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RUNECRAFT

BOOK I
THE SEVEN RUNES OF POWER

RUNECRAFT

THE EPIC TALES OF KHABALLE

The Epic Tales of Khaballe

Volume I - The Advent of the Ahfham*

Volume II - The Seven Runes of Power

Book I - RuneCraft

Book II - RuneQuest*

Book III - RuneMaster*

Volume III - The Lost Word*

**Forthcoming*

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All the characters in this book have been brought into existence through the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. Any resemblance to any persons, living or deceased, is not intended and is purely coincidental.

*To Susan, Angela & Joseph:
For making my life complete
(and for letting me complete this!)*

*to TT:
For helping me find Khaballe*

*to SN, RL, JC, SL, & NS:
For venturing out to Khaballe and staying there*

*to all of you on your own Paths:
Let us work to shine the Light a little brighter.*

RuneCraft Principals

Ahfham (ä **fäm**) - original settlers of Khaballe
Arhyvhynne (**âr** i vin) - White robed Witch of the Moons
Ahrokh (**âr** äk) - SoulSlayer
Albera (al **bâr** ä) - Dryad Scout
Athar (**ât** är) - Wizard Advisor to the King
Azarel (äz är **el**) - one of Athar's ten wizards
Beleghor (**bel** e gor) - one of Athar's ten wizards
Delfyn (**del** fin) - Minister of Housing
Dhankwor (dän **kwôr**) - Soldier of the Stone
Dhynelle (din **el**) - Black robed Council Witch
Dhonlaa (**don** lä) - Valdhon's daughter
Dhymhon (**dir** non) - frequenter of the White Wyvern
Ellycyn (**el** li sin) - Princess of the Realm
Ennyjhenne (**en** ni jen) - former High Witch of the Moons
Evhyqelle (**ev** i kwel) - elven Wood Maiden
Eybbenna (i **ben** ä) - Priestess of the Sun
Eyrmysse (**ēr** mis) - Black robed Witch of the Moons
Farhyng (**fâr** ing) - Castellan of Rheg Nhor
Fhyndhella (fin **del** lä) - Delfyn's daughter
Fulnhyx (**ful** nicks) - Minister of Commerce
Ghanharl (**gä** närl) - Minister of Defense
Ghemella (ga **mel** ä) - Black robe Guardian witch
Ghudher (**gû** der) - owner/barkeep of White Wyvern
Jhaezyyre (jaz **ēr**) - legendary Black robe witch

Jhyrenne (jir **en**) - Prince Rhenycyn's mistress
Jukhuule (jə **kül**) - Black robed witch
Khaselle (kä **sel**) - madrigal singer
Khavhad (kä **väd**) - breeder of fine horses
Khezef Ahf (**ke** zef äf) - secret order of expert assassins
Khyrhyelle (kēr ē el) - High Witch of the Moons
Lhynette (li **net**) - White robed Council Witch
Lhelqerra (lel **kwâr** ra) - wife of Lyrqyldyn
Lyrqyldyn (lēr **kwil** din) - Sovereign Prince of the Wood
Mehtron (me **tron**) - ancient leader of White robes
Mharkhel (mär **kel**) - Knight of the Flaming Sword
Mhelynycyn (me lin **i** sin) - first King of Cyn Dynasty
Mhylzul (**mil** zül) - Khezef Ahf assassin
Neghez (**neg** ez) - mercenary
Nherycyn (**nâr** i sin) - King of the Realm
Padxyffu (pad **zif** fü) - White robed witch
Perhevyl (pâr **e** vil) - Sentinel of the Seas
Povharhed (pō vä **red**) - Minister of Labor
Ptalp (**pi** talp) - Senior-Elect of Sagghez'ah
Qelharre (kwel **är**) - Black robed Council Witch
Qenthyeffe (kwen **tē** ef) - Black robe Guardian witch
Rhenycyn (**ren** i sin) - Prince of the Realm
Rhyrt (rērt) - Junior-Elect of Sagghez'ah
Rhyvhelle Yhnjy (ri **vel in** jē) - Ahfham Grey robe witch
Satarsmyt (sat **er** smīt) - Thaum's demon general
Serafanyelle (sâr a fan ē el) - ancient dragon FireQueen
Setryv (**se** triv) - Knight of the Flaming Sword

Syrqyndyl (sēr **kwin** dil) - Warrior of the Wood
Tesarher (**te** ser er) - Minister of Finance
Thaum (thôm) - ancient leader of extreme Black robes
Thenycyn (**ten** i sin) - deceased son of King Nherycyn
Tomhylhen (tō **mil** en) - High Priest of the Sun
Ullyna (ü **lē** nä) - unicorn
Uriel, Peter (ür **ē** el) - Mage of the Star
Uvhymme (ü vim) - legendary White robe witch
Uxzel (**uks** zel) - one of Athar's ten wizards
Vento (**ven** tō) - Sylph Scout
Valdhon (väl **don**) - Minister of Internal Affairs
Vhalk (välk) - mercenary
Vhyqyrd (vi **kērd**) - Captain of the Royal Guard
Wodhyn (**wō** din) - Clan Chief of the Stone
Wyxotte (**wicks** ät) - White robed Council Witch
Xenyssa (zen **is** sä) - White robed Witch
Xumhek (**zü** mek) - City Father of Vhyt Dhaxz
Ydryj Jyr (**id** rij jēr) - Elder of Ghlor Nhor
Zhevyk (**zev** ik) - merchant
Zhultanyr - (zül **tan** _r) - Warden of Sevher'tah
Zomyel (zom **ē** el) - one of Athar's ten wizards

RuneCraft

Places

Bhel'Ehzz (bel ez) - Capital of Khaballe
Daath Ul Thaum (däth ul thôm) - hold in Thaum Weald
Eh-Thern-Ah (e **tern** ä) - village sotheast of Sagghez'ah
Erlym Range (**er** lim) - western range
Fhon Dhawz (fôn dāwz) - town that is home for the Dwarfs
Ghabry, Sea of (**gä** brē) - western sea
Ghaury, Sea of (**gaw** rē) - eastern sea
Ghlor Nhor (glor nor) - town that is home for the Moderns
Khaballe (kâ **bäl**) - central continent on Lhogosse
Kho Rhon'ah Arbor (kō **rōn** ä) - forest on Kho Rhon'ah
Kho Rhon'ah Mountains (kō **rōn** ä) - on Kho Rhon'ah
Kho Rhon'ah, Isle of (kō **rōn** ä) - small isle n. of Khaballe
Khyaroh (kē **ä** rō) - larger of the two moons
Lhogosse (**lō** gōs) - the planet
Mhaktyelle Deep (mäk **tē** el) - southwest forest
Mhaterelm Moor (mät **är** elm) - marsh off the Trsiel River
Mlkym Range (**mil** kim) - eastern range
Mystyk Keep (**mis** tik) - hold on the Isle of Kho Rhon'ah
Nahal River (nä) - river running west
Mhykord'ah (mi **kord** ä) - town that is home for the Clerics
Oertha Sea (**or** tä) - northern sea
Phul, Lake (pül) - on shore of Bhel'Ehzz
Qadesh Cavern (**kä** desh) - cavern under Mlkym Range
Qyntes'ah (kwint **tes** ä) - forest home of the Elves

Raffha Sea (**räf** fä) - southern sea
Rhampel Hills (**räm** pel) - hills east of Bhel'Ehzz
Rheg Nhor (reg nor) - town that has shipping and trading
Rraj Ahmorre (räj **ä** mor) - northern continent
Rraj Dhevhotte (räj dev **ät**) - continent southeast of Khaballe
Rraj Estette (räj es **tet**) - continent west of Khaballe
Rraj Mhajje (räj mäj) - continent east of Khaballe
Rraj Saghasse (räj säg **äs**) - northern continent
Rraj Syezze (räj sē **ez**) - continent southwest of Khaballe
Rraj Vhollhonne (räj vol **lön**) - northern continent
Sagghez'ah (säg **gez** ä) - town that is home for the Humans
Sarhag Fields (**sär** äg) - plains east of Bhel'Ehzz
Sevher't'ah (sev **ärt** ä) - dangerous merchant town
Skhuroh (**skü** rō) - smaller of the two moons
Sylvan Forest (**sil** van) - northeastern forest
Tanglewood - northwestern forest
Thaum Mountains (thôm) - haunted northern range
Thaum Weald (thôm) - haunted northern forest
Tymber Haunt (**tim** ber) - eastern forest
Tower of the Moons - witches hold
Trsyel River (tris **ē** el) - river running east
Twisted Horn - river running north
Vhyt Dhaxz (vit daks) - town that is home for the Halflings



PROLOGUE

Rivulets of rain wound their way down the solitary window. Though his vision was deteriorating, he still stared through the glass pane. While he could only make out the dull grey of the clouds from where he laid, they allowed his mind to wander, momentarily diverting his attention away from the constant pain that wracked his body. He felt it would be over soon, maybe even today. The thought, however, did not frighten him. Death was an old friend. The Reaper had left him until the end, collecting everyone else that mattered to him, so that it could repeatedly administer that anguish of loss and mire him in the despair that followed. When will it be my time? he often wondered. A tight smile formed on his lips, thinking he may finally have the answer.

He focused on the clouds again and they seemed to draw him to the window. With great effort, he willed himself to rise from the bed. At only thirty years of age, it was difficult for him to accept his condition. Every movement caused him considerable pain. *Pain*, he thought. *I have felt pain for so long. Too long. I'm so tired of it. Why? Why can't this end. Why can't it just be over?* He dragged his frail body very slowly to the window a few feet away and gazed up at what were the now familiar grey clouds. Memories came back to him, memories he did not wish to deal with. He felt the tears well up in his eyes and although his mind tried to escape, the memories still overtook him...

*Parents dying when I was young... All alone... And scared...
The wake... The flowers... That sweet reek from the flowers...
The funeral... School... Kids making fun of me... Still alone...
Still scared... Playing quarterback... Winning... The injury...
Meeting Annie... Spring... Falling in love... Annie breaking
up with me... Alone again... Honors... Then Julie...
Constantly going out and breaking up... Julie leaving...
Alone once more... Getting the job... The special project...
Meeting Lynn... Lynn... Lynn, I'll always love you darling...
The wedding... Having Danny... Completing the project...
Lynn and Danny dying... Damn! Why? Always alone...
Always that pain, that emptiness... And now this sickness...*



The sudden explosion of pain wrenched him back into reality. He doubled up and fell, lying crumpled on the floor. Death was taking him and he had no desire to fight it. In that final moment he saw a ray of sunlight breaking through the clouds and thought that it was finally ending. Although Peter Uriel lay dying, it was only truly beginning.



Though he was dead, Peter was completely aware of his surroundings in the room. Time ceased to exist as he entered a new plane of existence. He knew the essence of life was leaving his body. The union between his true Self and his vehicle, his body, was being dissolved. He sensed that a thin

stream of energy was exiting his body through his head. The stream was moving outward at a forty-five degree angle, creating a line of energy to some fixed point in the new plane of existence. While the experience was uncomfortable, it was not painful. The stream steadily continued to flow outward until it paused momentarily. Then there was a slight tug and the stream gently detached itself from what had been the most recent physical incarnation of Peter Uriel.

Peter's true Self, his energy, now existed on a more evolved plane. While still aware of the physical plane, his consciousness expanded to include this higher plane as well. His inner vision came into focus, physical senses replaced by metaphysical ones. His Soul performed an audit, contemplating the experiences of this past incarnation and selecting the three themes which he would use to lay the foundation for his next incarnation. In order to progress to his next level, he would have to overcome solitude and fear while mastering the aspects of his lower nature. He then removed the last bond to his past incarnation, his emotions. Peter Uriel experienced timelessness until he was prepared to begin his next incarnation.



Gradually yet suddenly the Thought-Form made ITS presence known to Peter. IT was pure brilliance, gentle though limitless with power, judgmental though compassionate. IT had complete awareness and total understanding; absolute knowledge and supreme wisdom. IT was the perfected balance of all that had ever existed or

would exist. The Thought-Form enveloped Peter and he was consumed with ITS love for him. Peter was bathed in ecstasy and joy for what felt like an endless moment. Then IT made ITSELF known to Peter using sweet, musical images.

"Know that WE are ONE though MANY, known as The HIERARCHY, The WHITE LODGE, and serve The ONE as do you. As a server of The ONE, you have done well and are greatly loved by US ALL. WE are pleased with your progress for you have attained the level of experience necessary to enter through The Portal of Initiation. However, the fulfillment of perfection you seek, Uriel, is not yet upon you. Before you stands The Portal. As you pass through, know that there are two Paths. The one leads to your next incarnation, that which you have prepared for and are ready. The other leads to a direct confrontation with the Dark Ones Of The Black Lodge."

Uriel was abruptly cast into a dense blackness. The warmth of love and joy that surrounded him evaporated, leaving a dread that gripped him with cold fingers of ice. An agonizing scream, deep and guttural was directed at him. Fear swept through him while a shadow slowly descended, bringing unspeakable horrors which violated his very being.

Lost in the depth of the blackness, ravaged by the Dark Ones, Uriel desperately tried to focus the remnants of his will on The HIERARCHY. Mentally reaching out, he felt THEIR touch and the blackness was immediately burned away by THEIR brilliance. The shadow, fear, and cold dissipated with the return of the sweet, musical images. **"Do not fear, Uriel, for they seek to influence you. Though**

they are wicked and powerful they are also in fear. The Path you choose will have great affect upon many and they are fearful of your choice. Choose wisely Brother the Path that you tread."

Uriel, though terribly shaken, responded without hesitation. "Masters, I am a mere servant of The ONE and will abide by YOUR will. Lead me to the Path that I may walk down its way."

The sweet, musical images of the HIERARCHY continued. "**Know then that a world in another dimension is being threatened. The delicate balance has been tipped and the Dark Ones seek the utter ruination of that world. One must be sent to restore the balance. He will bear sorrow and pain, hate and distrust. The full force of The Black Lodge will be sent against him. And the outcome is not assured. That, Uriel, is the Path before you. Do you accept the will of The HIERARCHY of The ONE?"**

Uriel was abruptly cast into a dense blackness. The warmth of love and joy that surrounded him evaporated, leaving a dread that gripped him with cold fingers of ice. An agonizing scream, deep and guttural was directed at him. Fear swept through him while a shadow slowly descended, bringing unspeakable horrors which violated his very being. The presence of the HIERARCHY departed, returning Uriel to a state of timelessness to contemplate the question. He was being given a choice, but was there really a choice involved? Is there ever really a choice? Regardless of the situation, there is always only one acceptable choice, one correct choice. There are many roads to the same end, but only one road which is the best for that particular journey.

There were two Paths, but only one correct Path. There was no question of right or wrong, good or evil. Those were inadequate terms society used. There was only understanding or the lack thereof. Did Uriel really understand what was being asked? This, as in all things, was not a matter of choice, it was a matter of understanding. For when one has complete understanding of a situation, there can only be one response and therefore no real choice was involved.



As Uriel came to this realization, he was transported before the Portal. He passed through the Portal without delay and experienced a new current of energy flowing through him. He was now before the two Paths. He first looked to the one on the right. It was rather straight though slightly winding, with a few peaks and valleys. He could see the right hand Path for a long distance, almost to its end. It offered a sense of familiarity, greeted him with vestiges of past incarnations who waited to accompany him on his next journey. Uriel felt a pull, almost taking a step onto the right hand Path but felt compelled to turn his attention to the Path on the left. He immediately felt terror and anguish. The Path was dark and foreboding with violent twists through dying trees and could only be viewed for a short distance. Heavy clouds shrouded what little could be seen.

It was one thing for him to objectively reason that the left Path was the correct one. It was another to accept it while actually confronting the reality of it. A part of him

tried to accept the Path, but another part could not. Though he willed his gaze from the Path, Uriel could not look away, his eyes fixated on the dying trees. The closest one, a massive ancient oak beckoned to him with a grey, gnarled limb. As he concentrated on the oak, he felt so much sadness, so much misery. Without realizing he was doing so, he projected his newfound energy to the tree. "Why the sadness?" Uriel quietly asked. "You can live again. Try. Try!" As Uriel continued to pour forth his energy, he began to feel warmth and joy emanate from within himself, even in the midst of the desolation of the left Path. And with the warmth and joy also came acceptance. With that, the images of the Paths began to merge and dissolve. But one image remained in Uriel's mind: the gnarled limb of the old oak had borne a single leaf.



Once again, Uriel experienced the gradual-sudden presence of the HIERARCHY and the sweet, musical images. **"You have chosen the correct Path, Brother. All that you have experienced in past incarnations has been in preparation for this. By acknowledging this, you have accepted your destiny and have demonstrated that you are truly ready to accept Initiation. You must depart quickly, however, for OUR time is short and the Dark Ones are already moving towards their goal. Though you are beginning incarnation you will retain the knowledge that you have here received. WE will be with you in many ways. You now have powers that were before**

unknown to you. Use them wisely. You are OUR only hope, Uriel."

CHAPTER I

The dryad was making her usual scouting of the Thaum Mountains. Three foot tall and humanlike in appearance, the elemental had a ruddy complexion and gossamer wings, but overall her form was somewhat lucid. Though she had been scouting these mountains for countless years, a constant uneasiness followed her. Even though the mountains were heavily wooded, and dryads were after all wood and forest spirits, she never really became comfortable here. The Thaums were a large range with jagged, snow-capped peaks that were believed to be haunted. No, not believed to be, they were haunted. Albera did not need the tales of others to persuade her. The dryad had seen too many strange occurrences in her years as a Scout to disregard her intuitions.

Today would bode another strange occurrence. Something was in the air. Earlier she had encountered Vento, a sylph Scout, and he felt out of sorts as well. She recalled the air spirit's earlier words to her, "*Albera, before the second sun sets, something very unusual will take place in the Thaums. Mark my words.*" Maybe that was it. The sylphs were much more flighty (Albera laughed outwardly at her own pun) and she was letting Vento's impressions disturb her. Still laughing, Albera continued north. She estimated that she was about halfway to her report station, the Towers of the Moons, when she noticed a mist gathering in a small clearing. The wind picked up and began blowing

from all four directions, causing a violent, swirling motion. From within the mist came a fierce howling and an image began to coalesce. As the swirling winds abated and the mist dissipated, the image materialized into a figure. The figure looked as if it were human and laid crumpled on the ground next to a staff. As Albera's astonishment wore off, she noticed something much more significant: *the figure wore a cloak of grey!*



Cold was the first sensation to reach Uriel's clouded mind. First the cold, then the wind stinging his face. Slowly, he opened his eyes and the brightness of the snow on the ground caused him to wince. He squinted and looked up. For a long moment he could make nothing out except for a vast brightness. Slowly, trees and a rising slope came into focus. His eyes followed the slope upward quite a distance before he saw the grey of the clouds, jarring something in his memory. He struggled with it momentarily and remembered looking out the window. Then it all came back in a flood.

Uriel pushed himself up to a sitting position on the snowy ground. "Impossible," he said aloud in a cracked voice. "I must be dreaming. They probably gave me more medication, I'm delirious, that's all, I'm..." but there was a lack of conviction as his voice trailed off. He felt like a little boy trying to talk himself out of being scared. He managed a derisive snort and said, "How many times have you tried that? Too many," he answered himself shaking his head.

He let the thoughts drift away and turned his attention to

the surroundings, slowly viewing the expanse. He was in a small, circular clearing surrounded by what appeared to be pines. The trees were taller than pines, had a reddish tinge, and a sweeter scent than what he remembered. The area was heavily wooded and the slope led him to believe it was part of what probably was a mountain range. The sky was an endless smudge, blended from varying shades of grey, ready to unleash a storm. As he scanned upwards, he saw two spherical spots of dull light a short distance from one another. He wondered what they could be. One was probably the sun, but the other? Maybe the moon. Strange to have the moon and sun out also, he thought.

He brought his thoughts back to himself and noticed for the first time that he was not wearing ordinary clothes. He was dressed in a hooded cloak of heavy, medium grey material while his underclothes consisted of a tunic and leggings which were also grey. The boots were slightly darker than his cloak and were made from the fur of some animal. A gust chilled him and he remembered he was still sitting on the snowy ground. Uriel stood up and noticed the lack of pain. He stood very still for a moment, taking account of where he thought he should feel pain. But there was none. A wide smile broke across his face. He was healthy again! And if he could be healthy again then maybe...

"Lynn!" he shouted. "Lynn, Danny!" he shouted again. Barely waiting for a response Uriel made short turns, calling out the names again and again. Finally, he listened intently for a long, lonely minute but only his echoes answered him. The snow began to fall heavily as he stood silently crying.

As the moments passed so did his sorrow. He tried to put things into perspective. That other life was over. Lynn's gone, Danny's gone. Everything from before was gone. His life was here now. He had a mission. He had been chosen to save a world. This world. But how? What was he supposed to do? He had no idea of where he was or where to go. Doubt began to creep back into his mind. This could not, *was* not happening. This was not reality. At least not his reality.

But the experiences after his death were still with him, though he tried desperately to dismiss them. He still could feel the loving embrace of the HIERARCHY... and the terror inflicted by those others. Something passed through him then, causing him to shake inwardly—and not from the cold. A familiar shadow descended upon him and Uriel became very afraid. A single thought raced through his mind: *they know I'm here*. Uriel began to run away.

The deep, guttural voice, speaking a primal tongue entered his mind. "Fool, you question this reality when you yourself have chosen it. You have erred greatly by your decision. You will be the cause of extreme suffering, pain and death. Know that your failure will cause the destruction of this entire world. You will know despair, Uriel. For you are ours."

There was a blinding flash of light followed by an explosion. Uriel was thrown back in the direction he had run from. From a sprawled position on the ground, Uriel looked up at the sky. The source of the light came from twin suns, the two spheres he had seen before. The rays from the suns had pierced the clouds, joining to form a solitary stream of

light. Uriel's eyes followed the stream of light to a short distance behind him. The stream of light shone on a gnarled staff, the top of which sparkled.

As he gazed upon the staff, he realized that the shadow and fear were no longer upon him and that the snow had stopped. Drawn to the staff, Uriel crawled over to where it laid. The staff was made of wood, was a medium walnut in color, and about five-and-a-half feet in length. The top of the staff held an emblem fashioned of liquid crystal that was in a state of constant flux. There were runes carved into the staff which read "The Staff Of Peter." He was both surprised at his ability to decipher the runes as well as what they signified. He knew the staff belonged to him, was somehow a part of him, but was still hesitant to touch it. Slowly he stretched out his hand and gingerly touched the staff. Nothing happened. Uriel then took the staff in both hands and felt pure power charge through his body. A subtle change came over him. He became calm, assured. He regained his sense of purpose and, at least for the moment, accepted his destiny.

At that same time, to the south, in Bhel'Ehzz, the capital of Khaballe, in the court of King Nherycyn, Athar, wizard and Advisor to the King, had to suddenly excuse himself from the daily proceedings due to a major "disturbance" he felt. Just to the north, in the Towers of the Moons, Khyrhyelle, High Witch of the Moons, abruptly halted the teaching of a difficult incantation to her students because she also felt a "disturbance." In that same tower, Arhyvhyne and Eyrmyse, daughters of Khyrhyelle and members of the Council, both had visions of a black goat

tearing at the only leaf on a tree which bled grey into the snow. And far to the west, beyond Tanglewood, in the Erlym Range, the blind eyes of the one known as the Dweller Between the Stone gleamed brightly.



Uriel, confident on the outside, shaken on the inside, had made his way northward down the slope of the mountain for the remainder of the day. As dusk approached, he wondered if he should continue to travel or try to find a place suitable to rest for the night. Though it was getting colder and he had no idea of where he was or where he was going, he had nothing with him as far as provisions were concerned, either. Hoping to find his destination (wherever that was) he continued onward since he still had some decent light thanks to the twin moons. Twin moons. *A little different from Earth*, he thought. The twin moons weren't stretching his imagination too much. He had known that other planets had more than one moon, but two suns? That was very different. The foliage was quite different, too. The pines were enormous here (larger than around the clearing), easily reaching three hundred feet high and three to four feet wide, with needles of a red-maroon hue and didn't have the sweet scent of the smaller variety. There were red flowers with thick black veins reminiscent of dahlias which grew in the snow. When Uriel pulled one from the ground, it gave off a very pungent odor. There was bramble that was pale violet and looked very soft, almost furry. Uriel reached down to touch it once and it constricted around his hand and

cut him. It had taken a few minutes, a small amount of panic and all his strength to free his hand from the bramble. After that incident he decided not to investigate the nature of this world any further until he could secure a guide.

Uriel had travelled the better part of the night when exhaustion took over and forced him to rest. There had been no sign of life and so he began to search for a relatively comfortable place to sleep. Finding a spot where several pines grew close together and afforded a type of shelter, Uriel laid down, hugged the staff close and closed his eyes. The same questions that had pursued him throughout the day and into the night still tugged at his mind: is this real, where am I, where am I going, what am I supposed to do, why haven't I seen anyone? The last question bothered him most. Though Uriel had not encountered anyone as of yet, the same feeling he had harbored all day was still with him: someone was watching him. He fell into a fitful sleep trying to piece together a puzzle that was lacking most all of the pieces.



Uriel's emotions and intuitions may have been on edge and his imagination may have been working overtime, but he was right about being watched. Albera had followed him since his materialization in the clearing. Although she was frightened of him, duty and curiosity (mostly curiosity) compelled her to follow Uriel. But she knew she could not leave him to report to Khyrhelle. Although Khyrhelle would be anxious to hear of this, Albera would incur the

High Witch's wrath if this wizard disappeared. But now he appeared to be asleep. She might be able to make it to the Towers and get back before he awoke. Albera began to leave and then thought better of it. Better safe than sorry.

The remainder of the night had passed without incident. The twin suns were low in the sky when Uriel awoke from a dream he could not remember. Though the dream seemed significant, his only recollection was of a black goat. Still groggy from sleep, Uriel set out with unanswered questions, a fragment of a dream, a sore back and an empty stomach.

Though he had reached level ground, things became worse for Uriel as the day progressed. The suns had been shining brightly in the early morning, but by the afternoon, they were obscured by dark grey clouds similar to those of the previous afternoon. It wasn't long before the clouds, accompanied by forceful winds, brought heavy, wet snow. His resolve was quickly diminishing. As the afternoon wore on, Uriel found himself in a blizzard and was having difficulty determining the direction he should travel. Visibility became very poor and he was beginning to wonder if he was covering the same ground. Along with the ever-present doubts, suspicions and fears, he now had to deal with physical inadequacies as well. He had not eaten since his "appearance" in this world and had gotten little sleep. His hands and feet were beginning to become numb with the cold. His eyes watered from the severity of the wind. Tiny icicles formed in his hair and moustache.

Uriel persisted in his aimless wandering, all the while his hysteria rising. When he grew too tired, he dropped to his knees. Head bent, looking down at the snow, he

wondered why this was happening. He became angry. He looked to the sky and yelled, "Why? Why in the hell am I here? Why? Did you put me here to suffer again? To die again? Why, damn it, why?" Uriel stood up and thrust his staff to the sky. He didn't know what would happen or what he wanted to happen. In any event, nothing did happen. The snow continued to fall, the wind continued to wail, and Uriel, receiving no answers, continued to wander.

It wasn't long before he felt his panic heighten once more. He tried very hard to think things logically through but could not arrive at any positive conclusions. He was losing his grasp on reality. "There aren't any answers, damn it! None," he shouted. He hugged himself tight with fear and wandered on. All he could think of was dying alone in the snow in this world he didn't even know. And then the Dark Ones would take him and... "Not that again, please not that again," he whispered.

Uriel, no longer watching where he was going, came to a small thicket of the pale violet bramble, stumbled and fell to his knees. The pain inflicted by the bramble quickly returned him to his senses. He looked up and saw a fairly large shape across from him on the opposite side of the thicket. At first he thought he was hallucinating. He rubbed his hands over his eyes, trying to clear his vision, and looked again. Something was definitely there! It was difficult to discern in the wind and snow, but something lay at the edge of the thicket. Uriel tried to make his way to the object but was prevented by the constriction of the bramble around his feet. He knew enough not to pull at it and desperately searched for something that might be of help. He saw

nothing. In frustration he grabbed his staff and furiously struck down at the bramble. A white flash erupted from the staff, severing the bramble from his feet. Uriel stood momentarily in shock at what the staff had done. Or was it what he had done? He dismissed it as something for later consideration. Not containing his excitement, he quickly moved to the other side of the thicket. There he saw the most wondrous thing of his entire life: a unicorn.

The unicorn was young, totally white with a silver mane and a small, twisted, golden horn on its head. It was lying in the snow with its front legs caught in the bramble as Uriel had been. Uriel reached down to pet its fur. It felt warm and silky. "Don't worry," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you. We're just going to get you out of this mess, okay?" He struck the bramble with his staff but nothing happened. Uriel tried striking the bramble several times, using different angles and grips, but received the same result. "Why doesn't it work?" he wondered aloud while staring at the staff. His patience, what little he had left, was wearing thin. Directing all his anger at the bramble, he swung the staff and this time the white flame cut through. He stopped for a moment and wondered why it had worked this time. "Who cares?" he said and turned his attention to the animal.

"There, that's better, huh? You can get up now. C'mon. C'mon little unicorn." Uriel bid the unicorn to rise but the animal did not move. "Is something wrong? Are your legs stiff? Do they hurt?" he questioned. Uriel laid down his staff, bent over the unicorn and rubbed its legs but to no avail. It suddenly occurred to him that he had not seen the animal move whatsoever. Uriel quickly checked the unicorn.

It was still soft and warm but Uriel could not find a pulse.

It assailed him as powerfully as the gales that blew around him. His death. The HIERARCHY. The Dark Ones. The weather. And finally the unicorn. He lost all command of his emotions.

"No!" he screamed in a harsh voice. "No, damnit, no! Not you too. Don't leave me. Don't leave me alone. Not again, not again. Come back, come back, come back," he pleaded with the unicorn. He hugged the animal fiercely and rocked back and forth. "You can live again," he whispered. "You... can... live... again," he mumbled once more, recalling those same words he spoke at the Portal, recalling a leaf growing from a dead limb.

Deep within Uriel, his inner-Self took control and forced a calm. He picked up the Staff of Peter and drew a circle in the snow with it, encompassing both himself and the unicorn. He then drew some esoteric symbols in the snow, knelt next to the unicorn, and touched the animal with the staff. Uriel heard himself speak irrevocable Words. Though his energy level was low, he felt it begin to build, felt the extreme pressure that was being exacted on his body and the pain that came as a result of it. He knew that to expend all his energy would probably kill him. It didn't matter anymore. He turned his full concentration on willing the unicorn back to life and directed all his energy to that end. He felt excruciating pain and white heat blaze from him. Uriel then fell into a deep, black nothingness.



Albera had, of course, followed Uriel the entire time. When he stumbled and fell into the bramble, she concealed herself nearby, on the other side, close to the unicorn. She noticed the unicorn only ten minutes before when Uriel came past the very spot but had been able to avoid the bramble and was unaware of the unicorn lying there. Albera knew at that time the unicorn had already expired, but very recently, within the past few minutes. She could relate to the sorrow Uriel felt over the unicorn. Unicorns were few in Khaballe and the loss of a yearling would be grieved deeply.

She had heard Uriel screaming and couldn't understand his anger. All along she thought that Uriel was just one of Athar's wizards who had misused a teleportation spell and was lost. Why he didn't use another spell to take him to his desired location was beyond her. But then she heard those Words. Although she did not know their exact meaning, she knew they were Words of supreme power. She unconsciously backed away from the thicket. She could feel the atmosphere tense as Uriel drew energy to himself from the surroundings: the air, the bramble, the trees, even Albera herself. There was a noticeable drop in the temperature and Albera shuddered violently, not entirely from the cold. The tension built for long minutes before there was a crackle in the air and a piercingly loud snap caused by the very rending of the atmosphere within the circle that shook the ground slightly. Simultaneously, a white flash emanated from Uriel and with that, still clutching the staff, he fell backward. Albera waited, then cautiously inched closer to Uriel and examined his appearance. His complexion was a ghostly white and wisps of smoke arose from his body. He did not

move nor did it appear that he breathed. Albera was just about to examine Uriel more thoroughly when she heard a rustling behind her. When she turned, her eyes were met by the gold and silver ones of a unicorn.

CHAPTER II

The Towers of the Moons was located in northern Khaballe, north of the Thaum Mountains near the Strait of Kho Rhon'ah. Northern Khaballe was somewhat barren, with a few nut-bearing trees and copses scattered between the mountains and the coast. Winters could be quite harsh here as there was no barrier from the severe northeast winds that came from the Oertha Sea, racing their way down the Strait. Worse than the wind was the perpetual dampness that clung to the trees, the Towers, everything. Sitting in front of a fire might warm you to an extent, but it seemed that nothing save a strong ale or mead could coerce the chill to relinquish its grip from your bones.

The Towers stood adjacent to one of the copses and was really the only landmark between the Thaims and the Strait. It was made of medium grey stone that was speckled with black and consisted of two turrets connected on various levels by walkways and by a large hall on the ground floor. The turret on the left was named Skhuroh (after the smaller of the two moons that orbited Lhogosse), was over a hundred and fifty feet high and housed the witches quarters. The right turret was called Khyaroh after the larger of the two moons. It was a third taller than the left one and held classrooms, libraries, laboratories and the Council Chamber. The common area consisted of the entrance and dining halls as well as access to the underground storerooms.

Even on a bright summer day the Towers did not afford

much welcome. It stood dark against the sky somehow shrouding its own presence. It was due in part to a magic spell encompassing the grounds of the Towers, forbidding entrance to any unbidden by the witches. But it also had to do with the fact that it stood alone in a wasteland, mirroring the self-imposed exile of the witches.

It was here, to the Towers of the Moons, that Albera had hastened. There being little she could do for Uriel, Albera decided to inform the High Witch Khyrhelle of the happening. An attempt to coax the unicorn to return with her proved unsuccessful: the yearling would not leave Uriel's side. Thus, she set out with a deliberate urgency, her instincts telling her that all was not over where the wizard was concerned.

Albera arrived at the periphery of the Witches' lands shortly after dusk. Before she could penetrate the mystical barrier encircling the Towers, Albera had to raise her consciousness to the appropriate level. This entailed performing a type of meditation, one which was practically automatic for an elemental but quite strenuous for a human. Even so, she still had a difficult time reaching the proper level due to the worries occupying her mind. Success came only after the second attempt. Albera hurried on to the Towers. As was customary, the portcullis was down, barring the entrance where the name of the structure, along with various mystical symbols associated with the witches, were etched in the stone arch above. The little dryad looked to the Guard Station on her right, an adjacent turreted-structure made of the same stone as the Towers that was fifteen feet in height. The Guardian witch on duty peered out from her seat

inside the Station. She was short, dark and slightly overweight, characteristics which betrayed the tinge of dwarven blood somewhere in her heritage. Ghemella was also young and over fond of giving people an unnecessarily difficult time, particularly if they were older.

"Albera, you are awful early—have you taken ill?" questioned Ghemella with mock sympathy.

"No, there has been an incident. I must speak to the High One immediately," responded Albera.

"What happened?" Ghemella asked excitedly.

"Nothing that I can speak of to you," said Albera with just a hint of disdain.

"Khyrhyelle is currently engaged in her studies and does not wish to be disturbed." Ghemella was making a very transparent attempt at bending the truth. It was evident that the young witch thoroughly enjoyed irritating the old dryad. "You may report what has happened to me and return to your rounds. I will relate your report to Khyrhyelle at a more convenient time."

"I may, Ghemella, but I choose not to. I will take my chances and bear the High One's wrath. But if I am too late because of your nonsense, it will be you who will be the object of her displeasure, not me."

Ghemella totally disregarded the threat. "Too late for what?"

Albera's cold stare was accompanied by a slight tilt of her head. The dryad made it evident that she did not wish to continue the game any further.

Ghemella matched her stare for a moment and then reluctantly conceded. "I will have Khyrhyelle informed of

your arrival. You may wait in the hall."

"I will wait in the Council Chamber. Tell the High One to meet me there and that she should request the presence of her Council."

Ghemella, somewhat taken aback, paused momentarily, then uttered a Word and made a Sign. With that, the portcullis lurched up and Albera disappeared into the Entrance Hall, leaving Ghemella to wonder what the dryad might have encountered to necessitate the gathering of the Council.



The Council Chamber was a large, spacious, circular room with a fireplace opposite the entrance. The floor and walls were made of the same dark stone as the exterior of the Towers and were bare save for the various arcane symbols painted on them and the sconces which held light-giving torches. An oval table bearing the exact same symbols engraved into the rich walnut finish occupied the center of the Chamber. At one end of the table was a small version of a throne, the same color as the table. Figures of moons were carved into the back of the chair which rested upon a slight dais, the front of which was tiled in white and black marble and depicted the waxing and waning cycles of the moons. On the right of the table were three chairs of blanched walnut, on the left three with a finish that was so dark as to be almost ebony. They were all occupied by Council members. At the other end of the table was a bench that was polished to match the table and was capable of seating three

people. It was here Albera sat and quickly related her story.

"This wizard is capable of performing the Ritual of Renaissance?" The question came from Eyrmysse, seated on the left, closest to the dryad. She was of ordinary height, but that was the only ordinary thing about her. Her hair was made up of large black curls which reached below her lowered cowl to the middle of her back and framed an olive complexion. Her eyes were light violet and compelling to say the least. Her black robe, which signified the Path she had chosen in the study of the magical arts, was purposely tight and revealed a good deal of cleavage, leaving little to the imagination. She was only nineteen but she had exhibited extraordinary talent, if not control, and was one of Khyrhyelle's daughters.

Before Albera could respond, the High Witch turned slightly and stared at Eyrmysse. Although completely shrouded within the grey robe and cowl, the effect her grey eyes had on her daughter was not lost. They blazed momentarily as she conveyed the thought to Eyrmysse: *You should know better than to speak unless questioned in this Chamber!* While the thought was directed to Eyrmysse, Khyrhyelle allowed it to be "heard" by anyone who could pick up the mental communication. In that room, that meant everybody except the dryad.

The High Witch did not wait neither for an excuse nor a response but redirected her attention to the Council without missing a beat—hardly a second had passed. "Do any of you have any questions for Albera?"

There was a moment of silence. The tension grew as Eyrmysse, with her head back, defiantly stared at her

mother, but did not dare ask her question a second time. Khyrhyelle ignored her and inclined her head to Dhynelle, who was seated next to Eyrmysse in one of the dark wood chairs. Although Dhynelle was nearing forty, her milk white complexion was still smooth. The hazel eyes were clear and bright and could have been feline in nature. Her hair was as not as quite as dark as Eyrmysse's, though longer and straight. Only the streaks of grey betrayed her age. "Yes," Dhynelle responded as she fiddled with her lowered cowl. She turned towards the dryad. "Albera, could you please describe the staff again?"

"Certainly. It was, oh, maybe five feet in length and made from a medium-colored wood. It had something affixed to the top. It was clear, like glass or crystal. There were also runes on the staff."

"Could you read them?"

"No. I could tell something was there but I could not understand them."

Khyrhyelle, listening intently, spoke up. "Arhyvhynne, could you please perform a mind scan when we are finished questioning Albera? You should be able to read the runes, assuming her mental image is still vivid."

Arhyvhynne acknowledged Khyrhyelle with a slight nod. Khyrhyelle's younger daughter, who wore the white robe, had a slender body similar to Eyrmysse, but unlike her sister, she preferred to conceal it. She had smooth, creamy skin and a wealth of hair the color of smoked wheat. You could drown in her deep blue eyes, which were the color of sapphires. Though only seventeen and considered very young to be selected to the Council, she was one of the best

mind scanners the witches had. If there was a memory lost in the caverns of the mind, Arhyvhyne could likely retrieve it. She was seated on the right, furthest from her mother.

There was a moment of silence and then Qelharre, the remaining dark robed witch and an elf, questioned Dhynelle. "What do you make of it?"

"I am not sure, but by her description it seems to be nothing out of the ordinary. It will be interesting to see what Arhyvhyne can come up with concerning the runes."

"So I thought also," replied Qelharre.

"Did he say anything," asked Lhynette, one of the white robes who was seated in the middle, next to Arhyvhyne.

"I could only hear him when he yelled," replied Albera. "The first time, it seemed like he was calling someone. It sounded like 'lindany' or 'linnany.' Does that mean anything to anybody?"

A few of the witches shook their heads. Lhynette asked Albera to repeat it again but it didn't help.

"Was there anything else?" questioned Lhynette.

"He seemed upset, confused. He wanted to know why he was here. He also said something about dying again and not having answers... and of course, that ritual." Albera purposely turned away from Eyrmysse when she mentioned the last item.

Once more silence settled upon the Chamber. After a few moments, Albera spoke up. "High One, I know there is something else of great importance but I cannot seem to recall it. I just cannot remember."

"Do not worry little one," Khyrhyelle said as she smiled warmly from beneath her cowl, "Arhyvhyne will find it. If

there are no further inquiries of Albera, we will allow Arhyvhynne to perform the mind scan." She paused for a brief moment. Only Wyxotte, the other white robe, had not asked any questions. Satisfied, she continued. "Good. Arhy, can you perform the scan here or will it be necessary to use a spell room?"

A slight grimace came upon Arhyvhynne's face. This was not really so much a question as it was a challenge. She dreaded having to do any work in front of a group. As talented as she was, she lacked confidence. Khyrhylene, knowing the importance of this being done quickly, was forcing Arhyvhynne's hand. "Here will be fine," she replied evenly. "Albera, we will do the scan by the fireplace." They waited for Khyrhylene's permission, then moved from the table.

Arhyvhynne and Albera sat cross-legged on a midnight blue circular cloth which had the familiar esoteric symbols of the witches intricately stitched in rich threads of gold and silver. They were facing each other, their hands in their laps. Arhyvhynne gave Albera a reassuring smile, then explained the procedure, which differed depending upon the willingness of the one to be read. If one was unwilling, there was a not too delicate probing of the mind. Though the pressure exacted was harsh, great care had to be taken with the subject's health. Drugs could not even be used to make the subject more compliant for fear of clouding the mind or altering the mental images. It also required much more energy from the reader to perform the task. A willing subject, such as Albera, need not have any fears. There was an imperceptible touch on one's mind while concentrating on

the events. Only if there was the need to delve very deep or if someone tried to hide something could the process become uncomfortable.

While Albera would try to mentally relate the entire incident with the wizard, Arhyvhynne would "read" her memories, conscious and subconscious—to the point where she could even pick out things that Albera could not consciously remember. Since part of what they were searching for was unknown, it would have to be a step by step recounting. If the unknown was found, afterward Albera would then have to concentrate solely on the staff in order for Arhyvhynne to read the runes.

After closing her eyes and regulating her breathing, Arhyvhynne began reading Albera. Albera began with the swirling winds. *No*, Arhyvhynne corrected, *they are mists*. Then the image of the crumpled body came into her mind. Then the cloak of grey. Arhyvhynne mentally questioned, *Is it the cloak of grey?* "Yes!" responded Albera excitedly. The abrupt breaking of the trance caused something like a static shock to both reader and subject. The jolt wore off after a brief moment and was replaced by the other, more significant shock.

"He wore grey, he wore grey!" Albera was jumping up and down and yelling to the witches, particularly Khyrhycle.

Arhyvhynne softly chided her. "Albera, I know you are excited but we are not done yet. We still have to read the runes. And please do try to communicate mentally."

"But...", Albera trailed off. She looked around for support from the other witches but found none. She meekly

resumed her sitting position and waited for Arhyvhynne to resume the reading.

Arhyvhynne issued instructions. "I am going to begin again now. Try very hard to concentrate on the staff. Block everything else out, including the grey. I know it is hard but try. After we read the runes, we will move to the other events." With that the deep breathing and trance-state resumed.

It took much longer than Arhyvhynne had anticipated. Albera's thoughts kept going back to the cloak of grey, her excitement being difficult to diminish. Most of the time was dedicated to deciphering the word "Peter." The first words, "The Staff Of" came very easily. But Peter, as a word or name was unknown to either of them. The remainder of the reading went more smoothly.

The remaining Council members withdrew to a wall and whispered their thoughts concerning the cloak of grey during the second attempt of the reading. Wyxotte made the first comment. She directed it to Khyrhyelle. "It would seem you have an equal." The witches reacted with some surprise. Wyxotte was very old, well over one hundred and had been on the Council for more than half her life. She did not show interest in anything very often. Over the last twenty years she became somewhat removed from the other witches. In that time she also lacked interest in her appearance. Her long white hair was unkempt. She had grown beyond plump, her weight especially accentuated by her short stature, being mostly of dwarven blood. Her skin, pallid for one of her race, was deeply wrinkled and spotted. Several large warts dotted her face. The light inside her eyes had been

extinguished. If she had her wish, she would resign from the burden of the Council and eventually die in peace. Only death, however, released one's responsibilities from the Council. Thus her apathetic attitude and thus the witches' surprise.

"Equal? That is far from determined I should think." Khyrhyelle did not conceal her smile. The witches responded with quiet, nervous laughter. Except for Eyrmysse that is, whose countenance betrayed that the thought interested her.

"Seriously Khyrhyelle, any thoughts?" This from Dhynelle. She seemed the most anxious. The appearance of the wizard gave her cause for a great deal of uneasiness. It took her many years to become comfortable with Khyrhyelle wearing the grey. And she had never been comfortable with any man.

"Who can say? The reading may not be accurate, although I trust Arhy. Albera may have been mistaken. The light... the snow... maybe the cloak was just soiled. Although," she commented more to herself than the others, "it perhaps explains the disturbance I felt earlier." Then more to the witches, "We really will not know until the reading is done and we see the wizard for ourselves."

"You plan to bring him here then?" Eyrmysse asked.

The reply held no doubt. "Of course."

"Is that wise?" Dhynelle was outwardly worried now.

Lhynette responded immediately. "Who else could be trusted? Surely not Athar or Tomhylen. Both have waited a long time to substantiate their preachings against the Evil One. They would most probably accuse this one as being a

minion and execute him as an example."

"If they could execute him." Eyrmysse garnered strange looks from all of them after that remark.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Lhynette questioned, her tone a little more harsh than she meant to show.

Eyrmysse shrugged her shoulders and looked away. There was that little smile that played at her lips. Nobody missed the smile.

"What about Nherycyn? The King would protect this one until the truth be known." Wyxotte had offered something twice now. She was really curious.

Qelharre let out an audible sigh and shook her head. "If you would pay more attention to the happenings in these lands, you would know that Nherycyn belongs to Athar and has for some time. You have become too concerned with your food and drink and fantasies, old crone."

"And I am not in the least concerned with your thoughts." Wyxotte didn't really need to add that. It was well known that the elf and dwarf bickered frequently.

Khyrhyelle settled the matter. "Neither am *I* interested in your personal conflict. This is not the time for this. Our concern here is with the wizard, nothing else. There is no other alternative. We will bring him here. Does there need to be a vote?"

No one immediately spoke up. Qelharre and Wyxotte exchanged looks that were neither kind nor hidden. The others cast their eyes away. Eyrmysse eventually responded, "No, mother." Again, there was that smile.

They resumed their seats and waited for the completion

of the reading. After a few minutes, Arhyvhyne and Albera returned to the table and Arhyvhyne related to Khyrhyelle and the others what she had found out. The cloak of grey worried all of them—even Eyrmysse seemed somewhat concerned. None of the witches knew what the word "Peter" on the staff could mean or refer to. Nobody dared bring up the possibility of the wizard knowing the Ritual of Renascence.

Khyrhyelle turned her attention to the dryad. "Thank you, Albera, for acting so professionally and quickly. Your patrol region is often times a dangerous one, yet that is why I placed you there. You are always aware of any happenings and keep us very well informed. Never have you disappointed me." An imperceptible glance to Eyrmysse was followed by a mental dart, *As have you*. "Though I am sure we do not mention it as often as bears merit, your service is greatly valued by us all."

Albera retorted, "That would then include the Guardians as well, would it not High One?"

Several of the witches lowered their heads slightly to conceal smiles. Khyrhyelle smiled inwardly, thinking that perhaps the dryad was getting too old for this. The High Witch surmised that there had been some sort of altercation, knowing that Ghemella and the other Guardians were difficult to get along with at best. The trouble was rooted in the Scouts believing they were no different from the Guardians: they were merely performing guard duty of an outbound nature. The Guardians on the other hand treated the Scouts as a lower class. At the heart of the matter both were wrong. The Scouts, being elementals, were different.

They followed a slightly different moral code and their spiritual progression was different. But in no way were they second class.

"Your point is well taken, Albera. However, the Guardians are chosen just as the Scouts are: for the qualities that are best suited for that responsibility. For me to repress those qualities would be to weaken those that I deem best at fulfilling those responsibilities. Granted, there are times when the Guardians act excessively—as do some Scouts. I would like to remind you that I am not in the habit of being summoned, nor is the Council, by anyone." Khyrhyelle added a sympathetic smile but her tone was not lost on Albera. There were many other things that needed the High Witch's attention and the petty Guardian-Scout squabbles were not high on her list of priorities.

"I am sorry if I inconvenienced you, High One." Albera lowered her head. "I only meant to do as I thought best."

"I understand. You did well little one. You may leave us now. But stay in the Towers, we may yet need to call on you again." The dryad left the Chamber with moist eyes and a smile. Khyrhyelle had the uncanny ability to admonish without destroying one's sense of worth.

The High Witch addressed her Council. "This, I feel is of great portent. We must proceed carefully—and wisely."

Dhynelle could only respond with a question. "How *do* we proceed?"

"We will have to send out a party to retrieve him," Wyxotte offered.

Lhynette shook her head. "No. Time is essential. Especially if it is true that he performed... that he performed

a ritual of that difficulty." There was an audible pause as she waited for a comment from the High Witch, but none came. "His condition would be too precarious for a physical move."

Eyrmyse toyed with a dark curl. "I agree with Lhynette. We must move very quickly. I think we should try a Spell of Teleportation." A teleportation spell would transport an object, usually a person, from their current location to the specified destination. It was a spell of only medium difficulty but had many variables which could easily complicate matters. One prerequisite was having a familiarity with both the point of origin and the destination.

Khyrhyelle nodded. "Yes, you are right. That was my initial thought. It would be the quickest and safest solution. Our only problem is forming the proper images. We are not exactly sure of the location or the wizard's appearance. All we have are Arhyvhyne's descriptions. It could make matters very difficult. Nonetheless, any objections?" There were none. "Lhynette, Qelharre, I do not wish you to participate. If we are unsuccessful we will need the two of you to make a journey." The two witches left the table and took positions on either side of the entrance. "Arhy, how is your energy level?"

"I do not feel that I should risk it." Arhyvhyne had not said a word since the recounting of Albera's mind scan. It was apparent that she was physically drained. The color had not yet returned to her eyes and her skin remained somewhat ashen.

"Will you rest now?" There was a hint of concern in Khyrhyelle's voice.

"No, I would like to stay—with your permission."

Khyrhyelle considered for a moment and replied, "As you wish." Khyrhyelle turned her attention to the remaining three witches seated at the table. "Wyxotte, will you, Dhynelle and Eyrmysse assist me in the preparation?"



The sconce-held torches had all been extinguished. A Magical Circle had been created and encompassed the table. A lone grey candle situated in the center of the great table was the only source of illumination. Beside the candle were two charcoal braziers burning incense. The burners filled the Chamber with pungent smoke. Only Khyrhyelle, Wyxotte, Dhynelle and Eyrmysse were seated at the table. All had their cowls over their heads. Before each was one of the universal symbols of the Holy Tarot. Khyrhyelle had the Wand. Wyxotte the Graal. Dhynelle the Star. Eyrmysse the Sword. All were in the process of entering various states of trance. Khyrhyelle's head was bowed; Wyxotte's head was tilted back; Dhynelle continually rolled her head from side to side; Eyrmysse moved her hands from her thighs to her breasts in a circular motion. The light of the candle danced and played with each of the figures, exaggerating their features and movements.

After a few moments they all joined hands. Together they recited the incantation. "We are gathered to perform the Spell of Teleportation. Through the grace of the gods of the various Paths we tread, especially the Goddess of the Moons, grant us, your servants, your power and protection in

the execution of our spell." Each of the witches traced an outline of a crescent moon in front of their face with their hand. The moons filled with an incandescent light and hung in mid-air. They resumed the incantation. "We conjure and invoke thee Oh Goddess, Oh beautiful Moon, Oh beautiful Star, Oh bright Light which shines before us! Come hither, come hither, come hither. Bring unto us the one whom we seek. Accomplish our will and desire, without wile or falsehood."

The room grew incredibly cold. The breath from the witches hung in the air forming an eerie light with that of the candle and the moons. Arhyvhynne hugged her knees and rocked back and forth; Lhynette and Qelharre unconsciously clasped their arms. The energy being amassed was thick enough to see.

Using the mental image Arhyvhynne had painted for them, the witches searched the countryside for Uriel. Minutes passed and longer. Finally, the witches began to get a feeling of proximity. But then Khyrhyelle cried out suddenly and the four witches seated at the table were violently thrown from their chairs as the moons dissipated and the candle went out.

The room was silent for a long moment. Then Arhyvhynne feebly called, "Mother?" More silence. "*Mother?*"

"Get some light, we need some light." It was Eyrmysse who responded. Qelharre managed to light a torch.

Eyrmysse was standing, supporting herself against the table. Khyrhyelle was sitting on the floor, taking deep, slow breaths. Dhynelle crawled to a chair, used it to stand up.

Wyxotte was sprawled on the floor.

Khyrhyelle looked around the Chamber, her gaze stopping on Wyxotte. "Lhynette... check... check Wyxotte."

While Lhynette went to examine Wyxotte, Arhyvhyne moved over to her mother. "Are you hurt? Are you all right? What happened?"

Khyrhyelle dismissed her with a wave of her hand. "Lhynette?"

"Wyxotte hit her head—but she is coming to. She should be fine."

Khyrhyelle seemed slightly relieved. "All right. Prepare the table. Quickly. We have to do the Closing."

"But mother, what happened?" Arhyvhyne asked.

"I said we have to do the Closing! There will be time for explanations later."

Qelharre began to straighten the Chamber up and Arhyvhyne quickly joined her. Lhynette helped Wyxotte into her chair. Eyrmysse and Dhynelle readied the table. Less than five minutes had elapsed before they were ready. It was imperative that they close the ritual properly. If not, the forces they had summoned could be loosed and cause a very dangerous situation.

The four witches seated at the table held hands once again. "Because thou hast diligently answered our demands, we do hereby license thee to depart. Go in peace unto your places. May there be peace between you and us, and be ye ready to come when ye are summoned by the Sacred Rites of Magic. Praise, honor, glory and blessing be unto they who sitteth upon the thrones, who liveth forever and ever." They traced the moons and ended the ritual.

Torches were lit and the other witches moved to their seats. Although Lhynette and Qelharre were also worried, Arhyvhyne could not contain herself any longer. She spoke before the last witch was seated. "Well?"

Eyrmysse answered. "*Someone, something* put up a barrier."

"A damn powerful one at that," Wyxotte added.

Arhyvhyne stared in disbelief. "A barrier? Are you sure?"

Dhynelle nodded. "Like touching pure energy." Her body trembled as she recalled the feeling.

Lhynette looked puzzled. "Who would put up a barrier? Surely not the wizard. Not in the shape Albera said he was in."

Qelharre looked to the High Witch. "Khyrhyelle? Anyone you can think of?"

Khyrhyelle had taken the brunt of the force from the barrier and did not look well at all. She was very pale, her breathing ragged and slightly erratic. Still, she emanated authority and control. "Who constructed the barrier? I do not know. But whoever put up the barrier now knows that someone else is aware of its existence. We have very little time." She paused then. She seemed to be weighing matters inwardly. The High Witch looked at each member of the Council. But when she spoke, it seemed to be to herself. "We will have to summon FireQueen."

CHAPTER III

Khyrhyelle, Lhynette and Qelharre descended into the depths of the Towers' dungeons. The Towers had many underground passages and levels, most terminating in dead ends. Passages began under both towers but only one was interconnecting. There were also many rooms, most empty, a few containing precious (or dangerous, whichever way you prefer to look at it) herbs and artifacts mainly used for casting elaborate spells.

The passages were unknown to any save the Council. And of the Council, only Khyrhyelle, Wyxotte and Qelharre knew most of the layout. This was the first time Lhynette had ever been past the storerooms. She replaced Wyxotte on this excursion for two reasons. First, Khyrhyelle had decided before that should the teleportation spell fail, Lhynette would accompany Qelharre on their quest to retrieve the wizard. Second, it was doubtful that the dwarf could take the strain of descending the dungeon at her age.

They had been travelling for nearly an hour, passing the storerooms on the first two subterranean levels as well as the actual dungeons on the seventh level. They had reached the eleventh level. Movement was slow. The passages were narrow, sometimes only wide enough for one to pass at a time. While the walkways tended to slant downward, the levels themselves were set off by stairs. The stairs could be difficult to negotiate, sometimes having as many as a hundred steps, sometimes very steep and sometimes

winding. The only light was supplied by the torches the witches carried. Combined with the stale, heavy air the smoke from the torches burned already tired eyes. A Spell of Teleportation would have saved much time, but Khyrhylle's energy level was too low.

"How much farther?" Lhynette whined. She had stopped and leaned against a wall. Her white robe was soiled and her cowl was lowered, revealing shoulder length golden blonde hair damp with sweat. Like Dhynelle, grey had begun to set in. Her doe-like soft brown eyes pleaded for a rest.

"Two more, only two more." Qelharre did not look much better than the white robe but sounded relatively fresh. She had all the characteristics of the dark elves; almond-shaped eyes, pointed ears, swarthy complexion, tall and slender. Her hair was flaming red. The eyes had the pink tint of an albino. It was impossible to ascertain her age. She turned to Khyrhylle, "Maybe you should have brought Wyxotte. I would have gladly put up with the bitching from the old crone just to see her die down here."

Lhynette could not conceal a giggle. "Qelharre, that is *terrible*." She wiped her brow on the sleeve of her robe. She turned her visual plea to a verbal one. "Khyrhylle, can we rest for a while?" They had only stopped briefly in a couple of storerooms to pick up some "ingredients" they felt may be needed on their impending journey.

Khyrhylle shot her a look that left no doubt as to the answer.



They stood before massive double-doors that were the entrance to a great cavern. Khyrhyelle drew some arcane symbols on the doors and uttered a Word. After a moment, the heavy doors swung inward.

Lhynette caught her breath. The cavern was illuminated by a faint golden glow whose source was magical. Strewn across the entire floor were dazzling gems of every hue, shape and size. Amongst the jewels lay armor and weapons of the most ornate kind. But Lhynette's eyes were quickly drawn to the center of the cavern, where on the highest mound of treasures, lay FireQueen.

The dragon was ancient. Some thought she was the first of her kind. If she was not, then she was *one* of the first. FireQueen (whose ancient name was Serafanyelle) was a huge beast, even for a dragon. She was over seventy-five feet long with a matching wingspan. Like all females, she mirrored the sunset, her colors being red and gold. She was red for the most part but her scales were highlighted with gold and she had a golden underbelly. Her eyes and horns were also gold. Only a unicorn could vie with a dragon for its beauty; few could surpass its magical ability and none could match the dragon for the terror it could instill.

FireQueen had lived under the Towers for more than five hundred years. The dragon had secured an arrangement with the High Witch at the time, Qhen Ennyjhenne (Qhen was a title attributed to a High Witch after her passing). Dragons were being fervently hunted and their numbers diminished terribly. In exchange for her occult knowledge and assistance when called upon, the witches would provide her with the cavern as shelter and the treasures confiscated

from the StoneWood Wars. Although saddened by the separation from others of her kind, FireQueen's sacrifice enabled her to enhance her power through the treasures. A dragon's affinity for treasure was well known. The reasons were not. Dragons were alchemists of a sort. They were able to transmute, to an extent, the energy from precious metals and stones into energy they could wield. For over five hundred years she had amassed energy from the jewels, weapons and armor. She had become the most powerful dragon alive.

During FireQueen's time with the witches, she had been rarely visited and only on a few occasions were her services ever required. She preferred solitude and let it be known. Humans and dragons typically did not have healthy relationships. Usually one or both turned up dead. More so humans than dragons. However, the dragons did tolerate the witches and wizards (when there used to be wizards). That was due to the common bond of magic they shared. Dragons were, after all, powerful magic-users.

FireQueen slowly picked up her head and fixed her eyes on Khyrhyelle. One not versed in the magical arts could have been destroyed by that gaze. Even Khyrhyelle, though prepared, was slightly shaken by their force. They regarded each other for a long time. Though they were not overly fond of each other, they did have great respect for one another. Khyrhyelle's thoughts drifted back to their first and only meeting. That was when Khyrhyelle was made High Witch. A good many years had gone by. Neither had changed.

Khyrhyelle finally broke the silence. "You were awake.

You expected us?"

"I awoke when he came."

"He wears the grey."

The dragon's eyes laughed. "I know." A belch of fire erupted from the dragon's throat. It was a real laugh to match that of the eyes.

"May I inquire as to what else you know?"

"Too much. More than you would desire." Sadness in the voice. Smoke rose from her nostrils. The mirth had gone.

Khyrhyelle knew better than to pursue the matter. She changed the topic. "Forgive me for I have been rude. Where are my manners?" She turned toward the white robe. "Let me introduce you. This is Lhynette. Lhynette, this is FireQueen. I believe you are already acquainted with Qelharre."

FireQueen stared at Lhynette and drove her eyes into her Soul. Lhynette had not been ready for that. She moved her hands back to brace herself but found nothing. Terror held her. She tried to resist, to begin a spell, fought with the Words. The dragon let her go. "You have done well High Witch. She is strong. She will be useful."

Though she was ashen and shaking and in awe, Lhynette did not back down. Khyrhyelle looked at Lhynette with a grimace and guilt in her eyes. She had known FireQueen would "test" Lhynette and knew it would not be pleasant. But she also knew FireQueen would render an accurate appraisal of the witch's worth. Khyrhyelle began to ask Lhynette how she was and got cut off by the dragon.

"Enough. What do you require of me?" FireQueen had risen to her full height.

Khyrhyelle's eyes fixed on the dragon's. This time it was

FireQueen who felt the momentary shock. Khyrhyelle spoke her ancient name, Serafanyelle, and in that fraction of a second, a huge battle sword magically appeared under the maw of the dragon. It floated menacingly for a count of five. Then Khyrhyelle released it and the sword fell, crashing among the gems. The cavern stilled. Their eyes never left each other the entire time. Then FireQueen laughed flames high into the air. After which the High Witch recounted the events surrounding the coming of the wizard.

When Khyrhyelle finished the story, they prepared to leave. FireQueen had agreed to transport Lhynette, Qelharre and Albera to the wizard, break through the barrier and bring them back. Not an easy task for dragon or witch.

The three witches followed the dragon from the cavern through various passageways. In theory, Khyrhyelle, Wyxotte and Qelharre knew the route from the cavern back to the surface but none of the three had ever walked it. FireQueen knew it by heart. She did not venture out often, usually once a season when she grew restless, hungry or both. And then only at night. She nor the witches had any desire for her to be seen.

It took them slightly less time to reach the exit than it did to arrive at the cavern, mostly due to the route being easier to navigate. The passages were much wider (to accommodate the dragon) and rose steadily.

They approached a place where the passage became very cramped. Only a short distance farther, the floor of the passage rose to meet the ceiling. They had reached a dead end. Here, the dragon stopped and drew in her will. FireQueen spoke a Word and the ceiling gave way to open

sky. The dragon, framed by moonlight, said "Quickly," and moved out into the night. The three witches followed. They had surfaced at the edge of the copse adjacent to the Towers. As the ground settled back to conceal the exit, no one noticed a remaining shadow cast back down the passageway.



The group was met by Albera shortly thereafter. Khyrhyelle gave each a hug and then helped them secure their scant belongings to FireQueen's back. Lhynette, Qelharre and Albera climbed onto the dragon. The High Witch walked around to the front of the dragon and softly placed her hand on the side of FireQueen's face. "Goddess watch over and return all of you to me," she whispered. The dragon gave a slight nod and Khyrhyelle backed away. The mighty wings began to flap and soon they were airborne. Khyrhyelle saw FireQueen become a distant shadow against one of the moons as snowflakes fluttered in its light.

