

## FULCRUM SHIFT



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Writers Club Press

San Jose New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **Fulcrum Shift**

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Writers Club Press  
an imprint of iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:  
iUniverse, Inc.  
5220 S. 16th St., Suite 200  
Lincoln, NE 68512  
[www.iuniverse.com](http://www.iuniverse.com)

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ISBN: 0-595-23888-2

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to the woman with the long brown  
hair—My Muse.*



# Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Roland Valliere and thank him for his daily support in the writing of this novel. Without him I would have never finished it.

I would also like to thank all the members of my family. Their belief in me made this book possible.





## C H A P T E R   I



The figure walked quietly down the cobblestone alley with purpose. His leather shoes made no sound on the stones. The black cloak draped around his body made him almost indiscernible from the buildings around him in the dark moonless night. He came to an intersection and stopped then turning left he paced off his steps carefully and stopped again under a stone arched bridge. Glancing around first, he placed a hand into a small hole in the building, and pulled himself upward. He proceeded quickly, going hand over hand, finding small crevices, until he reached the bottom of the arch. He grabbed the edge, and suspended by the strength in his fingers, he flexed his muscular forearms and pulled himself up onto the bridge. He hopped over the short wall onto the walkway and paused in a crouch. His sword clinked against the stones. He grabbed the metal sheath and moved it to a safer position. "Damn" he thought to himself. "I should have covered it with soft leather." He froze as still as a marble statue as voices came from the far end of the bridge. Two guards were walking toward him, laughing and talking. Their footsteps loud as galloping horses in the quiet night. "The wench had the biggest bosoms I have ever seen. And soft, just like a kittens fur. She said she had to be on top. If she lay on her back they flopped against her chin." His partner, the other guard, let out a roaring laugh. "Flopped against her chin, now those are some big bosoms." The two continued on across the stone bridge not yet seeing the black figure crouching against the waist high wall of the bridge.

Viss remained motionless in his crouch; his eyes fixed on the two men. They separated and walked toward him from two different angles. "What are you doing there? What brings you to this Court? Come out of those shadows there or I will feed you my sword." One of the guards put his hand on his sword in a mock attempt at terrorizing Viss. "Come out I said."

Viss didn't move, and this puzzled the guards. The typical intruder would have run by now, but this one just huddled there. The menace of two armed guards put any sane man into a flee for his life. This is what always happened. A guard happened upon an intruder, he called for a halt and the intruder, having been found out, ran for his life and a grand chase followed. More guards were alerted and the intruder was usually caught and sentenced to the dungeon. The intruder was usually a commoner, down on his luck and trying to better his station by stealing from the castle. But this was out of the ordinary. There was no shock at being caught, and no grand chase through the outer levels of the castle.

The two guards stepped closer, doubting their eyes. Maybe it wasn't a man. A moonless night could be deceiving. Viss waited patiently, his large hands remained relaxed and ready, lightly touching the stone near his feet. "The unexpected inaction can be just as much an advantage as the unexpected action." He thought to himself, remembering the words of an old master.

They got close enough to be sure it was a man, but carefully stood out of sword reach. One of the guards turned his head slightly to the other. "Alert the commander of the guard, I will take care of this one." Viss broke the silence as the second guard turned to leave:

"Fear not to be alone with me, he will return quickly."

The arrogance of Viss' statement stopped the second guard in mid turn and enraged the first guard so much that he rushed at Viss without even drawing his weapon.

"I am going to haul you along to the Captain either by your ears or spit on my sword." The quiet arrogance of Viss' statement angered

him. He traveled the three steps between them quickly and grabbing Viss by the cloak drew him up to a standing position. The violence began. In a blur of unexpected speed Viss grabbed the guard's wrists and smashed his forehead against his nose. The guard reeled back from the crack of the blow, but he couldn't fall. Viss had both his wrists locked tightly in his hands. "He looked at the other guard. "Do not draw your sword." His voice was confident and smooth, with no hint of the excitement of battle. The guard paused long enough for Viss to take initiative in the second round of violence. He crossed the guard's wrists one over the other. This made the man's shoulders shift and one of his feet to come off the stone of the walk. The second guard, sensing he had lost initiative and his comrade was in dire trouble, rushed in. Taking advantage of his captive's imbalance he jerked the guard violently, and the man toppled directly into the rushing guard. The two guards fell into a tangle of limbs against the stone. They recovered quickly and jumped to their feet, drawing their swords with clean metallic scrapes. Meet a fist with a fist, meet a sword with a sword, and bring death only when you must." The long remembered and oft-repeated ritual came to Viss as it had many times in the past. It was another echo of a master from long ago.

The two guards charged and in the moment before contact, Viss had gathered all the information he needed. They are both right handed, carrying standard meter long rapiers, held in classical military stances. This means they would only have been taught the twelve basic attacks. It was a weakness that Viss easily exploited. The first guard, enraged by his broken nose, the blood probably limiting his eyesight, rushed in with a sloppy overhand blow. The other, using more restraint, sent the point of his rapier directly toward Viss' chest. Viss twisted sideways. It presented a smaller target, and allowed the stab at his chest to pass harmlessly. At the same time he did this he raised his sword to block the blow aimed at his head. He then pushed himself off the short wall at his back and leapt past his opponents. The blade of his sword lashed out at the guard with the bleeding nose. The sharp edge

sliced deeply into his neck. Viss hit the ground, rolled, and turned as lithe as a giant cat. The guard with the broken nose crumpled to the ground with blood gushing from the severed artery in his neck. "Always dispatch the weakest enemy first." The voice from his past spoke again.

Now the tone of the battle changed. The remaining guard didn't charge. Witnessing the skill of his opponent he took a more careful stance and glanced toward the far end of the bridge where he and his partner had come from moments earlier. Viss, seeing the guard glance that way, took several quick steps. This put him between the guard and the exit. The man on the ground lay motionless, the pool of blood continuing to grow around his body.

The two circled slowly, neither doubting that only one would survive the next few moments. They closed on each other and their swords clashed viciously several times before they broke again. Both fighters remaining silent to conserve energy and maintain absolute concentration. Again they sprang, each bringing in an overhand strike at the other. As the two blades collided with a resounding ring Viss twisted his weapon slightly racing it powerfully down the length of his foe's sword. It smashed through the handguard and continued through the guard's hand. It severed his thumb. The guard's sword had also slammed down onto the guard of Viss' sword but didn't penetrate the harder metal. It was a move that could only be safely made if you knew your opponent's sword to be of inferior strength. This of course Viss knew. He had wielded the standard sword of the Captain's guard many times himself.

The guard bent over in reaction to the horrifying pain. Viss continued the motion of his sword in a fluid arc, bringing it back around his own body then down; burying its blade deep into the guard's skull. The man was dead before he hit the ground. Viss wiped his sword and keeping it at the ready he turned and trotted toward the open portal at the end of the bridge where the two guards had a few moments earlier emerged.

Viss had hoped to accomplish his mission without bloodshed but he had dispatched the guards relatively quietly, and the alarm had not been raised. They wouldn't be missed for a while yet. So he plunged through the portal into one of the outer ramparts of the castle proper still intent on completing what he had set out to do.

Several doors lined either side of the corridor. Passing the first of these he counted doors and corridors and turned at intervals. His goal was clear. He had bribed one servant and plied a second with drink to get a detailed description of where in the castle it was kept. Just as he entered a corridor that looked exactly the same as the one he exited a gong sounded an alarm. It was an alert to the guards in the castle that an intruder was somewhere inside. It was for him. By now the new watch had discovered the slain bodies he had left on the bridge. Running footsteps sounded from the corridor he had just come from. "Almost there, this is the corridor." He thought to himself. "Third door on the right. Throwing it open he jumped inside and shut the heavy wooden door behind him. With his back braced against it he listened quietly for the footfalls of searching guards. They ran past his door continuing on down the corridor until they disappeared. "Two guards. They would all be traveling in groups of two or more now that the intruder was found to be a capable swordsman. He relaxed, released the breath that he had been holding for too long and surveyed the room. It was a guest quarters that was never used. It was supposed to be empty but it wasn't. A multicolored rug covered most of the stone floor. The small stone fireplace was crackling sharply and giving off a warm orange glow. The head of a small bed leaned against the wall to his right. It extended out from the wall to the center of the room. Standing on the other side of it and looking directly at Viss was a large man. He gaped at Viss with an open mouth. Viss' unexpected entrance had frozen him in mid motion. He dangled a backpack over the bed and Viss couldn't tell whether he was putting it down or picking it up when he froze. The two of them locked eyes for several long heartbeats. Viss expected him to scream for help to any guards that may be lurking

around in the corridor outside. The man dropped the pack onto the bed and its thump broke the tension. "You best put that sword away." The man spoke in a deep rumbling voice. "This man has confidence. No doubt his confidence stemmed from capability." He placed his right hand gently on the pommel of a massive broad sword that hung at his hip. "More guards approach."

Guards were now opening and closing doors. It was standard procedure; first check and clear the main hallways, then move onto the smaller corridors, then check each room individually. Viss knew the procedure well. It wouldn't be long before this room was checked. He briskly walked across the room past the bed and the fireplace. The deep voiced stranger watched him but made no move to draw his sword. Viss threw a leg over the sill of the window into the cool night air and giving a quick nod to the rumble voiced stranger he climbed out onto a small ledge that he knew would be there. As he disappeared he heard guards burst through the door. "One or more armed men have broken into the castle and killed two guards. Have you seen anyone suspicious?" "Just the Governor." Came the rumbled response. One of the guards threw a curse at him and they exited the room, shutting the door with a slam. The big man walked to the window in long confident strides and looked out. Viss was gone. He had placed a hook on the ledge and lowered himself by a rope into a window on the level below.

The room was as black as night and Viss crouched again in silence and tried to get a sense of the room. Having come from the well-lit room above, his eyes needed time to adjust. He listened intently. The smallest of sounds could give him an idea of its size and what was in it. This room, he suspected, held his goal. He couldn't come directly to it because this floor of the castle was well guarded. But, by climbing the wall to the arch and then dropping down to this level he avoided most of the risk of being caught. As his eyes adjusted he surveyed the room. It was a large room, large enough for a group of horses to run in, if it were empty. It was filled with large waist high crates that were as wide as the span of a man's outstretched arms. Many were stacked on each

other. The stacks reaching to the wooden rafters of the ceiling. Moving to the nearest one and using the point of his sword Viss pried the lid off and peered inside.

The poor lighting inside the room made the contents of the box indiscernible. He reached inside and rummaged around. It was full of straw. He moved his hands around in it and finding an object he pulled it out. Holding it up in the dim light he looked at it. It was a head severed from its body. Its empty eye sockets stared at Viss. The skin of its face was shriveled and dry. Its mouth was pulled into a grimace of pain. It looked as if whatever pain it had suffered in dying was still with it and still causing it immense pain. He turned it around and examined it carefully. The neck was banded and capped in some type of metal as if the head were a wine flask and the metal cap prevented all the juices from leaking out. You could stand it upright on a table and it wouldn't fall. He stared at it morbidly hoping to recognize the disfigured face. The jaw dropped slowly open and the small hairs on Viss' body stood erect. A gleam of sweat instantly coated the skin of his whole body in horror. When the jaw started to close again his heart started to race and he dropped the head to the floor of the room. Something was terribly wrong here. He could feel an evil force at work here. Its presence was palpable, as if a demon were standing by his side. He glanced around the room uncomfortably and it took on a different atmosphere. It was no longer a room full of riches, no longer a cache of gold and weapons. It was now a catacomb. A place of raw death, complete with dead bodies, and haunted by the souls of murdered people not finding rest in death. Looking down at the head he fought off the nausea that threatened to empty his stomach. It wasn't the light; it wasn't imagination or tension. The mouth really did move, and it was still moving. It was trying to talk to him. He kicked it and it rolled across the room with a sickening series of thumps and metallic clanks. Leaning on the crate he wretched. His stomach was no longer able to hold its contents. He wiped his hands on his cloak and breathing deep he moved to another crate.

Prying this one open with the blade of his sword he once again pushed off the lid. He dropped his rucksack off his back and took out a small one handed torch. He did not want to blindly reach into this one for fear of the horror that might be inside. It was worth taking the chance of being seen. He placed the torch on the floor and rubbed his sword against a small piece of flint. The torch ignited. He picked it up and peered over the edge of the crate. The horror struck him like a hammer blow. He could see several heads lying cradled in the straw. One upward facing head opened its eyes as if in response to the light from his torch. Milky, rotten eyes stared at him. Its mouth worked furiously as if trying to talk. Its neck was capped in steel just like the other one. He reeled backwards, his heart beating furiously against his ribs, he could feel sweat curling its way out of every pore of his body. In the midst of combat, his heart never beat this fast. There was always an element of control. He could understand, and overcome a mortal enemy. His skill and strength gave him confidence. But this, he had no control over this. It went beyond the realm of control. These heads were alive; alive by means he couldn't fathom. There was a power here that rendered his sword useless. The strength in his muscles could do nothing against something so perverted.

Two days ago he thought that these crates were filled with valuables...But today he found they were filled with horrors. There was a platoon of soldiers, nearly a hundred, to guard two wagons filled with these crates. He paused, now his interest had changed. He needed to know what was going on. What was the Captain planning with this abomination? He scanned the room looking for clues. One crate, being larger and sturdier than the others drew his attention. Catching his breath and wiping sweat from his face he moved toward it. The air in the room was now stifling, as if it were drawing strength from his bones. He moved slowly closer to the largest crate. The wood of it was roughhewn and banded with iron. The other crates were plain wood but this one was of a much stronger form.



It stood as high as Viss, slightly reminiscent of a coffin. An enormous iron lock secured a metal band around its middle. Reaching out and touching the lock he pulled his hand back quickly in surprise. "Damn thing is cold as ice." It was not cold in the normal sense of cold but cold in a different way. Not cold like the haft of a sword that had been away from a soldier's body for too long, but a cold like a need. It felt as if it was pulling heat from his body. It felt like it was missing something and his body was the source that could fill this need. He pondered the need deeper. It felt to him like there was something dead inside, craving life, and trying to pull his very life from him. He backed up. His legs were weak, his body getting cold; the sweat on his face and arms was turning clammy. He felt like he hadn't eaten in days, no energy. "Maybe I will sit down for just a moment." With fatigue washing over him he sat down, his back leaning against the wooden crate. The sounds coming from the end of the room made no matter to him. He was too tired to worry about it. The sound of large doors opening came into his thoughts, but he didn't worry about it, he was too tired to worry. The thoughts filtered through like a detached fact. "Something mildly interesting to think about, but nothing to really worry about. Nothing of import, just need to get some rest." Clanging swords moved slowly closer to him. Voices were barking commands. He couldn't tell what they were saying, and he didn't really care. He dropped his torch on the floor and it sputtered as a call to the approaching guards. "Put down your weapon and come out from behind there." A guard cautiously walked around the crate with his sword at the ready. "Got something over here." He yelled to his companions.

The last thing Viss remembered was two guards leaning over him with smiles on their faces. "Looks like you picked a bad time to fall asleep thief." Viss hadn't fallen asleep. Whatever it was that was in that crate had sucked much of the life out of him. He would be executed for killing two of the Captain's guards. But for now he would live to see another day. The guards had rescued him just in time. If he had

remained slumped up against that crate for much longer, whatever it was that was inside would have drained the life completely out of him, leaving him a dead empty corpse, or worse. This was his last thought as he faded into a senseless dark deeper than sleep.

## C H A P T E R 2



Viss awoke into darkness, his mouth dry. Slowly turning his head from side to side he tried to get oriented. He was lying on a cot in a small cell. A shaft of light pierced through a small window in the door just a few feet from his head. Trying to sit up his body screamed in resistance. It wouldn't respond immediately to his commands. His arms, feeling heavy, were burdened by manacles attached to the brick wall by chains. Putting his feet slowly down on the damp floor he cringed. His leather shoes were gone and the floor was very cold. He sat quietly on the edge of the small cot letting his mind clear. The memory of what happened came slowly back to him. Memory of the crate came first. "That damned crate." There is something evil in there, something that drained him of all his strength. It sucked the marrow right out of his bones and sucked the will to live right out of his chest. He felt like a vein had been opened in his arm and his will to live flowed freely like blood. He looked at his arms, expecting to see them shriveled and small. They were as large as always, not withered like he expected. But they felt useless and weak even though the same shape and size as they always were and finely honed from years of hard work and training. He stretched and rattled his chains. The damage, however bizarre, will quickly heal. He stood up and fought back the dizziness. The length of the chains allowed him to move about the room freely. He stood in the center of the small cell. Standing relaxed with his legs shoulder width apart, his arms freely hanging by his sides, elbows slightly bent he

focused on his breathing. He slowly moved his arms and legs in a precise pattern, each slow movement ending with a pause at the end of a mock attack or defense posture. Each motion revealed a technique and each technique brought around another step until he completed a full circle, once again standing and breathing at the same precise spot he began. This was a complex routine that he had performed many thousands of times. This was warrior form one. It was the form of the tiger; strong and fast. It was a form that attacked quickly and with force. Its long blade swings like that of the swinging claws of a tiger. It is the first series of movements taught to a student of battle. There were twelve forms in all. Each one more complex and secret. Each one was more deadly than the previous one and he had mastered all twelve many years ago.

Life started to flow in his body again. "Energy begets energy, motion begets strength of motion." he muttered. His senses started to come awake and he took a new look at his surroundings. The cell was six paces by six paces. It was a perfect square and the cot against the wall reduced the walkable space to six paces by four paces. A door on the wall was near what he assumed to be the head of the cot because that was where his head was when he awoke. A strong smell of earth filled the room. The stone wall under the cot was moist; so moist that water slowly dripped onto the stone floor. There was a source of water on the other side of the wall. Maybe it was a river, or the ocean, or just a duct that water, or waste, flowed through. Sitting back down on the cot he took stock of his situation.

Three days earlier word had come in from scouts of the Thieves' Guild that the Captain's guards were bringing into the city two wagons loaded with valuable cargo. The exact contents of the wagons were not known and could not be found out. It had to be something very valuable because there were too many guards with it and they were described as being very nervous. When it arrived into the Captains City the Guild had members watching the gates. Viss was one of the watchers. It was easy to realize now why at the time he had felt nervous

about the whole situation, why he had felt something was wrong. But at the time he just attributed it to the import of the situation and the value that must be contained within the shipment. He didn't perceive it's true nature. The armed guard was harried and grim. Looking as if they had been battling for days without rest, or maybe traveling for a week without sleep. They had ridden through the gates with too much space between themselves and the wagons. It was very sloppy.

At the time Viss thought it was sloppy discipline or simply fatigue brought on by the hardships they had endured when obtaining the crates. But now he could see that they must have known that whatever it was in the wagons was something to stay away from. It was something that could drain the life right out of a man if he stood too close for too long. It had almost happened to Viss. It was really his good fortune that the Captain's guards had found him when they did. If he had remained slumped against that crate for much longer he would have died. He remembered the powerful waves of fatigue that had washed over him. The guards escorting the crates in the wagons had probably felt the same thing so had kept their distance as much as possible while still guarding it.

That evening after sunset the Guild held a meeting. The members had argued through most of the night debating what action they should take. By morning they had pounded out a plan: They would wait for one or two days to gather information from people planted inside the Captain's castle, friends of the Guild. The information they got just piqued their interest further. Clouding the mystery around the crates even further. One of the cooks serving boys managed to find out where in the castle the crates were stored, but he could uncover no other information. He told that the Captain and his wizard had placed absolute secrecy on the shipment. Nobody in the castle was allowed to inquire about the crates, their whereabouts or their contents, under severe punishment. So all they could discover was where the crates were being stored and nothing more. And because of this the mission of stealing into the castle and finding out more fell to Viss. He had

spent most of his younger life in the castle, first as a stable boy then as a potscrubber in the kitchen. Then he served for four years in the Captain's guard as he came of age. This is when he began his weapons and hand to hand combat training although in the ten years since he left the employ of the Captain he had refined his skills far beyond those taught to the guards, tutoring under several different masters.

So with his knowledge of the castle, and of the workings of the Captains guards it had fallen to him to penetrate into the castle and investigate the mysterious cargo. He was supposed to do it without being seen, let alone being caught. He really screwed that all up. He miscalculated the rotations of the guards and had to kill two of them. With just that he still would have been able to discover the contents of the crate and still escape through one of the various routes that he had planned. But the damned crate had baffled that plan. Mistakes always come in twos he thought to himself. A single mistake is easily repaired and recovered from but two mistakes will always condemn the best of plans. Now he sat in a cell imprisoned by the Captains guard and was sure to be hanging at the end of a rope very soon, if not for breaking into the castle with the intent to steal from the Captain then surely for killing two of the Captains guards. Punishment would be swift and severe. The Guild would not come to his rescue. No matter what his standing among the members of the Guild. If the Guildmaster himself were caught by the Captain and sentenced to die the Guild would not rescue him. They would elect a new Guildmaster. Preservation of the Guild as a whole was more important than any one of its members. To make matters worse, it was quite possible that when they found out that he was captured they would send an assassin to finish him quickly and mercifully. It would be nothing personal. He just knew too much about the Guild and its operation. If the Captain suspected that he were a member there would be torture enough to make any man talk.

So it would be either the Captain's Inquisitor followed by the noose or the poisoned blade of a Guild assassin. Neither choice was appeal-

ing. His two mistakes, he thought had brought him to a very bad situation, and bad occurrences always happened in threes.

He started a thorough inspection of his cell. Beginning in one corner he ran his hands along the wall, covering every stone, looking for cracks, water leaks or any irregularity that could be of help to him. The only light came from torches outside his room that cast dim flickers through the grate of the cell door. He couldn't get close to the door. The manacles stopped him from reaching it. Sounds came from beyond the door. He hurried back to the cot and lay down listening to the growing sound of footfalls. It was four men and they were all marching in step. They weren't being marched, but when soldiers walked together their footsteps always fell into the same rhythm. After years of training soldiers always marched in step. It could sometimes be a weakness. Something to be exploited. They stopped at his door, two bolts were thrown and the door crept open. Viss made another mental note: He was being kept in the under dungeon, only here were there double bolts on the doors. Viss had been down to this level only once in his years of service to the Captain. Prisoners were always kept in the level above this one where the cells all had single bolts. Figures stepped into the cell, all carrying torches. He winced at the pain they caused his eyes. "Stand up Viss." The voice was familiar to him. "Been a long time Holz." was his quick response. "The Captain and the necromancer will speak to you." "A touch of softness entered Holz's voice. "It wasn't just some common thief that killed two of his guards Viss. It was you, an ex-member of his own guard. The Captain has worked himself into a frenzy over this." One of the other guards spoke out in anger. "The man is a murderer and doesn't deserve an explanation. Prisoners receive the punishment they are due." Holz snapped at him. "This prisoner" voicing the word with heavy sarcasm "was a sergeant in the Captain's elite guard, youngest ever to make that rank if I recall correctly. There wasn't a finer soldier. I can't say what caused him to leave the guard and a promising career, but I can say this: No man has a stronger sense of honor, and don't get too close to him. He could

snap your neck quicker than you could cry for your momma. Leave you alive too, lying there with the bones in your neck broken but the blood still flowing freely to your thick skull so you could see and hear everything but not be able to move. Yes he is a dangerous one, give him respect and give thanks you weren't one of the guards on arch duty three nights ago.

Viss reeled. "Three nights ago!" Had he been unconscious for three nights? His mind raced. Time now became a very serious factor. The Guild had no doubt discovered his capture and now there would be an assassin waiting for the right moment to silence him. It would come soon; every day he lived was another day the Captain's inquisitor could draw information about the Guild. Viss pulled his face into a tight grimace. Holz must have read the surprise on his face because he addressed his question. "That's right, three days and three nights have you lay there on that cot as if in a deep sleep. Nothing could arouse you. The Captain himself came to visit you along with his damned magician. The mage had predicted that today you would awake. Now he and the Captain will have an audience with you."

Holz motioned with an arm toward Viss and two of the guards stepped forward and unlocked his manacles. Their serious demeanor had changed since their arrogant entrance. They now exercised extreme caution. When Viss slowly stood up they stepped cautiously back. The prisoner's physical presence demanded respect, even if he was just a prisoner. He stood easily a hand taller than any other man in the room even bare-footed. They all quickly parted, leaving him a clear path toward the door. Even after several days of unconsciousness he walked with a solid grace, his back erect yet flexible. Like a large cat he was always at rest and always comfortable, yet always ready to jump from coiled spring legs, and pounce with massive fore paw strength. The three nameless guards all stepped back slowly in small steps, not realizing their defensive postures. Only Holz stood his ground "Turn around." Viss slowly turned toward the cot. Calculations flashed through his mind. "Four enemies crowded into a very small room with



him. Two were in striking distance. He could disable these two and have a weapon drawn in his hand in time to face Holz and the last guard. It would be messy, he would sustain some injury, Holz was a superb swordsman, but the cramped quarters of the room would work to his advantage. His two remaining foes would have to wield their swords carefully so as not to harm each other. He let the thought pass. There still was the puzzle of the crates. No, he would meet the Captain. There was more to be learned here. If the Captain's sole desire was to have him killed he would surely be dead already. Viss relaxed his arms and the whole room seemed to relax as if everyone knew a moment of tension had just passed. One of the guards snapped a new, smaller pair of manacles on him and with a brisk motion of his arm Holz waved the guards into motion. They moved into the corridor, two guards in front of Viss, Holz and the fourth behind him. They went up several flights of stairs and into the dungeon proper. It smelled of death. There has been considerably more action here, since Viss was in the Captain's employ. They moved through the stench quickly into the castle. Viss knew the route well; they were heading straight up to the Captain's offices. Familiar smells brought back memories of the years he spent here. Coming to the double wooden doors of the Captain's office they stopped and Holz barked at the party to stay put. He opened one door and stepped inside. Viss took the opportunity of the small distraction to pull at his cuffs, testing them for any weakness. While the door was open he could hear voices inside but when the heavy wooden door closed again it muffled all sound.



## C H A P T E R 3



The wooden door opened again and Holz leaned out to wave for Viss to enter. Viss left the three cell guards and stepped inside. He took in his new surroundings with a quick glance, noting there were no windows, just a pair of doors opposite the one he entered. The room was large, about twenty paces deep. Tapestries softened the stone walls and floor. At the far end of the room near a large fireplace, were several high backed leather chairs, their wooden legs and sides stained very dark by the many years of sitting so close to the fireplace. The Captain stood near a chair with his arms crossed. His sharp eyes, like that of a hawk after a mouse, were locked on Viss. He remained very much like Viss remembered him. He had maybe a few more gray hairs in his short, neatly trimmed beard. His demeanor radiated authority, the type that comes from years of giving orders and making weighty decisions. His sword, impeccably polished, hung comfortably at his side. He turned from Viss glancing at a figure sitting in one of the chairs and spoke. "Holz, remove his manacles then leave us be." Holz started to protest this order but the Captain cut him short. "Menathon here" pointing to the figure in the chair "wishes to interrogate him. No harm will come to me, but this you cannot witness. Wait outside the door; I will call if I need your assistance." Holz, as if satisfied that he could still protect his Captain, removed the cuffs from Viss and saluted smartly. He exited the room quickly with his lips pressed tightly together. He

would probably keep his ear pressed firmly against the outside of the door.

Viss studied the seated Menathon. He wore a long robe with the hood up over his head. His face was very indistinct, almost blurry. A representation of absolute average as far as faces go. No distinguishing features. Everything about it was average. This was a face that you could see in a crowd and never remember. Magic was at work there. Viss thought that if he were to make a mask of a face that was plain and unnoticeable, then this would be it. He squinted in an attempt to clear his vision then continued his inspection. The wizard's hands were different though. They were unusually large and strong. Resting comfortably on the arms of the leather chair they looked out of proportion to the rest of his body. They belonged to a man much larger, almost giant in size. His eyes were two black marbles, small and sharp, and they penetrated into Viss like daggers, never blinking. Viss wondered if he even had eyelids. "Eyes that stood perpetually open never missed anything." He tore his eyes from the wizard and returned his stare to the Captain. "I should have you hung at dawn." The Captain spoke in controlled tones. "Damn you Viss, you killed two of my guards. You go sneaking about my house and now you have fallen very deep into something you do not understand. I should slit your throat personally for this." The threat was only half-hearted. There being no real force behind it. "You would have been already dead, never awoken from your cursed slumber if it wasn't for Menathon. He feels that maybe we could learn something from you. Sit down here in this chair so he can examine you." Thinking it couldn't be any worse than the noose, Viss crossed to the chair and sat down. The leather was warm. The Captain was probably just sitting here.

For the first time since Viss entered the room Menathon moved. Although his body looked frail, he moved smoothly. There was strength in this man, but it wasn't corporeal. His face darted closer to Viss and his features remained indistinct and bland. His eyes invaded Viss even deeper. His lips were pressed tightly together as if by force of

will alone he hadn't spoken in years. His face moved closer yet and his eyes burned holes right into Viss' skull. His lips parted slightly. As if locked into a trance Viss tried to move his arms. He tried to push the face away. But his arms wouldn't listen to his command. He continued to stare at the ever-growing face. It was similar to the feeling he had when he moved too close to the iron-banded crate. He was powerless and unable to move. Unable to summon the strength to do anything but watch. He stared at the face. There was nowhere else to look. The magician's lips opened more and revealed something inside his mouth. It moved back and forth as if impatient to leave the mouth. Viss smelled the foul breath on his face. The mouth was wide open now and the thing inside twisted and curled. The magic user paused with his mouth a scant finger width away from Viss' right eye. Viss felt as if the man intended to suck the eyeball right from his head. He couldn't move. He wanted to scream but he couldn't do that either. He could do nothing but watch in horror as the form inside the wizard's mouth crawled slowly out and attached itself to his eye. Tiny threads wriggled around his eye, squeezed painfully under his eyelid and traveled deep into his skull.

With his one clear eye Viss watched Menathon stare into him. The pain grew quickly until it reached a climax and he felt his mind burst open like an over ripe melon. Menathon smiled. Viss could feel the man rummaging around in his memories. Picking and probing at his past as if his mind were an open backpack and Menathon was up to his shoulders digging around looking for something. A small part of his mind was clinging to a thought. It was outrage. He battled to bring it forward. He battled to stop the rape of his mind. Menathon came across it and laughed. Viss could feel his laughter; he couldn't hear it, and Menathon's face never moved. The room began spinning and he felt himself being sucked into oblivion, losing consciousness. He continued to battle it but was lost. This battle he could not understand. There was no sword to wield on this battlefield, no fists to swing in anger. He was helpless and he knew that when he lost consciousness he

would be lost and whatever control of his own thoughts and memory he had would be relinquished to the mage. He railed against the wizard and threw thoughts of rebellion and anger. But with each attempt he grew weaker until he failed and blackness fell over him.

He regained consciousness to pain and voices. They were in the background and had been talking for a while. The pain enveloped the foreground. His skull felt like someone had pried it open with a blunt dagger. He fought back the urge to bring his hand up to assess the damage. Surely his eye was gone. With his lids still closed he rolled his eyes from side to side. Testing them. The pained eye screamed in torment but it responded, he could feel it move at his command. He shifted his focus back to the voices. They gained clarity and moved into the foreground. Someone new was in the room. A new voice joined the conversation. Someone new had come into the room. Pieces of the conversation filtered through. He felt the leather of the chair. He was still in the Captain's outer office. The wizard held the floor. "I have gone all the way back through his years, all the way back to the age of eight when he was left as an orphan on the steps of this very castle. Any memories before this are gone. They have been taken from him. He has been bereft of his early youth or he has none. He may have blocked these memories from himself, but they should not have been denied me. There is either a wall erected where I cannot penetrate or there is nothing there. He was created eight years old. Standing on your doorstep. Or he has been wiped clean of this time. If there is a wall blocking my entrance, I cannot see it. The threadworm is ineffectual here; it can only see that which the subject himself can recall. Viss tensed at mention of the threadworm, the thought of its attaching itself to his eye made the pain flare. "He awakens."

The new person in the room spoke with a calm deep voice. It was so deep that Viss could almost feel the leather of his chair rumble in sympathy. He recognized it from somewhere. "You have returned to us, do not feign." The rumbling voice spoke again. "We have need to talk." Viss raised his head and opened his one good eye. The other would not

open. He looked at the three in the room and recognized the new man. It was the large man he stumbled upon while trying to escape the guards. Things were getting very complicated. “The threadworm, although a very unpleasant experience, does not do any permanent damage. Your eye is swollen shut, but in a few days it will be fine. The man brought him a goblet. Viss drank some water. They all watched him closely, like they were trying to understand something written on his forehead. The Captain spoke next. “This examination was necessary. We intended to gather understanding from it. But, we have gathered nothing. You should be dead. Anyone, who gets as close to the contents of the crate as you did, dies quickly. My guards found you leaning up against it. It should have drained the life from you. Menathion was trying to understand why. We thought you knew something about it. Something we don’t know. But you know nothing. Yet you are still alive. Instead of answering questions we have just raised more. You have no memory of your early childhood. You were left on my steps as an orphan at about, the best we could guess, the age of eight. You couldn’t speak and we thought you were mute. But you learned quickly. You were as if you had known how to speak and we had to just remind you. It wasn’t something you had to learn. It was as if it were a forgotten thing you just had to remember. I took you in on that day and as you grew I treated you almost as a son. You never remembered your life before my doorstep and we never pushed the issue, not knowing whether you did not wish to remember or truly did not remember. The mage spoke next reciting facts as if Viss were simply a flask of some curious liquid. “You do not have any memory of your younger years, the memories do not exist. The threadworm has told us so.” He rubbed his chin with the fingers of a slender hand. The memories have been totally taken from you, or, you had no childhood. You were born at the age of eight.” He stared deeply into Viss as if looking for an answer to the absurd question. Viss stared at the magic user; not discerning anything unusual; the face was as indistinct as ever and his mouth was tightly closed. Viss almost gagged wondering what was hid-

den inside the wizard's mouth. He grimaced in disgust. "Before you see me as some kind of abomination I will explain. The threadworm is very frail." Viss stared into his mouth as he talked, looking for some sign of it. Menzler continued. "It can live only scant minutes without extreme moisture and heat—having no means to generate its own. The safest way to transport it is in the mouth. I no longer have it. It has been returned it to its host."

The three men stared at Viss. He stared back through one eye in a weak attempt at rebellion but his mien didn't convey the rebellion. The Captain grit his teeth, trying to make a decision. He glanced at Menzler, but the wizard stared back blankly, offering no help. He then looked to the tall stranger who nodded his head slowly. The Captain, as if making a decision looked again at Viss. "The Fulcrum has been unearthed." He paused to let Viss swallow the not so credible piece of information.

"The Fulcrum does not exist. It's a story told to children at bedtime."