She knew she did not have much time. The party to rescue the wizard would be leaving very soon. She wound through the underground passages at a dizzying pace. *I cannot get lost*, she thought. Minutes sped by. She was no longer sure she could return to her room in time. Still she pushed on. She was still deep in the dungeons when she passed an empty room. She stopped. *This will have to do*. She entered the room and immediately began drawing symbols on the walls and floor. The witch sat within the magic circle she constructed and began the process of

telepathically communicating with the Dark Master.



FireQueen was the first to see the barrier. Dragons had excellent night vision. The spherical barrier covered a large area. The fabric of the barrier consisted of a filmy substance that had gaping holes in it. As they drew closer, both Albera and Qelharre could make it out as well. Lhynette could not see it until they were almost on top of it. Qelharre deduced that the barrier had to have been constructed from far away. It was much larger than necessary, indicating the builder did not know the wizard's exact location. And the holes were evidence that the magic was fading. But they were all impressed. It took incredible power to create a barrier of this magnitude and to be able to sustain it for such a long period of time.

The dragon flew around the barrier several times, looking for a hole which was large enough to accommodate her. She did not find any. "I will have to burn through the barrier. Albera, which side is closest to the wizard?" The dryad pointed to a hole that would be a good starting point. FireQueen gained altitude to achieve the best angle. She plummeted down. They were nearly to the barrier when she roared. Flame shot out, seemingly encompassing everything. The witches hid their faces against the dragon's body and held tight. Albera followed suit. Even from where they were the heat was intense. The dragon was successful in breaking through the weakened barrier. The passengers were almost on the ground before anyone braved a look.

It took Albera a few moments to get her bearings straight. She led them to the thicket. They found Uriel there, his condition unchanged. The unicorn was still standing guard.

"It definitely is grey." Despite the accounts by Albera, Arhyvhyne and even FireQueen, Qelharre still had a fleeting hope that it was a mistake. She dismissed it. She could not, however, dismiss the uneasy feeling that had been steadily growing since their arrival. She was not the only one to feel it either. "The magic of the barrier is fading. Whoever created the barrier expects to be here before it deteriorates entirely. That will be soon. I do not particularly wish to be here any longer than is necessary. Lhynette, examine the wizard. If he can be moved, make the appropriate preparations. Albera, have a look around. Make sure we are alone. I will get our packs."



Albera was glad to be off. The ride on the dragon was unsettling enough, but standing around, waiting for something to happen was driving her crazy. She made a cursory survey but everything looked normal. Nobody had been around. No tracks. Nothing. But her instincts shouted at her. It *felt* all wrong. And it was feeling *worse* as time passed.

Albera turned sharply. She thought she heard something. The sensitivity of the dryad's six senses were immediately turned up a notch. She waited, heard nothing else. She shook her head. "Albera you are getting too old for

this," she mumbled to herself. She peered into the night. The effect of the darkness was two-fold: it assisted concealment and increased her apprehension. The light from the twin moons did not offer much help. She moved on in the direction she thought the sound may have come from—if indeed there was a sound. But then she heard it again. Clear. Distinct. Horses footfalls. Should she go back and inform the others? No, better find out who or what it was. She moved in closer, crouched behind some brush. Whatever was out there was making Albera shake with fear. She was nearing the point of hysteria. She abruptly recalled reports of strange deaths in the north, deaths that could not logically be explained, masks of horror on the faces of the dead.

She suddenly felt compelled to move out in the open. Her wide eyes stared unbelievably at her feet walking out from the brush. She saw them then. She had heard of them, never really believing in their existence. They were something you threatened your children with when they misbehaved. But there they were, two of them. *Goddess, were they hideous!* Skeletons, wearing the remnants of flesh encased in black armor, riding stallions of the same nature. Both riders and mounts focused on their prey with flames that filled hollow eye sockets. Froth gathered and driveled from what were once mouths.

Albera wanted to run, hide, anything. But the dryad was unable to move. All she could do was stare. Then one of the riders grinned, lifted a hand and pointed the bone of a finger at her. Then it extended the remaining fingers and curled them into a claw. The rider slowly turned its wrist upward and while doing so the claw transformed into a clenched fist.

The dryad began to feel her Inner Self torn out of her body. Before she was ingested, Albera managed a scream: "Slayers!"



Most considered them a myth. Some, including the witches, knew better. Regardless, little was known of the SoulSlayers. Their origin was a mystery. Whether they were implements of a more evil being or acted of their own volition was unknown. Their purpose was obscure. What was known about the ghastly skeletons was loathsome. Although the Slayers had been known to travel on foot, they were typically found on the back of some animal, usually a horse. Once a Slayer mounted the animal, the beast became possessed by the Slayer, transformed into its likeness and attached to it for survival. They fed on the Souls of their victims; hence their name. They tore the Souls from the living and bent them to their evil will. If it only meant death, it would not be so cruel. But the Souls were locked within the skeletons, aware of their deeds, unable to escape from the atrocities they committed. And the more Souls they claimed, the more powerful the SoulSlayers became.



Lhynette's head snapped up when she heard the scream. She turned to Qelharre, "SoulSlayers!"

Qelharre's face dropped. Being a black robe, she had studied the SoulSlayers and knew their reputation well.

Because they were otherworldly, they could not be physically killed. Even the dragon could do them no harm. She was pulled from her thoughts by Lhynette. "What?"

"I said, you and the dragon protect the wizard."

"How? With what?"

Lhynette snapped back, "Goddess, who knows? Build a little barrier or something. Anything. They will be here any minute." She paused for effect, "I am going to try a Spell of Releasing."

Qelharre was stunned as she looked at Lhynette. A Spell of Releasing was a spell of very high difficulty. It was the only known method to dispel a SoulSlayer. In effect, the spell released the Souls from their skeletal prison, rendering the SoulSlayer lifeless. She thought the only one capable of performing it, if even she knew it, was Khyrhyelle. Her look betrayed her thoughts.

"Khyrhyelle taught me. I have never performed it, though." She rummaged through her pack, trying to find the ingredients she needed. Her frayed nerves combined with the cold to make her hands shake badly. Twice she dropped necessary components. She finished mixing up her potion in a vial and looked at Qelharre and FireQueen. "I think I am ready."

"Goddess watch over and protect you," Qelharre whispered.

The dragon had not spoken since they landed. While the SoulSlayers could not harm her much, she was still in a dark mood. FireQueen was a very proud beast and was not accustomed to failing on a mission. What she offered Lhynette was no help. "Your spell, should it work, is only

sufficient for one of the Slayers. There are at least two."

"I know. But we have got to try something." Goddess, she thought, I am scared enough as it is and...

On the periphery of her vision, Lhynette glimpsed the eyes of burning flames that glowed eerily in the night. The SoulSlayers had appeared. Lhynette, though shaken, managed to get herself into a semi-trance state and a bright aura enveloped the white robe. Meanwhile the dragon breathed fire at the Slayers, trying to buy time if nothing else. But they took no notice. Both Slayers pointed at Lhynette at which time she threw the vial. It burst in front of them releasing a multi-colored gas. That seemed to stun them momentarily.

Now! Lhynette thought, but the Words would not come. "Damn ... dammit ... *damn!*" She began to feel the pull of the Slayers. Her fear mounted. She was losing herself. Just then the image of the dragon supplanted the fear in her mind. She regained her concentration. The Words began to flow. But at some point she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER IV

The SoulSlayers had a long trip back. It took them the remainder of the night and the next two days of hard riding to travel south through the western edge of the Thaum Mountains and on to Daath Ul Thaum. Only one or two paths through the mountains existed. That was all that necessity determined.

There simply was no reason to ever cross the mountains. Albera had been one of only a few who dared to venture into the mountains. Her job required that of her and she only scouted the northern edge of the range. Nobody dared travel beyond the perimeter of the Thaums because they were reputed to be haunted (not that the SoulSlayers would be vexed, mind you). There was little north of the mountains outside of the witches' home, and the Towers could be reached with relative ease by skirting the western edge of the range. The only other point of interest was the Twisted Horn River, which emptied into the Strait of Kho Rhon'ah north of the range.

The Twisted Horn was the largest river in Khaballe and flowed north from Lake Phul, south of the capital Bhel'Ehzz. It disappeared into Thaum Weald and reappeared somewhere in the Thaum Mountains. Actually, no one was sure what happened to the Twisted Horn when it entered the Weald. If the mountains were haunted, then the forest was a veritable living death. There were no accounts of anyone ever entering Thaum Weald and returning. It was an extremely

dense forest, impassable throughout. The trees were enormous. Ten good-sized men with outstretched arms were needed to encircle them. And the heavy-leafed branches formed a canopy that no light could ever penetrate. It was a land of enduring darkness, a darkness which permeated every living (or dead) thing in its boundary. And the sounds that emanated from the Weald were completely unnerving. The moaning of the wind (or was it?) and the lamenting cries from unseen voices were said to be the worst. If the atmosphere of the forest wasn't enough to turn you back, then the sounds would. Enduring this, if you followed the Twisted Horn into the Weald, about half way through you would be rewarded with a most frightful experience which paled that of the mountains or the forest. You would encounter Daath Ul Thaum.

Daath Ul Thaum was a massive fortress, large enough to house a small town. The fortification was of the motte and bailey type. The motte was a huge mound, encircled by a stone palisade; the bailey was an adjacent courtyard also surrounded by a stone palisade. A wide moat was created from the banks of the Twisted Horn. The keep was constructed entirely of black rock and had no windows. It emanated pure and complete hatred; the embodiment of evil. The citadel seemed to guard a place that would never need protection. To the inhabitants of Khaballe it was only a dread rumor. A passage from the histories of Khaballe, *The Sacred Scrolls of The Moons & Stars*, had it different though:

*There it stands, Daath Ul Thaum.
Surrounded by forests no road to its door.
There it stands, Daath Ul Thaum.
Weeping and crying but who is it for?
There it stands, Daath Ul Thaum.
It is said no one dwells there anymore.*

Most of the citadel's history was vague. Daath Ul Thaum was very old. It was constructed more than a thousand years before, shortly after the Great Mystical Wars. The losers of the Great Wars were all extreme black robes and were known as the Thaums (named after their demon leader). They were banished to the barren north central region by the victors, the Mehtrons (named after their leader), a mixture of white robes and moderate blacks. The Mehtrons, wanting to secure the Thaums, warded the area from the mountains south to what once was a sparse forest. The Thaums, content to stay within the bounds of the wards began work on Daath Ul Thaum and cultivating the Weald to grow into its present state.

After some decades passed, the Mehtrons tested the wards. To their dismay, they found the Thaums had erected their own wards. No one could enter what came to be known as the Thaum Mountains or the Thaum Weald without being subjected to the wrath of the Thaums. As Daath Ul Thaum reached its monstrous proportions and the Weald also began to grow thick with the enormous trees, so too did the rumors grow about the black citadel and its inhabitants. Another, earlier passage, from the Sacred Scrolls:

Silhouetted against the moons in the darkened sky.

The manor stands accepting the pleas to die.

The veils of cloud masses obscure sight.

For this is the citadel of Satarsmyt.

Of Daath Ul Thaum.

Sweet scents that reek from flowers drift through the halls.

Archaic symbols in blood adorn the walls.

The lower chamber aglow with candlelight.

Candidate of death awaits Satarsmyt.

Of Daath Ul Thaum.

The nymphet disrobes and lies eager for death.

She surrenders to Satarsmyt with her last breath.

She is devoured according to black rite.

Death's coven appears and worships Satarsmyt.

Of Daath Ul Thaum.

It was thought that both Mehtron and Thaum perished in the Great Mystical Wars. The histories are unclear. Mehtron encountered Thaum in the last of the great battles. Both were never seen afterwards. The fate of Mehtron was a mystery. Most felt he perished, for if alive he surely would have returned. Of Thaum, some thought he managed to escape and returned to the realm from whence he came, to wait for the appropriate time to restore his power. In any event, it was Thaum's right-hand-demon, Satarsmyt, who led the defeated wizards to their future demesne.

Thus it was to Daath Ul Thaum that the SoulSlayers travelled, and if it were to be known, with more than a little trepidation.



The Slayers entered the Throne Room, the black heart of the fortress. The room, like everything about Daath Ul Thaum, was dark, huge and oppressive. A mysterious, faint scarlet glow lit the room. Arcane symbols covered the walls and floors. They were drawn in blood, the blood fresh. The room was sparsely furnished. An altar stood at the center, it too covered in blood. At its center was a lone golden chalice, traces of blood still on the inside. One large, black floor candle stood in front of it. The candle was extinguished. Two thrones were against the back wall. One was placed in the center and was the larger, slightly more ornate throne. It was crimson and black with inlaid gold and flames carved into the back. It rested on a dais, its seat empty. A smaller throne of a similar nature was on the left. On it sat a terrifying creature. It had a round, somewhat human face with close cropped hair and beard. Three curved horns, like those of a goat protruded from the top of its head. The torso appeared to be human, but the arms and legs came from some hoofed animal. It had the tail of a goat.

The creature smiled sardonically at the Slayers, the tail slowly wagging back and forth. "I do not see the wizard." A deep, thick voice. Like it was unaccustomed to speaking.

Hundreds of voices issued from the mouths of the two SoulSlayers, voices that sounded as if they came from beyond the grave. "We have failed."

"So you have."

The myriad of voices responded. "The barrier weakened with time. They had with them the ancient wrym. The lizard

bitch tore through. We consumed the old scout, the one who before was known as Albera. When we came upon the wizard, he was protected by two witches, a unicorn and the wyrm."

"I know. Do you not remember that we had been informed?"

"Yes," answered the multitude of Souls that made up the Slayers, "but we had to flee. One of the witches, the white one, knew the Spell of Releasing."

"So do I." Not needing the physical components to cast the spell, the creature pointed two claws, spoke the Words and released the Souls entrapped within the two Slayers. The screams of the long imprisoned Souls pierced the air. But as the two perished, another SoulSlayer emerged from the shadows to devour the relinquished Souls. The creature on the throne threw its head back and laughed hysterically, creating a repulsive contrast with the mournful cries of the Souls as they were once more enveloped in darkness. It was over as quickly as it began.

The creature lost itself in thought. "The one who summoned me, lo those many years ago, will not be pleased." It was speaking to itself, recalling a time in the past. Moments faded away. The creature returned to the present. Flaming eyes came to focus on the SoulSlayer. "Ahrokh, as you took their Souls so do you take their responsibility. Do not disappoint me lest you suffer their fate." And with those words, the smile returned to Satarsmyt's face.

CHAPTER V

The High Witch's thoughts were distant as she gazed up at the moons. She contemplated the meaning of the knowledge the Goddess had just imparted. Khyrhyelle shivered and absently pulled her cloak more tightly around her. The witch had remained at the secret entrance to the Tower's dungeons, waiting. Much time had passed. And the weight of the knowledge it brought was unbearable.



After the witches and dryad had departed with the dragon, Khyrhyelle allowed herself the luxury of worry. Looking up into the night, waiting for the dragon's return, she wore a path through the snow with her pacing. *This*, she thought to herself, *does nobody any good*. Khyrhyelle cleared a small area on the ground, sat down and forced herself to relax and begin her meditations. When she finished, she pulled a deck of Tarot cards from a pocket in her cloak. The High Witch looked at her cards with love and handled them with reverence.

Tarot cards were used on two levels. On the spiritual level, the cards were used as a learning tool. Studying and meditating on the Tarot could reveal Inner Truths. The cards were a book of universal symbolism. The symbols were used as keys to unlock the subconscious mind. On the material level, the Tarot was used as a form of divination. The cards

were laid out in various spreads where the position of the card itself, whether it was right-side up or reversed and the proximity of the other cards formed the counsel of the reading. They were not meant to predict the absolute future. Rather, the Tarot described the qualities of a certain situation. They told of the direction that events were leading in and the people or things which influenced the situation. The knowledge was not written in stone. The knowledge gleaned from the Tarot was meant for guidance and counsel. How one proceeded with their actions ultimately determined how the situation became resolved.

Khyrhyelle, though she meditated with the cards often, tonight wished to garner some information about the situation she had found herself in. The High Witch laid down a cloth on the ground where she had cleared it and prayed to the Goddess to assist her with the Spell of Reading. From the deck, she pulled out the Queen of the Graal to represent herself. The card represented a fair lady who was honest, devoted and wise. She then posed her question mentally while shuffling the cards. Surprisingly, it was about her immediate future and not the wizard or the quest to secure him.

When she finished shuffling, the High Witch turned over the first card, placed it over the Queen of the Graal and said, "This covers me." She laid the next card over the first and said, "This crosses me." The third card was placed below the first two and Khyrhyelle said, "This is beneath me." The fourth card was located to the left of the first two. "This is behind me." Khyrhyelle drew back slightly as she viewed the fifth card. She placed the card above the first

two. "This influences me," the High Witch whispered. The sixth card was placed to the right of the first two, completing a solar cross. "This awaits me." She positioned the next card by the third, but to the far right. "This is myself." The eighth card was located directly above the seventh. "This is my environment." The ninth card was laid above the previous one. "The hopes or fears." As she drew the last card, Khyrhyelle shuddered. She stared at it for a long time. Her eyes grew distant. A gale whipped around her disturbing her but not the cards. Finally, she placed it above the last card, creating a vertical line to the right of the cross. "The outcome." She paused and then began to interpret the counsel that the Goddess was imparting.



Card 1: The Present Situation: Knight of the Graal. A

graceful knight holding a chalice rides a horse. His helmet is winged, indicating imagination. Though a dreamer, there is a practical side as well. The knight approaches a stream, the water symbolic of emotions. *Meaning:* The arrival of a message or the approach of a person. Either will cause incitement.

It appears we will have the wizard, Khyrhyelle thought, but with him we will also gain a great deal of turmoil.

Card II: The Obstacle: Queen of Stars, Reversed. A queen sits upon a throne holding a pentagram. She has the power of life and death. *Meaning:* A dark woman who should be feared and not trusted. Her intentions are evil.

A dark woman? But who? A witch? One of the black robes? No, it could not be. But if not, who? Khyrhyelle stared at the face of the Queen of Stars a while longer, but was unable to coax a mental image of the dark woman from the card.

Card III: The Basis of the Situation: The Moon. Two moons shine down on the plains. A black dog and white wolf bay at the moons. They are symbols of polarity. They are on different sides of a path which leads between two towers. The path represents the balance between extremes. Climbing out of a pool is a shellfish symbolizing conscious unfoldment. *Meaning:* You are being deceived by one close to you (Queen of Stars). She is one of your enemies, the rest

being hidden. She will cause terror and you danger.

The High Witch gave the card an ironic look. *You wish to conceal things from me, one who has served you and have worn your symbol.* She shook her head, focused on the meaning. *She is close. If she is close she must be one of the witches. The rest are hidden. Hidden... conspiracy maybe?* Again she shook her head and went on to the next card.

Card IV: The Past: Ace of the Graal, Reversed. From out of a cloud a hand offers a chalice. A dove (spirit) holding a wafer in its beak descends into the chalice. Five streams of water (the senses) flow from the chalice to the pool below. *Meaning:* An affair of false pretenses. You had a deceitful relationship. You were used.

Khyrhyelle was perplexed. She began to argue with the cards. *Who have I ever had a relationship with? I have devoted my entire life to the service of the Goddess. Save the MidSummer Rites, I have not had anybody. Maybe it is of a different nature. Maybe it is a friendship.* But she could not convince herself.

Card V: New Influence: The Lovers. The sun shines above an angel with outstretched wings. Beneath the angel are a naked man and woman. The man, on the right, stands in front of the tree of life. He symbolizes consciousness and looks to the woman. She stands in front of the tree of

knowledge, representing the subconscious. *Meaning:* You will become attracted to another. The furthering of a relationship. Love.

No, it cannot be! Khyrhyelle went numb. Her eyes were fixed on the card, lost in its depths. Her vision blurred. When she was able to focus again, the image of the man on the card transformed into that of the wizard. Her mind screamed, *I cannot allow this to happen!*

Card VI: The Future: Eight of Wands, Reversed. Eight wands are in flight across open country. They are on their downward trajectory. *Meaning:* Someone will become jealous of you, causing internal disputes and quarrels.

Jealous of what? My power? The High Witch considered the placement of the cards. *Jealous of what I may learn from the wizard... or my relationship with him.*

Card VII: The Querent: Two of Swords, Reversed. A blindfolded female crosses her arms across her chest. She holds two swords. This shows a precarious balance. A body of water lies behind her, her emotions. Two crescent moons shine above. *Meaning:* You are unaware of the disloyalty and falsehood that surrounds you.

So I am beginning to understand. The figure on the card however, disturbed Khyrhyelle greatly. *Am I truly that*

blind?

Card VIII: Outside Influences: Eight of Swords. A bound and blindfolded woman is surrounded by eight swords stuck in the ground. A castle, a symbol of attainment, high on a cliff is in the background. *Meaning:* Ill news could cause conflict and crisis. Others will try to prevent you from moving in the direction you wish. You are blinded to their desires.

I will have to closely evaluate everyone's motives for anything concerning the wizard. Despair descended on Khyrhyelle like an unwanted shadow. *Again the blindfold. Can I not trust anyone?*

Card IX: Hopes or Fears: Eight of the Graal. In the darkness, a man deserts his eight chalices, the chalices symbolizing previous hopes and concerns. *Meaning:* You are fearful that all you have worked for will be for naught.

Khyrhyelle absently nodded her head and sighed. *You cannot bear the weight of the world on your shoulders. You cannot hold yourself responsible for the things which you cannot control.* Though the thoughts were true, they offered no solace.

Card X: The Outcome: Nine of Swords. A person sits up

in bed. Their head is in their hands. Nine swords are on the wall. *Meaning:* Failure and despair. A deception could cause your death.

Khyrhyelle shook her head and then the image of the card seemingly came to life as she settled her head in her hands.



After the reading Khyrhyelle was unsettled, but sat quietly searching for answers. *A deception could cause my death? Who is deceiving me? The obstacle card. The dark woman. But who? A witch? Who are the others she is with?* The High Witch fought with it a while longer but came away without any solid theories. She considered the fact that both of the previous two High Witches who reigned at the coming of the eclipse lost their lives. *Coincidence.* She shifted her thoughts to the meaning of the fifth card, The Lovers. That, however, made her uneasy and she hastily drove her thoughts away from that subject. Khyrhyelle considered the third card, which referenced her past but like the rest, seemed as tangible as wisps of smoke on a breeze.

Khyrhyelle gathered her Tarot cards. Before returning them to her cloak, she gave them a long stare. "Ignorance is bliss. Sometimes I wonder if the price of knowledge is too high and the responsibility too great." The recollection of the conversation she had earlier with the dragon pushed to the front of her thoughts. Khyrhyelle's own voice echoed in her mind, *May I inquire as to what else you know?* And then, FireQueen's response, *Too much. More than you would*

desire. She thought about how much more the dragon had not divulged. The High Witch sighed then said, "No matter. It is why I am here and why I am who I am. I would not wish it different." But Khyrhyelle was afraid. Not for herself, but for Khaballe.

Khyrhyelle looked around in a daze. It was as if she just realized where she was and what she was doing here. *How long has it been*, she wondered. It was still night, still cold, still lightly snowing. She stood up and turned her attention to the moons, again losing herself in an attempt to unravel the reading. She had no idea how much more time passed before the image of the dragon against the moon Khyaroh broke her out of her daze.



The scene was grim. Qelharre practically fell off the dragon. She looked like she had been to the abyss and lived to tell about it. The dark elf was ashen to the point where she could pass as one of her lighter relatives. Both Lhynette and the wizard were strapped to the dragon, each looking like a prime candidate for death. It did not take dragonlore to know that even FireQueen had been affected.

"What happened?" The demeanor the High Witch presented was calm, controlled, strong. Inside, she wanted desperately to drop to her knees and cry.

Qelharre tried to respond. She opened her mouth, tried to formulate words but she could not speak. A tear ran down her cheek. She shook her head slowly.

"SoulSlayers." The dragon spat fire along with the

word.

Khyrhyelle closed her eyes, measured out her breaths. When she opened her eyes, she was the High Witch again. "Lhynette?"

"Weak," FireQueen responded. "*Very* weak. Her energy level was depleted. She was near to making her transition. I performed a healing on her. She should recover, but it will take some time."

A sigh of relief. A short smile of gratitude broke across Khyrhyelle's lips. "Thank you," she said to the dragon. "Where is Albera?"

Qelharre lifted her head, eyes locked with the High Witch. "Dead. The Slayers."

Anguish was on Khyrhyelle's face as she turned away. It was a rare occurrence when the High Witch outwardly betrayed emotion. She fought to regain her composure, was successful. "What about the wizard?"

"Still alive. Barely." The dark elf was beginning to recover from the shock. "Oh, the unicorn is on its way. It refused to fly with us."

Khyrhyelle nodded. "How did this—no, there will be time for this later. Are we in any immediate danger?" she questioned the dragon.

"No," FireQueen answered. "Nothing that I can detect." She added, "I only wish I was able to do more. I am sorry you lost the Scout, especially in that manner."

The High Witch nodded her understanding. "Your assistance has been immeasurable. Thank you again." She turned back to the immediate situation. "Qelharre, arrange for a couple of Guardians to meet the unicorn. I want the

wards strengthened. Doubled. No, tripled. I do not wish to take any chances. It would seem that someone is very interested in our guest. Make provisions for our best healers to keep vigil on both Lhynette and the wizard." Khyrhelle looked up at a sky beginning to lighten slightly with the coming of dawn. "This night has been long and overly cruel. Let us all get some rest. We will meet at our first convenience, I would guess sometime this evening."



Dusk would come again before the Council would meet. Outside, the falling snow painted a picturesque landscape. Inside the Towers, in the Council Chamber, the heat from the fireplace was ineffective in warming cold souls or cheering dispositions. There was no mistaking the somber mood that had blown through the Towers like an ill wind, though not all of the witches were aware of the extent of the disaster that had struck. Lhynette had not regained consciousness for some time and spoke to no one save the High Witch when she did. Qelharre locked herself in her room and fell into a fitful sleep. Arhyvhynne gleaned some information from Ulyyna, the unicorn, through a mind scan. But the information acquired from an animal, even one as intelligent as a unicorn, was somewhat sketchy. Animals could not willingly supply their information, so they had to be carefully coerced. Thus, she only knew of the Slayers and nothing else. None of the other witches knew of the nocturnal tragedy.

When the meeting convened, all the Council members

were in attendance. Khyrhyelle had once again become the implacable High Witch of the Moons. She had allowed herself to bathe but not to sleep, and though she looked well, she was exhausted. Qelharre, though she had garnered some rest, still had a haggard appearance. The dark elf, suffering from misplaced feelings of guilt, alternated between fits of depression and anger. And after only scant hours of sleep, Lhynette awoke and insisted she attend the Council meeting. Khyrhyelle thought it much too early for the witch to be up and about but did not wish to upset Lhynette in her condition.

The High Witch began with a prayer of thanks to the Goddess. Then she spoke to her Council. "Many things have transpired since the last rising and falling of the moons, most of them of an adverse nature. Though we gained the wizard, we lost Albera and nearly Lhynette." A gasp erupted from some of the Council members who were not aware of the happenings of the previous night. Arhyvhyne seemed to take it the worst. She formed a kind of bond when she performed a mind scan with somebody and was unable to quell the tears rolling down her cheeks. Khyrhyelle proceeded, her voice betraying no emotion. "And though she is reluctant to admit it, Qelharre still suffers from the effects of the encounter." The dark elf responded with a scowl. The High Witch continued. "Before we proceed any further, I would like a moment of silence to offer a prayer to the gods for the release of Albera's Soul and its continued progression in her next existence."

After the prayer, Khyrhyelle asked Qelharre to recount their journey to secure the wizard. The dark elf described

breaching the barrier, finding the wizard and sending Albera on her last reconnaissance mission.

"Some time passed. Must have been five minutes, maybe ten. It felt like hours." Qelharre paused. It seemed like she was playing the events back in her mind. "Lhynette was checking the wizard when we heard Albera scream." Her face contorted.

"What did she scream?" Wyxotte asked.

Qelharre pushed herself up and leaned across the great table. She sent a hateful glare towards Wyxotte and said, "Slayers. And would that it be you they took instead of her." Her last remark was ignored by all except the dwarf.

Of the Council members, Wyxotte, Eyrmysse and Dhynelle did not know of the Slayers. Wyxotte seethed. Eyrmysse raised an inquiring eyebrow. Dhynelle was astonished. She remarked, "SoulSlayers? Goddess, no."

"Goddess, yes!" Qelharre was losing control of herself. "As soon as FireQueen landed in the barrier I felt... this incredible wrongness, evil, something. I should have known. I should have done something... anything."

Dhynelle tried to comfort her. "I am sure you did everything possible Qelharre."

Qelharre retorted, "How would you know what was possible? You could not possibly know unless you were there."

"But I was there Qelharre," Lhynette responded, "and Dhynelle is right. There is nothing else we could have done. All things considered, we are most fortunate to be here to tell of it."

The dark elf would not let it go. "We?" "Who is 'we'?"

We?" She spat the word. "I am fortunate *you* knew the Spell of Releasing. If the burden would have been left to me *we* would all be dead, including that goddamn wizard!"

Khyrhyelle looked at Qelharre with compassion in her eyes. "Enough Qelharre," she quietly said.

Qelharre lashed out. "Enough? Enough what? Death? Pain? This... this—"

The High Witch whispered, "I said enough!"

Qelharre suddenly seemed drained. She shook her head slowly. "I am sorry. I do not know. I just... I just feel so... I just do not know."

"It is all right Qelharre, we understand." Khyrhyelle waited a moment and then asked the dark elf to continue.

Qelharre slumped back down into her chair before she continued. "Lhynette prepared herself to cast the Spell of Releasing. I constructed a small barrier around the wizard and myself."

"Why did you not include Lhynette in the barrier oh mighty dark robe?" Wyxotte chided her.

Qelharre's eyes went wide. The thought had never occurred to her.

Dhynelle defended Qelharre. "It obviously would have made no difference. The SoulSlayers had already entered through one barrier."

Wyxotte, sensing the upper hand, continued her verbal assault. "Yes, but the barrier was most likely their own. And if not, they could have entered through a rift as FireQueen did."

"This is completely irrelevant," said the High Witch. "Lhynette is, after all, alive and safe here among us." She

was quickly becoming agitated.

Wyxotte refused to surrender the issue. "Yes, but even you, Khyrhyelle, said how she nearly died. And the pain, not to mention the fright of the experience..."

Lhynette raised a feeble arm to gain the Council's attention. She spoke to the dwarf, her voice weak and shaky. "Maybe you should consider changing the color of your robe, Wyxotte. Your words surely do not become the white that you wear." It seemed quite an effort just for Lhynette to speak. But she made her point. Wyxotte, admonished, sat quietly with her eyes lowered.

"Thank you, Lhynette." The High Witch paused briefly, then continued in an accusatory tone. "I would think that the matter at hand is serious enough to displace our personal feelings and act like the Council we are supposed to be. Is it necessary to remind all of you that our responsibility is not only to each other and our orders, but to the entire realm of Khaballe?" The only sounds came from the fire crackling in the hearth. "Qelharre, would you continue?"

Qelharre knew better than to allow her melancholy to continue, at least on the surface. "The SoulSlayers appeared. There were two of them. We could see the eerie glow of their flaming eyes as well as their hideous mounts in the darkness. Lhynette threw the vial at them, or did FireQueen breathe her flames first? I am not sure—it all happened so fast."

"The flames came first but had no effect," Lhynette said in a feeble voice. Pain distorted her features. Like Qelharre, she was reliving the incident. "They pointed at me. They *both* pointed at me. Then I threw the vial at them. I knew it

was my only chance to recite the spell, but I could not. I was so scared. They began to take me. It felt like they were tearing my Soul right out of my body. Goddess, I felt so... *violated!*"

Lhynette's body shuddered from her violent sobs. Khyrhelle and Arhyhynne quickly got up and moved to Lhynette to try to comfort her. Qelharre pushed herself away from the great table. She tore the moons amulet, the sacred symbol of the witches, from her neck and threw it across the room in anger, cursing her inability to stop the SoulSlayers. Dhynelle got up and retrieved the dark elf's amulet. She hugged Qelharre and refastened the amulet around her neck. A few moments passed while the witches in the Chamber collected themselves.

Lhynette assured everyone she was fine and once again continued the retelling of their encounter. "While the SoulSlayers were... while they were... I was paralyzed with fear. Just as I felt myself slipping away, FireQueen entered my mind and cleared away the fright. I immediately began reciting the Words. But before I could finish, everything went dark. I awoke here."

"However did you manage to escape?" asked Eyrmysse, toying with a curl.

"Only by the blessing of the Goddess," replied Qelharre. "When the Slayers heard the beginning of the Spell of Releasing, they were very much shaken. Their mounts reared back and they both departed hastily—just before Lhynette collapsed. I have questioned it many times in my mind since then. The only reasonable theory I can come up with is that although they knew the spell could only affect one of them,

neither wished to be the one."

"Both the dragon and I went to Lhynette. I did not even know if she was alive. She looked so... frail. I knew she expended a tremendous amount of energy casting the spell. And at the time I did not know the Slayers had almost taken her as well." Qelharre paused, seemingly on the verge of more self-condemnation but thought better of it. She shook her head, whether it was to scatter the thought or due to the pain of recollection was unknown. "Anyway, FireQueen performed some difficult healings on her and her condition seemed somewhat improved. Then we rested a short while for Lhynette to stabilize. The dragon was invaluable. She had flown us to the wizard, worked healings on him from the time we landed, entered Lhynette's mind, cleared it and then worked healings on Lhynette. While Lhynette rested, I gathered our belongings and prepared for the return flight. After a time, we left."

The Chamber fell silent. Each of the witches seemed lost in their own reflections. Moments passed and then Khyrhyelle asked, "Does anyone have anything to add?"

Qelharre shook her head. Lhynette remained with her head slightly bowed. None of the others asked any questions.

The High Witch was about to speak when she saw Lhynette raise her head. She met the white robe's eyes. There was pain there. There was also betrayal. Lhynette spoke. Her voice was strong, steady. "They knew who we were."

"What?" The High Witch gave her a look of disbelief.

Lhynette's eyes were still fixed on Khyrhyelle. "I said,

they knew who we were."

"How can you be sure?" Eyrmysse asked. "Did they say something?"

Lhynette looked at each one of the witches. "When they saw us, they were not in the least surprised."

"So?" Eyrmysse questioned.

Lhynette turned on Eyrmysse. "So? You would not be the least bit surprised to see a dragon, two witches and a unicorn? Sightings of dragons and unicorns are not exactly common occurrences. And there was a barrier. And how did they know to go after me?"

Eyrmysse remained calm. "They must have known somebody would attempt the barrier again. Remember when we encountered it the first time. Then and there they knew someone was or would be coming. As for FireQueen and Ullyna, they probably acquired the information when they took Albera. And they attacked you because you threw the vial."

Lhynette countered weakly. "They pointed first."

"I know you have suffered much," said Dhynelle, "but I do not think we should make this any more sinister than it is. I agree with Eyrmysse. There is a logical explanation to everything that happened."

"So the black ones stick together, do they?" Lhynette was getting angry.

Arhyvhynne reached over and held Lhynette's hand. "I agree with them Lhynette and I wear the white as do you. You must not let this affect you so."

Lhynette pushed Arhyvhynne's hand away. "You are her sister." Arhyvhynne turned glassy-eyed and slowly turned

her head away. That seemed to bring Lhynette back to herself. She was not a person to be harsh with anyone, especially Arhyvhyne who was so sensitive. "I am sorry," she said to Arhyvhyne. Then she turned to the others. "Maybe all of you are right. Maybe I just need to get some rest and reconsider everything that has happened."

The High Witch knew that Lhynette said that purely for Arhyvhyne's benefit. Lhynette had not changed her mind in the least. And neither had Khyrhyelle. The words from the Tarot reading came back to haunt her. *A dark woman who should be feared and not trusted. Her intentions are evil. You are being deceived by one close to you. She is one of your enemies, the rest being hidden. She will cause terror and you danger. You are unaware of the disloyalty and falsehood that surround you. A deception could cause your death.*

A knock at the door interrupted Khyrhyelle's thoughts. Ghemella was ushered in and went straight to the High Witch. The Guardian had been assigned to Uriel's room. "Forgive me for the intrusion, High One." Khyrhyelle nodded. "The healer attending the wizard sent me to inform you that she believes the wizard will soon regain consciousness."

"Thank you." She addressed the Council. "I wish to go alone."

"Is that wise—considering what the wizard is capable of?" Eyrmysse thinly disguised her interest in accompanying her mother.

Khyrhyelle gave her an exasperated look, then stood to leave.

Ghemella followed the High Witch out of the Chamber. The Guardian made sure they were alone in the hallway when she spoke to Khyrhyelle. "I would like to say I am sorry about the incident with Albera. I did not mean to be overly gruff with her. I was just doing my job. I will apologize when I next see her."

"Pray you never do. She was taken by SoulSlayers." Khyrhyelle left the stricken Guardian in the hallway as she hurried to the wizard's room.

CHAPTER VI

The deep, guttural voice filled the darkness. It mocked him and laughed hideously. "You dare to come here? You dare to challenge our might? Our supreme power? You are pitiful. You are nothing. We will use you for our own ends and then we will burn you for eternity, licking your Soul with our tongues of flame." The darkness grew blacker. The visage of a goat-man emerged from the darkness. "They come for you." The goat-man laughed and then was supplanted by two skeletal mounts carrying black-armored skeletons. The flames that were their eyes never left his. Fear gripped his Soul in a vice. He wanted to cry out but he could not even do that. Though time did not pass in this darkness, he could sense the ghastly skeletons approaching, drawing closer. He could smell the stench of the rotted flesh hanging from their bones. They were almost upon him now, the claws that were their hands reaching out to take him. Suddenly, they retreated into the darkness, leaving Uriel all alone.



Uriel came to with a start. The Dark Ones had almost captured him again! But when he opened his eyes, it was not to their darkness, but to a beautiful vision. For above him stood an angel.

She was a vision unlike any other. Her long hair was the

color of silver if it could be woven into silk. She had the most lovely face and exquisite features. She exuded radiance. She was ageless and eternity was mirrored in her grey eyes.

"I've died again." His voice sounded strange to his ears. Not only was the throat harsh and sore but the words themselves were not in English. Uriel was very confused. "It's different this time. Why are you here? Where is the HIERARCHY? Did they send you? Have I failed?"

"Died again?" A touch of a smile, compassion deep in the grey eyes. "No, you are very much alive. As for your other questions... all I can tell you is that you are in the Towers of the Moons. I am Khyrhyelle, High Witch of the Moons."

Witch? screamed Uriel's mind. *Oh God no. Witch? No, this can't be. Why is this happening? Why is this happening to me?* Tears welled up in his eyes. Fear tightened around his heart. "No," he murmured weakly. "No. Stop. This has got to stop. Not again. Please, no. Not me. Someone else, not me." His voice trailed off as the darkness at the edges of his mind began to close.



Uriel barely opened his eyes. He immediately noticed it was dark, though something gave off a scant amount of light. He closed his eyes. It was warm. Or was it a lack of cold? He couldn't tell. No wind, either. *I must be inside*, he thought. Her words came back to him, ". . . you are in the Towers of the Moons. I am Khyrhyelle, High Witch..." Uriel

shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He attempted to move, groaned. He was stiff, sore. He opened his eyes again and surveyed the area. Uriel was in a small, dark stone room. The sparse light issued from four small candles, each burning in a separate corner of the room. He rolled onto his side. *Jeez, am I sore!* As Uriel looked to the walls, he noticed symbols were painted on them. No, not on the walls—the symbols seem to hang in the air! He shook his head again, trying to dispel the nasty tricks his eyes were playing on him. As he tried to focus his eyes, Uriel noticed something, someone in the doorway.

"So, the great wizard awakes," Ghemella said derisively.

Wizard? "I'm not—" Uriel cut himself short. *Witches and wizards, huh? Maybe it's better if they think I'm a wizard. Fine, if they want to play Dungeons and Dragons, I'll play Dungeons and Dragons. But I've got to be careful. I can't tell anybody anything.* He was forcing himself to be more rational. Uriel sat up with some difficulty. He looked over Ghemella. Her appearance did not do much to calm his nerves. The dark little witch leaned against a drawn sword. She held a wickedly curved dagger loosely in her right hand and had more at her belt along with a number of pouches. The smirk on the Guardian's face begged him to try something. He did not comply.

As Uriel followed her black robe to the floor, he saw his staff lying in front of the doorway. He slowly crawled over to get it. As he reached out for it, he was severely jarred by what felt like a bolt of lightning. Uriel was thrown against the far wall, sprawled on his back.

Ghemella laughed at him. "That is right, wizard. You are warded." She turned serious as she pointed her dagger at him. "Do not try to gain your staff or the exit again. Both lay beyond the barrier and the wards limit your magic. You risk it at your own peril."

Uriel's thoughts were lost in trying to understand the strange phenomenon of speaking and understanding this alien language. Ghemella meanwhile, had turned to leave, then stopped. She regarded Uriel as he tried to pick himself up. "My friend died because of you." It was an accusation, not a statement. "You had better be worth it."

He had just gained his feet when the witch's statement threatened to return him to the stone floor. It hit him almost as hard as the barrier. *Died? Someone has already died because of me?* He struggled with the concept. *Worth it?* "I doubt it," Uriel sadly mumbled.

Ghemella made a hand motion and said a Word and, before Uriel could react, the Guardian moved through the barrier, up to him and slapped him with her right hand, the dagger drawing blood across his cheek. "So, you bleed like the rest of us. Next time you will lose more than a little blood." Resetting the barrier, the witch turned to leave the dungeon.

Uriel wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and stared at his blood. *Don't worry*, the thought directed to the Guardian's back, *there won't be a next time*.

Uriel did not try the barrier, nor was he brave enough to inspect the ethereal floating symbols. Instead, he tried to piece together the fragments of his new existence. He was as unsure about his present situation with these witches as he

was about the Dark Ones. He could not determine if they were aligned together or if they stood against each other. Maybe neither one was aware of the other. Perhaps, there was no relationship between them at all. He poured over the events that had transpired since he arrived at this new world. Nothing seemed to interrelate. He felt haunted and hunted by the Dark Ones. He felt his heart ache at the demise of the little unicorn. He remembered doing something or saying something and then pain and darkness. In that unconscious darkness, he recalled the terror of the skeletons. And upon his awakening, there was the beautiful "angel," the High Witch.

Uriel was in the middle of his deliberations when Ghemella returned, accompanied by four other Guardians. Uriel eyed them suspiciously. Only one looked "normal." Another had the pointed features of an elf (though her complexion looked dark), the other two were similar to Ghemella. *Great*, he thought. *Not only are there the Dark Ones and witches, but this one and whatever the hell else her friends are.* He noticed they all looked relatively young and that the normal one wore a white robe where as the others wore black. *Maybe she's the leader... or an apprentice.* It also occurred to him they were all female.

Ghemella's voice brought him from his thoughts. "You must be made presentable before you are brought before the High Witch and her Council. A bath awaits you in the adjoining cell. We will escort you." Ghemella suspended the barrier with a sign and a Word, unsheathed her sword and raised the point to Uriel's heart. She gestured to the other Guardians with her head and they quickly fastened manacles

on him. One was placed around each ankle. Another bound both hands behind his back. A final shackle was placed around his neck. Then he was blindfolded.

The witches led Uriel to the right, a short way down a narrow corridor and into another small stone room. Ghemella repeated the sign and spoke the same Word, though she used a different tone. The Guardians removed the manacles, then the blindfold.

As Uriel looked around, he decided the room was identical to the previous one, including the weird floating symbols. The only difference being the bath adjacent to the back wall.

Ghemella instructed Uriel to undress. Although embarrassed, he did so, turning his back to the Guardians. Uriel undressed slowly. Though he had worked most of the soreness from his body, some muscles still ached. He was shocked when he removed his undergarments. Upon his chest, over his heart, he had the brand of an encircled five-pointed upright star. He touched it. The brand was made of gold.

"Turn around," Ghemella commanded him.

Uriel wanted to hide his nakedness but felt compelled to conceal the brand. He folded his arms across his chest, then turned.

Ghemella gestured to the elf. "Make sure our wizard is not hiding anything." The trace of a smile pulled at her lips. The two dwarf witches similar to Ghemella protested. The one in the white robe made a sound of disgust and turned away.

The elf witch proceeded to explore Uriel's body, then

allowed her hands to fondle him. He felt his face flush, his blood beginning to rise. He did not move, did not lower his arms from his chest. Instead, he stared straight ahead at the leering face of Ghemella. As they stared at each other, Uriel could see the room begin to shimmer and her face begin to change.

Ghemella abruptly turned away. "Enough," she said. The elf witch reluctantly left Uriel with a lingering touch. "There will be enough time for that, Qenthyeffe, at the MidSummer celebration." One of the others approached Uriel with soap, a brush and what appeared to be a razor. He took them with his left hand, keeping the right hand over his chest. He gingerly stepped into the tub and laid down so that the water reached his neck. Uriel closed his eyes and let out a low sigh as the heat of the water washed over him. The one who gave him the soap attached a mirror to the side of the tub for him.

Uriel looked at himself in the mirror. He was shocked. It was the first time he had seen himself since his death. He had known his hair was longer, but now it reached his shoulders and the brown was streaked with grey. His hawk-like features were sharper and combined with his hair to give him a wizened appearance. He had a few days growth of beard and his moustache needed trimming. But his eyes were what changed the most. There was a depth to his eyes that did not exist before. They held knowledge, understanding. As he looked at the mirror, his eyes seemed to stare back at him. His surroundings faded to darkness as his face began to change. He was staring into the eyes of Peter before he died, before the sickness appeared. He was mesmerized for a

moment and then closed his eyes. When he opened them, the image was gone. He stared at those eyes, his eyes, again and the image quickly began to form. He jerked his head away. By staring into his eyes, actually anybody's eyes—it also happened with the Guardian—he was able to see. . . What? What was he seeing? What sort of transformation was taking place? Or was it all his imagination? Those thoughts occupied his mind as he quickly bathed and dressed, being careful to not look at the mirror, even when he shaved.



It was purely psychological warfare, as least as far as Uriel was concerned. The Guardians had led him from the dungeons chained and blindfolded. They allowed him to rest after a long trek involving inclines and many, many stairs. Only when he was seated for what seemed like an hour (but in actuality only ten minutes), were his bonds finally removed.

It took Uriel's eyes a moment to adjust. He was seated on a bench at the end of a large wooden table in a circular, stone room and was surrounded by the ethereal floating symbols, the wards. At the opposite end of the table, seven robed and hooded individuals were observing him. Their deep cowls did not allow him to view any of their faces. Their only distinguishing feature was the color of their robes. Three of them wore white, three wore black and one, the one in the center, wore grey. He assumed them to be the Council. Uriel regarded each one, but could only determine the sex of one of them, one of the three in black. His eye

lingered on her, her breasts easily discernable under the tight fitting garment. None of them moved and all of them somehow exuded an aura of seriousness and superiority. *If they're trying to intimidate me*, he thought, *it's working*.

The one in grey spoke to him. "When you regained consciousness previously you seemed confused and quite distraught. I am not sure if you remember where you are or who I am."

Though he recognized her melodic voice, Uriel gave his shoulders a slight shrug. *Don't let them know you know anything*, he told himself.

"You are at the Towers of the Moons, located in far north central Khaballe. I am Khyrhyelle, High Witch of the Moons. Those seated before you are the Council. You are?" she inquired.

There was a long pause as Uriel tried to uncover any reason for withholding his name. He came up empty. *Ok, you've got to be cool now*. "Uriel, Peter Uriel," he said, voice cracking like an adolescent. *Damn, so much for being cool*.

After exchanging glances with several of the witches, Khyrhyelle spoke to him. "Uriel, I sincerely apologize for the condition of your accommodations as well as for the warding, but the facts that you are unknown to us, have demonstrated strong magical abilities and are aware, I am sure, of the prophecies, necessitate it."

Uriel nodded. *Yeah, right*.

The High Witch continued. "Good, I am glad you understand. We would like to question you if we may."

Again a slight nod. *Like I could politely decline*, Uriel thought wryly.

"We," Khyrhyelle started, "that is, one of our Scouts, found you just north of the Thaums. Could you please inform us as to where you came from, how you arrived here and what you had planned to do?"

The melodic sound of Khyrhyelle's voice mesmerized Uriel. He suddenly wanted to trust this woman, to tell her everything. Then he felt a slight pressure exerted on his mind. *No*, he screamed mentally. He closed his eyes. *It's a spell, witches can do that*, he told himself. He tried to compose himself. *Say something, quick*. Uriel opened his eyes and responded "I don't know."

"You do not know?" the High Witch asked incredulously.

He looked away from Khyrhyelle only to be drawn to the well-rounded breasts of the black robed witch. Uriel, whether he wanted to admit it or not, was still suffering from the effects of the sensual encounter with the elf Guardian. Again he closed his eyes, felt the pressure. "I, uh... don't remember."

The High Witch, who had been leaning forward, slowly sat straight back. Her voice lost the melody that had enthralled Uriel. She was not entirely happy with the level of Uriel's cooperation. "Since it seems you have an affinity for Eyrmysse, I will allow her to continue." She looked to her daughter. "Will you please help refresh Uriel's memory from the time he appeared to when we received the report?" she said with a hint of sarcasm.

Eyrmysse slowly lowered her cowl and flipped her long black curls back with both hands. Her smile was in place as she fixed her violet eyes on Uriel. He listened as she

recounted the events surrounding his appearance, his wanderings as marked by Albera (*Damn, I knew I was being followed!*) and the unicorn.

Uriel became melancholy at the mention of the unicorn. "It was so beautiful," he said softly. "I tried to save it," he added.

"Tried? Tried? Ullyna lives!" Eyrmysse saw that the name did not register with Uriel. "The unicorn *lives!*"

Uriel was stupefied. "What?"

Khyrhyelle repeated for him, "Ullyna, the unicorn you found in the thicket, is alive." She knew by Uriel's look that he either did not or could not believe her. She instructed Ghemella to bring the unicorn. Ghemella in turn delegated it to Qenthyeffe.

Meanwhile, Uriel wore a look of confusion. "I don't understand. How..." He left the thought hanging.

Eyrmysse did not. "How is only one of the questions we have for you." She sat forward, leaning on the great table, the violet eyes betraying a hunger. "Where did you come from? How did you get here? Who were you screaming to? Who is Lindany? What significance does your staff have? And how in the name of the Goddess were you able to perform the Ritual of Renascence without a replacement or substituting yourself?"

Uriel, not knowing what to say, said nothing and the ensuing silence was louder than any noise could have been. Uriel grew more uncomfortable with each slowly passing second. Unable to bear the witches stares, he lowered his head and bore holes into the table with his eyes. It seemed an eternity before Uriel heard the door open and raised his

head to see Qenthyeffe enter with the unicorn.

Ullyna, upon seeing Uriel, immediately bolted to him. The unicorn, her golden horn being magical, pierced the barrier and allowed her through, unaffected by the wards. Uriel threw his arms around the animal, placed his head upon the unicorn's neck, fighting back tears through tightly clenched eyes. All the while he stroked Ullyna's silky, silver mane.

Khyrhyelle, like the rest of her Council, was very touched by the reunion of savior and saved. But there was still the matter at hand. "I appreciate your happiness and wish to offer our sincere gratitude for... bringing Ullyna back, but you have not answered any of Eyrmysse's questions." The High Witch motioned Ghemella to return the unicorn to its stable. Ghemella naturally passed it on to Qenthyeffe.

Uriel raised his head and wiped his eyes with shaking hands. As the elf Guardian tried to lead Ullyna away, the unicorn reared and snorted. Breaking away, it nestled back up to Uriel.

"Tell her it is all right, Uriel," the High Witch said. "Tell her to leave and that you will see her again a little later."

Uriel wondered how much truth the statement held. *Probably not much.* He gazed momentarily into the gleaming gold and silver eyes of the unicorn and then hugged her once more. "You can go now," he told her. "It's alright. Maybe later we'll get together—maybe we'll go riding or something. Okay?" Ullyna seemed to consider for a minute and then reluctantly allowed herself to be led away by Qenthyeffe.

Once again the Chamber fell into silence. The witches and Uriel were locked in a stalemate. Khyrhyelle offered resignation. "Is there nothing you will tell us?"

Uriel shook his head and softly answered "I... I don't remember."

"Very well." The High Witch frowned. "You refuse to confide in us and therefore leave me very little choice. Though you will be brought to a more suitable room, the wards and barriers must remain until you decide to dispel our doubts concerning you. Believe me when I say that they are more for our protection than your inconvenience. I suggest you use the solitude to carefully reconsider your attitude. A Guardian will be posted outside your door and will be responsible for fulfilling any needs you may have. If there is nothing else you may leave."

Uriel stood to leave and was accosted by the remaining Guardians. "There is something Your Highness, or however you're addressed."

The High Witch was wary. "Khyrhyelle will be just fine. What is it?"

Uriel shored up his courage. "If you are sincere, about my treatment I mean, I would really appreciate it if your so called Guardians would refrain from... let us say, harassing me."

Khyrhyelle gazed at the young witches in turn, then back to Uriel. "Our Guardians are chosen for their certain... temperament. Some have not yet been initiated into the Inner Circle of our sisterhood and at times do not fully adhere to our codes." Here she turned to the Guardians. "If they did, it would demonstrate that they are nearing that level." Uriel

was unable to disguise his facial expression at her words and the High Witch picked up on it immediately. Her grey eyes studied him, then a shadow of her smile appeared. "You must also take into consideration the Path they have chosen. Most of our Guardians are black robes and they live according to a different set of ethics and morals than you may be accustomed to—not *wrong* mind you, just *different*. Nonetheless, barring any provocation, I assure you there will be no more... incidents."

Uriel again felt a strong urge to trust the High Witch. Considering the circumstances, she was being very good about things. But he refused to let down his guard. Uriel only allowed himself to say "Thank you." The Guardians then bound and blindfolded him, removed the wards and led him to his new room.



After Uriel departed, the witches debated Khyrhylle's decision to be lenient. "He has shown us no reason to act otherwise," the High Witch said.

Dhynelle, as usual, was the most disturbed. "He has also *not* shown nor told us anything. He hides something."

"He hides a great many things," added Arhyvhyne, "though maybe for good reason."

Dhynelle responded, "Reason or no, anyone with his power should be guarded more closely."

"Do you not mean any *man*?" Wyxotte spitefully asked.

Dhynelle ignored Wyxotte's comment. She instead was regarding Eyrmyse who seemed deep in thought.

"Eyrmysse?"

She did not respond immediately. Her expression was serious and for once the smile was absent from her lips. "The renascency bothers me." Khyrhyelle sighed impatiently. "Mother, hear me out. I have devoted a great amount of time studying the subject and though not expert, I believe I have acquired considerable knowledge." Eyrmysse began playing with a long, dark curl. "As you probably know, the Ritual of Renascence is very dangerous—perhaps one of the most complex rituals there is. The ritual attempts to resurrect one who has been dead for only a short time. Time is of the essence. If too much time has elapsed, the victim's Soul leaves the body and any attempt made thereafter imperils the Soul of the one performing the ritual. For all practical purposes, there are only two ways to perform the ritual. One is to substitute yourself for the one you bring back... trading places in effect. The other is to use another person as the substitute for the one brought back. With either method, a person must die in order to bring back the deceased."

Arhyvhyne was puzzled. "But Uriel is alive."

"Exactly," replied Eyrmysse. "There was only one person, to my knowledge, who ever successfully performed the Ritual of Renascence the way Uriel did. And that, my sisters, was Thaum."

That brought loud murmurs from the witches. Several made signs of warding. Arhyvhyne spoke above the others. "Are you implying..."

The smile returned as Eyrmysse arched her eyebrows.

Dhynelle countered the unspoken implication.

"Certainly, we know enough of that one from the histories to know he would not waste himself bringing back a unicorn."

"Unless he was trying to endear himself to us." Eyrmysse looked at her mother. "All I am saying is consider the possibility. He has appeared under the most unusual circumstances, has displayed enormous power and refuses to divulge anything to us."

"What about the Slayers?" asked Lhynette.

Qelharre was not thrilled to have that subject resurrected. "What about them?"

Lhynette rolled her hair around one finger. It was an attempt at mimicking Eyrmysse, but a poor one. "If Uriel is actually Thaum or a reincarnation of him, do you really think the Slayers would have come after him?"

Eyrmysse shook her head and laughed, at both the imitation and the question. "Did you stop to consider that the Slayers were not coming *after* him but *for* him?"

The Council fell quiet. Though not pleased with it, they had to admit to themselves that Eyrmysse had some valid points. After a while, Wyxotte spoke up. "Suppose we let Arhyvhynne perform a mind scan?"

Arhyvhynne began to respond but was immediately cut off by Khyrhelle. "No. He is very powerful and that alone, regardless of which Path he treads, makes him dangerous. It could turn out very badly for Arhy."

"You admit then that you have been too lax with him?" Dhynelle asked.

The High Witch concealed her displeasure. "There is no need to worry. He is, after all, within a barrier and is warded."

Although Khyrhelle's answer offered her little comfort, Dhynelle did not think it wise to pursue it. "How shall we proceed?"

The High Witch wasted little time in responding. "We will give him the rest of this evening and most of tomorrow to contemplate what has transpired today. If Uriel has not asked to speak with us by the rising of both moons on the morrow, I will go speak to him, alone."



Uriel gazed out of the slit that was his window, recalling a previous life in another room, staring out another window. That, however, was not something he wished to dwell on, so he turned his attention back to the immediate situation.

Uriel was much more comfortable in his new room. Although it was only slightly larger than his room in the dungeon, the room had a bed, wall hangings and a couple of books (which he was shocked he could read). He was almost ungrateful for it, though. He thought it might make him complacent and take the edge off his thinking. Only the floating symbols of the wards reminded him his status was not quite that of an expected and welcomed guest.

He had spent an uneventful night contemplating his supposed resurrection of the unicorn. It scared him just to think about it. He wanted to believe that he did not do what the witches had said. But inside, he knew it to be true. It very closely paralleled his willing the dead tree of the left hand Path to bear a leaf. He fell asleep certain that he had done it and could do it again, but not knowing how.



The next day was spent considering his options. He alternately argued with himself over divulging nothing, parts or all of his knowledge to the witches. On several occasions he almost asked the Guardian outside his door to summon the High Witch, but lost his courage or regained his senses (depending on his mood) before the fact. About the only conclusion he could come to was that his time was limited. It would not be long before the witches demanded answers to their questions. And if he did not willingly offer, they would find some unpleasant way to extract the knowledge from him.

Those were the thoughts he turned over in his mind as he peered out at the two moons in the darkening sky. A knock on the door brought his attention back into the room. The door opened and Khyrhyelle poked her head through. "May I come in?" she asked.

"Sure," Uriel responded, not quite sure of why she even bothered to ask. He gave her an easy smile, but his pulse quickened and his mind raced. His emotions were mixed over her beauty and her reason for coming to see him. Before he could stop himself he said, "I almost asked to see you a couple times today."

The High Witch had walked in, closed the door and was standing before him. "Really?"

Uriel went to put his hands in his pockets, couldn't find them in the robe and so, folded them behind his back. "It was, uh, getting a little lonely." *Why do I do these things to myself?* he asked himself in vain.

"Oh." Khyrhyelle walked past him to the window and looked out it. She watched the glow of the moons caress the snow on the trees. "A beautiful night," she said softly. She turned abruptly, "Has your memory improved any?"

The move caught Uriel off guard. *Damn, but she gets right to the point.* "A little. Mostly incoherent bits and pieces." Uriel hoped it would satisfy her.

"Would you like to share them with me?" She was once again in front of him, hands folded at her waist.

His heart kept encouraging him to tell her, but his mind refused. He couldn't look at her when he answered. "Not yet. Not until I can remember everything, until I can understand what's going on."

Khyrhyelle gently took him by the arm and turned him to face her. "Is it not closer to the truth to say 'Until I trust you?'"

The heat from her touch blazed straight to his heart. Uriel lost himself in her eyes and in the melody of her words. He desperately wanted her to hold him then, to let her comfort him, to tell her everything. But still he fought against it. "It's not a matter of trust."

Without a word, Khyrhyelle walked over to his bed, sat down and patted the spot next to her. Like an obedient pup he sat down next to her, though not as close as he might have liked.

"Uriel, may I be honest with you?" Khyrhyelle did not wait for the obligatory answer. "The longer you doubt us, the more difficult it will be for you to convince us to trust you. In fact, it is already becoming increasingly difficult for me to justify your treatment before the Council."

"What do you mean?" Uriel asked.

"They are not exactly pleased about your present conditions." The High Witch looked him straight in the eye and said, "They would much prefer you locked in a room in the dungeon, chained and unconscious. Along with the wards and barrier, of course."

"But why? I haven't done anything," Uriel said with outstretched arms.

"True, you may not have done anything—yet. But there are many unanswered questions Uriel. Many unanswered questions. You have forced us to conjecture. And the conclusions that have been drawn are not at all flattering."

"Such as?"

"Your unusual appearance without any supposed recollection of anything hides your origin. You are a wizard, anathema itself, and an *unknown* wizard at that. We have sanctioned only ten wizards, excluding Athar, due to the prophecy and you are not one of the ten. And not only are you an unknown wizard but a very *powerful*, unknown wizard. There has only been one other who was capable of performing the Ritual of Renascence as you did on Ullyna. You know the prophecies, do the circumstances not fit that which was foretold of the return of the Dark One?"

Uriel stood up. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Khyrhyelle looked at him as if for the first time. "You do not, do you?"

Uriel looked away, lowered his head. "No," he admitted.

They were both quiet for a while before Khyrhyelle shifted the subject. "Could you please tell me what happened

when you performed the ritual and what you remember afterward?" Her voice was soft, gentle.

Uriel exhaled a deep breath. "I honestly don't remember much. I was upset about the uni—about Ullyna. I was beginning to lose it. Then all of a sudden something came over me. I knew what I was doing and yet, I didn't know. Do you know what I mean? Does that make any sense?" Khyrhyelle nodded and he continued. "I touched Ullyna with my staff, said some weird words and then this pressure built up inside of me, inside my head. It got unbearable and then it became even worse. Then everything went dark." Uriel's voice grew quiet. He was talking to himself now, as much as he was to Khyrhyelle. His eyes grew distant. "I was in the darkness a long time, or at least it seemed like a long time. They were there. Waiting for me. And the goat-man. And he sent those, those things after me." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Then all of a sudden they disappeared and it was dark again for a while." He turned around then and looked deeply into Khyrhyelle's eyes. "Then I awoke and saw you."

Khyrhyelle grew uncomfortable under Uriel's steady gaze. She was beginning to say something when a sudden, tremendous pain shot through her. She grabbed her chest with one hand and supported herself with the other.

Uriel moved to help her. "Are you all right?"

Khyrhyelle managed a nod as a wave of nausea washed over her and left her feeling light-headed. It was a few moments before she caught her breath.

Uriel had sat down beside her. "What happened?"

"I am not sure," the High Witch responded with a shaky voice.

"Maybe you should get a healer," Uriel said.

"No, it is not me."

"Then what is it?"

Khyrhyelle wore a worried look on her face. "Something is wrong. Something has happened... but I do not know what." She did not mean to answer aloud and quickly changed the subject. "You mentioned people waiting for you, a goat-man, things he sent, in the darkness? Who were they? Do you remember?"

Uriel easily slid back into his memories against his wishes. "They were hideous." He closed his eyes. "They were skeletons and—"

"Had rotting flesh hanging from them. Their eyes were flames and glowed a wicked red. The horses they rode were of the same nature." She looked at Uriel. "Am I not right?"

Uriel was shocked. "How do you know?"

The High Witch stood up slowly and took a few steps to the window and looked out. She was having difficulty shaking her uneasy feeling. She became quiet for a time, in part to settle herself but also to decide whether she should relate the experiences of that terrible night. Making up her mind, she turned around and leaned against the wall. "When we received the report about you from our Scout, Albera, we immediately tried to teleport you here. Our efforts proved futile as someone had constructed a barrier around your vicinity. I was forced to send a party of four to bring you here physically. When they arrived at your location, they set about preparing you for the return. While they used healings to sustain what was left of your diminishing energy, they encountered the beings you spoke of. They are known as

SoulSlayers. They consume the Souls of their victims, using the energies to strengthen themselves and further their evil. They almost took Lhynette, one of the Council. She was barely able to dispel them, but not before they took Albera. Albera had been the first to encounter them and warned the others with her dying breath. She was a good Scout, probably our most experienced, if not our best. She was always very professional. We trusted her with a very difficult territory and she never failed us even until the end."