Menzler laughed. "Every story of horror told to children at bedtime comes either from half-truth or old truth. It is often so badly distorted with time and re-telling that it remains just a shadow of the truth. But sometimes the horror leans so heavily on our race that the horror remains pure through the generations and the ages." He stared at Viss, his visage grim. His coal black emotionless eyes driving home a point like no display of emotion could. To the wizard it was simple fact. There was neither need nor place for emotions and this gave strong weight to his statements. A strong yearning for his happy childhood, what he could remember of it, came rushing at Viss as if Menzler and the Threadworm had again poked a stick around in his memories and stirred them up vigorously. Childhood stories he had heard in the Captain's own castle, long forgotten came rushing back with a facility not normally available to him. His childhood after the age of eight was happy. Without parents or a history he was nonetheless well cared for by the many servants in the castle. He had heard the story of the Ful-



crum many times. It came from a variety of different sources but the story was always the same. In the early days of humanity life and the earth consisted of balance. Much like the creatures that roamed the forests and plains, man also followed this natural order of balance. Life and death were on opposite ends of a scale perfectly balanced across the Fulcrum. It is a hard, stone-like object; said to have been made by the creator's own hand and it kept everything in harmony. It was made and then hidden deep in the bowels of the earth. It is said that in a time now long gone by it was discovered by men and at first used sparingly and cautiously to effect changes over the earth. Men were able to change the climate, the creatures of the forest, and the ways of sun, rain and wind. They were even able to effect changes upon themselves. Large cities that reached into the skies were built. The face of the earth changed and men gained knowledge. They were able to hold off death and live unnaturally long life spans. Tremendous short-term gains were made and for a few generations every man on earth lived the life of a king. But the balance that must be kept was slowly being shifted and the gains were fleeting. Once the Fulcrum is moved, even slightly, the scales must eventually tip to collapse. There is a point where the balance has shifted too far and it can no longer be righted. The changes brought upon the earth grew more and more severe until the whole system collapsed in total devastation.

Many millennia have passed since this devastation and only hints of it remain. The Fulcrum was once again returned to its place deep in the earth where it has since rested in balance with the universe.

Menzler spoke again. "Yes, the Fulcrum is a truth. For two years now I have been receiving reports of strange happenings in the east. They are reports of perversions of man and nature that have left me sleepless on many a night. But never, until I have seen with my own eyes the abominations that you have also seen would I have believed that someone has discovered the Fulcrum. But it is true, it has been unearthed and it is being used by someone to effect change in a very evil way. In our deepest history our ancestors used it to effect positive

changes, that is changes they believed to be positive, and in a way the changes were positive but only in the short term—a scant few generations. Whoever it is that moves the Fulcrum now does it with deliberate evil intent. The destruction this time will be complete and it will take less than a few generations. Destruction this time will come very quick and it will be complete. You have witnessed only a small sample with your own eyes.” Viss sat there with his mouth open. The three men stare at him with grim faces. He licked his lips. “Why are you telling me this? What have I to do with this madness? This folly? Children’s stories are for children. I am a man who was never a child. My own childhood has been bereft of me. Sometimes I think maybe I was born at the age of eight and appeared on your doorstep at the brink of manhood. He reasserted with more energy his original question. “Why are you telling me this?” After a brief pause the Captain spoke again. “Menzler has intruded himself into your life, has peered into your every experience. Neither he, the threadworm, nor you can see your life before the age of eight. But, there are things, hints of things that may become. He has recommended extreme caution in dealing with you. My original judgment was to kill you for what you have done but he recommends otherwise. The Captain pointed at the deep voiced stranger who until now remained quiet. Stein has come here at my request to travel to the east in search of the Fulcrum and its perverter; and I want you to accompany him. Viss jerked his head back in revolt. The Captain continued. “I could offer you the ultimatum of death or the journey but you would not be a willing participant. I want you to do this of free will. Your help cannot be forced. He looked Viss directly in the eyes and posed his question. This had always been his style, always directly to the point and the matter at hand. “Will you join Stein in search of answers? At my request?” Viss snapped at him. “This is pure folly.” His thoughts flew immediately to his wife Marta. “I am a simple man with no heritage; a thief with a wife and a small home. I want nothing more than to return to my betrothed. At this very moment she cries for my life. Better I should die now. She will heal

and find another. But I will not desert her to the pain of not knowing if I will ever return. I will not abandon her as my parents did me.” The Captain continued his solid unblinking stare as if this was the response he had expected and had a response already prepared. “To gain your help in this, help Menzler says may be of import, I will ask you this. I could call in the guard and have you killed right here where you stand. You don’t doubt this. But I will make you a bargain. You will stay as my guest here in the castle for the night and tomorrow I will have one more opportunity to convince you of the import in this matter. And by days end you will decide to aid me and accompany Stein, or you can walk out of the front door and return to your wife.” Viss’ back stiffened. He cocked his head slightly as if waiting for more, for the trick. “On this you have my word. Now give me your word as a former officer in my garrison that you will give me this one day.”

Viss’ head began to spin. He had gone from certain death and an impossible situation to redemption. He would listen to more of this tomorrow and on the eve he would return to Marta. He started to feel dizzy at the prospect of his life and reunion with his wife. Mentally he was prepared to die. He had stolen into the Captain’s castle and killed two of his guards. He had been caught and was prepared to die for this, but he was not prepared for what had just happened. It was all going much too fast. He couldn’t summon enough strength to speak so he just nodded his head in acceptance of the offer. The group of men all visibly relaxed. The Captain, who had been leaning forward, straightened himself up and called to the door. “Holz!” As if his hand had been firmly grasped on the doorknob the entire time opened the door and rushed immediately in. He was inside, surveying the room for trouble, and had the door shut behind him before the echo of the Captains single syllable call to him had time to subside.

“Holz take Viss up to the best guest quarters in the castle. He is our most important guest for this evening. Insure the staff treats him accordingly and insure that he is properly fed and that all his needs are taken care of. As the Captain spoke Holz’s face registered more and

more surprise and when the Captain finished speaking he just stood with his mouth open. After a few moments he moved with a sudden jerk as if he snapping himself out of a stupor. He started to reach for the cuffs at his belt then stopped himself and moving to the door he opened it and with a motion of his arm waved for Viss to exit. Viss, still giddy from the unexpected turns this day had taken shakily got out of his chair and without looking back toward the three pair of eyes he knew were staring at him exited through the door with Holz following close behind.

## C H A P T E R 4



He looked around his quarters. It was lavish. Rich tapestries covered the walls and the bed was very large, and it looked very soft. He walked past it to a large double arch that led out onto a balcony. Holz stood by the door as if he were a servant. If the new order of things bothered him he didn't show it. Viss walked out onto the balcony. His room was several floors above ground level. A courtyard and garden stretched out below him. He slowly looked around to get his bearings and place himself in the layout of the castle. Everything was as he remembered. The main gate to the garden being several hundred feet across from his balcony. He leaned over the balcony and looked at the other balconies along his wall. The smell of lilacs filled the air and the health of the scene stirred him. He hadn't eaten in several days and his stomach came alive. He turned to see Holz with his arms crossed, scrutinizing him. "I haven't eaten in quite some time." Holz continued to stare at him. Uncertain as to where Viss stood in the Captain's view. Earlier in the day Viss was a prisoner headed with certainty to the noose. But now he was being treated like visiting royalty. Holz gave a curt nod in acquiescence. "I will have someone bring you something to eat." He turned and left the room. Viss stepped back out onto the balcony. It was late afternoon and a warm breeze was blowing through the courtyard. It was an end to the fourth day after his disappearance. His thoughts went to Marta. Tomorrow he would return to her. This business about the Fulcrum was pure folly, although something was defi-

nitely amiss. He thought about the heads in the crate. It was a perversion. Why did they have iron bands capping their necks? A sharp image came to him of one of the heads trying to talk. He could still see its jaw working. Yes, there was something wrong with this. But was it the Fulcrum? He looked out at the garden and a shiver passed through his body. Just the breeze he thought to himself and entered back into his quarters just as the food was being brought in.

After finishing his meal a servant brought him a wash basin. He stripped down to his waist, washed himself thoroughly and using a small table mirror of polished metal he examined his eye. It was red and swollen but not too badly. He had gotten worse in friendly tavern brawls. It will heal he concluded and walked back out onto the balcony to watch the sunset. As he looked out on the well-maintained trees and plants he didn't see the brown cloaked figure stealthily climb over a section of the wall and drop quietly into the thick brush at the far end of the courtyard. Feeling a healthy fatigue climb up on him he went back into his room, laid his clothing for tomorrow out onto the foot of the bed, climbed in and promptly fell asleep.

He was traveling back in time. Events in his life were clear. He relived the first time he saw Marta. He relived his years as a soldier in the Captain's guard. The dream was vivid; he was practicing with daggers in the courtyard. The cracked old voice of the Master of Arms was barking at him. "Before you can master any weapon, or any other man, you must first master yourself." The memory clouded and an older image came into focus. The dreams were moving quicker. They were coming into his awareness and then quickly passing through. The more vivid the memories, the longer they stayed. The day of testing came to him. Every year the Captain's Master of Arms would recruit boys from all the local villages. They would be tested for strength and determination. The day that Viss showed up for testing more than a hundred other boys also showed up. It was hours before sunrise and they all stood shivering outside the castle. Each boy was given a rucksack weighed down with stones. They would race to the next village.

That was the first time he met the Master of Arms. Over the next few years Viss and he would develop a strong bond. The Master of Arms was also orphaned as a child. His parents killed when he was very young. His voice rang out above the throng of boys. "Of you hundred boys I ask a simple task, go to Nawtoon twelve leagues to the east, the first ten to arrive shall be taken as trainees in the Captain's guard. The rest of you will go home to your mothers so she can soak your feet and wish you better luck next year. He remembered that morning well. The boys were all very excited. The Master of Arms cried out for them to begin and Viss was startled by the ferocity of the throng of boys. They all scrambled off at a full run ahead of Viss. He took off at a slower, more measured pace. The stones in the rucksack bit into his back and the straps dug into his shoulders but he continued on. At his steady measured pace he was soon counting the boys who had fallen by the side of the road exhausted. Their enthusiastic sprinting at full speed had drained all their strength. He counted them crouching on the road or off to the side exhausted and cramped, unable to continue. It was his first real lesson in manhood. Strength, power, ability were nothing unless tempered with discipline. A blacksmith never rushes when making the finest of swords. He must slowly heat the metal. Purify it, temper it, and fold it slowly many times into itself. So began the years of his tempering into the finest of swords.

The dream faded and another came into focus. He was younger. It was the week of carnival. Everyone in the castle and the local villages had spent long days in the autumn fields harvesting the crops, and long evenings feasting and celebrating. He could see Hollie clearly and he could still remember the smell of her hair. She had always taken a fancy to him. Her parents were at the festival. He had stolen away with her and a bottle of wine. They spent the entire night upstairs in her bedroom. It was such a wonderful time for him. He could see himself trembling as he ran his hands over her naked body. He could still remember the feel of her breasts, her soft skin. When her parents returned from the feast he climbed out her bedroom window. The

walk home was wonderful. The world was such a beautiful place. Everything was alive and right.

The dream moved on to earlier memories, each one flashing by. It was as if the dream world was recalling his life in reverse order. Soon, he knew he would come to that wall. The wall that stood at the age of eight, where all memories were lost, where beyond lay his life before he was left on the steps of the Captain's castle, presumably an orphan. His dream brought him to a door. It was large and wooden and a hand was knocking at it, pounding for it to open. It slowly opened to reveal a man standing on the other side. Viss stared at the face of the man, it was unclear, his features indistinct. Viss felt as if he had too much to drink and he couldn't focus his eyes. But everything else was sharp. He could see the man's clothing, his hands, and even the room behind him. Just the man's face was clouded. He felt a presence beside him. There is someone or something standing beside him also looking at the face. He felt the irritation of it. It was irritation at the fact that the presence beside him also couldn't see the face. Its need to know was as strong as his. It was trying to penetrate into his past, to see his history. It felt like the face was that of his father, but he couldn't see it. It was a face without features and without a name. It got blurrier and moved as if trying to talk. Viss could see the mouth moving, trying to voice words. Somewhere inside him a feeling welled up. He knows this feeling. He knows this rifling through his memories; the traveling back in time, the examining of his past, the going through him day by day and moment by moment. It was another attempt to penetrate through the wall that stood at the brink of his life. It was an attempt to penetrate the wall that stood at the moment of his crossing over from nothingness to existence. Menzler did the same thing to him. He just exposed his life, opened his skull, peered inside and took what he wanted. It was happening again. Someone or something was looking through his life as if it were a book. He returned to the blurry image of his father. He was sure it was in some sense his father. The blurry head was at exactly the same height as his. It seemed as if they had grown to be the



same height. The face continued to move. It was trying to resist the recognition of the figure standing beside Viss. It spoke in a distorted voice. Sounding as if it hadn't spoken for a very long time.

"Viss this is wrong. The time is not now. You must awaken. AWAKEN!" At the command of the voice he came awake and the darkness of the Captain's guest quarters greeted his one good eye. His heart was racing; his sweat made the sheets of the bed cling to his body. A dim light from a crescent moon came through the balcony doors. He sat up. He wasn't alone. He could feel something in the room with him. In the corner, past the foot of the bed was a darkness, something unnatural. The room was dark and the sliver of moon that shot through the balcony curtains barely brushed away any of it. This corner was darker than the rest of the room. There was something standing in the corner cloaking itself in the darkness. It was the something that moments earlier had been prying into his mind. It had taken him back through his life and brought him directly to the closed door of his past. But this thing had opened that door, had almost peered upon the face of his answers. It wanted to know exactly what he wanted to know. It wanted to know the same thing that Menzler and the threadworm wanted to know. He sprung out of bed looking desperately for anything to use as a weapon. The darkness flashed across the room and wrapped its hands around his throat. Its face was so close that he could smell its breath, acrid and foul. Its eyes, from a few fingers distance away stared at him, as if watching for the life to escape his eyes. It hissed and tightened its bony fingers around his throat. The horror of the situation, the speed at which everything happened, compounded by his weakened state after days with little rest and only one meal almost undid him. The first reaction a man has in a situation like this is to act defensively and grab for the hands strangling him. And this would be any man's undoing. A heartbeat of defensive action would be all the time the attacker would need. It was enough time for blood flow to the brain to stop and render the victim unconscious. Then a few more heartbeats later the defender would be dead. But Viss had been

trained in situations like this for many long hours over many years. He raised his hands up over those of his attacker and then straightening them out he plunged his fingers with a sharp stabbing motion right into the eyesockets of his opponent. He felt the eyeballs pop, felt warm liquid splash out onto his hands and wrists. Without a sound the creature released its grasp on his throat and crumpled to the floor. Viss took a painful gasp of air. Dizziness overcame him and he fell to the floor right on top of the creature.

The angle of moonlight into the room had changed when Viss stood slowly up grasping his throat. In another moment the thing would have crushed his windpipe. The strength of the muscles in his neck had given him enough time to respond with deadly accuracy. He looked down at the dark form then kicked it hard to assure it was dead. He bent down and wiped the fluid off his hands and wrists on its cloak. After the nervous rush of battle subsided from his veins he wondered about the creature. It had rummaged through his memory just as Menzler did. But this intrusion had gone further. It had broken through the barrier that stood between him and his childhood. It was seeking something from his past. It was looking for his identity and was trying to see who his father was but doing this had been its undoing because the man without a face upon being discovered had warned Viss and woke him before the creature could find out what it needed. And now it was dead.

Morning light was beginning to seep through the garden and into the room through the balcony doorway. His focus relaxed and his awareness of the world expanded. Birds were singing their first morning calls outside. He moved the corpse with his foot. It moved too easily, as if there was very little weight under the cloak that it was wrapped in. As the light grew he looked closer at it. There was only a skeleton. He touched the skull with his foot and it crumpled into dust. What was it? He chewed on this new puzzle. Everyone was trying to get into his head. He thought he had long forgotten his missing childhood. He could remember nothing, had long since stopped trying to remember.

It was a very old wound he wished to forget. Now it had been reopened and vigorously salted.

Using the wash basin from the night before he thoroughly washed his hands and arms then quickly dressed but he still felt naked without his sword. The encounter with the creature made the naked feeling very acute. Drawn by the fresh morning air he walked through the curtains onto the balcony and then out into the garden. Everything was covered in morning dew. He sat down on a stone bench and his thoughts went to Marta. Yesterday this garden had awakened his hunger for food. Today its life awakened another hunger in him.

A shouting voice filtered into his consciousness and he looked around. A second shout allowed him to pinpoint its direction. A man was standing on his balcony. The man pointed at him and shouted again. "He's out here in the garden." Several others joined the figure. They followed the point of a finger toward where he sat then all ran down the stairs of the balcony toward him. It was Holz with a pair of guards, different guards from the day before. Holz spoke quickly. "Seems like you have had an eventful night. It was definitely not human judging by the remains of it. The commander of the watch will be livid. No man or creature has ever penetrated to the central garden, we had thought it impossible." He paused long, looking Viss carefully over. "Your eye is much the same as it was yesterday. In time it will heal. But your throat it badly bruised. You had a rough encounter with our treacherous visitor. Come on inside we will go to the dining hall for breakfast, the company will do you good and you can tell me of the evenings events."

After breakfast Holz brought Viss back to the Captain's office. This time the two of them walked directly in. The Captain looked over from his conversation with Stein and Viss was relieved to see the wizard was absent from this meeting. "I have heard about what happened in your quarters last night." He paused to find the right words. "Today, as I promised, I will make one more bid for your help to join Stein in his quest for answers, and if you refuse you may go free. Men-

zler is in the storage room you broke into. Let's go there and examine more closely what you tried to see the night you killed my guards. Viss prickled at the reference to the dead guards. The Captain was applying leverage to him by reminding him that he killed the guards, and Viss himself was still alive only by his grace.

The four of them exited the room together and made their way down several familiar corridors. Viss' thoughts went to the crates and the severed heads inside. A loud thunderclap interrupted his thinking. It was so unexpected, and so loud they didn't know how to react. So they just stopped walking and waited for another one. It came quickly, and it shook the castle walls. The Captain and Stein broke into a run, Viss and Holz, being a step behind joined them seconds later. When the third thunderclap struck it almost knocked them off their feet. This time it was louder and sharper, like lightning. They were getting closer to its source. Clasping their hands over their ears they ran in anticipation of the next painful crack. The tremendous booms continued. Each one feeling like it would tear the castle down. As they approached the store room door the Captain threw his shoulder against it without slowing his pace. It was large enough for a horse to walk through unhindered but it flew open with the force of the blow. Stein, Viss and Holz stumbled inside after him. The four of them stood awestruck. The storeroom although very large and previously filled with boxes and crates now stood empty except for the one iron banded crate in its center. The side of the crate opposite their entrance was open and a bright red light tumbled out of it illuminating the wall opposite them. It was so red and thick that it was almost tangible. It almost poured out of the crate like blood. Menzler stood on the open side of the crate facing the party but not seeing them. Waving his arms in complex patterns his face was a grimace of pain and exertion. A jagged bolt of red lightning flew out of the crate with a crack that shook the building and sent everyone tumbling to the floor of the room. It hit Menzler in the chest and sent his body reeling backwards where he slammed into what appeared to be another invisible wall. He regained his feet, weary from

blow, and continued his hand motions. A bolt of blue lightning leapt from his hands and raced into the crate in retaliation. Menzler was battling something or someone inside the crate. If their melee continued it would tear the castle apart. The bolts of blue and red lightning raced back and forth. Each time Menzler was hit it knocked him off his feet. And each time he regained his feet and launched a retaliatory attack. His strength was waning. They could see it in his face. No human being could take the force of one of those massive red filled blows. Some kind of magic was protecting him but it wouldn't last forever and it looked like he was coming to the end of his strength. The four of them jumped to their feet and rushed to help him. Five paces into their run they all crashed into nothing. They all bounced off of an invisible barrier. It stood between them and the wizard. Viss jumped to his feet and felt for the impediment. It was some type of wall, but he couldn't see it. Stein and the Captain had also gotten to their feet and were exploring the barrier but Holz remained on the ground. He had run his head directly into the barrier and knocked himself unconscious. Nobody in the party took the time to check on him. Something inside that crate posed a danger to the whole castle. Menzler was the only thing stopping it and he needed their help. Viss ran his hands along the barrier looking for a flaw or a weakness. He reached his hands up high hoping that maybe it had a top like a brick wall and they could scale over it. Stein's voice rose over the battle sounds. "There is an opening here." Viss and the Captain ran over to him. "There is also a pattern on the floor." Viss looked down and he could see a path of powder on the stone floor. He followed it with his eyes. It formed a maze winding itself around the room and it looked like it led eventually to the crate. They bolted into the maze without any more hesitating. But their progress was slow. The frequent bolts of energy were heating up the room to an intolerable point and each time one flashed it threw them to the floor with its violent crack. If this continued for much longer the walls would melt. It was an eerie feeling to follow a maze where the walls could not be seen.

The maze first took them all the way around the perimeter of the room. They now could see into the crate but hadn't yet moved any closer to it. The pitch of battle had grown in intensity and now the screams of a beast could be heard above it. Viss glanced at the crate and saw Menzler locked in battle with a large creature just inside the portal. It seemed too large itself to actually be inside. It was like the inside was larger than the outside. They continued their frantic pace around the maze. Using their hands to feel the missing walls they quickly moved another circuit around the room and a level closer to their goal. As they finished their third circuit around the room, now moving faster because they could understand the nature of the maze Viss began to feel weak. For him it was a familiar feeling. The same one that had consumed him the first time he had encountered this crate. The Captain who was in front of him fell to the ground and began crawling. Stein stepped over him and continued to press on, leaning against the wall for support. Viss pushed himself to continue. Stepping around the Captain's crawling figure he pressed on after Stein who posed a peculiar image. He was moving along through the maze leaning heavily against a wall that couldn't be seen. He faltered, stopping to rest. The weakness was overtaking him. He came back alert with a start. He had almost succumbed to the drain on his life. It would kill him. Stein was shaking him, screaming into his face. "You have to push on. This shield here was made by the wizard to keep everything in. It protects the castle and the people but it won't hold forever and if the wizard dies so does this shield. We are almost there." Viss' heart was beating strongly with fear. He could easily have dropped right there and died. The weakness wasn't just physical it was also mental. His will to go on was being sapped. "I don't even have a sword. I have no weapon at all. How can I help?" Stein didn't hear his weak protest he had turned and continued to push through the maze. Viss redoubled his efforts and pushed after him. "How much longer? It seemed like it would last for an eternity." Then it all stopped abruptly. He stepped through the inner portal of the maze into the center chamber to join Stein, the wiz-

ard and the crated creature and it all stopped. The noise was gone. The bolts of lightning stopped and the weakness lifted from him. The quiet hit him like a hammer as hard as the thunderclaps had earlier. It was ominous, like someone had severed the noises with an ax. The wizard stared at Viss with a shocked expression and leaned over to use the respite to gain his breath and strength. Inside the crate an enormous creature stared at him. The image was confusing. It was full twice the size of a normal man and was crouched over as if the open side of the crate was a window that it was peering through. Its skin was a sickly gray and its eyes glowed red with hatred. Its skull was massive and too large for its body. It had massive physical strength. But it also exuded a palpable strength of another kind that made Viss fear it. There was something wrong with this thing. It was an unnatural creation brought straight from the depths of hell. It stared at Viss with its blood red eyes then tilted its head back and sniffed the air with a deep inhalation. The sound of the air rushing through its nostrils was like that of a blacksmith's bellows. "He has come." It spoke with an unnatural voice. That massive mouth, lined with oversized teeth and inhuman tongue, had not been meant to utter human words but what it said was clear enough to understand. Viss stared at it. He was entranced by the human words coming from the very inhuman head. He waited for it to speak again when it stepped into the background of the crate and a man stepped to the front. He was wearing a black tunic and leggings and around his neck, suspended by a leather thong was a jewel that glowed. As if he were reading Viss' thoughts he spoke. "This crate here contained something that was rightly mine and I opened this doorway to retrieve it. Stein spoke out. "Balther, I had my suspicions it was you. You must stop this. It is Madness! The Fulcrum must remain in balance. You will bring down destruction on us all." Balther cocked his head and laughed. "Our ancestors were fools. They did not know how to control it. The nine nexus stones are the key. They will contain it. By taking the one you had kept here I now have five of them. When I have all nine my mastery of the Fulcrum will be complete and the land

will be mine.” The wizard spoke next, fatigue slurring his words. “You are insane.” This verdict irritated Balther. “You have seen but the smallest part of my power wizard. Near me you are a child. Soon enough you will grovel at my feet and beg for mercy.” He laughed again this time and Viss could hear the insanity in his voice. He was truly mad with power. Viss watched the two; his brow furrowed in perplexion. They knew each other. This battle between them has probably raged on for years. Balther turned his attention from Menzler to Viss. His stare curdled Viss’ blood. “I have learned much about you and you are the one. Enter this doorway now. I have need of you. The command was a shock. Why would Balther want him? Why do they all want him? Why is he the one? What the hell is going on? Once again he is stuck in the middle of something he doesn’t understand and it just keeps getting worse. “I will not enter.” “Maybe you will not enter, but you will come to me. And every league you cross will weigh down on you like despair until your will is crushed and you enter into my castle and my plan of your own free will. Yes you are the one. You’re the piece that completes the puzzle. You were visited in the night by one of my aides. You killed it no? Can something that isn’t alive be killed?” Balther’s face changed and he stared at Viss with a triumphant look, his eyes glowing with glee. “And how fares your love?” Viss stiffened at the obtuse mention of Marta. Balther chuckled. “She is being escorted to me as we speak. My aide did not learn everything about you but it did learn something of your life and love. Make haste to join her here at my castle. She left early this morning and if you hurry you can catch her before she arrives. When she arrives I will chain her to my bed.” Balther threw back his head and let out a large belly laugh. It sounded unnatural. It was a pure laugh and it was grounded it evil. Viss could not contain himself any longer; his face had been growing red with anger. He hurled himself at the portal. Stein, anticipating this pulled a dagger from his belt and with a loud snap of his arm hurled it at Balther. In the middle of his leap Viss saw the dagger bury itself in Balther’s chest. Balther screamed as Viss was within an arms length of



reaching but before contact was made everything changed. The room he was leaping into disappeared, his target disappeared and Balther's scream was abruptly cut off. Viss fell tumbling with his arms outstretched into the far wall of an empty crate.

He jumped up crouching to his feet and dazedly looked around. The crate had reverted back to its normal self. He placed his hands on the wooden interior to assure himself it wasn't an illusion and his awareness of the rest of the room came back when the magic user spoke. "The maze has been lowered." Menzler, using the last of his energy had waved his arms vigorously in a complex pattern and dissipated the spell he had cast. His awareness regained, Viss' thoughts returned to Marta. It couldn't be true. That creature that had read through his memories knew everything about him. It knew everything about Marta. It had gotten word to others that must have gone to his home and taken her. How can a man be free when everything about him is known? How can he live knowing that every single moment of his life has been looked at? Even every intimate moment with Marta was looked at; the tender words, the fights and the petty arguments. He ran over to Holz who was still lying on the ground. Rolling him over he placed his hand over Holz's mouth. He was still breathing and still alive. The thing that drained them of energy and their will to live was now gone. It had lived inside the crate sucking at every living thing that passed near and now it was gone. How could Balther use it and keep it so near without feeling its effects. Viss took Holz's sword and bolted for the door. His only thoughts were of Marta's safety. It just couldn't be true. He refused to believe the possibility that she was in danger but a wrenching feeling in his gut was telling him otherwise.

Viss looked over his apartment. It was small with a sleeping room, a living area and a cooking area with a fireplace. It was destroyed. Someone or something had turned everything inside out and upside down. The table and the chairs were tipped over. The pottery dishes and bowls were all broken and strewn about the floor. Everything was

destroyed or broken. There had been a terrible struggle. Drops of blood were everywhere and in the kitchen there was a large red pool soaking into the wooden floor. Viss' gut wrenched even further at the possibility the blood might belong to Marta and that maybe she was injured or killed in the struggle. He rummaged around in the rubble searching for items. In the bedroom he found his backpack and the lock pick set the Guild had given him. He gathered things he would need and quickly stuffed the pack full. They must have taken her this morning and couldn't have much of a head start. The sooner he left the better his chances of catching up with them. His focus was so intense and his thoughts so deep that he didn't notice Stein enter the apartment.

"How can you follow them when you don't know where they are going?" Viss snapped his head up in shock drawing his borrowed sword in the same instant. If Stein had been standing closer when he spoke Viss would have severed his head with a single slice before realizing whom it was. The anxiety of the moment had caused his reflexes to be razor sharp but also dulled his senses. He looked Stein defiantly in the eyes. Glaring at him almost asking him to provoke him. Their wills locked for several seconds then Viss submitted. His shoulders slumped and he sat down on the bed and let the pack slip out of his hand to the floor. "It is a nasty business that you have gotten into but I sense you are key to the health and well being of the land. There is blight upon it and you may play a critical role in its salvation. The black mystery of your past keeps us from discovering your secret. Maybe on your head lies our redemption and this is why Balther seeks you. It does puzzle me why he didn't just kill you. The intruder into your bedchamber had the opportunity. If in your hands lies our redemption then killing you would be the logical and easy thing to do. Maybe in your hands lies our destruction and Balther needs you. Maybe he wishes to bend you to his will. It is obvious that he has plans or need of you. This is why he impels you to him. "I will not be a pawn to this man." The muscles in his jaw tightened with anger and the words slipped out

through clenched teeth. "I will find Marta. Then I will find Balther and kill him." Stein calmly replied to his anger. "You will not gain anything by rushing off unprepared. It is a full fortnight journey on horseback to Balther's castle. The Captain has many resources at his disposal." He held up his hands as if to ward off the questions he knew Viss would fire at him but Viss remained quiet. "I have known Balther for many years. I have watched him slowly poison himself with greed and power lust. These are things that if allowed to enter a man's soul slowly devour it until nothing pure remains. I know where Marta is being taken. It is a long and, in the current state of things, treacherous journey. We should take the remainder of today to prepare ourselves, gather the supplies we need and have horses readied. The Captain will make arrangements that will aid us along the way. I will choose a small party of men to accompany us. If we travel hard, and have some luck we may be able to catch the kidnappers before they arrive at Balther's castle." Stein paused then gave a hard look at Viss. "Then we will wring the life from Balther and return balance to the Fulcrum."

Viss stood up and reached a hand out and grasped Stein's hand firmly. "I will regain my beloved and to the last drop of blood that flows through my veins I swear I will kill the man that has taken her from me." Stein clenched his teeth as if squashing the urge to tell Viss how nearly impossible a task he has set for himself. His teeth displayed his doubt at the statement but his eyes shined brightly with that hope that maybe Viss could bring redemption to a land that was quickly being poisoned and killed. The two of them quickly left the small dwelling and headed back to the Captain's castle. They had much to do before their departure in the morning.



## C H A P T E R 5



Two hours before dawn Stein knocked at his door. Viss had slept very little. His thoughts ran in circles over the same ground. What would happen to Marta? Would he be able to catch up with the party that took her? What did Balther want with her? What did Balther want with him? Was she even still alive? That was a thought that kept creeping into his mind but he kept pushing it out. It couldn't be true. What little sleep he did get was troubled and uneasy. He climbed wearily out of his bed and let Stein in. He lit an oil lamp, put it down on a table and sat back down on the bed. Stein unfolded a parchment of paper he was carrying and sat down on the bed beside Viss. "Everything is prepared." He spoke quietly; his voice mixed with the soft uncrumpling of the parchment, his face grim in the lamplight. He too looked like he hadn't slept all night but it wasn't from worrying. He spent the entire evening making preparations for their journey. "We have horses and supplies waiting for us in the stables." The fatigue he showed in his face didn't show in his voice. It was soft yet strong. "What of the Captain and Holz?"

"They are both weak and would have been drained of life had the nexus stone remained in the crate any longer. We have Balther to thank for their lives. Menzler fared better, even with the battle against the demon. A funny lot those magicians. You don't know how much of their strength is physical or how much is magical. Maybe his body is totally exhausted and now only magic remains. No matter. He seems

reasonably well and will meet us in the stables.” He raised the parchment up for Viss to examine. “This here is a map of the land.” Viss leaned over to look at it in the pale lamplight. Stein’s finger rested at one point on the left side of the map. “From the castle here we have a long journey east.” His finger traced a line east over the parchment and it responded to his burly finger with a whisper of crackling. “A scout from the Captain’s guard has returned to the castle this past evening bringing news of a small party of riders heading east along the main route. They are several leagues from here and their progress shows they have ridden hard for the day. The scout followed them for several leagues then broke off and returned. He reports six men on horseback and another person tied and draped over a seventh horse. Riding as they were, their horses would drop in another day or two. They either have new mounts prepared and will change at some point or they wished only to get an initial distance between us and them and will soon slow to a more manageable pace. Several hours ago a squad of the Captain’s best guard was dispatched with fresh horses. They will change their mounts along the way and may catch up to our quarry. We will take another route. “His hand shifted south on the parchment. We will ride hard to the city of Meersburg where we will sail a boat along the rapids of the Meer River to a point here at Algereth where we should arrive before the kidnappers and we will await them. Viss cocked his head and raised an eyebrow at Stein. “It sounds like a dangerous undertaking. The Meer is a dangerous ride in the spring thaw. The mountain snows now thawing make it treacherous. Many have died along its banks.” Stein had a ready answer to this. “They are riding their horses to the limit and are more than forty leagues from here in just one day. I think they will have the resources to purchase fresh horses as they need them, or they plan on stealing them. If they get new mounts, either way, the squad we dispatched will not catch up with them, but will constantly remain a day’s journey behind them for the full length of the journey—some three hundred leagues. No, we must take another, quicker route, even though more dangerous.” He

rolled up the parchment as Viss nodded his head in acceptance. There never was any doubt that Viss would take the risk. He would take any risk. He just wanted to be sure it was the best plan. Stein grabbed the oil lamp and the two headed out the door toward the stables.

Menzler was waiting for them. He looked haggard and his air of superiority was gone. He looked at Viss and Stein through eyes withdrawn into deep sockets. The ordeal of the day before had pushed him to the limits of his endurance. "Three horses are ready and they are the swiftest in the Captain's stable." His voice was very flat. He spoke with a minimum expenditure of energy. "Where is Roland?" Stein asked the magic user. Before Menzler could respond a voice replied from one of the horse stalls. A slight man wearing a leather vest and leather hat stepped out into the lamplight. His hair was dark, his leather jerkin and belt a bit too large for him. His eyes were bright and quick and he looked at the party with a sideways glance of his head and a quick quiz-zical half grin. Black curls peeked out from under the cap, which was too large for his head. He gave a quick bow and a dagger at his belt momentarily glinted in the lamplight. Viss couldn't tell whether the bow was serious or in jest. "This is Roland." Stein introduced him to Viss. He is a cook here at the castle, but he has many other skills that may be helpful in our quest. He will join us and Menzler will not be going. He does not have the strength for it. Menzler stepped forward. "I am not as young as I used to be." He paused and looked at them all as if in expecting them to argue with him. Then he continued. "The sun will soon rise so we should make haste. This is from the Captain." He held out a leather pouch the size of a fist. Stein took it and put his hand inside. Viss heard the tinkle of coins. It quickly disappeared into Stein's tunic. "It should be enough to purchase passage on a boat and more horses thereafter. If you spend it carefully you should not need more. It is quite a handsome sum." Again the wizard reached into his coat and pulled out an item. He held it out directly toward Viss. "It is a book of lore. You will find the story of the Fulcrum and nexus stones in here. There is also other lore that may help you to understand your

plight and the plight of the land. The horses have been fed arrowtooth root. It will give them stamina and strength beyond their normal capacities. It will not harm them, but they can be driven to exhaustion and death. Roland has a pouch with more. In a time of urgent need a human can consume it, but under peril. Strength and stamina are not the only effects it has on a man and too much can kill.” Sensing the send off was over the three men climbed onto the horses and waited while Menzler struggled to open the stable doors. During the pause Roland cocked his head and cackled. “The Sword, the Cook, and the key are off to save the world.” He tipped his cap back, kicked his horse into a gallop and the three riders were through the doors and out into the early morning darkness. As they rode hard into the first glimmers of eastern light Viss found himself wondering exactly what Roland meant by calling him the Key.

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The knife that Stein had thrown dug itself deep into Balther’s chest and pierced his heart. The violence of the blow knocked him to the ground. But before any blood was spilled his head hit the stone floor and he was knocked unconscious. Instantly the portal he was holding open closed and the spell he had cast to call the demon ended. The demon disappeared back to where it had come. For Balther this proved to be a stroke of luck. If the portal had remained open Viss would have completed his leap onto Balther and would have insured he was dead. But the portal had closed and Balther lay still on the stone floor. No mortal could have survived the impalation. But Balther, in a sense, was no longer mortal. He wore around his neck, suspended on a leather cord one of the nexus stones, the stone that wielded the power over life and death and it would not let its possessor die. A dark red light ignited deep inside the stone. It crawled over his body and seeped into the knife wound. The knife pushed out of his chest and fell limply onto his stomach. His heart began beating again and after a few strong beats his



eyes opened. Balther sat up then stood up and the knife clattered to the stone floor. He picked up the knife and held it high in the air. With the other hand he grasped the nexus stone around his neck. He laughed a booming laugh that echoed off the empty stone walls in the empty room of his castle.

Viss, Stein, and Roland rode their mounts hard through most of the morning. Viss, who had ridden horses all of his adult life, marveled at their stamina. Even the strongest of mounts he had ridden never had this much strength. After years of riding, a man becomes tuned to the horse just as the horse becomes tuned to the man. They almost become one. Each knows much about the other. The horse can smell the moods of the man and the man can sense the mood of the horse. To Viss the horse felt strong. He could feel it's desire to continue running. But he knew it was an unnatural feeling. When the arrowtooth root wore off his mount would feel the full effect of the long run. It could even kill it.

Shortly after leaving the castle they had angled their path southeast, making a direct line for Meersburg. The terrain was mostly pasture with copses of woodlands. The spring sun quickly burned the dew off the grasses. The initial fever of haste that had initially driven Viss had long wore off and been replaced by stolid determination. Time and again as the morning grew his mind raced along with the gallop of the horses and his thoughts returned to Marta. She was a pure and simple young woman. She didn't deserve to be caught up in this mess that he had caused. His thought reviewed the many times that she had chastised him for being a member of the thieves' Guild. One night after a long argument she told him he should return to the Captain's employ as a soldier. Military life in times of peace was not that bad. At least she would have him home at night. But a thief's life meant she spent many nights alone in bed. When he tried to explain that he didn't steal items like a common thief he stole information she wouldn't listen. To her having him at home was more important. "I would prefer you be a sta-

ble boy. At least you would be home every evening. And I wouldn't spent every sleepless evening worrying about you." She was right. She was always right. Maybe a simple life was what really mattered. If a man found a way to put bread on the table then it was enough. If the bread wasn't the freshest and the wine was watered down it didn't matter. They were together and that was what really mattered.

When the sun reached midday they stopped to rest the horses and have something to eat. After watering the horses they let them free to graze and sat with their backs against a large tree. Roland set about digging food out of one of the saddle packs. He had to chase after one of the horses to get it. Stein cautioned him against getting too comfortable. "Don't dismount any more gear, we won't be breaking long. If we ride through the night we should make Meersburg by early morning. The shipping Guild only allows ships to leave the ports in the morning. It keeps the shipping flow on the river organized. If we don't make it to Meersburg in the early morning all the ships will have left and we will have to wait until the following morning to find passage. I do not want to lose a day in this fashion. If we are lucky we will find passage on an eastbound ship by sunrise. After boarding, there will be plenty of time to rest." In response to Stein's command Roland grumbled something about not being able to prepare a proper meal without going through more of the horses packs but he acquiesced and returned to the tree with just the one he had already taken from the horse. After having some bread and cold barley soup they quickly broke camp, gathered the horses and continued their ride to the southeast.

They could see the lights of Meersburg from several leagues off. The men and the horses were now exhausted. They had been pushing the limits of endurance for one full day and now almost one full night pausing only occasionally to water the horses and stretch their backs and legs. For the past several leagues the horses had walked. The arrow-tooth root that Menzler had given them had long worn off and the horses were showing signs of serious fatigue. These last few leagues were going to be the longest. Viss tried to shake the tired feeling from

his head. The rhythmic striding of his mount kept trying to seduce him into sleep. Viss looked ahead to Stein who was several horse lengths before him. Roland was riding behind him. He didn't turn to look but could hear the steps of his horse. A moment later his horse walked right up beside Stein's. He didn't see Stein stop and raise his hand signaling for him and Roland to stop. He glanced back. Roland was more alert than he was. He had almost immediately stopped his horse several strides back. Stein sat with his back straight and tense; his one arm still raised in a signal for Viss to stop. Viss couldn't make out his face in the darkness but by the slant of his head he appeared to be listening. Viss' ring of awareness expanded quickly. He listened to the woods around him. They were riding through what appeared to be a large copse of trees. Suddenly everything was suspicious. Every shadow became a hiding place for kidnappers. Viss slowly exhaled. In the tension of the moment he had stopped breathing. He took control of it. He inhaled, waited four heartbeats, then slowly exhaled. This was a calming exercise taught to thieves. It was a skill much needed when a man spent his nights not wanting to be seen or heard. He quickly relaxed as the night air cooled the sweat that suddenly appeared on his skin. His hearing sharpened and expanded further and further out from his horse. He listened for any sound. His senses were now sharp enough to hear the turning of an owl's neck or to see the glint of a star in it's eyes. But he heard nothing at all. Nothing except the sounds that his comrades and their horses made and this was exactly what was wrong. Everything was quiet, maybe too quiet. There should be small noises that fill every night; crickets chirping, insects buzzing, small rodents scurrying about, bats swooping around after prey. A keen ear would have heard all of these things but to realize these things were missing takes an even keener ear. He continued his breathing exercises and peered around slowly—not to focus his eyes in any direction but to turn his ears in all directions. His horse snorted and stamped as a faint thrumming noise broke the silence. It grew quickly louder until something passed by them directly overhead at treetop level. It was the

sound of great leathery wings. Something passed slowly by overhead. He looked up but didn't see it. It passed out of sight over the tree line. The same sound came again and he looked up quickly to see another creature passing along the same route. It was human in shape with great leathery wings twice the span of a man's arms. In the darkness Viss couldn't make out much detail but the creature was darker than the slowly lightening sky. He saw it as a silhouette as it flew by. It was beating its wings in a slow arc and it reeked of evil. There was unnaturalness about it; it was more than just its misshapen form. It gave off an aura of evil. The horses sensed it sooner but now the men could sense it. A third creature came slowly into view. This one was flying slower its wings beating a slow almost labored rhythm. Viss craned his neck. This one was carrying something. It had a person in its grasp. He strained to make out some detail. The two figures were struggling. The extra weight caused this one to fly much closer to the ground. It was barely clearing the tops of the trees and it was carrying a woman. She struggled silently against its strong grasp. It kept her securely clamped against its chest. The fervor of her struggling made it apparent that she would rather plunge to her death than be carried away by the beast. The three men were all frozen by the incredulity of the scene. None had ever seen such a thing and it took several heartbeats to comprehend. The three creatures had kidnapped a woman. By the time they had registered the reality of this situation the creatures had all moved out of sight. The sound of their wings no longer heard. During the event the three riders had all slowly turned their mounts around. Now Viss was facing Roland who turned around and looked at him. For a long pause they looked at each other. Their pause was broken by the sound of Stein's horse galloping past them. He had taken up the chase, following the fading sound beating leather wings.

Their black skin against the night sky made it nearly impossible to follow them. Viss only caught glimpses of the figures through gaps in the treetops. It was only the sounds of their wings that made it possible at all. Stein stopped often, waving for Roland and Viss to stop so he

could listen. Then he would jaunt off in another direction. It seemed that the creatures were not flying in a straight line but almost circling around as if looking for something. They did this several times until one time they stopped to listen and heard nothing. Viss strained his ears to hear over the heavy breathing of his mount but heard nothing. They couldn't have just disappeared. It had seemed like they were gaining on the chase. The sound of their wings had gotten distinctly stronger the last few times they stopped. Stein had been guiding them well. He looked to Stein just as the man pulled up along side him. "They have landed in a clearing just ahead. We will go on foot." The three of them dismounted quietly and silently walked stealthily through the brush several paces from each other. Viss could see a clearing of the trees up ahead. Moonlight filtered weakly through to them. Stein lay down on the ground and crawled through the brush to the end of the tree line. Viss and Roland followed cautiously behind. Stein stopped and waited for Viss and Roland to join him at the edge of the clearing. "We have some luck. The breeze blows directly at us. If those creatures have a keen sense of smell they shouldn't be able to detect us. We may be able to move closer while they are occupied. About a hundred paces away in the center of the small clearing the leather wings had landed and the third one had released the woman. They were standing around her in a circle. She tried to run but one of the creatures pushed her down. She got up and tried to run again and another of them pushed her down again. She stood still and they all tormented her by hovering over her and clawing at her with their hands. They were taunting her, tearing her clothes off. When all of the garments were shredded from her body the game turned evil. They started pawing at her body and grabbing at her breasts. They were around her in a loose circle and one at a time each one came in and made advances at her. Soon the game would turn very badly. She sensed this and stopped trying to protect herself from their advances and broke into a frenzy of motion trying to break free of their circle.

Stein crawled on his belly out into the field. Viss and Roland followed behind. They quickly got closer to the party. Viss could now see that their intention was clear. They were for the moment just enjoying themselves. But Viss could see their enormous members dangling between their legs stiffening with excitement. They were going to rape her. The creatures were human in shape and size but their engorged members were inhumanely large like those of wild animals—the size of a man’s forearm. The thought of this woman being violated sickened Viss. It was a horrible enough thing when a woman was violated by a man but to be raped by evil spawn such as these? It made his stomach churn and his blood boil in anger. He jumped to his feet. “STOP” He screamed with all his strength. A small part of him was rescuing Marta.

Everyone in the field was electrified. For several long moments nobody moved. With animal like instincts the flying demons normally would have flown quickly into the air as a defensive reflex but the interruption was so startling that it went beyond instinct and the command to stop froze them in place. The surprise was so complete that to move would have brought attention and maybe attack to them. Stein slowly stood up. “Let the woman alone and be on your way back to hell from whence you came.” Roland crawled away and back into the tree line. Stein looked sideways at Viss. “Well you have taken the element of surprise away from us.” The three creatures recovered from their initial shock, looked slowly around, reassessed the situation then folded their wings and walked slowly and confidently toward Viss and Stein. The women who now lay on the ground watched the three leave her. Her jaw sticking tautly out in rebellion. She apparently had more confidence in Viss than he had in himself. Viss drew his sword as Stein did and carefully observed and made mental notes as the beasts approached. They were agile. He already knew this from watching them torment the naked woman. They also had the ability to launch very quickly into the air, which added a very dangerous dimension to their attack. As Viss walked closer he could see that they were also tall—a full head taller than even Stein. This meant they had a long arm

reach. He would have to keep a careful distance if this ended in a melee. That was enough of their strengths. In the space of another heartbeat he noted three of their weaknesses. First off they carried no weapons. Viss grasped his sword tighter as if to reassure himself that it truly gave him an advantage. Second, they were arrogant. They walked with confidence directly at him and Stein and he hoped it was because of arrogance and not because the creatures knew from past battles that humans were easy prey. Third, they were slender. They didn't have much body mass. No doubt heavy bodies would make difficult flying. So without body mass they probably were not very strong. If he could get a firm grasp on one of them he could overpower it with his strength. But they probably knew this and would be very elusive. Stein leaned toward him. "They have very delicate wings don't they?" This was a tip. Yes, another weakness. Their wings must be thin and fairly delicate. They would protect them at all cost. If one of these creatures couldn't fly it would die. Viss felt a little better. Maybe there was some hope in this situation. It felt good to have Stein at his side. "Don't come any closer." Stein rumbled in his deep voice. Up until this point in the whole episode none of the creatures had uttered spoken a word. They had been totally quiet. Their only utterance had been the sharp whistling of their wings. They stopped five paces away and stood three in a row. The center one flexed its wings slowly and cackled in glee its voice high pitched like a boy child except brought up an octave. "You've come to rescue the maiden." It cackled again before continuing its speech. "Next you will tell us that if we let her go we can fly away with our lives." At this all three broke out in a loud cackling. Stein flinched. It was as if these were the exact words he was going to use next but the creature had stolen them from his mouth. The evil cackling made the hair on Viss' neck stand erect. He felt his grip grow slippery with sweat around his sword. "We will trade." The demon in the center spoke out again. Its high voice a sickening lilt. "We will give you the woman in exchange." "We will not barter with demons. Let her go and you can fly away with your lives." Stein's repetition of the

statement angered the three demons and they all fluttered their wings. "Do not mock me." Its voice grew more shrill. "That one beside you, he is clouded to me, but you old warrior I see YOU very clearly. The demon raised its wings slowly and beat the air lifting itself gracefully up and spoke again. "Your life is laid out before me as the pages of a book." It hovered in the air with its feet at eye level. "And I can see the day and means of your death. This is something that every mortal fears yet wishes to know." He paused. "But once disclosed every mortal wishes he hadn't learned it." The slow beating of its wings five paces away caused a soft breeze to blow on the men's faces. The carefully orchestrated drama put a fear into Viss and for a brief moment it worked. He felt small in this great world. He felt meaningless. The little things that he wanted and chased after were of no importance. The world would go on without him when he died and wouldn't even notice. Viss glanced at the other two creatures. He had been momentarily lost in thought which was a very dangerous thing because only a fraction of a heartbeat was long enough for a close quarters attack to be lethal. He quickly wiped the sweat from his sword hand. "Do you wish to know? Do you wish to know the time and means of your death?" Stein remained silent at the challenge and glanced at the woman across the field. Her eyes were open wide in horror. He faltered and took one small step backward. The weight of this knowledge if it were true would burden him; yet a morbid sense of curiosity held his tongue. A small yet strong part of him wanted to know. His self-discipline was waning and by not speaking he was allowing the beast to continue. His mind flew off on a fantasy. If he knew the time and place of his death maybe he could avoid it and live forever. He stood entranced by the thoughts and words of the demon. The beast raised its hands toward the dark sky. It smiled exposing sharp teeth. "The time and place of your death IS NOW!" In less than the span of a heartbeat the creature drew a dagger from its waist and darted as swift as a crack of lightning straight at Stein's heart. Viss knew the words were only a ruse. It could no more see the future than he could. It had only used trickery to mes-



merize Stein. It was a trick that even the youngest of magicians knew, but it worked and Stein stood frozen long enough for the attack to take place. Viss watched in horror as the blade headed straight for his companion's heart. A bowstring twanged sharply behind him. Viss didn't see the arrow fly through the air; he only heard its whistle and the sharp crack as it penetrated into the flying creature's skull. At such close range the force of it jolted the instantly dead body off of its intended course just enough to miss Stein's heart. The dagger buried itself into his left shoulder and the two figures tumbled to the ground connected together by flailing limbs and a cold steel blade.

The other two creatures sprang into action by beating their wings furiously to gain height. Viss rushed to the nearest one and swung his sword in a wide long arc. The creature popped into the air and avoided his blade by the length of a finger then swooped back in. The talons on its feet reached for his face. Another arrow flew through the air and another crack sounded as it crashed through this beast's chest. It screamed weakly and abruptly fell right on top of Viss. It weighed no more than a child and Viss shrugged it off easily. The third creature, seeing that the battle was now lost, rose quickly into the air and flew itself directly across the field at the woman. She cowered as it made a quick grasping pass at her then continued flying on. It did not want to be pierced by an arrow in the same manner as its comrades. The three men hurried across the field to her. Scratched and bruised she sat on the ground and looked at them. Viss fired questions at her. "What happened? Where did they take you from? Meersburg? Are there more of them?" She didn't answer any of the questions. She just gave them a vacant stare as Roland joined them with extra clothes he had taken from one of the saddlebags. She took the clothes and quickly dressed. She displayed no hint of modesty as the men watched in the growing morning light. Stein looked at Viss. "She is either in shock or is a mute." Those evil creatures probably took her from Meersburg, which is where we are heading so we will take her with us." Roland continued to talk to her as they walked back to the horses but to no avail. She just

stared at him blankly without responding or even acknowledging that she understood. Her presence sent a stabbing pain into Viss' heart. He looked at her; her skin was soft and white and she reminded him of Marta but in his current state of mind any woman would remind him of Marta. They climbed up on the nervous horses. Stein pulled her up and sat her down behind him and they continued their ride toward Meersburg. "What were those damn things" Stein spoke aloud as if to the whole group yet to nobody in particular. The woman tightened her grasp around his waist as if maybe she understood what he was saying and the mention of them brought back a chill. "Things are quickly going sour in the land. Those abominations were either created by some perverse mind or they were summoned from some hell. In either case the Fulcrum's power is being abused and I can't see it getting any better. Things will only get worse. We need to find some answers. Maybe Meersburg can tell us something.

Meersburg is a very busy river port and an important stop for ships traveling along the Meer between larger cities. It was very early in the morning when they entered the main gates and the town was already vibrant and alive with people milling about their business. Peasants were heading out to the fields and people were starting out on their morning tasks. They passed through the marketplace and Viss was warmed by the rich smells of cooking fish and meat. His stomach rumbled. Stein looked over his shoulder at the woman. "Do you live here? Were you taken from Meersburg?" The woman just looked at him with a blank stare then clutched his waist tighter and leaned her head against his back. Stein led the group on. He knew his way around the town and after a few turns up and down side streets they stopped in front of an Inn called the Golden Lion. They dismounted and unpacked some of the gear then a stableboy took the horses around to the back.

Someone had thrown open all the shutters and the inside of the Inn was bright and cheery. They made their way to a large wooden table

and sat down but Stein went in to the kitchen in search of the innkeeper. The three sat glumly. They were too tired to talk and were just glad to be sitting on something that wasn't constantly rocking. After a few minutes of quiet sitting a short stocky woman came out of the kitchen with a large platter of breakfast foods and drinks and in a matter of seconds they were eating heartily. Just as they finished their meal Stein came out of the kitchen with another man. "This is Varga. He is the owner of this Inn and an old friend of mine. I have explained to him the urgency of our situation and he has offered to help us in any way he can. He and I are going to the port to find us passage on a boat. The three of you should go upstairs and get a little sleep." The stable-boy, who had been listening for his cue, came out of the kitchen and announced his assistance. "I will bring you to your rooms." Viss and Roland grabbed their belongings, and bringing the woman, followed him upstairs.

The room was small and had four bunks. Two bunks on the left wall and two on the right. Roland and Viss chose bunks and lay their packs down on them. The woman lay down on a bunk and went right to sleep. "Do you suppose she is mute or maybe just in shock from last night?" Roland asked Viss; hoping Viss would settle it. "I don't know, she seems to be recovering well from the experience of last night. She ate well and she is already asleep. And, she seems to have taken a liking to Stein. She doesn't seem to be in shock. I think maybe she just can't talk."

"She has taken a liking to Stein. He is quite the handsome man." Roland chuckled around the statement. "I don't think she is from Meersburg. She didn't seem to recognize anything. If this were her home she would have tried to let us know in some way; even if she can't speak. Did you notice her eyes? Viss shot him a glance of incomprehension. Puzzlement furrowed his brow. "They are two different colors. One is blue and the other is green." Roland smiled then broke out in a song about a boy who can't take his eyes off a girls breasts.

‘Her eyes are green like the sky, or are they blue like the fields’ He shot a sideways glance at Viss and smirked.

Viss woke up to Roland shaking him. “How long have I been asleep?” “Maybe two hours.” He rubbed his eyes, the flesh around his right eye was still a little tender but his vision was clear. “Stein is downstairs. He has found us a passage on a ship heading east and it leaves within the hour.” He spoke as he packed his things then paused and motioned for Viss to get up and make haste in his own packing. Viss shot a glance at the girl who was still sleeping. “What about her?”

“I have spoken with the Innkeepers wife. No woman has been missing. She is not from here and there has been no incidences with flying demons. When I described them to her she looked at me like I was mad. But she has agreed to take care of the woman. She will let her live and work here in the Inn. Make haste the boat departs shortly. The girl sat up abruptly in her cot. Seeing the other two packing she slipped on her leather shoes and stood up as if ready to go. “You’re not from this town are you?” Viss spoke softly. It was more of a statement than a question. The woman shook her head slowly as if she understood. He took a step closer to her. This was the first time she had responded to anything they said to her. “Where do you come from and how did those creatures catch you?” At this mention of the creatures her eyes grew wider. The memory of them was very vivid in her mind. Viss could see her reaction. She couldn’t talk but she understood everything he said. Roland interrupted. “The Innkeepers wife has a job for you here at the Inn. You can live here in one of the rooms and earn your keep by working as a barmaid. Viss and I will be leaving with Stein on a boat this morning.” She shook her head in an emphatic no and ran out of the room and down the stairs leaving Viss and Roland to stare at each other. “I don’t think she wants to work here?” Viss looked at him carefully. “I don’t think that’s it. I think she wants to come with us. She doesn’t want to be parted from us or from Stein.” They finished their packing and went downstairs. Stein was eating at a table and the mute girl was sitting beside him grasping his arm tightly. Stein looked

up at them as they came down the stairs. "Looks like we will be taking her along with us. She has been telling me for the past ten minutes how she would miss the two of you terribly." He threw back his head and laughed between bites from the food piled on his plate. "We tried to talk her out of it but she only shakes her head. The most we can get is that she doesn't come from here." Stein grunted. "She is a puzzle, one that we will figure out another time. For now sit down and eat." Viss and Roland joined Stein and the woman at the table. Reaching under his vest Stein pulled out a map and rolled it out on the table. I have secured us travel on a ship sailing the Meer all the way to Terake. I've seen her, she is a good craft and the Captain is charging us a fair price. Our horses are being prepared and there is room for them on the ship so we will take them along.

"What about her?" Roland pointed at the woman locked against Stein. "It seems that she will be joining us. Maybe it was just chance that we happened into her rescue but I have a feeling that there is something more to the puzzle than she presents. She comes from nowhere, no home, carried by creatures from nowhere on this Earth, she can't speak, yet I always feel that she is trying to tell me something. I think that if we can reveal the puzzle she represents we will gain something. Yes, she comes with us and maybe along our journey some town or area of the land will spark her into talking. Today we sail aboard a ship down the river Meer and she goes with us." Just as he finished, the stableboy came in the front door and announced that the horses were packed and ready. Stein pushed away from the table and led the group to the kitchen where they thanked the Innkeeper and his wife for their hospitality. Then they left the Inn, mounted their horses, and rode down the cobblestone streets to the port.



## C H A P T E R 6



Viss expected something smaller. She was a big ship, full masted with plenty of room on board to hold a crew and plenty of room underneath to hold cargo. “That’s her. The Tamara.” Stein pointed. “Her name is the Tamara and she leaves this morning to make a direct run down river with a full cargo hold. She set into Meersburg three days ago carrying lumber. They picked up dried fish and seafood back inland. The ship has a regular route between Meersburg and Terake. The Captain has made the journey several score times. He will make good time. “Viss looked over the ship. She was large. A man could walk forty paces on her deck. The mast seemed to knife up into the clouds while deckhands were busy scurrying about making her ready for sail.

The four of them dismounted onto the dock and Stein called out to the deckhands. “Permission to board the Tamara?” One of the deckhands, a wiry man with a face wrinkled by years of sun and saltwater responded. “My name is Finch. I am the first mate. Come aboard, the Captain’s expecting you.” He came down to the loading plank and escorted them on. “Fetch these horses and bring them below.” He yelled to some of the nearby sailors. We will have the packs removed and brought to your rooms. I will show you to them.” They walked to the aft deck and climbed down a steep set of steps. Small rooms lined both sides of a very narrow walkway and the men had to tilt their shoulders to the side so as not to get stuck between the wooden walls.

They passed several doors and finally, at the end of the corridor the sailor opened the last two doors, one on the left and another on the right. "These are your two rooms, divide them any way you like, but there are only two bunks in each room. He gave the woman a quick glance and cracked a wide grin. "The senior sailors stay in the other rooms but not to worry; they have very strict orders not to bother you." Again he grinned at the woman. "Death at sea is a horrible fate. If any of the sea scum so much as looks at the lady here you let me know and I will personally have him thrown overboard." Viss looked at him carefully, trying to decipher whether he was serious or not. Maybe he would throw an out of line deckhand overboard. But he doubted that on this river it would be a death sentence. More likely just a prompt firing from the job without pay. "The Captain will see you later in the day but for now he is very busy. He has bills of lading to tend to and plenty of paperwork to complete for the journey. After you have unpacked and settled into your rooms feel free to look about the ship but stay out of the crew's way. They also have much to do. It is easy to get hurt if you don't know the ways of a sailing vessel. I will send someone to find you when the Captain's ready to see you. You won't go far." With that he grinned one final time and squeezed past them back down the corridor on his bowed legs. His gait was uncomfortable as if he couldn't walk normal unless the ship was rocking back and forth on water. Stein pointed to the room on the left. "She and I will be taking this room." There was a slight gruffness to his voice as if he were embarrassed to make the declaration that he and the woman were now a couple. The woman looked up and stared at him. A small smile flickering across her face. The declaration had sealed something between them. It was his admission that they were together. Roland shot a sideways glance at Viss and when he caught Viss looking back he winked and opened the door to the room on the right. He had to pull the door handle. It opened out, a narrow door into a narrow hallway. The four of them moved in an uncomfortable circle to allow Viss and Roland to enter the room. After entering and closing the door Viss



heard Stein open the other door opposite them. The two doors could not be opened at the same time without interfering with each other.

Viss surveyed the room. It was barely four paces deep. A double bunk on the left wall, a small table and chest on the right wall and just enough room for a man to walk straight down the middle to the back wall and look out a small circular glass window. Roland dropped his things on the top bunk and jumped up. Viss walked straight through to the window. The glass was thick and distorted the view of the port. He could see blurred shapes of ships, the dock and an outline of Meersburg. He took a closer look at the window itself. Being high up on the ship it wouldn't have to be watertight but would have to be strong so as to resist the constant beating of wind and waves. He turned and sat on the lower bunk leaving his pack on the floor. Laying back he looked up at the bunk above. He could see the depression of Roland's already sleeping body on the mattress. The wooden walls of the room muffled the sound of Roland's snoring. Above deck he could hear voices. It sounded like Finch was barking commands. He felt something bump the vessel. Or more likely it was the vessel stretching its wooden muscles in preparation of departure and bumping the dock. It had been a very long night and his muscles were sore his mind clouded. Sitting erect on a horse for such a long journey felt more strenuous than if he had walked. His thoughts wandered weakly. How was Marta faring? And how did he get mixed up in all of this? Everything seemed to be heading for disaster. Powers were shifting in the land. Creatures only heard of in fairy tales were now roaming free and wreaking havoc. Power was being corrupted, the world was changing and he felt like there was a hurricane brewing and he was standing in the very eye of it. Where he stood was reasonably calm but a step in any direction meant disaster and death not just to him but to many others. Balther is insane. If it is true that he has possession of the Fulcrum and he is collecting the nine nexus stones then the earth is doomed. The fairy tale says it took ten times ten thousand years for the world to heal the wounds it received the last time the Fulcrum was shifted. If this is true

then the devastation must have been enormous and almost complete. He didn't even have a clear idea of what exactly the Fulcrum was let alone face it and stop it. But he took solace in remembering that Stein had told him that once they were aboard a ship he would have time to talk and answer his questions as best he could. He fought off fatigue and picked his pack up off the floor. He rummaged around and found the book that Menzler gave him. He hefted it heavily and looked closely at it for the first time. The cover read: "Dark Lore of the Earth". The pages were made of a tough leather-like but thin material and felt oily. They were covered with a light sheen of some type of oil to keep them from getting brittle. The first page was a table of contents: "A history of darkness, The Fulcrum, the nine nexus, creatures of darkness and summons." He carefully flipped through the pages looking for the section on creatures of darkness. He had already encountered several; maybe he could gain some insight. The book was replete with drawings and diagrams. As he passed them one jumped out at him and he froze. It was a rendering of the creature that he saw in the crate back at the Captain's castle. It was the one that had battled with Menzler. It had an overly large skull, a thick muscular body, penetrating eyes and large nostrils. "An Orgrath, one of the greater minions of darkness, possessing enormous physical strength and durability, immune to most types of magical assault with the ability to wield lesser magical spells such as lightning. Keen sense of smell but poor eyesight and lacking in intelligence. It is bound to serve its summoner. It is best suited to tracking because of its keen sense of smell. Viss flipped through some more pages. There were drawings and descriptions of all sorts of creatures. Many of which were human in appearance. Others were not even vaguely human. This book was very wide ranging Viss thought to himself and it was going to take many hours of reading and studying to digest even a small portion of it. He carefully closed it and put it back in his pack. Glancing out the small window he saw a small ship passing by. Because of his limited view he couldn't gain any perspective so couldn't tell whether it was the other boat that was moving or the one

he was on. He stretched and felt his body begin to uncoil. The knots in his back relaxed and he fell to sleep with the sounds of the boat creaking and Roland snoring in the bunk above.

He was dreaming and in his dream he could see Marta; her hair was disheveled and her clothes were tattered and dirty. She has gone through a terrible ordeal, her eyes puffy and red. She was sitting inside a small wooden box with her legs pulled up and her arms wrapped around her ankles. There was no opening in the box but he could see into it. She reached up and tapped on the top. Tap, tap, and tap. It was very weak as if she knew no one could hear her but she had to do something if not just for herself. Viss couldn't bear the anguish. To see her suffering, looking for help. He screamed out her name. She needs him and he can't respond. He has no body and no voice. He can only watch her misery. She looked up at him as if she heard his scream. His heart began to race. The anguish was replaced by hope. He screamed her name again. She paused and cocked her head, balled her hands up into fists then pounded at the sides of the box. He woke up. It took him a moment to get his bearings. He looked around the small room. Sunlight was pouring through the small window. There was a knocking at the door. It sounded exactly the same way Marta had pounded on the box. Tap, tap, and tap. "Are you awake?" A muffled voice called through the wooden door. "Finch here. The Captain asks that you eat with him in his quarters." "I hear you. We are awake." Viss kicked his legs up, pushing on the supine form of Roland through the mattress above him. "We will be with the Captain immediately. Thankyou." Finch grumbled something from behind the door then the two men heard his footsteps go quickly away down the narrow hall.

Roland and Viss huddled into the hall and knocked on Stein's door. "Stein are you in there?" Viss called out and after several more knocks Roland declared they must have already gone to the Captain's room. They wound their way out of the inside of the ship and up onto the deck. The Tamara was well on her down the Meer. The shores to both

left and right were distant but discernible. They both looked west to the aft of the ship. That was the direction they had come from and Meersburg was nowhere in sight. Viss couldn't tell whether they had traveled a league or a hundred leagues but the sun was in that direction starting to get low in the sky, which meant it, was already late afternoon. It would be setting in a few hours. The exhaustion from the long ride the night before had lay them both out like rocks for the better portion of the day. They moved on looking about the ship and after getting directions from one of the deckhands they made their way to the front of the ship and back again below deck. This time they went through a different door than the one that took them to their room. They knocked on an ornate door that they assumed was the Captain's. A deep voice that had been talking inside paused then called them in. The cabin was large by boat standards. A tall, gangly man with a long beard and large hands waved them inside. Finch was standing at the far end of the room near a doorway with curtains in front of it. Through there was probably the Captain's sleeping quarters. Stein and the mute woman were sitting on a bench with a table in front of them. The woman had one hand clamped tightly on Stein's bicep. Everyone had a mug either in his hand or in front of him.

"Come in. Come in. I am Mastik the Captain, and this is the love of my life Tamara." He waved his hands in a grandiose gesture of affection for his ship then continued with his speech, obviously enjoying it a little too much. "Yes the Tamara, the one great love of my live, the woman who has for more than a fortnight of years never once betrayed me and always remained on an even keel no matter how stormy the waters or how hard the demands I put on her." He grinned wide, a mischievous twinkle coming to his eyes. "One of these days you will fill her bays with too much lumber and she will sink to the bottom of the river putting you and herself out of your misery." A woman's voice called out from behind the curtain then stepped out.

Her hair was long and black and she was wearing a black dress of a simple cut. But this simplicity of hair and dress was offset by the jew-

elry she wore. Each arm had several bangles and bracelets of different precious metals and her neck held several more. “Ahhh yes, my other wife Irina.” The Captain said then bellowed a laugh. “The other true love of my life. All the jewelry she wears is a symbol. He paused then looked at Viss and Roland. “A symbol of how well Tamara has treated me. Irina is as slender as an arrow and so frail that I fear she would be tossed about the ship in heavy seas and puncture the hull so I weigh her down with jewels and precious metals. It is better than keeping it in the strongest of locked boxes. Try getting a hand near any of it and she would bite it clear off.” With that he bellowed another laugh. Irina made a mock chomping motion at him with her jaw as if to bite off the remarks. “You will regret those remarks dearly this evening when you are sleeping out on the deck of your beloved barge.” She walked out to him and placed her hands about his neck and he responded in a very throaty voice lowered in volume. “M’lady I would puncture the hull myself ere I miss one single night of your tenderness beside me.” Irina smiled in victory and kissed him quickly on the cheek. After the moment passed he called to Finch. “Get the newcomers some mugs and wine then fetch us all supper from the galley. We need to continue our talk.” Irina sat down at the table and Viss and Roland joined them.