"I... I don't know what to say," Uriel stammered. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Khyrhyelle's eyes flashed. "Sorry? No, Uriel, I do not believe you feel sorrow. Regret perhaps, but not sorrow. We have risked much, even lost a most precious life, to safeguard you, one who we know nothing about. Where would you be if it were not for us? Dying in the snow of the cold grip of winter, or much worse, your Soul would be in the icy grasp of the Slayers. Yet, you disclose nothing, wrapping yourself in the veils of concealment. Were I—"

A sudden rap on the door interrupted the High Witch. Without waiting for acknowledgement, the door opened and a young girl, a Guardian, wearing black rushed in. She looked at Khyrhyelle through tear-stained eyes.

Khyrhyelle barely contained her anger. "Why have you—"

"Forgive me High One," the girl managed through sobs, "but it is Arhyvhyne."

The color drained from Khyrhyelle's face. "What is it? What has happened to Arhy?"

"She... is... dead!"



The members of the Council were already in the laboratory when Khyrhyelle arrived. She quickly moved to where Arhyvhynne lay sprawled on the floor. She knelt next to her daughter and searched her still warm body for any sign of life. There was none. Khyrhyelle became very still. When next she moved, it was to smooth Arhyvhynne's long hair and kiss her with her tears.

The High Witch stood up, disguised her emotions, somehow managed dignity. She would not let the grief control her, at least not in public. "What happened?" she asked very softly.

Qelharre brought a young black robe to the front of the gathering. "This one was with Arhyvhynne. Her name is Jukhuule. Tell Khyrhyelle how this happened."

The girl was obviously still shaken and feared for Khyrhyelle's reaction. "High One I am sorry but it was not my fault. Honest. Please do not blame me. She made me help her."

"Do not worry, no one is blaming you," Eyrmysse said. "Having studied under me, I of course recommended her to Arhyvhynne when she asked for a black robe she could trust," she told the others.

"You mean you knew about this?" Khyrhyelle asked incredulously.

"No, she just asked me for a black robe. I had no idea what this was about." Eyrmysse turned back to Jukhuule. "Calm down and start at the beginning."

"Arhyvhyne sought me out this morning. She said she needed a black robe to help her with an experimental ritual. Being of the Council I naturally did not question her. She gave me a list of things to bring at the appointed time, which would be when the moons rose. She was here waiting for me when I arrived. Amidst the preparations she told me she was going to attempt the Ritual of Renascence."

Khyrhyelle almost fainted at that and Eyrmysse supported her for a moment. When Qelharre was sure Khyrhyelle was ready she bid Jukhuule to continue.

"Arhyvhyne assured me it was only an experiment, that she was not actually going to go through with it. But somewhere in the ritual she lost control—or something took control of her. She seemed to fight it for a long time and then she just collapsed."

Eyrmysse was thinking out loud. "What would possess her to attempt a renas—Mother! The wizard! Get the wizard!"

Khyrhyelle returned a blank stare to Eyrmysse before it sank in. "Is there still time?" she asked excitedly.

"Yes," her daughter responded, "but not much. We must hurry."

Khyrhyelle turned to a Guardian. "Bring Uriel here. And his staff. Quickly! *Quickly!*"



Uriel stood in front of Khyrhyelle, staff in hand. He was very scared. Something was happening that he felt was beyond his control, but he did not know what. It never occurred to him why she might summon him.

"I do not wish to waste any time. My daughter is dead. You have the power to bring her back. Do so."

Uriel's mind reeled with what she asked. *Bring her back?* Khyrhyelle seemed to tower over him, bending him to her will. He was speechless. He gestured with an open hand to show his lack of understanding.

Khyrhyelle pressed him. "I will give to you anything you desire. I will allow you to leave, treasure, anything. Just do what I ask."

"Khyrhyelle..." he faltered.

The High Witch pleaded with him. "We risked our lives for you! Albera died for you! We *saved* you! Please, you must. *You must!*"

Tears came to Uriel's eyes. "Don't you understand?" He took Khyrhyelle's hands in his and felt her immense hopes, pain and fears settle on his shoulders, shoulders surely too small to hold them. He cried openly. "I don't want anything from you. All I want is to bring her back to you. God knows I would do anything to bring her back. But I don't know how."

At those words, Dhynelle came between them and slapped him with all her might. As the change came over Uriel, he barely noticed that she made a sign with her hand, had said something he did not understand. Uriel only pushed her aside, paying her no heed. Instead he brought his eyes to meet Khyrhyelle's and something passed between them. It was everything and nothing.

Uriel walked a circle around Arhyvhyne with his staff, drew some symbols in the air, and then knelt down beside her. He gently placed his hand on her cheek and whispered,

"I am coming." He touched her with his staff and the Words spilled from his mouth. The witches gasped at the sound of those Words and looked away but Uriel did not hear nor see them for he was already far away and surrounded by the pain of extreme concentration. Somewhere within himself, his mind tried to alter his actions, arguing that he was still too weak, that the way was too difficult, that this had nearly killed him last time. But he listened only to his heart.

As before, the tension mounted, but much more rapidly this time as Uriel seized the energies from all those around him. As before, the temperature dropped, but more drastically. As before, the air cracked loudly and a white explosion erupted from Uriel, bringing several of the witches to their knees. And as before, he welcomed the enveloping darkness, only to become aware that *they* were waiting for him.

CHAPTER VII

A lone person stood upon the battlement, folded arms resting upon a crenel, chin resting upon the arms. The light blanket of snow that lay upon the quiet capital glistened with the dying rays of the late afternoon suns. The sparkles of light were as beautiful as the glare was bright.

The individual was lost among the shimmers for a while, remembering earlier, happier times, remembering previous visits here. The battlements were a favorite place to visit. Many thought it was ego that drove the frequent visits. In truth, there was that aspect. But there were other things as well, most of which ranked higher on the list. A visit to the battlements was often times a retreat, often times an escape, a place to brood or rejoice, a place to philosophize or clear one's mind. Today, however, was a day of brooding and escape as the melancholy of past versus present rose like bile. The mind tried to fight against it: *That has never been my way—rise above it!* Aided by a strong gale which came off the river, the short-lived depression was seemingly blown away. The figure not only welcomed it, but reveled in it, lowering the hood and letting shoulder-length dark blonde hair blow in the crisp wind.

"Rhenycyn! You will catch your death out here."

Surprised, Rhenycyn turned quickly. Shaking his head and smiling, he offered his sister a late retort. "That would leave you the sole heir, would it not dear Elly?"

Princess Ellycyn ignored his comment. "I have been

looking all over for you—I should have known you would be up here. Do you not know they are waiting for you?"

"Let them wait. I am but a formality—as are you," the Prince snapped. He reached out to touch her cheek then. "I am sorry Ellycyn. I felt the need to be alone for awhile. It is just that... it is—"

"It is Athar, as usual," she finished for him. Athar was the wizard Advisor to the King. "That is all it ever is with you. Can you not leave it alone?"

"Can *you* not see that with each passing day the situation worsens? You know how they are." He paused, then added, "And no, I cannot, nor do I wish to leave it alone."

Rhenycyn turned around and leaned back on the crenel again, his hazel eyes focused on Bhel'Ehzz. From his position atop the castle he could see most of the eastern part of the city and beyond the walls of the city to the Sarhag Fields. The Prince followed the main eastern road as it cut through the Fields like a scythe from outside the walled capital to its guarded entrance into the city. There, the road split three ways. One continued straight to the castle but the other two forked around either side of the castle and across the Twisted Horn River. The roads joined again at the western edge of the capital, becoming the main western road to or from Bhel'Ehzz. He viewed the military housing, merchant shops and residential areas with mixed emotions. Rhenycyn felt pride but also an equal amount of frustration. Bhel'Ehzz was a great city—a great capital, but improvements were needed. *His* improvements.

Ellycyn moved next to her brother. She poked her head

out from beneath her hood, trying to judge if it was safe to talk. She thought it so. She put her arm around Rhenycyn and squeezed. "It is beautiful, is it not?"

The Prince returned the gesture and smiled. "Yes, it is," he said, "very beautiful." He turned to face her, took her gloved hands in his. "Walk with me to the other side, will you?"

Ellycyn thought about their father and his Advisor waiting on them. "I am becoming quite chilled up here. Can we not go inside?"

Rhenycyn lowered his head. There were very few things he would refuse his sister. "Very well."

The Princess reconsidered and changed her mind, deciding that her brother needed a little more time. "To the west Your Highness," she said laughingly. She bowed to him then and said, "Lead on."

He flashed a smile and kissed her forehead. "After you, Your Highness."

Together, they began to make their way to the opposite side of the castle. They stopped for a brief moment on the south battlements for a winter's view of the partially frozen but glistening Lake Phul. "I am beginning to understand why you venture here so often," Ellycyn said. Rhenycyn returned his sister a knowing smile and they walked on to the western side.

The castle had been built on the eastern bank of the Twisted Horn River which divided the city into eastern and western sections, the west being the larger of the two. Across the river to the west, adjacent to its bank was the Royal Commons. The Commons was a public expanse that

consisted of a garden, meadow and woodland. It stretched along most of the cities' western riverbank and was bordered on the north and south by the two main roads leading west. Numerous merchant shops were located along the two main western roads with the residential area existing between them and the titled living near the Commons. The poor and the more, let us say, questionable establishments existed along the walled western fringes of the capital and the areas to the north and south of the main roads along the Twisted Horn.

The castle itself was more of a fortification than a palace. It was fashioned from the dark grey stone that was common to Khaballe. Four purple flags depicting green dragons and grey castles rippled in the winter winds, one on each of the turrets at the corners of the castle. There were several floors consisting of living quarters and meeting areas. Below ground were the obligatory dungeons.

As Rhenycyn looked out at the great city, he could not help but think that, in spite of the wizard, he would one day be king and rule here. But it was not of the adoration or the homage he was thinking, but the responsibility instead. He had spent his whole life (twenty-nine years) preparing himself for the task. He studied diligently, mastering most of the aspects considered desirous in a ruler. Where most would be content, the Prince would delve to the very fabric of a matter in order to fully understand and appreciate the intricacies of it.

Although he strived to be truly ready to accept the charge when it came, deep inside he constantly fought with himself over his legitimacy. Though there was no question

of parentage, Rhenycyn was not the first born, there being an older brother. But his brother Thenycyn had died some years back, even before their mother had, leaving him as the sole male heir. As studious as Rhenycyn was, so was his brother as indolent. Though never spoken, the nobility was actually quite relieved at Thenycyn's death. The only one displeased at the turn of events, outside of the immediate family, was Valdhon. The elder statesman of the King's Ministry had positioned his only child, Dhonlaa, to marry Thenycyn. When the years following Thenycyn's death showed that Rhenycyn had no intention of pursuing his brother's interest, Valdhon took personal offense. Even now, though Valdhon had grown old and feeble, he still sought revenge by fighting Rhenycyn on any issue that the Prince brought before the Ministry.

The questions and fears of Rhenycyn's competence were in his mind only though he was sure that at least his father shared them. Nherycyn, his father, was a strong ruler, well-loved and respected throughout the realm. His reign had been peaceful and productive and had instilled courage and conviction in the people of Khaballe. Though such was not always the case in what had come to be known as the 'Cyn' Dynasty.

Rhenycyn's ancestors had ruled Khaballe for over five hundred years. They had for the most part been strong rulers, a few even exercising various degrees of tyranny. But in some cases it was deemed necessary not only by the crown but the aristocracy as well. Such was the case which precipitated the genesis of the dynasty. A void was created by the untimely (and somewhat mysterious) demise of the

king. Mhelynycyn, at eighteen, became the first monarch of the Cyn dynasty by seizing the throne during the ensuing power struggle, 'eliminating' several rivals along the way. At the time, Khaballe needed a forceful ruler to unite the people and Mhelynycyn was best suited for the position. Though there was no question that his methods were not condoned, they were viewed with indifference as history proved him to be an effective, successful and even highly regarded ruler.

Since Mhelynycyn's reign, there had been no struggles for succession as there had always only been one male heir. Most regarded this peculiarity as a curse directly related to the manner of Mhelynycyn's rise to power. Nevertheless, on only a few occasions has more than one male been born to a king of Khaballe. And on those occasions, only one had lived to see the throne. Without any other heirs, there was a constant fear of a coup d'etat by the more aggressive members of the King's Ministry. Enter the King's Advisor. The position was created to act as a buffer between the king and his Ministry and was always awarded to one of the ten allotted wizards. Overthrowing a king? Difficult but possible. Overthrowing a king with a wizard? Very difficult and next to impossible.

Athar had been King's Advisor to Rhenycyn's father and grandfather and quite possibly his great grandfather. Since the death of his oldest son, Nherycyn had come to rely on Athar more and more. And after his Queen passed on to the Greater Plane, Nherycyn began to delegate a portion of the political matters to him as well. Since then, it had become common knowledge that Athar managed some aspects of the kingdom. Some wondered why the King had turned to Athar

and not Rhenycyn. It was the very same question that exasperated the Prince.

Those were the thoughts the Prince contemplated as he stared out at the western section of Bhel'Ehzz. Ellycyn, sensing the shadow of the dark mood pursuing her brother, sought to avert it.

"How goes your relationship with Lady Fhyndhella?" she asked.

Rhenycyn returned from his reflections with a start. "Huh? I am sorry, I was preoccupied. Did you ask me something?"

"Fhyndhella? How are you two doing?"

"Well, I suppose."

"What sort of an answer is that?" she chided him.

"We see each other often enough."

The Princess considered her brother's response. "She is the daughter of a powerful Duke and a member of the Ministry. Her marriage to you would be shrewd, securing a vital alliance. But the real question, I suspect, is do you love her?"

"I... like her. Fhyndhella is quite beautiful and I enjoy her company but, something is missing." He thought about it, trying to find the words. "She lacks a passion, a fire within her."

Ellycyn's eyes, slightly more green than her brother's, played mischievously. "Namely, you enjoy a good fight."

"I suppose I do," the Prince replied laughingly. But then he seemed to hear the truth behind his own lighthearted response.

The Princess turned serious. "Have you been with her

yet?"

"No. Almost on a couple of occasions, but we thought better of it. Neither of us can afford scandal. When the need arises, I usually visit Jhyrenne." Jhyrenne was one of Ellycyn's attendants. Though she was of peasant stock and more than a little promiscuous, she was the favorite of both Prince and Princess, for different reasons. After a few fond, reminiscent thoughts, Rhenycyn returned the favor. "What of you and the noble Sir Mharkhel?"

The Princess turned away, blushing. "*Please*. We are only friends."

"Elly, if you both persist in this manner you will die only friends. Everybody knows you both feel differently. One of you should do something."

Ellycyn turned on her brother, tears welling in her eyes. "He is bound by his *damn* vows and *damn* honor and *damn* everything else he stands for! And I cannot do a *damn* thing about it!"

The Princess returned her glassy eyes to the capital, trying to regain her composure. Rhenycyn, not knowing what to do or say, simply stood there watching his sister. Silent minutes passed. Finally, Ellycyn turned to him. When she spoke, her voice was void of emotion. "Father requires us. I suggest we see what this is about." She walked past Rhenycyn without waiting, leaving only her tracks and an occasional tear in the snow for him to follow.



Rhenycyn walked into the cozy study adjacent to the

great library and immediately sought out his father. He was seated across the room, next to an end table, upon which were scattered numerous books. Nherycyn was clothed in a light blue tunic and matching leggings over which he wore a royal blue robe embroidered with gold thread. The King sat pensively, nursing an ale. Nherycyn had always been physically fit and took pride in his appearance. But now, whether due to his age or the loss of loved ones, but most likely as a result of both, the King had grown soft and looked much older than his seventy-one years. His tall, lean frame was now bent and flabby. Dark age spots littered his light complexion. The King's white mane fell to just above the shoulders, but his pate was bald. The blue eyes which had been sparkling and animate had grown pale and become recessed. As he became aware of his son's presence, Nherycyn raised his head and muttered an obscenity concerning punctuality and being cheated out of his late afternoon nap.

Athar, the King's Advisor, sat on the other side of the end table, a book in his hands, finger marking a page. From a distance it might be difficult to differentiate between King and Advisor. But only from a distance. Though Athar was at least twice as old as Nherycyn, he looked healthier. He was about the same height as the King but he carried his weight better. Though the wizard's hair was white, it was a bit longer than Nherycyn's and he wore a flowing beard, both contrasting with his bronze skin. Intense brown eyes peered out from beneath dark, shaggy brows. Except for his wizard's regalia, Athar would have looked the epitome of a caring, old grandfather. He wore his chosen colors: black leggings,

tunic and a matching robe embroidered with various magical symbols in silver. His black pointed hat was also adorned with silver symbols and ornate silver wings. Amulets hung from chains around his neck, pouches from his cincture. He smiled and nodded at Rhenycyn.

Ellycyn turned from a window and leaned against the wall, her hands propped on the sill. The Princess was pretty in a plain way. She was not one who delighted in elaborate costume. Ellycyn wore a long, pale blue dress which made her look a little too thin. A white shawl was loosely draped over her shoulders. Her dark blonde hair, a little shorter than her brothers, was in a small pony tail. There was still a trace of redness in the hazel eyes. Her face was a mask as she regarded Rhenycyn and then her father.

The Prince dropped into a chair across from his sister. He considered apologizing for his tardiness but decided against it. He had resigned himself to the fact that whatever this concerned, it would be an exercise in futility. Rhenycyn spoke to his father. "What has caused you to summon us, especially on a day of rest and worship?"

"It is exactly as you said," the King responded.

Rhenycyn wore a look of confusion. "What?"

Nherycyn, already irritated at having to wait for his son, issued an audible sigh of impatience at his lack of comprehension.

"Father, I am afraid that I do not understand either," said Ellycyn.

"A summons. This concerns a summons. It would appear that the event we have guarded against for so long is upon us."

Ellycyn was startled. "Father, are you all right? You are not dying?"

Nherycyn rolled his eyes and shook his head, a trace of a smile upon his lips. The King turned his gaze from his daughter to Rhenycyn. The smile faded. "Would that my son worried so."

"Maybe I do—maybe more than you think."

The old King waved his hand several times, dismissing the matter. "I have not called you here to discuss my health or your loyalties—or lack thereof."

"Then what is this 'event' of which you are speaking?" Ellycyn asked.

The King inclined his head to his Advisor. "Athar?"

The wizard bore his eyes into Rhenycyn. "It would appear that the Evil One or at the least a minion of his has returned."

"Thaum?" the Prince asked in disbelief. "It cannot be."

"Oh, but it can, Your Highness, it can," assured Athar emphatically.

"Tell them," the King ordered his Advisor.

"As you wish." Athar went on to relate the events from the appearance of the mysterious wizard to his refusal to speak to the Council. While doing so, he absently fingered one of his amulets, an encircled, inverted, silver pentagram. By the time he finished, Rhenycyn was in disbelief and Ellycyn aghast.

"How did you come across this... information?" the Prince asked.

"From the witches themselves," Athar replied.

"Who? Was it someone reliable?"

"Yes," the Advisor said. "One who is well placed."

"What of the Slayers? Is there any news from the north concerning them?" Rhenycyn was not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Not really, though it does account for reports we have received regarding some unexplained deaths in that region. But to answer your question, we have heard nothing of the SoulSlayers since the incident. The witches are not certain whether they successfully dispelled them or not. They are not optimistic, however," the Advisor added.

The study fell silent for a time. Rhenycyn stood and went to the window, searching for answers, or more probably questions, in the quickly approaching dusk. Ellycyn occupied the Prince's vacant seat. Nherycyn poured himself another ale, propped his feet up on an ottoman. Athar watched and waited.

The Princess questioned her father. "What do you propose to do?"

"I told you before. A summons. Bring him here, interrogate him. If it turns out to be what we think, then we execute him. Athar's idea actually. Tomhylhen has been notified and he concurs. So do I."

"Of course," the Prince muttered under his breath.

"Any questions?" the King asked.

Rhenycyn walked over to where his sister was sitting and placed his hands upon the back of the chair. "As a matter of fact, yes," said the Prince, trying to control his mounting displeasure. "Why have you not brought this matter before the Ministry?"

Athar answered for the King. "We felt that it would be

in the best interest of the kingdom to not produce any premature reactions."

"What about us?" Rhenycyn gestured to Ellycyn and himself. "It seems that the matter has already been decided. You have neither asked us for any counsel nor our opinions. Why did you even request our presence?"

"We were merely offering a suggestion—"

The King cut off his Advisor. "You were *ordered* here, not requested, so that we could inform you of how we were going to proceed." At that, Nherycyn began having a serious coughing fit. When it finally subsided, he asked Rhenycyn if there was anything which remained to be discussed, but Ellycyn answered first.

"I cannot believe you are so callous as to drag some poor fellow halfway across the country to answer a few questions. The only 'crime' he committed was bringing back a unicorn. Not some evil demon mind you, but a unicorn! And I am sure that given some time, Khyrhyelle and her Council will be able to supply you with all the answers you desire."

"Khaballe is not ruled by Khyrhyelle," the King said bitterly.

"Speaking of Khyrhyelle," the Prince cut in, "would there be any reason for the witches to enhance the facts of the story, make it seem to be more than it is?"

"No, not that I can think of," said Athar. "That does not mean, however, that it could not be the case. They could be conspiring to realize some private purpose."

"And what of you?" Rhenycyn accused. "Both you and Tomhylhen have been preaching the return of Thaum since

time immemorial. This person very conveniently fulfills your role of scapegoat. Who is to say you have not conceived this entire story?"

The Advisor's eyes grew cold. "If you do not wish to believe me, request an emissary from the witches to verify what I have imparted. Though that will delay matters considerably and provide him ample time to begin his devastation."

The Princess joined the debate. "You speak as if his guilt has already been determined. Assuming everything you said to be true, there is still little evidence to warrant a summons. He has done nothing wrong."

Nherycyn finished his ale and stood. "The both of you test what little patience my old age retains. Athar, tell them of the Scrolls."

Athar stood, still clutching the book. He cleared his throat. "When I was first made aware of this... situation, I wanted to be convinced of the gravity of it before I confronted your father. I have done a great deal of research, pouring over various documents, histories and the like. Many made reference or alluded to something of this nature, but admittedly, most were vague. That is, until I uncovered this." The wizard's eyes gleamed as he opened the book he held to the marked page and handed it to Rhenycyn.

The Prince looked at the cover of the book first. "The Sacred Scrolls," he murmured. Although called the Scrolls, the histories were long ago transcribed into book form. Rhenycyn read the passage silently and without a word passed the book to his sister, proceeded to the window and stared into the night.

The Princess read it as well and, having finished with it, stood and returned the book to the end table. Like her brother, she was speechless.

"Well?" the King asked impatiently.

Ellycyn's face was a mixture of thoughtfulness and concern. "I studied the Scrolls intently when I was younger, but I do not recall any passage like that."

"There are many such passages Your Highness," the wizard stated. "Some no doubt have not been looked upon since they were recorded by their author."

"Rhenycyn?" The King wanted to hear some form of repentance from his son.

The Prince walked over to the end table and picked up the book. "I understand most of the allusions that the Scrolls refer to but what about the 'Forgotten Palace' and the 'Darkness Waxes against the Waning Sky?'"

Athar took the book from Rhenycyn. "The only thing we have been able to equate to the 'Forgotten Palace' is Daath Ul Thaum. The other makes reference to the Millennial Eclipse."

"The Eclipse?" Ellycyn asked.

"Yes," Athar responded, "the time approaches when both moons are aligned with both suns. The last occurrence was nearly a thousand years ago at the culmination of the Great Mystical Wars."

"Is it due to occur soon?" the Prince asked.

"Our astronomers are not sure. Due to celestial conditions, they have not been able to indicate a precise date. It is certain it will not be during the next six cycles and it may not be until a year or more passes. Do you now

understand our concern? Why we feel we must act in haste?"

"There are definitely some points that coincide," conceded the Prince, "but I still feel a summons is excessive. I would prefer to investigate the matter further, seeing if there are any additional correlations to the Scrolls."

The wizard became chafed. "What other 'correlations' do you desire? His appearance, his ability to perform the Ritual of Renascence, the demons, his being at the Towers of the Moons, Daath Ul Thaum, the Eclipse." The Advisor appealed to the King. "Nherycyn?"

"I believe I have heard enough. We will send a summons requesting his presence and see what type of a response that elicits." Athar was somewhat taken aback by the King's decision to only request the mysterious wizard's appearance. Rhenycyn and Ellycyn eyed each other, quietly sharing the small victory. "Athar, should he decide to come, inform Tomhyllhen. I would think he would want to be here for the questioning as well."

"And if he does not comply?" the Advisor probed.

Nherycyn shrugged his shoulders. "Then we will wait and see. If this wizard is involved in any questionable events that require us to offer a second invitation, it will leave little room for interpretation. I am tired and in need of rest. That is all."

Athar inclined his head to the King, rose and left the study. Ellycyn also rose to leave and gave her father a quick kiss on the cheek before she followed the wizard out. As the King walked out Rhenycyn called to him. Nherycyn stopped but did not turn around. "Thank you," the Prince said. The King made a gruff noise which passed for a response and

continued out of the study.

Rhenycyn spent a moment gazing out the window before taking the seat his father had vacated. He picked up the volume of the Sacred Scrolls of the Moons & Stars and flipped through the pages absently. Then he allowed himself to go to a specific page and once again looked upon the passage:

Lo! For the Destroyer comes!

*Riding the Winds of the Eternal Realms,
Death must grant leave in its Demesne,
The Horned Ones respond with Reverence,
As he Masters the Art Arcane.*

*Marked by the Encircled Pentagon,
Existing amongst the Crescent Moons,
He will Raise the Forgotten Palace,
As he Masters the Power of the Runes.*

*The Heights, the Depths, the Lands Faerie,
All come to Pass in These Scrolls,
Darkness Waxes against the Waning Sky,
As he Masters the Knowledge of the Soul.*

CHAPTER VIII

Alone in some abysmal place on the astral plane, Uriel could feel the weight of the darkness bear down upon him. He could sense the Dark Ones there, lurking in the shadows, watching him. Thus it was for a great while. All that time, Uriel stood on the brink of hysteria waiting, just waiting. How much time had passed? A minute, an hour, a day? Weeks? How Uriel would have agreed with Bergson that time should not be measured by regular intervals but by durations!

Finally, Uriel sensed the first signs of the receding darkness. But as he reached out to the threads of light, his fears were realized. The sickening familiarity of the voice of the Dark Ones pierced the blackness. "You have performed well for us, little worm, by bringing one back who we will need to serve our future plans." *Khyrhyelle's daughter?* Uriel thought. "Did you not know? Your sacrifices only go to serve our ends." A peal of laughter was followed by the emergence of the goat-man. As the echoes of the laughter faded, Uriel unsuccessfully tried to look away from the creature's flaming eyes. "Allow me to introduce the one who awaits you. This is Ahrokh." The goat-man blended into the shadows as a mounted skeleton rode forth at the mention of his name. The mass of voices which issued from the SoulSlayer called out to Uriel. "Soon the time will come when you will be required to leave your fortress, mortal. Know that I will haunt you and shadow your every step."

The intensity of the flaming eyes increased. "I shall savor your demise. Though I must save you for my masters I will consume the essence of every living thing with you."

A forceful gale blew away the darkness and Uriel found himself looking into the grey sky of a clouded day. Out of the clouds, high atop a snow-covered mountain, came a haggard-looking old man clutching a staff. The remnants of the old man's cloak whipped about as powerful winds threatened to cast him to his death. But he remained steadfast. Above the tumultuous roar of the winds, Uriel could somehow hear him speak. "Do not listen to their words Uriel, for they seek to confuse you. It is you who needs the young witch Arhyvhyne. Believe in yourself and know that you have the power to not only withstand them but defeat them." As clouds descended upon the ancient one, Uriel lost sight of him. But he could still hear the blind man's words. "I await your visit which will grant my release."



Uriel opened his eyes to a darkened room. He looked to the right and noticed a figure standing there. He turned on his side and squinted, trying to focus his vision. When he saw it was Ghemella he groaned, rolled onto his back and closed his eyes.

For the next several minutes, Uriel fought a heavy drowsiness but then heard some noises followed by a familiar voice. Slowly he opened his eyes to the beautiful vision of Khyrhyelle. Their eyes met and held for an

unending moment. Then his eyes followed hers as she turned to look at her daughter. Uriel was overcome with emotion as he stared at the girl he brought back to life. Tears spilled down his cheeks as he sat up and reached out his arms to hold Arhyvhynne.

They broke apart and he clasped Arhyvhynne's hands. "Thank God," he said in a weak voice.

Arhyvhynne looked concerned. "Are you all right? How do you feel?"

Uriel managed a faint smile as he replied, "Exhausted."

"We just wanted to see if you were recovering properly," the High Witch said, "and to thank you—not that we could ever properly do that."

Uriel laid back down. "Just seeing you together with your daughter is thanks enough." He looked at Arhyvhynne. "How are you?"

"I feel fine," she said smiling, "absolutely fine." Arhyvhynne stood. "Mother, I think we should leave him to his rest."

"Yes, you are right." Khyrhyelle joined her daughter. "I will send another healer to continue restoring your energy level. When you next awake you should feel much better." Mother and daughter turned to leave, then stopped. "Consider what you would wish from us, Uriel. Anything within my power I will gladly give you. Again, thank you so very much."

"Yes, thank you," Arhyvhynne added. She impulsively came back, hugged and kissed him softly on his forehead. But Uriel was already deep in slumber.



Khyrhyelle tossed and turned in her bed. It was the third straight night that she had difficulty sleeping. The first night was a natural reaction to the ordeal with Arhyvhyne. The second sleepless night was brought about by the telepathic arrival late in the evening of the summons from King Nherycyn requesting Uriel's presence for questioning. The High Witch had been up most of the night trying to decide how she would approach the Council with it. Tonight, her insomnia stemmed from the Council's reaction to her decision and her second-guessing herself on if she made the correct choice.

Relinquishing the fight, Khyrhyelle got out of bed and put on her robe. She took a candle, lighted it and left her room. She informed the night Guardian of where she would be and walked down many silent corridors, the shadow of the candle flame dancing on the walls. She reached her destination and entered the Council Chambers. Shivering from lack of heat, she immediately went to the fireplace and started a fire. She sat in front of the fire, staring into the yellows, oranges and reds, searching for warmth and serenity. The former came willingly but the latter was much more difficult for the High Witch to entice. She was just beginning to reach a level of tranquility when she heard a knock at the door. Khyrhyelle sighed heavily and without turning called out for the person to enter.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

At the sound of the voice, Khyrhyelle turned her head so sharply she hurt her neck. "Uriel, what are you doing

here?"

"I just woke up a little while ago. I had to do some thinking and decided I wanted to see you. One of the Guardians told me you were here." Uriel walked over to the fire and warmed his hands.

"You look well rested. How are you feeling?"

"Good. I feel good. Well, for the most part at least. Still feel a little run down and I've got some cobwebs but I'm sure it'll pass." Uriel gestured that he wished to sit next to the High Witch. "May I?"

"Certainly," Khyrhyelle responded and Uriel seated himself. "I would just like to again offer our sincere thanks for your returning Arhyvhynne to us, to me."

"I told you, no thanks are necessary—I'm just thankful I was able to do it. Did you ever find out why Ar, Ariv—"

"Arhyvhynne?"

"Yes," Uriel smiled, "Arhyvhynne. Did you ever find out why Arhyvhynne tried to perform that ritual?"

"Her explanation was rather vague." Khyrhyelle ran a hand through her hair, then pulled her knees up against her chest, hugging them. "She would like us to believe that she was merely testing the theory of substitution in reascency, trying to prove that your... ability is not as unique as it appears."

"I take it you don't you believe her?"

The High Witch considered the question for a moment. "I think that there may be ulterior motives or at least more to her explanation than she cares to share. But she is a grown witch and I trust her implicitly."

The Chambers fell quiet then, save for the occasional

crackling of the fire. Witch and wizard seemed to be thinking far away thoughts, both of them mesmerized by the patterns within the flames.

The silence abruptly ended when both Khyrhyelle and Uriel began talking at the same time. They laughed, started at the same time again and argued over who should be first. Uriel forced Khyrhyelle to begin.

The High Witch crossed her legs and let her hands fall into her lap. Khyrhyelle still looked into the flames as she spoke. "I received some disturbing news concerning you last evening." She paused waiting for a reaction from Uriel. When she decided none was forthcoming she continued. "It would seem the King has become aware of your presence here as well as the unusual occurrences you have been involved in. He has requested that you travel to Bhel'Ehzz for questioning."

"I take it you didn't tell him about me?"

"No," the High Witch responded, "nor did I instruct anyone else to."

"How did he find out about me then?"

"Most likely through Athar." Uriel gave her a puzzled look so she explained. "Athar is King Nherycyn's Advisor, a very powerful position."

"So?"

"Athar is also the most powerful wizard in the realm. He has access to a multitude of information and people. It is not an uncommon practice for him to use his spells to derive knowledge on a given situation. Though in all honesty, I must admit that as High Witch, I have my sources as well. However, there is also the matter of the prophecies."

Uriel thought about what to say. Although he had unintentionally given slight indications that he was unfamiliar with what transpired in the kingdom, he did not want to come right out and admit ignorance. The matter had now grown more serious, however. He decided a general question may suffice. "What about the prophecies?"

"The references to you are uncanny."

"Are they?"

Khyrhyelle stood up and offered Uriel her hand. "Come, I will show you."

Upon taking her hand, Uriel felt hot lightning streak through his body. For a moment all he could hear was his heart pound and the roar of blood rushing through his ears. He thought of Lynn and Danny then, the first time in a long time, and immediately felt the guilt weigh down upon him. He blushed darkly as a result of the combination. Fortunately for him, Khyrhyelle was herself engrossed in trying to dispel similar feelings.

Uriel tried to avert his eyes as he slowly disengaged his hand from Khyrhyelle's. "Where, uh, are we going?"

"To the library," she told him.

Khyrhyelle retrieved a torch, lit it and together with Uriel proceeded to leave the Chambers and walk silently to the library, each lost in examining buried feelings and desires. Neither one noticed a figure trailing them through the dark hallways from a distance.



Uriel looked up from the Sacred Scrolls. "I will admit

there are some coincidental similarities, but most of this is... very vague. Stuff like this can be explained to fit almost anything—or anybody." He was trying very hard to sound nonchalant, particularly after seeing the reference to his brand of the pentagram.

"Uriel, they may be 'coincidental,' but they are accurate. As a young witch I studied the Scrolls for years. They have truthfully portrayed the events from the beginnings of Khaballe, through the millennia to the Great Mystical Wars and to the present." Khyrhyelle took the book from him and placed it back on a shelf.

"There is the advantage of hindsight," he argued. "As I said before, the interpretations could be adjusted to explain the situation. How do you, or anybody for that matter, know what the author truly meant?" He caught himself panicking and moved the subject to a slightly different area. "Who wrote this, anyway?"

"The authors are for the most part varied and unknown, generally believed to be from the Ahfham" the High Witch said in a cursory manner. She wished to return to the heart of the matter. "Uriel, I am not trying to establish guilt, nor am I judging you. I am trying to make you aware of how the events are being viewed by others."

"You don't just mean the King and his Advisor do you?"

"No," Khyrhyelle responded. She walked over to a window and looked out. "The Council and I had a bit of a disagreement."

Uriel felt his heart sink. *I was starting to adjust to this place, just getting comfortable with Khyrhyelle and beginning to trust her,* he thought. *I was even going to*

ask—but it doesn't matter anymore. "You're sending me away to the King aren't you?" he said quietly.

Khyrhyelle turned from the window and stared straight into his eyes. She felt it time to inform him of her decision. "No, I am not. At the time you were to bring back Arhyvhyne I promised I would give you anything you desired, including your freedom. Should you wish to leave here now, I, nor any of the Witches of the Moons will attempt to bar your path. I have never gone back on my word and do not plan to begin to do so now. If I were you, however, I would carefully consider the alternatives to leaving at this time."

Uriel was shocked and touched at the same time. "You went against the entire Council?"

"No," the High Witch answered, "four were adverse to my thoughts of allowing you to choose your own destiny, two agreed."

"Your two daughters?"

"No, actually. Arhyvhyne was one, but the other was Lhynette."

"Would your decision have been the same if I was unsuccessful with Arhyvhyne?" ventured Uriel.

The room suddenly went cold. The grey of Khyrhyelle's eyes was of granite as she regarded Uriel. He knew that he made a mistake then. Better that he would have angered the High Witch instead of hurting her.

Khyrhyelle's voice forced its way into Uriel's mind, filling it and seemingly the entire library. *I am High Witch of the Moons and I wear the Grey which I have earned. I have the power and the authority to do what I deem necessary and*

correct. I have chosen to spare you because I have not as yet unraveled your significance. Pity you my wrath if you are who they think you are. I can save or destroy as I see fit. The line is very fine, Uriel. See you do not force me to cross over it!

Khyrhyelle violently withdrew her voice from Uriel's mind, drawing the air from the room as well. Uriel staggered and supported himself against a table. Khyrhyelle spun around to leave but Uriel, though breathless, called to her.

"Khyrhyelle..."

The High Witch turned and glowered at him, eyes still smoldering.

Uriel was still trying to catch his breath. "Your Highness, I'm... sorry... I wasn't... I didn't mean..."

"Groveling does not become you. What do you want?" she asked him.

"Your advice," he said, trying to appease her.

Though Khyrhyelle read through his transparent act, she sighed and fought against the corners of her mouth from curling upwards. "Meaning?"

"Before, you said I should consider alternatives to leaving. What do you advise?"

"To remain here." The High Witch folded her arms across her chest. "Your presence was requested, not demanded. To go to Bhel'Ehzz could mean your death. Athar and Tomhylhen can both be very persuasive. They have probably made a strong case against you already and your supposed lack of memory would suit them well. In addition, your journey to the capital alone could be perilous. The Slayers may be lying in wait for you."

"You would... permit me to stay?"

"I gave you my word. As long as you do not interfere with us you may do as you like."

Uriel walked up close to Khyrhyelle and faced her. "Do you remember before, in the Chambers, when we both started to say something?" Khyrhyelle nodded once. "What I wanted to tell you was that I decided what I wanted in return for my 'service' to Arhyvhyne. I wanted to ask you if it would be all right for me to stay here and study. That is what I would like. What I want to know is if you would like the same thing."

The High Witch regarded him coolly. Wordlessly, she turned and walked down one of the aisles of books a ways, then stopped. She looked at the top shelf and ran her finger across several heavy volumes. Stopping at one, she pulled it out and walked back to Uriel.

Khyrhyelle handed him the book. "Start with this. If you have any questions seek me out. You may come and go as you please but you will have a Guardian with you at all times. She will inform you as to where you are allowed to go and what is permissible for you to do." The granite came back to her eyes. "Remember my words, Uriel. Do not cross me."

"Thank you, I will remember," Uriel said. The High Witch turned to leave but Uriel reached out and gently touched her shoulder. "You didn't really answer my question," he said to her back.

Khyrhyelle turned and looked at him for a long moment, considering what to say and then lowered her eyes. When she looked back up at him, she responded very quietly, "I

thought I had."



Dhynelle kissed Qelharre and slowly removed her hand from the dark elf's small, naked breast. "You still seem troubled. Did you not enjoy our little... encounter?"

Qelharre sat up in the bed and stretched. "Yes, very much so," she said, not being completely truthful. Dhynelle was more of a consoler to Qelharre than a lover. It seemed that whenever the dark elf fell into one of her moods, Dhynelle would be there to comfort her mentally as well as physically. There were times when Qelharre did not mind it and even precipitated their liaisons. But there were also times when the dark elf felt remorse afterwards.

"Then what bothers you?" Dhynelle asked as she put her arm around Qelharre.

Qelharre shook her arm off, got up and began dressing. "The reason why we are here in the first place."

"Khyrhelle and the wizard?"

The dark elf nodded. "I cannot believe she intends to keep him here even though we outvoted her," Qelharre said, the anger building. "We know little, if anything about him. And suppose Eyrmysse is right. Suppose he is aligned with Thaum or his minions in some way. She risks much by allowing him to stay and I cannot understand why."

"It is evident that she has more than a passing interest in him."

"You believe so?"

Dhynelle smirked. "I will wear white if she does not

give herself to him before MidSummer Day." Dhynelle gave Qelharre a mock look of piety, making the elf laugh. "There is also the small matter of Arhyvhynne. Returning one's daughter from the dead must count for something."

"Yes, but Khyrhyelle is not the type to let personal matters influence her. You see how she is with Eyrmysse."

"Eyrmysse is her own person. And besides, she wears the black," Dhynelle added as an afterthought.

Qelharre no longer seemed sure of the reasons for her anger. Except that maybe Dhynelle had been transferring the extreme dislike of the wizard and situation to her. Dhynelle may truly care about her, but Dhynelle definitely cared about Dhynelle more. And Dhynelle was seriously frightened by the wizard. "Khyrhyelle is above that. Consider also that all Uriel has done was bring back Arhyvhynne and Ullyna—not exactly heinous crimes."

Dhynelle could sense Qelharre drifting away from her. "What of the prophecies?" When the dark elf responded by shrugging her shoulders she decided to play her trump card. "How soon we forget our little encounter with the SoulSlayers."

The mention of the Slayers immediately cast Qelharre into a deep depression. "I am afraid you are right," she said sadly. "We cannot afford to take a chance of that magnitude."

Dhynelle rose and walked to where Qelharre was standing. "He frightens me Qelharre. Something must be done about the wizard. Whether Athar's suspicions concerning the wizard and the prophecies are founded or not we cannot allow this to continue!"

As suddenly as Qelharre had become angry and then indifferent, she became emotional. "I fear for us. I would trust Khyrhyelle with my life, but..."

Dhynelle slowly drew her finger across Qelharre's cheek, gently took her hand and led her back to the bed.



No one saw or heard from Uriel for the next few days. He had confined himself to his room, leaving only when necessary. The reasons were simple. Ghemella was his Guardian and he did not relish having to ask her for anything (though she did check in on him periodically of her own accord). He also felt it would be a good idea to lay low, seeing that Khyrhyelle had gone out on a limb for him with her unpopular decision. But foremost was his engrossment in the study of the book which Khyrhyelle gave him. The book was a modern history of Khaballe, covering the time period from the end of the Great Mystical Wars to the present. With it, he began to understand more of the world he had chosen to serve.

Uriel was able to see a map for the first time and know where he was in relation to the rest of Khaballe. The early part of the book often made reference to the drastic changes that were wrought upon Khaballe and the rest of this world as a result of the Great Mystical Wars. Uriel, however, was unable to find any maps showing the previous lay of the land or anything of the Wars themselves.

He found there had been ten major cities, but now only nine remained. The missing city was on a small island to the

north called Kho Rhon'ah and Uriel could only glean that something had happened to it during the Great Wars. Interspersed between the cities were a number of villages, mostly of an agrarian nature.

He learned about the socio-economic structures of the cities and that each had distinct inhabitants and thus personalities. He was shocked to find that several cities, Qyntes'ah and Fhon Dhawz in particular, were very segregated. The racial/ethnic difficulties here centered on humans, elves, dwarfs and halflings, with the most serious conflict between the elves and dwarfs. Seven centuries before, the two fought each other in the StoneWood Wars. Nothing much was resolved, though there remained much tension between the two races even until today, as was exhibited by Qelharre and Wyxotte.

More than five hundred years ago was the FireHunt. This was the impetus for FireQueen's pact with Qhen Ennyjhenne, High Witch of the Moons at the time. It was precipitated by the elves who thought wood sacred and the dragons who were fire breathers and admittedly had torched a few trees in their time. Therefore the conflict. But many felt (not surprisingly the dwarfs among them) their vengeance against the great reptiles was due to having to settle for a draw in the not too distant StoneWood Wars. It was a fierce and bloody struggle with much destruction. But in the end most of the dragons were driven from Khaballe, finding homes in distant lands.

It was during the FireHunt that Mhelynycyn gained recognition among the people of Khaballe as a cruel and ruthless DragonHunter. The populace, looking for heroes

against these supposed savage beasts, propelled him to popularity. So much so that he was able to position himself as a viable candidate for the throne which he eventually won (or took).

Thus the Cyn Dynasty began and prospered for two hundred years before its first test. Then, in the year 2668 of the Third Age, the inhabitants from the southeast continent of Rraj Mhajje crossed the Sea of Ghaury and invaded Khaballe, planning to add it to their empire. The Mhajjeans showed patience, if not intelligence, in waiting seven hundred years after the Great Mystical Wars to attempt an invasion. The Great Wars changed the face of the world causing the other kingdoms to want little to do with Khaballe afterwards. But the Mhajjeans were a warlike people populated with ogres, trolls and humans who were at best considered barbarian. Whether they had ignored or simply chose to forget Khaballe's power is not known. But they came in the summer of 2668.

Their goal was to take the halfling city of Vhyt Dhaxz and use that as a base for taking the capital, Bhel'Ehzz. They did not count on the tenacity of the halflings, however. Although the little ones (as the halflings were often referred to) lost the city, it took much longer than the Mhajjeans had expected. That allowed for a massive army to assemble at Bhel'Ehzz. Both armies moved from their bases and met at the Sarhag Fields. The battle quickly turned badly for the Mhajjeans. Though they had brought magic users, they simply were not of the caliber of the Towers' witches and were dispatched without much effort. Though the bulk of the Mhajje army was defeated easily, the battle lasted for many

years. The Mhajjeans were a tribal people and when the main army disbanded, they quickly formed smaller, more efficient raiding parties. The result of the Mhajjean War, as it was called, is that many of the barbarian Mhajjeans stayed in Khaballe, settling for the most part in the mountainous regions of the continent.

The only internal strife occurred a little over a hundred years ago. Political uprisings simultaneously befell most of the cities in what could only be explained as a strange coincidence. The insurrection was not directed at the Crown, but instead at the local nobility. Baronies, earldoms and duchies that had descended through the same bloodlines since before the Cyn Dynasty took power, suddenly found themselves the target of revolt by the bourgeoisie. All lost power as a new aristocracy emerged.

The aristocracy held most of the local power in Khaballe. They were landed and produced their goods or parts thereof on their country estates, then transported them to the city. Many of the nobles preferred to manage their own shops in the city and lived there for a portion of the year, leaving the mundane duties at the manor for family members. The merchants and craftsmen also held some power through their guilds, but they were not nearly as influential as the nobility. Finally, there was the Lord Mayor, a figurehead and little more. His main responsibilities were to preside over the city council (consisting of the nobles and GuildMasters) and uphold the law through the city guard.

All laws, offices and loyalties of each city were subject to the king, however. And to reinforce that point, the

Journey of Homage took place every five years. Representatives from each city came to Bhel'Ehzz and reaffirmed their loyalty to the Crown. It was instituted by Mhelynycyn and its purpose was actually threefold. First and foremost, remind the nobility not in any uncertain terms who ruled the kingdom. Secondly, maintain national security and learn of intrigues first hand. Finally, conduct court, which entailed reviewing policies, laws and the like as well as establishing new business. Such was the politics of Khaballe.



The wild, flickering flame of the nearly spent candle caught Uriel's eye and broke his concentration. He stood and stretched, tried to rub the redness from his eyes. He moved to the window, gazed out and estimated it was well into the evening. *Damn, that late*, he thought. Uriel walked over to his bed, laid down, put his hands behind his head and crossed his legs at the ankles. He closed his eyes but his mind was moving too fast to allow sleep. He then tried some relaxation techniques but was only partially successful.

Uriel was exhilarated over the knowledge he had obtained the last few days and was almost to the point of being obsessed with obtaining more. But there was so very much—too much—to think about that he was beginning to have trouble keeping it all straight.

Throughout the day a thought kept pushing its way to the front of his mind, acting as an impediment to his goal. *In order to refill the cup, you must empty it first*. With a new

found burst of energy (he was on his fourth wind by now), Uriel pushed himself up from the bed. He stood defiantly, hands on hips and said to himself and anyone else that might be interested, "Sometimes you just gotta say 'What the...'"

Uriel walked to the door, opened it and spoke to Ghemella. "I want to see Khyr—the High Witch. Please," he added a little late.

The witch was preoccupied with sharpening her curved dagger. "I believe she has retired for the evening."

"Shit!"

Ghemella took her eyes off the dagger. "What?"

"Nothing." Uriel fought with himself. *If I don't go see her now...* "Take me to her. Now."

Ghemella was taken off guard by Uriel and was uncertain for a moment. Her emotions went from shock to anger to distrust. She eyed him suspiciously. "I have to examine you—"

"You so much as try to touch me and I'll put you where I brought Arhyvhyne back from." Uriel put on his best badass squint to hide his empty bluff.

Ghemella was not one to be frightened easily, though in this instance she felt discretion was the better part of valor. She was not entirely sure of Uriel's powers and did not think it wise to test him over a matter such as this. Ghemella turned, took the torch off the wall and walked down the corridor, Uriel following.

They soon arrived at the door of the High Witch's quarters. Uriel stood there, hesitant. He rapped softly once and then remembered Ghemella waiting behind him. He quickly knocked three more times in rapid succession

attempting to show some authority. A moment passed before Uriel heard the door open and Khyrhyelle stood before them, obviously being woken from her sleep. Uriel was amazed that someone could look that bad and yet look so good. At the same moment he came to the realization that most things about her amazed him.

Khyrhyelle looked from Uriel to Ghemella. The dark little witch just shrugged her shoulders. Khyrhyelle's gaze came back to Uriel. "Yes?" she inquired in a drawn voice.

"I... uh... needed to see you."

"Could it not wait?"

"I suppose." Uriel could hear Ghemella's snickering. He was completely embarrassed and wished he could hide somewhere. "Look, I'm sorry. It's late. I didn't want to wake you up." He put his head down like a scolded puppy and turned to leave. If he had a tail it would have been between his legs.

Khyrhyelle took his hand and led Uriel into her room. "It is all right, I am awake now." Then she leaned over to Ghemella and whispered, "Leave us, I will be fine."

The High Witch closed the door and said, "Could you please start a fire?"

"Yeah, sure. Look, I could still leave. I mean it's obvious you're tired—"

"The reason you are here must be very serious."

"What makes you say that?" Uriel said a little too quickly.

"The hour is very late. I fear you do not look much better than I—"

"Are you kidding? You look great." *I don't believe I just*

said that. Uriel once again tried to find his imaginary hiding place.

Khyrhyelle flashed her dazzling smile and said, "Thank you." She moved to a closet and brought out a blanket, laid it on the floor next to the fireplace and indicated that Uriel should sit. "You are also quite nervous and are apparently trying to retreat from some sort of decision you have made."

"Am I that obvious?"

Khyrhyelle sat next to him in front of the fire. "What is obvious is that you are uncomfortable and have wanted to leave ever since you came to my door." The High Witch looked deeply into his eyes. "What are you afraid to tell me?"

Uriel turned his eyes away from her and gazed into the fire. A short time passed as the hypnotic patterns of the flames began to relax him. He was just about to speak when he received a paranoid thought that he had been put under a spell. His eyes went wild as he felt like a trapped animal.

Khyrhyelle was studying him all along, though she was determined to allow him as much time as he needed. When she saw the change come over him she took his hand in both of hers. "Uriel, what troubles you so?"

The concerned look in her eyes and the melodious sound of her voice chased away all doubt. It was as if Uriel realized for the first time what this woman had done and gone through for him. In this strange world of unknowns, shadows and danger, she had been his truth, light and protector. He wanted very much to just hold her and tell her what he felt then, but settled for just the former.

Khyrhyelle held Uriel, felt him shaking and tried to

soothe and console him. After he settled down a bit, he stood, wiped his eyes and walked over to the window. While gazing out of it he said, "I regained my memory."

Khyrhyelle felt the sudden happiness in her heart cloud slightly. "Would it not be closer to the truth to just tell me that you trust me now?"

Uriel looked at her, overwhelmed by the emotion mirrored in her beautiful grey eyes. He decided to let the last veil drop. "Yeah," he said, managing a half smile, "I trust you." Though as he began to relate to Khyrhyelle the actual events surrounding his coming to Khaballe, he wondered if she would even believe him.

CHAPTER IX

"Is this a good spot?" Uriel was holding two baskets along with his staff and wanted to drop them where he was.

Khyrhyelle arrived at the spot Uriel had chosen and surveyed the area. They were well into the trees north of the Towers, just beyond the boundary of the spell which protected their grounds.

Uriel grew impatient. "Well?"

"I suppose it will do."

"Thank you," Uriel replied sarcastically. He dropped both baskets, opened one, took out a blanket and proceeded to spread it out. Meanwhile, Khyrhyelle took out the contents of the other, the aroma making Uriel's mouth water and stomach growl.

After she spread out their lunch, Khyrhyelle looked to the cloudless sky and seemed to absorb the energy from the twin suns. "I cannot believe how beautiful the weather is."

The weather had been unusually pleasant for this time of year. Northern Khaballe seldom experienced spring. Many times the transition from winter to summer was a short-lived week. But this year the greys of late winter had given way to the greens of early spring a month earlier than expected.

Similarly, the mood within the Towers of the Moons was also somewhat of a surprise. There had not been any more strange or alarming incidents to speak of. Nor had there been much of a reaction from Bhel'Ehzz concerning Uriel. A terse reply was received informing the High Witch

that King Nherycyn held her personally responsible for Uriel. Admittedly though, the King and his Advisor may have been slightly more demanding had Khyrhyelle told them about Uriel's admissions. His revelations were accepted as truth by the High Witch and her Council. Though the Council remained a bit wary of him, only Dhynelle and Qelharre expressed their displeasure of the situation. Even Eyrmysse shifted her position and supported her mother. With Khyrhyelle feeling she had the support of the Council in the matter concerning Uriel, she decided to grant him access to most of the Towers without a Guardian at his side. He made good use of his privileges. While he enjoyed riding with Ullyna, he spent most of his time in the library partaking in earnest study.

Uriel had come to learn much regarding Khaballe, but shied away from exploring his obvious powers and delving into the magical arts. He did not feel comfortable with the concepts yet and had a great respect for power, realizing how easily one could be consumed by it. The latter increased his admiration for the witches. The fact that they could wield this enormous power, yet not be tinged by its darker side was remarkable. And Khyrhyelle, with the most power, yet the most unpretentious of them all, was in Uriel's eyes the most remarkable as well.

They had become close over the last month and a half since Uriel revealed the circumstances pertaining to his appearance. He often times visited Khyrhyelle full of unanswered questions and keen speculations. Many a night was spent in front of the fireplace in one of their rooms, discussing, comparing and contrasting Khaballe and Earth.

Though nothing physical had developed, there was a definite tension there, present at all times. Khyrhyelle fought against her feelings for Uriel which had grown considerably. Likewise, the inner turmoil Uriel felt was beginning to eat away at him as well. While he admitted to himself that he enjoyed Khyrhyelle's company and found any excuse to be with her, still he felt pangs of guilt concerning Lynn.

Uriel was experiencing that exact discomfort when he heard the whisper of Khyrhyelle's voice echo in his mind. "Huh? Did you say something?"

"I asked you if you had lost your appetite."

"Why?"

Khyrhyelle put her hands on her hips. "Because you have been complaining about eating since we started out and now that I have prepared the food you lose yourself somewhere."

Uriel shrugged his shoulders, looked down. "Sorry, I was just—"

"Thinking about Earth," Khyrhyelle finished for him.

"Yeah." He smiled at her and shook his head. "Let's eat."

Khyrhyelle and Uriel shared a luscious lunch of vegetables and fruits, the witches being vegetarians for the most part. It had taken Uriel sometime to become accustomed to the fare, not believing one could be satisfied without a meat dish. But he learned to enjoy his meals and even took a turn preparing them.

After lunch, they decided it would be nice to take a walk. Uriel, true gentleman that he was, offered Khyrhyelle his hand to help her up, though he failed to relinquish her

hand even after his duty was fulfilled. Khyrhyelle, very aware, only smiled inwardly.

They walked hand in hand for a time, engaged in small talk and savoring the sights and smells of spring. Uriel would point to an unfamiliar tree or flower and Khyrhyelle would talk about the medicinal properties of a leaf or the fragrance of a petal. The twin suns were getting lower in the sky when Khyrhyelle stopped Uriel and they both sat down under a tree for some shade and rest. Khyrhyelle eased the conversation around to the eventual topic. "How goes your studies?"

"I still have a lot of questions."

"I suppose you would. Have you uncovered any reference to who your—*our*—nemesis is?"

Uriel screwed up his face in thought. "Not really. Based on the histories, my guess is Thaum, but who knows?" He suddenly got an idea. "Would it be possible to check out Daath Ul Thaum? You've seen it haven't you? Maybe you could see if anything strange is going on?"

The High Witch shook her head. "I have only seen the black fortress once, clairvoyantly, an event I would not be anxious to repeat. Even so, I do not know of anyone who could recognize the difference between strange and normal concerning that place. The dark ones there work strange magics."

"Which reminds me. I am still having difficulty with the concept of the distinctive Paths the different robes represent."

Khyrhyelle thought for a moment before she began. "There are primarily two distinct Paths, the right hand Path

and the left hand Path." Her mentioning the Paths caused Uriel to recall his experience during his initiation. "We refer to them by color: the white and the black, which represent the two main forces behind your progression. The white seeks to aid in the progression of the group and prefers creation; the black works individually and for the purpose of destruction. The white searches for the points of synthesis; the black for poles of opposition. The white works with spirit; the black with matter and form. The white desires evolution; the black, involution. You may consciously choose the Path you will tread when you have attained a certain level in your progression, as we witches do in an initiation ceremony. Most, however, live their entire life, or lives for that matter, without consciously being aware of the Path they are walking."

Uriel was shaking his head. "Why would one choose the black Path?"

"First of all, do not associate the Paths with good and bad. Good and bad, right and wrong, they are all societal labels meant to keep the masses from self destruction. Most look at things subjectively. You must learn objectivity. You must come to understand relativity. What may be viewed as evil and wicked on one level may be deemed necessary and correct on another."

Uriel gave the High Witch a puzzled look. "So what the black robes follow and believe is... correct?"

Khyrhyelle shrugged her shoulders. "Each person is unique. One may unknowingly play a significant part in a larger scheme and thus be required to follow a certain Path. One may be on a specific Path in order to work off the

karma of a previous life. Remember the symbolism of the wheel. Though the spokes all begin at different places and the Paths they take to the center run at differing angles—sometimes directly opposite of one another—the ultimate goal is the same: to reach the center."

Uriel fought with the concept, something still bothering him. "What about really evil people—like Thaum for instance? Are you trying to tell me there is a purpose for what he did—and may be doing now, that someone is doing this in order to bring about certain events that the gods deem necessary?"

"I am not a god nor do I profess to know their reasons. Nor do I know the purpose for each individual Soul in existence. I can tell you this, however. What you consider evil is a level, a state of being which at one time was regarded as good, which should have been left behind, in order to progress to a greater and more inclusive good."

"Stagnation?" Uriel asked.

The High Witch nodded. "The longer one stays at the same level, the more difficult it is to progress. Instead of cultivating new strengths, of transforming vice into virtue, one tends to attempt to enhance the existing strengths until they have chained themselves to that strength. They have created vice from virtue. Is there a difference between one who is preoccupied with the spiritual and neglects the physical and one who is consumed with the material and neglects the ethereal?"

"Yes," Uriel responded, "the one preoccupied by the spiritual is better."

"If we were meant to lead an entirely spiritual existence

why do we incarnate in these sheaths called bodies?"

"So they are equally fanatical?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

Uriel gave Khyrhyelle a wry smile. "Telling."

"Good. Excess, whether it be of a positive nature or negative, is equidistant from the purpose of life."

"Which is what?" Uriel asked. But the High Witch would only look at him, waiting.

Uriel sat quietly for a long while, trying to figure out what Khyrhyelle was attempting to help him understand. He kept remembering the words of the HIERARCHY: *One must be sent to restore the balance.* A sudden shimmer of sunlight in Khyrhyelle's silver hair got his attention. He looked into her grey eyes, then at her grey robe. He recalled the scene in the library when she spoke in his mind, saying *I wear the Grey which I have earned.* He found his answer and was amazed at its simplicity. "Balance," he said. "Blending. Integration. When you mix white and black you get grey. Grey is the symbol of balance." He smiled then, proud of himself.

"Meaning?"

Uriel frowned. *But what does it mean?* He tried an easy way out. "Meaning the purpose of life is to become balanced."

"How?"

"By striving to progress," Uriel responded, quite unsure of himself.

The High Witch smiled. "Nice words, but meaningless. Can you have positive without the negative?"

"Huh?"

"Can you have only one side of a coin? Can you have only light? Or darkness? How can light exist without darkness or darkness without light? Are they not dependent on each other for their own definition?" She could see Uriel was having trouble understanding the concept. She tried an example closer to home. "You spoke of this energy on your planet called 'electricity.' Is it all positive?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is electricity made up of entirely positive energy?"

"No," Uriel said. "It consists of charges of protons, neutrons and... electrons. The electrons are negative."

"Are these electrons bad or evil?"

"Bad or evil? They're just charges of energy. How could they be bad or evil."

"Exactly."

Uriel gave her a frustrated look. "I don't think I understand."

"The secret is to understand both and balance them. Positive and negative, white and black, male and female, spiritual and material, stars and moons, they are all *parts* of the whole. When you blend the two Paths so that they merge into one, you have balance, you have the grey. You see everything as a part of the whole."

Uriel was overcome, both by the knowledge itself and Khyrhyelle's imparting of it. "How is it you came to wear grey?"

The High Witch was solemn. "That I cannot reveal. Would you be able to if that question were asked of you?"

"I can understand why you wear the grey. But what about me? It must be a mistake—or a joke."

"Spiritually, you are at the same level as I. You must now achieve the same level in the physical world. You must gain the experience that will attune your physical body to your Soul."

"What about the others, though? I can see how you are above the others and are High Witch because you wear grey. But are there different levels associated with the different Paths?"

Khyrhyelle shook her head. "First of all, I am not 'above' anybody. A little farther down the Path perhaps, but not above or better. For example, if we set out on a journey, and I began before you did, would I be better than you?"

"Of course not," Uriel responded.

The High Witch continued. "Anything I may have learned by starting out before you might not even be beneficial to you because you might choose a different path than I did for your journey. It simply might not apply. And even if we did choose the same path, we are still two different people. What was successful for me may actually work to inhibit your progress. Not to mention that what I was meant to experience on the journey may be different than you."

Uriel was awed. Even though it was a very different perspective for him, he immediately grasped the simple truth of it.

Khyrhyelle proceeded to address the rest of the question. "Secondly, the High Witch does not necessarily wear grey. The vast majority of all the High Witches have been white or black robes." Uriel seemed surprised at this and the High Witch tried to help him with it. "The 'levels'

you ask about are referred to as grades. We have eight."

The High Witch went on to explain the system of progression for the Witches of the Moons. "The first three grades are designed to have the student learn the theory, practice and philosophy of witchcraft. A novice that arrives at the Towers and devotes her life to our practices begins at the grade of Theorycus. When she demonstrates that she comprehends the tenets set before her, she is then allowed to begin to practice the Arts under the grade of Practycus. When one exhibits a certain level of competence, she advances to Phylosophus, where she begins the study of metaphysics and is exposed to a higher level of complexity in the Arts. Most of the Guardians fall into the grades of Practycus or Phylosophus. Ghemella, for instance, has been newly elevated to the grade of Phylosophus. She is more than adequate in spellcraft but needs to strive to understand the underlying concepts behind the practice of the Arts."

"What about the Council?" Uriel asked.

"Not so fast," Khyrhyelle said as she smiled. "At the grade of Phylosophus, the procedure changes slightly. In the first two grades, when one demonstrates competence at one level, they progress to the next. However, the grade of Phylosophus is designed to lead the student to the level of teacher; from novice to master. To progress from Phylosophus to Adeptus Mynor, one must *master* the knowledge of the Adeptus Mynor level before one is elevated to the grade."

"How long does this take?"