Mastik started the conversation. “True what Stein here has been saying. Something is amiss in the land. I have been running up and down the Meer for many years now and as little as five years ago trading was good. There was always plenty of food from the ocean to haul up river and the return trip the same with lumber. But there has been a blight on the forests these past few years and the older trees have been dying; rotting from the inside out. It is the same with the fish. The fishermen have been complaining about empty nets. The fish haven’t been running on their same migratory routes. I haven’t heard any stories of strange creatures of the like Stein here describes, but I don’t doubt the truth in it. Everything seems to be off kilter, even the weather. Used to be a time when a man could work a fair day and have something to show for it but not of late. It’s as if the whole world is off balance.” Viss

gave him a startled look then looked at Stein. It was as if he knew the whole story of the Fulcrum. The whole group remained quiet, waiting for him to say more. It was as if Mastik had put his finger on a hot stove without knowing it and they were all waiting for his scream of pain. Here was a man who had spent his whole life watching the flow of the river and the people and the goods they carried. The river was an enormous artery carrying blood through the system of the world and Mastik could see that something was clogging the flow and choking it off. He just couldn't see what that something was. He could feel it, maybe sense it on a basic level but he didn't know the cause of it. If he did know the cause of it he wouldn't know what to do about it. Viss thought that maybe he should tell him about the Fulcrum. Maybe if everyone knew and believed it then something could be done. He grabbed his wine, took a large gulp for courage and watched Mastik stare blankly at his own wine goblet. He must be thinking about the plight in trade. Everyone remained quiet, each thinking his own thoughts. While trying to work up the courage to broach the subject Viss looked at Stein but he gained no help from the man's blank expression.

"How long will our trip down river take?" Roland broke the silence with a question aimed at Mastik who looked up from his drink happy to find a reason to change the subject. "If the winds stay favorable we should put into the port at Terake in about four days. Viss did some calculating. That would give them time to scout for Marta's kidnappers. If they haven't added any numbers to their party they should be able to form an ambush and rescue her unharmed. It sounded simple but his stomach knotted at the thought. A thousand things could go wrong. He wasn't worried about the potential battle but by the fact that if they realized they were being ambushed in a rescue attempt they could slit her throat just to foil it. He looked to his wine again but this time the thought of another sip made his stomach curdle. Again someone broke the silence. This time it was Irina. She pointed her hand at Stein and the woman and the gold on her wrist jingled softly in the

silence. “She doesn’t speak does she?” Stein shook his head. “She’s been with us only a day and hasn’t uttered a word, hasn’t tried.” “There is something amiss, I can feel it. She has been tampered with. Her silence is unnatural.”

“Silence longer than two breaths is unnatural for any woman.” Mastik grinned at his own comment then quickly averted his eyes in embarrassment when Irina jabbed him with an elbow. “Really, I have sensed something about her. She wants to speak but there is magic about. She has been maybe bound?” Irina got up from the table and hurried back through the curtains into the other room. They all watched the slow bellowing of the curtain as the ship rocked and waited for her return. She hurried back into the room carrying a small wooden box. She placed it on the table in front of the seat she had been sitting in and then opened the lid just far enough to slip a hand inside. Viss craned his neck to get a peek at what might be inside but her hand motions were so elusive he doubted that light from the lanterns had the opportunity to pass into the box. She withdrew her hand grasping a small glass bottle and pulled off the cork that was stopping the top. “Do you know her name? Have you given her a name?” The men all looked at each other, embarrassed by the question. None of them had thought to give her a name. Being the only woman in their party. They had been simply referring to her as “her”. She just sat quietly with her eyes growing wider, watching the bottle as if she were imagining some horrible fate that would soon befall her. Irina poured a few drops into the palm of a hand and cupping it gently she put the bottle down and pulled a chair away from the table and beckoned for “her” to sit in it. The woman looked to Stein then moved to the chair. Irina moved another chair close to her and sat in it so they were close and their knees partially intertwined. She dabbed a finger in her oiled palm then rubbed it on the woman’s lips. “There will be no hurt with this. Someone has sealed your voice and we will see if it can’t be unsealed.” She rubbed her palms together spreading the oil evenly and gently across her hands then rubbed her palms on the woman’s throat slowly and

gently. Viss found himself uncomfortable at the act. It aroused passion in him. He looked at Roland and saw him feeling very similar with a wide grin and surprised look on his face. As she breathed deep Viss could see the shape of Irina's breasts through her thin black dress. For a slender woman she had a very ample bosom. Irina slowly rubbed oil on her own lips then spoke. "So the gift of speech was given to me, so I give it to you." The men all watched in growing anticipation. Mastik grinned fiendishly, his eyes sparkling brightly. Irina leaned over slowly and placed her lips in a full kiss on the woman's lips. She brought her hand around slowly to cradle the back of her neck and insure she didn't pull away from the gentle but overwhelmingly powerful embrace. The men all sat as if mesmerized while the kiss lasted for a very long moment. The raw sensuality of these two women embracing in a kiss like this made the air crackle with lightning. Finally Irina pulled herself slowly away from the woman and all the men exhaled the breath they were all holding.

She sat back slowly in her chair and grasped the woman's hands tenderly. "Tell me your name." The woman's forehead wrinkled. There was strain in her eyes. She was struggling inside but her mouth never moved. They all stared in anticipation, waiting for her to speak as the tension built to a silent crescendo and the woman slumped her shoulders in defeat. The men all exhaled again; this time in disappointment. Mastik chuckled to relieve the tension. "Aye that's a good one." Everyone looked at him as if he had an answer and would elaborate. "The next time I meet a beautiful mute I will remember to use that one to steal me a long passionate kiss!" The joke broke the tension in the air and after a heartbeats pause they all laughed. All except Irina who scowled. Mastik couldn't resist. He continued with his joking. "Maybe I can find me a beautiful young mother with a newborn babe who cannot give milk." With that he motioned with his hands like he was rubbing oil on his lips and face. "So I speak with these lips, so you can give mild with those teats." He puckered up and made suckling sounds



with his lips.” The men all broke out in howls of laughter that broke up the uncomfortable tension they had all felt with the kiss.

Irina slammed her small fists down on the table. “There is Black Art here.” The men quickly sobered up and wiped the tears of laughter from their eyes. Roland grabbed his side as if the laughing had caused him to pull a muscle. Irina’s intensity quickly brought back their sense of how serious their situation was. The fun her husband had started now dissipated quickly. She reached back in the box just as deftly as before and brought out several more items; a small black lump that looked like a polished stone, a knife and some more oil. Again the men all stared, mesmerized by this next part of the display. Without pausing, as if performing a ritual, Irina’s hands moved quickly. She took the small knife and made a cut on one finger then dripped blood onto the black stone. Viss could hear her murmuring softly in rhyming patterns. She grasped the new vial, unstopped it and dropped a small amount of its liquid onto the now bloody stone. Here husband stared in horror. Viss looked at the ship’s Captain. His hands were grasping his wine mug so tightly he thought it might break. Time seemed to slow for the group. It was a very long moment as they all watched the thick fluid slowly pour out of the vial, form into a large drop and fall ever so slowly onto the stone. It contacted the bloodied stone with a shattering crashed and the room filled with a light smoke. The crash and the smoke aboard a ship, and in such confined quarters brought out the instinct for action in the men. It brought out the instinct to run, to find water and fresh air but the two women sitting calmly on either side of the stone staring quietly into it kept them from action. They fidgeted nervously, quietly fighting the desire to flee. Irina’s chanting became louder and the fog grew denser. The smell of it reminded Viss of flowers by the ocean. Maybe the ocean smell was just the river and he only now was noticing it. It grew so quickly and so thick that he could almost taste it. Maybe it was some type of ancient or exotic wood. The room with the chanting, the smoke and audience took on the feel of a religious temple with the two priestesses at the center of

the ceremony. They sat quietly watching, not moving for fear of disturbing the process. The tension quickly built. Irina chanted louder and faster—her voice beginning to strain. She was exerting a lot of energy. Viss looked around slowly. Something was happening to the smoke in the room. It gathered itself together in one area behind her. It was as if it were trying to form itself into something, to make itself solid. The men all watched with rapt attention as the smoke cleared itself from the entire room and formed a column. The smell was gone. It was the size of a large man and it quickly compressed and took on curves. It was so thick now it appeared solid and in the form of a man. In moments the smoke got itself into its final shape. It was a man. He was very tall and slender. His ears were pointed and his overly large eyes were almonds shaped. He wore a tunic clenched at the waist with a belt and he had long leather boots on his feet. He carried a quiver of arrows across his back. Every detail was perfect. It was just as if someone was standing there. Viss could clearly see the smoke colored feather ends on the arrows, every wrinkle in the man's clothing, he could even see the man's smoke colored eyelashes. Everything was perfect except for the fact that the whole image was in an ashen smoke color, right down to the last detail. Everything about him was the same gray color. He stood with its feet spaced slightly, his hands comfortably at its side with elbows slightly crooked. He blinked his eyes when Irina spoke. "This woman's voice has been locked from her. It is an abomination, some unnatural force has been used." She never took her eyes off the mute woman as she spoke to the figure she knew was there but had not once looked at. "You are of the truth. You have had the sight since time beginning. And as you have done for my mother before me and for her mother before her I ask you do this for me. This woman wishes to speak her own name, and to tell us of her journey. I ask you to unlock this in her." The mute woman sat paralyzed, her eyes wide, staring at the figure not knowing what would come next. "Can you do this?" The muscles in his neck gracefully flexed as the bowman turned

his head slowly and looked at all the people in the room; pausing to make solid eye contact with each in turn.

When its smoky eyes locked with Viss it stopped and turned its shoulders to face him directly. Viss felt the milky gray penetrate him and felt something rise up in him. It was a feeling of being looked into in a way that was deeper than eyes normally saw. He felt as if his soul were being again exposed. The apparition was looking into his life and seeing his past. This shifting of focus to him was wrong. He didn't want to be looked at in this way again. He did not want to be exposed for someone else to know all the secrets he could not see. He fought off the stare, willing the being to look away, willing it to turn its head and get out of his mind. "What is the woman's name?" He shouted at the figure silently in his mind. It understood what he thought and the corners of its mouth curled up in a broad grin as if it laughing at him. It knew something that he didn't. Viss was overwhelmed with anger. His fists clenched and his jaw tightened. The smoky figure was practically condescending to him. IT knew something about him that he himself did not. It continued the stare for several long seconds then continued its head and body back again toward the mute woman the smile remaining on its face. It stepped slowly with its right foot backward in a precise military like move. Now it's body was sideways to Irina and the woman but its face was still looking toward them; only now over its left shoulder. In another liquid and precise motion it reached over its shoulder toward the quiver of arrows on its back pulled out a bow with its left hand and an arrow with its right. It nocked an arrow into the smoke colored bowstring pointed the weapon and the mute woman and slowly drew the arrow back in the bow exactly as if everything was real. The muscles on the bowman's arms quivered with the tension and the bow itself flexed slowly under the pressure of the string being drawn back. Viss tried to swallow a dry lump in his throat. Everything was happening in an unreal otherworldly place. Viss' body moved slowly, everything moved slowly, everyone in the room was frozen at the sight of the arrow pointed at its target; the mute woman's throat.

The rapid pace of his heart beating was out of alignment with the slow pace that the rest of the world was taking. Is this why the being mocked him? Because it would kill her and he was powerless to stop it? He could still feel its smile, its eyes boring into him. It knew something he didn't know. The smoky figure drew the arrow fully back and in that moments pause between when the arrow is ready for its flight and its release Viss screamed. He took one step forward then dove for the woman. He could not stand there and watch as the arrow pierced her delicate throat. He knew that even though it was only smoke it would pierce her skin as if it were wood. He threw his body in front of her and felt a shaft of pain penetrate his body beginning at his back going through his chest then exiting his breast. As he hit the ground he turned to see the figure once again smiling at him as if it still knew something he didn't. The sharpness of the pain was too much for him. It exploded behind his eyes and he blacked out.

Viss woke up in his cabin bunk. The mute woman was sitting on a stool near his side her eyes and brow wrinkled. She dipped a washcloth in a basin and placed it on his brow. "How long have I been out?" He asked groggily. She just stared at him. He felt as if she could comprehend the question but couldn't acknowledge it in any way. He grumbled. "The two of us are a perfect pair. No one can get into your head and everyone gets into mine." Her frame tightened ever so slightly and she stared at him even more intently as if she were hoping there was something he could read in her eyes. He ran his arms along his chest looking for a wound. "That arrow didn't seem to do me any harm. I wonder if it would have helped you? He took his hands off his chest and twisted them together in anguish, puzzling over whether he made the right decision. Maybe it was meant only for her, would work only on her. But the smoky man smiled at him, almost as if he knew he would take that arrow. If that was the case then the arrow must have been meant for him even though it wasn't pointed at him when he released it from his bow. What was the effect? There didn't seem to be

any. He stared into the woman's eyes and again he was unable to plumb the depths of concealment. Was it simply concern that showed in her sympathetic face or did it run deeper? Does she, like everybody else know things about him that he himself doesn't?

Roland popped his head in the open doorway. "Ahh you are awake. Irina wants to speak with you. I will fetch her. He popped back out and closed the door. Scant heartbeats later several set of footsteps hurried back down the narrow hall. Irina, Stein and Roland all crowded into the small cabin. Stein spoke first. "You gave us quite a scare there." They all looked down at him lying on his bunk all their brows furrowed in concern. He felt uncomfortable at the scrutiny and tried to divert the attention with a question. "Who was that man of smoke? I thought he was going to hurt her." He glanced quickly at the woman. Irina pulled herself closer in the group, getting closer to him. The bangles jingled softly at her wrists as she took the rag from his forehead, rinsed it in the basin and replaced it. "That was Ushusal, a very powerful being from another place and time. He has many arrows with many different powers. That one was probably an arrow of unlocking. I thought to unlock her voice." She put her hand on the mute woman's shoulder. "So that she could talk. But when you dove into its path of the arrow it passed..." She hesitated and swallowed to build her courage. "It passed through your head." His eyes went wide and he brought his hands up to his head as if expecting to find the shaft still impaled there. "We all looked on horrified for a few long moments. Ushusal walked over to you, grimaced as if in dismay, removed the shaft from your head then looking at it in his hands he slowly faded away. Your heart was beating strongly but you remained in a deep sleep that we couldn't wake you from so we brought you in here to rest." She paused again to look him over carefully. "That arrow was meant for you."

She increased the intensity of her stare and leaned closer. Time and distance mean nothing to Ushusal. The arrow is symbolic. He simply put it where he knew you would be. There are no obstacles that can stop it from achieving its target. It was meant for you and you received

it. I didn't at first understand why, but while you were in your black sleep your friends told me of the quest you are on and of the mystery of your childhood. This must have been the goal of Ushusal—to unlock your memory." Viss sat up and the cloth fell off his forehead and onto his stomach. His heart raced. The possibility excited him. To know after all these years. Irina put her hands on his shoulders. "Lay back down and try to relax. If you feel up to it we will explore this together." She put the wet cloth back on his forehead. "This could be painful. Sometimes we choose to forget our past because to remember it brings unbearable pain. Maybe you witnessed your parents being slain. Or maybe it was something worse. Bringing it out could hurt you very deeply, maybe even drive you insane." He swallowed hard. "I want to try."

"Close your eyes and think about yesterday." The two of them slowly walked through the events that happened the day before. Everything was clear in his memory. Her voice softly asked him to go back further. He jumped back to his difficulties in the Captains castle and his imprisonment in the lower dungeon. Her voice urged him further back and he smiled at the thought of Marta and the small home they shared together. Back, ever backwards. Her voice drew him gently back in time urging him to relax. He felt almost as if he were asleep. His head bobbed gently. The memories came swifter. He remembered the years of service in the Captain's guard and the years of happy play as a boy in the castle. But he felt it coming closer; the barrier where his memory stopped. He approached it tentatively at her request, touched it and saw nothing. It was still there; a great blackness that barred him and everyone else from seeing what lay on the other side. "I can remember nothing." He opened his eyes. The sudden drop from many happy memories into the pit pained him. He always ignored it. Not thinking about it made it hurt less, but now facing it again and finding it still there stabbed him sharply. The whole party crowded into the small room and stared at him intently. Irina urged him on further. "Try again. Is there something to be unlocked? You describe it as a

wall. If there is a wall then there is a door. And if there is a door then there is a lock and maybe Ushusal has unlocked it. He closed his eyes again. "I remember sunshine and the smell of the city. I was just a boy standing at the door to the castle. This is the earliest memory I have. I don't even know how I got there or how old I was or even what my name was. The cook who took me in told me I looked about eight so I became eight. Before that there is nothing." Just as there always has been nothing. Again he opened his eyes and stared at Irina. "This is very strange indeed. The arrow of unlocking has never failed for generations. It has been sparsely used but always worked. I can only think that whatever magic has locked away your memory is either very powerful or you simply have no memory any earlier because you did not exist any earlier and you were but a boy of eight standing on the steps of the Captains castle."

That evening after they all ate a hardy meal in the galley they all returned to their quarters. The sailors continued the watch, tending the ship and her sails through the night. They would not pull into any port along their route unless they had to. Quick dashes up and down the river is how they made their money. Viss lay on his bunk and took out the book that Menzler gave him. Thumbing slowly through it he turned to the section on the Fulcrum.

'Every day has a night. And every thing has an opposite. No thing can exist alone. It must have its counterpart. These opposites pull on each other and give each other strength. The hawks in the air feed on the mice in the field. If the hawks kill too many mice the hawks will grow in number and eat even more mice until there are too few mice; then the hawks will die. When there are fewer hawks then the mice will grow in number. Thus the pendulum swings back and forth until a balance is found with the right number of hawks and mice. On a larger scale the whole of the world works in the same way. The seas and the lands are balanced, day and night, the grand ice and the great heats of the world and the powers of life and death, good and evil. But, this sys-

tem is complex beyond the understanding of a man. Every small piece is important to the whole. Each element is part of the legacy of life and death. Each small animal, every rainfall, and every motion of the tide is critical to the well being of the whole. All these things must be watched, centered, pruned, cared for and changed so the system remains whole and balanced. When the world was created so was the Fulcrum created to hold this task. To guide all of the pulses of life so they create a harmony and balance with one another. The Fulcrum watches over all these things and guides them all to the good of the whole. It maintains a perfect balance. It is a channel of energy. It gives and takes all the different energies of the world and keeps the health and balance; the energies of life, death, growth, strength, change and light. It gives energy to the waves and it moves the moon in its cause above the earth. It gives the energy of magic and takes the last breath of life from a dying man, giving it to someone else. It is everywhere in the world and everything flows through it. But it can be altered. It can be tricked into false decisions and the energy that flows through it can be changed. One man in possession of the Fulcrum and the strength to use it can greatly alter the course of things. One man can bring about great changes. Wealth and abundance, rain for crops, a mild winter can be brought to some. But if these things are done then the flow of energy has changed. A mild winter at one place means a more severe winter elsewhere. Abundant rain for crops in one place means drought in another. As with the hawks too much life in one place means too much death in another. And the two places are tied together. Destruction of one part of the cycle means destruction of the whole cycle.

In a millennium gone by this happened but instead of one person altering the Fulcrum the race of humans all did it on a grand scale. Giant metal beasts were built, the ways of the earth and energy was advance and the world was raped of its strength. The air and water were slowly poisoned. The forests and lands were plundered. The Fulcrum was slowly shifted by the arrogant will of the people. For a few generations there was enormous prosperity for many. But all this



energy was stolen from other places in life and eventually the Fulcrum was shifted so far out of balance that it all collapsed. The world was plunged into darkness and almost died. It took thousands of years to regain the balance.'

Viss put the book down. It is very hard to comprehend things on such a large scale. He had his small life. It is all he has ever known. There was his work, his friends and his weekends at the tavern. His head hurt from trying to absorb so much. When he argued with the tavern owner over how many ales he and his friends had drank through an evening that was real. But to imagine things on a world scale was impossible. The forces of nature moved in circles so large that he couldn't see them. How could he do this? He was befuddled. What did one man matter? What difference could one man make? The energy that flowed in and out of the Fulcrum must be enormous. His energy was a minuscule trickle, an indiscernible drop in a river.

He sat up on his bunk and stared out the small round portal. The sun was starting to move low on the horizon and casting long shadows. He could feel the ship undulating with the motion of the river water. All of this that the book told of was too much for him. It made his skull hurt. The scope was too large. "Might as well ask a frog to understand magic." His only real goal was much simpler—Marta. She is the only real thing in his life that matters. She is the small part of his existence that is fundamentally important to him and to his well being. He has been tossed into this nightmare of an adventure seemingly with the world at stake but it isn't his battle. As one man there is very little he can do about anything except for maybe Marta. Maybe he could rescue her. This is something that is clear, definable and easy to understand. A band of men has kidnapped her. He will meet them, kill them if necessary and regain her. All his heart and soul he can put into this because without her he is lost. He will go to any lengths to get her back. Menzler was wrong to take her against her will; against his will. This means that the rules have been broken. There are no more rules or restrictions Viss thought to himself. He is a man that has followed creed and rules.

But when Menzler broke the rules it now freed him to any means necessary. He will cheat, lie, steal or kill. He would do anything at all to get her back, even if it means destroying Menzler and everything about and around him.

He returned the book to his backpack, lay back down on the cot and listened to Finch's peculiar gait make its way down the hallway. A knock came on his door and he called for Finch to enter. Finch popped his head inside the doorway. "The Captain expects we will make port shortly after sunset. Your friends are making ready and the lady Irina wishes you to visit her in her quarters before you depart. Viss thanked him and Finch closed the cabin door and made his way back down the hall.

After packing up his belongings, insuring he had everything he made his way across the ship to the Captain's cabin. The ship was bustling with activity and Finch seemed to be everywhere at once directing things with his normal vocal flair. The light of the town in the evening dusk could be seen far down river on the port side. He rapped on the Captain's door. Irina opened it and ushered him quickly inside. She was pale and moved slowly as if she had not slept or eaten for days. "I have worked all of my spells through the night to try to penetrate the mystery that you pose to me." He sat down and stared at her with pity. The mystery of his past had long stopped exhausting him but others continue to try. "Nothing avails me. Nothing at all. And Ushusal will not return at my summons. The only thing I get is a great sense of danger that surrounds you. Great things hang on your fate. This is something that must not be born lightly. I wanted to tell you this and wish you strength and wisdom. Strength to withstand the future that awaits you and the wisdom to make the right decisions." "Thankyou but I am on a very simple mission to..." "Stop." She shouted, finding some strength in her exhausted frame. "Ignorance may leave my husband and me safe. I do not wish to know. I have a small piece of a good life here with a man that adores me much. I am content. If I were younger I might join you. But I have found my place in the world. I used to

travel much and had many of my own adventures but here now I have my place. Before you go there is one small thing. I wish to share it with you." Viss looked at her with anticipation. "The cards have shown me a small bit of truth." She paused and stared at him as if waiting to see if he wanted to know or not. "The woman in your party. The shroud of darkness that surrounds her is not so thick as yours and I have discovered her name." Viss perked up. There was weight in this. Why was it so important? Irina held it very gravely. Why couldn't she simply tell him? Why did she have to soften him up to it first? "It doesn't bode well though." She continued. "Her name itself is a bad omen." He knotted his brow. How could a name be a bad omen? Irina stared directly at him. The directness of her stare made him uncomfortable. "Her name is Marina." Viss blinked rapidly several times. She was right this doesn't bode well. No woman would ever name her daughter Marina.



## C H A P T E R 7



Viss thought about the tale of Marina. She was a beautiful woman with a loving husband who was a metalsmith. They had three children. Her husband, ever the good tradesman and a capable metal worker built a good comfortable life for them. They had a large home and a servant. Marina had help raising the children, which left her with plenty of free time for herself. For many years she dabbled in magic beginning with card reading but slowly over time she delved deeper into the magic arts into casting spells and conjuring. With each new spell and ability learned she grew hungrier. She eventually turned to the dark forces of magic for more power and skills and fell in with evil.

The story goes that she started to commune with an evil being and as her children grew older so did she and she mourned the loss of her youth and beauty. She obsessed over this and sought immortal youth and beauty. It consumed her and her destruction was complete when she made a pact with a high level demon. He promised her immortality in exchange for the lives of her husband and children. With the patience that only an immortal being of evil can have he eventually convinced her to kill them and one night she took one of her husbands hammers and crushed all their skulls. From this point there are two different versions of the story. One version tells that the demon tricked her into this task and did not have the power to grant her true immortality but immortality in story which has some truth to it because the story of Marina is still remembered through many generations and may

continue to be remembered forever. The second version holds that she did gain immortality and lives to this very day—unable to die, which is now what she dearly seeks because without the family she murdered she wanders the earth alone and unhappy as a soul without rest.

Viss snapped out of his reverie. She is definitely right, the name doesn't bode well and if her name truly is Marina it just deepens the mystery that surrounds her.

Viss and Irina had nothing more to say. The news had fairly well shocked him so they bid each other a curt farewell and he left the Captains quarters, hurried up onto the deck and traced his way through the ship. Crewmembers were scurrying about unloading crates. He heard the clump of hooves and made his way below deck to check on the horses.

An hour later the crew was packing and unloading the horses. Stein paid the ship's captain the balance of the agreed upon fee and they were soon riding the horses at a slow walk off the port area and into the city proper.

Being an inland town with no royalty or ruling presence Terake was small but vibrant. For many generations its people have made a good life using the river as a means of transport and trade. There were many inns and taverns lined along the docks to accommodate the daily arrivals and short stays of sailors and merchants and the harbor itself was packed full of all kinds of ships and boats. The harbormaster is no doubt and very busy man. They didn't stop anywhere longer than a few moments. They went directly to the outdoor marketplace and purchased food and water to sustain them through the next leg of their journey.

Making their way quickly in a northeast direction the ride out of town was uneventful. They stuck to main roads as often as possible because the terrain here was more difficult. The forest was deeper, the trees older, and the brush thicker. Whenever the road was clear and level they rode at a quicker pace which exhilarated Viss. He had spent too much time in the past few days in his cabin just reading his book

and the fresh air did him good. The smells of the forest seemed to cleanse the smell of salt and old wooden planks from his body.

By noon they were riding the horses at a walk and were ready to break for lunch. The four of them dismounted and let the horses graze. Roland gathered wood for a fire. Viss sat on a rock and the others sat in various places under trees. Stein spoke out softly. "We made good time. We should be able to intercept our quarry some time tomorrow evening unless something goes wrong or the weather doesn't hold. He shot a glance at Roland who raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment. Stein sat down on the rock beside Viss. "We are being followed." Viss resisted the temptation to look around. "Been with us since Terake. It keeps back a distance and as far as I can tell the damn thing is not human. It isn't riding a horse but it is still as fast as hell. A human wouldn't be able to keep up. We pushed the horses all morning and it kept up with us fine. I have caught glimpses of it and several times during the day and at one point the wind favored us and I got a scent of it. Damn thing stinks. It is no creature I recognize. At first I couldn't understand why it kept swinging wide, but it must be swinging with the shifting wind patterns so the horses don't smell it and get spooked. It might be waiting for dark. We will ride through the night and stick to main roads under the moonlight. If this thing intends to strike at night when we sleep then we just won't give it the opportunity. A moving target is harder to hit. We will take a good break now. We will feed and water the horses and have a warm meal. Then do it once again before nightfall to help us ride strong and alert through the night. When we come across a good spot with a favorable wind condition I will break off and wait for it.

A few hours later Stein brought the band to a stop beside a stream. The foliage was thick along the banks and the path they were on was the only clear spot. They couldn't see more than a few feet off the path in any direction. Stein jumped off his horse and sprinted to Viss. "This is where I will wait for our friend. It is only a long arrow flight behind us and is biding its time at what it considers a safe distance. It isn't fol-

lowing us by sight but by smell. That's why it keeps ranging wide from side to side—to find out scent and not to hide its own. The terrain leads naturally to this pass. To follow us cleanly it will pass right by here. I will wait hidden in the water to mask my scent. You travel this path at a horses walk for a short time then make camp. If the path forks always go to the left. People generally go right. You always go left. If I don't catch up with you by sunset break camp and continue your ride through the night and assume I have run into serious difficulty. He hurried back to his horse, grabbed his sword, his bow and his satchel. Marina reached down and kissed him. They all watched him quizzically as he looked around on the ground. He circled around the horses then ran up the path in the direction they had just come. He stopped, grunted approval then scooped up a big lump of freshly made horse dung and smeared it on his satchel. He hurried over to the edge of the brook, shoved his sword and the satchel under some brush near the edge and walked out into the water then crouched until he was submerged up to his nose. They all watched as he slowly shifted so the brook-side brush gave him cover. Viss kicked his horse and the three of them began to move again down the dirt path.

Viss rode first down the path. Marina followed him on Stein's horse and Roland followed behind her. He thought about Stein. The first night when this whole change in his life started he had run into him. After killing those two guards, the alarm had sounded in the Captains castle and he was running through the familiar corridors. He had ducked into a room and there was Stein, a big man, unpacking his things onto the bed. He had no doubt just arrived at the castle. Why? What was the reason for him being on this quest? How did he fit into the puzzle? He himself is in it for the love of a woman. His heart skipped at the thought of her. But why was Stein doing this? It surely wasn't for a woman or he wouldn't have so quickly taken up with Marina. He waxed admiringly at Stein. Everything seemed to come so easy for him. He was a large man, well muscled from hard work, intelligent and well versed in many skills. He was a natural born leader and



he carried this mantle easily. He made decisions and people followed them. Viss promised himself that he would talk to the big man and regardless of what he said he would discover some things about him, understand him a little better. He clucked at his horse to keep it moving and glanced back to see if the other two were okay. Just as Stein had said they would stay along this path riding for a time always taking the left if it diverged then make camp. He mused at this. That was something about leadership. It was the ability to take calculated risks when the situation warranted it and the ability to make good decisions on the spot without and indecisiveness. Stein's abilities made him feel just a little bit inadequate.

Stein waited patiently in the gently rolling brook with his nose, his eyes, and the top of his head protruding from the surface. Patience is a skill that is built with time and the only way to learn how to wait is to wait. He had moved to a good spot where he could see through the brush and observe a good portion of the horse path. His eyes slowly scanned back and forth and his nose slowly drew in air. After a short while his sense of smell became accustomed to the brookside foliage and the smell of the water. His mind pushed these smells aside. He was waiting for the distinct odor of the follower. It reeked something awful and after a few minutes it came to him—a very pungent odor through the brush. At the far end of the path he saw something move and a few moments later it came into full view. It was tall like a man, but slender. Its arms and legs were unusually long and its torso shorter than a man's. It walked slowly, bobbing its head back and forth pointing its chin up to smell the air. Its skin was pale like ash and its gait awkward. When it moved it was all knees and elbows. Its hands rubbed at its greasy loin cloth and it moved further along the path stopping abruptly a few yards from where Stein was hiding in the water. Lifting its head slowly it smelled the air cautiously. Stein got a good look at its face. It was a distortion of a man with a flat very wide nose and large nostrils. It had no eyes. Its skin was seamless from cheek to forehead as if there never were eyes or even eyesockets. It shifted its feet planting them

squarely facing toward Stein. "I have no eyes yet I can see." Its thin lips spoke in a soft yet shocking voice. It sounded like a rasp drawn against the blade of a sword. It curled its lips in a mimic of a smile and tilted its head down as if it were looking straight at him. "You are not the one I seek, but you were in its party, and now you are not. Come out of the water and bring your sword." Stein glanced at his sword and pack on the bank between him and the creature, still perfectly hidden. "I can smell the steel of it. It leaves a foul taste on my tongue. Bring it. Bring it." Stein slowly stood up in the water and stepped forward. The creature mirrored his every move pedaling slowly backwards. He picked up his sword and the bag. The creature backed further away from the water and was now standing on the path. Its feet were twitching and stamping at the ground in anticipation. Come, come. It beckoned with its skinny arms. "Fuck!" Stein's mind raced. He was missing something here. There is a threat below the surface. The creature was too confident.

He glanced around. Maybe there were others. He dropped his satchel and hefted his sword in a defensive position. Its weight was perfect for his strength and size. It had a large menacing blade with an extra long handle so he could make strong chops with two hands. He held it that way—with both hands. Some creatures of darkness were thought to have simple magic spells and all were known to use deceit and trickery. He moved closer and felt a change in temperature. The air grew warmer. He moved closer yet and the air got warmer still. The damn thing was hot to be throwing off heat that he could feel from further than sword reach. Its body must be an inferno. That meant speed. The thing must be incredibly fast. It must burn a lot of energy and have to feed often. But it wasn't strong. Its muscles were too thin. It couldn't generate brute muscular strength. He locked his eyes on its face and examined where its eyes should be. It continued to shuffle its feet as if almost unable to contain itself. The dance of death began. 'Arms and legs can move quickly and a head moved slower to keep the eyes focused on a foe. But this thing had no eyes so it didn't need to

keep its head steady. The hips are the slowest part of the body to move. They are the center of weight and the limbs move quickly around but the hips themselves cannot move quickly. Stein slashed at one of the creature's hip with a lightning fast first strike and first blood was drawn. The tip of his sword opened up a wound on the creatures hip the length and width of a man's finger. It shrieked in pain and sprung and pummeled him with a lightning fast series of blows with its fists. The majority of them fell on his sword arm at a speed beyond human ability to defend and they focused on getting him to relinquish his sword. The smell of it and the heat from its body forced Stein back. He felt his sword-hand forearm crack with a blow and he fell back into the brook. The eyeless creature cackled a laugh. It hated the smell of steel and no doubt hated Steins sword for the wound it caused. This may have been what saved Stein from the attack. Instead of focusing on killing him it vented all of its anger at his sword. Again waving its skinny arms it beckoned for him to come out of the water. Stein shifted the sword to his other hand. He had a bone broken in his sword arm and he couldn't grasp the sword tightly. He knew the pain and damage of the broken bone would eventually sap him of his strength and speed so he launched himself back into the battle. Four quick steps forward, a feint at the creature's head then a straight-arm thrust directly at its abdomen. It avoided the feint and the thrust and once again rained blows down upon him. Again it focused on the arm that held the sword. Again Stein backed up under the pressure. The sweat ran down his body like a river as he backpedaled and tried to defend himself from the attack. He tripped over his satchel and once again tumbled into the river. The water felt cool. It washed away his sweat and drained away the heat absorbed from his foe. The damn thing was practically on fire. If he hit it with a stick, the stick would probably burst into flames. It didn't like the water. That was clear. It beckoned him with its arms again. He crouched down letting the water soothe him. "If it wanted him it damn well could come and get him." It stamped its feet in growing impatience and started scouting around on the ground. It grabbed

his satchel and emptied it out then started rummaging around the path looking for something. Stein looked at the satchel. His foe had strewn about the contents. On the ground lay his pouch of gold, some food, bread, a small flask of water. Stein stood up in the water and looked harder. Yes and some arrowtooth root. Roland must have slipped it into his bag. The creature stopped and looked at him to see if he was leaving the water so Stein quickly crouched back down. It grunted in discovery reached down and picked up a rock. It ran to the edge of the water near Stein and cocked its arm back. Stein never had time to duck into the water. The arm speed of the creature was a blur. The rock glanced off the top of his head with the speed of an arrow. As his head fell back he swallowed water and choked. The only thing he heard was the hollow rap of the stone connecting with his skull. His legs got weak but he fought off the urge to pass out. There were two creatures now rummaging for rocks. He closed his eyes, opened them slowly and they focused. There was just one creature looking for another projectile. He had to act fast. A direct hit in the face with a large enough stone and he would drown in this river. He felt around on the bottom and found his sword. He pointed it toward the bottom then leaned on it pushing it firmly into the spongy bottom. Its handle almost reached the water's surface. He wouldn't lose it this way. When the creature got as far away as he thought it would get in its search for another projectile he bolted out of the water, grabbed the arrowtooth root and turned to dive back in the water. His foe got to him before he could complete his turn and again pummeled him with sharp stinging blows to his back and head. The force of the blows changed his dive into a stumble and he fell back into the water. Again the water cooled the heat. He turned, crouching in the water, faced it and stuck the arrowtooth root in his mouth and chewed vigorously. It shredded into strips and he felt its power course through his veins. He chewed quicker and watched his foe rummage around the trees mumbling to itself. The root broke into strands and he started to feel dizzy...His legs twitched and he felt flush with a fever. He flexed his good arm and another rock bounced off his head.

The creature stood staring at him. He trudged slowly out of the water toward the impatient enemy. It cackled and beckoned toward him. When he was free of the water the creature launched another furious attack. He reached his arms out and grabbed it, circling both arms around its midsection. It slammed its fists against his face and head furiously. He didn't recoil from the blows because fire also ran in his veins. He felt the two ends of the broken bone in his arm shift and grind against each other as he locked his hands together. Muscle was the only thing that kept his hand and wrist from falling off the rest of his arm. The pain became unimportant. The only thing he felt was the heat from his body mingling with that of his enemy. He squeezed with all his strength and it changed its attack to his arms. Now, instead of battering Viss it was trying to break his hold. The heat was unbearable. He could smell his own flesh burning. He lifted it off the ground and walked backward. If he couldn't squeeze the life out of it maybe he could drown it. It shrieked and struggled to free itself. Its motions were now desperate and its screams rose to a crescendo. He launched himself backward hoping he was close enough to the water, and he fell in dragging the screaming creature with him.

The ordeal was over in a few heartbeats. The creature stopped screaming as soon as it was submerged. Wafts of steam rose off the water and Stein stumbled slowly back to the shore. His skin was burned from the heat and the broken bone in his arm was protruding bloody from the skin of his forearm. He looked out at the water and a glint caught his eye. The creature's dead body was falling quickly apart, almost melting in the water. In the center where its chest used to be something red was glowing. He waded back out into the water. Reaching out into its remains he pulled out a large glowing crystal about the size of a baby's fist. It pulsed with a deep almost blood red color.

The hours ride further up the path had been uneventful for Viss and his companions. They stopped to make camp, ate and waited for sunset. They each glanced constantly from what they were doing to the

path where they had come in the hope of seeing Stein rejoin them. Shortly before nightfall they re-packed the horses without speaking then moved out of the short campsite. Whatever it is that was following them never showed itself. But neither did Stein and this bothered Viss. Before he could just follow Stein's leadership and wisdom but now he had to step into those very large and competent shoes. It seemed so long since he was in the Captain's guard. Everything had been so easy for him then. He clucked his horse on and tried not to think about how hard the quest had all of a sudden become. If he didn't think about it maybe the knot in his stomach would go away.

They had been riding at a slow walk for only a few hours when they broke out of the forest into a small valley. The land curved gently down like a bowl and was filled with tall grass and at the far end, only a short distance away, they could see a small hamlet. They stopped and looked across at it. "Maybe there is an Inn. This road is traveled well enough so there should be some accommodations." Viss agreed with Roland's statement. Looks like several dozen small houses and some larger buildings. Lamps were burning in many windows. "No doubt this is a regular stop for many travelers. If we spend the night that thing that is following us, if it is still following us would only wait. And, if Stein were now trying to catch up with us this would be a very likely place. Let's spend the remainder of the night. And in the morning we can have a good breakfast before setting off again. Maybe the villagers will lend us some insight and direction." Viss looked at the woman for her opinion. She just stared back in the moonlight. She looked tired and would welcome a good night's rest. But there was worry on her face. First in her mind would be reuniting with Stein. She probably would prefer to go back and look for him. After that, waiting here for him would be her second choice. He fought the urge to acknowledge her wish and go back looking for him. He had an uneasy feeling about this little town. But now that he was in charge of the quest he had an uneasy feeling about everything. Every decision was a heavy one. It was so much easier to follow someone else.

As they entered the hamlet he peered into every shadow looking for danger. He glanced back at his companions who were more at ease. They trusted his judgment more than he did. This was quite a burden. He knew he could handle it but a small part of him hoped that Stein would quickly rejoin them so he could shift the mantle back onto those broad shoulders.

Along the main road through town he spied a large two-story building that was well lit by lamps in the windows. A large wooden sign hung over the front door. They made their way down the quiet street and stopped under the sign. The sounds of people laughing and drinking filtered out through the lit windows. "Looks like a place we could stay the night but we have no way to pay for either food or lodging. Stein carried all our gold. Roland quickly spoke up. "I have some coins. I've been saving them for an emergency. I'll go in and see what kind of arrangements I can make."

He came out a few minutes later with a young man. "We will be sharing a single room upstairs. We can eat here too but the owner says the owner isn't running a fancy Inn. I told him we are expecting a man to join us sometime later in the night so if Stein shows up he will know to send him up to us. The boy here will take the horses around to the stables in the back. They grabbed their belongings and went inside.

The tavern was crowded, surprisingly so for such a small town. Many of them must be travelers. They were a lively and happy bunch, laughing, drinking, and telling stories and jokes. Nobody even looked up to watch them enter. This made Viss feel more comfortable. The feeling of being surrounded by all these people, all this life made his worries about whatever it was that followed them from the last town a little less sharp. They found an empty table in the corner and sat down. A barmaid quickly brought them a simple but ample meal of bread, potatoes and ale. By the time they finished second helpings the tavern had started to empty and when they had finished their ale the tavern was empty except for a few men sitting at the large oak bar. They retired to their room upstairs Roland once again checking with the

owner to insure that if Stein came in looking for them he would know they were there. Without unpacking their bags they all lay down promptly and fell asleep. Marina was on the one small bed and Roland and Viss were on the floor to either side of it.

He hadn't been asleep long when Viss heard the drunks in the pub downstairs. They were getting louder and a small part of his sleeping mind thought it was funny that they had suddenly become so loud. When they had retired to their room there were only three or four men left nursing their drinks. How could three or four men make so much racket. A thin fragment of smoke reached his nose and he awoke with a start; his heart pounding. Roland and the woman were both still asleep. Now instantly wide-awake he listened carefully and smelled the air for fire. There was some kind of commotion going on and it was getting louder. He definitely smelled smoke and the noise wasn't coming from downstairs it was coming from outside. He stood up and gently walked around the cot with the sleeping woman, stepped over Roland and looked out the window. He heard slapping feet on the floor behind him and Roland joined him. They stared out the window. They were perched directly over the main street where they had entered the Inn. The wooden sign below them and to the left. To the west the sounds of screaming and clashing metal came to them and to the east several buildings were on fire and lighting up the night sky like a perverted early sunrise on the little village. Men were running in the streets below them, their weapons in hand. The clang of clashing swords now came from all directions. The melee was getting rough. Viss could see men getting quickly and violently cut down, outnumbered by growing numbers of goblins dressed in varying degrees of metal and wooden armor; their hisses coming between the clash of weapons. The men engaged in the battle were ill prepared, grabbing their swords or any weapon they could as they jumped out of bed not having any time to don any armor. With their village burning they were fighting for their lives, and losing the battle. The goblins were overrunning them. Viss grabbed Roland by the shoulders. "We have got to move now. The



goblins are overrunning the town. By morning there will be nothing left but ashes.” Marina was awake and at the window with them. Viss’ words startled them into action and they scrambled around the room and grabbed their equipment. They had all gone to sleep fully clothed which now saved them precious seconds. They bolted out the door and down the stairs. The battle had already made its way into the tavern. The innkeeper and some of the guests were engaged in a vicious brawl. The bodies of several dead goblins were strewn about the floor and a woman was trying to put out a burning table with a blanket. Viss jumped into the fray taking strong swings with his sword. He dispatched two goblins quickly as a third fell to the ground behind him with an arrow in its throat. He looked up to the stairs and saw Roland nocking another arrow into his bow. Marina ran to help the woman put out the burning table. The unexpected help of Roland and Viss was enough to turn the tide of the melee within the tavern and in a short time all the goblins that had come in were dead. As more men came down the stairs to join the fray and they all rushed to the main door and barricaded it with tables and chairs. Everyone was in a state of panic. The innkeeper shouted out orders. “We have bought a precious short time here. The barricade won’t last. They will either break in or torch the building and smoke us out. If you have left weapons or armor in your room get it now then we will bring the battle to them.” He waved a wicked looking mace toward the stair and several men bolted to get their weapons or armor. Others searched through the dead bodies looking for weapons or armor. There were a score of men now, heavily armed and ready for battle. They moved the furniture from the door and burst out into the street. The few goblins that were on the immediate outside were slaughtered quickly. The innkeeper knowing the attack had come from the east turned right out on the main road and shouted a battle cry. The men all followed him in a furious run. Doors opened and more men joined them. Their band was swelling quickly. They now numbered almost three score warriors. The Innkeeper continued to bark orders calling the group to a stop. Any man

with a bow, sheath your sword and go into these windows. He swung his mace pointing to the upper level windows on either side of the street. The blasted goblins will be easy to target. "Some of the men, including Roland bolted for nearby doors. The innkeeper then called out to someone. "Aram" He pointed at a large man. "Take five men, turn them around and protect our flank. This is where we make out stand. "Viss was thunderstruck by the Innkeepers leadership. No doubt he was an old soldier. "Sein" He called another man. Take ten men north around those building and curve back in toward this road at the potter's house. The man Sein clapped the closest ten men on the back or shoulder and they all ran off down a side road. "You" The Innkeeper now pointed his mace at Viss. "You look capable enough and handy with a sword. Take ten men one block south down this road." He pointed the mace to their right. "Then turn east, and at the fountain turn north back toward this main road. I will take the remaining men straight up this road and all three groups will meet at the potter's house. Do not stop to battle. Break through any problem spots just clearing a path as quickly as possible. Viss grabbed a group of men and they turned off down the side street. The three groups progressed toward their destination slaying the invading goblins with efficiency. Once organized, a band of well-armed men fighting for their lives could wreak great pain on any foe. Viss and his group passed a burning building and goblins were now scampering away from the threat. The outcome of the battle was quickly turning and both men and goblins knew it. Driven by rage, yet disciplined into fighting as units, the men were making easy work of the goblins that fought simply out of greed and bloodlust. Cowardice was a strong goblin trait. They didn't fight in cohesive groups. It was every goblin for himself and it was this rage and bloodlust that just might save the town. They could have crept quietly through the sleeping town killing people in their beds, but they came in with a clamor that woke everyone up. Viss estimated by what he had seen so far that the goblins had begun their assault maybe three hundred strong. He estimated no more than a hundred screaming gob-

lins left. To over run the town in a simple rush they should have brought twice as many of their number. Then it would have been easy. They would have overwhelmed the townsfolk no matter how valiantly they battled. Viss' group turned a corner around a larger burning building at the well and headed back in toward the main road where the three groups would meet. By now they were close to the eastern edge of town. Men and goblins were still fighting in small groups everywhere but the goblins were starting to turn and run, one-by-one. The fighting got markedly easier but he could see now into the main square in front of what he guessed was the potter's house. It was probably some kind of a marketplace during the day. The other two groups had arrived and were fighting a pitched battle. He could see the Innkeeper swinging his mace furiously. His group quickly entered the fray and he started to chase a retreating goblin east when one of his companions grabbed his arm and turned him around sharply, stopping him in mid stride. The men in the square had all stopped their fighting. The goblins were retreating unhampered. Viss looked at the group. They all faced east down the road out of town.

He turned his head over his shoulder and looked. "Oh shit." He turned his body full around and looked straight down the road just like the other men. At the very edge of the village was a horde of goblins standing shoulder to shoulder in the dirt road. They were packed in tight with the ones on the edges pressing against the buildings on each side. Behind them was a single man on horseback. Red light from a nearby burning building cast an eerie glow on him. Something on his chest glowed with a dull greenish-blue tint. It looked as if it took the red light from the fire, changed it and sent it back out blue-green; only sickly and twisted, dull, almost putrid. "One of the nexus stones." Viss thought to himself. The book described it well but the words were just words. The reality of seeing one was much more powerful. He looked at the horde of goblins. They did come in great enough numbers. There were twenty of them across from building to building and judging by how far back the rider sat Viss estimated them to be ten deep.

That meant about another two hundred and they were being held in reserve, waiting to be released at the right moment. They all just stood there as if on leashes, waiting to be released. It was very ungoblin like. If they weren't being controlled their bloodlust would have them thrown into the fray. The rider must be using the nexus stone to control them. Viss could see the eastern sky behind the rider beginning to softly lighten Dawn would come soon. When the rider released that horde the town would be devastated. The townsfolk already exhausted would all be dead before dawn. The men all stared at the throng facing their death. They were all thinking the same things Viss had been thinking. More men slowly trickled into the square. Battle weary they all looked on in trepidation waiting for something to happen.

The innkeeper remained silent. He had no orders to bark. He too was overwhelmed by the thought of what would soon happen. No command he could give would change the outcome of this impending battle. They all looked on in horror as the horseman raised one hand then brought it down quickly in a sharp chopping motion. This released the goblins in a fury of snarls and swinging weapons. The townsmen braced themselves for the onslaught and Viss ran down a side alley. This would be a slaughter. These were good, simple people. They had their happy lives working in their shops, trading their goods, tending their crops and in the evening meeting in the taverns to talk over drinks. He couldn't let it be this way. The world was going bad. Terrible forces were being unleashed; killing and destroying everything. His teeth ground together in anger as he sprinted around a building turning left. His goal was the man on the horse and his path took him on a long arc that he hoped would bring him well around the small army of goblins outside of town and directly to the rider's back. He heard the sounds of battle pitched at a fury. Men and goblins screamed in agony over the clashing of swords. It spurred his legs to go faster. Every moment meant more people died. He jumped over bodies and avoided a clash with a club wielding goblin and spying a spear sticking straight up out of a body, without slowing down he grabbed it

on his way by. Shifting it into his left hand he found its balance. He rounded the final corner toward his goal at full speed. The sound of screaming grew louder and the rider came directly into his view thirty paces in front of him. He sat comfortably with no goblins to guard his flank; watching the melee with supreme confidence. He appeared to be totally oblivious to Viss' approach. Viss cocked the spear over his left shoulder and in three steps hurled the spear directly at the rider. The anger and hatred with which he threw it sent it straight, without any arc or sag in its path, quickly covering the remaining twenty-five paces between them as if it were sliding along a rope. In less than the span of a heartbeat it slammed squarely into the center of the rider's back and knocked him off his mount. Viss never slowed his pace. 'I have got to get that stone.' He thought to himself. 'He must have been using it to control the goblin horde in check. Maybe they weren't being controlled anymore but there still were two hundred of them running around in battle lust. They would still be enough to over run the town.' He rounded the horse, which hadn't moved, and looked for the fallen body of the rider. In his haste and the darkness with only fire-light he ran into something dark and solid as a tree. He bounced sprawling to the ground. What he ran into wasn't affected in the least by his headlong running collision. Horror rose up in Viss and his face and he felt the blood leave his face. Standing before him was the horseman; grinning in the red orange glow of nearby fires. The spear was sticking clear through his body. It went in through his shoulder blade and protruded a foot through his chest. Viss watched as the figure grasped the spear near the point and slowly pulled its full length through his chest. He drew it slowly as if it would increase Viss' pain or his own pleasure. He just smiled his red orange smile, his eyes locked on Viss and after completing the theatrical act he dropped the spear to the ground and laughed. Scrambling to his feet Viss hefted his sword unsure if it would do any good at all. The man was big, much bigger than Viss and probably a good head taller than Stein. He crossed the distance to Viss in three long quick strides and grabbed Viss with one

hand by the throat. Viss sunk his sword into the man's midriff full up to the hilt. The big man paid it no notice and lifted Viss one-handed off the ground again laughing. This time the laugh sounded odd, almost metallic, as if the sword in his stomach had disturbed something inside his body. As he choked for air Viss twisted the sword viciously with both hands. He pushed so hard that he felt his hands might also be inside the body. The man dropped him to the ground, pulled the sword out of his gut, turned it around and offered the hilt to Viss who stared holding his throat. Viss took it and jumped back to assess the situation. He glanced quickly around; hoping that no goblins had taken an interest in the situation. Things were bad enough already. They were all too busy with their bloodletting. Not that his foe needed their help. Again the big man approached him, closing the distance with large strides. The jewel, hanging from a chain, glowed a pale gray at his chest. Viss got control of his breathing and calmed himself. Every breath, both in and out, exacerbated the pain in his neck and throat. The man had nearly crushed his windpipe with one hand. He stepped back in an attempt to avoid the quick advance but his inability to breathe clearly only momentarily delayed the inevitable and when the large grinning man was reaching out his hand to again grasp Viss by the throat an explosion down the road stopped them both. It was different than the normal combat sounds that were in the background and it was much louder. The large man, knowing something Viss did not, shook his fists at the sky. "I am the chosen bearer of the stone. No power rivals mine." A bolt of lightning rose from his fists upward. It lasted several heartbeats and cast an unnatural gray-blue light on him and everything around him. Viss could smell the unnaturalness of it as it burned the air and reached toward the cloudy night. The figure laughed and forgetting about Viss in his madness pointed a hand at a nearby building. Lightning flew from him and crackled painfully against its wall. He swung his arm in a circle and the sickly gray raced along the sides of buildings down the center road of town. His laughter grew louder and more incoherent while the stone on his chest grew

brighter. He was insane with power. His eyes glowed with the same gray as the force that emitted from his fingertips. The power of the stone, being pent up inside his body had long ago burned up the last vestiges of the human. All that remained was a beast, barely in control. Viss edged away. Maybe he could find another way to overcome this. Maybe while his foe was self absorbed he wouldn't be noticed slipping away. "STOP!" The man screamed at Viss and he froze and turned to face him. "Time to die." He raised his hand to point his finger directly at Viss' heart but before he could unleash his lightning he was struck by a blast of red light. Viss shielded his eyes from the power of it. Red lightning was racing around the man's body; traveling along the skin, burning him. His eyes were melting and his skin was crackling but he didn't fall to the ground. He remained standing. The powerful red force kept him upright and shaking. His mouth opened and Viss heard him emit a crackling sound as if someone had thrown a green log on a campfire. As the man's flesh burned Viss followed the path of the bolt of red lightning down the road to its source. It came from a man standing in the middle of the road. He held a red glowing object in front of him and this was the source that the red power came from.

Everything stopped as abruptly as it started. The possessed man fell to the ground; nothing more than charred remains. The gray stone, the only sign of life, glowed through the pile of burnt flesh and ashes. Viss looked down the dirt road to the man that saved his life and probably that of the village. He watched him as he slowly walked toward Viss. In the brightening morning sky he recognized the figure's gait. Unmistakably it was Stein. Viss ran to greet him.

Stein stood weakly in the light of the burning town one arm wrapped tightly against his chest in white cloth. The other hand, holding the stone dropped to his side. His face and clothes were covered with filth. He had gone through a lot this night but as Viss approached him he smiled. Viss had never seen him smile. "We had hoped you would catch up with us here." Viss glanced down at the still glowing red stone in Stein's hand. "I got it from the thing that was following us.

It put up a nasty fight.” He nodded his head toward the makeshift sling on his arm. “It held it inside its body. It must have swallowed it without knowing what it had. Didn’t really know how to tap into its power either or I would be cold by now. Fed off its energy well enough though. We had one hell of a melee. It broke my arm and gave me some nasty burns.” He held out his good arm so Viss could see the burns on the inside. “I didn’t at first realize you were part of the battle here. The nexus stones are tuned to each other. This one guided me to the one your friend over there was abusing. I didn’t know exactly where in the town he was but when he started throwing bolts of lightning around I zeroed right in on him. “You were just in time. You surprised him while he was showing off for my benefit.” “Good thing. If he had been ready for my attack we would have brought the whole town down in ruins.” Stein pointed at the charred figure. “You better go collect up that stone and tuck it away for safekeeping.”

When Viss grabbed the stone he was greeted by a peculiar sensation. It gave him a cold warmth. It had strength but it was a distant strength, very hard to reach. He saw a thousand roads leading from him to the power of the stone and felt as if one of the roads was a short walk directly into its heart. But of all the roads he couldn’t quite tell which one was the right one.

The two of them slowly walked back toward the center of town. Bodies were scattered everywhere but the fighting had stopped. When their leader was killed the spirit of the goblins was broken and many of them were abandoning the fight. A few scattered people were picking through the carnage looking for family and friends. “Stein, things are going really bad. Everywhere we go the world is getting worse.” Stein glanced over at him and grunted. He had quickly fallen back into his stoic demeanor. The sound of men and goblins fighting around a corner punctuated Viss’ statement and brought out a response in Stein. “Powers are being wielded by men and creatures that don’t understand their use or consequences. That man who held the stone. What would he do after he plundered this village? Just move on to the next one?



Then the next? Eventually there would be no more towns.” At Stein’s mention of the stone Viss patted the pocket where he had just slipped it as if maybe it wasn’t real or maybe vanished in the few seconds it had been there. Stein continued. “The world is covered in a fine chain mail of life. Each link is intertwined with those around it to make a strong whole. If you keep tugging at it and tearing at it eventually it won’t be able to handle anymore and the whole thing will burst apart.” Viss was shocked by Stein’s emotional display. “Balther must be insane. He is thinking about power and control today but not looking ahead to the future. How can he be so blind? He thinks he is doing the right thing. He has a formidable amount of power now. We can see the results of it. He thinks he can transform the world.” “The world doesn’t need to be transformed.” Viss spat the words out. Stein turned his head slightly as they walked and looked at him with one tired eye. “This happened long ago and it all came to ruin. I don’t think it happened this fast. The legends imply that it took several generations but it eventually came crashing down and it wasn’t just one man. It was many. They slowly changed the world. People lost sight of their humanity, lost sight of their place in nature. They pulled themselves out of the circle of life and changed it by raping the earth. They took and never put anything back until it all collapsed. Now it’s happening again. The Fulcrum has been unearthed and the circle is being distorted—only this time at a much faster pace. What took generations to happen last time may only take years this time. If the nine nexus stones can be united with the Fulcrum the power unleashed could destroy everything in a few beats of a heart.” Stein turned his head back to the front. Not wanting to watch the pain of revelation on Viss’ face. Viss’ response was unexpected. “We will stop him. We now have two stones in our possession and there must be more. We will find them.” They walked on and came within sight of the Inn as the battling ended. The goblins, sensing they had lost, were scattering and leaving the town. They preferred not to fight in the morning light that was fast approaching. Burned and dead goblin bodies lay everywhere. Long streaks of burn

marks lined the streets in crossing patterns. Stein had wielded a lot of lightning, marring the town and dropping goblins in large numbers.

The Innkeeper was standing outside his Inn still barking orders and leaning on his mace in exhaustion. People were carrying wounded inside. Viss and Stein followed them in to see it had been quickly transformed. Wounded people were laying everywhere on blankets and being tended by those fortunate enough not to have been hurt physically. Viss looked around. He saw Marina tending a man stretched out on a table but he didn't see Roland anywhere. Everything caught up with him in a rush. Marina was safe. Stein had rejoined them and Roland, as crafty as he is, was probably climbing back down from atop a building somewhere his bowstring exhausted from bringing down goblins. He walked over to the corner where they had eaten only a few hours ago; found an empty space between some other exhausted warriors lay down and fell asleep.

It was sometime in late afternoon when he woke up. His eyelids were very heavy and his body ached. The events of the past few days and last night had exhausted him beyond the point where a few hours of sleep helped. He had just shut down. His sleep was so deep that someone could have picked him up and tossed him out of one of the windows without waking him up. Rubbing his eyes he looked around. He picked out Stein, Marina and Roland all sleeping in different areas of the large room. Many other people were sleeping, their bodies crowded along the walls or anywhere there was floor space. Nobody wanted to retire to a room upstairs either because of an unwillingness to climb the stairs from exhaustion or the security they felt by staying together. A few people were milling around tending the wounded. Much had happened since the morning. There were fewer people in the inn and it was quieter. He stood up slowly and walked toward the kitchen. In front of him a woman was weeping over a man lying on one of the tables. Viss stared as he passed by. The man was dead, his green tunic full of blood. The woman was probably his wife. Viss won-

dered if they had any children. He felt his face get hot with anger and putting his head down he walked past the two. The injustice of the scene made him rage inside to the point that his body shook. These were simple people. They didn't deserve this.

As he approached the door to the kitchen he tilted his shoulders and weakly skipped to his right to avoid bumping into someone he hadn't seen. He felt a strange sensation. His skip was weak and slow. He should have collided with the other but didn't. It was his fault. He was deep in thought with his head facing the floorboards. He didn't see the other person. They should have collided but didn't. He turned his head to see the man still walking away. He wore brown trousers and a green tunic and he looked familiar. Where did Viss see him before? He turned fully around to get a better look. Something was not right. He was blurred. Viss wiped his eyes and looked again but the man remained blurry. Everything else was clear and normal. Viss watched as the man paced about the room nervously making gestures with his arms. It looked like he was trying to talk to people in the Inn but couldn't speak. He turned to Viss and a cold chill ran down Viss' spine. The man had a look of inhuman anguish on his face. His green tunic was covered in blood and torn where he had been dealt a terrible blow with a blade. It was the man on the table; the man the woman was crying over. He wasn't dead. He was alive. Viss didn't see him get up off the table. He turned to look at the table. The woman was still there and still weeping over her dead husband; the man still lying there, his green tunic stained with blood and torn where he had been dealt a terrible blow with a blade. Viss looked back and forth several times. The walking apparition stopped near the woman. His mouth and arms moved vigorously but she never looked up at him. Viss moved closer. The sweat that had appeared on his face vanished with a cold feeling. The walking man took a sudden interest in him. Viss looked closer at his blurred face. It was the same face as the man on the table. Same clothes. Just not as real. Viss felt as if he were looking at the man through the reflection in a polished sword. A perfect image but

not quite real. He started forward toward Viss his mouth moving and his arms waving. Viss' heart jumped to double speed. The figure made no sound. Even his feet made no sound on the floor. Viss watched frozen in horror as the man came face to face with him and extending his arms tried to grab Viss' shoulders. The man's hands passed straight through Viss and the only thing Viss felt was a cold chill. He stepped backwards and fell to the floor. The weeping woman, distracted from her grieving, looked over at him. The shadow of the man on the table continued futilely in his attempt to communicate with him, his mouth moving, and his arms now gesturing toward the woman. She turned back to the table. From his vantage on the floor Viss looked around to see if anyone else had taken notice of the apparition. Like a slap in the face he realized this wasn't the only one. Another wounded man walked around the room. Blood covered his face and he had that same almost real look as if he too were a reflection in a sword blade. Viss got quickly to his feet and hurried the rest of the way into the kitchen. People were milling about, cleaning tables and plates; preparing food. Roland was stirring vegetables into an enormous kettle.

Roland heard him enter and looked up from his kettle. "You look terrible." Viss responded by ignoring the statement and going to a water barrel to ladle himself something to drink. It went down like sand. Slumping over the barrel he let the ladle fall to the kitchen floor. Roland crossed the room, grabbed him and walked him to a stool where he plopped down just as his knees gave out. "You are as white as a sheet. I will get you some soup." Viss watched him cross to the stove and saw another apparition. It was a woman. She walked around the kitchen aimlessly not trying to talk to anybody. She had already attempted that and had given up. One of her arms was missing; hacked off at the shoulder. She kept reaching to the shoulder with her remaining arm as if to staunch the flow of blood that had long run out. Roland returned with the soup. "You look like you have either lost a lot of blood or have seen a ghost." Roland handed him the soup and picked through his clothes, probing his body for wounds that would

cause the blood loss. Viss took the soup in a shaky hand and winced at the comment. Roland didn't push him into talking he just loosed his clothing a little so he could relax. Viss drank some of the soup and started to recover. The dead woman walked out through the closed door. Roland refilled his bowl and after he finished it he felt solid enough to talk. "They are everywhere." "Who's everywhere?" "The dead people. They're everywhere. The man in the other room, the woman...her arm...You can't see them?" Roland pulled up a stool beside him to get closer, and to ease the weak feeling in his legs. "You can see the dead?" "Yes. They are all in pain. They died in the battle. They can see us and keep trying to talk but nobody sees or hears them except me." He raised his head and looked Roland straight in the eye for the first time since coming into the kitchen. "How come I can see them?" He pressed his hands to his temples and moaned. "I don't want to see them. It hurts too much." Roland stood up. "I am going to get Stein. You stay right here and finish your soup. I will be right back." He looked with concern at Viss but he just stared into his soup.

Roland barged quickly back into the kitchen with the big man right behind him. "He keeps talking about dead people and how he can see them. Stein walked to Viss and with his big hands he plucked Viss off his stool and stood him up.

Without relinquishing his grasp he stared nose to nose at Viss. "Listen to me Viss." Concern flashed across his mien because of the pain in Viss' face. "Give me the stone. The damn thing changes you. It gives you the ability to see the dead. It is somehow tied to death. It isn't evil though. Death is just another aspect of life. It is another link in the chain of things. But the stone has great power and it changes a man in its own way just as all the other stones change a man each in its own way. I discovered this my self when I gained the red stone." He patted his pocket where the stone was kept. It has an effect on battle and war. When I face an enemy I can see things more clearly. Weaknesses and strengths become apparent to me. Other things too. I can sense movements of enemy groups without seeing them, and my strategic skills

have improved. The stone you have has probably heightened your awareness of and sensitivity to death and maybe pain. This is why you see the spirits of the dead still walking among us. It is also why you have become so distraught over it. It will get stronger and manifest itself in other ways that I cannot imagine. But you will either harness its strength and keep it in check or it will control you. For now we should put it away. Keep it off our bodies at least until we understand it better.” He patted down Viss’ clothing and withdrew his hands with a jerk.

“Roland, This doesn’t feel right. I already carry one stone. Maybe you should retrieve the other.” Viss reached into his vest and pulling it out he held it out for Roland who looked around nervously as if to be sure no dead people were walking around. “I don’t know if I can do this.” He stammered, looking back and forth between Viss and Stein. “Here take this one.” Stein held out his red glowing stone. Roland took it tentatively with his fingertips and afraid that the red glow might mean it was hot, quickly tucked it into a pouch at his waist then glanced around nervously as if waiting for some kind of war apparition to appear. Stein took the gray white stone from Viss and tucked it into his pocket without blinking or hesitating. If it had any effect on him he didn’t show it. Roland continued to look around nervously as if waiting for something to happen.

Stein helped Viss to his feet. “We are moving on. There is bad weather rolling in. A big storm is brewing and it is already starting to rain. Viss you go upstairs and gather up our supplies. Roland you pack us up some food for traveling. I will go find Marina and the innkeeper. We will need horses.”

A short time later, fresh horses packed with supplies and two nexus stones among them the four of them left the devastated town behind them with a light rain falling and the rising sun still making an appearance through the light clouds. Ugly black thunderclouds covered the sky over the horizon toward the north. Viss hoped the clouds would shear to the west and they would miss the worst of the storm. Roland

pulled alongside him and as if reading his thoughts commented on the storm. “This is going to be bad. We are going to catch the worst of it. It is moving very fast to the southwest and will be upon us shortly before sunset. Don’t ask me how I know. I can just feel it.” Viss watched him as his hand moved to the stone held in the pouch at his waist. Earlier Roland was horror stricken at the thought of taking a stone. Now it seemed that he was enjoying it. It was putting him in touch with the earth and sky. It was tuning his senses and heightening his awareness. Thoughts of the stone turned Viss’ eyes toward Stein who rode a horse’s length in front of him. He watched as the big mans back swayed to the rhythm of the horses’ walk. If he was seeing dead people he wasn’t showing it.





## C H A P T E R 8



For the remainder of the day they picked up the pace. The rain had become steadily stronger and the sun had long since been blotted out. At the first hints of wind, which meant the fore part of the storm was now upon them, they broke for a quick meal, eating cold rations from their packs. Everything was too wet to even attempt a fire. It was quickly growing worse and Roland was growing increasingly anxious. He always took great care in preparing their meals and insuring they all ate well but this time he was rushing everyone. "This is going to be very bad. The center of it will pass directly over us. I don't think I have ever seen the likes of a storm this powerful. Stein looked at him. "You can feel this?" Roland nodded his head vigorously and Stein made a decision "We will find shelter." Stein climbed back on his horse and the three others followed his lead. The field they had taken their meal in would offer them little comfort in this storm. They would have to find someplace soon so they rode quickly away in search of someplace safe with the rain now pounding heavily upon them.

The thunderheads beat at them mercilessly and assaulted them with sheets of cold rain while random bolts of lightning cracked through the sky. It all built to a crescendo that seemed as if it would never stop. The horses slowed to a crawl and visibility was so bad they couldn't see the ground at their feet. Stein turned his horse around and put his face up against Viss' ear. "We are running out of time. The storm grows ever worse and if we don't find shelter before the winds get much

stronger we will be tossed against the trees. And as if to accentuate his point the rain changed to hail and they all raised their hands to cover their faces from the painful stinging. "There is a copse of trees." Roland pointed off to their left. They all looked where he was pointing but none of them could see anything. Roland nudged his horse in that direction and they all followed behind. The hail beat on them and the frequent flashes of lightning illuminated their misery. They reached the trees, which were small and sparse and didn't offer much cover. Roland pointed toward a hill. "There is cover that way." He said it with the conviction of the stone he carried in his pouch. They climbed the hill slowly. It seemed like a bad idea because it again exposed them to the force of the storm and the pelting of the hail. Viss thought for sure that they would be beat to death. As they approached the top they got off their horses and walked them the rest of the way. A valley lay on the other side and Roland continued the walk now down the other side. Viss was disappointed. He hoped that shelter was at the top of the hill. The terrain was soft grass all the way down into the center of a valley surrounded on all sides by tall hills just like the one they had climbed. In the very center of the valley was another copse of trees. These thicker and older than those of the last group they passed through. They stopped in the center of the copse and Roland fell to his hands and knees looking for something. "I can feel it." He screamed over the noise of the storm. "It is here somewhere." He pulled a dagger from his belt and stabbed at the ground furiously. They all stared at him. His clothes were hanging wet and soggy with the hail pelting his back.

"Here, I think it's here." He waved for them to help him without breaking the furious rhythm of digging the earth. They all jumped down and started digging with their hands in the thick and heavy mud. The sound of their digging changed over the storm when their hands discovered a flat wooden object. They struggled to uncover it; fighting against the rain and mud and hail. It looked and felt like a solid wooden door.

“I knew something was here. I just knew it.” Roland screamed in the rain. The hail got larger; it no longer stung them. It now hurt them as they beat at the door trying to break it in. Roland’s dagger made a ringing sound as it hit something metal. He found a large iron ring and Stein grasped it with the hand of his good arm and flexed pulling with his back and thighs. The trap door swung open.