"Sometimes months, sometimes years. It depends entirely on the dedication of the student. The process is the

same when one desires to advance beyond Adeptus Mynor. There are two further grades, Adeptus Major and Adeptus Exemptus. In order to be considered for a seat on the Council, one must have at least achieved the fourth grade, Adeptus Mynor."

"Would it be improper to ask what grades the Council members have?" Uriel was a little embarrassed at his request.

"Not at all," the High Witch responded. "Their grades are known to any who know how to decipher the markings on their robes. Of the black robes, both Qelharre and Dhynelle are Adeptus Mynor. Eyrmysse is an Adeptus Major." Uriel face showed an added respect for Khyrhylle's black robed daughter. "Of the white robes, Arhyvhyne and Lhynette are Adeptus Majors. Wyxotte has attained the level of an Adeptus Exemptus. Although I really do not know if she still has command of all that grade entails."

"And yourself? I take it you are an Adeptus Exemptus."

"No, I am not. There are two further grades which are only available to those who wear the grey. The wisdom imparted in the grades of Magyster Temply and Magus would be lost upon those who wore the white or the black. The six previous grades can be viewed from a black or white perspective. The final two grades require the blending of the two Paths into one. And in case you are wondering, I am of the Magyster Temply grade."

"Are there advantages exclusive to each grade? Can Wyxotte tell Lhynette what to do, for instance?"

"The grades are merely signs to indicate to one's Self how far one has travelled down the Path and how much

farther one still needs to progress." The High Witch frowned before she continued. "Unfortunately, many times the grades are pursued not for the desire to progress, but to impress and gain the adulation of others. 'So-and-so has reached that grade, so I have to. I have to surpass so-and-so.' That sort of thing. Any perceived rights and privileges are non-existent. Except that once you attain any of the Adeptus grades, you are qualified to teach the lessons of any of the previous grades. Outside of that we are all equals and should treat each other as such."

Uriel was overwhelmed, not only by what Khyrhyelle imparted, but by her depth of knowledge and her ability to relate it. "It's a lot to take in. I'm not sure about all this."

"As well you should not be. Do not accept merely because it is I who speak. Seek out the answers to your questions and find the truths within yourself. But remember, some truths are best left veiled until the Soul can bear the weight of their knowledge."

As he reflected on their conversation, Uriel noticed that the sky had turned overcast and the light breeze had given way to a cooler wind. He wondered if he detected the hint of a warning in her last statement.



"Damn!" the sylph said, struggling with the barrier surrounding the Towers. "Relax, just calm down," he said out loud. "How in the abyss am I supposed to relax with that *thing* out there?" he asked himself. "Just shut up and do it," he said, answering his own question. Finally successful, he

raced to the Guard Station.

Ghemella gave the sylph a strange look as he approached. He was a little shorter than his predecessor had been and his body was made up of a blue-grey cloud-like substance that drifted on eddies of air. "Vento?" she asked warily.

The sylph's cherubic little face was blowing out breaths of wind as he spoke. "The High Witch... where is she?"

"She is indisposed." Ghemella failed to hold back a smile. *I am out of practice*, she thought wistfully. "What can I help you with?"

Vento still had not caught his breath. "Slayer!" he gasped.

It took the dark Guardian a moment to discern what the sylph said, but then her eyes grew large with sudden understanding. "Slayer?" she said, her look quickly turning to one of worry. "Where?"

"Nearing the... grounds," Vento managed.

"Khyrhyelle," she whispered. She had to warn the High Witch, but that would mean leaving her post. There wasn't any question in her mind about which took precedence. She began to leave, stopped and called back to the sylph. "Vento, inform the others about the Slayer and tell them where I have gone. Oh, and find someone to take over here."

"But..." he called out, stopping short as Ghemella was already too far away to hear him. Vento shook his head. "A bad omen. Very bad. Extremely very bad."



Ghemella had walked the area just outside the barrier for the better part of a half hour without finding any trace of Khyrhyelle and Uriel. Already in a frenzy, she began to panic even more when she couldn't find them. She was hesitant to locate them by reaching out with her mind, fearing the SoulSlayer might discover her. But she was losing time. *It may already be too late.* "Stop thinking like that," she said out loud.

The dark little witch thought she caught a glimpse of something through the trees. She headed in that direction, but saw no trace of the couple. The wind had become fierce and the cold of the air was mingling with the ice flowing through her veins. She suddenly felt another, isolated cold, the cold touch of magic, malevolent magic. With her dwarves sight, she was able to make out glowing scarlet spheres far in the distance.

Ghemella moved away quickly and silently. She stopped several times, listening for telltale sounds but heard nothing. She kept looking over her shoulder, trying to determine if there was any pursuit. She almost screamed out loud when, with her head turned, she ran into Khyrhyelle's back, sending both of them to the ground.

"Ghemella," the High Witch said, "whatever are you doing? Why are you here?"

The witch hugged Khyrhyelle, then swiftly regained her composure. She gave both her and Uriel a meaningful look, then held a finger to her lips. "Shhh. SoulSlayer," she whispered.

The High Witch did not waste any time. "The barrier, quickly!" she said quietly.

The threesome moved off in the direction of the barrier, using the trees as camouflage. Many times they stopped, hearing sounds that may have been their hearts beating in their chests, blood rushing through their ears or the footfalls of their adversary. Each time they could never be sure which it was.

They finally got close enough to the barrier to feel the tingling of the encompassing magic when Slayer and mount suddenly appeared, barring their Path. It focused its flaming eyes directly on Uriel, disregarding the others. "Greetings, mortal," the multi-voiced entity said.

At the sound of the Slayer's voices, Uriel went numb. He dropped to his knees and covered his ears against the laughter interspersed with wails and laments. Khyrhyelle began to utter some Words but Ahrokh was ready for her. "Silence, slut!" the dissonant voices screamed out as an invisible arm picked Khyrhyelle up and slammed her into a tree. The arm tore at her breast and then moved to her neck, suspending her against the tree, two feet off the ground.

Uriel voiced a soundless scream when he saw Khyrhyelle pinned to the tree. *I've got to save her.* He struggled to one foot and tried to push himself towards his staff. But he was overcome by the stench of death emanating from Ahrokh and he fell to the ground, retching. Ghemella, sensing that something must be done soon to preserve Khyrhyelle's life, rushed the Slayer, curved knife in hand.

Ahrokh immediately turned his concentration to the Guardian, releasing the hold on the High Witch who dropped to the ground. Before Ghemella could get close, the outstretched skeletal finger pointed to her and began to

consume her essence.

Uriel picked his head up and frantically searched for his staff. He saw it in front of him and slightly to the right. He reached out his hand but was nowhere near it. He heard Ghemella whimpering and tried to crawl. *Hurry damn it, hurry!* He reached again with all his strength and felt like he tore a muscle but he also felt the touch of wood. Just then he heard an agonizing scream issue forth from Ghemella. Uriel grabbed the staff, rolled onto his stomach, pointed the staff in the general direction of the Slayer and spoke a single Word.

A bolt of lightning exploded from the staff. Dazed and unsteady, Uriel's aim was off. Instead of the Slayer, the mount was struck, which in reality was nearly as effective. Ahrokh, preoccupied with taking Ghemella, reacted too late to deflect Uriel's blow. He was unseated heavily, the mount sprawled back a distance as well.

Amidst the ensuing confusion the Council appeared, though Wyxotte and Dhynelle were not among them. With their help Khyrhyelle, Ghemella and Uriel were ushered into the protective barrier before SoulSlayer and mount could recover adequately. The group stood within the confines of the barrier, taking stock. Khyrhyelle and Uriel were both fine, if a little shaken. Ghemella, her eyes distant and unfocussed, was in shock but would recuperate.

Outside the barrier, Ahrokh was once again atop his skeletal stallion, flaming eyes burning with hate. The High Witch walked up to the edge of the barrier and stared at the Slayer with granite eyes. "You have erred," she said quietly though all heard her.

A thousand voices of laughter erupted from Ahrokh. "Erred? This has only been a greeting. The appointed time has not yet arrived, Oh most holy slut. I only wish they would allow me the opportunity to taste the sweetness of your body before I ravaged you." Khyrhelle shook from a combination of fear, disgust and anger. "But alas, that is not meant to be. Your fate has been entrusted to another."

"We will see," said Khyrhelle.

"No, unfortunately *you* will not. Time will not allow you to see our victory." The laughter came again and the stallion reared. Ahrokh pointed to Uriel and called, "Until we meet again." The SoulSlayer then turned and galloped away.

CHAPTER X

Uriel poked a burning log in the fireplace. Khyrhyelle had been in a foul mood the remainder of the day. Uriel tried several approaches to bring her out of it, all of them excluding any mention of the afternoon encounter. Each attempt however, was futile. So he tried the more direct approach. "Interesting day, wasn't it?"

"Quite."

Okay, so much for that. Let's try concern. "How is Ghemella?" That, to Uriel's surprise, made the High Witch laugh. "What's so funny?"

"Ghemella," Khyrhyelle responded. "When she recovered sufficiently to speak, she asked for me and I went to see her. She was falling all over herself thanking me for saving her Soul. She practically fainted when I told her *you* were her savior."

Uriel scowled. "The more I think about it..."

"Nonsense," Khyrhyelle countered. "You would save her again and again if the need arose."

"Only because she was protecting you."

"Am I truly to believe that?" They both laughed but then Khyrhyelle turned serious. "Uriel, how did you manage that spell you used on the Slayer?"

"It just sort of came to my mind all of a sudden. I had read it in a book I picked up in the library on basic spells. It was the only spellbook I've looked at because I was worried about the power. Even some of those basic ones looked

pretty potent to me. I mean, look at what I did to the SoulSlayer. If that would have been an ordinary person, I would have killed them."

"The interesting thing is, Uriel, that if I were to cast that spell on you right now, you would only be mildly stunned and only for a very short time. You must have the ability to enhance the properties of a spell. And though the power frightens you, you really should become more familiar with the art, especially if any more altercations like this afternoon arise."

Uriel left Khyrhelle standing and sat in front of the fireplace. "Khyrhelle, what about this afternoon? What do you make of it?"

Khyrhelle let out a sigh. "Two things. First, we were foolish to think that they, whoever they may be, forgot about you. You are obviously still their utmost priority. Secondly, we will all have to be very careful whenever we leave the grounds."

"What reason would there be to leave the grounds?"

"The Midsummer Day celebrations for one."

"What's MidSummer Day?"

"Ah, you have not studied the festivals yet, have you?" Khyrhelle remarked.

Uriel shook his head. "No, I haven't got to them yet."

"We celebrate eight festivals during the course of our year, one of which is MidSummer Day. It is a celebration of life, marking the time when the day is the longest and night the shortest. It represents the pinnacle of life, the supreme triumph of light over dark."

"How do you celebrate it?" Uriel asked.

"Normally it is a five day affair where all the residents of each city or village gather together and participate in food, drink, games, contests and the like."

"How do the witches celebrate it?"

"It is a little more special for us. For the witches, Midsummer Day is also a sort of respite. Because we are confined—by our own volition, mind you—to the Towers for the greater part of the year, we allow ourselves to take leave of the Towers for a period of a month. This allows us sufficient time to travel to and from our respective homelands, or wherever we may wish to participate in the MidSummer Day celebration. It is also the time we allow ourselves to forsake our abstinences."

Uriel gave her a questioning look. "Your abstinences?"

Khyrhyelle sat down beside Uriel before she answered. "There are several things that one should abstain from in order to keep the Spirit from being tainted when performing magics or partaking in ritual. As I am sure you no doubt noticed, we do not eat any meats and only consume wine, mead and ale as beverages, not something to be indulged in. Nor are any forms of narcotics tolerated, except in certain rituals. We always dress in our respective robes. And, of course, barring you, there are no men."

"So this festival is the only time you are... allowed to do these things?"

"We do not encourage everyone to go out and do these things while they are away. Nor do we actually forbid them throughout the year. They are merely actions which detract from our energy levels and so impair our effectiveness in our chosen vocation. The goal is to view other things as more

beneficial, leaving one's previous interests behind. However, there are certain physical needs which are more difficult to live without than others. And sometimes it is necessary to fulfill those needs."

Uriel suddenly felt the heat of the fire on his face. He shifted uncomfortably. "Are you alluding to..." Uriel fumbled for the right word but left it hang.

"Sex? Yes," Khyrhyelle responded in a matter-of-fact manner. "For some, it reaches the point where they have taken to enjoying the company of other women. Dhynelle, for instance, though she has had abhorrence of men for a very long time."

"What about you? You have two daughters." The question no sooner left his mouth than he was embarrassed to have asked it.

"It was the first MidSummer Day after I became High Witch. There had been a great deal of dissent concerning my ascension. The year had been a trying one and the pressure I felt was great. I went away for the celebration with every intention of releasing my frustrations. I came upon a small festival and indulged myself with strong wines and meads, and I imagine someone took their liberties with me."

Uriel was incredulous. "Someone would rape the High Witch?"

"It was unlikely he, they, knew who I was. And I never said I was unwilling."

Uriel tried to disregard the 'they.' "You don't even know who the father is?"

She shrugged. "I remember little of that evening." Khyrhyelle reflected inwardly for a moment before

continuing. "Arhyvhyne was an entirely different matter. I had so much enjoyed Eyrmysse that I decided I wanted another child. A man, an earl that kept us in supplies on a continuing basis had become enamored with me. He was a good person, decent, fair and hard working. He kept trying to convince me to marry him, which as a witch I could not, nor had I any desire to do. I did decide however, that he would make a good father and so I made him the proposition that he could be with me during the MidSummer celebration, but that I would keep any female offspring he bore on me. At first he was reluctant, but he agreed after realizing that would be the only way and the only time he would have me."

"Do all the people of Khaballe take sex so lightly?"

The High Witch sensed that Uriel was a bit piqued and choose her words carefully. "No. Some such as the upper nobility regard it very highly, demanding virginal marriages for instance. However others, such as ourselves, do not. Many confuse love with sex while often times one has nothing to do with the other, sex being a product of physical attraction or need and love being something cultivated over an extended period of time. Love can be and should be expressed daily, in a thousand different ways that are much more significant than the single physical act of sex."

Something inside Uriel was moved by Khyrhyelle's words but he refused to acknowledge them. Instead, he sat quietly, brooding. Khyrhyelle stood and then took his hands, helping him up. Khyrhyelle looked at him intensely, her eyes glistening with emotion. Uriel felt the flame of desire burn in his heart and clasped her hands tightly. "You fear for

the feelings we share for one another," Khyrhyelle said, telling herself as much as she was him. "Do not be afraid. There is no one else, nor do I search for another. My fondness for you has grown into deep affection. I cannot explain it, I cannot understand it and, Goddess knows, I have fought against it. But the feeling remains and grows stronger as the days pass. Uriel, I want you to be with me during the MidSummer celebration. And I want you to stay with me after as well." She held him tenderly, then kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You should be going now. It has been a long and difficult day. We both need some rest."

Uriel's head was spinning and he was too overcome with emotion to speak. After giving her a long look, he finally began to say something, but Khyrhyelle put a finger up to his lips. He gave her a half smile, then turned to leave. He stopped at the doorway and looked at her again. He took everything in, the silver of her hair, the grey of her eyes, the shape of her mouth, the curves of her body. He replayed the musical tones of her voice in his mind. He wanted to memorize everything about her, to immortalize her very essence in his Soul. He spoke the words "I love you" but was never sure if he had said them aloud or mentally.



Though it was getting late and Uriel was physically exhausted, he knew he would not be able to sleep. His emotions were running wild. Part of him was afraid that if he went to sleep, he might wake up and find out that it was all a dream. Ironically, it was not long ago that he wished

that were the case. Another part of him wanted to retrace every word and feeling that passed between Khyrhelle and him and drown in that luscious high, but he knew that would probably drive him crazy. Still another part told him he *was* crazy for not going back to Khyrhelle and taking her in his arms and spending the night with her. He opted to stop by his room to pick up a book and proceeded to the library. He figured he could try to do some studying which might help to put off, at least temporarily, sorting through these newly released feelings.

Uriel returned the book he brought to a shelf and chose one concerning the festivals of Khaballe. He sat at a table, lit a candle and turned pages for a half hour retaining little if anything he read. Whenever he ran across anything concerning MidSummer, he would think about the celebrations which in turn led him to fantasizing about Khyrhelle and him. He was still too happy and too excited and too everything else to actually get any pertinent information from his reading. He was doing poorly at keeping his emotions under control. His latest feelings however, were an onslaught of guilt. Memories of Lynn and Danny haunted him, arguing that he should not allow himself to become entangled in any relationships.

A flash caught his eye, dragging him from his self ministrations. Uriel was startled to see a silver moon dangling from a chain across from him. He looked up from where the moon was nestled in a valley of cleavage to a playful smile and then to enticing violet eyes. "I didn't hear you come in."

"How could you? You were leagues, if not worlds

away." Eyrmysse was leaning slightly forward, her arms folded and resting on the table.

Uriel was totally disoriented. He let out a deep breath. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I was. What are you doing here at this hour?"

Eyrmysse raised an eyebrow. "I could ask the same question."

Eyrmysse always seemed to make Uriel uncomfortable. "I was, uh, just studying."

The black robe gazed at his book. "The festivals. Which one interests you?"

Uriel said, "The celebrations of MidSummer," and saw the witch's smile widen. *Damn, I walked right into this one!*

Eyrmysse sat back and played with a black curl. "My favorite," she said. She pushed herself away from the table and stood up slowly, allowing Uriel to caress her body with his eyes. Then she fixed her gaze on him, not allowing him to break the contact. She moved with fluidity, letting her words carefully embrace him. "MidSummer Day is a celebration of life and the creation of life. It is intertwined with the passions of power and the lusts of the soul. It is the visitation to the temple of the flesh and the worship of pleasure. It is the essence of sensuality."

Uriel's mouth was dry, his palms wet and he was sure Eyrmysse could hear his heart pounding. It only got worse when she came around the table and stood next to him. Eyrmysse reached out and Uriel froze with trepidation, not even allowing himself to breathe. But Eyrmysse simply picked the book up off the table.

"A wizard with your powers should not waste his time

with things of this nature. Your studies should be solely of the magical arts." Eyrmysse left with the book, losing herself in one of the library's many aisles. Uriel thought it a good time to leave. He got up, stretched, looked around and not seeing the witch anywhere, made for the door. But with his hand on the door, he heard Eyrmysse call "Wait!"

Eyrmysse walked up to Uriel holding three books. She held them out to him and he accepted them. "These are much more appropriate for someone of your stature," she said. Uriel looked at the titles: *Guardians of the Black Arts*, *Rite & Ritual* and *Theurgical Goety*. A severe shiver ran the length of his spine as he could almost feel the power the books emanated. He became aware, as if for the first time, how the library looked eerie, bathed only in candlelight. He was scared.

He paged through one of the books, feigning interest. A drawing on a page caught his attention and saw that the subject matter referred to sexual magic. Uriel quickly closed the book and tried to hand all three back to Eyrmysse. He attempted a look of confidence with a half smile as he said "I don't think I'll be needing these."

The black robe gave him an intense look. "You are probably right," she agreed, though she did not take the books back. "You have shown your mastery in a great many ways. Only you are capable of performing the Ritual of Renascence as was intended by the great ones. And even your minor spells are so great that they can have an effect on a SoulSlayer. The others fear you, but not I. No, I would worship you. Make me your apprentice. Teach me. Show me the greatest magic."

Uriel shook his head, trying to discourage her. "Eyrmysse, the greatest magic I know of is love."

"Then show me love." Eyrmysse threw her long black locks back seductively and slowly ran both her hands from her thighs to her chest. Her hands stopped there and she drew the left side of her robe away, revealing an ample breast. An endless moment passed before Eyrmysse cupped her breast with her right hand and sensually massaged the nipple with her thumb and forefinger. A small moan escaped her as she bit her lower lip and moved towards Uriel.

Uriel was torn between fright and desire. He murmured, "No," but Eyrmysse paid no attention. They were face to face now, and Uriel was becoming intoxicated with the smell of her hair, her perfume. Eyrmysse reached down with her left hand and forced him to drop the books. Then she took his right hand and moved it to her exposed supple flesh. *God help me*, Uriel thought. Just then, the library door opened hitting him square in the back and sending him to the floor. Arhyvhyne walked in and immediately went to help Uriel up. Eyrmysse, meanwhile, had spun around and adjusted herself before her sister even knew she was there.

"Are you all right?" Arhyvhyne asked Uriel.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm fine."

"Eyrmysse?" Arhyvhyne gave her sister a puzzled look. "I am sorry. Have I interrupted anything?"

Uriel didn't give Eyrmysse a chance to respond. "No. No, nothing at all. Your sister was just helping me select some books, that's all." Uriel had a thought and quickly added, "Since you're here, would you mind giving me your opinion as well?"

Arhyvhynne was flattered. "Certainly," she responded.

Eyrmysse gave Uriel a cold stare, leaving no question as to her displeasure. "Yes, by all means sister, please assist our little wizard. I believe I have done all I could for him, tonight." Eyrmysse moved past Arhyvhynne to the door, then turned and stopped. She tossed her head, twisted a curl and allowed her smile to return. But the smile looked cruel and calculated to Uriel. "Until we meet again." As Eyrmysse left the library, Uriel wondered if it was just coincidence that she used the same parting shot as did the SoulSlayer.

While Uriel stared at the door, Arhyvhynne picked up the books and examined them. She was dismayed. "You are not going to study these are you?"

"Huh? No. No, your sister picked them out for me." Although Uriel wanted to retreat to the quiet of his room, he thought he really should take advantage of Arhyvhynne being here and get her help in selecting a couple of spell books. Reflecting on the events of the day, he felt it was time he began to play by house rules. And apart from Khyrhynne, he respected, trusted and liked Arhyvhynne most. "I didn't want to say anything with Eyrmysse here but I thought you might help me pick out something more... appropriate. Something relatively easy that I could start out with."

"You must forgive Eyrmysse. She is beautiful and arrogant and tends to immerse herself in obtaining power. She uses all her talents to draw others down her chosen Path. She is very accomplished for her age. And I say that as a colleague, not her sister. Though I must admit I wish she had chosen the white Path. Eyrmysse would have been a highly

regarded white robe. But I respect her choice. She is my sister and I admire and love her very much."

Uriel nodded agreement, thinking how well Arhyvhyne knew her sister, though he just couldn't picture her wearing white. Or maybe he just couldn't see her in anything other than black.

Arhyvhyne helped Uriel select two books to help him begin to understand magic. One, simply entitled *White Magic*, was the book Arhyvhyne herself began with. She spent a good deal of time painstakingly describing some pertinent details to Uriel before she even allowed him to open the book. And Uriel appreciated it, gaining insights that had previously escaped him.

"I think you would make a wonderful teacher," he told her.

"Thank you."

"No, thank *you*. You have no idea in how many ways you have helped me this evening."

Arhyvhyne's deep blue eyes shone. "It pleases me greatly that I have been able to help you, even in this small manner."

Uriel bade her good night, thinking how happy he was that he was able to bring such a truly good person back from the dead.



Uriel returned to his room to find the door slightly ajar. He stood outside his room, not sure what to do. He had visions of Eyrmysse lying in bed, waiting for him with her

nakedness. Then he thought it might be Khyrhyelle. He pushed the door very slowly and carefully, at most an inch and tried to peek in but spied no telltale clues. Finally he worked up enough nerve to enter.

Uriel walked into an empty room. A cursory glance indicated that nothing had been disturbed. He placed the books onto a table and moved to the window. Arms over his head, he leaned against the wall and looked out at the two moons. He ran the events of the day through his mind, quickly passing over some, lingering on others. He turned around and rolled his neck, trying to relieve some of his tension. It was then he noticed something on his pillow.

He moved to the bed and picked up what he now knew was a note. It read:

*Go to the first dungeon level. Enter
the sixth room on the right. Wait for
me there. Come alone. Tell no one.*

Khyrhyelle

Uriel read the note over again. He wondered why Khyrhyelle wanted to see him at this hour, why it couldn't wait a couple hours until the morning. He also questioned why he had to be alone and why he couldn't tell anyone. His thoughts were interrupted when the note suddenly flared, startling him. His frantic hands opened to release the note, but to his amazement found it had vanished without leaving a trace. Evidently, Khyrhyelle was taking no chances. Uriel exhaled a loud sigh and said "Just what I need after a day

like today, more intrigue."

His thoughts turned to the dungeon, a place he had heard about but never visited. Somehow, he could not convince himself that this was an ideal time to become acquainted with it. He decided to take a light cloak should the dungeon be cold, a candle and his staff. Thinking he might have to wait for the High Witch, he picked up one of the books from the library, *White Magic*. Then he thought better of it and returned it to the table, figuring he would be too tired—or worried—to read.

A deep feeling of foreboding walked along side Uriel as he made his way to the dungeon. The only sounds in the Towers came from his footsteps and an occasional crackle from a torch. The shadows on the walls played tricks with his eyes and added to his apprehension.

He could only come up with a few reasons why Khyrhyelle would want to see him under these conditions, none of them good. The most probable one was the one he feared the most: that Khyrhyelle had somehow found out about the episode with Eyrmysse. Earlier, before he found the note, he had debated with himself over whether he should tell Khyrhyelle about it or not. He decided that he should, but now, faced with the reality of it, began to second-guess himself. Another possibility was that the King decided he wanted his head and that Khyrhyelle was attempting to sneak him out. And then an even darker thought crossed his mind. After another encounter with the SoulSlayer, maybe the Council decided that to eliminate him would also eliminate their problems.

His descent was becoming an act of labor as physical

exhaustion and mental anxiety vied for his attention. Nearing his destination of the first level, Uriel heard a loud popping sound. He spun around and smashed into the stone wall, dropping his candle. "Shit! Damn!" He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized the sound came from a torch. Though Uriel wanted to turn back, he continued on and reached the first level without resting, more out of fear than determination.

He made his way to the sixth room on the right and found it was empty. Thinking he may have misunderstood, Uriel checked a few other rooms but encountered nothing different. He was afraid of that. He had secretly hoped that when he got here, regardless of her reasons, Khyrhyelle would be waiting for him. It was not enough to be tired and worried. Now he would have to wait for her on top of it.

Upon entering the sixth room, a blinding flash was emitted. Because of his long trek in the darkness, Uriel had difficulty adjusting his eyesight. But after a long moment his vision cleared, allowing him to see the magical symbols of a ward floating about him.

After his initial anger subsided, Uriel tried yelling to gain someone's attention but it was to no avail. He finally sat down, resigning himself to his fate. He asked himself over and over who would do this and why. His speculations were endless. They were also fruitless.

Time slowly passed and his thoughts drifted to the High Witch. In Khyrhyelle, he believed he had found someone who could adequately fill the void that had hurt him for so long. He recalled the lingering look he had of her and was afraid that somehow, something had changed between them.

He prayed it would not be so. He also thought of Eyrmysse. He knew that every time he saw or even thought about Eyrmysse, the unbidden image of her partial nakedness would enter his mind. He had a feeling that the woman was as dangerous as she was alluring and vowed to keep his distance.

Finally, there was Arhyvhynne. Though she lacked Khyrhylene's wisdom, she made up for it with her honesty, sincere caring and willingness to give of herself. She was one of those rare people whose outer beauty matched the inner. He was very fond of her. As he pictured Arhyvhynne in his mind's eye, the words of the haggard old man on the mountaintop echoed hauntingly in his ears. They were Uriel's last recollections as he surrendered his exhausted body to sleep.



Uriel woke with a start. He was instantly wide awake, keenly aware of a dread which coursed through his body. He had no conception as to how much time had passed, but he knew he had to find an escape from the ward. *Now*. He suddenly knew there was only one reason for someone to want to keep him here.

He studied the ward and saw that it had begun to fade. *Not enough!* he thought. He cursed his failure to bring the book on magic. It could have supplied a way out. Uriel considered his alternatives. Although he thought better of it, he took his staff, pointed it at the ward barring his exit and spoke a Word. Lightning from the staff struck the ward but

ricocheted off. Uriel ducked as the bolt dangerously caromed off ceiling, walls and floor before it struck Uriel a painful, if light blow on the arm. Ignoring the burning in his arm, Uriel examined the ward. He decided it was considerably weaker and that he might be able to get through it now.

Uriel held his staff as a lance, lowered his left shoulder, braced himself, and then ran full force into the barrier. A massive, excruciating shock surged through his system, rendering him momentarily unconscious. He was badly shaken and in a great deal of pain. He felt burning sensations in many places on his body. He opened his eyes, blinking several times before he could determine he had made it to the hallway. The realization that he made it through the barrier strengthened his resolve. *Move. Move, damn it, before it's too late!* With the help of his staff, Uriel gained his feet and staggered off into the darkness.



The cowed and black robed witch moved stealthily through the hallway. She had been very careful, making sure no one had seen her. The witch did not even use a torch or candle, preferring to be concealed in the comfort of the shadows. She reached her destination, tried the door, found it bound by magic. Nothing less than expected. A few Words and a couple of signs and the door was opened. She silently closed it behind her.

The witch viewed her prey as pangs of guilt showered down on her. *No matter. It must be done.* She removed the

contents from within the folds of her robe and prepared them. This would be the critical part. She had to wait for the ingredients to blend properly. As the magical properties increased, so did the chance that her victim would sense their presence. Anxious moments passed without incident. The black robe gathered the mixture and sprinkled it over the victim's body while reciting the appropriate Words. A web-like substance first enveloped the body, seeped into it and then constricted the vitals. The victim lay enervated, unable to prevent life from being slowly and painfully drained away.



Though Khyrhyelle was deep in sleep, a part of her, a magical sense, knew something was amiss. Her will fought desperately to leave the rest she knew she needed, but the response of her flesh was sluggish. When she came awake, it was only to find herself unable to move. She helplessly struggled against what felt like a sticky film encompassing her entire body. Pain exploded throughout her being as the substance penetrated her body and clenched her internals in a vice.

The High Witch knew what was happening now and with that knowledge, also knew there was nothing she could do. She was deep in the throes of a powerful black magic and she had no way to reverse the process. She was dying. The thought did not frighten her. What frightened her was the reason why someone would want her dead.

Amidst the agonizing pain, Khyrhyelle could still feel

her energy seep away. The High Witch focused on the energy, reached out with her will and gathered power for what she was sure would be the last time. She used the remnants of her strength to open her eyes. And she beheld her murderer.

Strength and will were abandoned. Her mind swirled in a frenzy, Tarot cards flashed by, their meanings screamed in her mind. Khyrhyelle's last thought was of Uriel and then the pain was gone. She felt her Self leaving, went through her reflections and then Khyrhyelle was embraced by the Light.

CHAPTER XI

The road from Sevher'tah to Bhel'Ehzz ran east-southeast and connected with the road from Ghlor Nhor some leagues west of the capital. Though it was not an overly long route, the rains of spring in central Khaballe had made the going painfully slow. Still, Mhylzul was ahead of his appointed meeting time by a day. He travelled alone and paused only for brief meals and rest, more for his horse than himself. The horse, an all purpose bay Mhat he "acquired" just before he set out, had been more than adequate for his needs.

Mhylzul approached the junction of the two roads and came to a halt. He stared ahead into the dreary, overcast sky, unaffected by the steadily falling rain or the brisk wind that accompanied it. Rain had followed his entire journey from Sevher'tah. First he had grown accustomed to it, then welcomed it. After all, once you were wet it didn't much matter any longer. And it had served as a deterrent to others, allowing him to travel the road relatively unnoticed.

As he paused, sitting in the rain, his thoughts were on Bhel'Ehzz. If he pushed, he would be there before late evening, a full day before he was required. He thought about the comfort of a bed and someone to share it with and decided it was worth the effort. Mhylzul adjusted his pack, spurred his horse and moved on.

After several hours Mhylzul could begin to discern the flickering lights of the capital as dusk turned into night. He continued for another league or so then turned off the road and headed northeast. He rode in that direction until he neared the

Twisted Horn River. Mhylzul dismounted, removed his pack from the horse and sent the animal away with a kick in the rump. After shouldering the pack, he carefully made his way down to the river, getting as close to the city as he would dare.

Mhylzul hesitated at the riverbank for only a moment before entering the Twisted Horn, being mindful to try to keep the pack dry. He had chosen this method of entry because the roads into the walled capital were guarded. Anyone entering or leaving Bhel'Ehzz was required to state their business and was subject to inspection. Though Mhylzul could have obtained false credentials, he preferred no one had any documentation of his arrival or departure.

The swim was a long and cumbersome one, but such things had become routine and frequently necessary in his line of work. Once, after completing an assignment, he was required to seek refuge with the rats in the damp darkness of a cellar. Another time found him residing in the sewers of a city for an extended period. In comparison, the swim was not much of a sacrifice.

With the aid of the night gloom, Mhylzul passed into the city proper undetected. He made his way to a pier on the western bank and emerged from the river under its cover. He moved into an alleyway and began looking for some dry clothes. The first set Mhylzul found was on someone much smaller than him. He was a big man but did not have any distinguishing features. Except for his eyes. They were as black as his hair and held no mercy for anyone. Three more people passed and the cold was becoming bothersome before he found a suitable candidate. Obviously inebriated, the fellow would not be able to put up much of a fight. Still, Mhylzul wanted to prevent any kind of a scene. A blow to the head preceded his acquisition of a new wardrobe.

Mhylzul left the alleyway in search of the White Wyvern, a tavern named for the albino lizard which guarded the premises. He tried not to make a habit of staying in the same place twice, but knew he would have to in Bhel'Ehzz. The capital was kept relatively clean from the baser elements of society. There were only a handful of establishments where one could be served without inquiries. Fewer were the places where one could procure a woman.

The gloom and chill had made the White Wyvern busy tonight. Mhylzul entered and his nostrils were immediately assaulted by the odors of liquor, sweat and cheap perfume. He made a quick survey. A bard, singing the stories of times past had a crowd in the far corner. A voluptuous serving wench occupied a group in another corner. An intense gambling party occupied the third. There were no vacant tables and only one or two seats at the bar. Mhylzul was pleased. He would not be remembered.

Mhylzul made his way to the bar and took several minutes to eavesdrop on parts of barroom conversations. Satisfied with what he heard from one customer, he occupied one of the remaining seats next to him. Then he waited a few minutes for the bartender. The bartender, Ghudher, was a big, well-muscled bald man. He nodded to Mhylzul. "Ale," Mhylzul said, then laid down a silver *pennhutz*. "Strong," he added.

The bartender eyed the coin, then Mhylzul. Most of his patrons paid with copper *pennhutz* and most could not afford the stronger ale. He turned and came back a moment later with a mug, setting it before Mhylzul. Ghudher reached for the coin and Mhylzul, with lightning quick reflexes, pinned the bartender's hand to the bar with his left hand. They eyed each other coldly, but neither spoke a word. His eyes never leaving the barkeep, Mhylzul

grabbed the mug with his right hand and did not put it back down until its contents were gone. He nodded his approval and then smiled. A tremendous belch followed and then, turning the bartender's hand over, he placed another silver coin into it. "Just makin' sure," Mhylzul said, still smiling. Ghudher walked away, not amused.

Mhylzul consumed two more strong ales before he decided to start planting seeds. He turned to the man on his right and asked, "Whatta you think?"

"Huh?" A middle-aged man, well into his drinking, turned glassy eyes to Mhylzul.

"Didn't you hear 'em?"

"Who?"

"The knights, man, the knights."

"Knights! Where?" The man's eyes grew large and then began craning his neck, looking for knights.

"They were there, they saw 'em."

"Saw who?"

"Slayers!" he hissed.

"Slayers!" the man yelled.

Mhylzul backhanded him on the arm. "Shh. Don't let it get around." The man nodded vigorously. Mhylzul continued just above a whisper. "They say a wizard's come. Ghost of Thaum or somethin' like that." Mhylzul made a sign of protection. "They said they're up north. Comin' south. Been takin' everybody. Lost nine of their own before comin' back. Villages emptyin' out. Rumor is them bastards even took the High Witch."

The man turned to tell the story to his drinking partner and remembered his imposed vow of silence. He turned back, eager for more of the terrifying news, only to find an empty seat.

Mhylzul had made his way to the end of the bar and cornered Ghudher. "I'm lookin' for a bit of companionship."

Ghudher snorted, "Aren't we all."

Mhylzul pulled out a gold *pennhutz*. "I'm a bit more determined than others."

The bartender understood the double meaning. "Seven gold. Plus whatever the girl wants."

"Five. And not a copper more."

Ghudher folded his massive arms. "The price is seven."

Mhylzul liked the bartender. He had guts. He was stupid and was trying to steal him blind, but he had guts. He decided to give him one more chance. Mhylzul pulled out five gold *pennhutz* and said, "I strongly suggest you take the five." His smile was completely unnerving.

Sweat poured down Ghudher as he weighed his options. The din in the White Wyvern was steadily increasing and many at the bar were demanding more liquor. Finally he shook his head and moving past Mhylzul said, "Keep yer money."

Mhylzul grabbed the bartender's arm. He said quietly to his back, "My final offer. *Four* gold and the White Wyvern will still be standing in the morning."

Ghudher was not a man who was frightened easily. But something about Mhylzul did indeed scare the hell out of him. This guy was more than he seemed. He did not think he was bluffing. Again, loud calls caught his attention from the bar. He figured it was a good way to save face. He turned around and shook his arm free. He tried to give Mhylzul a look of anger mixed with frustration. "Deal," he said. "And make it fast. Customers are waitin' on me."

Just then an excited patron latched on to the bartender. "Ghudher! Ghudher! Did you hear about the SoulSlayers? Slayers are coming! Slayers!"

"What?" asked Ghudher, totally confused.

"Slayers! They took twenty-five knights up north. Even took the High Witch. And they say Thaum's come back!" With that the man made a sign.

Somehow Mhylzul managed a look of horror while smiling inwardly. *It was more than worth it*, he laughed to himself. He took Ghudher's hand and placed seven gold *pennhutz* in it. The bartender looked at his hand and then lifted puzzled eyes to Mhylzul. Mhylzul held his gaze for a moment and then asked, "Where are they?"

"Follow me," Ghudher managed in a shaky voice. Ghudher led Mhylzul down two corridors and up two flights of stairs. He showed him several girls. "Pick a girl and a room, I gotta get back." He hurried back down the stairs and to the bar. Along the way he wondered which disturbed him more, the rumors of Slayers or the man upstairs taking liberties with one of the girls.



Mhylzul decided on a room before he selected a girl. He checked four rooms before settling on one. He wanted one with a view. *Always leave yourself an out*, he thought. The one he chose was being used, but he managed to convince the occupants to leave. He then picked a young elven girl to spend the night with. Mhylzul had a thing for elves. Something about almond eyes and pointed ears. He often contemplated the possibility of any elven blood in his heritage.

After four times, Mhylzul finally fell into a deep slumber. The girl was thankful. He had been very rough with her and refused to pay her, saying he wanted her to stay till the morning should he want her again. She believed she deserved to be compensated now. The girl carefully got out of bed and began to go through his things. She found some wicked-looking weapons, papers with names and places and various pouches before she came across any money. She took some silver and copper and hid it behind a loose part of the wall. Then she decided to take some of his papers, hiding them as well.

Although still very early, morning came too quickly for either one of them. The elf girl rolled over and moaned as Mhylzul rose, stretched and did his customary visual inspection of his belongings. He immediately knew they had been tampered with. He had left his pack five floorboards from the wall and the pack was now resting against it. He always left his things a certain way and used mental markings as verification. This was not the first time it paid off.

He went to his pack, rummaged through it and took something out. He went back to the bed and adjusted his pillow. Then he slapped the girl on her bare bottom. The girl turned onto her back and Mhylzul placed ten silver *pennhutz* on her stomach. "Once more," he said. The ten silver coins plus what she took during the night made her very compliant.

After he was spent, Mhylzul kissed her forehead and reached under his pillow. Then, in what for him was a fond farewell, he kissed her left breast before slipping his knife up and under it. The girl had just enough time to gasp before dying.

Mhylzul searched the room and quickly found the papers and money the girl had taken. If it was only the money he would not

have had to kill her. But if she was able to read, the papers could have been very incriminating. He shook his head. *Greedy bitch*, he thought. Mhylzul took a copper and with a sarcastic smile inserted it into her. Then he dressed her, careful not to get any blood on the sheets. After making sure the alley was clear, he tossed her out the window. He stared down at the crumpled form for a moment, realizing he hadn't even known her name. "Too bad, you were pretty good."

Gathering his belongings, Mhylzul went downstairs. He bought an ale and mentioned his displeasure to Ghudher about the girl leaving him in the middle of the night. Then he went out searching. It didn't take him long to find what he needed. He hit an already unconscious drunk and carried him over to the girl. He draped him over her and placed the bloody knife in his hand. He was being sloppy, but he didn't much care. They would find a bloody girl and a man with a bloody knife. It would be good enough.

Mhylzul made a quick stop back at the White Wyvern. He motioned to Ghudher and the barkeep went to him. Mhylzul whispered even though there was only one other person in the room. "I found your girl. You better have a look out back." The barkeep's face lost its color. Ghudher went outside to see what had happened to the girl. When he returned Mhylzul was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER XII

The combination of fear and darkness pushed Uriel up the staircase at a reckless pace. He slipped and went down, but only lost a couple stairs while gaining another bruise. Climbing the staircase was physically much more straining than his descent and he could feel his will begin to waver. But he picked himself up and continued on, despite loud protests from his already exhausted body.

Time seemed to speed past and Uriel felt he surely must be near the top. Thinking he saw some light and heard some noises, he made a final, frantic push. He tried the stairs two at a time but missed. Uriel fell forward, then crashed into the wall. He screamed as he lost his balance and fell backwards down the stairs, his body coming to a stop a flight down.

Uriel did not know if he lost consciousness or not. All that he could sense was the urgency of the situation and the severe pounding in his head which prevented him from proceeding. His first movement caused him to expel the contents of his stomach. Slowly, he tried to get on all fours, every move causing some adverse reaction. He looked for his staff and thought he saw it a couple of stairs behind him. He backed down the stairs slowly and retrieved it, happy to have it back but at the same time thinking it was small consolation.

Unable to regain his feet, Uriel climbed the stairs on his hands and knees the remainder of the way. He was unable to skirt the area of his previous accident and it sickened him again. He was fortunate to keep his balance though his hands and knees were

heavily soiled. Farther up the stairs, Uriel tried to clean himself off, to no avail. The cold stone of the stairs cut his hands and knees making every step he reached not only painful but treacherous with the slickness of his own blood.

It was a long time before Uriel gained the Towers proper. He collapsed, allowing himself a moment of rest. Looking around he saw no one and heard nothing. He began moving again, crawling down to the end of the hallway where he used a table and his staff to stand up. Uriel stumbled off in the direction of Khyrhyelle's room. Along the way he encountered a few unfamiliar faces reflecting unabashed sorrow.

As Uriel approached Khyrhyelle's room he saw three Guardians barring the entrance. He immediately knew the middle one to be Ghemella. He recognized one of the others as the white robe who was usually with Ghemella. The other was a white robe as well, but someone Uriel did not know. He stopped a foot in front of Ghemella, saw the tears in her eyes. The panic and fear which had pursued him throughout the night caught up and washed over him. He was too afraid to speak. The Guardian looked him up and down and he realized how bad he must look.

"They have been searching for you," Ghemella managed, voice cracking. Uriel saw her lip quiver and the throat constrict. She tried to speak again, faltered. Then Ghemella stepped aside and solemnly opened the door. Uriel just stood there, moments passing as he tried to build up enough courage to walk in. He closed his eyes, let out a deep breath and finally entered the quarters of the High Witch.

They were all there, all seven of the Council. Qelharre was beside herself in Dhynelle's arms. Wyxotte was seated in a chair, her complexion the color of paste. Lhynette stood behind Wyxotte

with her hand on the old woman's shoulder. Eyrmysse stared out the window oblivious to everything. Arhyvhynne was on her knees beside Khyrhyelle's bed, holding her mother's hand to her breast and rocking gently back and forth. Only the daughters did not turn when Uriel entered the room.

Dhynelle was the first to speak. "Where have you been?" The words came slowly, the tone accusatory.

Uriel disregarded her as his eyes found Khyrhyelle. He did not have to ask. He knew. The immeasurable pain of loss struck a blow so hard that Uriel fell to his knees. He crawled to her side and met Arhyvhynne's gaze. Eyes red from tears looked into his for comfort, understanding. He had none to offer.

Uriel turned his eyes to the High Witch. "Come back. Khyrhyelle, please come... back." Uriel's eyes suddenly went wild with the recollection of his powers. He looked at Arhyvhynne and said, "I can bring her back!" Then he turned to the others as well and repeated himself. "I can bring her back! I *can!* I can do it!" Uriel touched Khyrhyelle with his staff and immediately tried to get into trance.

Arhyvhynne instantly grabbed hold of Uriel and shouted at him, "You cannot! It has been too long. You will lose yourself. You will die!" Uriel paid no heed and continued to attempt to build the proper images. But his energy level was spent and his will could no longer be sustained. Still he tried, however.

Then Uriel heard a voice which cut through his mind like a knife. Slowly he turned to look with dread into violet eyes. "Her Soul has already departed, Uriel. You cannot bring her back. An attempt of renascency after the Soul has departed would result in you losing your Soul as well." Eyrmysse twisted her final words into Uriel's heart. "You are too late."

With all hope taken away from him and replaced with oppressive guilt, Uriel slumped to the floor. Despair settled upon him. Somewhere in his mind he heard the words of the SoulSlayer Ahrokh predicting Khyrhyelle's demise. Then the words were accompanied by deep, guttural laughter. The tears only stopped when the darkness came.



This time, Uriel was spared the agony of apprehension. The Dark Ones were waiting for him. "You have once again succeeded in furthering our endeavor and proving yourself a worthy servant. Thank you, little worm." The words "Thank you" repeatedly echoed through his mind, becoming thunderous. Then the words transformed to a mocking "I love you," the voices a sick dissonance which parodied Khyrhyelle's harmonious tones. Macabre images of Ahrokh with Khyrhyelle assailed him.

Trying to escape the onslaught, Uriel withdrew deeper within himself. But the images would not relent. He was too weak, not up to the task before him. He wanted it all to stop, to be far away from this world. There was nothing for him here any longer. The pang of loss tore at his heart. Was it better to have loved and lost? *NO! Never!* He would gladly welcome the mercy of death were it offered.

So intense was Uriel's despair that he was unaware of the change that occurred. The Dark Ones had dwindled into the darkness and the darkness had transformed to a bright sky. Atop a mountain, the blind eyes of the ancient one reflected the pain etched deep in Uriel's heart.

As Uriel gradually became aware of the change, the old man

spoke to him. "As I share your grief, Uriel, so do I rejoice that Khyrhyelle has returned home. She has accomplished that which she was sent to do. Know that the HIERARCHY holds her in THEIR loving embrace. She is safe Uriel. She is beyond the grasp of the Dark Ones." With that, clouds began to converge. Then, amidst the clouds, Uriel saw Khyrhyelle wrapped in brilliance and felt THEIR presence ever so briefly. As the experience faded, he could barely make out the words of the Dweller, "Beware Thaum's daughter."



Uriel awoke to darkness. An agonizing moment escaped before he realized he was in his own room. He sat up in bed and, hoping it had all been the proverbial bad dream (but knowing it wasn't), decided to find the answer. He stood, walked to the door and opened it. Ghemella stood just outside. That was as much an answer as he needed, but decided to ask anyway. "I wasn't dreaming, was I?"

Ghemella shook her head. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Empty. Drained." Uriel sighed. "Ghemella, I..."

"I know. We all did—in our own way." Ghemella paused before telling Uriel the inevitable. "Uriel, the Council is waiting for you."

The realization bore down on him that his champion and protector was gone. He would face the Council alone. The fear he felt was apparent his eyes.

Ghemella led him wordlessly to the Council Chamber. She was about to knock and announce Uriel, but instead turned and

faced him, looked directly into his eyes. "I want to thank you for what you did yesterday."

Was it truly only yesterday? Uriel thought. He remembered Khyrhyelle laughing about this very topic. He smiled sadly. "Nothing anyone else wouldn't have done."

"Still, you were the one that did it. Thank you for saving my life." The witch held his gaze for a moment, exhaled a deep breath, then turned and knocked on the Chamber door.



The Council was not overly impressed with Uriel's explanation of his whereabouts from the previous evening. There were no witnesses and no note from the High Witch. Lhynette could, however, vouch for the ward. She had been sent to verify Uriel's claim and found lingering traces of the magical barrier.

The old feelings of mistrust had risen to the surface. While nothing truly implicated Uriel, nothing exonerated him either. None of the witches seemed willing to take his side. Certainly Dhynelle and Qelharre would not, as they were his chief accusers. Wyxotte as usual remained noncommittal. Lhynette might have been a possibility would the victim not have been Khyrhyelle. But deprived of the presence of the High Witch, she was being very cautious. Eyrmysse, who could have endeared herself to Uriel with her support, instead was vindictive. If Arhyhynne had been herself, she would surely have come to his defense. But she was overwrought with her loss, totally detached from the events transpiring around her.

The Council could only agree to confine Uriel to his room with Ghemella as his guard. Upon his departure, the witches

resumed arguments concerning what approach to use to expose Khyrhyelle's killer and what should ultimately be done with Uriel.

Dhynelle did not conceal her feelings regarding the latter. "We should rid ourselves of this curse. We should have him killed."

The word "killed" seemed to touch something deep in Arhyvhyne, evoking a response. "I have seen enough of death. I do not wish to conspire to be a part of another." She paused and looked at each of the witches in turn, reminiscent of her mother. "Do you forget that it was Uriel that saved my mother and Ghemella both from that incarnation of the abyss! She would have died! They both would have died! He would have achieved the same result without implicating himself. Why would he save her only to kill her hours later?" Though none of the witches responded, their suspicions were not diminished.

After the quiet had become uncomfortable, Wyxotte, as eldest of the Council and interim High Witch, turned the thoughts of the witches to finalizing the details of Khyrhyelle's funeral. In truth, there was little left to be determined. The last rites for a High Witch varied little from that of a Council member or common witch. A pyre would be constructed behind the Towers in the traditional place. All the witches would gather the following night under the moons. Dirges would be sung and rituals performed. The difference in the rites came when the High Witch Khyrhyelle would be cremated. This last event brought with it the question of Khyrhyelle's successor. The two candidates (one white robe, one black) for the exalted position of High Witch of the Moons would be performing the cremation rite.

Wyxotte went through the motions required as she requested a candidate from the black robes. There was no doubt as to who it

would be. Dhynelle was usually unable to divorce herself from her personal feelings and Qelharre's moods were known to all. Eyrmysse, though young, commanded respect with her strong abilities and was their choice. Then Wyxotte questioned her own white robes. The dwarf's thoughts went back to the last time she performed these duties. At that time she was not *quite* so old and still entertained thoughts of becoming High Witch herself. But a young witch, with unusual talent and acumen was chosen as the white robe candidate and eventually High Witch. A tear came to Wyxotte's eye. *Ah, Khyrhyelle. I'm so glad it was you. I would have paled in comparison. You were the best one for us. You always did the correct thing. I miss you already.*

The sound of Lhynette's voice brought the old witch back to the present. "I am sorry?" Wyxotte said, thinking she had not heard right.

"I do not wish to be a candidate," Lhynette repeated for her. "It is not my place. There is one more suitable than I."

Wyxotte gave Lhynette an incredulous look. It was generally thought it would come down to Lhynette and Eyrmysse with the white robe hopefully becoming High Witch in the end. "Goddess I am too old for this."

Qelharre came in on cue. "You are too old for anything other than death. And you would surely receive that were you to be a candidate and attempt the Trial."

"It never ceases to amaze me how stupid you can be." Wyxotte shook her head then looked to the ceiling and implored the Goddess. Then the dwarf directed her attentions back to the elf. "Do you really think I have any desire to become High Witch?"

"But that only leaves Arhyvhynne," Qelharre said.

"Exactly," stated Lhynette.

Shock showed itself in the faces of the other Council members, Arhyvhynne more in disbelief than the others. "No! I will not!" the young white robe shouted, then stood abruptly and ran from the Chambers.



Uriel stood in front of the window in his room, recalling the same event from a previous life. He relived the losses of his loved ones once again and then thought of his own death. "If only it would happen again," he said to himself softly. Though he realized that death, or any other means of escapism, would not solve his problems, still the thought persisted. He had accomplished little, if anything, since he had been sent here. *Actually I've probably made matters worse*, he thought. The oppression of his dark feelings fell upon him again and tormented him. As his anger welled up he looked for an outlet. He grabbed a book, ready to throw it against the wall, when he realized it was one of the books Arhyvhynne had given him. The thought of her calmed him and he wished he could see her and share their grief. Just then the door opened and Uriel turned to see Arhyvhynne walk in.

"Arhy, I was just—what's wrong?" Arhyvhynne sat herself on Uriel's bed, folded her hands in her lap and did not respond. She looked so very young and frail it tore Uriel's already bleeding heart. He moved to her, crouched down in front of her and asked if she was all right.

"I cannot believe they expect me to do this. My mother has just died—*been murdered*—and they put this upon me."

"Who put what upon you?"

"The Council," Arhyvhynne said. "They expect me to be the white robe candidate for High Witch."

The thought staggered Uriel. It had not occurred to him that there would be a successor to Khyrhyelle. "How is the High Witch chosen?"

Arhyvhynne sighed. "There are two candidates, one from the white robes and one from the black. They must be existing Council members."

Uriel interrupted. "Excuse me, who's the black robe candidate?"

"My sister."

Arhyvhynne's answer caused a look of dismay on Uriel's face. "That's terrible—putting the both of you against one another, especially under these circumstances." He could only hope Arhyvhynne read his reaction as a concern for the sisters as opposed to his dread of Eyrmysse. "Then what? Is there a vote or something?"

"Were it that simple. Each candidate must undergo the Rites of Trial."

"The Rites of Trial?"

Arhyvhynne stood up and began to pace. "The Rites of Trial were, in theory, created thousands of years ago by grey robes who belonged to the Ahfham. The Ahfham are thought to be the original settlers of Khaballe. Whoever they were and wherever they came from, they created incredibly powerful and intuitive magics which, in the case of the Trials, are designed to test the candidates."

"Test them how?" Uriel sounded suspicious.

"The morning after the Last Rites for the High Witch have

been performed, the candidates are led to the sixth level beneath the Towers. At the sixth level are three tunnels, the right for the white robe, the left for the black. Spells are cast into each tunnel which in turn activate the dormant Rites of Trial. Then the candidates enter the respective tunnels. The first one to emerge from the middle tunnel is the new High Witch."

Uriel was confused. "I don't understand. A race? What kind of test is that?"

Arhyvhyne, still pacing, responded. "It is a race of sorts, Uriel. There are specific things you must accomplish, specific criteria which must be met in order for one to proceed. The spells of the Rites are so intricate that they read the Souls of the candidates and construct the Trials based on each individual's strengths, weaknesses, hopes and fears." Arhyvhyne grew quiet for a moment as a look of pain passed over her features. "Mother would only say that you had to be able to cast a certain level of spell and provide answers to complex metaphysical problems. She refused to give us any details."

"Sounds scary." *What a stupid thing to say.* "Is it dangerous?"
That wasn't much better.

"There have been witches who were never seen again after entering the tunnels and some who have died upon emerging from them. But none in recent history."

Great. Glad I asked. "What do you plan to do?"

"I cannot." Then slower, with less certainty, "I do not know. I have neither desire for the power nor the attention. Nor do I consider myself worthy of the position. I am too naive, lack authority and am the youngest of the Council—younger than most all of the initiated witches. And, as I am sure you know, I am not the epitome of confidence." Arhyvhyne sat on the bed once

again, her head bowed. "I would be a poor choice for High Witch."

"That's not what your mother thought." Arhyvhyne raised her head and looked at Uriel. "She had a constant feeling that something like this was going to happen. She talked about it often. And she said she hoped it would be you after she was gone. She loved you very much and had a great deal of confidence in you. She knew you had a lot to learn, but she was certain you would be up to it." Though he didn't understand why, Uriel found himself adding his encouragement also. "Though it probably doesn't mean much to you, I think she was right, too."

Arhyvhyne, already in tears hugged Uriel tightly. "Uriel, I miss her so much. I wish she was here." And Uriel, unable and unwilling to contain his sorrow, hugged her back. For gentle moments they shared each other's grief, beginning the healing process they both needed. Finally they let loose of one another and made embarrassed attempts at drying their eyes.

They talked of Khyrhyelle for a while, exchanging stories that at times made each other laugh and other times cry. Finally, Uriel asked the question that they both had been avoiding. "What are you going to do?"

"I am not really sure. I am not sure what they expect of me."

"Does it *really* matter what they expect?"

The young witch shook her head. She was silent for a moment as she struggled with some inner battle. "I think I know what I should do, but I do not know if I can."

Uriel gave a short laugh. "I sympathize, believe me." Then he took Arhyvhyne's hand and stared into her sapphire eyes. "If you truly believe it is something you should do. If the feeling within is undeniable. If your Soul pushes you in that direction, then it is the

next step in your progression and you are capable of doing it. It may be difficult at first, but you have it within yourself."

"Thank you, Uriel," Arhyvhynne said. She attempted a little smile of confidence and then turned to leave.

"Arhyvhynne," Uriel called as she reached the door and opened it. When Arhyvhynne looked at him, there was no pretense of confidence, no attempt to mask her feelings. She again looked too young and too frail to have to deal with this. He could see the unbearable weight she carried reflected in her eyes. He wanted to say some magical words that would guide her through this. But he could only stand there looking at her, hoping she would persevere but thinking she could not.



The moons were plainly visible in the crystal clear night sky. The cloaks of the witches billowed with the force of the winds. The Witches of the Moons had emerged from the Towers in pairs, chanting dirges as they walked to the Sacred Grove behind the fortress. They encircled the pond in the Grove, each holding a torch. In the center of the pond was a small islet and upon the islet was the pyre for the High Witch. It was here that the Last Rites for Khyrhelle would take place.

Uriel was allowed to attend the solemn event. Though he was accompanied by Ghemella, it no longer bothered him. Ghemella's attitude toward Uriel had undergone a complete turnaround. She tried to be accommodating whenever possible, bending rules without breaking them.

He was flanked on the opposite side by Arhyvhynne. She had not revealed so much as a hint as to what her decision was. The

young white robe was rigid and displayed no emotion. It was as if she burned the remnants of her feelings as they would soon burn the physical remains of Khyrhyelle.

Uriel tried to locate the other members of the Council. Eyrmysse was the first one he spotted. Though, like her sister, she betrayed no emotion, a change had come over the black robe. Apart from her sorrow, one could sense that the power she so desperately sought would soon be within her grasp. *If* she emerged from the Trials as the new High Witch.

Next, he found Lhynette. The white robe was visibly nervous. She often times looked in Arhyvhynne's direction, hoping for some sign that would indicate her decision to accept candidacy. But no sign was forthcoming. Uriel took it to mean that if Arhyvhynne did not step forward, Lhynette would in fact go through the Trials.

He could not find Dhynelle or Qelharre, though he was sure they were there somewhere, together. Wyxotte, presiding over the service, stood upon the small bridge which linked the Grove to the islet.

Wyxotte raised her torch high above her head, signaling the beginning of Khyrhyelle's Last Rites. The cry of the wind was the only audible sound as the hooded witches joined hands and bowed their heads. Wyxotte began: "In the Name of the Wisdom, and of the Love, and of the Justice, and the Infinite Mercy of the ONE ETERNAL SPIRIT. Sisters, let us call into our consciousness Those Great Entities, the Keepers of the Kingdom, of Whom the Goddess is our principal connection." Again, the only sound was the howling of the gales as the witches made contact with their Higher Selves. Then Wyxotte continued: "Before all was nothing save the SUPREME SPIRIT." From somewhere physical or not, a

gong sounded. "The Word of Will was Uttered." *Gong*. "I AM became WE ARE." *Gong*. "Life, Light, Love and Law constructed the Cosmos. And such is our concept of Creative Conscious Energy Itself as Existing Cosmos." *Gong*. "Whoever has the least capacity for Love need never fear extinction. Love is immortal in Itself and is the real elixir of Eternal Life. They that live in Love with the DIVINE ONE shall not perish, but will only change conditions of awareness and existence." *Gong*.

The witches began a chant which was at once beautiful to hear and painful to listen to. As the chanting grew in fervor, the light from the twin moons merged into a single beam which descended upon Khyrhyelle. A vision of the High Witch appeared in each attenders mind. Khyrhyelle was dressed in bright light, her silver hair shining, her grey eyes revealing compassion, her heart emitting love. The vision faded as the chanting ended.

There was a period of silence before Eyrmysse moved to the foot of the bridge and prostrated herself before Wyxotte. She spoke the ritual words seeking permission to cross the bridge and stand as a candidate for High Witch. After the dwarf consented (reluctantly), Eyrmysse rose, crossed the bridge, stood to the left side of the pyre and tossed back her cowl, torch in hand. Thus, the black robe candidate for High Witch took her place at the crematory.

Although nothing had been said, most of the witches knew Eyrmysse would represent the black robes. But rumor had spread of Lhynette's declination and Arhyvhyne's refusal of the candidacy. Lhynette was probably considered the better choice of the two. She was older and had more experience. She had attained a reasonably high level of mastery in her craft and would have the respect of the Council. She was willing to experiment, but that

was under Khyrhyelle. Khyrhyelle had encouraged personal growth, exploration, experimentation, and calculated risk. Without Khyrhyelle's presence, Lhynette would most likely turn conservative, as she had shown in the matter concerning Uriel. Arhyvhynne on the other hand, was liked by everyone in spite of her being introverted and shy. It was generally accepted that one day she would become High Witch. She was much like her mother, who everyone regarded highly. But most felt she needed more time to evolve and progress, to add to and refine her skills.

The force of the wind increased, seemingly with the anticipation of the witches over who the white robe candidate would be. Lhynette looked to Arhyvhynne with pleading eyes. But Arhyvhynne ignored her, eyes fixed on her mother lying on the pyre on the islet. Thus it was for long minutes. Finally, Lhynette dropped her head and began the walk to the bridge. There was a collective exhalation from the witches as they realized who the white robe candidate would be. Tears ran down Arhyvhynne's face as Lhynette knelt down before Wyxotte. The old witch gave Lhynette her blessing and she stood. Lhynette turned and looked to Arhyvhynne again only to receive the same result. Lhynette made her trek across the bridge and it caused Arhyvhynne to cry openly. She squeezed Uriel's hand and the pressure she exerted was painful, but Uriel bore it wordlessly. Lhynette took her place on the right side of the pyre, pulled down her hood, raised her head up and accepted her fate.

The witches resumed their chanting and the wind raged, the branches of trees dancing wildly, the leaves adding their own song to the witches dirge. The light from the twin moons steadily waxed until it became brilliant. Then all was silence. Not a sound was uttered, not even the wind dared to breath. All waited for

Wyxotte to begin the culmination of the Rite.

Lhynette and Eyrmysse raised their torches as Wyxotte did, but before the old witch could speak the words, Arhyvhynne cried out, "Wait!" All eyes turned to the young white robe as she ran to the foot of the bridge and knelt there.

Wyxotte was unsure as to what she should do. She looked to the gathering of witches, but there was no sign, no sound. Neither Dhynelle nor Qelharre made any motion. Wyxotte turned her eyes to the islet. Eyrmysse did not seem to care one way or another as she just stood there, defiantly. Finally Wyxotte looked at Lhynette and the white robe simply nodded once. Wyxotte, though not convinced it was proper, granted her assent and Arhyvhynne crossed the bridge. Lhynette, who was also in tears, though hers were of relief, welcomed Arhyvhynne with open arms. The two witches hugged and then Lhynette held Arhyvhynne at arms length and looked into her eyes. "You have done the correct thing," Lhynette told her. Lhynette embraced Arhyvhynne again then brushed Arhyvhynne's cheek with a kiss. She said "I will serve you as I did your mother," then turned and left the islet.

So there the sisters stood, on either side of their mother. White and Black. Light and Dark. Synthesis and Opposition. Evolution and Involution. The coven looked upon them, wondering which would become their new leader. If it were Arhyvhynne, would she be able to control the power? If Eyrmysse, would the power control her?

Suddenly, a shadow was cast upon the Grove. There was an intake of breath by the witches as a huge silhouette could be seen against Khyaroh, the larger moon. It moved across the night sky and circled the Grove three times before it spouted flames into the darkness and gave a shrill cry. FireQueen had paid her last

respects to the High Witch.

Wyxotte regained the attention of the assemblage as she thrust her torch high above her head. Arhyvhyne raised her torch as did Eyrmysse, though more slowly and with a badly shaking arm. Then Wyxotte proclaimed loudly, "Qhen Khyrhyelle, let the Illusion of the World pass over thee unheeded, as thou goest from the Midnight to the Morning." With that, the dwarf dropped her torch into the pond. The Witches of the Moons repeated the blessing and disposed of their torches in the pond as well. Though only the sisters now held torches, the Grove was still brightly lit by the light of the moons which focused on Qhen Khyrhyelle, wrapping her in its unearthly glow.

The sisters recited the final blessing together, Eyrmysse saying "Midnight" and Arhyvhyne "Morning." Then Eyrmysse, her face stoic, lit the pyre. Arhyvhyne hesitated, as she was openly crying again and had difficulty seeing through tearful eyes. But finally she placed her torch upon the pyre and the flames ascended high into the night.

Wyxotte led the congregation in a short chant followed by a silent moment of reflection. Then she ended the ceremony: "Whoever has the least capacity for Love need never fear extinction. Love is immortal in Itself and is the real elixir of Eternal Life. They that live in Love with the DIVINE ONE shall not perish, but will only change conditions of awareness and existence. In the Name of the Wisdom, and of the Love, and of the Justice, and the Infinite Mercy of the ONE ETERNAL SPIRIT." *Gong.*

The witches withdrew to the Towers as they had appeared, in pairs but now singing hymns. It also appeared that FireQueen had returned to her subterranean home. Soon only the sisters, Uriel and

Ghemella were left. Upon the islet, Eyrmysse gazed at her sister through the flames. Her look was one of both arrogance and contempt. Arhyvhynne was no longer a sister, but an adversary that stood in her way to becoming High Witch. Arhyvhynne returned her sister's look, knowing the path before her would not easily be tread. Eyrmysse offered up her half smile and then left, but Arhyvhynne remained, her mind occupied with all that had taken place and all that was still to come. When the flames got dangerously close, Uriel and Ghemella escorted Arhyvhynne off the islet. The three stayed in the Grove until the fire burned itself and their grief out.

CHAPTER XIII

The Inn of the Falling Leaf was a favorite establishment in Bhel'Ehzz. As it was frequented by all types, it was not unusual to dine next to the table of a baron or an earl. Even the royal family had dined there. The Falling Leaf was noted for its fine food, comfortable lodging, wondrous entertainment and pleasant atmosphere. Built from the massive argentrees which encompassed it, the Inn derived its name from the beauty of the rare trees. Both leaves and bark were a deep green tinged with a sparkling silver which shed and grew year round, seemingly oblivious to the seasons. They were guarded cautiously not only for the silver which could be extracted from them but for their beauty which was so renowned. Considered exquisite and exotic items, the fallen leaves would be gathered or the bark and leaves would be picked right off the argentrees to be collected or sold. The leaves and bark of the argentrees brought healthy prices from many a merchant and port all over Khaballe.

Mhylzul was not overly thrilled at meeting his contact at the Falling Leaf. It was the type of place where he would stand out, be noticed, attract attention. Mhylzul found his appointed table amidst looks of conjecture and sat down with a scowl. He despised these people and their arrogance, returned looks that made the others turn away. *Damn that bastard for making me come here!* He ordered an ale to settle himself. The drink came and he took a sip—and almost choked on it. While the brew was excellent, he didn't expect two knights to enter the Inn and occupy the table next to his.

"The rumors grow, Setryv. Something must be done quickly, before they spread much farther." Mharkhel, Knight of the Flaming Sword, the personal guard of the royal family and army of the King, gave his childhood friend a long look of deep concern.

"You pay too much heed to the tongues of drunkards. The situation is not serious. We will simply locate the source of the rumors and quell them. Quietly, though painfully, of course." Setryv toyed with a dagger and smiled wickedly.

Mharkhel shook his head. "Ever on the offensive."

"As *you* should be," Setryv teased.

Mharkhel's face turned several shades of crimson, partially from embarrassment, partially from anger. The muscles in his body visibly tensed and most would have considered it a signal for a swift apology. Mharkhel was tall, solid and well-muscled, easily the best the Royal Guard had to offer. But his personality was in direct conflict with his build. He had a mild temperament, was well-mannered and preferred to walk away from a fight rather than participate. Especially where his best friend was concerned.

And Setryv was his best friend. They had been likened to sun and moon, day and night, light and dark. Setryv, always wore a smile whose sparkle vied with his shining blue eyes for one's attention. His almost white blonde hair contrasted nicely with his sun-bronzed skin. Optimistic, he invariably exhibited a positive attitude and nothing seemingly could ever bother him. While not quite as big or strong as Mharkhel, Setryv was a little more agile. Mharkhel, on the other hand, was the physically darker of the two with long brown hair and haunted, chestnut brown eyes. He was sometimes moody, usually somber and reserved. He took things

seriously and personally—not due to his ego, but because of the responsibility of his position with the Royal Guard.

The two had been in friendly competition since early adolescence. Mharkhel excelled in close combat, particularly with sword and dagger. It was said that Setryv must have some elven blood for he was deadly with the bow and other long range weapons. On horseback, the two friends fared equally. They were also equal in their admiration for a certain Princess. Setryv knew Mharkhel had been and still was Ellycyn's favorite. Though he would never try to influence Ellycyn away from Mharkhel, Setryv still entertained hopes that the Princess would someday have a change of heart. In the meantime, Setryv still enjoyed taunting his friend's lack of pursuit.

"Will it never end with you?" Mharkhel said, his eyes still hard.

"It will end when she finally grows tired of your imagined lowliness and chooses to love me."

Mharkhel's dark eyes smoldered. He was about ready to offer a retort when someone bumped into him. The man was dressed in well-worn leathers and was accompanied by another who was hooded and wore black robes. The one in leathers gave Mharkhel a dirty look before he and his companion seated themselves at the next table.



"Who in the abyss is this?" Mhylzul whispered in an irritated tone. He was under the impression that he was only meeting one person and did not like having the knights' attention directed toward them.

The one in robes, though he appeared to be young, was frail. He pointed a small hand to the other and announced, "Neghez, your assistant."

"My ass!" Mhylzul quickly regained his composure and lowered his voice. "I work alone. Were you not informed?"

Neghez placed his hands on the table and began to speak as he arose. "I—"

"Shut up and sit down," Mhylzul said, eyes glaring. Neghez, however, did not sit until the robed person placed a hand on his arm.

The black robe patted Mhylzul's hand, discreetly letting a pouch slide into it. He smiled at Mhylzul, saying "I thought it best that I procure some aid to assist you in this most important endeavor."

Mhylzul tucked the pouch away without thought to counting the gold. He considered Neghez, then the black robe before speaking. Mhylzul used his most diplomatic voice. "I appreciate your concern, but I assure you, it won't be necessary."

Neghez gave his counterpart a cynical look. "You can't do it alone." The black robe shook his head at Neghez, showing disapproval. Mhylzul simply ignored him.

"I take it you have made arrangements then?" the black robe asked.

"Everything is in place." Mhylzul was lying through his teeth. He didn't even have a plan yet, but he'd be damned if he would work with anyone else. He *was* one of the Khezef Ahf after all.

The Khezef Ahf was an elite order of professional assassins. The order was so secretive that most of the members did not even know one another, the assassins only being identifiable by the brand of the runic letters KA over their heart. The assassins

committed murder with cold calculation, rarely missing a target. Their incentive was great, for if they did they were required to take their own life. The leader of the Khezef Ahf was, of course, an unknown, referred to only as The Watcher and rumor had it that there was one placed even higher than him. Or her. There were several layers of buffers between The Watcher and the assassins, at least six that were known.

Procuring an assassin was an expensive proposition. One had to compensate The Watcher and his or her intermediaries even before the job was accepted and assigned. If The Watcher did not accept the contract, the money was not returned. If it was accepted, the assassin also demanded a fee—in advance—even though the job was not guaranteed.

Sensing that he was being slighted and opportunity was passing by, Neghez tried to cause the black robe to reconsider. "I got you the information you needed. I can get anything else. I can still be of value."

Mhylzul snorted. "I doubt it."

The black robe mulled it over a moment before he passed some coins to Neghez and dismissed him. "Your services were appreciated."

Mhylzul smiled. "A decision you won't regret."

Neghez pushed himself from the table, disgusted. He got up to leave and stared at Mhylzul. "Talk is cheap."

"So was your mother," Mhylzul replied.

Neghez unsheathed his sword and made a quick move towards Mhylzul, upending the table in the process. Mhylzul dodged the table and had his sword ready, parrying a thrust by Neghez and countering with a swift slash that cut Neghez' arm badly. Others entered the fray which was quickly getting out of

hand. Mharkhel and Setryv both moved to end the fracas and had their hands full. Mharkhel took on an already heavily bleeding Neghez, bringing him to his knees with two powerful smites. Setryv went after Mhylzul. The knight spotted him opposite a group of combatants, but by the time he reached there, Mhylzul had disappeared into thin air. Neither was there any sign of the black robe.

Setryv suppressed a few lingering skirmishes and got back to Mharkhel, who was attending Neghez. "How is he?"

"Bad, but he will live," replied Mharkhel.

Setryv winked at Mharkhel. "A shame. I should kill him. It will make it easier for us."

"No," Neghez murmured. "No, I have information... information for the King."

"Sure," Setryv said as he rolled his eyes. "Who were your friends?"

Neghez, though, refused to answer and only mumbled more about seeing the King as the knights led him away.



Part of a wall moved and Mhylzul entered a small, damp room which was dimly lit and had the acrid smell of a burnt out torch. The frail black robe who waited eyed Mhylzul cautiously. "Did anyone see you?"

"No. Do you have the uniform?"

The black robe handed the clothing to Mhylzul. "Return them to me when you have finished."

"Don't worry," Mhylzul said as he put on the clothes. "I'll dispose of them properly." He stopped before leaving the room.

"You understand this will be an additional expense," he said to the black robe. Not waiting for a response, he snuck out of the room and made his way down dark corridors towards the cells. He encountered no one until he neared his destination. Then two guards rounded a corner causing Mhylzul to act quickly.

"You two," Mhylzul pointed at the guards as he called. "Where are you coming from?"

"Section E4," responded one of the guards. "Who—"

Mhylzul cut off any questions. "Where are the ones brought in earlier this evening?"

"E6," responded the other guard.

Mhylzul nodded curtly and moved past the two guards who decided to forgo any altercation and continue on their way. He found Section E6 after encountering only one other guard who, while emphatically swearing off liquor, was in the process of losing the contents of his stomach in a variety of ways. After examining several cells Mhylzul called to one of the prisoners.

The prisoner looked up and, with difficulty, made his way to the cell door. "What—"

Mhylzul grabbed the prisoner by the neck, choking off the question. "Talk is cheap," Mhylzul hissed into his ear. The prisoner's eyes bulged when he realized who actually had him. Terribly weakened from loss of blood and the earlier events of the evening, Neghez could only struggle against Mhylzul in vain.



"A bit early for a visit," Rhenycyn said as he looked out one of the windows of his private suite. The first sun was just peeking above the horizon.

"I am sorry for the intrusion Your Highness, but—"

"Rhenycyn, Mharkhel. Rhenycyn. Have I not told you to call me Rhenycyn when we are not in formal company?" The Prince, clothed in light blue, had turned and faced the knight.

"Yes, Rhenycyn," Mharkhel replied uncomfortably.

"Actually, I am glad you came by. There is something I wish to discuss with you. Please, have a seat."

"I rather not, thank you."

"As you wish. Mharkhel, we have known each other a long time and of the Royal Guard you are my most trusted knight. I wish to be frank with you." Mharkhel inclined his head. "What are your feelings regarding my sister?" the Prince asked.

Mharkhel answered immediately. "Princess Ellycyn is the light of the realm, no offense to either your father the King or yourself. I am her champion and pledge my undying loyalty to her. I love the Princess completely and without any aforethought as I am sure all her subjects do."

"How very nice," Rhenycyn mumbled under his breath. "Forget her being a princess. What do you feel for Ellycyn herself?"

Mharkhel was red with embarrassment. He lowered his head and said, "My feelings are irrelevant. I am not worthy of her."

"Mharkhel, look at me." The knight raised his head and the Prince continued. "You could not be further from the truth. I do not know of anyone with more courage, more heart than you. Your loyalty and virtue are beyond question. I would trust you not only with my life, but with those of my father and sister as well. There is no one I place above you Mharkhel, no one. What in the name of the gods makes you think you are not worthy of her?"

Mharkhel looked at the Prince, pain clearly reflected in the

dark eyes. His jaw was set tight as the knight fought back long-hidden memories that tore his emotions. He did not respond.

"I simply do not understand. You with this feeling of being unsuitable and her too dignified to make the initial move. The two of you have been playing this game for years now. It is no secret how you feel about each other. You do know she is totally taken with you, that she loves you very much?"

"How dare you!"

The Prince whirled around and saw his sister standing in the doorway. "Ellycyn, I—"

"How could you?" the Princess said quietly. "How could you?" she yelled and left, slamming the door.

Several seconds passed before the Prince spoke. "I am sorry, Mharkhel. I hope I have not caused the two of you any more problems. I should know better than to entangle myself in my sister's affairs." The knight looked offended. "No, I did not mean affairs, I meant concerns." Rhenycyn let out a long sigh and changed the subject. "Just what was it that you came to see me about?"

Mharkhel recounted the events of the previous evening to the Prince. After which he spoke of Neghez. "He will speak to none save the King. All we could get from him was that he had information concerning a supposed assassination plot."

"An assassination? On who? My father?"

"He would not say."

"He is just probably trying to save himself with this wild story." The Prince began pacing. "Although you did say that there was one among them dressed in wizard's garb. That seems odd. Did you recognize him as one of Athar's ten?"

"No, but I did not get a good look. Things happened very

quickly and he had his hood on the whole time."

"What about Setryv?"

Mharkhel shook his head. "He said neither looked familiar to him. He did say that when he went after them it was as if they had disappeared. They were simply gone. No one knew who they were and no one saw them leave."

"Although I am quite sure," the Prince said, "that this Neghez is making a poor attempt at exonerating himself, we should still investigate."

The Prince readied himself and he and Mharkhel made their way down to the dungeons. When the knight found the cell containing Neghez empty, he called to a guard. "Where is the prisoner Neghez that was taken last night and confined to this cell?"

"Dead, Sir Mharkhel," the guard replied.

"How?" questioned Mharkhel incredulously.

"Died during the night. The slash across his throat must have opened up. He bled to death."

"His throat was cut?" Mharkhel asked. The guard nodded and the knight turned to the Prince, looked at him meaningfully. "He was badly hurt when we brought him in but there was not a mark on his throat much less a cut. He was murdered."

Rhenycyn's look did not betray the uneasiness that suddenly gripped his heart and mind.



The frail black robe knocked twice on the door, paused and then knocked once. The door opened by itself. "Enter," a voice from within called.

The wizard entered, the door closing behind him. Though both suns shone brightly outside, the room was wrapped in darkness, the atmosphere heavy. Bookcases filled with texts lined the walls. A few chairs as well as end tables were scattered about the periphery of the room. At the far end of the room was a couch, upon which lounged two naked women, chained to each other by the collars they wore. The center of the room was dominated by a large table fashioned from dark wood. A few black candles illuminated the cards that were spread across the table. At the table, the Dark Master sat in a massive and ornate chair, his back to the wizard. He was speaking in low, guttural tones, the words ancient. The wizard stood silently waiting for the magical communication to conclude.

A half hour and more passed before his master spoke. "Is it accomplished, Azarel?" he asked, his back still to the wizard.

"Yes, master," the frail black robe answered. "Neghez is no longer able to identify Mhylzul or myself. Nor is he capable of divulging any of the plan."

"I specifically instructed you that the one from the Khezef Ahf would be sufficient. I trust you will not err and doubt my wisdom again?"

"No, master."

"Good." Suddenly Azarel had a contorted look on his face and dropped to his knees. Pain coursed through his body and he desperately labored for air. "Then I assume that the next phase of our plan will transpire without any such... complications." As the Dark Master finished speaking, the pain eased away and Azarel was allowed to breathe again. "Arise." The wizard struggled to his feet. "Inform this Mhylzul that I want it accomplished as close to the Journey of Homage as possible. Do you have any questions?"

"Are the negotiations with all the cities' representatives proceeding smoothly?"

The Dark Master considered for a moment. "Well enough, though there are still those who are slightly less than enthusiastic. We still have time to... convince enough of them to view things in the correct perspective. Is there anything else?"

"Will you be going north, my lord?"

"No. Satarsmyt assures me Ahrokh is keeping a closer watch on Uriel than did his predecessors. They even had a slight encounter the other day. He continues to send the Slayers out on a regular basis. Enough to keep the rumors alive but not arouse the attention of the knights."

The Dark Master called Azarel and the women to him, having his way with each. Then he said, almost as if in passing, "There is one other item of note. I just received word from the north and the Towers. We were successful; Khyrhelle is dead."

CHAPTER XIV

The members of the Council of the Witches of the Moons gathered at the sixth level of the dungeons. The sixth level had only one purpose. It was the location of the labyrinth known as the Rites of Trial. As one entered the sixth level, there was a small, circular antechamber. The room had magical symbols not drawn, but carved into the very floor and walls. The antechamber led into three adjacent tunnels, the end ones being the starting point for each candidate. From the middle tunnel would emerge the new High Witch of the Moons.

Wyxotte's breathing was labored, the descent to the sixth level exhausting her. Lhynette was speaking to Arhyvhynne in hushed tones, trying to build, or more likely, instill confidence in the young witch. Dhynelle and Qelharre also shared a quiet conversation. Whether it concerned the Rites or a more personal matter could not be determined. Eyrmyssse stood by herself, lost in the labyrinth of her own thoughts and desires.

Wyxotte, though her hair was stringy with sweat and she had not yet regained her breath, called the two sisters to face her and imparted instructions. After Wyxotte cast the spell which would activate the dormant Rites of Trial, the two candidates would enter their respective tunnels. There would be a total of six Trials, each designed to probe their strengths and weaknesses, their character and beliefs, their knowledge and wisdom. Whether the events which transpired during the Trials were real or a mirror of reality was unknown. What was known was that it was real enough for some witches to have died undertaking the Trials. Wyxotte

concluded by wishing the Goddess' protection for the witches, surprising even herself with her genuine concern for Eyrmysse as well as Arhyhynne.

Eyrmysse took her place in front of the tunnel on the left. Symbols of power unique to her Path were stitched into the special black robe she wore. Identical devices were painted on her face in black and purple. While she still retained her usual look of arrogance, there was also a trace of concern, a slight crack in the mask of confidence. Eyrmysse feared little in life and her sister was not one of them. What troubled the black robe was the nagging worry of the difficulty of the Trials which awaited her.

Arhyhynne slowly moved to the tunnel on the right. The last forty hours had taken a tremendous toll on her. Her posture was slouched, her eyes were still red and she had dark smudges under them. The white painted symbols on her face were barely noticeable against her pale skin. The white robe had been in the Sacred Grove until early morning and had only two hours of repose before having to begin her preparation for the Trials. She had the look of a lamb knowingly being led off to slaughter.

"Are you both ready?" Wyxotte asked, her breath still labored.

"Yes," Eyrmysse answered quickly, her voice betraying her anxiousness.

When Wyxotte looked to Arhyhynne, the young witch walked over to her sister and embraced her. "Goddess' protect," she said and kissed Eyrmysse on both cheeks. Eyrmysse only looked at her blankly, refusing to acknowledge her sister in any way. Arhyhynne grimaced at the lack of response and then returned to her spot in front of the right tunnel.

Wyxotte drew in a deep breath and cast the activation spell.

For a moment, there was only a tingling in the air. Then wisps of smoke began to appear in the antechamber. The tendrils became thicker and took on a soft glow as they filled the entire room, making it impossible to see beyond a few feet. The effect could not have lasted more than a minute, but when the smoke thinned and then disappeared, Arhyvhynne and Eyrmysse were gone.



As the ethereal smoke filled the room, both sisters could barely make out something at the entrance to their respective tunnels. They approached warily and were aghast to be greeted by the beckoning figure of Qhen Khyrhyelle in a badly decomposed state. Eyrmysse managed a sharp intake of breath before she spoke the Words of dispelling. Arhyvhynne meanwhile, cried out and moved to greet her mother. But as Eyrmysse's Words sounded forth and Arhyvhynne reached out a hand and touched her mother, the shade of Qhen Khyrhyelle dissipated, leaving the two young witches trapped within the tunnels, their fate before them.



Arhyvhynne was completely disoriented. Discomforted by the appearance of Khyrhyelle, though she was relatively sure it had only been an illusion, she turned back to the tunnel entrance only to find it was no longer there. She was enveloped in a thick, dark fog (mentally as well as physically) and her vision was severely limited. The white robe stood for some time gazing into nothingness, trying to determine which way to go. Arhyvhynne finally figured it didn't really matter. She moved forward (if

indeed it was forward) down the tunnel unable to discern even where her next step would place her.

The murky fog remained as Arhyvhyne searched for some sign, some indication that she was moving in the right direction. But a quarter of an hour passed and she had encountered nothing. The young witch had felt for walls, variations in grade, changes in temperature, but there was nothing. Not even a sound. The blinding fog was her only companion.

The white robe continued for a time, fighting her rising fear and panic. Arhyvhyne wondered if she had already failed; maybe she was condemned to spend the rest of her life wandering aimlessly through this clouded domain. She thought her only chance would be to reach out with her mind, but leaving herself open like that, in this unknown realm, would be a great risk. Tears came down her face and she cried out to her mother, imploring help and releasing grief at once. But there was no answer.

When Arhyvhyne regained her composure she reluctantly decided there were no other alternatives: she would have to search the area with her mind. She sat down cross-legged and tried to relax but the semi-trance was slow in coming. Carefully, very carefully, she reached out her mind, trying to detect something, anything. She sensed nothing. Farther out she went and farther still and still nothing. Arhyvhyne was beginning to press her limits when she suddenly recoiled. Though she still hadn't sensed anything, she knew she was entering uncharted territory. She would have to proceed with extreme caution.

Arhyvhyne increased her concentration and awareness and pushed out. *There!* Her mind felt something on the very fringes of her senses. She stood up and moved quickly in its direction though she could not tell what it was. The closer she came, the stronger

the sensation grew, but the white robe still could not determine its source. Finally she reached an impasse. She focused her mind and felt an invisible barrier in front of her with the source of her sensations somewhere just beyond the barrier. She gingerly put her hand up to it and waited for a shock but none came. The barrier was as solid as a wall, just invisible.

The young witch ran down the length of the barrier, searching for an entrance or a way around but could not find either. However, as she moved up and down the barrier her sensations remained constant, neither growing stronger nor weaker. Confused, Arhyvhynne sat herself down in front of the barrier. It was obvious to her that she had to get through it. How was the question. She was an adequate spellcaster but she figured that none of the spells she knew would be powerful enough to destroy the barrier. Still, she had to try. It might only be a well-crafted illusion.

Arhyvhynne stood and moved back some paces from the barrier. She chose a spell that would cast a magical lightning bolt, thinking that the bolt, unlike a fireball, might be able to at least crack the barrier. Arhyvhynne spoke the Words and cast the bolt. The effect, or rather the lack of one, was disheartening. There was no crack, no damage, no sparks from contact, nothing. It was as if the barrier simply absorbed the bolt without any adverse effects. Thinking the barrier might have incurred some unseen damage, Arhyvhynne checked it with her hands but found it to be sound.

A great deal of time passed. Arhyvhynne sat down, paced, cursed those who subjected her to the Trials ("I told you I was not ready for this!" she yelled) and cried, all to no avail. She employed meditation over and over, seeking inner guidance but did not particularly care for the conclusions she drew. She had gotten this

far only by using her mind scanning abilities. The next step would be to use that same power to break the barrier. *Easier said than done*, the white robe told herself. If the truth be known, the proposition frightened the young witch. Naturally Arhyvhynne was afraid of failing and being forced to await death in the gloomy, perpetual fog. But she was also afraid of succeeding, of having such power and control over her mind that she could actually destroy something, or worse still, *someone* with it.

Though reluctant, Arhyvhynne entered a semi-trance and quickly reached the level of awareness where she could sense the barrier. Her mind strained as she pressed against it without result. A second attempt was equally unsuccessful, though she sensed something within herself, as well as the barrier, blocking her efforts. For the third attempt, Arhyvhynne gathered her will and stiffened her resolve. *This will be the last time*, she thought. *It will end one way or the other.*

The white robe focused her mind and reached the level of the barrier once more. She lashed out at it, trying to break through and destroy it. She was relentless, continually driving all her energy into the impenetrable wall. And then Arhyvhynne felt the slightest give in the structure. She raised her level of concentration even higher, struggling to take advantage of the weakness. As she did so, the wall began to slowly transform, until Arhyvhynne was looking into her own eyes.

Arhyvhynne now understood that *she* was the wall that actually barred her way and the barriers she faced were the barriers *she* had constructed within herself. The young witch saw herself as she really was and there were aspects which made her very uncomfortable. She knew she had to get past these to continue. She began to build up her energies before she could talk

herself out of it.

Staring into her own sapphire eyes as she heightened her awareness, Arhyvhyne concentrated on breaking her barriers. Sweat mixed with tears as she exerted her will against herself. She experienced anguish, remorse and a strong desire to surrender to herself. She cried openly now, the agony being too much to bear. Still she exerted herself, not even sure why, driven only by the knowledge that it must be done. Finally, one by one, the barriers were shattered and Arhyvhyne left the less desirable aspects of her personality behind. As she reached a new level of awareness, the image of herself began to break apart and the fog began to lift.



Instead of fog, Eyrmysse was wrapped in darkness. The black robe looked for the entrance to the tunnel, trying to get her bearings. Unable to locate anything through the inky blackness, she began aloud, "What in the Goddess—"

Eyrmysse was cut short by a magical bolt that took her in the left shoulder and knocked her down. She crawled across the floor looking for a type of shelter as more bolts were cast, just missing their target. The sparks from the bolts off the stone floor allowed her to find a slight protrusion from the tunnel wall. Eyrmysse lunged for and made it, though she slammed into the wall.

Peeking around the jut of the wall, Eyrmysse could scarcely make out three figures in the distance. Then a bolt glanced off the wall, causing her to jerk away. She grimaced at the pain the movement caused her. She checked her shoulder and could make out blood on her hand as she drew it away. As the adrenaline subsided, her blood ran cold and malice was in her heart. *These*

three will pay dearly, she told herself.

Deciding that her first priority was to get a better view of the area and her adversaries, Eyrmysse cast a fireball to provide some light, but also to demonstrate an offensive posture. Though the fireball seemed to be engulfed by the inky blackness, the faint light it produced allowed her to glimpse the area. The tunnel appeared to be about twelve feet wide and about as high. The ceiling was adorned with stalactites. About sixty feet away was what appeared to be some sort of rock formation taking up half the width and height of the tunnel. The boulder partially concealed the forms of three cloaked beings, one each in black, white and grey.

"What quarrel have you with me?" Eyrmysse asked loudly. But the echo of her voice was the only answer she received. Without benefit of any indications from the robed figures, Eyrmysse quickly decided to take the offensive. She figured she could spend hours here without any gain unless she took the magical battle to the three mysterious beings.

Eyrmysse wrapped herself in a protection spell, moved out from her small shelter and stood in the middle of the tunnel. Nothing happened. She took a doubtful step forward but that did not result in any action by the three beings. Another step and another again without any reaction. Eyrmysse was nearly halfway to the formation which hid the cloaked ones when a fireball exploded at her feet and filled the air with smoke. When the smoke dissipated, one of the cloaked beings, the one in white, stood before Eyrmysse.

The white robe, though she appeared to be solid, was of an ethereal nature. She was white as a ghost (which indeed she was), the hair, eyes or lips void of any color. But her face held a beauty that was almost severe.

"Uvhymme!" Eyrmysse spoke her name as she looked at her in disbelief. "Is it truly you?"

"It is I," said Uvhymme, though the lips did not move.

Eyrmysse started, confused. "Why... I do not—"

The voice of Uvhymme responded, "To gain the tunnel beyond us," here she indicated the others at her back, "you must defeat each of us in magical combat. I am your first adversary. Though I will not engage in any conflict with you, know that you must kill me to proceed."

Eyrmysse regarded the spectral figure. Uvhymme, dead for several centuries, was the most highly regarded white robe in the history of the witches. She was known for her unconditional dedication and single-mindedness, particularly in bringing about advances in the healing arts. Many initiates still used her as an example to aspire to. Eyrmysse, her previous anger dissipated, appealed to Uvhymme.

"I do not wish you—or your... companions—any harm. I merely want passage to continue with the Trials."

"Passage without conflict is not possible," said the form of Uvhymme.

Thinking that she might easily slip around the white robe, Eyrmysse made a quick move only to be mirrored by Uvhymme. Several attempts at the same type of feint produced the same result. She even tried to just push Uvhymme out of her way but to no avail. Perplexed, Eyrmysse considered her plight. She felt this must be some sort of test. She couldn't believe that she was really supposed to dispatch one such as Uvhymme without a fight.

While she deliberated, Eyrmysse felt the seconds slipping away. And that turned her thoughts to Arhyvhynne. Was her sister advancing quicker than her? Was she nearing completion? How

successful had she been? The questions weighed heavily and pressured her into a decision. *It is only her ghost*, Eyrmysse told herself. *She is not alive. It is not as if I would really kill her.* But in the depths of her Soul, Eyrmysse knew that she was making a poor attempt at rationalization. She would *never* allow *anyone* to stand in her way.

Eyrmysse stared into the colorless eyes of Uvhymme. "You leave me little choice, Great One." After waiting for a reaction that was not forthcoming, Eyrmysse began to recite the Words to a very powerful bolt spell. She cast the bolt, driving it into Uvhymme's chest. The white robe fell to her hands and knees. As the figure of Uvhymme began to fade she looked up at Eyrmysse, her face contorted with pain, her eyes crying blood, the blood a ghastly contrast against the pale skin. When the figure was gone, Eyrmysse stood quietly, her emotions running the gamut from ecstasy to remorse. She looked down and saw a small pool of Uvhymme's blood on the ground. Eyrmysse reached down and touched the dark red liquid and then all hell broke loose.

An onslaught of bolts and fireballs struck Eyrmysse at once, driving her to the ground. Eyrmysse twisted her way back to her previous shelter and took several more bolts in doing so. Though she had kept her protective barrier active, she still felt much of the searing pain, the barrier only absorbing the brunt of the powerful blows.

The fireworks abruptly ended but before Eyrmysse could catch her breath, a black robed figure appeared to the side of her. Without thinking, Eyrmysse launched a strong fireball which hit the figure square in the chest, but it seemingly had no effect.

"You must do better than that daughter of Qhen Khyrhyelle," the figure said. Eyrmysse studied the specter which was similar to

Uvhymme in all but clothing and facial appearance. This one had the look of contempt without so much as a trace of compassion. "Do you not know who I am?" Eyrmysse regarded her coolly and did not even offer her so much as a guess though she had one. "I am Jhaezyyre, master of mystical warfare."

Though she expected it, the announcement still sent a chill down Eyrmysse's spine. The spirit of Jhaezyyre was Uvhymme's counterpart. One of the most renowned black robes, Jhaezyyre had devoted her life to the study and development of magical warfare. She was the author of several of the best and most read treatises on the subject. Eyrmysse herself studied the texts with a passion.

"So it will be student against teacher," Eyrmysse said with a smile, hiding at once her fear and awe.

The expression on Jhaezyyre's face did not change. "You have much to learn. Prepare yourself."

Eyrmysse felt as much anxiety as she did excitement. She was now entwined in a chess game of martial skills at the highest degree. *If she defeats me, it will mean my life. But if I win...* The thought itself exhilarated her. There was no doubt that this was an opportunity she would never refuse.

The encounter however, did not proceed exactly as Eyrmysse planned. An hour and more had passed and the two witches had tested each other from near and far, using magic and not. Jhaezyyre had inflicted a great deal of punishment on the young black robe. In fact, Eyrmysse so far had been beaten in every way imaginable. She was bloodied, exhausted and in excruciating pain. Meanwhile Jhaezyyre was relatively unmarked. She had allowed Eyrmysse few opportunities and though Eyrmysse had taken full advantage of her scant chances, the effect was minimal.

There had been few verbal exchanges during the battle but

now Jhaezyyre's voice rang out through the tunnel. "Your spells are losing their effect and you are losing your energy as well as your blood. Even I take no pleasure in continuing this. You cannot stand against me. Leave now while you still have your life. Your lesson has ended."

Lesson, Eyrmysse thought sardonically. It had, to this point, been a costly education for the young black robe. She had learned of techniques and spells that she had not encountered elsewhere but the price was likely to be too high to pay. If she accepted the offer to walk away, she did not know if she could live with herself. If she remained to the end, she probably would not have long to live with herself.

Though mind and body were weak and her spirit near broken, Eyrmysse answered as only she could. "You offer leave only because you yourself are unable to vanquish me. The lesson has not ended, Jhaezyyre, it only now begins."

Jhaezyyre immediately responded with an assortment of magical firepower that had Eyrmysse cowering behind her small shelter. The debris that fell on Eyrmysse caused her to recall the weakest area of a barrier and now knew how she could exploit it against Jhaezyyre. The difficulty would be in distracting the master warrior.

There could be only one way, Eyrmysse saw. She didn't know if she had enough energy to pull it off, but it was her best chance. Her *only* chance. Eyrmysse constructed an illusion of herself. Though it didn't have to be perfect, it still depleted her waning energy and she needed to conserve enough for two more spells. The next spell was a teleportation. Eyrmysse teleported into the middle of the tunnel, leaving herself completely open for attack. A split second later, Eyrmysse placed her illusionary self

directly in front of Jhaezyyre.

Jhaezyyre had seen Eyrmysse appear in the middle of the tunnel and began a spell that would end the conflict. But before she could cast the spell, the illusion suddenly materialized before her. Because of the proximity of the illusion, Jhaezyyre was forced to act without benefit of a close examination. She mistook the illusion for the real thing and cast the spell at it, thinking the distant figure was a ruse to get Eyrmysse herself in close. Eyrmysse pooled her remaining energy and cast a bolt high above Jhaezyyre's head, striking a huge stalactite. The stalactite fell, piercing the vulnerable top of the barrier and cleaving Jhaezyyre in two.

Eyrmysse viewed the spectacle with cold detachment for a brief moment. Her elation at defeating Jhaezyyre was shadowed by her extreme fatigue which caused her to slump to the ground. Though she was in desperate need of rest, she only allowed herself scant minutes before she forced herself to continue the Trials.

As Eyrmysse began to rise, a grey cloak brushed her hand, startling her. The black robe looked up, her gaze met by granite eyes. The figure in grey was wrapped in a mantle of power and light. Though her features were hard, they reflected some inner turmoil. Time ceased to exist as they stared at one another, each lost in her own private thoughts. A tear escaped the grey robe then shook her head once and was suddenly gone.

Eyrmysse shivered violently and cursed the second reappearance of her mother.



Arhyhynne sat upon the dais of the High Witch in the

Council Chambers. Every knee bent in her presence, every adoration was hers. She sat in judgment of her fellow witches and held their fate in her hands as all looked to her for guidance and succor. She agonized over every decision, wondering if she had made the correct choice, wondering if she had been fair. The weight upon her shoulders was great and in the few moments she had to herself she wondered how her mother had ever managed. Arhyvhyne hated every minute of it.

The days seemingly went on without end until one night, in the darkest hour before the dawn, Satarsmyt stole into the Towers. The demon entered the Council Chambers and confronted Arhyvhyne. "Arhyvhyne," he spoke, his voice thick and unaccustomed to speech, "most exalted of all High Witches, I have come to offer a pact."

Arhyvhyne was sickened with fright as she beheld the hideous creature. Failing speech, she motioned with her hand for the demon to continue.

"All those within these Towers, save your most divine self, are now mine." As Satarsmyt spoke the words, the Chamber filled with the inhabitants of the Towers. "And they are all subject to my every whim." The demon's tail wagged as he stroked his close cropped beard and pulled at the leftmost of his three horns while thinking. "Allow me to illustrate. Lhynette, kill Wyxotte."

Wyxotte did not offer any struggle as Lhynette walked over to the old white robe and thrust her hand into her chest. As Lhynette wrenched her hand deep within the dwarf, Wyxotte screamed and dropped to her knees then onto her back. The screams suddenly ended and Lhynette stood and held Wyxotte's heart high above her head as if it were some great prize. Arhyvhyne sat wide-eyed in disbelief. When Lhynette proceeded

to devour the heart, Arhyvhynne gagged trying to fight back the bile.

"So you see Arhyvhynne—Arhyvhynne? Arhyvhynne!"

The High Witch turned her attention from Lhynette licking her hands back to the demon. "What is it you want?" she said softly, barely able to speak.

"Not much actually, just a small favor." Magically the SoulSlayer Ahrokh appeared next to Satarsmyt. "I wish you to kill Ahrokh."

Arhyvhynne was bewildered. "Why?"

"Because if you do not," Satarsmyt answered, "he will consume the Soul of every being within these walls. After witnessing which, you will then become my bride and produce my offspring. You have one minute in which to choose."

The demon relaxed his hold over the throng in the Chamber and they cried out to Arhyvhynne for her intercession. Among the crowd Arhyvhynne saw her mother and sister both in tears, both begging to be saved from their terrible fate. Uriel was on his knees imploring her. Witches, both white and black robes, frantically pleaded for their lives.

Arhyvhynne turned to look upon Ahrokh. She expected to see the rotted flesh and skeleton partly encased in black armor. She expected to see the hideous flames that were the creature's eyes. She expected to see the matching mount. She expected to see the dark, macabre desires in the Slayer's heart. And she was not disappointed. What she did not expect to see, however, was Ahrokh's Inner Self.

For Arhyvhynne saw that this was a creature much like others. A creature shaped by its environment. True, it fed off the Souls of its victims and needed them to maintain its existence. But

that was its nature. It was created for that sole purpose. Was Ahrokh different from an animal that hunted and killed to survive? That was a question Arhyvhyne could not answer. And even as the Slayer stared defiantly into her eyes, Arhyvhyne could not disguise what she felt: *though you may not have the right to live and to take other's lives, I do not have the right to take yours.*

Arhyvhyne looked away, thinking what this decision would cost. She would be Satarsmyt's bride. She would bear demonspawn. *Demonspawn.* Terrified faces and pleading voices surrounded the white robe, stealing her away from her own personal misery. The clamor reached a deafening level.

"Silence!" Satarsmyt yelled. The demon turned to Arhyvhyne and held out a beautiful golden dagger. "The time has come. Will you kill Ahrokh?"

Arhyvhyne averted her eyes from the demon and dropped her head slowly. Tears ran down her cheeks as she shook her head and silently mouthed the words, "I cannot."

A great wail rose up from the witches. Amidst the cries of "Demon whore" Arhyvhyne could hear the giddy laughter of Satarsmyt and his SoulSlayer, Ahrokh. As the Slayer began tearing the Souls from his victims, Arhyvhyne's eyes were riveted on three people in the crowd. Khyrhylene said nothing, but the anguished look on her face was one that clearly spoke of betrayal. Eyrmyse pointed an accusatory finger, saying "I should have been made High Witch." And though the screams of agony drowned out his voice, Arhyvhyne could see Uriel say the words "I loved you."

Arhyvhyne saw the distorted looks of pain that crossed the faces of her mother, sister and Uriel as they were being taken. And she saw the mocking look of Ahrokh as he ingested them. She had

only that moment to dwell on the consequences of her decision before demon hands tore off her clothing. But then her entire surroundings suddenly dissolved into fog before her eyes.



As she toiled scouring the privy, Eyrmysse felt she had reached the depths of disgrace. She had lost her magical abilities as well as her beauty. Once a powerful Council Witch, she was now a slave, the property of a shoddy, contemptible, struggling merchant. She performed menial tasks for Zhevyyk, a man who was mostly take and little give. He took her for granted, he took out the frustrations of pathetic business dealings by beating her and he took liberties with her. The only thing he gave was Eyrmysse's body to the business associates he either needed to appease or owed money to. And then he would beat her for being a whore and performing better for them than himself.

Zhevyyk pulled Eyrmysse to her feet by her tangled and unkempt hair. "You worthless slut!" The merchant slapped her across the face, drawing blood and sending her to the floor. Looking around the small room he commented "It is still filthy, just as you are." He kicked her and was about to add another when he heard raucous noise from the front of the shop. The merchant turned to see who was disrupting his shop and saw the bodies of two burly men fill the privy doorway. Zhevyyk's face was immediately drained of all its color.

The larger of the two men folded his arms across his chest and laughed saying "You did not expect to ever see us again, huh, *qyqyx*." (*Qyqyx* was a term that, roughly translated, referred to the maggot infested excrement of an anally diseased prostitute.)

Zhevyk's mouth moved frantically but no words came forth.

"It has taken us a long time," said the other intruder, brandishing a golden dagger. "Many seasons have passed since we began tracking you from Rheg Nhor to Sevher'tah and this shack of a shop. And each day I thought of how you cheated us and how we would repay you."

Zhevyk was so stunned he couldn't even come up with a decent lie. He faltered again, then began, "Surely you do not believe—"

"Shutup!" said the one with the blade. "There are no excuses for you little *qyqyx*."

Zhevyk went wild-eyed looking for a way out. He knew his life was on the line. Suddenly he dragged Eyrmysse to her feet by her hair. "The girl! You can have the girl!" he cried with hope in his eyes.

The brigands seemed to notice Eyrmysse for the first time. The one with the blade began to express his disinterest but was stopped by his companion, who was now wearing a sinister look. He turned to Eyrmysse and looked her body up and down then asked, "Does Zhevyk own you?"

"Do you think I would be here if he did not?" she responded, eyes glaring.

The brigands laughed so hard tears came to their eyes. "Come," said the larger of the two, motioning to Eyrmysse with his hand.

As Eyrmysse walked up, Zhevyk, thinking he just might escape with his life, encouraged the men. "She is good. *Very good.*"

"Shutup worm!" shouted the larger brigand. As he ran his hands up and down her body, Eyrmysse continued to glare at him.

"This one has spirit," he said admiringly. He turned to his partner. "Give me the dagger and tie up Zhevyk." Taking the dagger, the brigand held the point to Eyrmysse's breast. "I have a proposition for you." Eyrmysse eyed him coolly. "We can kill Zhevyk and you will come with us as... our servant. Or, you can kill Zhevyk and leave here with your freedom." With a flick of the wrist, the brigand held the blade in his hand and extended the handle to Eyrmysse. "What is your choice?"

Without taking her eyes off the brigand, Eyrmysse took the dagger. She then turned and walked up to the securely tied merchant who was propped up in the corner. Zhevyk whispered, "Cut the ropes, we can escape together." Eyrmysse smiled and, with a cruel gleam in her eyes, cut Zhevyk's leggings, grabbed his genitals and hacked at them with the dagger. The merchant could only manage one long scream as he gawked first at Eyrmysse and then at the bloody cavity before he dropped heavily to the floor.

Eyrmysse turned to find the brigands gone. She dropped the golden dagger and dried her bloody hands on her dirty clothes as she ran out of the shop. Eyrmysse ran as fast as she could, as far as she could, before she fell from exhaustion. Breathless, she turned to see if there was any pursuit. But there was only inky blackness where the back streets of Sevhert'ah should have been.



Arhyhynne had returned to the disorienting fog of the tunnels. Before her, seated upon a throne was a grey robed figure. In fact, everything about the figure was grey: her hair, skin, eyes, even the lips. Enshrouded by the heavy, swirling mists, it was almost difficult to tell where the fog left off and the woman began.

The woman looked old beyond words. "Who are you?" asked Arhyvhyne.

"I am Qhen Rhyvhelle," the apparition said to her. Legend had her as one of the original grey robes who had devised the Trials.

Arhyvhyne kneeled before the throne and bowed her head. "I am not worthy to be in your presence."

"You are more than worthy child. Rise, there is much that must transpire in the imminent future concerning yourself and the wizard."

Arhyvhyne stood, wisps of fog floating past her. "Uriel?"

"It is he I speak of. He will have great need of you and upon you he will depend. However, the Path Uriel walks is perilous. Do you choose to accompany him?"

Arhyvhyne did not hesitate. "He risked his life to return me from the threshold of death. I must help him in any way I can."

"Even should it mean your life?"

Though the tone of Qhen Rhyvhelle did not change, Arhyvhyne somehow knew that this indeed was a grievous question. She considered it for a time before she answered. "If it were not for Uriel, I would not have my life. Yes, even if it means my life."

The figure of Qhen Rhyvhelle shimmered and her voice cried out, "So you have chosen and so shall it be!" With that Arhyvhyne was once again left alone in the fog, though now she felt even more solitary than before.



A figure advanced from out of the darkness of the tunnels.

Cloaked in grey, she stood before the black robe, studying her.

"They have sent a grey other than my mother," Eyrmysse remarked.

"Do I detect relief or anxiety in your voice?" the grey robe asked.

Though the wisdom of the question troubled her, Eyrmysse disregarded it. "You are?"

"Qhen Rhyvhelle."

"I see."

"I wonder if you do." The comment did not evoke a response from Eyrmysse, who was beginning to learn her place amongst the entities of the Trials. "You have walked a great distance down your chosen Path in a relatively short time. You have gained much power and knowledge though I fear little wisdom."

"Thank you," Eyrmysse said expressing sarcasm.

This time it was Qhen Rhyvhelle who elected to disregard the comment. "The Path you tread crosses that of many others. Most of them in a negative manner. Should you become High Witch I fear that it will become even be more so."

Eyrmysse eyed her evenly. "I expect you are about to offer me a choice."

It appeared for a moment that the great grey robe smiled slightly in sympathy. "I have not come to offer you choices, Eyrmysse. I am here to help you enhance your awareness and help you to see what lies before you. The choices are your own, my child. I cannot tell you what the outcome will be should you continue the Trials. I can tell you that if you continue, whether you are successful or not, there will be grave times. The Path ahead will darken and your life is not assured."

"And should I choose to... conclude the Trials at this point?"

"If you were to support your sister, you could have a happy and successful life developing the concepts you have learned here. You could greatly influence the events of the future. The histories would remember you as a powerful black robe."

"What of the wizard?" Eyrmysse asked, almost introspective.

Qhen Rhyvhelle shook her head solemnly. "He will not be yours," she said quietly.

"You lie!" Eyrmysse shrieked. "I *will* have him. I *will* be High Witch. I *will* have the knowledge and the power and none, *none* will stand before me!"

As with her sister, Eyrmysse saw the figure of Qhen Rhyvhelle shimmer away into nothingness and heard the words, "So you have chosen and so shall it be!"

CHAPTER XV

"It has been nine hours," Lhynette complained. The white robe stood next to a wall, leaning on it and absently tracing the symbols carved into it.

"You have reminded us of the lapse of time every hour on the hour since we have been here." Dhynelle was not overly fond of the long wait herself. She had been pacing the small antechamber for the last quarter hour. "You are not the only one who has been subjected to this, Lhynette. I, too, wish it was over."

Lhynette raked her greying blonde hair out of her face. "I wonder how much longer it will be," she thought out loud.

"The only one who could offer an answer has been asleep for hours." Qelharre, seated on the floor with her legs crossed, gave Wyxotte a disgusting look. "Look at her. The perfect representation of a bloated, snoring *bhalen*." A *bhalen* was a huge, menacing sea creature, not unlike a whale.

Lhynette reprimanded the dark elf. "Qelharre! She has been through much. We have *all* been through much." The white robe put her head down and quietly added, "Some more than others." Lhynette had been chastising herself for subjecting Arhyvhyne to the Trials. During the nine hour wait, her priorities had switched from Arhyvhyne becoming High Witch to having the young white robe come out alive and mentally stable.

"I would never have believed it would take Eyrmysse this long," Dhynelle said.

Lhynette shot her an irritated glance. "Obviously Arhyvhyne has been found as suitable if not more so."

Qelharre cut off Dhynelle before she could start her rebuttal. They had argued the advantages and disadvantages of each candidate no less than six times already. "I do not envy whoever our next High Witch will be. There are many complex issues that will have to be dealt with. And I am afraid the effects will be far reaching. I fear for her as well as ourselves."



Heat lightning flashed through the starless sky and distant rumbles of thunder could be heard though the air was still. The Sacred Grove was populated by the entire coven this night. As with Khyrhyelle's last rites, the cowled witches surrounded the pond and held torches. Upon the islet, six white robes and as many blacks encircled the solitary argentree. Uriel was suspended upside-down from the lowest branch of the massive silver-leafed tree. Dressed in alternating black and white tunic and leggings, he was secured at the left ankle by a rope and his right leg was crossed behind his left. His hands were tied behind his back. A thirteenth witch, a black robe, stood next to Uriel. A flash came from the black robe's hand as she produced a golden dagger that reflected light from the twin moons and the silver in the leaves. She held it high in the air and spoke Words summoning more heat lightning accompanied by the still distant thunder. The black robe then turned to offer the dagger to yet another witch, a white robe kneeling in front of Uriel's hanging body.

As the white robe looked up, her hood fell back revealing large curled raven black hair. Violet eyes that held undisguised turmoil looked first to the black robe, then the dagger. Eyrmyse knew this was a Trial to determine if she understood the white

robe's Path. She knew that Uriel's life was forfeit if she did not act. She also knew that she would have to sacrifice her life to preserve his. What she did not know was if this were real. Would she really die in Uriel's place if she chose to replace him on the argentree? A true white robe would undoubtedly make the sacrifice. But she was not a true white robe, she was only playing the part. And playing the part could mean her life.

The black robe with the golden dagger brought the blade to Uriel's throat and carefully drew it across, drawing blood. It was not enough to kill him, only to make him suffer and Eyrmysse think. Thin rivulets of crimson liquid flowed down Uriel's neck and face. Though he did not cry out, his eyes revealed much pain and he focused them upon Eyrmysse.

Eyrmysse shut her eyes tight and tried to think. *If I do not take his place, he will die. His death will result in my failing this Trial and perhaps not becoming High Witch. But if I sacrifice myself for him, and they take my life, I will not become High Witch either. I will be dead.* An uncharacteristic tear escaped as she opened her eyes and looked at Uriel deeply. She did not see his pain and blood, rather she saw him for what he really was. She recalled the night in the library and felt a pang in her heart for what could have been. Or what could still be. A barrage of feelings she was unaccustomed to assaulted her then. Feelings she would not confess to. She quickly repressed them, thinking *I must do this for one reason only. I must become High Witch!*

Eyrmysse rose up and offered herself to the black robe. Uriel was immediately cut down. He stood and briefly stared at Eyrmysse with a blank look that revealed nothing. Then he moved to one of the white robes and embraced her. Eyrmysse could see the sapphire eyes of her sister peek out from the depths of the cowl

at her. And the warmth in her heart went cold.

Her robe was taken from her and, clad only in her underclothes, Eyrmysse was hung from the argentree in the same manner as Uriel. The wind suddenly picked up as did the lightning and thunder. Wolves began to bay at the moons. The witches left the Grove. But Eyrmysse did not notice. Her eyes were glassy with the vision of her sister walking away with the man she was willing to sacrifice her life for. *I only allowed this so that I might become High Witch! Never again*, she swore to herself.



Like her sister before her, Arhyhynne knelt upon the islet of the Sacred Grove, staring at the hanging figure of Uriel. She felt immeasurable sorrow at seeing him in such pain. And she knew that she could do nothing to prevent it. Or rather, she shouldn't do anything to prevent it.

As Eyrmysse was tested for her understanding of the white Path, Arhyhynne was being tested on the black Path. She turned her gaze upon the black robes she wore, somehow feeling unclean. But she still had to try to understand their Path and she knew that this Path dictated that no matter the circumstance, her survival *should* be utmost in her mind. The one hanging before her had risked his life for her, had battled death and brought her back from the brink of its realm. How could she forsake him? And the question of Qhen Rhyvhelle echoed accusingly amidst her thoughts, *"Even should it mean your life?"* Certainly it was not this she spoke of? Was it?

The black robe with the golden dagger slit Uriel's neck causing Arhyhynne to gasp and let out a small sound of pain.

This is what the gods will, she told herself. She was unsteady as she stood up, knowing what she must do. Arhyvhynne took the dagger from the black robe without looking at her. It felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds. She looked down at her hand, ghost white against the black fabric of the robe. It was shaking violently. She could not bring her eyes to meet Uriel's, knowing the look of betrayal that would be there waiting for her, haunting her for eternity. Heat lightning flashed and reflected off the silver in the leaves of the great argentree, making Arhyvhynne flinch and drop the dagger.

Arhyvhynne could only look at the dagger lying on the ground. It was as if she were completely paralyzed. The attending black robe picked up the dagger and offered it to her once more. Thunder sounded in the distance. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Let it be me," she said softly.

Her eyes remained closed as the witches took the black robe off her. A feeling of cleanliness returned to her, allowing her to relax and be at peace with herself. It was a worthy sacrifice. She had done the right thing. As they suspended her, a vision of Uriel and her together stole into her mind and brought with it the sadness that it would now never come to be. And that bothered her. More than she wanted to believe.

She opened her eyes, wanting a last glimpse of the one who had saved her life and who she in turn now saved. What she saw was Uriel walking away, hand in hand with Eyrmysse. Sensing her eyes upon him, he stopped and turned around. "You must learn to do the necessary, Arhyvhynne." In that instant and in those words Arhyvhynne reached a better understanding of the Path and her failure to follow it. Her mother had understood the relativity of actions based on their occurrence on one level or

another. Now she began to see it as well. As she looked back at Uriel there were tears in his eyes as he said, "You could not have caused me more pain if you had killed me." And then Eyrmysse led him away.



Eyrmysse began her ascent of the dark mountain before her. As she climbed higher and higher the way before her became more difficult. The stone and rock of the mountain cut her hands, knees and feet. She became less sure of the handholds and footholds. Blustering winds attempted to dislodge her from her precarious position. At one point she stopped and looked up, but was unable to see any pinnacle. Her eyes were then drawn down and she was overcome with vertigo as she gazed upon the unending swirling blackness of the abyss that had replaced the lower part of the mountain. Eyrmysse hugged the rock edifice desperately and the tears that escaped her tightly shut eyes mingled with blood. She knew her next step would be the most difficult. She fought against the fear that had paralyzed her, willing her foot to move ever so slowly towards the next hold.

Thus had Eyrmysse continued for a longer time still. With her confidence somewhat restored, she ventured a glance up and thought she made out the peak in the blackness. As her heart thrilled at the sight, a terrible gust of wind sought to throw her from the mountain. Her right hand came free followed by her right foot. As the winds buffeted against her, Eyrmysse's grasp weakened. The force of the wind tore her robes from her and caused her left foot to lose its hold. She quickly reached across and managed to secure her right hand to the mountain. As the

winds continued to batter her, Eyrmysse struggled to gain footholds and clung to the mountain with her nakedness.

The winds would not relent, only becoming more brutal. The gales were sharp as knives and tore at the black robe's exposed skin. Eyrmysse's legs and arms became raw from the severity of the winds but she still forced herself to move towards the mountain top. As the wind continued its assault, so did the rock of the mountain scrape the soft flesh of her stomach and chest with each foothold gained.

After what seemed hours, Eyrmysse reached the peak and pulled herself painfully onto the top of the mountain. She lay there a long time, unable to move. Finally, a voice called out to her. "Rise Eyrmysse, daughter of Qhen Khyrhelle."

Eyrmysse picked her head up slowly and saw an old man in tattered robes leaning heavily upon a staff. She pushed herself up and felt sharp pain flood her body. She was raw and bleeding as she stood naked before the beleaguered figure. But Eyrmysse did not attempt to cover herself. She stood defiantly, the violet eyes alive with the energy of attaining the mountain.

Wisps of thin white hair protruded from the hood of the old man. The remnants of a grey robe loosely covered his pallid skin. His lean body seemed easily swayed by the fierce winds that still howled around them. He let out a long sigh and then asked "What are the Seven Runes of Power?"

Eyrmysse tensed at the question and eyed the old man suspiciously. "They are the seven mystical glyphs inscribed in stones that encompass all knowledge."

"Enumerate them."

"Darkness, Stagnation, Destruction, Light, Progression, Creation, and Self."

"Which Rune do the Witches of the Moons protect?"

Eyrmysse shuddered from a gust of wind. Again, suspicion in the violet eyes. "Destruction."

"According to the Sacred Scrolls of the Moons & Stars, the reincarnation of the Dark Master will bear what symbol?"

"A golden pentagram." Eyrmysse began to wonder at the questions. So far they had been such that most anybody knew the answers.

"According to the Scrolls, where is the world of Faerie?"

This was from a very obscure passage, one that was only hinted at. "Somewhere to the north. Either Rraj Saghasse, Ahmorre or Vhollhonne."

"What caused the conflict leading to the Great Mystical Wars?"

Eyrmysse sensed a trap. Her opinion differed greatly from traditional interpretations and she decided to be cautious. "Thaum's zealous desire to conquer and rule the world."

"Do not be false with me again for it is useless to conceal your true thoughts."

"If my answers are already known to you, then why this pretense?" she shot back caustically.

"Can thou perform the Spell of Figuration?"

This was a very high level spell. It allowed one to see the true Inner Self of another being. Few in history had ever been able to cast it. Eyrmysse was not one of them. The implication made her sober and she gave the old man a cold stare. "No."

"What attributes are required to become High Witch?"

"Power," Eyrmysse replied immediately. "Strength, perseverance," she added after a moment's thought and considering her mountain climb.

"Is that all?"

The black robe thought deeply. "Knowledge. The High Witch should be well versed in not only the magics but the histories and politics as well."

"Why do you wish to become High Witch?"

"For the power and the knowledge. To learn and be able to cast the great spells. Not so much to control all others, but so that none can control me."

"What have the Trials taught you thus far?"

"That I am capable and worthy of becoming High Witch," Eyrmysse replied boldly. "I have suffered through and defeated Jhaezyyre. I have suffered through total indignation and survived it. I have suffered through the opposite Path, have given myself up to it and have walked it. I have told Qhen Rhyvhelle that none would stand before me and none have."

The old man slowly made his way to Eyrmysse. He groped for her hand and held it gently. Though the wind still whipped around them she was no longer cold. She looked at him and realized for the first time that he was blind, his unfocussed eyes staring past her as he spoke. "In my heart, I feared you would reach this point. I hoped against hope that you would heed the words of Qhen Rhyvhelle. But in my mind I knew you would stand before me for your desire and courage are great. You have one Trial left before you, Eyrmysse. Powerful you are and much knowledge you have attained but whether or not that is enough..." The Dweller Between the Stone's voice trailed off into the darkness as did his form.



Standing before the Dweller, Arhyvhyne only differed from her sister in the color of her hair and eyes and that she chose to try to cover her nakedness as opposed to flaunting it. Arhyvhyne was even as bruised and sore as her sister had been. The main difference and maybe the most telling, was that she lacked Eyrmysse's inner fire and determination.

Those who had constructed the Trials knew how to push the candidates limits without destroying them in the process. Maybe it was also the Soul Itself that pushed those limits and understood them. Regardless, Arhyvhyne was too weak to survive what Eyrmysse had been subjected to. Though she still had to contend with heavy fog, a swirling abyss of mists and the brutal winds, Arhyvhyne's ordeal with the mountain was not as long nor was it as arduous. Perhaps the Trials felt it necessary to test Eyrmysse further. Or maybe Eyrmysse's Soul did.

Arhyvhyne had already satisfactorily answered the questions pertaining to the Runes of Power and the Sacred Scrolls and pondered her response concerning the Great Mystical Wars. "Thaum sought to destroy the balance. Many think it was to rule over Khaballe and eventually the world. But I feel there were other, deeper reasons." The Dweller inclined his head, indicating Arhyvhyne should continue. "I do not understand the reasoning of gods or demons. Perhaps it was necessary in the greater scheme of things. Perhaps it is why we are here now."

"Can thou perform the Ritual of Renascence?"

Arhyvhyne shuddered violently and her sapphire eyes blazed for an instant, giving the old man a look of enmity. "No, I cannot," was all she said.

"What attributes are required to become High Witch?"

"The High Witch should have a high level of awareness and

be understanding," Arhyvhynne answered. "She should also have wisdom and knowledge. And she must be strong."

"Why do you wish to become High Witch?"

Arhyvhynne shook her head. "I do not wish to be High Witch. I do not feel I am worthy, nor do I feel I am ready."

"Then why are you here?"

"Wyxotte is too old and Lhynette felt I would be more suitable than she, though I do not know why. They all expect so much from me. Even Uriel thought I should be the candidate."

"What have the Trials taught you thus far?"

Arhyvhynne took a long time before she answered. "I am stronger and more powerful than I thought, but that frightens me. I am afraid I may use my power in a negative manner."

"What else have you learned?"

"The Paths are more similar than they appear."

"What of Uriel?"

Here, the white robe became introspective. "He is somehow very important in all this. I have pledged to help him in any way I can." The Dweller nodded his head as one would to a little girl, showing patience, waiting for her to reveal the heart of the matter. But Arhyvhynne would not confide anything else, though she had a hint of what might be forthcoming.

After Arhyvhynne was silent for a time, the Dweller smiled at her in sympathy. Or maybe he smiled to himself. In either case, he slowly made his way to her and took her hand. Arhyvhynne, though she felt akin to the old man, still covered herself as best she could with her other hand. But as the Dweller began to speak to her she dropped her hand to her side. Arhyvhynne not only realized that the Dweller was blind, but that he could see beyond the nakedness of her body to that of her Soul.

There was a profound sadness when the Dweller spoke and his age was reflected in his voice. "I have followed the progress of your Path in my mind's eye for many years. Though you have studied long and hard and are pure of heart, you are still very young and naive. You know not the enormity of the tasks which await you. Though I have waited a long, long time for these events to transpire, I wish for your sake that it could be another who stands before me, Arhyvhyne. But alas, it must be you."

All through the course of the Trials Arhyvhyne had a small hope buried that this might pass her by. But somehow the words of the Dweller brought a finality to her situation, seemingly causing her scrapes and sore muscles to burn more fiercely and the force of the winds to increase.

"Before you remains one Trial. But the trials you will face after this will require more than you have given here. Perhaps more than you are willing to give." The figure of the Dweller Between the Stone lingered for a moment and Arhyvhyne heard his final words: "You have it within yourself to accomplish this. Whether you choose to do so is a question only you can answer." Then he was gone.



Eyrmysse stood just inside the mouth of a cave which she came upon while climbing down the opposite side of the mountain. Her descent had not been as treacherous as the ascent. The winds still buffeted her, but they were not as strong and she had easier access to handholds and footholds. She found her clothes on the ground and she put them on carefully, her sore muscles protesting against the movements and the fabric of her

robes irritating the scraped skin. She discarded the shoes, her feet being too raw and blistered.

The cave tunnel wound its way for a length and Eyrmysse followed it. She looked back and found the entrance to the cave gone and a wry smile crossed her face. She continued on until the tunnel opened up into a small cavern. The black robe knew that it was here that the Rites of Trial would culminate and she entered it with mixed feelings of anxiousness and apprehension.

A steady breeze blew in the cavern, but not from any particular direction and its source was unknown. The floor was blanketed with a foot of swirling crimson smoke which cast a red glow throughout the cavern. Situated in the middle of the cavern was a white, grey and black veined marble altar. The sole object on the altar was an intricately carved golden dagger. The cavern afforded two other entrances (or exits), one from which Arhyvhynne had just emerged and the other between the outermost two. The center aperture led out to the sixth level of the dungeons where the Council awaited the appearance of the new High Witch. The opening to the antechamber seemed veiled and the view distorted, resembling heat haze.

"Eyrmysse!" the white robe cried out and ran to meet her sister. Arhyvhynne embraced her warmly and for a brief moment received an almost imperceptible hug back from her. Then the older sister disentangled herself and stepped back, the facade back in place.

"You have made it to the last Trial," Eyrmysse said, feigning surprise.

"Oh my sister it has been horrible. *Horrible!* I never thought I would make it this far."

"Neither did I," the black robe said under her breath.

The sisters proceeded to attempt to explain their Trials to each other but were unable to do so, save for in the most general terms. Everything seemed suddenly vague to them, as if their memories were bound by some magical spell (which they were). Though their memories were intact, it was extremely difficult to vocalize them.