The four of them peered into the meter square black opening. It was so dark that it seemed to pour out around them. It offered them shelter but none climbed inside. It could be filled with water or it could be bottomless. A jump into it could be a long plunge to death. Flashes of lightning illuminated the sky and trees around them but couldn’t penetrate the darkness of the hole. Stein dropped a knife into it and listened for it to hit something but the sound of the hail and the rain drowned out everything. He grabbed a rope from his horse and tying his sword onto it lowered it into the hole. Two meters down, about the height of a man, the rope went slack his blade was touching something. Hopefully it was the bottom of the hole. He raised it and tried again this time from a spot on the opposite side of the hole. Again the rope slacked at about two meters. He let go of the rope and promptly jumped down before anyone could raise any questions.

The jump was short and easy and he quickly looked up and saw the silhouettes of his three companions peering down at him. Getting down on his hands and knees he felt around for a few meters in every direction ensuring there was enough room for the four of them to fit safely. He felt around for his sword in the pitch black, found it, untied it from the rope and sheathed it. He reached up and grasped the edge of the trapdoor and swung himself up to join the others. Reaching his arms out he drew Roland and Viss close to him. “It is safe and dry. There seems to be enough room for the four of us to safely escape this weather. Unpack the horses and toss everything down.” Roland and Viss didn’t need any more encouragement. The thought of safety from the storm moved them into quick action. As they unpacked the horses Stein lowered Marina gently into the dark opening and in a few min-

utes they had removed everything from the horses, tossed it all down the hole and had climbed down after it. They left the door open to give them some light and a possible means of escape in case they ran into any trouble.

They all sat quiet in the dark, shivering from the cold of the rain. Every part of their bodies ached from the pelting of the hail that continued to fall through the square silhouette above them. While Viss rubbed his body he listened to someone else rustling around in one of their packs. His head, the back of his neck, and his shoulders hurt the most. As he shifted away from under the hole to remove himself completely from the hail a soft orange glow lit up the space they all sat in. Stein was standing with his sword held up. It was wrapped with some cloth he got out of a pack and burning softly. Roland and Marina were leaning against a wall and shivering. Viss looked around. They were in the end of a corridor. It was four meters wide and it extended past Marina and Roland then past Stein and further on past the soft ring of light that the sword emitted. It appeared to slope gently downward. Viss watched as Stein loosened his grip on the flaming sword and rubbed the fingertips of his hand against the wall. It was cold to his touch, as if it were some kind of metal like a sword and smooth like the flat end of an axe. Stein ran his hand along the wall. He could find no seams, no stone, and no mortar. "There is some strange craftsmanship here." He mumbled and walked further down the corridor away from the rest of them keeping his hand against the wall. Viss watched as the bubble of light slowly moved away from him then disappeared. He couldn't tell whether Stein went around a corner or the makeshift torch burned out. He spoke out to Roland in the dark. "We are never going to find Marta. I mean we left in a big hurry, trying to catch up with her kidnappers and all along the way crazy things have happened—the goblins, the weather." "And now we have lost our horses." Roland chimed in. Viss hadn't even thought of that. It soured his mood even more. "They probably already have arrived at their destination and delivered her to the dark lord." "She's not dead Viss. He has

plans for her. He doesn't want her killed. So there is still hope. We will have to face him and make him pay for what he has done." The simple statement didn't comfort Viss. The timbre of Roland's voice didn't sound very convincing. "Maybe we can't stop him at this point. He is gathering power but so are we. He is changing things. All this stuff is all his doing. I can sense it. It's the stone I'm carrying. I can feel the dark forces milling about somewhere and there is an undertone of something I can't yet fathom. It's been gnawing at me." He paused to gather his thoughts. Trying to put into words something that was unexplainable. I can feel him manipulating everything in subtle ways. Sometimes I can almost see him. He has some of the stones. I can't exactly tell what he is doing but the feeling is getting stronger. Maybe because we are drawing closer to him or maybe because I am getting tuned into the stone. I don't know." Viss listened in the dark as Roland rustled around in the packs. In a short time he had a torch lit and stood up. "No need to stay here still getting drenched under the hole." He walked down the corridor after Stein. Viss and Marina picked up the remaining packs and they trudged down the corridor where they met Stein on his way back.

"The corridor ends with a shut door some ways down. It is made of the same metal as the walls and it doesn't seem to have any way of opening. Maybe we can force it. But I am not sure if we should. The stone is trying to tell me something but I can't tell what." His torch sputtered out as if to accentuate the uncertainty of his stance on matters. It wasn't like Stein to be uncertain about anything. Roland's torch was sufficient to keep them talking. They walked together the short trek toward the door and after examining it tried to open it by working at the edges with swords and daggers. Throwing their shoulders against it also bore no fruit. It felt as if the door were painted on the side of a castle wall. They made no progress until they got desperate. Always trying to get the door to 'swing' open wasn't working. When the door gave just a hint of a crack they worked at it differently and with

renewed vigor. Soon there was enough of a crack for Viss to fit his hands into it and slide the door open.

They stood in the open doorway and looked into another corridor. This one was wider and with a higher ceiling. Unlit torches lined both walls at even intervals and there was another metal door on the left wall. The dim light from Roland's makeshift torch didn't allow them to see very far into the new corridor. Stein grabbed a torch from the wall and lit it against Roland's. He grabbed another, lit it and gave it to Viss. "We will check that door but first let's see what the corridor brings us to. Roland what have we got for writing implements? We may need to keep a map." Roland dug around in the packs and came up with some parchment. With their torches in hand they quickly moved down the corridor with Roland stopping to note doors on his map. They didn't try to open any of the doors. They just followed the corridor on its long gentle slope downward until it ended in an open door that led them into a large room. It was twenty meters square and filled with dust, overturned tables, and several human skeletons. It looked as if there had been a fight here more than a few years ago. Stein glanced around quickly from corner to corner as if he were seeing something the others couldn't see. "This place definitely has inhabitants." He pointed toward the other side of the room where a door was in the center of the wall. This door was more comfortable for them to accept. It was wooden with metal bands, hinges, and a large metal handle. It was almost inviting after all the other metal doors and walls they had been passing. They made their way carefully across the room and Stein pressed his ear against the hardwood. He couldn't hear anything and unsure whether it was because there was nothing on the other side to hear or the door was just too thick he looked to Roland for impressions. Not sensing anything Roland just shrugged his shoulders.

They all held their breath as Stein grabbed the iron door handle, turned it and pushed the door open. The rich smell of soil wafted into the room and the opened door revealed a cave to them. It was impossible to tell how big the cave was because it stretched past the limits of

their torches but it felt pretty big. The sound of the door opening seemed to get lost then echo faintly back to them.

The temperature of the room they stood in quickly and noticeably increased. With the smell of earth coming from the cave it would have been expected that the temperature would drop, but it didn't, and this unexpected change in their surroundings heightened their awareness.

Roland broke the silence. "That is definitely the way." He pointed through the open doorway. The four of them moved cautiously through the doorway and the heat assaulted them. Stein drew his sword and slashed at nothing in the hot air. Roland and Viss drew their weapons and the three of them instinctively formed a circle around Marina. They all looked for an enemy that didn't exist and Stein cussed.

"The longer they are dead, the dimmer they get. That one just recently died. It looked solid enough to give me a scare. If it were real I would have heard it though. And it would have never gotten that close without warning." Roland spoke softly in a quavering voice. Trying to keep his words from traveling any further than the small circle that the party formed. "We aren't alone. There are others in this cavern with us. I can feel them. There are a lot of them. I can feel their tension building. They are just waiting to see how many of us are coming through the door then they will attack."

The group pulled in tighter around Marina and peered into the darkness of the cave. Shapes came slowly alive and separated themselves from the black recesses. Figures stepped slowly out into the circle of torchlight in front of them and Stein glanced back at the open doorway. If the creatures didn't have any spears or projectile weapons they could back out through the door and he could hold them off until it shut. It was a big sturdy door and it would give them time to beat a retreat. He wondered if the skeletons in that room had tried to do the same thing. With all the doors they had passed unopened on their way here it would have been easy for another group of creatures to follow them all the way to this standoff which meant they would be pinched

between two groups and facing certain death or capture. They were only a few paces from the open door but if they made a break for it and the creatures carried spears they could unleash a barrage that would cut them down before making it through the doorway. He gave a quiet order to Roland who was closest to the door.

“Roland, turn slowly and see if there are any creatures in the room behind us. If not we will make a slow exit back the way we came and as soon as we are through we will slam the door and barricade it with all the tables and benches in there.”

As Roland turned to investigate their escape route Stein assessed the oncoming horde. They were human in form with unusually long arms and legs. Their eyes glowed red in the torchlight and there were at least two score of them. As they moved closer Viss could see they were carrying clubs and swords. A few had shields which they started banging with their weapons. The throng started a slow and quiet rhythm. The suspense of their slow movement and the quiet drumming was unnerving. Why didn't they just attack? Stein's mind raced. Maybe the light hurt their eyes. He raised his torch higher but it didn't affect their forward movement. Their long skinny legs carried them still closer at the same tentative pace. What seemed like hundreds of red eyes watched them closely. Stein reached into his pocket. “Maybe this is keeping them in check.” He brought out the stone of death and held it over his head so they could see it. The gray blue glow stopped their slow forward motion and the drumming of weapons against shields. The long limbed creatures backed cautiously away from the party and disappeared out of the torchlight back into the dark corners of the cave. They waited until all sounds of retreat ceased then Stein broke the defensive circle, and holding the stone high in one hand and the torch in the other he walked off deeper into the cave. All along the walls of the cave were waist high tunnels leading off into unknown depths. Through these the creatures had poured out and upon revelation of the stone of death had just as quickly and stealthily disappeared back through. He returned to the party.



“If they had really wanted us dead we would be dead. I can see plenty of others walking around who have met this fate. But the stone keeps them away and it should continue to do so. They respect it, maybe fear it. There is another stone down here somewhere. I can sense it. So they must understand the power that it has. I think it has a grasp on them. Maybe they worship it or maybe one of them possesses it and rules with it. Either way they know its power and can feel the same power in us. There is another door in here. It is a large metal one. This is the way we are going to go. We go straight for the stone and we take it from them or they take ours from us. I wish I knew what stone it was. It would make the struggle easier. Some stones wield less power than others do.

They sheathed their weapons, hefted their torches up high and followed Stein across the cave to the door. It was exactly like the one they had first encountered and it led to more perfectly sculpted corridors exactly like the ones they had earlier walked. It hadn't occurred to Viss before but the perfection of these doors and walls made him uncomfortable. How could a man or group of craftsmen make things so exactly the same? Even a master blacksmith who toiled at his trade for a lifetime could not make two swords exactly the same. Differences in the metal, differences in the heat or even fine differences in the hammer blows he applied gave each item individuality. But this, it was uncanny. You couldn't tell one stretch of wall from another and each door was exactly the same. There was some kind of magic at work here. It was another network of corridors, this one larger than the last. They would have quickly become hopelessly lost but Roland guided them with the stone; leading them confidently on as if he knew exactly where they were, and where they were going. But he didn't know where they were, or where they were going. He just felt which way was right. So he led them onward. All the while the presence of the creatures all around them, just outside of their torch light, in every shadow. After walking for what seemed like a very long time they took a short break to eat cold food from their packs then continued on.

They followed the corridor, it was one straight line, straight as the bolt from a crossbow and Viss wasn't sure but it felt like it sloped slightly down and with the distance they had traveled that meant that they were surely deep under the surface by now.

Abruptly the corridor stopped and they were all staring at a door exactly like the others they had seen earlier in the corridors. Roland proclaimed that this was the way to go and Stein placed one ear against and listened. He looked back at the rest of them and shook his head. Viss couldn't tell whether that meant there was nothing on the other side or that he could hear nothing. Stein grasped the handle of the door and pushed it open the width of a man's finger. On the other side was a large room, forty paces on a side and lit by an unnatural light. They could hear the muffled sound of voices somewhere in there. Stein placed an eye against the opening and peered inside. Several men were standing around a large table and several of the long limbed creatures like the ones they had encountered earlier were scurrying about. Stein focused on the men at the table. They were pointing at different areas of the table and discussing something amongst themselves. One of the men abruptly looked up the door the party was huddled behind and spoke aloud. "Come in, we have been expecting you." Stein didn't move, he just continued to spy the scene calculating battle odds and summing up the group; what weapons they carried and whether they could control the unnatural light. It must be some kind of magic he thought. Maybe they could turn it on and off or manipulate it in some way that could prove an advantage in a melee. The voice inside spoke up again. "Suit yourself, but there is much to do and much we need to discuss." The men around the table, after pausing and watching the door went back to looking at the table and discussing it amongst themselves. Stein opened the door and the four of them walked through into the room. One man separated himself from the group at the table and approached. His walk was confident and his strides were long. His head, a shock of curly brown hair bounced slightly, presenting a gaiety in contradiction to his grim face and his piercing blue eyes. "We have

been expecting you.” The emphasis on the ‘have’ made Viss shiver. Around the man’s neck, hanging from a leather thong was the unmistakable glow of a nexus stone. It was banded horizontally with red and milk blue stripes. Centered toward its bottom was a red spot the size of a pebble. It gave the appearance of a red eye looking at them. “My name is Stephen.” He held out his hand toward Stein. Stein grasped it in a firm handshake and before he could reply Stephen replied for him. “And your name is Stein. In the old language it means made of stone. It is a fitting name for a man hardened by so many battles. He walked around the group. “And this is Roland, the man of many talents without whom you all probably would have starved on your long journey.” Roland turned red at the compliment. Stephen glanced at the woman. “You my dear, I will not say your name. It doesn’t bode well.” Finally he came to a stop in front of Viss. “You my friend pose quite a mystery. There is emptiness around you. I can not see your name, nor your past. Nothing about you can I feel or see. He reached out a hand and touched Viss on the sleeve as if to reassure himself that Viss really existed then he nervously fingered the jewel around his neck. “This troubles me deeply.”

The nexus stone he wore gave him the power to see into people, to know them, to know about them and to see pieces of their past. But about Viss it showed Stephen nothing. “I have grown very comfortable with this stone and seeing you with only my eyes tells me you are there but it almost feels as if you aren’t there. “The other two each carry a stone. This I can see, do you also carry one? Is that the reason that I cannot “See” you? Does a stone protect you from my sight? Viss shook his head. “I carry no stone.” After a long stare Stephen shrugged it off and turned calling to one of the dark eyed creatures. “Bring our guests some hot food and cool water.” He turned back to the party and pointing to the table bid them with an outstretched arm. “Come, we have a lot to discuss. They all walked across the room and gathered around the table joining the others. Waist high and several meters square it was a tiny landscape. Viss marveled at it. It showed hilly grass covered ter-

rain complete with tiny trees. A Blue river was painted across its mid-section. The detail was impressive. Tiny houses could be seen in small clusters. It appeared to Viss that the tiny model/map covered about as much territory as it would take a man to walk across in one half of a day. Stein, recognizing the terrain, pointed to a thumb sized building at one end of the table. "Balther's castle."

"Correct. He has a thorn in us being so close to him." Stephen placed his forefinger on the other end of the table. "We are right here, but deep below. Raising a trained army is taking more time than he would like. With the Fulcrum he can change the weather in a very short time but he can't raise battle-trained troops so fast. We harry his patrols and steal some of his supplies. We are not strong enough to stop him, only impede his progress. But maybe with three stones we can stop him." He looked again at Viss as if trying to look through a fog. Viss was staring at one of the glowing globes suspended from the ceiling. Stephen noticed his stare and commented. "It is some kind of strange magic. This is an underground complex, a castle of sorts. There used to be mining here that is where there are many coves and dead end corridors. It must have been built during the last configuration and has remained unchanged. The world in some ways must have been a very different place. The people reached for the stars and the lights have burned like no torch ever has for a thousand years. And they will probably continue to burn long after we are all dust. A few other things remain of those times and we have learned a little about them."

Something moved on the table and Viss jerked his head to look. There were tiny figures moving about. One of Stephen's comrades began mumbling a spell. His brow furrowed deeply and the rest of the group stared intently at him. "There it is." Stephen pointed at one group of tiny figures leaving the block of Balther's castle.

"We have been waiting for Balther to dispatch a crew of soldiers to one of his warlords in delivery of a stone. Someone on the inside tipped us." He called to one of the large eyed creatures again and after issuing him a series of instructions sent him scurrying off. These men have

been preparing to ambush. Viss thought. And their prey just left the castle.

"We will have to be leaving soon." He pointed to another spot on the tiny terrain. "Our prey, carrying our new stone should arrive at the ambush point in three hours. It will take us two hours to get there and there is a group of men already rotating on and off for several days now." He looked directly at Stein. "Will your party be coming with us? I realize you don't know anything about us so I will sum up our story—but quickly because time is short."

"Three years ago I was Balther's first engineer. Cedric here was his first wizard." He pointed at the man still whispering incantations over the table. I was running Balther's mines. About a kilometer from here a crew was digging a rich ore deposit. We had taken it deeper than normal because it was very rich. Well we got to a certain depth and came right up against a solid metal plate." Stephen walked over to the nearest wall and pressed his palm against it. "Just like this one." He kept walking along the wall dragging his palm across it as he talked. "No matter what we did we couldn't break it. Magic was useless and weapons were useless. We erected scaffolding above it and dropped enormous stones onto it. But they did nothing. Not so much as the smallest scratch on the surface of this strange metal. So we just kept digging around it. It took weeks and we just kept uncovering more and more of it. It was just an enormous flat surface. Then we began digging just trenches in four directions. Finally the eastbound trench came to an edge where the metal dropped off into a wall. We now know it was the roof of a building we had found. The east trench brought us to a wall. We dug along this north and south until we discovered a door and got inside this complex. It is like an enormous castle. Built of materials that are totally mysterious Built so far back in the past the earth has forgotten about her and grew right over her. There are things down here, amazing things, complex metal objects and rooms that mystify the mind. We have been trying to understand anything about her but have so far learned very little. For now she serves as a fortress and hiding place

from Balther. The Fulcrum was here down here. This is where it was found with the stones. At first Balther's motive was true. He was just trying to understand the stone and this place; but in a few short months he was lost and mad with power. Cedric and I tried to control things as he spiraled downward. He was delving into dark things and people were dying. Cedric and I, knowing he was lost and knowing it would get worse packed up a group of nearly one hundred good men and came here. Pretty good fortress we got here. They can't get in if we don't want them to. There are only a few doors and we have them well guarded and trapped. Balther stopped trying to flush us out. For now we are only a small thorn to him and not yet worth worrying about. But he knows I have a stone, and he will be needing it. Eventually he will muster up the resources he needs to flush us out. Before that happens though we will strike him first. In a few hours we should have what I thought would be our second stone. Now I find it will be our fourth. There are only a total of nine stones and the fulcrum makes ten."

Stein looked down at the table. The little figures moved very slowly. You couldn't really see their progress when you stared at them but if you looked away for a time and then looked back you could see they had moved. They were moving south away from Balther's castle. "They are heading for the port city." "Correct" replied Stephen. "No doubt with some terrible mission to complete. There are forty men and one stone in their party. We will take eighty men and four stones. Sixty men and twenty kobolds. Twenty will stay here at the core complex. With these numbers and the element of surprise we should be able to quickly subdue them and attain their stone. "We leave now. Will you join us?" Everything in the room became quiet and everyone stared at the party of four expecting an answer. Stein turned and looked at the other three. Turning again he answered: "Anything that will bring down Balther." Stephen nodded his head. "Then let us go."

The rest of the men and the Kobolds in the room began scurrying about packing and making ready. One of the men at the table

addressed the party. “It will be a long night. Will you be needing anything before we depart?” Roland, always concerned about the well being of his friends, spoke up. “We should replenish our food and water supply.”

Stephen ordered a kobold to take Roland to the kitchen and they scurried off with their almost empty packs. The men in the room gathered closer to the table and discussed their plan. When Roland returned with four packs filled with food and water they all exited a double door opposite the one they had come in.





## C H A P T E R 9



The double doors opened onto a double wide corridor that then spilled into a circular hall with arches that reached from the floor and climbed up the walls at evenly spaced intervals where they all met at the center of a large domed ceiling. The inhabitants marched quickly through but Viss, Stein, Roland, and the woman s looked slowly around the room awestruck at the sheer scale of it. It must have been ten times the height of a man. And everywhere it was brightly lit by the mysterious lights.

“What lies through that door?” Viss blurted out pointing at the light blue glass door to their left. Stephen stopped and looked at him then followed his outstretched arm. “Another puzzle of this place. Behind there is the likeness of a man, a ghost of sorts, calls himself the librarian. He won’t answer any questions though. We are not going that way now. When we get back I will show you to him.” The group hurried on through another set of double doors into a corridor that sloped slightly upward. This one was totally dark and several of the men lit torches. In a few minutes they all came to a stop at the end of the corridor where they climbed a long ladder and left the complex through a hatch door exactly like the one they had come down. They emerged to find the rain was still vigorously beating the ground.

Once they had all climbed to the surfaced and huddle around the door lightning cracked. Marina pulled herself tight against Stein. “She will be safer if she stays here.” Stephen looked directly at Stein who dis-

entangled himself from her and looked directly into her eyes. No words were necessary. Stephen pulled a kobold from the group and ordered it to take the woman back down. After they descended Stephen closed the door and the group marched off without a word being spoken. They walked in a loose formation, forty men, nineteen kobolds, Stein, Viss, and Roland. They were all completely soaked to the bone from the heavy rain. And the strikes of lightning illuminated the mud they were sloshing all over their boots and leggings. Any sense of grand adventure was quickly washed out of them. They were off to do battle Viss thought. Blood would run with the mud before the night was over. And the blood wouldn't just be spilled by steel. The stones they carried would add terrible ways to die. He felt a queasy feeling in his stomach. What type of power did their opponent's stone wield? The not knowing was the worse part of it. Feeling the uncertainty well up inside himself he started his breathing exercises and felt himself calming.

The party marched through the storm. Cedric and Stephen were in the front followed by Stein, Viss, Roland and a handful of commanding men. The rest of the force marched in files behind. Several times Cedric stopped them to mutter incantations in order to check on their progress and the progress of their quarry. Roland handed them bits of dried beef and they chewed it gratefully. The rain soaked through everything and even the beef was soggy.

It seemed to Viss that with each step they took the storm grew worse. It was as if something were trying to stop them from their destination. He almost wanted to stop the group and make them walk backwards to see if the storm subsided in strength. Things went from bad to vicious and his face began to hurt from the constant wind-blown rain. Cedric stopped the group again to mutter an incantation but this time he shook his head to indicate something was wrong. Viss watched him put his head close to Stephen's. It was the only way to talk over the rumbling of the rain on the ground. They exchanged words then moved the group onward. Within a short time

their trek turned upward as the ground sloped into a hill which quickly turned into a cliff. Soon they were grabbing at branches and roots to keep themselves from sliding back. Their hands became as muddy as their feet and legs. The first of their group achieved the top of the hill and a bolt of lightning cracked unusually loud as if to announce their arrival. With the struggle up the hill they had lost their formation. They all climbed up in random fashion because there was no distinct path to follow. The man above Viss fell to the ground screaming and rolled directly toward Viss who jumped to avoid a collision. His jump saved him because at that very instant a flying beast plunged down from the air into the space he was just occupying. The creature screamed and swung a club at him, just missing his head. Lightning cracked again as Viss rolled and drew his sword coming back to his feet on the slope. Another lightning flash revealed at least a dozen of the evil things attacking the group. The initial onslaught of the surprise attack was successful. It killed several of the men in the party. But now they were aware of the attack and responding with swinging swords. Every man and Kobold in the group was engaged. The tide of the battle started to equalize and then it tipped in the favor of the men when bowstrings began to twang. Several of the beasts were quickly brought down with arrows and the rest of them sensing the battle would soon be lost sped off over the hill in the darkness. The fierceness of the rain was a hindrance to the men but the weight of it on the flying creatures and the torrents of swirling water in the air hindered them even more. They were not able to fight strong foes. Their advantage lie in surprise and speed. The element of surprise had quickly disappeared and they had no mobility in the tumult.

Viss looked up toward the crest of the hill. That was too easy. It was only a precursor to the actual battle. It was just something to soften them up. The real ambush probably lay just over the hill. He looked to the top of the hill. Dark figures were hurtling over. He peered in the rain and squinted his eyes, trying to see if it was true. Lightning cracked again and he saw them. It was an ambush, a terrible one. Gob-

lins were pouring over the hillcrest in a horde. There was no mistaking the jerky motions of their long limbed awkward bodies. Viss screamed and pointed toward the crest. Most of the group had been looking for or tending to their fallen comrades. Viss' scream spread to the nearest men and they carried on with the shout until everyone was looking at the hilltop. The next flash of lightning revealed the onslaught to everyone. What initially seemed like a masterstroke of tactics on the part of the ambushing goblins quickly turned into a grave error. The goblins in their bloodlust rushed down the hill at full battle speed and if the terrain was dry they would have had a distinct advantage in position by fighting downhill. They could have pushed their offensive all the way down the hill until every last man and kobold was dead. But their haste was their undoing. As soon as they hit the wet and muddy slope they began running faster and faster to keep from falling. In the span of a dozen steps many of them had fallen and began rolling. The men on the hill stood their ground and slashed at the goblins as they passed. The goblins numbers were quickly decimated. Unable to defend themselves they were easy prey to a quick sword. The two foes should have attacked in unison. The flying creatures in the air and the goblins with a carefully orchestrated attack could have made the ambush a total success. But they didn't. The flying creatures had attacked alone and been quickly killed or scattered because the men could draw their bows. And now the goblins were killed because they had misjudged the effect of the weather on the terrain. If Balther had caused this storm in order to help the ambush he had miscalculated. The storm was the total undoing of the ambush.

The men and Kobolds finished the job by drawing their bows again. Some of the goblins had rolled, run, or fell right past their party to areas below them on the slope and now men notched arrows and when lightning lit up the sky they released them. After a few rounds like this there were no living goblins remaining and as quickly as the battle began, it was over.

They gathered together and counted everyone living, dead or wounded. Stephen quickly rallied them together raising his voice over the storm. "Those goblins were organized by someone. This was a planned ambush and there may be more, at the least the commander and his escort. We need to take the top of this hill now. Leave the dead and wounded here we will come back for them." With that he began up the hill and the rest of them followed quickly behind. They were the distance of an arrows flight from the top although when the attack started they were half that distance from the top but the going was slow. Blood and bodies added to the mud made their climb even more treacherous but the rain was beginning to subside and by the time they reached the top it dwindled to a drizzle. Stephen counted the party members. "Our loss is not great." Viss looked around for his friends. Roland and Stein had found each other first and he joined them.

"We still have trouble." Stein pointed down into the valley opposite the side they came up. Viss squinted through the drizzling rain. He could see figures moving. They were a good distance away and very small. It reminded him of the table top scene back at the underground castle. Roland spoke up. "The stone bearer is there among them. I can feel him and he is headed straight for us." He stuttered. He was not looking forward to more combat. "I am out of arrows." He reached an arm over his back to assure himself that he still at least had his quiver. "No need for arrows in this battle." Stephen and Cedric had joined them. "The fighting will be different this time." The five of them peered into the valley and at the moving figures. They all paused to catch their breath then without a word they started down the hill toward the stone and its bearer.

Stephen and Cedric were in the front followed by Roland, Stein and Viss. The remainder of the party, both men and Kobolds followed haphazardly behind. Stephen made no effort to organize them. Each man was preparing himself mentally for the unknown clash ahead and nothing Stephen could do would make it easier. They gripped their weapons tighter. This side of the hill was lusher than the previous and

climbing down was easier. This valley was a natural holding place for plants and trees like a bay keeping everything alive within it healthy. This is partly why the goblins were so taken by surprise when they rushed over the crest of the hill onto the muddy and slippery slopes. They assumed the terrain would be the same on both sides of the hill.

They quickly came to the bottom of the valley where the terrain was mostly tall grass. The rain had stopped and the crescent moon, peeking through breaks in the clouds, was casting enough light for them to see the enemy stop at the other end of the grassy basin about two lengths of a bows journey away. For a long moment the two groups just watched each other—trying to assess strengths and weaknesses. Viss noted that there seemed to be no more than ten of them with one standing taller than the others. Human no doubt while the rest probably goblins. “Awfully confident. We have them outnumbered.” Viss whispered to Stein. “They don’t know that we are carrying a stone—let alone three. He thinks he can just use the stone he’s got and wipe us out.” They looked again toward the enemy and in the beat of a heart, as fast as lightning a yellow ring of light danced off the body of the tall one. It radiated outward from his body at waist height and spread like the ripple of a stone thrown into a pond. It hit them before they could react and they all fell screaming to the ground. Some of the men in the back of the party who were already injured screamed in pain and their screams hadn’t subsided when the second shock wave hit. “It’s the Saturn stone!” Stephen screamed through clenched teeth. “These waves can continue until we are totally beaten. Then they can simply walk up and finish the job with steel.” Viss now knew why their opponent was so confident. Before the third shock could hit them Stephen stood up and using his stone peered into the tall figure across the grass. “This is a trap.” He said just before the third wave hit them. The few of them who had stood up fell back to the ground in agony. Viss could feel his resolve fading. The pain was unbearable. It felt like fire in his whole body and it caused him to lose control of his muscles. Without getting up Stephen continued. “His orders are to keep us here as long as possi-

ble, and if he can kill us then all the better. This is just a diversion and it is unclear to me why, but I think he doesn't know why. He just has his orders and his stone, which I can tell, has very deeply addled his brain with power. Viss looked at Cedric who was mumbling furiously. He lay on his back waving his arms in the air over his head. And it looked funny to see a mage casting a spell lying down. He wondered if the arm motions had to stay the same in respect to the magic users body of if he had to change them to keep their relationship to the earth. A green glow bathed them all in the night. It was a circle of light, like a bubble surrounding the whole party. Viss watched and braced himself as the next shock wave raced toward them. Like a rock parting the water in a stream the bubble of green light parted the shock wave around them and Viss turned to watch it move right past them and up the hill. Stein shook the pain out of his head; handed Viss something then crawled over to Roland. "Give me your stone." Roland quickly handed him his stone and Stein turned to Cedric. "After the next wave passes drop the shield." Viss couldn't tell if Cedric understood Stein's request. He continued to mutter incantations and wave his hands. Viss supposed the shield could only be held as long as the caster could continue the spell. As the next wave passed them Cedric stopped his incantation and jumped to the ground. Stein threw his arms in a fierce forward motion, pointing them directly at the enemy. He hoped to get his attack in before the next wave of pain was begun on its journey across the field. He flashed a tremendous bolt of red lightning at the dark group. It was so vicious that the ground rumbled and Viss could feel the hair on his head standing up. The heat from it warmed the air around them. The bolt reached the enemy just as a yellow ring started to form and the two collided with a tremendous crack. Stein followed this with a second bolt then with a third and a fourth. His face grimaced with strain and each time the bolt neared the enemy it was met by a yellow ring in a deafening crack. Stein stopped his attack and leaned forward to catch his breath. They all waited for a yellow ring to race toward them but none came. Stephen, who had been using his

stone to watch their foes shouted at them. "There is only one left. His entourage is dead but it doesn't matter to him. He still feels confident. His purpose was to delay us and keep us here. He doesn't have to attack to do that. While Stein regains his strength so does he and the two of them seem to be locked in a stalemate but time is against us because he knows in time the plan will be completed and he will win. All that he knows is that a door will open for him and he will escape. He just doesn't know how the plan against us will be completed. Stein grimaced and renewed his attack. Stephen's words of a stalemate were not agreeable with him. He would rather win this battle or die losing than have it go on this way until the trap was completely sprung but using the stone this way was generating enormous heat in his body. His clothes were already dry and scattered drops of rain were turning to steam as they touched him but he didn't stop. He threw another bolt of red across the field, then another, and another. A ring of yellow met each bolt until Stein fell to one knee and threw a final bolt, as thin as a thread across the field.

Stephen leaped excitedly. "You have overcome him! He lay in the grass in exhaustion and his mind is black to me. He must have lost consciousness or he is dead!" Stephen's voice climbed in excitement. "If we take him now the stone will be ours." He broke into a slow run across the field and Viss and some of the others followed. Stein and Cedric slowly got to their feet and followed. The group of running men watched in horror as their prey sat up in the grass. Stephen, Viss, and the other running men mustered what strength they had and ran even faster. In just a few moments they could be on him. They watched as he shook the pain of Steins' attack out of his head. 'A hardy character' Viss thought. The figures head jolted and he stood quickly but unsteadily up. He recognized the threat heading his way. He waved his arms in the air as if to cast a ring of yellow at them and they all stopped running. Some of them jumped to the ground for fear of the pain but the pain never came, instead the air shimmered and hummed behind him. The hum was a steady familiar throb to Viss. He knew it



was a doorway opening up and he watched as the air changed and began to shimmer. While the rest of the group remained on the ground, waiting for the ring of pain, Viss stood up and looked into the forming door. Hoping not to get a glimpse of the terrible creature that was behind the door the last time it opened. The rest of the party stood still in fear. Stein and Cedric had not yet crossed halfway across the field. He alone knew exactly what would happen and he seemed to be the only one capable of motion. The rest of the party braced for an attack. They didn't know it was a door that was opening here. They thought this was how the yellow pain began. The air behind the man looked and felt the same as the air that had opened up inside the crate in the Captain's castle. It seemed like so long ago. He continued his tentative steps forward watching for a sign of the creature. But the only thing he saw this time was stone. It looked like this door opened up into a room somewhere inside a castle. The man who opened up the portal grasped something that was suspended on a string about his neck, gave them a mocking bow, tossed his head back and laughing he turned and stepped toward the portal. Viss bolted into action running at top speed. If this man was going to escape through this portal then he wouldn't do it alone. Just before the man stepped into the threshold he stopped to take one last gloating look at the frozen party and it was his undoing. The smile that started to break on his face registered shock and turned pale as at that instant Viss leapt with all the strength in his legs and crashed with outstretched arms and full force into the small of his back. The two of them tumbled through the portal together and it winked out instantly leaving the rest of the party, Stein, Roland, Stephen and the others standing alone in the field and the now quiet night.

"Damn it all." Stein grunted. He was only a few paces behind Viss by the time they had tumbled through the portal. He also had recognized what was happening and expended every shred of energy he had to reach it in time. But he had arrived at the spot just as the temporary doorway closed. He cursed himself and looked around carefully. He

had seen rough-hewn stones through the portal. He sniffed the air. It was damp, not the smells of a field of tall grass but the smells of underground rooms. It must have opened up into a room somewhere under Balther's castle. He paced the area carefully looking for more clues but could find nothing else. Stephen grimaced. "Viss is gone. The Saturn stone is gone. We have battled here for nothing and the ambush we were intending to spring on an unsuspecting enemy has been sprung on us." Stein added to Stephen's misery. "Viss was carrying a stone with him. It is possible that the plan was to get us away from the underground castle. Maybe there is something there that Balther wants." Stephen jolted. "You might be right Stein. Maybe the plan all along was to get us away from there. Maybe there is something there that he wants. There is much there that we don't understand. But having the Fulcrum at his disposal maybe he has learned of something." Stephen barked orders at the nearest Kobold telling him to take the Kobolds he needed and tend to the dead and transport the wounded. He and the rest of the party would make haste back to the complex.