Frustrated by her inability to coherently piece together the Trials, Eyrmysse decided to examine the exit to the dungeons and Arhyvhyne followed. The two found that a magical barrier prevented them from exiting the cavern. While the sisters could see the remaining Council members in the antechamber through the barrier, it was obvious that the opposite was not true.

Arhyvhyne recalled fragments of her initial Trial and told her sister, "I might be able to break through."

Eyrmysse gave her sister a wary look. She did not discount the possibility. She knew that changes had taken place within herself and assumed the same for Arhyvhyne. "I do not think it wise, if indeed you are capable of destroying the barrier. I have the feeling something more ominous awaits us." She motioned with her head towards the altar.

The sisters walked together to the altar. Looking at it, both Arhyvhyne and Eyrmysse were drawn to the golden dagger, the same blade that they had encountered in several of the previous Trials. Eyrmysse reached out a hand to the dagger and as she did so, a scroll materialized above the golden weapon. The scroll floated in the air and was yellowed with age, its edges torn. Eyrmysse read it first, turned away, obviously disturbed. Then Arhyvhyne read it. A moment after, the scroll dissipated into the air.

The white robe shook her head forcefully. "No!"

"We must," responded Eyrmysse.

"No! *I* will not."

Eyrmysse sounded as if she were explaining to a child. "I am not entirely pleased with the prospect myself. However, we have no other alternative." She knew she was very close to realizing her dream. Although even she did not particularly care for the rules, she knew she would win the game under the prescribed conditions.

Arhyvhyne pointed to the exit. "The barrier."

"Do you honestly believe you can break through?" Again, as if to a child. But secretly, a worry. *What if she could?*

"I do not know, but I have to try. Certainly it is preferable to..." The white robe shuddered.

Eyrmysse shrugged her shoulders and turned her back. Arhyvhyne proceeded to the barrier and sat before it. It was an effort for her just to get into trance. It didn't take long for her to realize that this simply was not an option. There were stronger magics at work. They were meant to conclude the Trials in a specific manner. But Arhyvhyne would not let it go.

Finally, after a quarter hour and more, Eyrmysse lost her patience and confronted Arhyvhyne. "It is evident, sister. There is only one way."

Arhyvhyne looked up at Eyrmysse, defeat in her eyes. But she did not respond.

"I have gone through the abyss for who knows how long just to get here." The black robe dwelled on what she could remember of the previous five Trials. She was getting angry now, working herself into the state of mind she would need to be in. "I am not about to sit here for eternity waiting for some miraculous deliverance. Make no mistake, I plan to leave this cavern as High

Witch."

"You would do that to your own sister?" Arhyvhynne asked incredulously. She could not mask the deep hurt she felt.

"It is you or I, sister." Eyrmysse spat the last word. "Will you stand against me or not?"

Arhyvhynne broke into tears. "Oh, Goddess," she cried. "Oh sweet Goddess..."

Eyrmysse hoped that Arhyvhynne would confront her. If she acquiesced, it would not be easy. She helped her sister to her feet, looked at her with violet eyes that held no mercy. "It would make it easier if... at least you would have a chance."

Arhyvhynne drew in a deep breath, then sniffled. She thought of her second Trial with Satarsmyt and her fourth at the argentree. She thought of the words of Qhen Rhyvhelle and the Dweller. She thought of her mother. She thought of Uriel. With Eyrmysse. *You must learn to do the necessary.* At that moment she recalled her first Trial and knew she could defeat Eyrmysse at her own game. And she knew she was not deceiving herself. But she did not entertain the thought. She would not compromise herself. She must follow her Path just as Eyrmysse must follow her own. She lifted her head high and a glint of steel, reminiscent of her mother, entered the sapphire eyes. She held her sister's gaze for a moment. Then reluctantly, "Do what you must." Arhyvhynne turned her back on her sister and walked to the altar. She took the golden blade in her hands, turned and waited for Eyrmysse.

The black robe approached cautiously. Eyrmysse did not believe that her sister would turn on her, but now was not the time to make foolish assumptions. The stakes were too high.

Their eyes met. Neither could intuit the other's feelings. Fresh tears ran down Arhyvhynne's face. Sweat beaded Eyrmysse's

forehead. Arhyvhynne held out the blade. Eyrmysse did not hesitate. She accepted it.

Arhyvhynne placed herself upon the marble altar. *It feels so cold*, she thought. She looked around the room, giving everything a last, lingering glance. Then she turned her head slightly to look at her sister. Deep blue eyes over brimmed with tears. But the voice was calm, steady. "I understand. I forgive you." The words sent a chill down Eyrmysse's spine. A torrent of emotion overcame her and the black robe faltered for a moment. But only for a moment. Then the golden dagger came down.

CHAPTER XVI

"It is a great opportunity," the Prince argued. Rhenycyn was adamant, his mind already made up.

The King gave his son a half frown. "I doubt that a visit from you would change much after all these years."

"It is a possibility," the Prince responded. "If he would even move from hostile to noncommittal it would be significant." Rhenycyn eyed his sister. "Ellycyn, what are your thoughts?"

The Princess had worn a cynical look ever since she was called to this meeting and did not put forth the effort to even pretend interest. "I think you are more than adept at worming your way into other people's lives and making them think what you want them to. Why should this instance be any different?"

Nherycyn raised an eyebrow but did not otherwise acknowledge his daughter's caustic remark. Then he inclined his head to his son.

Rhenycyn obviously had not anticipated his sister's reluctance to forgive and forget the episode between Mharkhel and himself. He had counted on her support but he continued on, undaunted. "I think he may secretly be pleased that I, on behalf of the crown, would attend his eightieth birthday party."

"Valdhon is not one easily influenced. He has been a member of the Ministry for..." the King stroked his beard while he tried to remember. Finally, he shook his head and dismissed it. "He does not take well to covert attempts at flattery and bribery. Your presence at his celebration may only incite him further."

Rhenycyn rose and walked to a window, stared out at the

pouring rain. "Something must be done, father. The Journey of Homage is only a short time away and there is much I wish to accomplish. Valdhon will be sure to mark and counter my every move."

"That he will, that he will." Nherycyn sounded tired, though not uninterested. The King looked to Athar and asked, "What do you advise?"

It was the first time the wizard had been asked to offer his counsel concerning Valdhon's upcoming celebration. The King's Advisor had sat quietly and thoughtfully throughout the discussion. Now, bushy eyebrows came together, giving the outward display of serious contemplation. He adjusted the cincture around his waist, then fingered the silver, inverted pentagram that hung from his neck. "I think you are correct, my Prince. Something must be done to minimize Valdhon's interference in the upcoming negotiations." Those statements shocked everyone in the room. The following ones did not. "However, I do not believe that your attendance at the Minister's birthday celebration would bring us to that end. I am afraid it would arouse even deeper resentments against you. My portents concerning this are sinister." Athar turned to the King as Rhenycyn did a slow burn. "Remember that Valdhon does not have any conflict with the crown, just the Prince. If we decrease Rhenycyn's visibility and role up to and during the meetings, we may successfully implement some of the Prince's plans without Valdhon knowing or suspecting."

Nherycyn nodded, seemed to like the idea. A knock at the door of the library interrupted them momentarily. A black robe, Azarel, one of Athar's ten wizards entered. He was flanked by two white robe wizards, Zomyel and Beleghor. They stood inside the

door waiting to be acknowledged. The King turned to his son. "Rhenycyn?"

The Prince took advantage of the interruption to inwardly repress his emotions. When he spoke he was cool, confident. "Athar has some valid points. But I think if I stayed out of the picture, he would see through it anyway. I would rather work with Valdhon than behind his back. And I think he just might respect my efforts."

"Athar?" the King asked. The Advisor merely shrugged his shoulders, as if the matter was no longer his concern. Nherycyn looked back to his son and said, "I leave the decision up to you. But consider carefully before deciding, especially what Athar has cautioned us about. Either way let me know. We will need to make appropriate arrangements." The King motioned Athar to acknowledge his wizard.

"Azarel?"

The frail wizard went through the customary salutations before addressing the group. "We have received important news from the north. The details are not yet clear, however."

Uneasy looks passed among the group of four. The news could be anything what with rampant rumors of the SoulSlayers and the wizard staying at the Towers. The King's Advisor was somber as he said, "Go on."

Azarel looked to Zomyel who related the news. "Khyrhyelle has become Qhen Khyrhyelle. The High Witch has passed on to the spiritual plane."

Beleghor added, "A new High Witch has emerged from the Rites of Trial and reigns at the Towers of the Moons."



"You summoned me, master?" Azarel looked anxious. He was worried that he had somehow incurred his master's displeasure.

The Dark Master sat at his table, watching his chained "pets" play together. "You need not worry yourself. You performed well. I called upon you because there has been a change of plans. Contact the one from the Khezef Ahf."

"What do you wish him for?"

"The Prince plans to represent the crown at Valdhon's eightieth birthday celebration. Although this is still some time before the Journey of Homage, we could not have asked for a more fortunate situation. There will be a most stately gathering to witness the event."

"Mhylzul should perform his service then?" the wizard asked.

"Yes. Have him secure a position in the Prince's entourage. I will leave the rest to him." The Dark One turned his face to his servant. The face wavered between that of a human and an enormous fly. A thousand eyes looked upon Azarel. "So should you."

Azarel looked down and fought back the sickness he felt at seeing one of his master's true faces. He spoke through clenched teeth. "And the Prince suspects nothing?"

The Dark Master let out a snort of derision. "Athar warned him. But I knew Rhenycyn would never heed the words of the King's Advisor. In fact, I knew it would goad him to do the exact opposite."



Two of the Royal Guard, Mharkhel and Setryv, as well as Vhyqyrd, the Captain of the Guard, escorted Rhenycyn to Valdhon's celebration. Vhyqyrd was a light elf whose pointed features were greatly exaggerated. Heavy amounts of grey mixed with his red hair. He was tall, always impeccably dressed and though he was getting on in years, took immense pride in his still superb condition. The elf was a man of complete dedication to Khaballe and was void of any trace of humor, having no tolerance for anyone who would not obey and execute orders. He always had with him a small, personal notebook in which he detailed everything that concerned his knights from general comments to minor and major infractions. Vhyqyrd was also not fond of the personal relationship Mharkhel and Setryv shared with the Prince. Both knights had been dressed down for bringing the matter of Neghez before the Prince before Vhyqyrd was notified.

Among the Prince's other attendants were his squire and several stewards. The Prince's party had left the castle and crossed the Twisted Horn using the middle of three bridges. The evening suns glimmered on the water and reflections of the Royal Commons shimmered on its ripples. They continued through the Commons, surrounded by the spring beauty which accompanied their every step. Here, the brightly colored flowers and subtle shades of the woods complimented each other in an orchestra of visual delight. But these sights were not enough to ease their minds. The tension had steadily risen since they had left for the celebration. Everything had to be perfect. There could be no mistakes. Rhenycyn had even struggled for days concerning the gift he would offer the senior member of the King's Ministry.

The Prince had decided upon a rare and expensive gift for Valdhon, though it was more likely a peace offering. The gift was

a case of *Regi Argenti*, an exquisite wine of select grapes from an exclusive region, fermented with the silver-tinged leaves of the argentree. The wine was renowned not only for its flavor but for its unique visual appeal as well. The spirit was purple-blue in color with thin silver veins running through it. The wine was very dry and distinctive, though it was not heavy, left no aftertaste and had a pleasing bouquet. A single bottle could cost more than twenty gold *pennhutz*. Very few individuals, save the royal family or guests thereof, ever had the fortune to sample the exotic liquor.

After leaving the Commons, the party turned right down an avenue where most of the upper nobility resided. The homes opposite the Commons were all magnificent, each distinct in its own way and Valdhon's was the most lavish. Not that he was the type, however. He preferred things to be simple, straightforward and logical. But as he got on in years, his daughter Dhonlaa began to manage most of the household. After the death of Thenycyn and the subsequent refusal of Rhenycyn to claim her as his betrothed, Dhonlaa took to making Valdhon's home as palatial as was possible. If Dhonlaa could not be a princess or a queen at least she would live like one.

As they approached Valdhon's estate, the Prince felt his apprehension grow. Both Mharkhel and Setryv sensed it and heightened their awareness. They craned their necks looking for anything unusual. One of the stewards caught Mharkhel's eye and the knight pointed him out to Setryv saying, "That one. He is not known to me."

Setryv studied the steward Mharkhel referred to. He was carrying the case of *Regi Argenti* and was strongly built but did not have any distinguishing features, though the dark eyes were cold and distant. "I do not recognize him either. Yet in some way

he looks familiar."

"Yes, I know exactly what you mean." Mharkhel added, "Make sure that one does not get too close to the Prince." Setryv nodded gravely. He was all business when he had to be.

The party entered the courtyard and assembled at the entrance to the Minister's home. Rhenycyn looked the party over. The Prince had chosen to wear his formal royal blue, hoping to strike an air of acquiescence with his personality and authority with his clothing. He wanted neither Valdhon nor any of the other affluent guests to forget he would one day be king and that this was simply a gesture of good will. His knights wore their formal dark blue and gold and both were armed. Even the stewards wore the matching royal blue of the Prince. Satisfied, Rhenycyn took a deep breath and motioned for his squire to lead the way and announce his arrival.

A good many of the nobles were already present. Though Rhenycyn toyed with the idea of arriving stylishly late, he opted for a less conspicuous entrance. A hush fell over the gathering as the Prince and his entourage were announced and entered. Rumors had it that the Prince would attend in lieu of his father, but most thought it unjustified speculation. Why would Rhenycyn play up to Valdhon?

Rhenycyn looked over the crowd, making note of some reactions. He settled his hazel eyes on Valdhon, flipped his blonde hair back, walked up to his host and offered his hand. "Hello Valdhon. Congratulations on your eightieth birthday. May you have many more—which you should be assured of by the looks of you."

The Prince spoke an obvious untruth. Valdhon looked terrible. He was hunched over and needed support of a cane. His

limbs were gnarled and age spots covered his hands and his face. The dark brown tunic he wore only made his skin look more pale. But his blue eyes danced with mischief. The senior member of the King's Ministry disregarded the Prince's offered hand and snorted, saying, "You wish I were dead."

"I must admit there were times when that may have crossed my mind," Rhenycyn responded laughingly and withdrew his hand.

"There were rumors you would come. I thought they were foolish. However it appears that you are the fool. Unless you have come to ask for my daughter in marriage, I have no desire for you to be here." The remarks drew loud murmurs from the guests.

Rhenycyn fought back a retort and looked at Valdhon's daughter who was standing next to her father. Dhonlaa was of medium height and slim, had curly light brown hair, hazel eyes and wore a low cut red dress that clung to every curve. Dhonlaa was an attractive lady who knew how to accentuate her every feature. *She looks great*, Rhenycyn thought. *She would have made a beautiful princess and queen. For Thenycyn.*

Rhenycyn smiled at Dhonlaa and took her hand, kissing it lightly. Again, loud whisperings came from the guests. Someone noted that Rhenycyn was not accompanied by his girlfriend. Many turned to Fhyndhella's father, Delfyn, who was attending the party, and questions arose concerning the relationship between the Prince and his daughter. Meanwhile, the Prince turned his attention back to Valdhon. "I came here with the sincere desire to be with you in celebrating this most auspicious event. I was hoping we could put the past behind us."

"Hope is only for those who no longer command their own destinies." The old man bore his eyes into Rhenycyn and added,

"Something that seems to run in your family of late."

This time the Prince was unable to disguise his anger. "Say what you will about me, but never, *never* apply the same remarks to my family!" Though the words were just above a whisper, the attention of all the guests had been redirected back to the Prince.

"Do you threaten *me*?" Valdhon fumed.

Rhenycyn's lips curled into a cruel smile. He spoke to the crowd as much as he did to Valdhon. "I think the senility of your old age has caused you to forget who is in your presence and to whom you speak. Your words against the King neighbor on treason. I would hate to have to begin inquiries where you are concerned. Especially so close to the Journey of Homage."

"It would suit your purpose to have my father indisposed at that time, would it not Your Highness?" There was a collective intake of breath as Dhonlaa lashed out at Rhenycyn. "After all, the real reason behind your outlandish presence here is to diminish my father's influence in the upcoming negotiations, is it not?"

The Prince quickly regained his composure. It would not fare well for him if he took the offensive against a woman, one that would not only have married his older brother but could also be viewed as being left out in the cold by him. "It is no secret that I would prefer to have your father stand with me rather than against me, my... lady." Rhenycyn looked into her eyes and felt a small stirring of desire. He considered why he refused to court her after Thenycyn's death. The main reason had nothing to do with Dhonlaa herself except that she had been Thenycyn's choice. And he wanted to make his own choices and decisions concerning a bride, concerning everything. Pride could be a difficult vice at times. "I regret that my presence has caused these feelings of resentment to surface at what should otherwise be a joyous

occasion. Perhaps as the evening proceeds we will find reason to come to better terms."

"Only if I do not live to see the morning," Valdhon said.

Rhenycyn grimaced, gave the old man a curt bow and lightly kissed Dhonlaa's hand. Then the Prince turned and immersed himself with the guests, mingling, exchanging pleasantries and talking politics. Mharkhel and Setryv hovered like vultures, neither letting the Prince nor the big, dark-eyed steward out of their sight. Vhyqyrd followed the Prince like a shadow.

After all the guests arrived, they gathered together to take part in the toast to Valdhon's eightieth birthday. The gathering uttered exclamations of surprise when the Prince presented his gift and ordered the *Regi Argenti* opened. The steward's circulated amongst the guests, pouring the exquisite liquid in fine crystal made by the elves from Qyntes'ah. The sparkling rainbow-colored crystal was so delicate and beautiful it almost vied for the praise given to the wine.

Mharkhel and Setryv kept a close watch on the proceedings and were pleased that nothing seemed unusual and that the big steward came nowhere near the Prince. He was occupied at the far end of the room serving Valdhon and his closest friends.

When everyone was served, Rhenycyn called for silence and all eyes focused on the Prince as a hush came over the room. "Friends and associates, we have gathered here this evening to honor a man who has devoted his many years to the just running of government in Khaballe. Although words passed between us before, I feel great admiration and respect for Valdhon. Though my father's reign has been without incident for the most part, there were difficult times when Valdhon's counsel and shrewd thought led us through adversity. He has kept the interest of this kingdom

at the forefront of his endeavors and has worked to keep Bhel'Ehzz and Khaballe at the level of greatness they are today."

Cheers and shouts of praise arose from the guests, mostly for Valdhon, but acclaim could also be heard for the King and Prince. Valdhon could sense he was being positioned as a worthy tool of the King and Prince, as a necessary good and did not especially care for it. He wore a sour face and resigned himself, for the time, to being the object of the Prince's laudatory comments. Rhenycyn on the other hand was pleased with himself. He was marshalling a great deal of support by admitting the differences between Valdhon and himself, by making the effort at putting those differences aside and proclaiming the worth of the man who was making a crusade against him.

The Prince raised his hand and once again the room fell silent. "I would like all of you to join me in toasting the eightieth birthday of Valdhon." Rhenycyn raised his glass high in the air and faced the old man. "May you live long enough to counsel me through my reign."

As glasses were raised and shouts of "Hear, hear" resounded throughout the hall, the big steward slipped out of the house, seen only by Mharkhel. The knight, who suddenly recognized the steward, cried "No!" and moved quickly through the crowd, roughly pushing people out of his way. But the steward was long gone by the time Mharkhel could make his way to the exit. In the commotion, no one noticed Valdhon beginning to choke violently. Within seconds, the old man had dropped his glass and fell to his knees and then to the floor. People screamed and Dhonlaa hysterically called for a healer.

It took the healer a minute to get there and she had to fight her way through the guests that had gathered around Valdhon and

his daughter. The healer worked on the old man for several minutes to no avail. Rhenycyn had just arrived when the healer pushed herself up and somberly regarded Dhonlaa. The healer shook her head and said, "He is gone." While Dhonlaa let out a sob, the healer turned to the Prince, accusation in her eyes and said, "The wine."

"What?" Rhenycyn asked not comprehending.

"His tongue is black," the healer explained. "The wine was poisoned."

Rhenycyn simply stood in shock. Dhonlaa burst into tears and knelt next to her father, hugging him tightly. Paranoia seized many of the guests and they began to force fingers down their throats, thinking that they too had been poisoned. Amidst the frenzy that ensued, Vhyqyrd had Setryv seal off the premises, allowing no one to leave until everyone was accounted for.

After some semblance of order was restored, Vhyqyrd reported Mharkhel's and Setryv's findings to Rhenycyn. "There is only one person missing, Your Highness," Vhyqyrd said.

"Who is it?" the Prince asked, afraid to hear the answer.

Vhyqyrd motioned for Mharkhel to answer the Prince. "It is one of our stewards," the dark knight replied, "the one who was serving wine to Valdhon's group. He is the same one I saw leaving and gave chase to." Both Mharkhel and Setryv thought it wise to tell the Prince and Vhyqyrd in private it was the same man they encountered at the Inn of the Falling Leaf.

Dhonlaa looked up from her father, tears running freely down her face. Her voice was calculated. "You had him assassinated. You came here on his birthday and had him murdered!"

Rhenycyn's face lost all color. "Dhonlaa, I... no, you must believe me," the Prince tried to explain.

"You had him *murdered*," she screamed. "On his birthday." Dhonlaa returned her attention to Valdhon, her sobs becoming uncontrollable.

Rhenycyn turned away from the grieving woman and noticed that a wide berth had formed around himself and his knights. He gazed at the crowd, hoping to find support. Some in the crowd wanted desperately to believe him. More held looks of accusation. But mostly, their eyes betrayed fear. Of him.



"Were there any... problems?" Azarel asked.

"Not really," Mhylzul answered. "The big knight, the dark one—what's his name?"

"Mharkhel."

"Yeah, Mharkhel. I think he remembered me from the Leaf. He tried to follow me, but he didn't stand a chance."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"You are sure he is dead?"

Mhylzul let out a short sigh and gave the frail wizard a look of impatience. "Positive. No one can survive *velheno*. Not even wizards," he add wryly.

Azarel passed over the comment. "I trust that the chief steward, the one who hired you has been... terminated as well?" The assassin nodded. "Good."

A light knock sounded at the door. They were in the same dimly lit room that they used before Mhylzul paid his final visit to Neghez. The secret door opened and another black robe entered. This wizard contrasted greatly to Azarel. He had black skin and

haunted brown eyes and was taller and more well-built than even Mhylzul. He closed the door behind himself wordlessly.

"Who's this?" Mhylzul thinly disguised his alarm. The assassin knew that men akin to the black man were from Rheg Nhor, the city to the far south, a port of the Raffha Sea. Rumor had it they had migrated over from Mhajje, the continent southeast of Khaballe. Though they were universally big and strong, and known for their expertise with a ship as well as weapons, they were relatively unknown in the kingdom. They preferred the south sea and seldom took up residence in any other part of Khaballe.

"This is Uxzel. Like myself, he is one of Athar's Ten. He is second in ability only to myself."

"What's he doin' here?" The assassin knew he could deal with Azarel if he had to, even with magic involved. He was quick enough to take out the wizard before he could unleash a spell. But the imposing figure of Uxzel changed the odds to the wizard's favor.

"I did not believe the Khezef Ahf knew fear." Azarel laughed a sick, little laugh. "You need not worry. We still have need of your... services. I have requested Uxzel to assist me in a teleportation spell." Mhylzul wore a wary look. "I am sure Bhel'Ehzz will be sealed off and we do not wish to take the risk of you being apprehended."

"I can get out."

"Perhaps, but the teleportation will make the outcome certain."

Mhylzul argued ineffectively for several minutes before he decided that he had no choice in the matter. A few more minutes passed while they discussed Mhylzul's destination. They settled on a secluded place outside of Sevher'tah that all three knew well.

That fact surprised the assassin. It appeared that Uxzel must have been well-traveled.

"When do you want me back?" the assassin asked.

"Return for the Journey of Homage. With the great influx of people into Bhel'Ehzz, you should have no difficulty passing into the city. Are you ready?"

"No."

Azarel laughed again and it sent a chill down Mhylzul's spine. Killing people was one thing, but these guys got under the assassin's skin. The wizards positioned Mhylzul and began uttering the Words which would transport the assassin to his new location. Mhylzul felt a tingling throughout his body and then a brightness enveloped him. Soon, the wizards were alone in the room.

CHAPTER XVII

Eighteen hours had passed and the nerves of the remaining four witches were frayed. They all sat on the cold stone floor of the sixth level antechamber waiting for the emergence of the new High Witch. Surprisingly, Wyxotte had held up the best. With the help of an occasional nap, she had remained calm throughout the wait. The dwarf had tried to explain on several occasions that the Trials took a great deal of time but her words fell on deaf ears. Lhynette was beyond depression, convinced she had sent an unwilling Arhyvhynne to her death. Qelharre succumbed to the increasing anticipation and took refuge in one of her melancholy moods. Rejected by the dark elf in her attempts to soothe her, Dhynelle bordered on becoming a prophetess of gloom and doom.

"What would happen if neither is found acceptable?" Dhynelle asked no one in particular.

"That has never happened, at least not that I am aware of." Wyxotte turned to Lhynette and tried to coax her from her lethargy. "Do you ever remember reading that such a thing happened?"

"Huh? No, no I do not." The white robe thought for a moment then added, "But this could very possibly be the first time."

The statement alarmed Dhynelle. "Why would you say that?"

"I am beginning to believe that I was meant to be the white robe candidate. I forced Arhyvhynne to accept what should have been my burden. Now I must bear the guilt of what I have done to Arhyvhynne along with the possibility of still having to face the Trials."

Dhynelle let her head drop back against the wall and let out a sigh. She, like the others, looked worse for wear. Her grey streaks had recently become more pronounced and her bright hazel eyes were tinged with the red that accompanies long hours. A thought suddenly occurred to her and she looked apprehensively towards Qelharre. "If Lhynette is right..." she said, her voice trailing off.

The dark elf rolled her pink eyes. "Please. I have enough to worry about without you adding every conceivable possibility to them."

"But one of us would have to be the candidate." Dhynelle started expounding arguments but was interrupted by a gasp from Wyxotte.

The other three witches looked at the old witch. Lhynette asked "What is it, Wyxotte?"

Wordlessly, the old white robe stretched out her arm and pointed to the middle tunnel where energy was visually converging, causing a shimmering in the air. The witches unconsciously drew themselves up from the stone floor, their eyes fixed on the spectacle before them. As the shimmering grew brighter, a figure began to coalesce. The shimmering became supplanted by an intense golden light, so brilliant that it hurt the eyes, causing the witches, as one, to drop to their knees and bow their heads. Then the golden light slowly faded away, revealing the new High Witch of the Moons.



As Eyrmysse brought the golden dagger down with both hands, Arhyvhyne suddenly vanished. The blade, however, entered the altar effortlessly and an astonished Eyrmysse looked

on, more as a spectator than a participant. Though she tried to pull the dagger from the altar several times, she was unable to do so. Bewildered, the black robe looked around the cavern for her sister. Her violet eyes came to rest on the middle exit where she noticed the air shimmering. A moment passed before realization and anger swept over her simultaneously.

"No!" Eyrmysse screamed and ran towards the exit. "No!" she screamed again as she flung herself at the opening. The black robe came in full contact with the barrier and the ensuing shock reverberated through her system as she was thrown violently across the room. Eyrmysse crashed into the altar and landed heavily on the cavern floor. The voice of Qhen Rhyvhelle was the last thing she heard before she passed into unconsciousness.



"Before you stands Arhyvhynne, the High Witch of the Moons," the voice of Qhen Rhyvhelle proclaimed. "Know that she is our chosen and as such you are bound to her and by her. Be ye faithful and loyal to her. Be ye guided by her wisdom and truth." There was a brief silence before a clap of thunder resounded through the Towers marking the departure of Qhen Rhyvhelle.

The four witches in the antechamber picked their heads up in unison. They laid their eyes upon Arhyvhynne who was enshrouded in radiance. There was a power there, a maturity unseen before. How much of it was a glamour was uncertain. Beneath all of it, she was still only a seventeen year old girl.

Lhynette was the first to speak. Her voice was heavy with emotion and tears welled at the corners of her eyes as she said, "*Arhyvhynne, lhe ehe ehsaltaat ede bennhez frah thut strezhell.*"

Which is to say "Arhyvhyne, you are the most exalted and blessed amongst all women." Lhynette used the old tongue, the language of magic and spells. It was not lost on the other three witches.

Arhyvhyne, herself overcome with emotion, gave Lhynette a warm smile then managed to say, "Will you all please get up?"

Wyxotte shook her head and placed a restraining arm on Dhynelle who was beginning to rise. "I believe we ought to offer our fealty."

"It is not really necessary," Arhyvhyne said, somewhat embarrassed.

"Yes, it is," replied Wyxotte firmly.

When they had finished, the witches questioned the High Witch about the Trials but were answered with vague references, in part due to the sacredness of the rituals and in part due to Arhyvhyne's memories being magically bound. Lhynette then asked how Arhyvhyne felt and if she was alright. The High Witch responded that she was for the most part in tact but that she was in desperate need of some rest.

"There are a few things which must be dealt with first," Wyxotte told her. "You must go to the Grove for the Impartation Ritual. When you are done there, you must call your first Council meeting so that we may elect your replacement. As soon as she is with us, we will have to organize your coronation this evening. It is now slightly after midnight. You should be able to get a few hours rest between the meeting and the coronation."

They began to get themselves together to leave when Arhyvhyne brought up the topic which had been carefully avoided. "Has anyone seen Eyrmyse? I am worried about her."

Wyxotte answered for them all. "I would not worry about

your sister—unless you are worried about how she will conduct herself."



Alone, with only a pouch in her hand, the new High Witch made her way out to the Sacred Grove in the very early hours of the morning. She stopped at the edge of the pond and cast her eyes upon the islet where only twenty hours before she watched the remains of her mother burn into the sky. Though the pain was still fresh in her heart, she had been numbed to an extent by the Trials. But only to an extent. She allowed herself only a brief period of grief before preparing herself.

As she disrobed, Arhyvhyne thought about how nice the night actually was. She looked up with appreciation at the glowing moons and twinkling stars. The temperature was warm and the scents of spring flooded the senses, intoxicating her. Naked, she entered the pond and cleansed herself, then swam out to the islet as was required by the ritual. The fresh, clean water felt so good against her skin she was reluctant to leave the pond. But she did so and wrung out her long, blonde hair as she stood on the grassy knoll. She opened the pouch that she had taken with her and mixed the prescribed ingredients which included oils and powdered herbs. She anointed herself with the ointment, rubbing it all over her body, deep into her skin. Then she added a splash of pond water to the pouch and the remaining few drops of the ointment and drank it.

Arhyvhyne immediately began to relax. She could feel the tension and stress from her mother's death and the Trials leave her body. The sights, sounds and smells of the Grove became

intensified. She gazed out at the beauty of the flowers on the islet caressed by the moonlight and she closed her eyes, letting their aroma wash over her. She drunkenly made her way to the great argentree and the sight of it brought fragments of memories from the Trials. The High Witch reverently ran a finger along a leaf, then a limb and finally the trunk. She embraced the tree briefly and then laid down at the trunk in a fetal position. She closed her eyes and fell into a half-sleep.

Arhyvhyne was conscious of her surroundings but was also aware that a part of her, the spiritual part was somewhere else at the same time. The High Witch saw a holy place, some sort of temple or shrine. She was dressed in her customary white and she knelt down in the temple, exhibiting her veneration. A chalice magically appeared before her and she accepted it and drank deeply. Arhyvhyne was still aware of her physical surroundings but was undisturbed even though she knew she was not dreaming. She could now detect the presence of others though she did not see them. Voices entered her mind imparting knowledge that belonged solely to the High Witch. Some dealt with spells while others were purely informational. Some rested just beneath her awareness and others deep in her subconscious. The seeds were planted that would blossom as time, experience and necessity wove their intricate threads of life.

Still in a daze, Arhyvhyne sat up slowly. She looked around the islet. The sky was still in darkness, the moons still visible. How long had the Ritual taken? An hour? Two hours? Or only minutes? She had no idea. Using the argentree, she got to her feet and made her way to the pond, sat down at the edge of the bridge and dangled her feet in the water. She lost herself in the ripples before she looked across at the Towers and saw lights from

candles or torches flickering in a couple of rooms. The massive towers and the land encompassing it all seemed to reach out to her, accepting her, renewing its welcome. *Impressive*, she thought. *And all my responsibility. Wonderful*, she added cynically. With a frown, the High Witch pushed herself up, swam back to the other side, dressed and went to meet with her Council.



No one, not even Arhyhynne was surprised that Eyrmysse walked into the Council Chambers half an hour late. The black robe had remained unconscious in the cavern for quite a while. When she came to, she was able to leave the cavern through the middle exit and found the antechamber empty. Reality hit her hard then and Eyrmysse's emotions alternated between grief and anger. She went to leave, but as she placed her foot upon the first step, she turned around and looked back at the antechamber. "I *will* be back," she said under her breath and unleashed a tremendous fireball which scorched the wall. She left the sixth level of the dungeons a very bitter young woman.

Arhyhynne wanted to run over to her sister and hug her and tell her everything was alright, that the ordeal was over, that they could be sisters again. But she anticipated Eyrmysse's response and fought back her desire. She was already learning self control.

"It is about time," Wyxotte commented, her voice sarcastic.

The black robe raised her head and the cowl fell to her shoulders. She was still unquestionably beautiful and sensual, even after what she had gone through with the Trials. But the violet eyes were hooded and she somehow looked older. And more dangerous. She flashed her patented smile at the old witch,

saying "I did not hear any complaints from the High Witch."

The comment caught Arhyvhynne off guard. She did not expect a confrontation so early. Eyrmysse waited for a response while the other witches waited to see how the new High Witch would handle her sister, herself. Silence augmented the tension. Arhyvhynne suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable sitting on the dais her mother had ruled from. *How would mother handle this?* she wondered. She made a half-hearted attempt to circumvent the issue. "We have more important business than your punctuality to discuss." Her voice was small, her eyes diverted.

Eyrmysse was smug. "Such as your coronation?"

"Sister, please. I assure you this is as difficult for me as it is for you."

"Is it really?" Eyrmysse said as she glared at Arhyvhynne.

Arhyvhynne knew she was rapidly losing control of the situation and hoped for a miracle. Wyxotte supplied one. "Leave it alone, Eyrmysse," cautioned the dwarf while she gave the black robe a steady look. "Arhyvhynne was found to be the better candidate. You failed." The white robe's last two words seemed to stifle Eyrmysse and settle things down. All, however, were amazed at the active role Wyxotte had taken since Khyrhyelle's untimely death.

The High Witch quickly took advantage of the situation to change the topic. "Our first concern is that of adding a white robe to the Council. I have pretty much made up my mind unless anyone wishes to propose any other candidates. My choice is Xenysa." This, for all intents and purposes, was a non-issue. On the last occasion a replacement was necessary, the choice for the white robe Council member fell between Arhyvhynne and Xenysa. Though Xenysa was considered an ideal candidate and

a possible successor to Khyrhyelle, she declined in deference to Arhyvhynne. Xenyssa felt that her time would eventually come and that Arhyvhynne would greatly benefit by the experience. In retrospect, a decision that exemplified Xenyssa's foresight and wisdom.

There was a short discussion of some other witches, but it was more along the lines of candidates they might look to in the future. When it came to a vote, Xenyssa received all seven possible votes (the High Witch's counted for two in the absence of a Council member) though she only needed four. Arhyvhynne hoped that most of her reign would proceed as smoothly as Xenyssa's vote, but feared the opposite would be true.

Ghemella was sent to inform Xenyssa that her presence was requested by the Council. The Guardian was surprised to find Xenyssa waiting for her though it was not yet four in the morning. The witch stood framed by the doorway, tall and thin. Her long, silky hair was as white as the robes she wore and both contrasted greatly with her smooth, ebony skin. She had a commanding presence though she was reserved, held a goodly amount of knowledge and was an adept spellcaster. Little was known of her background though it was assumed she hailed from Rheg Nhor. Her name indicated a trace of halfling blood in her ancestry but her appearance did not support it.

"Why are you awake at this hour, Mistress?" Ghemella questioned in a surprised voice.

"Why are you here at this hour, Ghemella?"

"I was sent to inform you that the Council requests your presence."

"Now you know why I am awake at this hour." A hint of a smile was on Xenyssa's lips.

"I will tell them you are coming then?"

"Yes, thank you. I will be down momentarily."

Ghemella left the white robe's room. She wondered about Xenyssa. The Guardian thought she was a very mysterious lady who knew entirely too much.

Xenyssa entered the Chamber and went directly to Arhyvhyne. She knelt before the High Witch and offered her blessing. The white robe rose and gave Arhyvhyne a small smile. A moment later, she moved to Eyrmysse and spoke words of solace. Then she seated herself on the bench at the far end of the table.

Arhyvhyne spoke softly, barely audible above the crackling of torches. "I am sorry to have you awakened at such an hour, but as I am sure you know, there are a great many changes taking place." Xenyssa nodded her understanding. "We have requested that you be here so that we may offer the vacant white robe Council position to you. We would be honored to have you with us and," she added as an aside, "I want you to know that our vote was unanimous."

The black woman spoke with unfeigned humility. "I am not sure I am worthy of such confidence, however, I am at your command, High One. Should it be within my power, I will endeavor to perform any task that you require of me. If it is your feeling, as well as the Council's, that I may in some way assist our sisterhood, I will gladly accept the position."

"Good," Arhyvhyne said with an air of satisfaction. "You may take your rightful seat among us." Xenyssa stood and took the seat that had previously been Arhyvhyne's. The High Witch let out a deep sigh. "Now let us get down to business."

For the second time in the last forty hours, the Sacred Grove was the gathering spot for the Witches of the Moons. The first event had been laden with sorrow, the air filled with the heavy sound of dirges. But tonight was a time of celebration as light, airy chants floated along the eddy of breezes. The twin moons were high in the sky, thinly veiled occasionally by the passing of clouds still tinted with the pastel pinks and purples of the setting suns.

Anticipation was at a peek as the coven waited for the appearance of their new High Witch. The Council members, including Xenyssa, stood upon the islet, also awaiting the emergence of Arhyvhyne. The three white robes all appeared in good spirits, eagerly looking forward to the ceremony. Wyxotte continued to act out of context, being animated and speaking freely. Lhynette had the spirit of a young schoolgirl, now that (in her eyes) she had been justified in "forcing" Arhyvhyne to partake in the Rites of Trial. Even Xenyssa, normally reserved, allowed herself to show a morsel of exuberance. Of the black robes, only Qelharre seemed to be enjoying herself to any degree. Dhynelle had remained relatively subdued, partially due to the selection of another white robe (the last three High Witches had not worn black). Then of course, there was Eyrmysse. She had not been shy in exhibiting some of her new found powers, silencing many who sought to suggest that she had not been the best candidate. The sister of the High Witch looked on in uninterested detachment, thinking all the while that this should have all been for her. Even Uriel was present, though his presence was protested by both Dhynelle and Qelharre. Arhyvhyne demanded that he be there, her only compromise that Ghemella would be his "escort."

The ceremony would include the ritual acceptance of Arhyvhyne as High Witch and the subsequent formal induction

of Xenyssa as a Council member. Having visited the Grove earlier in the day, Xenyssa had gone through a private initiation similar to that of Arhyvhyne. Preceding the ensuing celebration, Arhyvhyne would briefly speak to the gathering, stating her conception of her mission, her objectives and her expectations of the Council as well as the coven.

The mysterious gong signaled the commencement of the coronation. The hooded witches set their torches in the ground, joined hands and bowed their heads. As before, Wyxotte led them through the opening prayer. The witches began to sing a song of power and glory and the music of their voices was truly magical. As the song reached its climax, the lights of the moons, Skhuroh and Khyaroh, converged on the Towers.

A collective shout of elation erupted from the witches as Arhyvhyne emerged from the Towers. The High Witch was radiant, bathed in the silver moonlight. As before there was a glamour about her. She wore her simple white robe with the hood down around her shoulders. Upon her wheaten hair was an intricate metal mesh caul adorned with sapphires. The jewels were as beautiful as her eyes, which were sparkling and moist with joy and happiness. The crescent moon amulet about her neck was now decorated with the blue gems as was the matching ring on the ring finger of her left hand. In that hand she carried a book which was nestled against her breast. A small wand occupied her right hand.

Arhyvhyne slowly made her way to the islet while the witches continued with their hymns of worship. Once upon the islet, the gong sounded ending the song and the High Witch, surrounded by her Council, spoke the Ritual words of acceptance. "I thank thee, O Wisdom of the Ancient Witches, for what thou hath granted to me, thy handmaiden. May your lives guide my life,

may I clearly hear your voices speak within my Soul, may you increase my awareness and may you usher me into your universal understanding." Arhyvhyne fixed her eyes upon the coven before continuing. "Thou see before you thy servant. To the utmost of my abilities will I guide thee and protect thee. To the end of my life, your service, will I endeavor to be ever devoted to and apply all my energies to the furthering of our sisterhood, the Witches of the Moons."

The witches responded in unison, "High Witch Arhyvhyne, as thou are our servant so shall we serve thee. Thou who are the most exalted and blessed amongst all women. Upon thou do we bestow all our faith and upon thou do we confer all power so that you may deliver us from delusion and deception and assist us in seeking eternal verity. Do not block our Paths, rather represent reality to us so that we may come to comprehend our spiritual center."

Following a litany by both the High Witch and the coven, Arhyvhyne called Xenyssa to her and the newest white robe took her vows as a Council member. Arhyvhyne conferred her blessing upon her and then proceeded to address the Witches of the Moons.

"I offer you, my sisters, my sincere and heartfelt thanks for your warm acceptance of me. This has been a difficult time for all of us, what with all the mystery and suspicion that has clouded our lives." Most of the witches nodded their agreement with Arhyvhyne's last statement. "We have found little information as to why my mother," there was a noticeable catch in her voice, "was prematurely taken from us. All we know is that she was murdered," here she began to visibly struggle to keep her emotions intact, "by magical means. Though it pains me to acknowledge

this, it is probable that one of our sisters is responsible." Though this was generally known to the coven, still whispers and comments circulated through the gathering. "Should any of you have any information pertaining to the... to this incident, I strongly urge you to confide in me or one of the Council."

After pausing to regain her composure, Arhyvhyne continued. "It would not only be disrespectful but foolish to stand here before you and tell you that I will continue as my mother did before me. She did, after all, wear the grey and was wonderfully wise. She was unquestionably the most remarkable woman and the most talented witch I knew. She was..." the young witch caught herself and smiled sheepishly. "I am sorry, I admired and loved her very much. Let me just say that I will try to adhere to her policies as best as I can."

"My main concern during this reign will be to assist not only our sisterhood, but our individual selves as well, down the proper Paths of progression. In line with this is my desire to protect our interests throughout the realm and to keep the Witches of the Moons as an autonomous state as much as is possible. In light of recent events, I am afraid that this may be a difficult proposition. Be that as it may, with the assistance of the Council, who I expect to greatly rely upon for guidance, I feel that we will be capable of dealing with the darkness that threatens us."

"To you, my sisters, I ask that you continue to live by the tenets that the High Witch Qhen Khyrhyelle had set before you." It was the first time she had referred to her mother using the past tense title and it was obvious it disturbed her. But she continued, undaunted. "Devote yourselves to the study and practice of the arts. Have faith and believe in the mystical powers that have been bestowed upon us. Work only under trustworthy direction, your

teachers or members of the Council, and trust implicitly those with whom you work. Do all work with the deepest respect for the operators, objectives and spiritual beings involved. Take responsibility. Press your limits to increase your ability but do not make attempts into areas you do not fully understand. And of course, know, will, dare and keep silent. I will always be accessible to you. Seek me out when the need arises. Again, my sincere and deepest thanks."

The coven engaged in a final hymn of praise after which each witch approached Arhyvhyne and genuflected, paying her respects and offering her best wishes. Many times the High Witch discreetly looked down the line for a certain person, but Uriel was at the very end, the last to greet her. It was the first time they had seen each other since Khyrhylene's Last Rites and they hugged each other tightly. They stood apart then, face to face, holding each other's hands. Not a word was spoken, however. Arhyvhyne recalled fragments from the Trials concerning Uriel and became slightly disturbed. Uriel was happy for Arhyvhyne as well as for himself. After all, the other alternative would have been Eyrmysse and that could have gone very badly for him. As if they read their minds, both Arhyvhyne and Uriel turned and looked for the black robe. Their gaze was met by the uncomfortable stare of violet eyes. Eyrmysse scowled and turned away, walking back toward the Towers. It seemed the black robe also recalled something of the Trials and Uriel.

Following the ceremony, the witches broke up into their cliques, some staying in the Grove, others congregating in the Great Hall in the Towers. There were fruits and mead to consume and talk centered on Arhyvhyne and the future of the sisterhood before it progressed (or deteriorated) to philosophical discussions

and the theories behind the workings of complex spells. Arhyvhyne had already been accosted by several of her sisters regarding various mundane matters. Being new to the game, Arhyvhyne was unskilled in the art of diplomacy and listened to each one in detail. In short time she was overwhelmed and confused. It was early in the morning before she could disengage herself from matters politic and continue to her next destination and the last of her required duties.

Some of the sacred knowledge that the High Witch received at the Ritual of Impartation was the location of FireQueen's cavern, the accompanying route to it and the means of entrance. Thus it was that Arhyvhyne stood just inside the dragon's dwelling, totally in awe and unquestionably frightened.

The red and gold lizard blew smoke through her nostrils. "Of all the High Witches I have encountered these past five hundred years and more, I respected your mother the most. She was the only one I would have considered an equal. My deepest sympathies, High Witch Arhyvhyne."

"Thank you," the white robe responded in a small voice.

"You have a great many unenviable tasks before you, High Witch."

Arhyvhyne could not tell if the dragon used her title sarcastically. She was sullen as she responded, "So I have been told."

"Do you think yourself capable of your new position?" This time it was evident, FireQueen was definitely goading her.

The High Witch replied with humility. "Though I do not believe myself worthy, I will do my best."

FireQueen roared flames into the air, drew herself up and beat her leathery wings. A wall of flames surrounded Arhyvhyne and

she shrank away but the dragon's eyes held her and bored into her. The dragon's voice screamed into Arhyvhyne's mind, *Do your best!*

The High Witch made a futile attempt to fend off the horror and panic that seized her. The heat of the flames washed over Arhyvhyne in waves and she dropped to her knees coughing furiously and gasping for breath. At the same time, the dragon relentlessly pressured the white robe's mind, pushing her to the brink of insanity. FireQueen withdrew then and Arhyvhyne cried out at the tremendous pain in her head and fell forward.

It was a moment before the flames died away and the High Witch stirred. She picked herself up slowly and saw FireQueen looking down at her, scornfully. Arhyvhyne reacted without thinking, driving the power of her mind into that of FireQueen. The dragon roared and fought back but found the white robe to be more of a match than she had expected.

They were locked together, witch and dragon, each exerting the force of their wills, neither with an advantage. Until, that is, Arhyvhyne recalled the Trials and heightened her concentration, reaching down deep to explode out with a massive surge of energy that took FireQueen full force. The dragon was on the defensive now and the High Witch pressed the advantage with her incessant attacks. The pattern continued with the dragon faltering until the High Witch abruptly retracted her energies.

Breathless, the pretended adversaries regarded each other. Arhyvhyne felt terrible about what she had done. Though she felt it was necessary, it was way out of character. Still, she knew enough not to give up the hard fought ground she had won. "I am sorry, Serafanyelle, but do not put me to the test again. Ever."

The dragon took careful note of the use of her ancient name.

It sounded odd coming from a human voice. Not even Khyrhyelle had been so brazen as to address her in that fashion during their initial meeting. Smoke rose from the nostrils, but when FireQueen responded, the eyes were laughing, taunting. "It is not tests from me you need to fear, High Witch."

CHAPTER XVIII

In the week that had passed since Arhyhynne succeeded her mother as High Witch, the Council centered its attention on two main issues. The first matter dealt with the unlikely manner in which Khyrhyelle had met her demise. The Council ascertained little from the evidence they had gathered and no new information had been forthcoming. The witches had determined the type of spell used, a recondite variation of a paralysis spell. In the fashion it was used, it would be considered a casting requiring a relatively high degree of knowledge and mastery. It was generally thought to be a spell that would be in a black robe's repertoire, the point illustrated by the fact that Eyrmysse was the only one who knew of its existence. Or at least she was the only one who *admitted* knowing of it.

Given that, however, they could not limit their inquiries to black robes. It was possible that they had amongst their sisterhood one so accomplished as to live her outward life as a white robe though she secretly walked the black Path. Or as Dhynelle had been quick to point out, a misled white robe posing as a black.

Only two other theories had emerged. One was that the SoulSlayer Ahrokh, or whoever had sent him, had managed to possess one of the witches. The other was that Uriel was behind the death of the High Witch. Which lead to the second matter that caused long nights and heated debates amongst the Council members: the question of what to do about Uriel.

Dhynelle argued in no uncertain terms that she thought Uriel, if not directly, was in some way responsible for the misfortunes

the witches had encountered. She felt drastic measures had to be taken immediately, including imprisonment in the dungeons, subjection to a team of mind scanners (she did not trust an interpretation solely by Arhyvhynne) and ultimately sent to Bhel'Ehzz to be judged by King Nherycyn, his Advisor Athar and Tomhylhen, the High Priest of the Clerics. The black robe was backed by both her colleagues though Qelharre felt more strongly about it than did Eyrmysse, who had remained rather distant.

Arhyvhynne agreed that Uriel was in some way involved in the big picture but argued that he had done nothing but good since he had arrived, that he was an important ally and as such it was imperative that he be allowed to function freely. Lhynette supported the young High Witch as did Wyxotte, though for different reasons. Lhynette again had someone she could believe in and throw her allegiance to. Wyxotte saw this as a test for Arhyvhynne and a black robe versus white robe confrontation. Xenyssa, though she was known to be an impartial thinker, was expected to side with the High Witch and the white robes. Which she did, but only after she strongly expressed that they should exercise extreme caution and remain alert.

The discussions dragged out for some time as Arhyvhynne felt it important to convince the black robes to alter their views. Lacking success, Wyxotte (knowing what the outcome would be), finally convinced the High Witch to call for a vote. As was expected, the white robes outvoted Dhynelle, Qelharre and Eyrmysse.

Uriel, knowing his fate was being decided, tried to melt into obscurity. He spent most of the week in the library, though he did allow himself the luxury of some riding time with Ullyna occasionally. In turning his attention to books of science and

nature, he found out that unicorns were not necessarily drawn to virgins, as the mythology of Earth assumed, but to those pure of heart and mind. The unicorn was a complex creature: powerful, fast, intelligent and mystical. Though their numbers were few, less than a hundred populating the continent, they lived long lives, similar in duration to that of the witches. The golden horn, along with the gold and silver eyes were symbols of the blending of opposites, though the horn alone was the instrument through which the animal's magical powers were manifested. Many sought the unicorn for its horn, there being many rumors of the power one could wield with it and the exceptional medicinal attributes it had. But a unicorn without its horn was as a cripple and died shortly thereafter.

The sighting of FireQueen at Khyrhyelle's Last Rites coupled with his arrival to the Towers by the dragon led Uriel to research them as well. The dragon was a mystical beast like the unicorn, though more temperamental. The unicorn was a benign vegetarian. Even when accosted, it would much rather flee than take part in an altercation though this was due in no part to cowardice. But the dragon was viewed as a predator. It was carnivorous and could communicate in the language of men. Though Uriel could understand the feelings behind an event such as the FireHunt, it still saddened him to think of such a majestic creature being stalked and killed. But then, he never had a dragon breathing fire down at him.

The early recollections of Ullyna and FireQueen led to thoughts of the Dryad who lost her life in the attempt to rescue Uriel from the SoulSlayers. He knew little of the lives of elementals and examined those inhabitants of Khaballe next. What he found surprised him. The elementals were a complex

substructure of the elements themselves. There were four distinct races mirroring each one of the elements and each race was ruled by a king. Albera, a dryad or wood spirit, actually was a relative of the earth spirits, the gnomes. Her replacement, Vento, was a sylph, an air elemental. The other two races were the salamanders and undines, fire and water elementals.

The elementals lived deep in their own environment and rarely allowed themselves to be seen by humans though they worked secretly on their behalf. The witches, however, shared a common bond of magic with the elementals and the two interacted when the need arose.

Traditional teaching held that the elementals led an existence for the benefit of humanity. As an elemental progressed in that fashion, it began to have a purpose of its own. When this occurred, there was some discrepancy as to whom an elemental owed its allegiance to. Some of the elemental kings, particularly Niksa, the undine king, had become obstinate concerning this point. He felt elementals should at that point help their own kind to attain a separate existence. But the matter, in question for centuries, still had not been settled. The result was that an elemental usually made its own decision and the respective elemental king decided what their future relationship among their kindred would be.

During his week of studies, the High Witch dropped in on Uriel from time to time. In part, she was curious as to how he was spending his time and offered her assistance in any matter. The other purpose of Arhyvhynne's visits was to assure him that his status was not in peril with the new Council.

Although designed to foster his resolve, the visits led Uriel to consider the grave situation he was in. That, together with the vast differences between Earth and Lhogosse (the name of the planet

he was on) and the reasons for his being here made his mind spin. At times he felt he had been pushed beyond the brink of acceptance. He even questioned if it was all real, if it indeed was happening to him or if he was a small part in some bizarre dream. But deep inside, he knew better.

Uriel reflected on his experience with the HIERARCHY, searching with a blind mind's eye for some hint or sign of what he was supposed to do, of what was expected of him. His lack of knowledge and direction along with the enormous pressure that he felt over his mission seemed to follow him closer than his shadow. This in turn, weakened Uriel to the point where he could not suppress memories of his several encounters with the Dark Ones. Although he tried to relegate those thoughts to the back of his mind, he was becoming unsuccessful more often of late. At times, he could almost feel their presence, willing him to take up their cause and walk the black Path. As the darkness of night touched the Towers in the northland, so, too, could he feel the touch of the Dark Ones upon his Soul. The result was that it was becoming increasingly more difficult for him to fight his mounting desire to give himself to the power and allure of magic.

In one of his dark moods, Uriel's thoughts led him to investigate the darker beings of Khaballe. He found little in the way of documentation regarding SoulSlayers and the like. Uriel knew he was likely to find more information about them in the texts of the black robes, but recollections of the books that Eyrmyse had attempted to give him dissuaded him.

What he uncovered from more standard sources was rather sketchy. It turned out that SoulSlayers were a more malevolent, powerful variety of the *Ehsermhottt*, zombie-like beings created through black magic. While the conjuration of an *Ehsermhottt*

required a certain level of magical mastery, it was believed only a high level adept could summon a SoulSlayer into being. The *Ehsermhott* had to be infused with a single-minded directive and acted as a group while the Slayers were cognitive entities in command, more or less, of their own will. Both thrived from the deaths they inflicted on mortals and disposing of either was a difficult proposition. It was thought that the *Ehsermhott* had to be burned. Only a complex high level casting could dispel the SoulSlayers.

As he delved deeper into the dark side of Khaballe, Uriel uncovered some cryptic mention in the reference books to the incubus and succubus. Unable to find any details about them, he risked investigating a black robe text—and wished he hadn't. He found that these were demons who defiled humans. The incubus was of the male variety, the succubus was female.

As he read about the perverted beings, Uriel heard the door to the library open. He looked up and was met by violet eyes filled with contempt. She looked different now, the blatant sensuality accentuated by malevolence. Ghemella had mentioned to him that she had learned a great deal during the Trials. That she had become more dangerous. Violence waiting to happen. Uriel saw it in her face, in her stature.

Uriel's heart stopped as Eyrmysse walked toward him and stopped at his table. As she looked at the book in his hands the snarl on her lips melted away into a smile. *That smile*, he thought. *God, how I hate that smile*. The black robe absently fingered the crescent moon which hung enticingly at her chest. Uriel seemed mesmerized by the medallion and fought to take his gaze from it. He succeeded, but only to have his eyes drawn to hers. Seconds escaped while they stared at each other. Uriel noticed the room

beginning to change. Following a brief period of brightness, the room began to blur and became nondescript.

The only thing that appeared to remain in the library was the black robe. And then Eyrmysse herself began to change. Her face began to be supplanted by another. The effect scared Uriel, afraid of what he might see. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his vision. Everything returned to normal when he opened his eyes.

Eyrmysse still stood before him, but now her eyes betrayed some inner conflict. She struggled within herself for another moment before she turned and walked away, wordlessly. Surprised, Uriel breathed a sigh of relief. But he allowed himself only a small one. Though Eyrmysse was lost among the maze of the library aisles, there was no guarantee that she would not return.

In an attempt to block Eyrmysse out of his mind, Uriel turned his attention back to the reference book. Thoroughly disgusted with the deviate incubi and succubi, he turned to another section in the book. There he discovered other vile creatures: ogres and trolls.

They supposedly originated in Mhajje, the continent south and east from Khaballe. It was generally accepted that both ogre and troll came to Khaballe during the Mhajjean War. But there were some accounts of them which predated the war. Those had been explained away as a few isolated instances where small groups of the creatures ventured across the Sea of Ghaury and settled in Khaballe.

The ogre was large, somewhat taller and broader than a good-sized human. It had strong limbs, a hairy body and a porcine head. It was carnivorous and was known to devour its human adversaries after killing them. They fought with abandon and their

favorite weapon was the spear, although in a close battle, they were deadly with the two tusks which protruded from their faces. Their only weaknesses were their affinity for liquor and their somewhat less than inferior intellect. Their social unit was the clan and they dwelled in hilly regions near forests.

The trolls were even more frightening than the ogres. They were gigantic, fully ten feet tall and powerfully built. The troll was heavily muscled and had a slight resemblance to a hairless ape. The trolls were smarter than the ogre (which isn't saying much), especially the troll leaders, who were usually capable of reading and writing and were considered good strategists. Like the ogres, they were carnivores. Unlike the ogres who preferred raw meat, the trolls liked their humans and assorted animals roasted. The trolls' habitat was the mountainous regions of Khaballe and their tribes lived in caves. Though not on the level of the dwarves, they were good stone masons. They were deadly with slings and various type of catapults, some small enough to be held in their large hands.

As he continued to read about the strange creatures Uriel suddenly felt uncomfortable. His spine tingled and he knew Eyrmysse was eyeing him. He could *feel* Eyrmysse's eyes studying him, causing his pulse to race and his blood to rise. He fought against looking up at her for as long as he could, trying to concentrate on the book, boring his eyes into the pages. But the words were a blur and made no sense. The more he tried to not think of her the more he did. He finally succumbed to the powerful urge and raised his eyes to her, fearing what he would see. But the black robe only fixed him with a momentary glance before walking out the door.

Uriel slumped back in his chair. "Man, she is one strange

woman," he remarked aloud to himself. He decided he had encountered enough for one day, whether it was in the form of the written word or the black robe. He pushed himself away from the table, gathered the books and returned them to their respective places. He lingered for a moment in the black robe section, a natural curiosity causing him to peruse some of the titles on the shelves. He saw a beautifully bound volume in black leather and picked it up. As if it burned his hand, Uriel immediately dropped the book. Shivers travelled the length of his spine and he was loath to replace it. And he did not. Uriel left the library with the exquisite embossed silver words of the cover etched in his mind: *The Black Lodge*.

The night that followed was a rough one for Uriel. His apprehension of being waylaid by the Dark Ones during his slumber was unfounded, however, he did suffer through terrible nightmares. He was especially troubled by one in which he set *The Black Lodge* on fire and as the pages of the book burned, so did his Soul. Another involved Eyrmysse. The black robe alternated between pleasing and brutally punishing both Uriel and Arhyvhynne. He didn't know if it was worse being the victim or the spectator.

Unwilling to be subjected to more of the fiendish nightmares, Uriel stayed up after he awoke from his latest ordeal. It was still very early in the morning and not knowing what to do with himself, he once again went off to immerse himself in the witches' library.

He entered the room, slightly concerned for whatever reason that someone would be there. But he found it empty. The eerie candlelight seemed to affect him more than it did just a few hours previously. Uriel walked through a couple of the aisles with

marked disinterest, then returned to the black robe section. He told himself that he was just curious to see if anyone had picked up the book. But the truth was that he felt drawn to it in some way.

He found the book where he left it, but made no move to pick it up. A candle flame wavered on a shelf as he stood rooted to the stone floor, mesmerized by the cover. Once or twice he began pick up the book but stopped himself. "Nothing wrong with a little curiosity," he rationalized aloud and finally stooped down to retrieve the tome.

"Are you certain?"

Uriel jumped at the sound of the voice. He turned around startled, put his hand to his chest. "Jeez," he gasped, taking a few deep breaths, "you really scared me."

"You have not answered my question."

Uriel looked at the black woman before him. He had only seen her from afar to this point and was surprised by her looks. He had never seen anyone with such deep black pigment. In contrast, her hair was so white, he at first thought she was wearing the hood from her robe. If it wasn't for her exotic beauty, Uriel would have taken the slender white robe for some specter. He caught himself staring and quickly said, "You must be the new Council member. Xenyssa, right?"

Without answering him, the white robe reached down, picked up the book and placed it on the shelf. "You must be very careful, Uriel. I know of a few who have been seduced by the power that emanates from those pages."

"I was only doing some research," he responded defensively.

"So were they. They were combating a spell or trying to become familiar with an adversary or," here she became introspective, "preparing themselves for what they might

encounter at a particular level." Xenyssa quickly returned from some painful, private memory. "Though you wear grey, it was my understanding from Khyr—from Qhen Khyrhylle that you were a relative neophyte when it came to magic. You should know that one must have attained a certain level of adept before deriving any usefulness from the books of the Dark Ones. And even then the temptation can be great." She paused and then said, "Unless you feel yourself ready and seek to immerse yourself in the dark magics and tread that Path."

The white robe said the last statement in a matter-of-fact tone, without so much as a hint of accusation, but Uriel took it as such. "I told you before, I was just researching some stuff." Xenyssa rested her black eyes on Uriel. She was deep in contemplation, as if she were weighing the scales of his innocence—or guilt. As Uriel returned her look, he noticed that the room immediately began to change. In a matter of seconds a bright aura formed around Xenyssa and then she too began to transform. Disturbed by the vision, he averted his eyes from the white robe, then slowly returned them to her.

Everything was as it had been. Xenyssa offered Uriel a perplexed look and a raised eyebrow. She seemed to reconsider something and then abruptly walked down the library aisle calling to Uriel as she went. He followed her and they stopped when they came to another wing in the library. Here, she pulled down from the top shelf an oversized, loosely bound tome. Gold lettering adorned the dusty cover as well as arcane symbols, including moons and stars. The black woman rested her eyes upon the heavy book for a moment before handing it to Uriel.

"The Sacred Scrolls?" Uriel asked. Xenyssa nodded affirmation. "Why are you giving it to me? I've seen it before," he

said, his voice flippant. He was somewhat irritated from the previous evening with Eyrmysse and his lack of sleep, not to mention being caught "examining" *The Black Lodge*. But he was most upset with himself for even thinking about the mysterious book, though he would not admit it.

"What you have seen are abridged copies." The white robe pointed to the book saying, "That one is intact. Many feel it may be an original."

"So?"

"You may garner some pertinent information from the Scrolls in their entirety. Nothing has been omitted and it is free from the interpretation of others. The passages, however, are more difficult as most of them are in verse and use the old tongue."

"Anything specific I should look for?" Uriel asked, bordering sarcasm.

Either Xenyssa didn't notice or she didn't care to. She reached on top of the shelf and pulled down a much smaller volume. "This is a type of index. I suggest you look through this and... research whatever raises your interest." She left the index with him and turned to leave.

"Xenyssa, I'm sorry." Uriel wanted to say more but didn't know what to say.

She turned to him and shook her head sadly, dark eyes showing understanding and sympathy. "Do not concern yourself with it." She stood there facing him for a moment. It was if she, too, wanted to say something further. But she quickly turned away, leaving the candlelit library as quietly as she had entered it.

Uriel sat himself at a nearby table and absently flipped through the index until the word 'Wizards' caught his eye. He looked up a few passages regarding them but came away none the

wiser. Of course, he wasn't searching for anything in particular, either. But it did lead him to wonder why there were so few of the witches counterparts.

He pulled out three histories before finding any reference as to the reasons for the short supply of male magic users. What Uriel uncovered led him back to several pages in the Scrolls and what he in turn found there was unsettling. For it seemed that when it came right down to the heart of the matter, he was the reason.

The Scrolls talked of the appearance of one who would cause great upheaval. *The Destroyer*. The Destroyer would be a male, a powerful magic user, one descended from Thaum. Or perhaps Thaum, himself, in another form. This personage would usher in a dramatic change in the spiritual fabric and consciousness of Khaballe. It was generally interpreted to mean that the success of the Destroyer would result in demonic worship and control.

While the Scrolls were followed reverently, the doctrine concerning the coming of the Destroyer was very obscure. It was not researched or zealously followed until after the Great Mystical Wars, when it became all too apparent what could happen if a power that great was left unchecked. Many at the time likened that occurrence to the description provided by the Scrolls, but numerous things had been left unanswered and the results exacted were more on a physical plane than a spiritual one.

In order to diminish the likelihood that this Destroyer would come among them unannounced and unnoticed, the government of Khaballe passed laws to that effect. They first disbanded all fraternal brotherhoods of a mystical nature and prohibited the founding any such organizations. As it was obvious that there would always be those born with the "gift," they limited the practice of the magical arts by males to a number of ten. These

were selected and approved by the King's Ministry. Those who showed ability but were not selected were subjected to a life of confinement and misery while the ten became the responsibility of one wizard who guided, directed and furthered their learning. In later years, the position of the eminent wizard evolved into that of the King's Advisor.

Trying to take his mind off of his obvious similarity to the description of the Destroyer, Uriel turned his attention back to the index of the Scrolls. This time, he got to the middle of the index before the island of Kho Rhon'ah caught his eye. He had heard Khyrhyelle mention it from time to time, but only in passing and he got the impression that there was something enigmatic about the place. In conjunction with a few histories, he was able to paint a fairly accurate picture of the mysterious island.

It was originally a place of learning, a university of sorts for those interested in metaphysics and the mystical way of life. The Wizards of the Stars, as they were known, travelled to the north of Khaballe (for then it was only a country in the midst of a vast continent) and congregated there to perform certain rituals and study. As the tradition grew, many stayed the year round and construction on an academy began. This mirrored similar events transpiring with the witches who were busy building their own school a little to the south. Though the studies of the witches and wizards were similar, it was believed that segregation would enhance or at least stimulate academic pursuits as opposed to stimulating other areas.

Day to day life transpired much as it did at the Towers. There was teaching and philosophy and discussions that would go on for centuries without any resolution. The sum total of the wizards' accumulated knowledge was transcribed and stored in the library.

As the academy grew in size and prosperity, so did their needs. By necessity, a small town grew around the academy and thus the city of Kho Rhon'ah came into existence.

Kho Rhon'ah continued in that fashion until the split between Mehtron and Thaum occurred which precipitated the Great Mystical Wars. Thaum and his extreme black robes left Kho Rhon'ah and went south, passing beyond the witches Towers of the Moons. When the disagreement extended to an all out confrontation, Mehtron and his followers became increasingly fearful that Thaum would strike against the academy. They prepared powerful magical wards to guard the academy and its contents. When the war reached its height, a tremendous battle was fought just to the south of Kho Rhon'ah. There, the opposite magics collided. Enormous amounts of energy were expended and the incredible power unleashed wreaked havoc with mother nature, causing monstrous earthquakes and flooding. Tremors could still be felt more than a year later and it was several years before the geographers could map out the new lay of the land.

The partial victory for the white robes resulted in Khaballe becoming an island continent with Kho Rhon'ah a small isle itself to the north. Though the academy for the most part still stood, none, including the remaining white robes, were powerful enough to dispel the wards. Almost a thousand years had passed and no one had gained entrance to the Academy of the Stars.



By week's end, Uriel had been summoned before the Council. Though he had earlier indications from Arhyvhynne that his status was not in jeopardy, he was still quite nervous about the

summons.

Escorted by Ghemella, Uriel arrived in the Chambers and took his place on the bench at the end of massive table. All the Council members were present and all wore their hoods, preventing Uriel from deciphering any hint of what their decision was. His mind wandered a moment as he recalled his previous times here. Though he was relatively sure that the Chambers hadn't changed, it somehow seemed different. The dark stone walls and floor, the arcane symbols, the torches, the fireplace, the table, it all seemed the same. Except for maybe the witches themselves. After all, Khyrhylene was no longer among them.

The High Witch brought Uriel out from his reverie. "Yes, Arhyrhynne?" he said and smiled.

"She is the High Witch!" Dhynelle hissed. "Show your respect and address her as such." The words were accompanied by a harsh stare.

How quickly we embrace our new High Witch when it suits our purpose, Wyxotte barbed the black robe telepathically.

Meanwhile Uriel faltered, any composure lost. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any offense—Your Highness," he quickly added as an afterthought.

"None taken," Arhyrhynne responded with a small smile, piqued and satisfied at the same time.

She went on to inform Uriel that the Council decided to allow him to maintain his status as a guest. She did not mention that the vote was four to three in favor. After announcing various stipulations and cautioning him about several additional issues, the High Witch brought up a different subject.

"Before the fifth moon rises we will be celebrating the *Khresnhet*, our festival of cleansing and growth. We thought you

might like to join us. It is not customary to have a man amongst us, however I thought we should include you due to your status as a wizard." At that, Dhynelle delivered an audible snort while the others sat in amazement, though nobody actually contested the High Witch's invitation.

"How long is five moons?" he asked after a hooded look at Dhynelle. "Five days?"

"Witches usually speak in terms of moons, two moons being the equivalent of a day," Arhyhynne explained. "I am surprised you did not know."

Uriel shrugged. "What happens at this festival, anyway?"

Arhyhynne became somewhat animated as she explained. It was clear how much she enjoyed the holiday. "*Khresnhet* promotes an inner cleansing and continued development on the spiritual side. On the physical side, it encourages the cleaning of one's home and nurturing the growth of the crops."

"Our celebration begins at sunrise when all the witches gather in the Sacred Grove. The Council members disrobe the witches one by one at the edge of the pond and confer a blessing of the goddess while they are anointed with special oils. Then the witch enters the pond, crosses the length of it and emerges on the isle where I also bestow a blessing. They partake of a mead which includes argentree leaves and, when all our sisters are on the isle, we weave garlands for our hair and perform ritual dances with branches from the argentree. The celebration ends at moonrise."

"Let me get this right. You do these dances all day and you only drink mead?" Uriel asked, somewhat incredulous.

"The dances are at specified times," Arhyhynne answered. "During the intervals, we sing hymns and talk, of course. As for the mead," here she smiled, "it is, shall we say, sufficient

sustenance."

"And you do this while you're... naked?"

"Yes." Not surprisingly, the answer was supplied by Eyrmysse, the only one of the Council outside her sister who looked enthused at the prospect of having Uriel join them.

Uriel was somehow forced to look at the black robe. She wore her patented smile and curled a black lock around her finger. The thought of seeing her naked unsettled him. But not as much as the next thing that entered his mind.

According to the Scrolls, the symbol of the Destroyer was a golden pentagram. It was the same as the brand on his chest, a secret Uriel had guarded with his life. It was probably the only thing he had never told Khyrhyelle. The symbol of the five-pointed star was so feared that at some point in time, people began wearing charms of the opposite nature: a silver, inverted pentagram designed to ward off its golden counterpart. It became a standard accoutrement of first wizards and then clerics.

It was immediately obvious to Uriel that if he participated in the festival, the witches would see the brand. There was no way he could conceal or disguise it. He attempted to change the subject somewhat to hide his distress and buy some time to come up with a plausible refusal. "Do they do this all over Khaballe?"

"To an extent," answered Lhynette. "*Khresnhet* is a minor holiday but is celebrated throughout Khaballe. Originally all the celebrations followed the same pattern as ours, which is descended from our ancient sisters. However, over the years, the customs have deviated from region to region, even city to city, though the rural areas tend to follow our ceremony a little more closely. In most cases they still perform some ritualistic cleansing and dancing but follow that with games and contests and other forms

of merriment, not excluding the consumption of great amounts of food and liquor."

After a moment the High Witch turned it back to Uriel. "Do you think you would like to join us?"

Not knowing what to say, Uriel decided he better go with the truth, at least partially. "If you don't mind, I would prefer not to. I think I would feel more than a little awkward. And though I appreciate your attempt to include me, I can't help but think that some of the witches would not exactly welcome my presence there."

Arhyvhyne, Eyrmysse and Dhynelle all began to say something but were cut off by Wyxotte. "We understand completely, Uriel. And thank you for considering our feelings as well." The old witch eyed both Eyrmysse and Dhynelle before turning to Arhyvhyne. "Is there anything else the High Witch requires us for?"

Arhyvhyne was confused and a little put out at having her authority wrested from her. "No, I believe we are done." Then, in an attempt to reassert herself she asked Wyxotte to stay behind. After the Chambers cleared out she asked the dwarf, "What was the meaning of that?"

"I was saving you from Dhynelle and your sister, not to mention yourself," Wyxotte responded.

"Saving me from myself?"

"Think about it, Arhyvhyne. A man, a naked man mind you, the only man they have seen for the better part of a year, amidst all of us, naked as well, after having the mead."

"So?"

Wyxotte shook her head and turned away, mumbling, "Only to be that young and naive again."

Four moons swiftly passed and the day of the *Khresnhet* celebration was upon them. Uriel arose to find the Towers empty and wandered around restlessly. He wanted to get a look at the ritual taking place in the Sacred Grove. Actually, he was more interested in seeing the participants than in seeing the ritual, but somehow felt that it would be degrading.

He fought with it for the better part of a half hour before deciding to sneak a peek. After all, he *had* been invited. Uriel made his way down to the main hall but was unable to find a suitable viewing angle there. Undaunted, he went up several floors, taking the stairs two at a time. But to his dismay, when he arrived at a hall window, his expectations were not met.

Though he could see a large group of people at the edge of the pond, he could not make out particulars. He focused upon the isle, but could barely distinguish some images of people milling around. Initially, it frustrated him to think that Arhyhynne was there and that he could not see her. Then it disturbed him that he *wanted* to see her.

He turned back to the large group and saw someone, someone who could have very well been Eyrmysse, staring up at the Towers, directly at him. Or so he thought. His face burned crimson with embarrassment and he quickly moved from the window.

Uriel roamed aimlessly through the Towers, feeling disgusted and chastising himself for his stupidity. It wasn't long before he found himself before the doors of the library. The library had become a place of solace to him. He had retreated here often, a haven against the outside forces he had no control over. He entered the library without thinking about it and immediately lost

himself amongst the walls and isles of books. Uriel casually glanced at some titles but found none that drew his interest or could take his mind off the ongoing celebration.

He continued walking through the library while he thought about Arhyvhynne. And Eyrmysse. The black robe had a tendency of unnerving him, regardless of what she did. "What an absolute bitch," he said aloud. "She goes out of her way to make my life miserable. Absolute misery. What the hell does she want from me anyway?" Uriel was suddenly startled and looked around. He thought he saw a glimpse of a shadow but there was no one there and he heard no unusual sounds. The only thing of notice was a black leather bound volume with silver lettering. There was less than a moment of indecision before Uriel pulled *The Black Lodge* from the shelf.

CHAPTER XIX

It was a busy night in the White Wyvern. After a hot day in the capital, a sizable portion of the lower class inhabitants of Bhel'Ehzz sought refuge in the form of cold ale and companionship. Two large men sat at the cramped bar. One was obviously enjoying himself, pinching and grabbing every serving wench that had the misfortune of sauntering past him. The other only seemed interested in the dark golden liquid that never seemed to be in the stein long enough to lose its chill.

Another serving wench strolled past the bar and received a hand firmly entrenched in her rather well endowed chest. She squealed and made a rather poor attempt at feigning indignation. Ghudher, the barkeep, moved quickly to discourage any further attempts to partake of the attributes of the barmaid.

"Easy friend," the patron said. "It's the night before MidSummer celebration begins. I was only sampling the goods."

The barkeep eyed the blonde man coldly. "Keep yer hands to yerself. I don't mean to warn ya again. This isn't the first time for you tonight."

"Exactly my point, my good man. If they weren't enjoyin' it, they wouldn't be comin' back now, would they?"

"Just leave the girls alone. If yer interest be in that direction, I strongly suggest you look elsewhere." Ghudher drew himself up. "I run a respectable place here."

The blonde man's eyes turned hard. He began to say something, then swallowed his retort. With much effort, he managed a smile. "I'm sorry friend. I meant no disrespect to your

establishment or your girls." He paused then said, "Another ale if you would be so good. Here, this is for your trouble." He tossed a silver *pennhutz* on the counter.

Ghudher ran a hand over his bald pate before picking up the coin. After a grimace, he went down the bar to pour the ale.

The other man turned to his friend and whispered harshly "Are you determined to get us thrown out of here?"

"Shut up and drink, Mharkhel." Then, under his breath, "If it were not for me, everyone in this bar would know us for knights." Ghudher returned with the ale and Setryv managed another smile and drank deeply. He issued a tremendous belch then turned to his partner. "If you would take your face out of your mug for a moment, maybe you could start gathering some information."

"And if you would keep your hands off the ladies the same would be true of you. Besides, you just told me to drink," Mharkhel replied weakly.

The knights were incognito, dressed in the crude garb of laborers. Their mission was to draw out the sentiment of the common people concerning the government in general but more specifically the Prince. Setryv was enjoying himself but Mharkhel was uncharacteristically drowning his sorrows in amber ale. Things had progressed from bad to worse between the Princess Ellycyn and himself. That and the self-inflicted burden of Valdhon's murder were taking a toll on the dark knight.

After a few more ales, they managed to secure a couple of seats at a table. They joined four others who were deeply engrossed in discussing politics. It was just what the knights hoped for.

"I don't care what you say. It was obvious. He had the old man set up. It was no secret he wanted him outta the way," a dock

worker strongly declared, the smell of the river and ale emanating from him.

"What's that, friend?" Setryv asked innocently.

"The Prince, man. I say he had old Valdhon murdered," the dock worker responded. "Whatta ya say? Am I right?"

"Well," the blonde knight fumbled, "I dunno."

Dismayed by his lack of an opinion, another dock laborer cut him off. "Gotta be. The Prince is cleanin' up. Consolidatin' his power." The man winked, as if he had an inside source.

An older man stroked his short beard in thought. He wore the clothes of a merchant and his manner of speaking was more refined. "This year's Journey of Homage should prove very interesting. It would appear that the Prince is making his move. After all, the King's become nothing more than a doddering old fool."

At that, Mharkhel began to rise, his hand coming to rest on his concealed knife. But Setryv put a restraining arm on him saying, "Sit down, friend. There's no need for you to go to the bar. A wench will serve us shortly." The blonde's eyes flashed a warning but it was still a moment before Mharkhel seated himself.

Hoping to take the attention off his friend, Setryv steered the conversation toward a different topic. "Have any of you heard any more rumors about the Slayers?"

"They're not rumors," one of the dock workers replied. "Our friend Dhirnhon was here the night we got word. Weren't ya Dhirnhon?" he said and poked the man with his elbow.

Dhirnhon, the fourth at the table, sat slumped in a chair. He was a middle-aged man who frequented the White Wyvern. "It's the truth they're speakin'. I was here that night," he said groggily.

One of the dock workers burst out laughing and slapped

Dhirnhon on the back. "Who are you kiddin'? You're here every night!"

The entire group broke out in laughter, Dhirnhon being the only one who didn't appreciate the comment. When they settled down, Setryv asked, "How did you come about hearin' this?"

Dhirnhon sat up in his chair, assuming an air of importance. "A fellow come and sit next to me at the bar. The knights told him the Slayers killed twenty of their own and took the High Witch. It happened up north it did," he said emphatically. "And the reports from up there still talk of strange happenings and unexplained deaths."

"And there's been no word from the Towers as to the cause of death of the High Witch," the merchant added. "Only that one of her daughters, the white robe, Arhyhyne, now reigns."

"Who was this man that told you this?" Mharkhel asked Dhirnhon.

"An agent of the knights," Dhirnhon answered as if he related a secret.

Mharkhel stood up, agitated. "That's absurd! The knights employ no such persons."

"Shut up," Setryv said and hit the dark knight in the chest. "Of course they do." Setryv waited for Mharkhel to seat himself before he turned to Dhirnhon. "I, too, have a friend that... is a friend of the knights. What did this one look like?"

"Big. *Real* big. Dark hair. And his eyes. I'll never forget his eyes. He had strange eyes."

"How do you mean?" asked Mharkhel.

"They were black. And... I dunno. Soulless. The guy kinda gave you the creeps just lookin' at him," Dhirnhon explained.

Mharkhel and Setryv exchanged a knowing glance. Mharkhel

was just about to say something when a deafening cheer erupted in the bar. Someone had managed to pull down a barmaid's bodice. Two burly men immediately appeared from nowhere to help "escort" the miscreant out of the bar.

Before the howling could die down, a barmaid brought a round of drinks and Setryv needed all of his self control to stop from grabbing her. The merchant eyed Setryv and said, "You have good taste. I have had her before and may do so again tonight."

Dhirnhon scowled. "I don't know what you see in her. Now the Princes' lady, Fhyndhella. She's a beaut." He took a drink, spilling more on himself than he got down his throat.

"Both you and the Prince are crazy," one of the dock workers said. "If I were the Prince, I'd take Dhonlaa over her in a second. That's a lady with class."

The other laborer shook his head. "All of you can't be blind, can you? Princess Ellycyn is easily the most beautiful lady in the land." The dock worker unfortunately did not notice Mharkhel's dangerous look and continued on. "I would give anything to—"

Mharkhel got up quickly and reached for the man, almost overturning the table in the process. Setryv lunged at Mharkhel, knocking him down. The disturbance, on the heels of the episode with the barmaid, combined with the heat of the day and the liquor of the night to ignite a full blown melee.

With the fight at its height and amidst flying chairs, glasses and other assorted items, Setryv had all he could do to drag Mharkhel out of the White Wyvern and into the street. It took a lot for Mharkhel to lose his temper, but when he did, something came over him and he became next to unstoppable. Setryv pulled Mharkhel to his feet and began laughing. "That was great. It has been a while. I really enjoyed that."

Mharkhel focused distant eyes on his friend. There was no recognition in his eyes as he gave him a dirty look and pushed him hard in the shoulder before walking off alone into the night.

The next morning found the two knights and the Captain of the Royal Guard in the Prince's quarters reporting their findings. Rhenycyn paced, not happy with what he heard. "Damn! I thought that this would have died down by now. Will it never end?" The knights said nothing and the Prince continued his pacing. "Are you certain this one that was talked about in the Wyvern was the one who poisoned Valdhon?"

"No, Your Highness, we are not certain," Vhyqyrd replied, "but the description is very similar. I would be very surprised if it were not him."

The Prince nodded. "Make sure one of your own frequents the White Wyvern. A different man each night. He is bound to come back."

"What about The Falling Leaf?" Setryv asked. "We saw him there as well."

"Yes, that may be a good idea." Rhenycyn considered a moment, then added, "Though do you suppose he would show himself there? He is not the type to fit in there. He would be easily recognized."

Mharkhel cleared his throat. "Forgive me Your Highness, but I think our surveillance will be for naught." Vhyqyrd's jaw tightened at the dark knight's comment. "By the way he operates, I am beginning to think this one may be of the Khezef Ahf. He seemingly appears and disappears at will. He has at his disposal extremely powerful and rare poisons. He had the audacity to murder the senior member of the Ministry and, not to mention, he was probably the one who gained entrance to the castle and did

away with that rogue in our own dungeon."

Vhyqyrd exercised his rank. "I am afraid you may be right. However, we still need to try to cover every possibility, even though they be unlikely." The Prince wore an exasperated look.

There was a knock at the door and Ellycyn entered. She stopped suddenly when she saw Mharkhel. Upon seeing her, the dark knight fought a recurring battle in his heart. Ellycyn was exquisite in her own simple way. She was a genuine, down to earth person whose disposition was typically bright and cheerful. And though the Princess was not a striking visage, she *was* very pretty. But the dark knight felt he was not deserving of her.

Ellycyn and Mharkhel glanced at each other for an instant and Rhenycyn could have sworn the temperature in the room dropped by twenty degrees. The Princess made a distinct move to turn her head towards Setryv. "So here you are," she said to the blonde knight. "They told me I might find you here. I was hoping you would do me the honor of escorting me to the opening ceremonies of the MidSummer celebration tonight."

Shock registered on the face of the Prince. Vhyqyrd's reaction was no reaction. Mharkhel showed outrage quickly followed by hurt. But Setryv, always smooth, responded with a stiff bow and said, "My lady, I would not only be honored but delighted to escort the fairest maiden in the land."

"Excellent," the Princess said with a short laugh. "I will expect you to call at the fourteenth hour. Until then." Ellycyn inclined her head towards Setryv and turned to leave but gave Mharkhel a quick look before doing so. Her hazel eyes were unusually cruel and a tight smile played at her lips.

After the Princess left, the two knights were left standing in disbelief. Mharkhel's anger had returned and he had only a glare to

offer his friend. Setryv shook his head while trying to conceal his pleasure at his good fortune. Rhenycyn struggled at being casual. "I, uh, believe we are, uh, finished gentlemen. You may leave." Then as an afterthought, "Oh, Setryv would you mind staying behind a moment? There is something we need to discuss."

Mharkhel tore his eyes from Setryv, gave the Prince a bow and left quietly, following Vhyqyrd out the door. The blonde knight stared at the closed door and exhaled loudly. Then he turned to Rhenycyn. "Your Majesty?" he asked.

"It is nothing Setryv. I just did not want you and Mharkhel leaving together and getting into it."

"I appreciate the concern, Your Highness, but I am most capable of handling myself. As well as Mharkhel."

The Prince's voice lost a little of its warmth. "See that it is not necessary. I am not in any position to lose two such as yourselves. And Setryv, do not become overly endeared with the Princess. I have a strong suspicion that she is using you to provoke Mharkhel."

Though the words caused Setryv's jaw to tighten, he responded with a smile. "Do not be so certain, Your Highness." Then he bowed and left the Prince's room.

The knight was moving down the corridor easily when he neared a corner and a hand suddenly reached out and grabbed him by the throat, pinning him to the wall in the process. "Traitor!" Mharkhel spat. "You were like a brother to me. How could you do this? You know how I feel about her."

Setryv worked at easing Mharkhel's hand off his throat with only partial success. "What would you have me do, Mharkhel? Refuse the Princess?"

"That is but an excuse. You have wanted Ellycyn all along.

All this time you have pretended to be my friend, my brother. You have only stayed close to me in order to stay close to her." Mharkhel's eyes went distant as they did the night before. He spat in the blonde knight's face and strengthened his grip on his throat.

Setryv's face was becoming a deep red and sweat and spittle ran freely down his face. "Mharkhel," he managed to croak.

Mharkhel was fighting an inner battle as much as he was Setryv. He desperately wanted to choke the life out of the unknown person before him, but something was stopping him. Recognition registered in his mind and he realized where he was and who he was with. Mharkhel eased his grip a fraction. "What can you say to me? What lie do you have the courage to tell me? Tell me I am wrong Setryv. Tell me you do not love her."

The blue in Setryv's eyes turned to steel. "I love her, it is true. But I love her more than you. Because I have waited for years. Waiting for you to respond to her. Waiting for you to acknowledge her feelings. And all you have done is make her suffer humiliation by her waiting. Though she be Princess of the realm, all you can think of is Mharkhel. And do not forget that I encouraged you all the while. I have not intruded upon you and I have not interfered. In the end, *she* asked me."

The truth of the words incensed Mharkhel and he again felt himself slipping away. But he flung Setryv from him before it overtook him. The blonde knight landed heavily on the stone floor and laid there, massaging his bruised throat. Mharkhel looked down at him and his feelings rapidly alternated between guilt and hate. "This has been but a warning," the dark knight cautioned. "Stay away from her." Mharkhel then turned and stormed off down the corridor, a man at war with everybody including himself.

It was a lovely night in Bhel'Ehzz compared with the previous one. The torrent heat of the previous week had subsided and it was comfortable if not cool. It was about as good as one could expect in the capital in the middle of summer. And it was the beginning of MidSummer, the most celebrated festival of the year.

Stajhonne, the ancient name for MidSummer, was an observance of the victory of light over dark; the longest day contrasted to the shortest night; the high point of creation and life. It was one of four major festivals that coincided with the changes of the seasons. The major festivals, such as MidSummer, lasted half of the Khaballean week (five days in length). The four minor festivals, including the recently observed Khresnhet, were only one day affairs.

Khaballe was an intensely spiritual country, with a deep reverence for the Supreme Being. Though they referred to that Being in many different ways and worshipped varying aspects of It, they understood that Being was all one in the same. They were also a people, for the most part, who held a healthy respect for nature and the order of life. Thus, the seasonal celebrations were based on the cycles of the suns and the waxing and waning of the moons and treated as religious holidays. Granted five days could be considered a lengthy time for celebration and there was an abundance of merrymaking and festivities involved, however the underlying significance of the events was not lost on the participants.

The capital was alight with huge standing torches and the streets were teeming with not only the inhabitants of Bhel'Ehzz, but from cities and villages throughout Khaballe as well. Most of

the people crowded into the main road from the castle to the Royal Commons. They were not necessarily interested in viewing the royal family as they led the traditional procession to the Commons. There was still a great amount of social and political unrest over the murder of Valdhon. The spectators gathered in this area because most of the festivities would take place on the grounds of the Commons.

Nherycyn emerged from his castle at dusk seated upon a brown Royale with white socks. The horse was as old as the King and typical of its breed which was known for its strength, stamina and temperament. He was greeted by a smattering of cheers as opposed to the tumult his appearance would usually bring. The King was accompanied by Athar, Rhenycyn, Ellycyn and Setryv, who bore the King's standard. They each were mounted on brown Royale horses and wore their stately attire, attempting to issue a subtle reminder that, regardless of popular opinion, this was where the power in the kingdom resided. Even Ellycyn, who usually frowned upon such things, complied by wearing her jewel-studded circlet and an elegant silk gown with matching ribbons. She looked resplendent as she rode beside Setryv. The blonde knight's proximity to the Princess coupled with Mharkhel's absence was noted by most onlookers and rumors quickly abounded.

It was also observed that Fhyndhella was not on the arm of the Prince. Rhenycyn had been seeing much less of her lately, especially in public. Fhyndhella frequented the castle occasionally, but the Prince refused to be accompanied by her during any state affairs. He was trying to be careful by not rubbing any political salt in Dhonlaa's open and still bleeding wound.

The regal party was followed by the Knights of the Flaming Sword, personal guard of the royal family, and led by Vhyqyrd.

The group wound its way down from the castle across the middle bridge to the Commons. As they began to cross the bridge, the Knights broke out in song, a somber rendition of the Khaballean anthem. They followed that with a seasonal ballad and were joined by the spectators who crowded the bridge.

The crowd, charged with the spirit of the event, raised their collective voice to the darkening dusk of the first night of the MidSummer celebration and filed in behind the royal family and Knights. A thousand tiny suns reflected off of the Twisted Horn River from the bridge, a result of the torches the crowd waved. As the torchlight procession reached its destination, Rhenycyn had a fleeting recollection of the last time he formally took this route. It was to Valdhon's party and he hoped he would fare better this evening than he did that last one.

In the middle of the Royal Commons stood a huge pile of wood, easily the height of several men. The wood had been collected during the past year from the Commons itself in preparation for the opening MidSummer ceremonies. Athar dismounted and moved like a ghost to the small hill of trunks, boughs and branches. He was dressed in his usual black and his white hair flowed behind him from under his black pointed hat as his equally white beard trailed like tendrils of smoke.

The King's Advisor raised his hands to the sky and implored the gods in a strong, clear voice. Those in the Commons responded as the litany required. When they completed the verbal exchanges, Athar spoke a Word and the wooden mound erupted into a bonfire.

The crowd cheered but then quickly fell silent as ten witches appeared, seemingly from out of the flames. They were an equal number of white and black robes who had travelled to the capital

to take part in the celebration. Some had family here while others simply came to enjoy their respite from the isolation of the Towers.

Each of the ten witches took a burning branch from the bonfire and danced through a ritual that depicted the passing of winter to spring and finally to this, the high point of summer. When their retelling reached the aspect of summer, the witches lowered their cowls and discarded their robes. Dressed in tunics with wildflowers in their hair, they were masterful with the branches and moved with fluidity and grace. Through their dancing and chants, the witches wove a magic that encompassed the entire crowd, allowing each person to further understand the reasons surrounding the celebration of this great event and helping them to share in the communal bond with nature.

At the completion of the ritual, Athar led the crowd through a prayer of thanksgiving and then deferred to the King. Since the Valdhon incident, Nherycyn had taken more interest in governing his own kingdom. He had become infuriated that someone had the audacity to disgrace and frame the royal family. Worse, he was now convinced that Rhenycyn was not yet competent enough to take over the burden of ruling.

Nherycyn, still astride his mount, looked out across the crowd. Though a small fire flashed in his eyes, his frame was bent and he looked older than his years. When he spoke, his voice was weak and shaky and those few who were interested in his words strained to hear them. He talked of his years as King and the accomplishments the kingdom had seen, trying to draw an analogy that, like MidSummer, this was the summer of his reign. Most did not share his view. When his words were met by unenthusiastic mutterings, the King lashed out. He spoke on the lack of loyalty

and trust that his subjects displayed. He held that this was a time for them to band together, to find common ground, not revel in apathy and suspicion. A nasty fit of coughing ended the harangue and the King was met only by an awkward silence. He looked angry and defeated, feeling more like a father defending his son than a King defending his subjects. And that made him feel guilty.

From somewhere near the front of the crowd, a man called out "Why not a bit o' the *Argenti* to help that cough, Your Majesty?"

The allusion to the wine that killed Valdhon was not tolerated by Vhyqyrd and he motioned to the Royal Guard. Setryv, leading the way, immediately made for the man. But Rhenycyn motioned them to stop. "An excellent idea, my good fellow," the Prince said as he smiled. "Drinks for everyone—on me. Enjoy the MidSummer!" Where speeches failed, the promise of free liquor did not. Loud cheers broke the silence of the night and the crowd dispersed, seeking to alleviate the dryness in their throats.

The Royal Commons was crowded with tents and booths. Some supplied various foods and ales while others were occupied by merchants hawking their wares. There were several bards, harps in hand, relating the tales of years gone by. Brightly clothed jesters mixed with the people, delighting especially the children with their tricks and agility in juggling assorted burning objects.

The MidSummer celebration also had games of skill or chance where child or adult could lose themselves a few copper *pennhutz*. For the children, there was a makeshift dragon that hung from the trees that one could ride. Another favorite was the DragonHunt, where children could use wooden swords to 'kill' several large different colored papier-mâché dragons stuffed with candies and assorted prizes. The adults had a knife throwing

contest where points were scored the closer one got his knife to a bullseye hanging from a tree. Similar to that was the archery booth where the participant had to knock items off a ledge using bow and arrow.

One of the main attractions was the game of *bhokhette*. A game of strategy and skill, it had become the rage in Khaballe and was played and enjoyed by all the classes. It consisted of a course where balls slightly larger than an orange had to be rolled past obstacles into designated areas. Once one reached an area they could continue on to the next of ten areas. Points were awarded based on number of throws, proximity to the area, striking opponents' balls and finishing position.

Another major attraction would be the *jhukrhette* championship. This was a game played on a field with a net at each end. Two teams comprised of ten men on each side attempt to run, throw or kick a ball into the opposing team's net, each technique worth different points. The teams were formed by the various guilds in cities across Khaballe. Each city's guild teams played one another during the season. The first place finishers of each city played in a round robin tournament that resulted in the championship played during the third day of MidSummer. This year the game featured the deck hands of Rheg Nhor against the defending champions, the stone masons of Bhel'Ehzz, in a classic matchup of speed versus power.

But the most anticipated contest was the *trevhette*. The *trevhette* consisted of three separate events that tested endurance, speed and strength: hand-to-hand combat, riding and jousting. The overall winner was the person who accumulated the most points and emerged victorious in at least one of the events. This person was considered the best athlete in the land and received a rather

substantial monetary award in addition to the large amount of prestige associated with the victory.

A long line of men quickly formed at the booth where those wishing to participate in the *trevhette* had to register. Next to that booth, gamblers placed wagers on the outcome of the *jhukrhette* match and got the early line on the *trevhette* as well as the *bhokhette*. Meanwhile, many of the women flocked to the crafts and merchants booths, and haggled over the prices of silks and trinkets. Some children made for the dragon ride, others the Dragon Hunt, while the remainder ran around aimlessly, inventing new games and releasing enormous amounts of energy without showing any sign of slowing down.

Those that preferred a more relaxing evening had a few options themselves. One could recline under the brightly colored tents, eating roasted meats and quaffing ales and meads while being entertained by the bards and jesters. There was also a play you could attend and children could go to the puppet shows. And you could seek out the counsel and guidance of the witches, an opportunity that did not present itself too often as few lived outside the confines of the Towers.

The King and his retinue also had the fortune of enjoying the evening. Nherycyn, even in this somewhat unpopular time, was immediately surrounded by various officials, nobles, dignitaries and GuildMasters. And though they overstayed their welcome, Nherycyn tolerated it, if in fact he did not secretly enjoy it after the lukewarm reception he received earlier in the evening.

For the better part of the night, Athar kept company with the King. He conversed with Nherycyn's political guests, being affable with his words and gestures but intimidating just by his presence. The King's Advisor also spent some time with a few of his

counterparts, the witches.

Prince Rhenycyn enjoyed a small resurgence of popularity after his offer of free beverages. He took advantage of it by circulating amongst the people, talking with the commoners and playing games with the children (and letting them win of course). He spoke freely about Valdhon's murder when the topic arose, attempting to regain the people's trust by showing he had nothing to hide. By the end of the night he had done a great deal of politicking and felt it had been well worth it.

Ellycyn remained with Setryv for the duration of the evening. The Princess also performed a bit of the obligatory political toil and tried, like the others, to promote confidence in the ruling family. The knight spent his time winning several prizes for her, easily cleaning up at the archery booth. Any questions regarding Mharkhel were smoothly turned aside by Ellycyn and the dark knight had not been seen the entire evening.

Until the hour was late, that is. Some of the booths had begun to close for the evening when Mharkhel appeared, bleary-eyed and staggering somewhat. The noises of the evening which had diminished to an extent now disappeared completely. But Mharkhel seemingly did not take notice. Silently, he made his way to the *trevhette* booth. When the knight arrived, he found the attendant closing up. "I want to register," Mharkhel said, the words slightly slurred.

"I am sorry Sir Knight, but registration for the *trevhette* has ended," the attendant replied.

"I just need you to add... two names to the list."

"I am afraid that is not possible, Sir Knight."

Mharkhel grabbed the front of the man's tunic and picked him off the ground, bringing him to the knight's height. "I see you have

little regard for your well being, friend."

Just then Setryv came upon them. "Anything I can help with, Mharkhel?"

The dark knight turned slowly, immediately becoming sober at hearing the sound of Setryv's voice. "You have done enough already, Setryv," the dark knight said and cast the attendant to the ground.

Setryv helped the attendant to his feet. "What seems to be the difficulty here?"

"This knight," the attendant indicated Mharkhel rather meekly, "wishes to sign up for the *trevhette* but the registration is over."

Vhyqyrd, who had just arrived looked at Mharkhel disapprovingly. "Knights do not traditionally participate in the events. You know that."

"It would appear," Mharkhel said as he motioned towards Ellycyn who was standing a ways off, holding an armful of prizes, "that some of us are already exempt from complying with tradition."

"That is different and you know it," Setryv said in his own defense. The blonde knight contemplated the situation for a moment, then pressed Mharkhel. "What is this really about? You have nothing to prove. Everyone is aware of your prowess."

"You and me, Setryv. It is about you and me."

Setryv shook his head slowly with understanding. "No, it is about Ellycyn."

"Believe what you wish."

"Do you believe that you will endear yourself to her by combating me—and several others? Do you believe you have impressed her with your actions? With drinking? With taking your

frustrations out on the likes of poor attendants?" Setryv settled himself down, his voice becoming soft and quiet. "This is so unlike you, Mharkhel."

Mharkhel's face reflected the deep emotion that Setryv's words kindled in him. But then he seemed to suppress his feelings. Or hide from them. "You have taken her from me. That, too, seems out of character." Mharkhel shrugged, as if the outcome of this conversation were a foregone conclusion. "You leave me with little choice."

Setryv's retort was curt. "The choice belongs to Ellycyn. And she has already made it."

Mharkhel's smile betrayed insolence. "Do not be so certain." Then the knight walked away, his arm around the attendant, convincing him with apologetic words and a few silver *pennhutz* to add two names to the list of *trevhette* participants.

Setryv was left standing by himself for the moment, haunted by hearing his own words uttered back to him. He tried to dismiss them and returned to Ellycyn. It was time to get her back to the castle. He would need some rest if the remainder of MidSummer were to be a celebration for him.

CHAPTER XX

"Damn!" Setryv swore under his breath. The sword slid off his own, the flat of the blade colliding with the side of his head. He easily fended off his opponent's advance, however, and assumed a defensive position to allow himself a bit of a respite.

It had been a long day for Setryv, for all the participants of the *trevhette* actually. The second day of the MidSummer celebration was warmer than the first and very humid, with occasional showers that muddied parts of the Commons. The first of the three *trevhette* events, hand-to-hand combat, had reached the final stages. Over sixty men had registered for the *trevhette* and, through the course of the day, the field had now been reduced to less than eight. After Setryv's match, only four combatants would remain.

The competition was held in a makeshift arena, the field of which measured thirty feet on each side. The participants fought against one another for an allotted amount of time using specially dulled weapons, choosing one that met their preference. Armor was allowed and ranged from leather to mail and full plate.

Winning a match was achieved in one of four ways: forcing your opponent out of the prescribed area, beating your opponent so thoroughly that he was unable to rise from the ground after a given period of time, submission by your opponent, or, if the allotted time expired, the match was decided upon points awarded for blows rendered and their severity. The match was no holds barred. One could only be disqualified for inflicting a life-threatening blow, using real weapons, using magical charms or

wearing magically protected armor.

The winner of the match advanced to the next of five rounds and was opposed by one who was also victorious in the previous round. Losers sought out healers to tend to their wounds. Points were only awarded to the top eight finishers. First place was worth one hundred points. Second place received sixty points with third getting fifty and fourth forty. Fifth place claimed twenty points while the remaining positions claimed fifteen, ten and five points respectively. Each point so painfully earned was worth some *pennhutz*. But probably more important, some respect among one's peers.

Setryv, his strength slightly regained, contemplated his next move. He knew that many times, whether it be late in the day of a battle or the late rounds of a competition, fatigue set in. The survivor was usually the one who retained their stamina, could keep their level of concentration high and remain patient. The knight saw that his opponent, a medium-sized man with great agility, was struggling against both him and fatigue. His moves were not as graceful as they had been at the outset. The blows, when they landed, were weak. And he relied more and more on his defense, simply waiting to counter and score points. Setryv thought his opponent was hoping to survive until time expired and win on points.

The blonde knight decided he could finish it quickly and lashed out with a barrage of strokes, driving the man back. Most of the strokes scored and did heavy damage, the last of which knocked his competitor's sword loose and it fell to the ground. Setryv quickly positioned himself between the sword and his adversary.

Cautiously brushing the damp hair from his eyes, Setryv

caught his breath, smiled and said, "It might be prudent to give it up, friend. You have earned your points. There is no dishonor in leaving the field." Though the words sounded earnest, his look clearly mocked his opponent. Then he added, "There is no reason for you to be subjected to further *disgrace*."

What little dignity the man had left quickly dwindled. With a cry, he made a desperate lunge for his sword. But Setryv was waiting for it. The knight placed a perfectly directed boot to the side of the man's head and he crumpled to the ground. Setryv was on top of him immediately and struck him twice in the jaw with the hilt of his sword. He pulled his opponent to his feet and beseeched the crowd to pass their judgment. They screamed and yelled for the knight to finish him, but Setryv pretended innocence and only continued to urge them on. Then he made as if to walk away, pirouetted and backhanded his adversary across the face. The man fell to his knees and then flat on his face. It was over. The crowd cheered wildly. Setryv was a semifinalist.

The three other survivors were Bheirz, Vhalk and Mharkhel. Bheirz was a finalist from the previous year and a local tough, the kind of person who lived for this sort of thing. His assets were his size and strength. His claim to fame was a barroom incident where he was reputed to have torn someone's heart out with his bare hands. Nothing was known about Vhalk. He was thin and tall, with lightning speed and amazing agility. He had been precise and masterful in eliminating each of his previous opponents. Mharkhel had been a cold, calculating machine, viewing his opponents as mere obstacles and brutally eliminating them en route to taking his revenge on Setryv.

A large crowd gathered for the first semifinal match. Among the spectators were the King, the Prince and Princess, and

Vhyqyrð with his knights. Similar to the previous day, it was observed that Fhyndhella was not in the immediate presence of the Prince. It was also wryly noted that Jhyrenne, widely rumored of participating in sexual escapades with Rhenycyn (though not of late), was in attendance as one of Ellycyn's ladies in waiting.

The announcement of the first semifinal match drew a groan from the crowd. Bheirz had drawn Vhalk, which meant that Mharkhel and Setryv would meet in the other semifinal as opposed to the final.

There was a scramble to place bets as the combatants entered the arena. Bheirz was greeted by a scattering of jeers. He wore only leather and mail, spurning the use of a helmet or other protection. He chose his weapon, a battle-ax, then moved to the center of the arena. He raised his arms high, then flexed and showed off his physique. His short cropped brown hair and beard already glistened with sweat.

Vhalk chose a unique weapon, a double-ended sword. Like his opponent, Vhalk wore leather and mail but he also wore a light helmet with the visor down. Many thought it was more a means of disguise than protection. No one had seen Vhalk's face through the entire tournament and he had been careful to keep it that way.

Clouds raced overhead and the smell of rain was in the air again as the day gave way to the early evening hours and the match began. From the outset it went bad for Bheirz. Vhalk's technique of strike and retreat frustrated Bheirz completely. Blow after blow landed on Bheirz's body, solid painful shots that could almost be felt throughout the large crowd. And when Bheirz attempted a counterattack, Vhalk's fluid movement and quickness made it an exercise in futility for the big man to get close enough to strike.

The crowd seemed to be enjoying the trend the match had taken, encouraging and cheering Vhalk while ridiculing Bheirz, many secretly fighting vicariously through Vhalk. As the match progressed it became apparent that Vhalk was merely taunting Bheirz, not taking him seriously. He was achieving great success with minimal effort. He handled the double-ended sword as if it were an extension of his arms and was scoring at will.

Deciding that the match had gone on long enough, Vhalk delivered a crisp, swift blow that jarred the battle-ax from Bheirz's hands. Like Setryv had done, Vhalk positioned himself between adversary and weapon. Bheirz's face went red with rage and the crowd yelled its approval. Then Bheirz pulled a sword, a *real* sword, from his back beneath his leathers.

The crowd gasped in unison at the serious violation of the rules. Many, including Vhyqyrd, Mharkhel and Setryv, began to enter the arena to disarm Bheirz. But Vhalk motioned for them to stay back. He seemed neither surprised nor upset at the turn of events.

The two circled one another, waiting, anticipating. Bheirz made a couple of poor feints before attacking in force, using overhand strokes. Vhalk brought the double-sided sword up to deflect the blows, but three consecutive strikes shattered it. Bheirz made a dangerous lunge towards the midsection which Vhalk eluded with a spectacular somersault. Then he avoided the brunt of a downward thrust meant for his head, taking it in the left leg, near the calf. Vhalk scrambled to his feet, though there was a noticeable limp and he was bleeding badly.

Once more some in the crowd made to subdue Bheirz but Vhalk again signaled them to remain where they were. They looked on as Bheirz immediately began to stalk Vhalk again. They

heckled Bheirz loudly, trying to distract him while disguising their fear for this man's life who had captivated them with his prowess. Bheirz made an inside move which Vhalk easily evaded, even though it was clear how difficult it was to move with his injured leg. But Bheirz noticed something as they passed close to one another and his eyes went wide with disbelief. He screamed out some unintelligible word and doubled his efforts, striking out in a frenzy.

Vhalk let him in close, taking a flesh wound in the side just for a shot at Bheirz. He made the best of the opportunity by attempting a roundhouse kick. The movement, made with the injured left leg, was still amazingly fluid and graceful. The kick was powerful and crisp, catching Bheirz square in the jaw, an audible crack sounding at impact.

Bheirz staggered back, dropped the sword and brought his hands up to his face. Before a second passed, Vhalk struck again, this time with a ninety-degree kick to the groin that sent Bheirz to the ground. The crowd went wild and many called for Bheirz's life. But Vhalk just left the arena, helmet still on his head, the limp becoming more pronounced with every step.

Rhenycyn was so impressed with Vhalk's performance that he seriously considered beginning the process to add him to the Knights of the Flaming Sword. He mentioned it to Vhyqyrd who was sitting next to him. The captain of the Guard wrote down the suggestion in his ever-present notebook. "It is truly a shame that this Vhalk will not be able to compete in the championship," the Prince said. Then Rhenycyn turned to his sister who was seated on the other side of him and added, "Speaking of which, is it safe to ask who is your champion?"

The Princess sidestepped the question. "I never believed it

would come to this. Even seeing them out there all day and knowing they would both win, I was hoping..." Ellycyn fidgeted in her seat for a moment and wrung her hands. "Every time one strikes the other it will be as if they had struck me."

"As it will be with me," Rhenycyn appended.

No, my brother, Ellycyn thought, not quite. You are not the cause.

The most anticipated match of the day began amidst a light mist that developed into a steady drizzle. Both combatants wore full armor save helmets and used the sword as their weapon of preference. It was soon noted that this would not equal the thrilling show of the previous contest. While Mharkhel was clearly the aggressor, both he and Setryv fought with extreme caution.

They persisted in that fashion for the better part of the match with Mharkhel accumulating the majority of the points and administering the more telling blows. There were those, however, particularly among the knights, that sensed something was amiss. There had been a few opportunities that Mharkhel did not take advantage of. And Mharkhel was known to be a master of exploiting an adversaries' misfortune or weakness.

As the match wore on, the field became muddied and both men struggled with their movements. Soon the inevitable happened. A powerful strike by Mharkhel caused Setryv to lose his footing and slip. He went down on one knee.

Mharkhel stood over Setryv, but did not press his advantage. The two could only look at each other, neither moving, neither uttering a word. Setryv could almost hear Mharkhel's thoughts as he looked upon his face. He didn't know if it was sweat or rain or tears that ran down his friend's face. He could, however, see how difficult this was for him.

The dark knight desperately suppressed the sensations that urged him to destroy his adversary. He stepped back and allowed a stunned Setryv to regain his feet. Loud murmurs passed through the crowd. Mharkhel pressed on and Setryv fought back though confusion clearly showed on his face. He felt a sense of urgency, knowing he was behind with little time left in the match. The blonde knight tried to pick up the pace and began taking calculated risks. But Mharkhel did not falter. Nor did he take advantage of them.

Calculated risks soon turned into gambles and a second misstep combined with a thunderous blow from the dark knight sent Setryv sprawling. He scrambled for his weapon, did a roll and struggled awkwardly to his feet in a bad defensive posture. But it was all for naught. Mharkhel had remained where he was, content to grant Setryv a second respite.

The crowd, Ellycyn and her brother included, was in disbelief. Rumor was widespread concerning the strange love triangle and it was generally thought that if Mharkhel had the opportunity to inflict serious bodily harm on Setryv, he would. Some went so far as to say that one less knight would certainly simplify the matter. And the point could be well argued that Mharkhel had the opportunity to bring to fruition any or all of those notions. But to the dismay of the crowd, Mharkhel was satisfied to continue to just score points and not make any mistakes until the match ended.

Which it eventually did. A trumpet sounded signaling the end of the match. It was only the second one of the day to be determined by points and clearly Ellycyn and Rhenycyn were solitary in their gratitude for it. Setryv, a slight smile on his face despite his labored breathing, lowered his sword and reached a

hand out to his friend. After studying the hand for a moment, Mharkhel turned his back and awaited the decision.

There was little anticipation as the judges tabulated their scores. It was quite evident who the victor was and there was no surprise when it was announced. Mharkhel left the field less than enthusiastic. He had deprived himself of Ellycyn and had squandered an opportunity to take his misguided revenge on Setryv. Looking at him trudge slowly away, one might have thought that he had been beaten instead of emerging victorious. Setryv would have argued that Mharkhel actually had lost. After all, Mharkhel was really fighting himself and whatever the outcome, one part of him would be lost. Setryv just hoped it would be the right one.

A large crowd stayed to witness the award ceremony, all disappointed that Vhalk would be unable to battle Mharkhel for the championship. In the midst of arguing how the match would have turned out, they were stunned to learn that Vhalk had insisted on fighting for the championship in spite of his badly injured leg. Mharkhel had been reluctant to fight, feeling there was "no honor in defeating a maimed opponent."

The rain had tapered off and the skies gradually cleared just in time for the spectators to see one of the suns set. The other followed closely behind and colored the lingering clouds in soft pastels. Mharkhel and Vhalk met in the center of the arena amidst the cheers of the appreciative crowd. Vhalk appeared as before, helmeted, wearing leather and mail and holding a double-ended sword, though now his left leg was heavily bandaged. Mharkhel wore his armor and wielded a broadsword. The knight looked slightly embarrassed, as if he were going to do battle against a woman or child.

A trumpet sounded beginning the match and it was immediately apparent that Vhalk was unable to move with the fluidity he was accustomed to. He was still dangerous with his strange weapon however, proving so on Mharkhel's body early and often. But the blows had little effect on the big knight. Mharkhel was content to stay on the defensive, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of attack.

After five minutes the crowd started getting on Mharkhel. That didn't bother him. Neither did the occasional glimpses he caught of Ellycyn and Setryv. But it was after the knight fended off a vicious offensive from Vhalk that he seemed to remember what this was all about. He decided it would be best for all involved if he finished the match. No sense in taking chances. A lucky blow by Vhalk could finish it for him. And Vhalk, despite his injury, seemed more than capable of delivering such a blow.

Mharkhel cautiously struck out at Vhalk and the knight was amazed that his opponent somehow managed to escape. *This one should be taken seriously, injured or not*, he thought. He began to formulate a new plan of attack. Every movement, every thrust, every blow was directed at weakening Vhalk, trying to force him into submission. And the plan was working. Though Vhalk persisted, Mharkhel began to gain the advantage. A feint allowed Mharkhel in close and he rained blow after blow on Vhalk, sending him to the ground. Incredibly, Vhalk regained his feet and retaliated with a powerful counterattack that Mharkhel was forced to absorb.

They squared off in the center of the arena and traded thunderous blows. After the fourth successive shot landed, Vhalk went down again. Somehow he managed to get up and continue on. They engaged each other anew and Mharkhel faked a kick at

the wounded leg, then landed yet another blow, this one to the helmet. Vhalk staggered and the ensuing thrust to the midsection had him on the ground for the third time.

Mharkhel began walking away but was attacked from the back by Vhalk who had scrambled to his feet. This time it was Mharkhel who went down. But when Vhalk pressed the advantage, the knight rolled onto his back and used his legs to flip his attacking opponent over his head. Vhalk landed heavily, the wounded leg bent under him at a bad angle. He tried desperately to rise, finally successful after the third attempt. Meanwhile, Mharkhel had been imploring the judges to stop the battle, but to no avail.

Vhalk screamed Mharkhel's name and the knight turned to look at him. Vhalk had his weapon in the ground and was leaning heavily on it. Blood had soaked through the bandage and his leg appeared to be completely useless to him now. But he still gestured for Mharkhel to continue the fight. Mharkhel looked to the judges and they asked Vhalk if he wished to yield. Vhalk shook his head vehemently and gestured to Mharkhel again. The knight shook his head in dismay and grudgingly went forth with his weapon.

Vhalk had all he could do to defend himself, even against the half-hearted attacks by Mharkhel. The first blow that landed sent him to his knees. The knight waited for Vhalk to struggle to his feet. That brought loud comments from the crowd to the judges who now began to be sympathetic to Mharkhel's plight. It took only a glancing strike to bring Vhalk to the ground on their next encounter. Without looking to the judges, Mharkhel thrust his sword into the ground and began to leave the field. The judges, already feeling the pressure of the crowd, declared the match over

and Mharkhel the champion of the first *trevhette* event.

The cheers for the knight turned to gasps of astonishment as Vhalk, now on his feet, threw his helmet down in disgust. Actually, *she* threw *her* helmet down in disgust. Long, golden locks fell about her shoulders and she angrily called out to Mharkhel, "Were it not for this leg..."

Mharkhel turned and was stunned when he realized that his opponent had been a woman. Then shock gave way to chivalry and he ran back to help her. He was speechless for a moment as he looked upon her. She was very pretty and her delicate features contrasted sharply with the persona of the warrior he had just been battling. "I am sorry. I had no idea... had I known..." Mharkhel was fumbling badly. "Here, let me help you, Vhalk."

"Shut up. And get your hands off me." Her dark brown eyes flashed a warning as she pushed the big knight and began limping away. Then she stopped and turned back to him. "And my name, Sir Knight," she said with a touch of sarcasm, "is Vhalkhette and tomorrow you will not fare as well in the riding event. Tomorrow you will be leaving the field in defeat. Tomorrow, the day will be mine."

And Mharkhel did not doubt it.



MidSummer Day was cloudless and warm as it had been each year for as long as memory could serve. The inhabitants and guests of the city rose early in the morning to witness the *jhukrhette* championship. The capacity crowd witnessed a thrilling match as Bhel'Ehzz, the defending champions and favorites, trailed the entire match but rallied in the waning moments to

defeat Rheg Nhor.

Though the excitement the match had provided was great, talk centered on the valor Vhalkhette exhibited the day before. During the award ceremony the previous night, the eight who finished (less Bheirz) were each conferred their honors and each had the opportunity to bask in the grandeur of their accomplishment. Except Vhalkhette. She had been kept at arms length. There were mixed emotions and widely differing opinions which were hotly debated where she was concerned. A few people offered quiet support. Some felt threatened by her superior ability. Most were outraged at her impudent attitude. But all were intrigued by the lithe blonde warrior who was as graceful as a swan and as deadly as a cobra.

It had been the first time a woman had finished among the top eight in a combative event. Other times women had masqueraded as men and entered the competitions, but none had ever come close to receiving points. There was a great deal of speculation as to who Vhalkhette was and what her background was. Many stories circulated, the most widely accepted one that she was a mercenary from the west, probably from Sevher't'ah. But whoever she was, all wondered, competitors and spectators alike, how Vhalkhette would fare in horseback riding.

The hot bright suns of the afternoon brought with them the second event of the *trevhette*. The riding event was a race, but a difficult one designed to display excellent horsemanship. The course began in the Commons, progressed through various parts of the capital and ended back at the Commons. At different points, one had to coax their steed over fences and trenches, navigate shallow water, maneuver their horse through narrow, walled passageways and discern the best route of three to the finish line.

By late afternoon, eight heats had been run and the winners were getting ready to face one another. Though not the sentimental favorite, Vhalkhette was, bad leg and all, the odds makers bet. She would be challenged by Setryv who was excellent on horseback. Another possible threat was Khavhad, known throughout the continent as a superior breeder of the Royale horses which were supplied to the King and nobility. He was also reasonably good off a horse, receiving five points in hand-to-hand combat due to Bheirz' disqualification. Mharkhel was also one of the eight but did not figure to be a factor. He had been fortunate just to win his heat, which probably had been the weakest group of eight.

The race started and the field quickly narrowed to only six riders. As was anticipated, Mharkhel was the first casualty. His horse was a jet black Ghwer warhorse and unaccustomed to jumps. They barely made the first fence but were unable to cleanly negotiate the second and took a fall. The second victim succumbed to the next fence. The horse came out of it unscathed but the man received a broken leg. Though neither he nor his horse were injured, Mharkhel was sullen. He would receive only five points for his meager effort. If Setryv won or even if he placed high, the blonde knight would take the overall lead in the *trevhette*. The same would hold true for high finishes of Vhalkhette or Khavhad. Mharkhel left the field hanging his head low, already concentrating on tomorrow's final event.

Vhalkhette, in the lead from the start, was the first to encounter the next obstacle, the trenches. She rode a black and grey Sud, known for their speed, courage and their endurance in dry, arid lands. She was closely followed by Khavhad on his prize Royale and Setryv who forsook his Ghwer for a grey and dun

Nord, a horse that was fast and surefooted though usually found in colder climates. All three leaders had little difficulty with the trenches but another rider misjudged the jump badly which resulted in the field being reduced to five.

All the riders easily passed through the shallow water and thundered into the streets of Bhel'Ehzz. The streets of the city offered their own obstacles in the form of loose gravel, debris, merchant carts and people wandering around who did not know better. Setryv had closed the gap slightly between himself and Khavhad through the water and was holding his own while Vhalkhette maintained her lead over the breeder.

At the halfway point they lost the fourth place rider when he unsuccessfully tried to go inside of Setryv on a turn. Other than that, there was no change as they headed back towards the Royal Commons. Vhalkhette rode at a strong pace and led Khavhad by a few lengths. The breeder had been keeping pace with Vhalkhette, picking it up only when he felt threatened by Setryv. The knight pressed Khavhad on several occasions but could not overtake him. The fourth rider trailed well behind, content to wait for the others to make mistakes.

As the group approached the Commons, the riders were forced with a difficult decision: choosing which of three routes to take. The first route took you through a very narrow passageway, only wide enough for one rider, followed by a precarious succession of three jumps. Although it was the shortest route, it was by far the most difficult. The second route was a good distance longer but the passageway was not as narrow and there was only one jump as opposed to three. The third route did not offer any hazards but was much longer than even the second. In essence, it was a conservative option for the weak of heart.

There was no doubt in Vhalkhette's mind which route she would take. The first one was the shortest and if she emerged from it, she was guaranteed victory. Frustrated at following a woman the entire race and sensing his time running out, Khavhad put his heels to his Royale's flanks and urged him on towards the first route. Setryv knew only one rider could get through the narrow passageway of the first route which meant either someone would be left behind or someone would take a spill. His chances of getting through were slim, therefore, he opted for the second route. The remaining rider played it safe as he had throughout the race and selected the third route.

Vhalkhette and Khavhad were neck and neck as they approached the passageway. It was obvious neither rider nor horse would yield to the other. But Vhalkhette had better positioning and pulled slightly ahead. Her black and grey Sud entered the passageway first and Khavhad was unable to alter his course. The Royale's shoulder collided with the Sud's right flank. Vhalkhette's injured leg was crushed against the left wall but she still maintained her grip on her horse through the passageway. Khavhad and his Royale went down heavily. The breeder would fight the effects of a concussion for only a few days but it would take much longer for the effects of his stubbornness to wear off. Khavhad had lost his prize horse to a broken leg.

Vhalkhette was the first to emerge from the passageways back into the Commons. She held tight to the reins with one hand and to the Sud's mane with the other. Her left leg hung limp at the horse's side but her black and grey showed no ill effects from the collision. She had only one final trench to surmount before crossing the finish line.

Setryv appeared next, fifty yards behind. He had a brush with

danger when his Nord's back left hoof struck the top of the fence during his jump. But they were able to maintain their balance and race down the final stretch. The knight had no hope for victory. He assumed Khavhad had somehow finished ahead of Vhalkhette seeing as how he was nowhere in sight.

As Vhalkhette approached the final trench, the pain from her leg clouded her mind and the feeling of nausea was overwhelming. She had all she could do to hold on to her horse and dropped her head down to the Sud's neck. No longer able to guide her horse, Vhalkhette relied completely on the steed's instincts. And he intuitively responded. The Sud easily cleared the trench and covered the remaining distance, flying across the finish line. Setryv followed suit several seconds later with the remaining rider finishing a minute after that.

Vhalkhette's horse eased his gallop into a trot and then came to a halt. She slid off and almost fell to the ground, her leg barely able to support her. She was oblivious to the cheers (mostly from those who made money off of her) as she concentrated on trying not to be sick. Vhalkhette struggled to replace the anguished look on her face with one that was slightly more dignified when she realized all the crowd's eyes were upon her. When she felt she had control of herself, she immediately sought out Mharkhel but came face-to-face with Prince Rhenycyn instead. The Prince attempted to offer her his congratulations but Vhalkhette suddenly pushed him away and moved as quickly as her leg would allow to the nearest bush where she proceeded to retch.

The Prince stood slack-jawed for a moment before he was joined by his sister and Setryv. Ellycyn commented to her brother that it was strange that he seemed to have that effect on women lately. Rhenycyn failed to find the humor in the remark, though

the Princess enjoyed it immensely. The knight had all he could do to keep from laughing. He was in a pretty good mood. He had found out that he finished second, not third and earned sixty points, putting him ahead of Mharkhel. His point total was one hundred and ten to Mharkhel's one hundred and five but both trailed Vhalkhette. The blonde mercenary, as she was generally being referred to, had the lead with one hundred and sixty points. Setryv's main difficulty was that both Mharkhel and Vhalkhette had managed victories which qualified them for an opportunity to win the overall *trevhette*. The blonde knight would have to emerge victorious in tomorrow's jousting competition to win the *trevhette*. Anything less would secure the victory for Mharkhel or Vhalkhette.

After the awards for the riding event were presented, the crowd dispersed. They would relax and lounge for a short while before gathering again a bit later in the evening. At that time, with the suns still high in the sky, the most grandiose party of the Khaballean year would begin. Casks of ale and mead would be consumed, plates of exotic foods devoured. Everyone was encouraged to share in the spirit of brotherhood, by putting aside their differences and exchanging good wishes and pleasantries and making heartfelt resolutions. However, usually gossip and empty promises were what prevailed.

Then, just before sunset, the MidSummer ritual would take place. Following the ritual would be entertainment in the form of music and dancing. There would be more food. And more drink. The night of fellowship would transform into a night of romance. It was the traditional night to reveal one's true feelings about a member of the opposite sex, to begin a relationship or perhaps a life together with a proposal of marriage. But often times, as the

night progressed to early morning, unloosed passions coupled with the excess of drink to bring about the downfall, not the beginning of relationships.

As the night that was light began, there were rumors and gossip of some covert scheming by Dhonlaa. Of Rhenycyn being distant with Fhyndhella. Of Jhyrenne, always ready to satisfy the Prince's needs. Of Ellycyn and Setryv. Or Mharkhel. Of the young and beautiful warrior, Vhalkhette. Of witches *and* wizards. It definitely had the makings of a long and interesting evening.

CHAPTER XXI

Uriel stared at the fireplace across the room, enjoying the effects of the dying flames caressing the remnants of the remaining log on the grate. *Caressing, what a wonderful idea*, he thought. He snuggled his body to the back of hers. He had referred to it as "spoons" in a previous life, the recollection of that life not bothering him in the least.

They laid quietly for a while, content in their cuddling. Then she rolled onto her back and Uriel gave his partner a small hug as she lay in the crook of his left arm. He moved his left hand down and absently played with her breast while she lightly traced the gold branded pentagram on his chest. "This is incredible," he said, looking into her eyes.

She returned the look, undisguised desire portrayed in her eyes. "No, *you* are incredible," she whispered and kissed him deeply as they once again began to bring each other to the height of ecstasy.

This was the second time Uriel had been with her. Their initial encounter had been two nights previous, the first day of the MidSummer celebration, after the completion of the opening rituals. Their passion had been electric. When they finally reached the seclusion of her room, they literally tore each other's clothes off. They explored each other's nakedness with total abandon, their bodies quivering with every touch. Their lovemaking went unabated until light from the first of the rising twin suns peeked at them through the window and exhaustion rendered them incapable of more.

It had been agony not having her the duration of the day. But it also heightened his anticipation and longing for her. It was MidSummer eve and all through the day, into the evening and through the ritual celebration under the evening suns, their desire to be with one another increased until it was unbearable. Every word read, every phrase uttered, the scent of the foliage, the wind whispering through the leaves, they all hinted at the pleasures the night would bring.

And he was not disappointed. He had been returned to the font where his thirst of desire had been satiated. But while the first night with her had been wild and reckless, tonight they enjoyed slow, careful lovemaking, cherishing every nuance, taking turns pleasing each other in the most intimate ways.