## C H A P T E R   I O



Viss tumbled through the portal with his arms locked around the man's shoulders. A moment ago they were on soil covered with grass and it came as a shock to both of them as they landed on hard stone. The impact forced the air out of their lungs. Viss took less impact. He had fallen directly on the man who acted as a cushion between him and the floor. He recovered quickly and shifted his grip from the mans shoulders and chest to his neck. Slipping his left hand under the mans throat he locked it into his right elbow. The man reacted violently and climbed to his hands and knees. Viss rolled onto his back and tightened his arm against the mans throat. This lock would only take three seconds to render the strongest of men unconscious. It pressed against an artery along the left side of the victim's neck quickly cutting off blood flow to his brain. His victim kicked violently and wriggled his body trying to reach up over his own head to claw at Viss but it was unsuccessful and his body fell limp as he lost consciousness. Viss lay on his back, his arms locked around the mans head and neck lying on top of his chest. The two of them facing the ceiling and he continued to squeeze. He would insure the man was dead before he released him. To Viss' utter shock the man jerked free of his grasp and stood up with ease. He had simply pulled free from Viss' arms as if they were made of string. Viss, lying on his back simply started up at the man in disbelief. How could he just get up out of his grip like that? The man leaned his head and stared down at Viss also in disbelief. Then it hit Viss. He was

still holding him in his grip. The body was still there! He remembered now. Stein had given him the stone of death during the battle in the field and he was now looking at the spirit that just left the dead body. He released his grip and looked at his hand. He was still holding the pouch with the stone in his hand. He opened the loop of leather and strung it around his neck.

The man pointed a finger at him and moved his mouth. He was trying to draw power from the Saturn stone but nothing happened. He then raised his foot and brought it down directly toward Viss' face but again nothing happened. Viss had twisted his head in reflex but the foot passed through him without him feeling it. Viss rolled the dead body off his chest and stood up slowly. The ghost flailed its arms at Viss in vicious but ineffective blows. Nothing happened at all. Every strike passed through Viss without harm. The ghost had no corporeal essence. He had as much weight as an image in a mirror and realization of this came to him. He stopped his attack and stared at his own body lying on the stone floor and raising his hands to his face his mouth opened in a long silent scream. Viss stared in horror. Being freshly dead his foe was very strong an image. In time he would fade and get weaker until he was just shimmer that finally he disappeared. Thinking about this Viss glanced around nervously to see if there were any other corpses walking around. The last time he carried this stone he couldn't handle it but this time he was better prepared. He knew what it was and to a degree he could understand and accept it. He looked around the room. The walls were stone and covered by some tapestries. The floor was also stone and covered by a rug. Otherwise the room was absolutely bare with no furnishings, no windows and just one door to his left. He looked toward the ceiling. It was exactly the same, bare and indistinct. His eyes came back to the body on the floor. What should he do about the Stone it carried? The spirit of the dead man was also thinking about the stone. It was kneeling by the corpse attempting to move the clothing at its chest. Its face was a twist of anguish. His hands were having no effect on the corpse. Viss grabbed the body by its arms

amidst the meaningless protest of the ghost and dragged it over to a corner of the room near the hinged side of the door. If anyone opened the door this spot is the best hidden. The door, which swung in, would hide the body. Almost as an afterthought he rummaged through the corpse's clothes and found the stone. It was tied with a leather thong and it was hanging around the corpse's neck still glowing a beautiful golden color. He hesitated. He wasn't supposed to carry two stones. It was, according to Stein, not possible. He touched it tentatively and nothing happened so he pulled it off the corpse and strung it around his own neck where it continued to glow. It was supposed to be impossible but he did it anyway. Maybe there was something different about him that allowed him to carry more than one stone. Maybe he could carry more than two. He stood still and waited for something to happen. Maybe the stones would react. But they didn't react and he didn't feel anything unusual. The ghost looked at him in helpless rage as Viss took one last look around the empty room and headed for the door. He felt the presence of one stone around his neck and the other in a pocket at his hip as he braced himself for what might lie on the other side. He leaned against it and listened but the only thing he could hear was the faint echo of a memory of Stein saying "Two stone can not be carried by one man." He pushed the thought aside and looked at the door.

Stephen, Stein, Roland, Cedric and the others returned to the underground castle by the route they had all come and climbed back down through the trap door they had originally exited. As they stepped off the ladder and began their walk down the slightly sloping corridor they all knew something was amiss. There should have been two men guarding the door. They should have been stationed somewhere in this corridor but they were not here. They hastened their pace and finally reaching the door at the end they barged through. The large chamber they had earlier come through was now a scene of chaos just passed. They stopped and drew their weapons scanning for trouble. All the fur-

nishings in the room were broken and bodies were scattered about. It was the aftermath of fierce hand-to-hand combat. The bodies were of men, goblins and Kobolds. The underground complex had been attacked while they were away.

Stephen looked over the carnage, and judging by the number of goblin corpses, he knew his men must have been terribly outnumbered. Balther wanted something here and probably knew exactly where it was. By tempting them with the possibility of gaining a stone he had lured the brunt of Stephens men away from here and the remaining few we overcome with sheer numbers. He banged his fists against his chest. "Damn. What could he want? What could be so important to risk a stone to get it?" He looked around the room again. The other members of the party began checking the corpses. They were hoping to find someone alive. Stephen surveyed the room slowly. The greatest accumulation of corpses was in front of the glass doors behind which was the room with the librarian. He moved over to get a closer look. His men and Kobolds must have made a stand here. Using the invincible glass like doors for added protection. But this wasn't the case. The scattering of the bodies told the opposite to be true. The dead goblins had fallen with their backs to the doors as if *they* were guarding it and putting up a defense and not allowing his men to get inside. Everything fell together in his mind and he cursed. Damn it! Balther didn't need a thing. He needed knowledge and he came to the librarian to get it. Stephen called to the others in the party. "Balther himself has been here." He probably opened a doorway like the one we saw in the valley right here in this room then went in to see the librarian. He, no doubt, got what he wanted then left. What he wanted I don't know but I am to find out." He glanced at the glass doors. "Follow me Stein. The rest of you search the complex for wounded and survivors. The main room here will need to be cleaned of corpses so we can bring the wounded here and care for them." He thought that if Balther was able to transport directly into here then he must be gaining

mastery of the fulcrum. He and Stein moved bodies away from the glass doors and stepped into the library.

Stein looked around. This room was smaller than the glass doors suggested. It was six paces square and twice the height of a man to the ceiling. The walls were of the same blue color as the doors and totally opaque but giving a feeling of depth as if they were very thick. Otherwise the room was empty. Stein looked around puzzled. "*Where was the librarian?*" Stephen said the word "Librarian" aloud and a man appeared in the center of the room. Stein stared at him. Shocked at the sudden appearance he spoke his thought aloud. "A magician?" The figure heard his question and answered. "No, I am not a magician, although I appear by a magic of sorts." Stein's brow furrowed deeper in puzzlement. "Pay him little heed Stein. He speaks forever in riddles." "If you are not a magician then what are you?" The librarian smiled and held out a hand. "Touch me." Stein took two steps forward and attempted to grasp the outstretched hand. He grabbed nothing. His hand passed right through the librarian's hand. "So you are a ghost." "I have never lived—yet I exist. Having never lived I can never know death. Without life then death there is no ghost. I am a librarian and this is all you should know. I hold much knowledge but impart no wisdom. I could describe to you things about an apple you wouldn't believe but not a word about how it tastes. I could spend a hundred of your lifetimes describing the things and ways of the world in the smallest of details yet I tell you I know nothing.

Stephen interrupted the soliloquy. "Yes, yes, enough of your riddles already. How many countless hours have I spent muddling through the swamp your tongue causes?"

"Four hundred and seventeen." The librarian calmly answered.

"And you are right in your estimation of yourself. You have told me seemingly everything yet I learned seemingly nothing. Listen to me now demon." Stein watched as the veins on Stephens neck stood out while he spat the words at the librarian. The endless circular conversa-

tions between the two, ever leading nowhere left Stephen short of temper.

"This complex here has been invaded within the past several hours. The goal, we believe was this room and you. Were you visited today?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"No names were given."

"What did they want?"

"Information."

Stephen's face was turning red "I want to know everything that was said. I want to know every detail. I want to know what the men looked like and what their mannerisms were. The future of everything may lie in this now cough it up!"

He was spitting and screaming and by the time he finished he had moved face to face with the librarian as if trying to physically intimidate him. There was an uncomfortable pause as the two stared eye to eye then the librarian nodded his head in acquiescence and all hell broke loose. The door to the library burst open and a group of men ran in. Stein could see a battle raging through the opened doors. Three men ran into the library and they were wielding swords.

"Balther!" Stephen screamed in disbelief. He and Stein drew their swords and rushed to attack. The sounds and sights of battle through the open doorway excited them to instant fury and Stein was the first to engage with a brilliant attack directly at Balther; and catching him unaware he sliced his sword clean through Balther's neck. His sword met less resistance than he anticipated and the momentum of his swing brought the sword through the body of a second foe while Stephen made a blow at the third man. The three intruders should have all fallen to the ground dead. The encounter lasted less than the span of two heartbeats but the intruders continued unscratched into the center of the room as if they had not seen Stein or Stephen. The library doors closed shutting out the sounds of battle and the sudden quiet was a hammer blow with more impact than the previous outburst of vio-



lence. Stein and Stephen, in their rage, had passed right through the three entering figures and now were between them and the doors. They turned and looked at the backs of the three men now approaching the center of the room. Balther and his two cohorts stopped and looked around the room then Balther spoke. “Librarian show yourself.”

Stein hefted his sword to make another attack but Stephen grabbed his arm. The librarian had never disappeared. He was still standing in the same spot he was in when talking to Stephen and Stein but Balther didn’t see him. But now a second librarian, identical to the first appeared directly in front of Balther. “Stein shook his head, loosened the grip on his sword and mumbled. “Things are getting very strange here.” The second librarian was exactly identical to the first one—right down to the wrinkles in his robe.

“I come here for information librarian and I will have it from you.” Balther and his cohorts sheathed their swords. Stein and Stephen did the same and watched the intruders. After sheathing his sword Stein walked up to Balther and reaching out his hand, slowly passed it through Balther’s mid-section to satisfy himself that Balther wasn’t real. He muttered. “Some kind of accursed magic.”

Balther continued with his query. “Librarian, I hold in my possession the fulcrum and six nexus stones. Each stone I gain adds to my power. Tell me in one word how many stones there are? “Nine” Was the succinct response from the second librarian. The three intruders looked at each other. “Three more.” One of them said to the other.

“When I have all nine stones how do I unleash their combined power?”

“You gather them close together then bring them near the fulcrum and they will act each according to its role in the whole.”

“What the hell does that mean? I just throw them all on a table and it happens?”

“No”

What exactly do I do to draw their power into myself?” The second librarian paused then waved his hand in the air and a globe of bright

yellow light appeared over his head. "This is the fulcrum and each of the nine stones has a place around it."

Stein gasped. He was awestruck at the sight of the fulcrum. It was exactly like the sun—only smaller. Even though this was an illusion it cast a yellow glow of health on everything. He and Stephen were the only living things in the room but the others still showed the effects of it. It felt like a beautiful summer afternoon. The globe made even Balther's face look healthy and alive. Stein thought that if Balther could only feel this beauty, maybe he would not try to turn it to such evil ends. But Balther was oblivious to it. He was too far gone. The grimace of greed on his face showed how deep the poison ran in him.

The librarian spoke again. "The stones must be introduced to the fulcrum in a specific order." First the messenger." He held out his hand and a red stone appeared in it. He brought the stone up by raising his hand. The stone leapt from his hand and began a fast circle around the fulcrum over his head. Stein squinted his eyes to glimpse it revolving quickly around the beautiful yellow globe at a distance of one arms length. Its speed made it difficult to follow. "Then the lover." The librarian held up a golden colored stone and like the other it leapt out of his hand and began revolving around the fulcrum at about two arms lengths from the glow and at a slower pace than the red stone. "The mother." A multicolored blue-green and brown stone flew from his hand. Slower than the others it spun and again, further from the fulcrum. "The warrior, the King, the Queen, the Underworld, The WaterKing, and finally the cold stone of Death." As he spoke their names each stone flew out of his hand and began its circle around the fulcrum over his head. Stein looked at the last stone, the stone of death. It slowly prescribed its arc near the wall at the pace of a man walking. The whole group of people in the room, some real and some not, stood in silence, all craning their necks upward pointing at one stone or the other.

The librarian broke the silence. "This is the correct way to configure the stones. Whoever stands under their influence gains the power of all

nine times nine.” He waved his hand and the display abruptly stopped. There was power in the apparition and its disappearance left Stein with a feeling of loss.

Balther spoke. “Messenger, Lover, Mother, Warrior, King, Queen, Underworld, WaterKing, Death. Is that the correct order?” The second librarian nodded his head and said yes.

“You will tell no one of our conversation nor of who was here.”

“If no one asks.” Replied the librarian.

“Even if someone asks you will say nothing, you will say nothing of my appearance here or what we have discussed or I will destroy this building—destroying you.

“I can hold nothing from someone who asks.” He stared blankly at Balther as if the threat were totally meaningless to him. Balther cursed and placed a hand on each of his companions’ shoulders. They turned and walked back toward the door and when they opened it Stein could see that the battle outside had ended. Half a dozen of Balther’s men greeted them and Balther saw them all rush off as the door closed. Stein, Stephen, and the Librarian remained silent for a very long time.

Viss approached and listened at the door. The spirit was still walking around and its presence was so thick that he fought off the urge to shush it quiet. It was disconcerting to see parts of the ghost pass through parts of his body. And he shuddered with every imagined touch. He could almost feel it vaguely as a small change in temperature or a slight breeze blowing through the room. It was so faint that Viss couldn’t be sure if it was real or imagined. It continued to mourn over its body and chastise him and after it made several more futile attempts to grab him it stopped and stared at the door for a moment and forgetting its futile assault on Viss it tried to grab the handle. The ghost seemed to have changed its goal; it now had a new purpose and Viss watched it closely as it’s hand passed through the handle. The ghost paused for a moment, looked at him then walked through the closed door. Viss quickly opened the door and followed it. He watched it pass

through another door, this time without pausing to try the knob. Viss listened at this second door then quickly opened it. It revealed a stairwell and he followed it quickly up. He and the ghost climbed many flights of stairs and passed many doors. The scattered lamps became more plentiful and the walls were of a finer finish. They were passing from the dark bowels into a more habitable section of what Viss could only guess was a castle. Viss stopped as the ghost came to an abrupt halt. It was so engrossed in its own quest that it never noticed him following behind it. It paused and looked around carefully then stared at the wall on its right and after moments pause it walked right through the wall. Viss ran up to the spot and touched the wall. It had decided to take a shortcut. Why use the corridors when it didn't have to? He wondered if it could do the same in up and down directions. If it could pass through doors and walls then it probably could pass through the floor and the ceiling. Now Viss was on his own and he looked around carefully. Without a guide he felt more vulnerable. He walked to the nearest door and listened. "Stop! What are you doing there? A voice echoed loudly off the corridor walls. Viss froze and his heart jumped. His body turned cold as sweat quickly poured out of his skin. He took his ear off the door and turned to look back down the corridor from where he had previously come. A man was walking toward him. His body language, the way he walked indicated suspicion but not quite hostility. Viss had not yet proven himself as a threat or an intruder. He was just someone eavesdropping at a door. As the man walked confidently toward him Viss looked him over carefully. He was dressed in a leather tunic and leggings with a sturdy belt and a plain but functional sword. He was a man of moderate means, a man of the middle class, not a peasant but not a baron. He was probably a merchant or a craftsman. Viss turned his body slowly to face him directly and his arms relaxed without making any move toward his own sword. This could possibly play either way. The merchant could assume he was just a resident snooper or he was an intruder. Viss would go on his way if it was the first. But if the man determined him to be an intruder then Viss

would kill him. For Viss the first choice was preferable because it was quieter. The man stopped several paces from him and his face turned white as he saw the glowing stone around Viss' neck. "Uhh...uhh...excuse me lord but I did not realize that you are a lord of the stones." His eyes darted up and down alternating between Viss' face and the stones around his neck. How may I be of service to you?" Viss reacted to the situation without pausing. "I have lost my way." "Are you looking for the GreatRoom?" His eyes now rested on the stone and the pouch at Viss' chest. "Yes, I am looking for the Great Room." "It would be my great honor to lead you there." The man was obviously nervous and hoping that Viss would forget the insult of yelling at him from down the corridor. He began to ramble and Viss let him. It meant more information. "Lord, my name is Gren." He bowed deeply. "I am a translator for Lord Balther. I command four different languages and aid the Lord with his dealings with the different countries to the east." He raised his arm and pointed. Viss made note of the direction. Every fragment of information was important. He continued him rambling and Viss listened intently.

"We trade with the Harteks for weapons. They are superb miners and smiths. The Gemali deal in herbs, potions and all type of magic and alchemy. And the Rhish have lush farmlands. But I am rambling on about the doings of Lord Balther." His talking about himself seemed to give him confidence and he talked to Viss more directly. "You carry two nexus stones and are no doubt headed toward the Great Room. I will leave you to your mission my lord. "Viss quickly capitalized on the situation. The mention of a Great Room piqued his interest. Maybe this is where the ghost went. "You could maybe help me here? I was going to the Great Room but seem to have lost my way. Could you lead me there?" The translator smiled broadly. He knew he was making points with someone of power. To him this was not a bearer of a stone, but a bearer of two stones. He could hardly contain his excitement. "Please yes my lord. It would be my great pleasure. We are not far from there. The corridors and halls in the castle can be very

confusing. If you would follow me we will be there in but a few moments.” With that he moved off decisively, all the while talking about his dealings as translator with the countries to the east.

They passed people in the corridors and nobody paid them any attention. When they entered a doublewide corridor Viss could see their destination. It was a set of double doors made of very sturdy rough-hewn oak. A rugged looking, battle tested guard stood at each side. The linguist stood back as Viss approached. “I hope, M’lord that I have been of help?”

Viss started something and now he had to complete it. It was obvious that this was the great room and the linguist was not going inside. He reached confidently for one of the door handles without acknowledging the guards. They ignored him.

The air inside felt different and the sound inside the room was also different. The lighting was brighter and harsher and he squinted against the brightness. The air and the sound were different here because the room was enormous. It was the largest single room that he had ever seen. Five hundred soldiers could easily stand inside, but it was empty of everything except wooden support columns rising up to meet the ceiling at ten times the height of a man. The light was different because a tremendous source of yellow sunlight emanated from high up in the center of the room. He tried to look at it as the door closed behind him. The light became palpable. It not only illuminated the room but warmed it as well. Using his hands to shade his face he looked directly at it. It was a small sun. He felt its heat. It felt like the summer sun at noon. The two jewels at his chest glowed with heat. They were absorbing the heat and warming his chest. He walked slowly into the room. As his eyes adjusted he realized there was a man standing directly under the glowing sun and the waves of heat and light made his image shimmer. He looked as if he were waiting for something or beckoning to the glowing globe for something. He was beating his chest and pulling his hair but Viss could hear no sound come from him. Viss could hear his own footsteps on the stone floor but

could hear no sounds from the man berating himself. As Viss got closer he realized it was the spirit of the man that he killed. This was where he went. He was looking to the power of the small sun for help. Looking for it to save him from his own death. Viss stopped his forward movement. He didn't want the figure to see him. It would pester him further so he walked to his right, circumnavigating the room slowly. This brought him around toward the back of the spirit. He stood close to a wooden column and watched carefully. From his new vantagepoint he could see the double doors that he entered. Except for the spirit, the sun, and himself there was nothing else in the room and as the thought occurred to him that there was nothing he could do the double doors opened and several figures walked confidently in. It was Gren the linguist with Balther and another man. The two door guards followed right behind them. The glow of the sun grew noticeably brighter. The tormented spirit threw his hands in the air, ran to Balther and threw himself on the ground at Balther's feet but Balther took no notice and walked right through him deeper into the room. The group followed him and the five of them moved slowly across the room toward Viss and stopped directly under the sun. Balther spoke. "Do you think you could stroll nonchalantly about my castle without me knowing about it?" Viss looked at the group. The linguist had a smug look on his face. He had played himself well. He was suspicious of Viss all the while but played stupid quite convincingly.

The group was being cautious. Why didn't they just attack and overpower him? Something was stopping them from being too aggressive. Maybe this room held dangers? Or maybe it was the two stones around his neck. The thought gave him confidence and he stepped away from the column that was partially shielding him and addressed Balther directly. "What have you done with Marta? Balther replied with a grin. "I have used her. Used her to bring you to me. "Balther's voice was off-tone. There was a strangeness to it. It sounded like he was losing touch with reality. All of this made Viss very uneasy. He watched as the spirit lamented Balther with no response. It waved its arms and cried

out silently as if imploring something but Balther continued on without seeing it.

“I see you have brought me two more stones. This brings my total count to eight. And now only one remains for me to obtain. Which ones have you brought me?” The man standing next to Balther, the one Viss didn’t recognize leaned over and spoke something in Balther’s ear. “My consort here tells me that one of the stones you carry is the queen of stones; the stone of rings. You have killed Malick and taken it from him.” At the mention of his name the spirit stopped its lamenting and listened. “Malick was an incompetent fool. I would have killed him myself as soon as his usefulness was completed. But he failed just as I had suspected he would. I sent him on a decoy quest and even that he couldn’t accomplish.” With these words the spirit of Malick stiffened and began to quiver with anger. Balther continued. “So you have only brought me one stone. The second is already mine. Nonetheless my total comes to seven.” Again the man beside Balther leaned in and whispered something to him. Balther paused to listen then continued “And the stone you possess is the stone of death.” At the mention of the stone of death the two guards and the linguist tightened. The linguist took one small step backward and away from Viss. “I carry at my neck the king of the stones. It wields power and mastery over all the other stones.” Viss played into the group’s anxiety. “Can anything master death?” It seemed to work because the group became noticeably more uncomfortable. Even Balther hesitated. They were afraid of what he could do with the stone and they didn’t know that he couldn’t do anything. They didn’t know that he couldn’t use either of the stones at all. He continued to play with the doubt he had planted. “And why do you carry only one stone?” Viss knew that nobody could carry more than one stone. Nobody except himself. This had an effect on the man that had been whispering in Balther’s ear. This was definitely a concern for him. But Viss was bluffing and he wasn’t sure what he was going to do here. They obviously weren’t going to just leave. Balther was in possession of a stone. The whisperer at his side also had a stone and he



probably knew how to use it. They didn't even need the power of the stones. The five of them could charge Viss and take him down by physical force alone. No swordsman could survive an assault by five trained swordsmen for more than a few heartbeats. The ghost of Malick, who had been watching and listening, walked across to Viss and putting his face right up against Viss' face opened his mouth trying to speak. Viss waved his arm to ward him off and the motion caused alarm in the five foes standing in the center of the room. The guards drew their swords quickly and the group looked around expecting an attack. The ghost broke into an open-mouthed grin. Viss looked at the ghost teeth in his mouth. The ghost turned his head and looked at Balther then turned back to Viss and tilted his head back in a silent laugh. Balther and his group waited. They couldn't see the ghost and they didn't know why Viss had waved his arm. For the moment everything was at a stalemate. Viss repeated his original question. "Where is Marta?" Balther gave a terse reply. "Give me the stones and I will reunite you with her." "If you have harmed her I will bring the walls of this hell hole crashing down." This enraged Balther. His face turned red. Everything seemed to be building to a crescendo. The guards hefted their drawn swords nervously. The whisperer at Balther's side grew tense and the spirit of Malick watched everything intently. Even the glowing globe seemed to grow in intensity. But nobody moved. The group was simply unwilling to attack him. Again the whisperer leaned over and putting a hand on Balther's shoulder and he said something that made Balther smile. Viss looked on uneasily as the man then turned and waved his hands. Everything grew quiet and a chill immediately filled the air. Behind the group of five a doorway appeared. It was the same kind of doorway that Viss and Malick had tumbled through. It was the same kind of doorway that Viss had first seen in the crate in the Captain's castle. The doorway that the evil creature had appeared through and no sooner had he thought of the hideous creature that those burning red eyes appeared inside the shimmering. Viss' heart began to pound and his skin started to crawl. The size, the strength, and the pure evil of that

thing was still fresh in his memory and here it was again. He watched in horror as it slowly stepped out of the gate and into the room. The floor shook with each step it took. Balther looked directly at it and pointed at Viss.

“Get me those stones.” He commanded. The Orgrath turned its head, looked directly at Viss and howled. The strength of the howl nearly knocked everyone off his feet. Balther gave Viss one last look and laughed then turned and quickly led his entourage out the double doors that they had all come in.

The room burst into action as the door shut. The Orgrath screamed again and Malick waved his arms at Viss as if trying to get his attention. Viss’ familiarity with the Orgrath was the only thing that saved him. He knew a bolt of energy would be the first attack so he jumped to the ground and rolled as the expected bolt slammed into the column he was standing near. Malick was pounding his hands against the wall in a frenzy and looking at Viss. Viss kept moving. He darted from column to column as the Orgrath threw energy bolts. The Orgrath stopped the assault and screamed in anxiety. Each bolt he threw was avoided. The room was too big and there were too many columns. Viss could dart from column to column for cover. Then it changed its tactics. It raised its arm and instead of throwing a bolt of lightning like energy it threw a web of energy tendrils. These covered more area and as Viss darted for cover a tendril hit him with an impact so strong it changed the course of his roll and he slammed against the wall near where Malick stood pounding. He got up quickly but was shaken. He wasn’t going to last much longer. He had no magic and his sword was useless against this foe. The Orgrath, seeing the energy tendril make contact relaxed his attack. He now had the tactic he needed so his superiority was established. Now he could enjoy the battle and savor Viss’ eventual death. Maybe it wanted to stave off its return through the doorway it had come through or maybe it just was savoring the moment, but it stopped its attack, stepped forward and spoke in a raspy voice. “You have enormous power. This I can sense. But you

don't know how to use it. This I can also sense. Stand still and I will bring you to a quick end. Call it a gift." Viss felt the red eyes staring into him. But they never looked at the ghost of Malick. Only Viss, carrying the stone of death could see him. He glanced at Malick and Malick responded by pressing his ghost hand against the wall. Viss realized that Malick wasn't pounding the wall. He was pressing on it, always in one particular spot, directly on one particular stone. He noticed too that Malick was getting dimmer. Stein had told him that the apparitions would dim over time and eventually disappear. Viss tried to stall the beast. "I will freely give you the stones if you spare my life." He took a few steps closer to Malick—ready to jump if the Orgrath sent more tendrils. He still felt a weakness in the whole of his right arm where the last tendril had touched him. "You will give me the stones after you die." Just as the Orgrath spoke these words it curled up its arm to unleash another round of tendrils at Viss and Viss sprung toward the wall where Malick stood and slapped his hand against the spot Malick was gesturing to. It was a gambit he took strictly on a hunch and it worked. A section of the stone wall disappeared. It was a doorway and Viss dove into it and rolled just as the energy tendrils arrived. As his roll ended he rolled again and an energy tendril touched him. This time just the edge of it brushed both his legs and he was engulfed in total darkness.

He lay in the darkness for a few moments then tried to stand but couldn't. The tendrils of energy had sapped him of his strength. After a few moments more his legs muscles twitched as he willed himself to sit up. He was in total darkness. He couldn't see anything at all. There was no sound of the Orgrath's attacks and the doorway he had jumped through was gone. The image of Malick broke the darkness. He stooped over and looked at Viss and smiled then he gestured and walked off into the darkness. Viss stood up shakily and followed after him. The only thing he could see in the total darkness was the apparition. He reached his hands out and felt a wall on each side of him. He was in a corridor and the fading image of Malick was leading him

down its length. He followed behind brushing his fingers along each side of the corridor. If one side opened up into another corridor he would know it.

After a few minutes the apparition stopped and just as he did before Malick made pushing gestures. Viss mimicked the gesture and pushed against a spot on the wall. A door opened into a well-lit corridor and Viss stepped into it. Malick led them quickly on. They moved through empty corridors, rooms and stairwells; always going further down.

Rounding a corner quickly Viss stumbled headlong into a guard standing at a metal door. Both he and the guard were startled by the collision and they both tumbled to the ground. Viss had the upper hand because he was already alert and ready for danger. The guard was just counting the minutes until another boring shift of guard duty was over. He didn't realize his shift was soon over forever and in anything but a boring way. They were too close for swordplay so Viss loosed his grip on his sword and drew his dagger. One quick thrust to the guard's neck and the conflict was over. He stood up, looked at the metal door and his heart started racing. Could this be the dungeon? The place where Balther kept his prisoners? He looked at the vague image of Malick who just smiled, bowed slightly and pointed at the door. Viss pushed open the door with a shaky hand and walked inside.

He was inside another corridor. The walls on the left and right were lined with metal doors about six feet apart. This was definitely a dungeon and here were the cells. He called out her name: "Marta? Marta?" He ran from door to door peering in the small grated windows calling her name. Everything was silent for several moments as he called for her and threw open each door as he came to it. Then all hell broke loose. All of the prisoners came to the small access windows in their cells and screamed for Viss to free them. He progressed down the hall quickly and lifting the wooden bar from each cell he opened the doors. The prisoners streamed from the various rooms. He looked quickly into each cell hoping to find Marta.

After a few minutes of frantic calling and door opening he came to the very end of the corridor where Malick's vague form stood near a single door. "Damn, the very last door." Viss thought. His hand trembled uncontrollably as he lifted the wooden bar and her face appeared in the small window. He threw open the door and grabbed her delicate form in a strong embrace

He held her longer than he should have. With the prisoners all escaped and running through the castle guards would soon come to investigate. But it didn't matter. His strength had returned in the form of her and nothing now would prevent him from stopping Balther. Peeling her away he held her at arms length and looked at her. Her hair was matted and filthy. Her clothes were torn and mud-stained. She has lost a lot of weight and her beautiful face was withdrawn and pale from lack of sunlight and food. He looked into her eyes and was surprised by what he saw. Her eyes showed a calm confidence in Viss. She knew he would come. There was never any doubt in her mind. During her ordeal with Balther she had told him many times that Viss would come and get her and that Viss would make him pay for what he had done. Viss paused a moment then drew his sword and grasping her hand they began their flight out of the dungeon.

"What do you mean he escaped?" Balther's voice boomed through the throne room. The soldier who delivered the message kept his head bowed and stared intently at the stone floor. "The search of the castle has been completed M'lord. The intruder and the woman in the dungeon are gone. The remaining prisoners have either been killed or returned to their cells." Balther bellowed. "I have lost the stones!" He jumped from his throne and it rattled with the force. "Gather the stone wielders to the tower." He stomped out of the throne room and headed toward the tower where the underlings who also carried stones quickly joined him.

The room was small and circular and no more than ten paces from side to side. In it's center stood a circular wooden table with chairs

where they all sat. All the way around the circumference of the room were windows that looked out onto the land around the castle. Balther addressed them as a group. “We have five stones, and the other four, I am now sure, are possessed by our enemies. I will have these stones. Our enemy is weak and the time is now. Gather together your armies. We will march into their nest, kill them all and take the stones. He walked to one of the windows in the room and pointed at the open field in front of the castle. “Gather your forces in the front of the castle. At sunset I will open a gate.” The group quickly left the room to gather their forces.

By dusk the army had assembled on the field. They were several thousand strong and composed of men, goblins and all sort of evil creatures. There was a morbid excitement in the air. The creatures had a bloodlust and it would soon be quenched by real blood.

The stone bearers made their plans in a tent in the very center of the throng and when the sun passed away and night made its full appearance they exited the tent and formed a small semi circle. Thousands of eyes watched them. It should have been a noisy affair but every creature was utterly silent. They all waited and a very faint squeak broke the silence. They all looked toward the castle. The squeak called out again. It was coming from the main gate of the castle and it was growing louder. It happened again and again—squeak, squeak. It started a rhythm: squeak, squeak, and pause. Squeak squeak pause. Balther’s wizard walked out of the main gate and behind him four burly men pulled a cart. It was the wheels on the cart that were squeaking. The throng of human and non-human warriors murmured and watched as the cart was wheeled out of the castle and into the semi-circle formed by the stone bearers. The Cart bearers hastily removed wooden bars from the top of the cart and slide the cover off. A blast of yellow light shot out and sent a beam of yellow light into the night sky. The throng of evil warriors gasped. The light was so thick and tangible that it was hard to believe the cart had contained it. They watched as the skyward beam widened. The fulcrum was slowly lifting itself out of the cart. It

lifted itself to a height of about two men over the ground and they all stared at it in awe; blinking at its brightness. It was no longer night. The field and all its inhabitants were standing as if in daylight. Every creature had been holding its breath and now they all let it out at the same time with a roar. An ecstasy of bloodlust raced through them. Stomping on the ground and banging their weapons against their shields they screamed in the light of the artificial sun. The pure power of it, neither good nor evil, brought out the evil in them. The stone bearers began a synchronized waving of their arms. Slowly the evil throng quieted down and watched them. Small threads of lightning passed from one stone bearer to the other. The threads grew into bolts and the bolts raced around the semi-circle from one stone bearer to the next faster and faster. They began to chant and the lightning raced in resonance. It built to a furious crescendo that screamed in the throngs ears. It grew thicker and moved faster until the stone bearers could not contain it anymore. It broke out of the circle and hurled itself at the Fulcrum. Just as it circled the stone bearers it now circled the Fulcrum moving faster and faster and screaming in a pitch that sent many to the ground in pain with hands clasped over ears. It flew off the fulcrum in another direction and hit Balther directly in the chest where the king of stones lay. He was engulfed in a blue flame and his body shook violently. Then it all stopped and quiet settled on the field. Balther stopped his trembling and glowing a dull blue he raised his face to the sky and laughed. It was superhuman loud and it bounced off the castle and echoed off the field and its occupants.

“The beginning of a New World is upon us. We here shall rule over the earth for a thousand times a thousand years!” This whipped the evil throng into a frenzy and they screamed with bloodlust in response. Balther shot his hands into the air and streams of blue lightning flew from his fingertips. The throng watched as clouds formed high in the sky and started to roil in anger. They curled and folded upon themselves quickly forming into massive black thunderheads. The light changed quickly. The light from the fulcrum was dimmed and the

thunderclouds rubbed against each other making loud thunderclaps. Balther lowered his hands. The storm gained enough momentum to sustain itself. Flashes of lightning between thunderheads crashed from cloud to cloud which now formed a thick blanket. They all waited for the torrent of rain that soon must be released. "I control the skies." Balther pointed to the west and the mass of thunderclouds rolled quickly off in that direction. Directly toward the underground fortress that held his enemies. "And I control the Earth!" He stomped the ground and everyone staggered with the force of it. The earth formed a massive ripple that headed west after the thunderstorm. Goblins and men fell as it passed under their feet. They quickly regained their feet and watched as the ripple of earth sped off and gained in size and strength. Balther laughed the laugh of insanity and waved his arms again in the air. The field in front of him shimmered and a large gateway shimmered and appeared. The throng of evil watched as an inhumanly large creature slowly stepped out of the gate. The red eyed beast slowly turned its head and examined the throng looking for its master. Its eyes settled on Balther and it turned its body to face him straight.

"The man who has stolen my jewels and escaped you once will not escape you a second time. The creature howled in pain at the memory of such a puny foe escaping it. "I give you the freedom to pursue him across the countryside, and I give you all of this gathering of fierce and brave warriors to aid you in this quest. Never have you lost a battle and never before has your prey escaped you." Balther pointed to the west, toward the underground complex. "You have scented the man before. Follow the scent and when you find him kill him and bring the stones back to me." The creature howled in glee. The prospect of leading a bloodthirsty chase across open countryside pleased it. It lifted its head and smelled the air then howled again and started walking off to the west. The evil gathering of goblins, men and creatures parted to let it pass then closed the gap behind it. They all watched as it walked out of the field into the line of trees. A captain on his horse screamed a goblin war chant then rode after it. The crowd screamed in unison then took



off in a run after the captain. In minutes the field was empty leaving only a handful of men with Balther and the Fulcrum in its cart.



## C H A P T E R   I I



After following Malick down several deserted corridors and through a couple of well-hidden doors Viss and Marta found themselves abruptly outside. It was getting very difficult to see Malick and Viss was afraid they would lose him before they could get out but they got out and when they reached the sunlight his image disappeared altogether. They walked west toward the underground complex for several hours but their progress was terribly slow. Marta was weak. The months in Balther's dungeon had taken a toll on her strength. The sunlight hurt her eyes and the ground hurt her feet so Viss carried her most of the way. Her body was unusually light and her grip on his neck was weak but it was earnest. They didn't speak. There would be plenty of time for that if they could escape the grasp of Balther. For now they focused all of their energy on the task at hand.

When Stein and Stephen exited the library they were met by one of Stephen's men. He was panting as if he had just run a long way. "Sir." He addressed Stephen. "We have found two survivors." Stephen grabbed him by the shoulders. "Who are they?"

The man looked at Stein. "I do believe sir it is the cook Roland? And the mute woman."

This jolted Stein. "Where are they? Are they harmed? How did they survive the slaughter? Lead us to them." The man caught his breath and explained. "Well sir we were doing a search of the corridors and

rooms. Just the ones that we normally could get into. We weren't even checking the doors that don't open. They never opened before and one of them just popped right open and the two of them just walked right out. Gave us quite a start. We almost rushed them. Things are tense what with everybody dead, bodies everywhere. I ran ahead to tell you. Another man stayed with them. Stein spoke up. "Let's meet them. From which way did you come?" The messenger pointed toward a corridor and the three of them rushed off. They hadn't gotten far when the two parties met. Stein rushed to Marina and grasping her by the waist he lifted her. He was overjoyed to see her and he never thought that he could ever feel this way again. She smiled and wiping tears from her face she kissed him. After a long embrace Stein put Marina down and clapped Roland on the back. "You are truly a weasely one! You always manage to keep out of harms way!" Stephen interrupted. "Roland, my guard tells me you came through one of the impregnable doors. Is this true?" Roland spoke up. "This woman here knows this place. She can't talk so she didn't outright tell me, but she knows everything in here. When Balther's minions invaded we were in the kitchen. One of those locked doors is in there. She grabbed my hand then touched the door and it just opened. I am not exactly sure of how she did it. She just did it. The door slid open from the floor to the ceiling and after we passed through it closed behind us. Then she led me to a room. She knows this place. She knows everything. The room was filled with magic. We looked into a box with a window and through the window we could see the fight out here. It was wondrous yet terrible. We watched until the fight was over. Then we saw you come in so we left to meet you.

They all looked at Marina but she just stared at Stein.

"Let's see what she can do." Stephen pointed to a door at the end of the room. "That door is one of the impenetrable ones." They all walked over to it. Stephen touched it and they all looked at Marina. At first she didn't understand what he wanted, she just held herself tightly against Stein. When she realized they were all looking at her she looked

at them one at a time. Stephen pointed at the door again. She slowly pulled away from Stein. Realization came to her. They wanted her to open the door so she touched a metal plate on the front and in her mind she asked the door to open and it opened. She moved back to Stein, put her arms around his waist and looked to his face for approval. They all looked through the open doorway and gasped. The room on the other side was enormous with a very high ceiling and it was filled with large machines of shiny metal. The room hummed quietly. Stephen looked at Marina. "Do you understand these things? Can you open all the doors? What secrets lie here? What magic? Are there any weapons here that we could use against Balther?" The barrage of questions made Marina nervous. She gripped Stein tighter and Stein spoke. "Let's ask the librarian. She knows this place. Maybe this place also knows her."

When they entered the library the librarian appeared in his usual place and Stephen fired off a question. "This woman here is a puzzle to us. She knows this complex and how to open the doors. Who is she?" The librarian stared at Stephen with his usual ambiguous stare then answered. "She is the interpreter." He said it in a flat and unemotional voice. It made Stephen prickle. "Interpreter? She can't even speak." "She doesn't interpret between people. She interprets between people and machines." Stephen sputtered. "You mean she talks to the doors?" "In a sense, yes. She asks the doors to open and they do." "How can she do this?" And we can't?" How can she talk to the doors and the machines?" "She was created by them. She isn't totally human. She wasn't born as you were. She was created by the machines to interpret." "How can this be?" The group was shocked and Stephen voiced this shock. "How can she be born of a machine? It is not possible."

The librarian continued. "Born of a machine is not quite right. The machines created her. She is part human and part machine. She was grown and built, not born. You would not understand it. You should just accept it.

Marina was listening closely, her eyes growing larger in disbelief. She didn't want to believe it but she knew that it was true. How else could she know everything about this place? The whole complex was laid out in her mind. Every machine, every door, every room. She could "talk" to all of it. "Terminals" The word popped into her mind. She could operate all the terminals, even the locator right here in this room. She stopped and considered the new thought. She could use the locator!

She tore herself away from Stein and walked across the room passing right through the librarian. A part of her understood that the librarian was just an image. She touched a metal panel on the wall and sent it a thought. And a box folded out of the wall at eye level.

Roland spoke up. "That's one of the magic boxes with a window in it." They all moved closer as she placed her hands on the touch pad below the box. Again she sent a thought to the machine. The box sprang to life and they all gasped. It truly was a window. Roland squealed with glee. "See, I told you. It is some kind of magical window." This was difficult for them to comprehend. It was like a window, but the view through it moved. They all pushed in closer and watched spellbound as the view changed.

They were soaring over trees much like an eagle, but moving in a straight line unlike an eagle. A figure was moving in the trees a long distance off and their view was heading directly for it. They all moved even closer to the box. Their amazement at the wonder of it now lost to their curiosity. They watched closely as they flew toward the figure. They got brief glimpses of him through openings in the trees. "That's Viss! I know it is!" Roland almost shouted. He couldn't control his enthusiasm. They all began chattering at the same time. They raced down through the trees and stopped a few feet in front of Viss. "Viss, Viss! Where are you?" They all called out to him simultaneously. But Viss didn't respond. He was trudging along at a slow and weary pace and carrying a woman in his arms. Roland screamed. "Viss where are you? We will come and get you." Everyone paused waiting for Viss to

answer but he didn't. He just continued walking. However it was that they could see him he couldn't see or hear them. They all fell silent and listened to Viss' heavy labored breathing. They could hear his footfalls on the forest floor but he couldn't hear them.

A deep and ominous rumbling broke their concentration. They watched as Viss looked over his shoulder. It was coming from somewhere behind him and Viss sensing that something was terribly wrong began to run. Marina moved her fingers and the window flew up into the air and scanned the horizon looking for a cause of the rumbling that was quickly getting louder.

Off at a distance they could see the ground was moving. Trees were falling. A giant wave of earth was rolling directly toward Viss and the woman he carried. The soil of the earth sped toward them. It looked like somebody plucked up the skin of the earth like it was a carpet and gave it a sharp snap. It was a massive single wave of a rolling earthquake. They stared in disbelief until Stephen broke their stupor. "I know this area. It is not far from here. He asked Marina to go even higher and the window shot straight up into the air while their point of view remained looking down.

"Yes, they are not far from here and headed directly for us along with that abomination of an earthquake. Stephen turned to the librarian. "Can you see that earthquake?" "Yes." "It is headed directly for us. Can you tell me how bad it will damage us?" "This structure will sustain no damage." The librarian answered. They all breathed in relief. "We will be safe in here?" Stephen, knowing the librarian had a funny way of answering questions just wanted to make sure. "There will be no harm to anyone inside this complex." Stephen turned and looked at the group. "As soon as it passes we will go out and find the two of them

Roland moaned and pointed at the image box. They all turned their attention back to it and watched as a tremendous thunderhead moved into view. It screamed in anger with enormous thunderclaps and followed closely behind the earthquake but at a slower pace. Balther had

released the Thunderstorm first but it moved slower than the quake so it would arrive second.

“Damn!” cursed Stephen. “Could things get any worse?” Marina continued to move the window view high over the trees then she stopped and shot like an arrow toward something in the forest. They went past the earthquake then through the thunderstorm and shot down to the ground. Marina found the third threat and they all looked on in disbelief. It was a huge band of goblins and men and vile creatures of all sorts and they were being led by one enormous demon. A terrible battle was eminent. The horde was heading directly for Viss just as the quake and the storm was. And when they had finished with Viss they would no doubt continue on to the complex. Stephen jumped into action. He ran out of the library to gather his men in preparation for the coming assaults.

Stein, Roland and Marina watched helplessly in horror as the quaking earth hit Viss. He fell to the ground dropping Marta and he covered her with his body as best he could. The two of them looked as if they were clinging to a log in an ocean storm. The ground rose sharply and cracked everywhere. The ground couldn’t just roll like water. It had to crack and giant crevices opened everywhere in the earth. The raw earth under the grass and trees exposed itself to the air like fresh wounds. They crested the wave and the violence of it threw them several feet into the air. Then they rolled back down the other end of the wave and it passed on its way to the fortress. For a full minute they watched as Viss and the woman lay silent then Viss moved. He sat up and slowly examined his body and satisfied with it’s state he stood up. He checked on Marta, helped her stand then he gently picked her up and continued his walking. Moments later he came to an abrupt stop and looked for shelter as the first of the rainstorm appeared. They scrambled among the fallen trees and the cracked earth looking for somewhere that would protect them from the fast increasing wind and the pelting rain. Only sharp flashes of lightning broke the darkness.



The earthquake hit the complex with a deep rumbling just as Stephen walked back into the library. Everyone jumped to the floor. Rumbling noises and screeches echoed loudly throughout the complex but it quickly passed. They all remained on the floor until they were sure the structure wouldn't collapse then they stood up and returned to the image of Viss and Marta struggling in the torrential rain that was pummeling them like hammers. Stephen broke their silence. "I have mounted a guard at the exit. As soon as the thunderhead passes us I will lead a party out to find Viss and the woman." Marina turned her head sharply and looked at him. She wanted to say something but couldn't.

The group was helpless. They couldn't do anything but watch as Viss and Marta struggled in the storm. They watched as the two climbed into the roots of an overturned tree.

The two huddled there for a few minutes and as quickly as it began it was over. The storm was past them and on its way to the complex. A guard walked into the library and reported to Stephen that the storm had begun over them. Again Marina shot a glance at Stephen. This time Stein noticed it and grabbed her by the shoulders. "What is it? What are you trying to say?" She stared at him then pointing to Viss she returned to her work at the metal panel.

The librarian answered the question they were all thinking. "She is opening a portal. The center of the room should be cleared." For a moment they stared at the librarian in shock. They had forgotten that he was there. Then they moved into quick action and cleared the center of the room of battle debris. The librarian himself walked away from the center of the room and Stephen and the guard followed him. Marina froze in concentration and a portal appeared. In the magic window a portal also appeared directly in front of Viss and Marta. The group in the library looked through the portal and Roland was the first to action. He dashed directly through it and appeared in front of Viss. He climbed down into the roots of the tree and helped Viss and Marta climb out. Stein and Stephen jumped through the portal and Stein

picked up Marta, Stephen and Roland grabbed Viss and the group of them stepped through the portal and into the library and Marina closed the portal behind them.

Viss looked around stunned. Exhaustion borrowed deep lines in his face. Everyone was drawn to the two stones hanging from his neck. They were glistening wet and glowing brightly. Stephen barked at the guard that had announced the storm. "Get them something to dry off with." The guard stood silently for a moment, his mouth wide open. He had never seen a portal. Then he snapped erect and bolted from the room on his errand. Roland started cooing over them. "We should move you to someplace warm and more comfortable. I will whip up something for you to eat." They all left the library, helping Viss and Marta and went to the room where they had all first met. They put Viss and Marta each on a cot then turned their attention to the wizard and the men huddled over the table. "It appears that the storm has stopped itself directly over us." One of the men said. They all looked at the miniature world and watched the storm as it swirled in a circular motion in one place. The man continued by pointing at another spot on the table. "There is the horde of evil." They all looked at the tiny knot of figures progressing slowly across the landscape. He then pointed at the wizard. "Haith says that there are no stones in the group but there is power. Something in there has been summoned from an underworld. They are making a line straight for us from Balther's castle. No doubt he sent them. But it is poor judgment on his behalf." He was going to continue but Stein interrupted him. "If the storm stays over us then it will make their attack very difficult for them and no doubt the earthquake has made their travel very difficult. Balther must have done this out of anger, or maybe he doesn't really care about the group. Either way it was a bad decision." Abruptly the image on the table disappeared and the wizard stood up. "We will have little trouble defending against the horde of minions but the summoned creature will be difficult. It will need my attention." He walked briskly from the room toward the entrance corridor." The remaining men in the room

followed him quickly out to defend the entrance. Stein and Stephen sat at a table to discuss their next move while Roland and Marina looked after Viss and Marta.

After a few minutes a soldier entered the room with a report. He addressed Stephen directly. "Sir, the defense is holding well. Haith is keeping the creature at bay and the foul army cannot gain entrance. Their fallen bodies clog the corridor." This bothered Stephen. Something wasn't right with this. It was too easy. Balther has been here before. He knows the layout of the complex and he knows how difficult it is to attack from the outside. He has been here before. And just as realization came to Stephen the guard who had reported turned white as a sheet and looked past them. Stephen turned to see Balther's guards rushing into the room through an open portal. Before anyone could react two dozen guards had entered the room with swords drawn and at their throats.

Stein, with battle proven reflexes was the only one that accomplished anything. He had thrown the first man off of him but before he could draw his sword a second and third man brought him to the floor. A fourth guard brought a dagger to his throat and he stopped struggling. The room went quiet. No one in the party spoke and none of the attacking soldiers, who were obviously well trained, spoke. Stephen cursed himself. He knew that the attack on the outside smelled of something wrong. It wasn't poor judgment by Balther. It was a masterstroke, a diversion to keep them distracted for just the right moment and that right moment had come.



## C H A P T E R 12



Balther walked through the portal and surveyed the room. He fixed his eyes on Viss who was pinned down onto a cot by two soldiers. “You have taken something of mine and I want it back.” Balther’s wizard walked through the gate then four well-dressed minions came through. Balther turned and addressed the four. “Gather up the stones.” His magician also spoke up pointing at Viss. “That one there carries two. Do not touch both. Remove them carefully one at a time.”

The four well dressed men walked around the room and gathered up the stones, one from Stein, one from Stephen, and carefully two men took one each from Viss. Balther cackled in glee. “I now possess all nine stones.” Stephen spat. “The power will kill you and I will spit on your charred bones.” He twisted against the two soldiers that held him and the sword at his neck dripped a thin line of blood. Balther ignored this and they all had to shield their eyes as he started to glow a harsh blue. “You will now witness the completion of my climb to reign.” He turned to look at the portal as several more well dressed men passed through it into the room. They all carried stones at their necks and Viss counted them. There now were eight minions and Balther wore the king of stones. That made nine and each one announced its presence to him. He could feel each one and he knew exactly where each one was. He closed his eyes and felt each stone. He knew them all just by their feel. As a bearer moved, he felt the stone move. He opened his mind to feel them more and a voice jumped into his head. “Why

don't you stop this?" He opened his eyes and responded aloud "Because I have a sword at my throat." Everyone stopped and looked at Viss quizzically as if maybe he had gone crazy. He realized they all heard his response but nobody heard the question. It popped into his head again. "Why don't you stop this?" This time he realized it came from Marina. But her lips hadn't moved. She had spoken directly into his head. "Do not speak aloud. Just think at me and I will understand." Her voice was pleasant and soothing but it felt strange coming from her. She had been so long without a voice. "You have been waiting for this moment. This is your purpose. Now is the time for you to act. The machine will awaken but you must give it the strength." Once again he felt the burden of everything resting on his shoulders and once again he didn't know what to do. "I don't know what to do. I am just a man."

Another voice penetrated his head. "No you are not a man." Viss felt himself grow weak and he leaned on the guards that held him. Now it was the librarian that talked in his head. "The interpreter is right. Just as she has a purpose so do you. You were created by the machine just as she was. You are not like the others. You have no history, you have no past, and you have no parents. "So I have no memory of my childhood because I have no childhood?" "Correct."

Viss struggled with the voices in his head as he watched four men carry a large wooden box through the portal. It was made of oak and banded with iron. It looked sturdy and heavy. Balther's men cleared everyone away from the center of the room and the bearers placed the wooden box there. Even the librarian moved away from it. Balther was getting anxious. His bright blue skin had faded and now just his eyes glowed. Everyone watched him in trepidation. They were afraid of what would happen next.

Balther grabbed the top of the wooden box and tore it off. They all gasped as a bright yellow light hit the ceiling of the room. It was so palpable that it was almost physical and it was as thick as a curtain. Blinking, Viss looked at it and he couldn't see through the beam. He couldn't see anything on the other side of the room. The room

throbbed with the palpability of it. "It's the Fulcrum." Viss could feel it and it was reaching out to him. He felt that it was trying to talk to him but he couldn't understand the words. He strained to understand. "The librarian again cut into his thoughts. "It is waiting for you to act." He struggled with the futility of it staring now wide eyed at the Fulcrum. It slowly raised itself from the crate and stopped a few feet from the ceiling of the room. Now the whole room was bathed in its yellow light and the bodies of the figures in the room cast strange dark shadows. The crate bearers quickly moved the crate out of the room and back through the portal. Balther waved an arm and the portal disappeared. Then he screamed. "Let it begin."

"No!" Stephen screamed in response and grabbing, by the blade, the sword at his throat he forced it over his head and ran it across the face of the man who held it. Just as the man screamed in pain Stephen twisted it and still holding it by the blade, with blood flowing from his hands, he thrust it into the neck of the other guard that held him. Free of his captors he drew his own sword and launched himself at Balther. Stein took the distraction as an opportunity to act. He dropped instantly, and with his full weight, to the floor and before his back contacted the floor his sword was drawn and he had swung it in a savage arc with all of his strength. It completely severed the legs off the two guards that held him and they fell to the ground in shock, their blood gushing all over the blue tiles. Stephen nearly completed his lion like leap at Balther but a blue bolt of lightning leapt from Balther's hands and hit him in the chest like a thunderclap. The force was so great that it stopped his forward leap and sent him backward, slamming him with bone crushing force against a wall five paces back. His body slid down the wall and crumpled onto the floor dead. The force of the thunderclap shook the room so violently that it knocked everyone off his or her feet. In the confusion the captors took their chances and bloody hand-to-hand combat broke out. Balther's wizard cried out an incantation but he never finished it. Stein threw his sword across the room and the hilt hit him in the face crumpling him to the ground. But now not

having a weapon several guards were able to again wrestle him to the ground. With Stein under control and Stephen dead the overwhelming number of guards quickly subdued the rest of the party. When Viss dropped his sword one of the guards hit him savagely in the stomach with the hilt of his sword. The melee had been vicious and short-lived. Several of the guards were dead along with Stephen. Blood smeared the whole of the blue tiled floor. Viss was doubled over and trying to regain his breath when Marina's voice cut into his head again. "This battle cannot be won by the sword. It is time for you to open up." Viss worked through his pain and looked again at the Fulcrum but he didn't feel anything different. He still got only that vague feeling.

"Now it begins." Balther spoke out with conviction. He looked at one of his men. One of the men that carried a stone. The man nodded his head and removed the stone from around his neck by tearing off the leather thong. He stepped forward and held it high over his head. It leapt from his hand and directly up toward the ceiling and started circling in a tight arc around the fulcrum making four or five revolutions every heartbeat. It circled so fast that it almost could not be seen and it's quick cutting through the air in its oscillation around the fulcrum resonated a high pitched note. The pitch of the note was so high that it was almost inaudible yet it was so loud that it hurt their ears. "The Messenger." Viss thought. He knew what stone it was just by the feel of it and the tone of its pitch. The color of the Fulcrum changed just slightly. The Fulcrum and the Messenger were forming a bond and the two of them together were becoming something else.

Balther nodded at another man and this one followed the same steps as the first. He cast his stone into the air and it too began its oscillation around the Fulcrum. But this one scribed its arc a little further away and a little slower. The pitch it emitted was a little lower in tone. Viss knew this stone to be the lover. The thought of this stone pricked his heart and he looked at Marta. She was too weak to stand on her own but the guards held her roughly in a standing position. With a grimace of pain on her face she stared at Viss imploring him to do something.



Viss struggled with the pain of helplessness as the ceremony continued and another stone joined the group symphony by adding its own note.

Viss looked helplessly from person to person hoping for something. Balther gloated and Stein was taut with the thought of his own helplessness, the muscles of his neck sticking straight out. Viss continued to look from face to face. Then his eyes fell on the librarian and recognition hit him like a thunderclap. This was the face that he struggled so long to see. The face that was always blocked out of his dreams. He continued to stare as the ceremony continued. A fifth stone was just added. It was the father of the stones and he knew it without looking. Five notes were now screaming a cacophony in the room. The librarian smiled as if recognizing the revelation in Viss. He turned his head and looked back at Marina who fell limp. The guards let her fall to the floor then one of them kicked her in the ribs viciously to see if she was just feigning. When she didn't respond at all they turned their attention back to the Fulcrum. The guards didn't know that Marina had no voice and couldn't cry out. Viss watched in fear as she crept slowly away from the feet of her guards. He licked his lips in worry. Everyone was enraptured by the growing power of the Fulcrum. The librarian was the only one that paid it no attention. He continued to stare at Viss with a smile on his face. Marina climbed to her feet unnoticed and touched a metal plate on the wall near where she had summoned the portal.

Viss swooned as a wave of information, thoughts, and images rushed into his head. It came to him from Marina but she wasn't the source of it. She was just interpreting it. It was coming from the room itself. It was coming from the library. For a few moments he couldn't breathe and he thought that his head would burst with the pressure of it. But the peak of the wave passed and it left him with a new clarity.

He examined the new knowledge in his head. It didn't come from the room. It didn't come from Marina. It was in his head all the time. It was always there. Marina just unlocked it. Now he knew why they were always trying to probe into his mind. Why they were always trying to unlock his thoughts. It's been there all the time just waiting for

her to unlock it. He realized the full import of what was happening. The Fulcrum, once fed all of its satellites would become a power source beyond compare. It reflected and channeled the natural powers of the universe and a man could use this power to do anything whether good or evil. The Fulcrum itself was neither good nor evil it was just power. He realized there was another use the Fulcrum could be put to. It's enormous power could be harnessed.

The stones continued to march. Each new one flew into the air and added its note to the symphony of spinning sound. The sound of it was now so loud that everyone was clapping his ears in pain. Everyone except the librarian and Balther, who stood with his arms outstretched, waiting for the climax that would bring his power.

The last stone was thrown into the air and the scene changed. The walls in the library disappeared. The people all stood on the same plane, in the same places as before but no floor could be seen to hold them up. They were in a black sky, black as pitch and surrounded by stars that shone with a sharpness. Viss looked down. There was no floor, just more blackness and more stars glowing as sharp as needles in different colors. Some were bright blue, some white, some red and some orange. He gasped at the beauty of it and looked up. The Fulcrum and the nine nexus stones continued their symphony. The guards that held him released their grasp and he took one hesitant step forward afraid to fall. But something met his foot. The floor was still there; he just couldn't see it. He looked around and everyone else was in the same state of awe. Some of them had fallen to their knees in supplication. He let the beauty of it wash over him and the tone of everything changed. With the room now gone the song of the stones was free to race away. The walls didn't contain it. He took his hands away from his ears and listened. He could hear the other stars also singing. This was the natural order of things. The Fulcrum and its stones sang their song, adding it to the song of the other stars. There was a pure beauty to it. It was a symphony of pure beauty, a song of life and strength and harmony. He listened more closely as his mind and body

became attuned to it. He focused his awareness on each of the elements in the symphony one at a time. He went from the fulcrum to each of the stones then on to the other stars and in the perfection of it all he heard a note of discord.

Something didn't belong here. It was a very vague sound and it clashed with the harmony of everything else. He focused his attention on it. Yes, he was sure now, there was something in the middle of the song that didn't belong here. It was an ugliness that was corrupting the song of perfection. He opened his eyes and looked at the glowing Fulcrum. It no longer hurt his eyes so he examined it closely. He could see a thread of yellow light pulling off of it. He followed it. It curved around the Fulcrum in an arch that went directly into Balther's chest. It was this thread of yellow that was emitting the note of wrongness. It vibrated like the string of an instrument in a note that didn't belong with everything else. He looked closely at Balther who stood there with his chest stuck out. The thread was sucking the life force from the Fulcrum and feeding it into Balther. He looked back at the beautiful glowing globe. It was being unraveled like a ball of string. The chord between it and Balther was growing thicker and feeding the Fulcrum's force into him faster and faster. Soon, he sensed, the Fulcrum would be gone and all of its power would be held within Balther. Viss heard the sound from the Fulcrum change to a wail of agony. It knew it was dying and it lamented. This painful scream struck Viss directly in the heart and the pain of it moved him into action. He took several running steps on the invisible floor and launched himself in a tackle at Balther but it was like hitting a granite column. Balther's body didn't move at all and Viss crumpled to the ground. He stood back up and standing behind Balther he wrapped his left arm around Balther's neck and squeezed. This would normally cut off the flow of blood to a man's head by squeezing the carotid artery and in a matter of seconds he would fall unconscious. But now it had no effect. The skin and muscle of Balther's neck did not give at all. Viss felt like he had wrapped his arm around the trunk of a tree and he was trying to squeeze the sap

out. It had no effect whatsoever. He released his grasp and stepped around in front of Balther and directly into the stream of energy coming from the Fulcrum, now as thick as a mans wrist and abruptly it stopped. The drain of energy ceased and the Fulcrum changed its pitch as if in a sigh of relief. This woke Balther out of his rapture and he screamed in anger. He drew his sword and made a savage swing at Viss who avoided the brunt of the swing but took a small slice on his hand from the weapon's tip.

When Viss stepped into the flow of energy the Fulcrum talked to him and in this talking everything in his mind was completed. He now grasped the whole picture and the puzzle was complete. The Fulcrum was pure power and it had a reason for being. It had a purpose. It was created a long time ago as a source of power for the underground castle they were in. It had done this for a very long time and it was happy. But when the people who created it disappeared like dust in the thousands of years that passed it was hidden away and has been waiting patiently to return to this task. The makers of the complex had designed it for this place. They had created it out of the stuff of stars and placed it here as the heart of the underground castle and now was the time for its return.

Viss screamed at Marina with his mind. "The machine is waiting for the Fulcrum. Its rightful place is here. Right here in this room." Marina understood and turned to look for the control panel that would reconnect her with the machine. She cautiously waved her arms. All she saw was stars and space but she knew that it was there somewhere. She found the wall by touch even though she couldn't see it. She slid her hands along the invisible surface and found the touch panel that put her in contact with the machine then she dug deep into its mind. The librarian watched carefully as she probed for the answer. She found it and with one simple thought of her mind she turned a switch that had been waiting to be turned on for ten thousand years.

Abruptly the room came back. The stars were gone and everything was as before with the Fulcrum and its satellites spinning up high in

the center of the room. The captives quickly recovered their weapons and a melee again broke out forming a maelstrom of fighting around two figures in the center of the room. Balther and Viss stood on a silver metal pedestal about three paces in diameter that was slowly moving upward toward the Fulcrum. An identical pillar was descending from the center of the ceiling. In moments two pillars would meet and capture the force of the Fulcrum between them.

Before Balther could recover from his wild swing that nicked Viss' hand Viss jumped into him and got inside his guard. Viss wrapped one arm around his waist and with his other arm he grabbed Balther's leg and with a heave he sent Balther crashing onto his back. The two of them fought viciously for control of Balther's sword as the pillar raised them slowly up toward the Fulcrum and people fought viciously around them. The glowing globe of energy over their head changed. The stones circled in a tighter orbit and melted into the surface of the star. The Fulcrum itself floated in the center of the room glowing now a bright blue. The cacophony of notes stopped and it emitted a low hum waiting to be encased by the two pillars. Balther and Viss rolled to the center of the pillar as its top changed. A depression formed in its center getting deeper and deeper until it was bowl shaped and forming a perfect half sphere. The top pillar did the same and in a few moments the two pillars would meet and form a closed chamber around the Fulcrum. It would be a perfect sphere shaped chamber that would contain the enormous power of the Fulcrum and it would use the energy as power for the underground complex. Viss knew that he had to get off the pillar but he was locked in a death grip with Balther. Neither one could loosen his grip or it would give an advantage to the other. He looked deeply into Balther's eyes and all he saw was insanity. The lust for power and the holding of power over the course of years had destroyed his mind. He was completely insane.

Viss tightened his grasp, looked Balther directly in the eyes and spoke. "The Fulcrum is mine." This evoked a jealous insane rage in Balther. "No the Fulcrum is mine." He pushed Viss viciously in an

attempt to break their hold. Viss let the hold break and dove up for the edge of the column. He grabbed it and threw himself up and out of the bowl falling to the floor and the base of the rising column. Balther stood up in an insane glee and raised his hands toward the glowing globe. "It's mine." His glee turned to a howl as his upraised hands melted from the heat of the globe. The energy, so pure, turned his hands into dust and the particles flew about the room. As the column rose the energy melted his arms and they also disappeared as dust. His screams continued until his head disappeared. In a heartbeat the remainder of his body was turned to ashes that were blown from between the two rods just as they came to a close; forming a perfect chamber to house the fulcrum and capture its energy.

With the containment of the Fulcrum complete the room was cast into temporary darkness. The brilliant light that had enveloped them was gone and the fighting stopped. Nobody could see while his or her eyes adjusted and Viss spoke in the darkness. "Balther is dead. The Fulcrum and the nine stones have found their rightful place. There is no more reason for you to fight. The world has now changed." He rubbed his eyes and looked around to see how Balther's minions would take this news. He turned to Marina. "Marina, open up a gate for them to return to Balther's castle." Her hands once again worked over the controls and a portal appeared at one end of the room. Their eyes had adjusted and everyone could see the situation. There were still enough of Balther's guards to easily win the battle in the room. Viss looked at them then broke the uncomfortable silence. "Return to your castle and in a fortnight send a party of four to represent whoever you pick amongst yourselves to be the new lord of Balther's castle. Then I will show you how a new age of prosperity will descend upon us all. The fighting is over and no more will die." Balther's men all looked around until one of them spoke up. "Gather up the wizard." He pointed at the crumpled shape of Balther's wizard. "The unnatural sway that the dark lord held over us is gone. The stones are no more and he is dead. We will go." He was a leader among them and when he headed for the gate

they followed. Two of them picked up the wizard and carried him through. When the last of them had passed through Marina closed it behind them.

The five of them: Viss, Stein, Roland, Marta, and Marina all looked at each other. They were the only ones left standing in the room. Roland dashed over to Stephen and checked his breath. "He is dead." Stein picked up Marina in a quiet embrace and Viss looked at Marta. He had been searching for her for such a long time. Many a night he lay in fear that he would never find her. Their life together had been so simple and so beautiful. But they would be together again and it would be beautiful but probably not so simple. He looked slowly at each of them then spoke. "I am not like the rest of you. This machine here created me. They created me as a human, with a human heart. But I am different. My journey to this moment in time has been long and hard and it seems that this was my destiny. But a destiny I would have never completed without the help of all of you. He looked at each of them as he spoke their names. "I would have never fulfilled this destiny if it wasn't for your strength Stein. I would have never fulfilled this destiny if it wasn't for your compassion Roland. Nor would I have completed this journey if it wasn't for your mystery Marina. But most of all I would never have completed this destiny if it wasn't for your love." And with this he walked over to Marta and embraced her slowly and lovingly for real for the first time since the day he left for the Captain's castle those many months ago.





## E P I L O G U E



Viss and Roland sat on a hill under a tree. Several weeks had passed since the death of Balther and the awakening of the complex. They looked down into a valley where it sat. After the Fulcrum was contained as a power source the complex had quickly come to life and elevated itself out of the ground as if coming out of hiding. Defense systems that only Viss and Marina understood had quickly killed the red-eyed creature and the majority of goblins and evil minions that were attacking it.

The complex wasted no time. Soon machines of every type, now possessing the energy to act, acted. They emerged from doors and walls and began their work. They repaired the damage that the earthquake caused. They leveled and cleared the fields, planted crops, irrigated, and cared for them. Come autumn they would also harvest the crops. The entire complex was now active and open for them and for Stephen's people to explore and learn about. It was a whole empty city waiting for them to discover its secrets. With the guidance of Viss and Marina they were slowly learning what it had to teach. They were learning about medicine, about the stars, about the earth, and about themselves.

Roland and Viss sat and watched the machines in their tending of the young crops. "It makes you really wonder Viss." "What does?" "Well it seems like the people who lived here in the past had such a wonderful life. I mean look at the food. There was no hunger. And the

wonders inside the building” He paused. “They had a remarkable, even beautiful society.” “Yes they did.” “It makes me wonder what happened. What went wrong? Why did it all end? What did they do to lose it? What I mean is that if everything is done for you then you must lose the ability to do anything for yourself.” “What do you mean?” Roland continued with his thought. “Let me give you an example. Everybody likes to eat right?” “Yes.” “And you know me. I love to see somebody enjoy a good meal. But the real joy comes from the work I put into making it. I have learned, after quite a bit of practice, how to cook a good meal, and the work I put into it is rewarded when someone enjoys the meal. There is a sharing there. It is a sharing between people. But when there is no cook to make the meal then it isn’t the same. There was no joy in the making and there is no real joy in the eating. Something is lost.”

They both looked out on the field as the machines moved on their proscribed paths without complaint. Viss commented on Roland’s thoughts. “Maybe you are right Roland. Maybe this is something that the people who lived here forgot and in this they lost all their strength. Everything was taken care of for them and maybe something happened like the Fulcrum was lost and they died because they couldn’t take care of themselves.” Viss pointed at the complex. “The records are all in there and in time we will uncover and learn their secrets. We will learn about them and their city. It may take generations and our children will grow naturally in this new world adapting and adjusting to the city in ways that we never will. But let’s hope that this time we as a people will be more cautious and will not make the same mistakes that they did.



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