When they finished, she got up and lazily moved across the room to the fireplace where she added a couple of logs. Though it was summer, it was always a little cool in northern Khaballe, especially so in the stone tower. She ran her hands through her long hair and then stretched, her silhouette against the backdrop of the fire beginning to arouse Uriel once more. He was filled with wonder. *She is perfect*, he thought, *absolutely perfect*. His eyes devoured every part of her and it was with effort that he forced his view from one part of her anatomy to another. "She beckons with her smile, her eyes dance like fire. She has hair of raven, her body is desire."

She turned back to him, sent a tantalizing smile. "Something you just came up with?"

"No, just some words from a song from before, back when I was a teenager. It was by a band—a group of musicians—called ZenArcher. A friend of mine was in it. He wrote it. Seeing you standing there like that... you just reminded me of it."

"What was it called?" she asked.

He snickered. "Queen of the Stones." She gave him a questioning look and he explained his mirth. "The song was about a witch."

She laughed and then remarked, "I thought there were no witches where you came from."

"Not really. I mean there were, but it's nothing like it is here. And no one even remotely close to you."

She toyed with a black curl as her violet eyes sparkled in the firelight and teased him with her smile. *That smile.* Uriel reminisced about the times when that smile had caused his blood to freeze. When those eyes had burned through to his Soul. When just being near her had made him uncomfortable. He shook his head slowly and sighed, then reached out his arms to her. She crawled beside him into bed again and they drifted off, the heat from the renewed fire washing over them.

A knock on the door woke Uriel, startling him. He sat up in the bed, his heart beating wildly, his mind disoriented. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. He struggled to latch on to the memories. *Or had it all been a dream?* But then Eyrmysse was sitting up beside him, setting his fears aside.

A second knock caused Uriel to begin to scramble out of bed to locate some hiding place. But Eyrmysse put a restraining arm around him. She motioned for him to be still and quiet. The black robe sent out a mental query as to the identity of the visitor. "Come in," she called out. Then she turned to Uriel. "It is all right. It is Jukhuule."

The door opened and a black robe entered. If she was surprised to see Uriel in bed with Eyrmysse, she gave no indication, though she quickly closed the door behind her. "I did

not mean to interrupt you, Mistress, but it is the appointed time for our instruction."

"Is it already?" Eyrmysse replied with regret.

"I can inform the others that we were forced to reschedule if you wish it," Jukhuule said.

"No, it is all right." Eyrmysse turned to Uriel and kissed him. "I am sorry."

Uriel was slightly embarrassed and managed to reply "That's okay." He was holding the covers up to his neck and felt as silly as he looked. *Isn't it supposed to be the woman that always does this on tv*, he wondered?

Eyrmysse crawled out of bed and began getting dressed. "Oh," she said, raising her eyes to the ceiling as she let her arms fall to her sides, "forgive my ignorance. Do you two know each other?"

Uriel shook his head. "I don't think so."

Jukhuule recalled a time, however. "Actually we met once, briefly. It was at the time Arhyvhyne... when you brought Arhyvhyne back."

Uriel nodded his remembrance. It seemed an eternity had passed since then. In a way it had been. Things were so different now.

Eyrmysse's voice dragged Uriel back from his recollections. "Jukhuule is my apprentice," she told him. "That is not an official position, but we have been close for a long time and she has studied under me since I was elected to the Council. She is very talented and devoted to her studies—and her Path. She would be a good match for either Qelharre or Dhynelle. I was preparing her to take my place upon the Council when I became High Witch." Her failure still caused her great pain and it was easily noticeable to the

other two in the room. But then she turned to Jukhuule and smiled her patented smile. "Do not despair Jukhuule. There will still come a time when we will need you to sit on the Council."

"I do not doubt you, Mistress." Jukhuule moved to where Eyrmysse was finishing getting dressed and helped her adjust her robe. She passed a side table upon which was *The Black Lodge*. Again, she showed no sign of surprise.

It was the first time Uriel was able to get a good look at her. Until now, she had remained by the door with her hood up and concealed by the shadows. But now, in the light of the fire, he was shocked by Jukhuule's features. She reminded him a little of Ghemella, with the darkness of skin and being slightly overweight. But it was as if some geneticist had played a cruel joke on her. The right side of her face was dark, the eyebrow a little bushy, the eye itself brown, the nose somewhat bulbous, the lips thick. But on the left side the skin was a lighter shade, the eyebrow thin and pointed, her eye hazel, the nose angular and the lips thin. She looked grotesque.

Uriel uncomfortably looked away. Eyrmysse filled the awkward silence. "We are going to do some work on barriers and will be involved for a few hours. I will come find you when we have finished. We will have another ritual to attend later." Then she added as an afterthought, "It is still very early. It may be a good idea for you to return to your room now. You would probably go unnoticed." She turned to Jukhuule. "No one is aware of our little... tryst." She need not say anything more. The implication did not escape the black robe.

Eyrmysse went back to Uriel and kissed him. And kissed him again. Then she left wordlessly, Jukhuule trailing behind her.

Uriel wanted to lie back down but took his lover's advice

instead. He dressed quickly and sneaked back to his room. He saw no one, that is until he met up with the High Witch.

"Uriel, why are you up so early?"

He avoided Arhyvhyne's sapphire eyes. "I, uh, couldn't sleep. Decided to go for a walk."

The white robe, as was her nature, expressed her concern. "Really? Is anything the matter?"

Great, now she's going to play twenty questions. "No. No, nothing at all. Just, oh, kinda restless, I guess."

"Restless?" Uriel answered Arhyvhyne with a shrug. The High Witch let it pass. "I am sorry I have not been able to spend much time with you lately. There is so very much that occupies my time now that I am High Witch, most of which is routine and a bit tiresome. It seems I have little time for the more important things. Have you been able to involve yourself with anything?"

Really? "Yeah, I've been doing a good deal of reading," he answered in an uninterested tone.

"Anything in particular?"

Damn. "Uh... histories, pretty much."

Arhyvhyne was surprised. "I thought you had been working on your magical skills."

"No!" Uriel answered immediately, then tried to soften his reaction. "Where did you get that idea? You know how I feel about that."

"Well, I know you had begun to look into it a while ago and it was mentioned to me that you had been spending some time with Eyrmysse." Uriel looked stricken, Arhyvhyne thoughtful. "It would probably be wise for you to augment your knowledge and skills in that realm," the High Witch remarked. "And Eyrmysse is, as I am sure you are aware, gifted. But as I have mentioned before,

you should exercise caution with her. She is overly fond of power and can be rather... seductive—in more ways than one." Uriel's face was drained of all its color. "Perhaps you should seek out Xenyssa. She is very wise and her Path is probably more closely aligned to your own."

"I'll, uh, keep that in mind."

The white robe switched gears, caught him off guard again. "Have you enjoyed the MidSummer celebrations?"

I don't believe this. "Yeah. Have you?"

"Yes and no. I have enjoyed having a larger part in conducting and celebrating the festival. But I was actually hoping to have some time to myself. And I was hoping we would be able to spend some time together and get to know each other a little better." Arhyvhyne took his hand in hers. "We have been through much together."

Uriel stiffened. He was unsure how to read her. Arhyvhyne was always so pure and innocent. *Unlike Eyrmysse*, the thought entered, unbidden.

The white robe delivered a small smile while releasing his hand. "Well, I must be going. There is always so much to do. Will I see you at the rituals later?"

Uriel felt guilty for being annoyed with her. She was so caring. And she was only looking out for him, as she had done since she became High Witch. But now he had someone else to do that. "Yeah, sure, I'll be there."

They parted company and Uriel rushed back to his room. He had no desire to hold any more conversations with anyone. Except Eyrmysse.

In the comfort of his own room, Uriel relaxed on his bed and thought about the strange turn of events that had taken place over

the last month.¹

What drove Uriel to start reading *The Black Lodge* back on the day of Khresnhet? Perhaps it was the months he had spent confined in the Towers. Maybe the loss of Khyrhyelle. Possibly his frustration at not knowing what his role was in this world and not being able to do anything about it anyway.

Whether the reasons were all or none of those, the result was the same. As soon as he opened the cover, *The Black Lodge* immediately engrossed him. The book constantly beckoned to him and this quickly led to a dilemma. He was extremely paranoid of being found with it by Xenyssa or worse still Arhyvhyne. It finally drove him to read it in covert fashion. Unable to sleep because of the terrible nightmares he suffered (which he refused to attribute to the book), he would wait until the middle of the night and steal into the library and devour its contents. The secret knowledge contained within the black leather volume kindled a strong desire in Uriel. Though he was unable to put it down and spent as much time as he dared with the treatise, it was still a painstaking process. It was very difficult material and Uriel could only read short sections before he was forced to take a break. He would have to reread passages many times, sometimes spending as much as an entire night on one.

Though wary of the allure of power, he now wanted to delve

¹The Khaballean year consisted of ten months, each month comprised of five weeks and each week, ten days. The year began at the beginning of spring, which lasted two months. Summer and autumn followed, three months and two months respectively. Winter ended the year and was three months long. The major festivals were held at the beginning of each season; the minor ones halfway between each season.

into the magical arts in order to prepare himself for whatever confrontations awaited him. At least that's what he told himself. He had become bored with the books he had received from Arhyvhyne. In the past, they had proved too rudimentary to help him save Khyrhyelle or adequately defend against the SoulSlayer Ahrokh. There was real power in the pages of *The Black Lodge* for those willing to make the sacrifice to acquire it. The Path left little room for deviation and usually, the more one embraced the beliefs and methods contained on those pages, the less the distinction became between the user and the used.

And though a part of Uriel noticed his lack of control, still he craved the words of *The Black Lodge*, telling himself *he* would master the powerful spells. He was sent here for that very reason: to save Khaballe. And he would save the world through his magic, the magic he would soon wield.

But Uriel had not overcome all his fears. Reason had not totally abandoned him. At least not yet. Though he was dying to experiment with some of the spells and incantations he had read, he was reluctant to do so. On only a few occasions did he dare some minor conjurations.

Uriel's first attempt was to summon darkness. It took him days to secretly scrounge up the ingredients needed to perform the spell. During that time, his apprehension built. He questioned whether he should perform the ritual at all; wondered what would happen should he fail. But something, something that was now a part of him, compelled him to continue. He made his first attempt one night (early morning, really) in his room. As Uriel began the casting, he felt the growing tension and the expending of energy as he had when he performed the renascencies. But when he willed the darkness into being, he experienced unparalleled exhilaration.

And though afterwards he was left feeling defiled and disgusted with himself, Uriel recalled the exhilaration that power brought him and focused instead on that.

Subsequent attempts on similar elementary spells brought similar results and Uriel ached to test himself with more difficult and powerful spells. He knew that the successful casting of a more powerful spell would mean a greater feeling of elation and, like a drug, Uriel had begun to crave that feeling. But he was afraid. And the more his fear mounted, so did his need to study more of *The Black Lodge*.

It had been two weeks before MidSummer and the Towers had begun to empty out for the month long optional vacation. Many of the witches travelled to various parts of Khaballe to visit with their families. Others simply wished a change of locale and atmosphere. Of the Council, Arhyvhynne was staying at the Towers as was Wyxotte. Lhynette had left for Bhel'Ehzz and Xenyssa had not yet decided on her plans. Dhynelle and Qelharre were both leaving, but only for a week or so and not until after MidSummer. Eyrmysse had decided to get away but she wasn't sure when.

With the majority of the Towers vacated, Uriel became less cautious with his actions. He began to visit the library earlier each evening. Thus it happened that Eyrmysse walked in on him a week before MidSummer. He was panicked when the black robe entered the library and came over to the table where he was sitting. Combating an equal mix of fear and guilt, Uriel wasn't quite sure what to expect from her. The black robe, her smile in place, leaned forward slightly to expose a little more cleavage. But then, in a very unpretentious manner, she encouraged Uriel to continue his studies and offered her assistance should he require it. After which

she went about her business and left the library shortly thereafter.

Uriel was stunned. Eyrmysse didn't force herself on him or threaten him. On the contrary, she had actually been helpful. He had seen a side of her he did not know existed. She seemed a little more like her sister than herself. She provided acceptance and support when others would have persecuted him with disapproval and opposition.

Bolstered by the encounter, Uriel ventured into untested waters later that evening when he attempted a more complex spell. But his conjuration to summon a spiritual entity failed miserably and resulted in him being forced to endure an interminable night of mental anguish. It was his first real taste of being used as opposed to being the user.

The next day Uriel alternated between states of fear from the experience of the previous evening and obsession to continue on at all costs. It was late afternoon before he ventured out of his room and by chance, ran into Eyrmysse. The black robe could tell something had happened and she gently persuaded him to confide in her. He found it amazing that she was able to relate to him, that she understood the pain and yearning, the fright and exaltation. She could express the very same feelings that loomed behind his every thought. Here was somebody who was going through the exact same thing he was.

She offered to assist him that evening and promised that it would be on a strictly platonic level. Uriel was very unsure about the proposition. He was afraid of suffering through another failure and he was still afraid of Eyrmysse to a degree. But his fear of not attaining a higher level and moving towards mastering the contents of *The Black Lodge* supplanted both those other fears.

The magic they performed that night was wondrous (at least

from a black robe's point of view). Uriel was impressed at Eyrmysse's serious attitude and solemnity. The black robe brought him along carefully, knowing when to offer assistance, when to let him struggle and when to push his limits. By night's end, Uriel had conjured a spiritual entity and had learned to command and control it.

They did not attempt any magic that next day nor the day after that (to Uriel's dismay and Eyrmysse's insistence) but waited for two risings of the moons. That night they performed the same conjuration. Again, Uriel was not happy with Eyrmysse's decision. He had wanted to try a more difficult casting but Eyrmysse had been adamant about progressing in a deliberate, conservative manner.

As in the previous working of magic, everything went smoothly. Uriel became more sure of himself and needed little direction from Eyrmysse. This time the black robe was able to focus on the subtleties, helping Uriel gain a better understanding of what he was doing and why. Afterwards they sat in his room for hours and talked. Their conversations ranged from Earth to Khaballe, from science to magic and included heavy doses of philosophy and metaphysics. It became obvious to Uriel that she was a lot more like her mother than she cared to let on. As a result, the black robe no longer seemed so imposing. And she still had not made any outward attempt to entice him, though her naturally exuded sensuality began to captivate him. Everything about Eyrmysse accentuated her easy going, relaxed style. The way she walked, stood, sat and arose; her facial expressions, gestures and voice. Even her smile no longer seemed to conceal some malicious, wicked thought.

When they next got together, it was three days before

MidSummer. As before, Eyrmysse had made Uriel wait two days before conducting their next session. She had encouraged him to study *The Black Lodge* during the interval and continue to build a solid foundation of knowledge. Read it like a textbook, not a story she had told him. Though not pleased, he did as he was told.

Uriel found out that night that they were to work the same conjuration they had in the previous two sessions. He let Eyrmysse know his displeasure at that. The black robe tried to explain that he needed more practice before moving to more difficult and complex work. She also contended that this was a bad night to try something different. It had been raining all day and the eerie reflections of lightning flashes in the darkened room testified that the storm had not relented. The moons were obscured and the tides could adversely affect him. On the other hand, it would be a good opportunity for him to perform a spell from his growing repertoire in other than optimal conditions.

It was apparent from the outset that Uriel was not in the proper frame of mind to perform magical work. He was taking everything too lightly, exhibiting a matter-of-fact attitude. It was not long before he began losing control. Recalling a similar incident less than a week earlier, he began to panic. By trying to escape from the situation, Uriel became entangled in an astral battle with the summoned entity.

Outside, the storm intensified and a jagged spike of lightning shattered the window of the room. Deafening thunder sounded as the rain poured in and Uriel, wearing a horrid mask of pain, was helpless to save himself from his fate. He was being forced dangerously close to the open window when Eyrmysse took control of the situation. She positioned herself between Uriel and the window and though the wind and rain buffeted her, the black

robe managed to disperse the entity and end the invocation.

With both of them completely soaked, Eyrmysse helped Uriel away from the window to his bed, being careful not to step in any of the broken glass. She tried to get back to the window to cover it in some way but Uriel would not let go of her arm. The black robe sat down next to him and tried to calm him down. But he shook violently and hugged her tight, repeatedly murmuring nonsensicals. Eyrmysse pushed the damp hair from his face and told him that it was all right, that he no longer had anything to be afraid of. After a few moments, Uriel finally regained control of himself. He looked at Eyrmysse as if for the first time. As she had done for him, he now pushed the wet, black curls from her face. He looked at the violet eyes and the small smile on her lips, both displaying compassion. She gently put her hand up to his face and he held it there. "Thank you," he said and he kissed her, tenderly at first and then stronger, his passion growing. He started to grope for her, but she refused to surrender herself to his advances.

"This is not the time, nor the place," Eyrmysse told him.

Uriel looked confused as well as disheartened. "But I thought..."

Eyrmysse shook her head and rested her hands in his. "You misunderstand me. Others will be here soon and I think it wise that we be discreet," she explained. "It might not fare well for either of us if our... relationship became known." The black robe smiled her wry smile. "Besides, the festival begins in two days. It would be fitting if we waited until MidSummer." Her violet eyes held his as she leaned over and kissed him. "I promise myself to you then."

Thus it was that Uriel and Eyrmysse became lovers.

There was awe in Uriel's eyes as he looked around the small, circular room located at the very top of the turret called Khyaroh. It had a slit of a window and one entrance which was watched by a Guardian. The room had the familiar dark stone walls with the obligatory symbols etched in them. The floor, however, was tiled with alternating black and white marble squares. Two pillars rose up to the ceiling. The one on the left was fashioned of black marble, the one on the right, white. A grey veil loosely hung between the pillars. Behind the veil stood a pedestal of grey marble, upon which was a Rune of Power. The Rune of Destruction was cast in gold with the inscribed character inlaid with silver. A column of miniature lightning flashes that reached the ceiling sporadically danced around it.

"So here you are."

Uriel turned and smiled at seeing Eyrmysse. "Oh, hi. Are you done teaching already?"

"Already? It has been three hours and more."

Uriel was taken by surprise. "Has it really? It didn't feel like that long. The time seems to pass so quickly when I'm here."

"Have you been here the entire time?" Eyrmysse asked.

"Yes. Well, not really. I stopped at my room for a short while."

"Has a day passed in the last week when you have not visited the Sanctum of Destruction?"

Uriel shook his head. "No, not since I learned about it."

Uriel had only been able to uncover vague meanings and abstract allusions to the Seven Runes of Power from the Sacred Scrolls and various histories. The *Black Lodge* did not shed any more light on the matter of their origin, but related, in theory, what could be done with them.

It was surmised that the Runes were created sometime previous to the beginning of the First Age, before Khaballe had been settled. They were thought to have been created by some aspect of divinity (or the demonic). A Rune was endowed with great magical power and esoteric knowledge specific to the theme of that particular Rune. Likewise, the possessor of such assimilated the properties of the Rune into their existing understanding of the craft. If one could ever secure all the Runes of Power, in theory, one would be elevated to the level of a god. Whether one could properly control the power and the knowledge was a different story, however.

When Uriel encountered a section in *The Black Lodge* about the Runes, they so intrigued him that he began to seek out other tomes that might divulge more information on the mysterious stones. When his relationship with Eyrmysse developed, he immediately questioned her concerning it. She in turn informed him that the witches possessed the Rune of Destruction and that it existed in a small adytum known as the Sanctum of Destruction at the topmost of the turret Khyaroh. She was unable to add much to his knowledge. She did know that three of the other Runes were under the protection of the King and that the locations of the remaining three were unknown. Of the missing Runes, at least one had been in the possession of the wizards at the Academy of the Stars in Kho Rhon'ah previous to the Great Mystical Wars.

Eyrmysse got Uriel's attention back from the Rune of Destruction. "Did anyone see you leave the room?" The black robe spoke quietly, out of the earshot of the attending Guardian.

"No, but Arhyvhynne saw me before I got back to my room," Uriel replied in an equally subdued tone.

"Did she say anything?"

Uriel recalled the uncomfortable meeting. "She wondered what I was doing up so early."

"What excuse did you give her?"

"That I couldn't sleep. She also has heard rumors that we're studying together."

"Really?" Eyrmysse played with a black curl. "How did you handle it? What was her reaction?"

"I pretty much denied it, though I'm not convinced she bought it. She suggested that I ought to consider working with Xenysa. She said that you were, let's see, how did she put it? Oh yeah, that you 'can be rather seductive in more ways than one.' I almost died."

Eyrmysse giggled. "But she does not suspect anything?"

"I don't think so."

"Good," the black robe said, not able to conceal her smile. She took Uriel by the hand and began to leave the Sanctum. "I believe we should find out just how seductive I can be," she whispered in his ear.

CHAPTER XXII

Khyaroh and Skhuroh had been visible in the sable sky for quite some time on the fourth evening of the MidSummer celebration. The Towers were quiet and the Guardian on duty at the Sanctum of Destruction was Qenthyeffe. Though she had started her shift less than an hour earlier, she felt herself becoming extremely weary. The elf had an increasingly strong urge to surrender to sleep during each passing minute. The Guardian fought against it, trying desperately to stay alert. She repeated the warnings through her mind about Uriel spending an inordinate amount of time at the Sanctum. But the Spell of Slumber was too much for her and she eventually dropped to the floor right where she stood.

At that, a black robed witch came out from the shadows of the doorway. She stepped over the slumped form of Qenthyeffe without giving her a second look. She went directly towards the Rune of Destruction and pulled aside the grey veil. The black robe was momentarily mesmerized by the erratic bursts of lightning that protected the Rune. She broke loose of the hypnotic display and made her preparations without delay.

The casting consisted of several parts and would be lengthy, delicate and demanding. First, the polarity of the barrier that encased the Rune had to be reversed. In theory, this was possible, though she didn't know if it had ever been attempted and what resulted in the event that it had. Upon success, she then had to enter the barrier through the vulnerable spot and remove the Rune of Destruction without coming into contact with the lightning or

releasing any of it into the Towers. If she reached that point, the barrier had to be returned back to its normal state.

What accentuated the complexity of the matter was that the barrier was of a high quality, being built by the same ones who had devised the Rites of Trial. Its construction was indicative of the simple genius that characterized the Ahfham. The barrier was self-sustaining, recycling the energy that it "borrowed" from the Rune and was released by the lightning. It was so potent that failure at any point could result in the witch's death.

At the appointed time, the black robe telepathically contacted her collaborator. While she had devised the plan to gain access to the Rune and developed the spells necessary to perform the casting, she would be in need of assistance in maintaining her energy and transporting her upon completion. Also, he was her only hope of deliverance should she encounter any difficulties along the way.

The black robe felt a mental touch and then a spectral image of Satarsmyt appeared followed by the steady flow of energy surging through her body. Drawing from her augmented energy, she built a visualization of the barrier, only inverted, then strove to make the mental picture a reality. Even with the benefit of the sustenance she received from the goat-man, the process took the better part of half an hour. Though the process was not difficult per se, it required a great amount of repetition and concentration. She was tired and bathed in sweat but she had successfully reversed the polarity of the barrier and it still appeared to be sound.

With the initial part of the casting completed, the witch required a break. Not only was her energy level largely depleted, but Qenthyeffe had begun to stir and the black robe had to prolong

the Spell of Slumber. The whole procedure was taking longer than she originally thought it would.

As soon as she was comfortable with Qenthyeffe's condition, the black robe turned her attention back to the matter at hand. She gazed at the barrier, her eyes unconsciously following the incandescent streaks that could prove so deadly. Then she focused on the Rune of Destruction.

In reversing the polarity, the black robe had been able to situate the barrier so that its vulnerable spot was positioned in proximity to the Rune. Next, she would have to thrust something that could pierce the barrier, reach in, seize the Rune and withdraw her hand without being struck by or releasing the lightning.

The witch removed a crescent moon she had fashioned of lead from the folds of her robe. With it, she cautiously probed the vulnerable spot of the barrier. She smiled. She received no shock. The lead worked as an insulator, absorbing the charges emanating from the barrier. But she was forced to withdraw the crescent when it began to grow hot and turn black.

The black robe eyed the barrier as she would a nemesis. Then she carefully aimed and swung the crescent moon at the vulnerable spot, the point of the moon piercing the barrier. She was barely able to stop her momentum before the entire moon and her hand entered the barrier. The lightning immediately converged around the area attacking the alien object that had entered its domain.

The assault from the lightning was melting the end of the moon that was inside the barrier. The witch quickly withdrew the moon and the fabric of the barrier sealed itself shut. But not before a flash of lightning escaped. The bolt shot past the black robe, coming close enough that the force of it knocked her to the

ground. The lightning ricocheted dangerously off the walls and floor of the Sanctum, narrowly missing both her and Qenthyeffe on several occasions. Then the image of Satarsmyt enlarged, growing to monstrous proportions before it seemed to simply absorb the wild streak of lightning.

Still sprawled on the ground, the black robe assessed the damage. The left pillar had been destroyed, evidenced by the large fragments of black marble that lay strewn across the adytum. The floor was littered with smaller shards of black and white marble while the wall bore charcoal scorched steaks indicating where the lightning had struck. Then she raised her eyes to the image of Satarsmyt. Although the specter of the demon had returned to its normal size, it was glowing now, the face betraying some cruel satisfaction it had derived from the experience.

The witch arose on shaky legs, still holding the partially melted lead crescent moon in her hand. She turned her attention to the barrier and instantly knew how the Rune could be retrieved. The question was if she could survive the process. A touch on her mind caused her to regard the spectral image of the demon. The ugly horned head appeared to nod affirmation and was accompanied by a telepathic "Yes." She scowled. *Easy for you to say*, she quipped mentally.

The black robe readied herself and, using the end of the moon that still had a point, swung at the barrier. The lead crescent entered the barrier as it had before, the lightning instantly assaulting it. The witch tried to use the pointed end of the moon to pull the Rune of Destruction toward the vulnerable spot. But the moon wasn't large enough. She moved her hand closer, until it was almost against the barrier, careful not to come into contact with the perilous energy. That allowed her to hook the pointed end of the

moon over the far side of the Rune.

The moon was getting hot and she swiftly debated pulling it out of the barrier. But the results of her aborted effort were fresh in her mind, leading her to decide that this must be her final attempt. Though the heat from the moon was becoming exceedingly uncomfortable, the black robe cautiously used the moon to drag the Rune towards the spot. By the time she maneuvered the Rune to where she wanted, the pain from the heat was unbearable. There was only one thing she could do.

With reckless abandon, the witch thrust her hand through the vulnerable spot in the barrier, dropped the moon, grabbed the Rune and tried to pull her hand free. But the barrier would not release her. Streaks of lightning viscosly attacked her hand as the barrier drained the black robe of her energy. Her screams were agonized and she was beginning to lose consciousness when the image of Satarsmyt came unbidden into her mind. She received a tremendous energy transfusion that would have killed her had she not been close to making her transition. Instead, it enabled her to extract her hand from the barrier.

The black robe staggered back, dazed from her near encounter with death. So clouded was her mind that she did not notice the throbbing in her hand for several moments. When it finally drew her attention, the witch looked down absently to her hand and beheld the glowing Rune of Destruction.

The Rune was alive in some inanimate way. Flashes of hidden pasts darted through the witch's mind. The remains of civilizations, images of destruction and glimpses of—of what? She was unsure. The visions passed too quickly for her to be certain. But she knew that the knowledge concealed within the Rune for thousands of years was accessible to her. There was a price to pay

to attain such knowledge, however. The Rune was wearing away at her very being, consuming what was left of the black robe's life. The burden of the visions became too heavy and she was overcome with vertigo. She felt herself falling into a deep black hole when suddenly there was a shimmering and she was gone.



"Give it to me," the demon ordered.

The witch glanced around, disoriented. At first, she could discern nothing through the heavy scarlet eddies that swirled about her. Then she saw the demon sitting in its familiar red throne and knew herself to be in the black citadel. "No! Never!" She clutched the Rune of Destruction tightly, holding it to her breast.

"Give it to me," Satarsmyt repeated in a thick voice.

The Rune tormented the black robe. She could feel its hunger for her and her masochistic desire to give herself to it. "No!" she hissed. "It is mine!"

The demon settled his flaming eyes on the witch. "I did not save your life merely for you to relinquish it to the Rune. I am not done with you yet. I have further need of you." Satarsmyt imposed his will on her. And against the stone. "Now, give me the Rune."

The force of the demon's will diminished the power of the Rune. But a part of the black robe still refused to surrender it. She was in tears, the malady of possession visible in her eyes, torn between want and loathing, knowing that she would lose herself to the Rune yet unable to part with it.

Satarsmyt rose from his seat and approached the black robe. He held out a clawed hand and commanded her to release the Rune. Which she did, with a cry of anguish and only after an

intense inner struggle. The demon's eyes flamed brighter and he became wrapped in an aura of ruby light. His already ghastly appearance transformed into a more frightening, unearthly look. Then, as the moments dwindled past, both demon and witch returned to a state of normalcy.

Oblivious to her surroundings until now, the black robe noticed others in the large, dimly lit Throne Room. Some were of this world, some were not; some she recognized, others were unknown to her.

The goat-man followed her gaze. "These," Satarsmyt indicated the beings the witch surveyed, "assisted me in making your endeavor successful."

"Why is my father not here?" Her voice was impudent. "I was under the impression I was to give the Rune to him."

"He decided to remain in Bhel'Ehzz for MidSummer. An opportunity presented itself." Satarsmyt returned to the smaller throne and seated himself. "How goes it with the wizard?"

The witch considered before she answered. "He is becoming much stronger. He studies *The Black Lodge* fervently. Overall, I would say he is coming along as was hoped."

"Is there anything else?" the demon queried. The tail began to wag and he had a curious look on his face.

The black robe weighed the question carefully. Her response was guarded. "Should there be?"

The fire that was the demon's eyes dimmed ever so slightly. He was not pleased at the lack of her cooperation. "What of his relationship with the High Witch?"

"I do not believe that there is one." The witch did not feel compelled to disclose everything she knew. Especially now that her goals did not necessarily coincide with theirs. She was not sure

the creature accepted her terse answers so she attempted to refocus the conversation. "What news from Bhel'Ehzz?"

Satarsmyt ran his clawed hand over his close-cropped beard. "All things are proceeding quite well in the capital. This Mhylzul of the Khezef Ahf seems more than competent. Fears grow and rumors spread. Word should be arriving there shortly regarding the sightings of Slayers in the north. If it has not already. And when they learn of the Rune, it should dramatically heighten the state of unrest in Bhel'Ehzz."

"What will follow?"

"I am sure it will be just as we have planned. Athar will be quite distressed that the Rune of Destruction has disappeared. The wizard, of course, will be suspect. He will be summoned to Bhel'Ehzz and arrive at roughly the same time as the Journey of Homage. Then the Great One will be in position to impose his domination and wrath upon this wretched kingdom and its citizens, elevating us to our rightful places." The demon's eyes burned brighter with every word.

"You believe Arhyhynne will turn him over to the King?"

Before the demon could answer, six loud knocks resounded on the throne room door. The creature rose and retrieved a heavy, black ceremonial robe from behind the throne. Satarsmyt answered the question while he donned and adjusted the robe. "She will have little choice. Not only will Athar demand it, but most likely Tomhylhen and the general populace will as well."

Pleased with his appearance, Satarsmyt nodded once to a wizard who guarded the door. The wizard, a black robe, knocked once and the door opened. A young girl, chained and naked, was escorted into the throne room by two other black robed wizards, none of which belonged to Athar's ten. The black candle was lit

and the girl was placed upon the altar and secured there.

Daath UI Thaum housed many men and women (though mostly women) such as her. Most of them were abducted from Sagghez'ah and were forced into roles of slaves, breeders and sacrifices. The slaves were forced to perform all of the most difficult as well as the most revolting and disgusting tasks. The breeders were the mates of the incubi and succubi and their offspring were partial demons that were enrolled as common soldiers into the False Legion. Those mates that proved to be sterile or barren became the Possessed. The Possessed subconsciously acted as the agents of Daath UI Thaum, appearing as normal humans leading normal lives while a part of them secretly sought to direct the matters in which they were involved to the ends of the Dark Master.

Regardless of what they did or how they performed, those seized from their previous lives were all physically and sexually abused on a daily basis in addition to being candidates for sacrifice. But even in death there was no deliverance for these tortured beings. For after the debauchery of the rituals, they were snatched from the grasp of death by the SoulSlayers.

Satarsmyt turned his eyes from his victim to the witch. "It has been long since you have visited Daath UI Thaum and taken part in our rites." He placed his clawed hands on her, allowed them to wander.

One aspect of the black robe felt disgust at the demon and her craving for the licentiousness and depravity the ritual would bring her. But there was also a facet that accepted it, welcomed it openly. That was the part she fought against. She made a feeble attempt at pushing Satarsmyt's claws away. "I really should be getting back before I am missed."

The demon's voice was smooth as he reassured her. "Do not concern yourself, my dear. I will return you in due time. Surely you will not deprive me of your flesh. The flesh I saved from the Rune?"

And though aversion was clearly visible in her eyes, she permitted herself to be led to the altar, where demon, wizard, creature and witch alike disrobed and immersed themselves in their sacrifice.



Uriel, half asleep, rolled over in the bed and reached his arm out to wrap around Eyrmysse. He came awake instantly when he found her to be gone. He got up and looked out her window. *Still night*, he thought. The suns weren't due up for another couple of hours. *I wonder where she could have gone*. He wanted to go out and look for her but he didn't dare leave her room.

Half an hour passed without the black robe's return and Uriel was becoming very worried. He had tried to go back to sleep but it was futile. His subsequent pacing did nothing to relax him either. He was convinced something drastic or unfortunate had happened. Another quarter hour elapsed and just when he persuaded himself to leave her room, Eyrmysse walked in, looking very tired and on edge.

"Where in the hell have you been?" Uriel asked.

"There has been a horrible incident. The Rune of Destruction is missing."

"What?" Uriel said in an alarmed tone.

"Someone or something has managed to remove it from the barrier in the Sanctum."

"I don't believe it," Uriel said, still astonished. "How?"

The black robe ran a hand through her hair. "I do not know."

"When did it happen? Just now? You've been gone for over an hour."

"It must have happened earlier in the night. I sensed something wrong in my sleep. I was having nightmares about the Rune and when I awoke, I felt compelled to visit the Sanctum. When I arrived there, I found the room in disarray, Qenthyeffe under some sort of spell and the Rune gone."

"Then what?"

"I searched for any indications of who could have done this but found nothing." Eyrmysse stood thoughtfully for a moment. "Did Jukhuule come here while I was gone?"

"No. Nobody came by. Why?"

"She was not in her room." She dismissed it and took Uriel by the hand. "You must get back to your room quickly. I must go and inform my sister and the others. This will not bode well for you."

Uriel's expression was apprehensive. "What makes you say that?"

"This will have severe repercussions throughout the kingdom. And I am sure that you will bear the brunt of the suspicion." Eyrmysse hugged him tightly as she said, "I fear for you."

CHAPTER XXIII

A good many casks had been emptied before the suns had finally dropped below the horizon. The Prince and his guests were located in a restricted area in the middle of the Commons and had contributed their fare share to the consumption of the much sought after liquor. Fhyndhella, Jhyrenne, Ellycyn, Setryv, Mharkhel, Vhalkhette, the Lord Mayor, GuildMasters and the members of the King's Ministry were among the consumers in the Prince's personal party for this MidSummer night. Only Nherycyn and Athar were not among them. The former had retired for the evening and it was presumed that the latter was with his wizards.

The interplay had been intriguing thus far. The Prince was playing his political game with the Ministry, Lord Mayor and GuildMasters while trying to keep his distance from Dhonlaa. Fhyndhella was on the Prince's arm, being completely obsequious. Jhyrenne subtly hovered, waiting for an opening. Dhonlaa was in the midst of her own political machinations and completely aware of the other two women whose attentions were on the Prince. Actually, it was three women. Vhalkhette was also in the Prince's group, by virtue of being the overall leader in the *trevhette*. As the possessors of the other two highest scores in the competition, Setryv and Mharkhel were in the company of the Princess, openly vying for her attention.

The Prince hadn't even wanted to include Fhyndhella on his guest list but he could not realistically exclude her as her father was in the Ministry. He knew Dhonlaa would also be present and figured that Fhyndhella's behavior would only incite the still

grieving daughter. Which it did. Dhonlaa, though disguising it fairly well, was seething. Fhyndhella had been hanging all over Rhenycyn the entire evening, showering him with "Yes, my Prince" and "Yes, Your Highness." The Prince was unsure as to whether Fhyndhella or his consumption of liquor was causing him to be nauseous. He was reasonably certain it was Fhyndhella. His only reprieve from her constant attention was his trips to the men's quarters, which were becoming increasingly more frequent.

Jhyrenne was a good friend to both the Prince and Princess. She was easy to talk to and had great common sense, considering the early part of her life was spent in the streets. The Princesses' attendant was expert in giving favorable impressions and became very sly once entrenched in a situation. Like Dhonlaa, Jhyrenne always had everything in the proper place, wore just the right clothes, said the right things and used it to her advantage. Tonight, she made it a point to stay in Rhenycyn's view, teasing him with a glance of her playful brown eyes, running her hands through her long brown hair or giving him an eyeful by bending over to adjust a fold in Ellycyn's gown. She was just biding her time, relatively confident that the Prince would have need of her before the night ended.

Dhonlaa had been circulating amongst the members of the Ministry, speaking in low tones, clasping hands, nodding and giving reassuring smiles. The black gown she wore was not as much for mourning as it was to show off her body. Politics wasn't the only game being played. Rhenycyn supposed that whatever she was up to, she would spring it tonight. If only he didn't have Fhyndhella with him, he might have been able to discover in some way what she was plotting.

As the overall leader in the *trevhette*, Vhalkhette was in the

company of the Prince for the evening. Most of the Ministry refused to converse with her. Not because she was a female or thought to be a mercenary, but because she was both. Those few that ventured to engage her in conversation found that she parried inquiries of her past and present with the same grace she displayed in battle. Even to the Prince she remained an enigma.

Ellycyn was in good spirits, having been temporarily spared the heartache of having to choose between Mharkhel and Setryv. Though only pleasantries had been exchanged, Sir Mharkhel was at least partially back in the good graces of the Princess. Ellycyn knew that actions spoke louder than words where the dark knight was concerned. By exerting himself in the competition, Mharkhel was expressing in his own way his feelings for Ellycyn. Meanwhile, Setryv, while he still issued smiles and laughter, was obviously discontented at having his friend back in the picture.

As the night wore on, things got progressively worse. Since Fhyndhella remained perched on the Prince's arm, Rhenycyn, who had entered the early stages of intoxication, began openly groping her. Fhyndhella was able to avert the Prince's forward attempts with propriety, but their polite struggles did not go unnoticed by either Jhyrenne or Dhonlaa. The Prince pressed Fhyndhella, suggesting that they steal away and consummate their languishing relationship in some nearby bushes. When Fhyndhella refused, Rhenycyn, angered and frustrated, disengaged himself from her. Fhyndhella, on the brink of tears, quickly excused herself and left the tent.

Dhonlaa thought it a most opportune time to make her announcement. She called the gathering to attention and addressed them all. "I would like to begin by publicly thanking all of you for your concern, consideration and support since my father's," here

she looked at Rhenycyn, "heinous and vile murder. As senior member in the King's Ministry you all had the opportunity to work with him and become familiar with his love of Khaballe, commitment to the proper dispensation of justice and dedication to the smooth operation of this government. My father and I were very close, even more so after my mother's passing, and I became his sounding board. We spent a great many evenings arguing points of philosophy concerning the laws and statutes of Khaballe," she reminisced aloud.

How very touching, the Prince thought sarcastically. *I just wonder where she is going with this.*

"There was a great deal I learned from him," Dhonlaa continued. "He shared with me his dreams and his visions. And that is why I have decided to dedicate my life to fulfilling them." There were murmurs from members of the Ministry. Rhenycyn inclined his head and squinted as if he questioned his hearing. After waiting long enough for effect, Dhonlaa dropped her bomb. "I am assuming my father's position in the King's Ministry. With the consent and approval from the members of the Ministry, of course."

The Prince didn't believe his ears. "What?" he yelled. He was a little out of character due to his level of alcohol consumption.

Dhonlaa walked up to Rhenycyn stopping no more than a foot away from him. "You did not expect this, did you my Prince? You thought that once you rid yourself of my father no one would oppose you. Well, you have underestimated me. You have *always* underestimated me. Now you have *me* to contend with. That is, unless you plan to have me murdered as you had my father."

Before Rhenycyn could answer, the flash of a short sword came up and rested against Dhonlaa's throat. It was held by

Vhalkhette. "The words you speak reek of treason," the warrior said. "I suggest you retract them before they become the last words you speak."

Dhonlaa was noticeably shaken and obviously taken off guard. She tried to muster some courage but kept looking down at the sword resting against her throat. She spoke first to the Prince, who seem stupefied by what was transpiring. "Tell her to put it away, Rhenycyn." Then she turned ever so slightly to Vhalkhette. "Surely you would not harm me in public, in front of all these witnesses." Then, almost in desperation, "Do you not know who I am, that my father was the eldest member of the King's Ministry?"

"Whether the blood that flows from your severed head is red or blue makes little difference to me. Apologize. Now." Vhalkhette increased the pressure of the sword on Dhonlaa's throat.

Rhenycyn recovered from his initial shock and immediately intervened. "It is all right, Vhalkhette." The Prince put his hand on the sword and carefully moved it away from Dhonlaa. "It is completely understandable that Dhonlaa is still suffering from her father's tragedy and is not thinking clearly." He gestured with his head to Dhonlaa.

Dhonlaa looked at the Prince, then at Vhalkhette, then back to the Prince. "My father's murder has been quite difficult for me. Next time I make any accusations I will support them."

"Yes, I suggest that you do," the Prince retorted.

Dhonlaa swiftly gathered her supporters, those whom she had convinced that she should occupy Valdhon's seat, and departed. Rhenycyn knew by those that left with her that she would be successful and a mixture of anger and depression washed over him.

Rhenycyn questioned Vhalkhette. "Whatever possessed you to do that?"

"The Prince should not be addressed in such a manner. Nevertheless, I am sorry if my actions have caused you any undue complications."

Rhenycyn looked closely at the beautiful blonde warrior. The sight of Vhalkhette sobered him and he quickly forgot the earlier embarrassment with Fhyndhella. "No, not at all. I doubt that this has exaggerated matters much. Most likely, the situation would have eventually ended up the same," the Prince lied. He took her by the hand which she eyed suspiciously. "Tell me about yourself. How did one as lovely as yourself come to be so talented in the art of defense?"

Vhalkhette politely withdrew her hand from his. "Do not mistake my loyalty for anything other than what it is. As a citizen of Khaballe I am bound by my honor to defend you. Though I am sure you think it so, there is no statute that requires me to give myself to you." The warrior turned and went off to seclude herself in a corner, leaving the Prince by himself.

Ellycyn, who had watched the entire exchange in dismay with Setryv and Mharkhel, now went to comfort her brother. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Rhenycyn grunted a response, then went into a quiet tirade. "Initially, it was Fhyndhella. She spent the entire evening hanging on me. She wishes everyone to think that she is still mine, but when the opportunity arises to confirm it... nothing. Then Dhonlaa, that bitch. Can you believe the audacity of that woman?" The Prince struck the palm of his hand with his fist. "The animosity she bears towards me must be endless. That family will bring about my downfall yet. She really set it up so very carefully,

so very well. I should have known. Someone should have known. I should have been told. Even the Ministry sides with her. I almost wish I did have the old man killed. I should have let Vhalkhette kill *her*." Then he got a faraway look on his face. "Vhalkhette. What a truly fascinating woman. Allure and power all in one. But alas, even she will not have me." Saddened, Rhenycyn looked around the tent for the one person that could comfort him. Ignoring Ellycyn and leaving her without so much as a word, he immediately went to Jhyrenne and the two of them left together.

Ellycyn felt sorry for both her brother and Jhyrenne. What with Athar, Valdhon's murder, Fhyndhella and now Dhonlaa, Rhenycyn was having a bad time of it lately. The Princess felt that Fhyndhella was the misdirected target of Rhenycyn's frustrations, however. Ellycyn was convinced that he did not have serious intentions towards her and that her brother should detach himself from her completely instead of just leading her on,. And one could not really fault Fhyndhella for trying to keep what she believed to be hers. Jhyrenne, on the other hand, was content simply to be the Prince's mistress. Ellycyn wished that it didn't have to be so. If only her attendant had been born of nobility.

The Princess shook her head sadly and decided to return to her two knights. She had difficulty finding them, eventually spying them in the midst of several young ladies, Minister's daughters, who were fawning all over them. Setryv was thoroughly enjoying the attention but Mharkhel was noticeably embarrassed. Ellycyn, herself riding the rough waters of emotions lately, resented it and lost her temper. Rather than confront the two scoundrels, she rushed out of the tent.

Mharkhel saw the Princess leave and brusquely excused himself to give chase. He caught up with her as she approached

the bridge leaving the Royal Commons. "Ellycyn," he called, but she walked on, unheeding. "Ellycyn," he called again and still there came no response. The knight came up behind her, grabbed her by the arm and turned the Princess to him.

The touch of her and the fact that Ellycyn was glassy eyed threw Mharkhel off. Now that he had her, he was uncomfortable and unsure what to say. "I am sorry. You left to go to the Prince and they... they just... came over to us and began asking about the competition."

There was no response from the Princess. They stood there quietly for a few minutes while a couple passed by and then another. Then they were alone on the bridge, the moons high in the sky, the reflections of the orbs shimmering on the Twisted Horn River.

A breeze stirred up and Ellycyn resolved an internal issue. She looked into the knight's brown eyes. "Mharkhel, I love you," she said softly. Then stronger, with more passion, "I need you. I want you. Now, Mharkhel. Tonight."

Mharkhel let out a long sigh, looked away from her shining hazel eyes. He felt the knots inside himself constrict even tighter. "Ellycyn... I cannot."

"Please, Mharkhel, please." She drew him to her. "Mharkhel, forget about your past, forget about the past few days. Forget everything but us."

The knight gently pushed her away. He still would not look at her. "You do not understand, Ellycyn. Though I share your feelings, it is not possible for us to be together. I cannot allow it to happen."

Ellycyn was in tears. "Why? What tortures you so? Tell me, Mharkhel. Can you not tell me what keeps us apart?"

"Ellycyn..." Tears were in the knight's eyes as he considered if he should confide in her. But before he could come to a decision, his mind was made up for him. Setryv arrived. Mharkhel's eyes went from his friend and lingered on Ellycyn. "I am sorry," he said, his voice a whisper. Then he abandoned his feelings and Ellycyn for the lonesome solace of the night.

"Damn you!" the Princess yelled at Mharkhel, his head bent as he trudged away. "Damn you!"

The sound of Ellycyn's pain would echo in Mharkhel's heart and mind long after the night ended. Fortunately for him, he was spared the sight of the Princess being consoled in Setryv's arms.



Raucous noise could be heard coming from the wing in the castle which housed Athar's ten wizards. In their social hall, empty tankards dotted the stone floor and half-eaten food was scattered across a large table. The candlelight was dim, the air heavy with the aroma of incense and the sounds of laughter and giggling. It was here that the wizards, together with the visiting witches, celebrated MidSummer night.

The revelry was reaching a crescendo. One wizard cleared a section of the table by pushing plates of food off of it while two others grabbed a witch and threw her onto the table. The witch eagerly tore off her robes and let the wizards have at her. The scene, or variations thereof, was replicated in other parts of the hall with some of the witches being the aggressors.

Azarel and Uxzel were in a corner of the hall, restricting themselves from participating, concentrating on successfully completing their mission. "Is she ready?" the frail wizard

questioned Uxzel.

The black man nodded gravely. "She has consumed enough of the laced mead to make her most compliant."

"Her memory?" asked Azarel.

This time Uxzel shook his head. "She will have no recollection."

"Good. Have the others bring her. The room is ready." Azarel disappeared down a hallway and Uxzel signaled two other wizards in an opposite corner of the hall. The wizards, the white robes Zomyel and Beleghor, made their way to a white robed witch who sat by herself, caressing a nearly empty goblet of mead. She looked up with bleary brown eyes and offered the two wizards a faint smile.

"Come with us, sister," Zomyel said. He took her by one hand and Beleghor went to take the other. But the witch would not relinquish the goblet. Beleghor was about to force it out of her hand when Zomyel shook his head. "Take her by the arm." The two wizards walked with the witch to a certain spot in the hall and stood adjacent to the wall until they were certain they were not being observed. Then Zomyel spoke a Word, pushed the wall inward, and entered, followed by the witch and Beleghor.

The room they entered was small. Black floor candles supplied the room with its only illumination. A circle and magical symbols were painted on the stone floor. Azarel and Uxzel were waiting for them. The frail black robe nodded once to Zomyel. The wizard took the witch's hand that held the goblet and deposited a powder into it, then added a bit more mead. "Drink sister, drink deeply." He smiled to encourage her but it was not necessary. The witch consumed the contents of the goblet without pausing for breath.

The wizards gave the mead a moment to take effect, then disrobed the witch and laid her within the circle, naked. Belegbor looked upon the witch with lust and desire. "I cannot wait to release myself from this vile white robe. It is as if the very touch of it burns my skin and corrupts my Soul."

Zomyel smiled his understanding and said, "You are not alone in your feelings, brother."

Azarel knocked once on the wall across from where the witch had been brought in. Minutes passed and then the wall slid open. The wizards' Dark Master entered. He was robed in black, the head of a black goat with ebony horns upon his shoulders. He gave the room a cursory inspection. "Let us begin," he said in his deep, guttural voice.

The wizards formed a circle around the witch. As their master began the conjuration, the wizards held their arms high, grasped each other's hands and walked the circle counter-clockwise. When the Dark Master began the evocation of the incubus, the wizards disrobed. Before long, the demon coalesced above the witch. It had the head of a leopard, the body of a lion and the tail of a crocodile.

The incubus leered at the witch for only a moment before he ravaged her. But instead of being revolted, she accepted and embraced the demon, enthralled with pleasure. Until the demon finished and its seed entered her. Then the witch screamed in agony as the seed settled in her and took possession of her.

While the screams of the witch continued, the Dark Master ended the conjuration and addressed the wizards. "Each of you, take and ravish this white slut of the Moons. Punish and sodomize her repeatedly. Violate every part of her body, for the demon within her will rejoice and grow stronger. But do not get carried

away with her. We would not want anything of a permanent nature to incapacitate our little Possessed."

CHAPTER XXIV

The events of the fourth day of the MidSummer celebration were not scheduled to begin until midday. This was largely to give the carousers of the previous evening an opportunity to recover. But it was unnecessary this year. For early in the morning, news arrived which had a sobering effect on everyone.

Three of the King's cousins (on his wife's side) and their families reached the capital as the suns began their ascent. They had travelled from Eh-Thern-Ah, a small village south of Sagghez'ah and west of the road that led to Mhykord'ah. They brought with them firsthand accounts of SoulSlayer sightings in that region. Scheduled to arrive before MidSummer, they had arrived five days late due to their encounters with the horrifying entities. They recounted how two of their party had been taken and how the Slayers were victimizing the inhabitants of the countryside east of the Thaum Weald. The cousins had heard reports that the Slayers even ventured into Sagghez'ah itself.

The rumors of SoulSlayers that the knights had attempted to quell and isolate now ran rampant. Talk shifted away from the *trevhette*, other pastimes and affairs of the previous evening. Witches and wizards became focal points of conversations, being the supposed experts in the field of SoulSlayers. They were expected to supply answers regarding everything from the origin of the Slayers to the best ways of eliminating them and everything in between. Some questioned the validity of the reports while others openly dismissed the cousins' stories as being imaginative excuses for their late arrival. But all, whether they admitted it or

not, were disturbed and frightened by the possibilities.

A large crowd was present for the final event, but the buzzing in the stands still revolved around the Slayers. The demeanor of the participants in the last event of the *trevhette* was more serious than normal. The jousters saw this as an occasion to demonstrate their ability to handle the threat of the SoulSlayers. Vhalkhette, though she could not even mount her black and grey Sud by herself, insisted on participating. Mharkhel, badly troubled by his episode with Ellycyn and the skeletons hanging in his closet, now had the added burden of the skeletal SoulSlayers as well. Setryv, whose first and foremost desire was to avenge Ellycyn, also shouldered the burden of the Slayers, as did all the Knights of the Flaming Sword.

The rules of the joust were simple. Two opponents were positioned at each end of the enclosed field, armored and mounted, each with a shield and a lance, the lances being twelve feet in length and about three inches in diameter. Each jouster was on their right side of a short fence, and at a signal from the King, charged each other. The object was to strike your opponent's shield with such force that either he would be unhorsed or your lance would break. Progressing to the next round was accomplished by unhorsing your opponent or breaking more lances than your opponent in three tries. In the case of a tie after three jousts, the opponents would continue to joust until one gained the advantage. One could be disqualified for the lance striking anything other than the shield or for using a gauntlet which locked onto the lance.

Except for Vhalkhette, there were few surprises before the championship round. The female warrior never ceased to amaze those who watched her. Given no chance at all to survive the first

round, she had somehow managed to unhorse her first opponent and defeat her next opponent three breaks to one before losing two breaks to one in the third round. Setryv had an easy time of it, only having one round decided on breaks before making the final. Mharkhel had unhorsed each of his five previous opponents, all but one on the first encounter.

With Vhalkhette not receiving any points, the overall championship of the *trevhette* came down to Setryv and Mharkhel. The money was on the dark knight, the stronger of the two. But a substantial number still placed their bets with Setryv.

It was late afternoon in Bhel'Ehzz when the two knights sat across from one another on opposite ends of the field, each seated upon a jet black Gwher warhorse. They readied themselves, Setryv alternating his gaze between his opponent and Ellycyn, Mharkhel staring straight ahead. Both lances bore the princess' colors. They were wrapped in alternating light blue and gold, with a white ribbon hanging from each tip. Setryv was making a declaration of sorts while Mharkhel wanted it known that regardless of their personal lives, he was still, and would always, be Ellycyn's champion.

Both horses anxiously pranced a bit, instinctively aware of the importance of this battle. And then King Nherycyn dropped the white silk which signaled them to begin. Both horses thundered down the field towards one another, kicking up clods of turf. The collision was earthshaking as both lances struck and broke. Neither knight was aware of what befell the other. Setryv, who was unhorsed, got up quickly (as quickly as one can when wearing heavy armor) and looked across the fence, hoping to see Mharkhel on the ground. Which he was. The other knight barely stirred and took a long time getting to his feet, needing the

assistance of a squire to do so.

Both knights returned to their horses, mounted and prepared themselves for the second joust. Once again Nherycyn dropped the silk and the knights urged their horses on. This time it appeared Setryv was moving faster when they met. The blonde knight struck Mharkhel's shield perfectly in the center, broke his own lance and unhorsed Mharkhel in the process. Mharkhel's lance held, however, as it glanced the upper right corner of the shield. But fortunately for Mharkhel, the strike was powerful enough to knock Setryv off balance and off his horse. Setryv, while he was winning two breaks to one, cursed his misfortune. Mharkhel was again slow to rise, down on his hands and knees.

"Get up cur!" Setryv's voice rang out, the noises of the crowd dwindling to whispers. "Do not dare to quit on me! Do not deprive me of beating you outright, you bastard son of a whore!" he shouted.

Mharkhel slowly turned his helmeted head in the direction of Setryv's voice. He pushed himself up, roughly thrusting aside the squire who was trying to help him up. Though his visor was down, Setryv could feel Mharkhel staring through the narrow slits. They stood that way for long seconds before Mharkhel's brown eyes went colorless, getting that strange distant look to them. Then the dark knight made his way back to his horse.

All was stillness until the white silk dropped for the third time. Then the booming sound of hoof beats mixed with the shouts of the crowd. The light met the dark and both took each other full in center of the shields, shattering their lances. Setryv was lifted completely out of his saddle and thrown back, hitting the ground so hard his helmet was jarred from his head. Stars exploded all around Setryv though his eyes were jammed shut.

When he was able to open them, it was to a severe pounding and the still visible stars. Then the stars gradually faded away to reveal a sunlit framed knight in black armor upon a jet black Gwher staring down at him.



The award ceremony that night was a somber one. The most frequent topic of conversation among the attendees remained the SoulSlayers. Rumors and gossip concerning Rhenycyn, Jhyrenne, Fhyndhella and Dhonlaa were a distant second. After them were Mharkhel, Setryv and Ellycyn. Vhalkhette, though her skill and courage would be vividly remembered, no longer felt the spotlight on her.

The holders of the top ten point totals received their due recognition, awards and monetary prizes. Vhalkhette had finished third with a total of one hundred sixty points and many secretly wondered how many more points she could have accumulated if she had been healthy. Second place went to a bitterly disappointed Setryv who edged out Vhalkhette by ten points. The unvoiced opinion amongst those who concerned themselves with such things was that Setryv had always been second to Mharkhel. This had put to rest any doubt. Mharkhel amassed two hundred five points, the first champion to score more than two hundred points in over ten years. All in all, it had been generally considered one of the best *trevhettes* in recent history. The last time the top three contestants all scored over one hundred fifty points was back in 2964.

The champion's award was a gold and silver coin, six inches in diameter and one quarter inch thick. On one side was depicted

the events of the *trevhette* engraved with the champion's name and score, on the other, the likeness of King Nherycyn. Upon receiving his award from the King up in the Royal booth, Mharkhel placed it in Ellycyn's lap.

The dark knight spoke, his voice heavy with emotion. "I offer this as a token of my undying loyalty, dedication of service and reaffirmation of my oath of protection. I do this not as the champion of the *trevhette*, but as the champion of the Princess Ellycyn."

The Princess looked at Mharkhel with a face of stone. "Let it be known that you, Mharkhel, have failed your oath and therefore have failed me. You swore to protect me, to keep me from harm's way, to defend my honor. Yet the only one I have needed protection from is you. You yourself have done nothing save cause me grief and embarrassment. I, therefore, release you from your obligation and absolve you of your oath."

Mharkhel, stricken, fell to his knees in tears. "No, Ellycyn, no. Please, you do not understand. Please. You cannot do this to me."

"It is as I have said. It is done. Now leave me. You are dismissed."

Mharkhel rose and looked into Ellycyn's hazel eyes. "Though it may neither be your desire nor your wish, I will never relinquish my obligation or oath. While I am able to still draw breath, I will endeavor to defend and protect you. And if it be possible to continue my service after death seizes me from you, so shall it be." With that the dark knight turned and left.

Vhyqyrd jotted something in his notebook. Athar stroked his beard in thought. Rhenycyn, though obviously displeased with his sister's actions, held his tongue. Nherycyn did not. "It would seem

my daughter has become as impetuous as my son," the King mumbled to no one in particular.



If the news of the SoulSlayers had cast a pall over the fourth day of MidSummer, then the final day was truly to be somber. Upon the request of the King, the Ministry met early on the last morning of the MidSummer celebration to discuss their options where the Slayers were concerned.

Five of the seven Ministers along with the King and Prince were present and seated around a large table in the castle's Hall of the Ministry. Tomhylhen, High Priest of the Star and Minister of Theocracy, was one absentee. As he resided with his clerics at Mhykord'ah, he only attended general meetings. Athar, as was the custom, acted as his spokesperson. Valdhon's seat as Minister of Internal Affairs had been vacant since his murder but by Nherycyn's request, Dhonlaa was allowed to take his place until an inquiry, report and formal ratification could take place. The old King had decided there was no use in putting off the inevitable and, though this would not placate Dhonlaa, there were members of the Ministry who would look favorably upon the gesture.

Discussion of the Slayers had gone on for over an hour with little progress made when there was a knock at the door to the Hall. The attendant at the door informed Athar that one of his wizards was waiting in the hallway with a matter of great urgency. The King's Advisor rose with a scowl, excused himself and left.

Moments later, Athar returned, the color of his skin almost matching that of his flowing white beard. He seated himself without a word but the King noticed his unusual mien and

interrupted the ongoing conversation by clearing his throat. "Athar? Is there something you would share with us?"

The wizard sighed, placed his hands on the table and pushed himself up. "I am afraid there is, Your Majesty." He paused, let his eyes pass over each member in the group, then let them rest on the Prince. "It is with great difficulty that I must inform you that the Rune of Destruction has been absconded from the Towers of the Moons."

The reaction of the Ministry was one of uniform shock and fear. Nherycyn appeared to age before their very eyes while his son had trouble diverting the accusatory stare of the wizard. After a few moments, the wizard calmed the group down. "Should I start from the beginning, Your Majesty?" The King nodded absently and Athar proceeded to recount the events they were aware of concerning the arrival of Uriel.

The Ministers had a barrage of questions when he finished and Dhonlaa was the first. "Why did you not tell us when this all took place? Was it not our right to know?"

"Both the King and I felt it would be unwise to make this public until we were able to draw some substantial conclusions." Athar was matter-of-fact, as if their decision was above question.

Dhonlaa pressed the matter, however. "Why was he not at least brought here for an official inquiry? The circumstances surrounding him and the passage from the Scrolls would seem to establish grounds enough, would it not?"

Athar answered sheepishly. "The King and I were of the same thought, my lady, however the Prince and his sister convinced the King otherwise."

Rhenycyn spoke up in his own defense. "I was far from certain at that time—nor am I yet convinced—that this Uriel is the

cause of all or anything that has transpired."

Fhyndhella's father, Delfyn, the Minister of Housing, spoke up. "I am in complete agreement, My Prince. There does not seem to be a great deal of evidence. What I hear is mainly conjecture." He was a tall, slim man with thinning hair of middle age who was known more for his astute dealings in real estate as opposed to his political savvy.

"Must you be so obvious in supporting Rhenycyn in hope of reconciling your daughter to him?" Dhonlaa pointedly asked.

"As an *actual* member of the King's Ministry, it is my right and duty to offer my insights when I deem necessary," Delfyn retorted.

"Enough, enough." They were Nherycyn's first words since learning of the Rune. "We are all painfully aware of both of your opinions regarding my son."

A severe-looking man in military uniform was the next to address the group. "What of the Witches of the Moons? Are they involved and if so how?" asked Ghanharl, Minister of Defense.

"The extent of the Witches' involvement has not been established. Perhaps we should request Lhynette to join us?" Athar questioned. The Ministers voiced their assent and an attendant was sent to locate the white robe.

Meanwhile, Povharhed, the Minister of Labor asked, "What of the other Runes of Power? Has there been any word regarding them?"

"The Crown is still in possession of three. The whereabouts of the three others have been unknown since the Great Wars," the King's Advisor answered. Athar went on to furnish them with a rather lengthy explanation of his understanding of the significance of the Runes. Lhynette had joined them by the time he had

finished and been informed as to why her presence had been requested.

"What do the Witches know about this mysterious wizard?" Ghanharl asked the white robe. He believed in getting right to the point.

"What concern is it of yours?" Lhynette's eyes were hard, her attitude disdainful.

"How can you ask such a thing?" questioned Ghanharl with ruffled feathers.

"It is very simple," Lhynette responded. "This is a matter that concerns the Sisterhood and we will act upon it accordingly."

"You cannot be serious. This is a matter of importance to the entire realm," argued the Minister of Defense.

"The Witches of the Moons are not subject to you and as a Council member of such, I am not in the habit of being submitted to inquisitions." The white robe got up to leave, but was halted by Nherycyn's voice.

"I command you to be seated and answer the questions that have been put to you!" the King shouted, slamming his palm down on the table. But the witch only glared at him. "You are subject to me and will do as I say or you will be held here until you decide it to be in your best interest to do so."

Lhynette giggled and turned to the wizard, "Athar, you are the one that really rules here. What is it you wish to know from me?"

Embarrassed looks were exchanged by the Ministers. Rhenycyn was about to say something when his father, unaffected by the quip, spoke to Athar in an exasperated voice. "By all means proceed if she will speak to you."

The King's Advisor did not fare all that well, however.

Lhynette had been more interested in proclaiming the independence of the Witches of the Moons. The wizard was only able to obtain generalities and vague answers from the white robe which did nothing to exonerate either the witches or Uriel. In fact, her comments had only cast the witches into deeper suspicion.

Lhynette was dismissed when they were done questioning her. But before she left, Dhonlaa said to her, "I do not understand how one who actually encountered the vile SoulSlayers and dispelled them could be so unwilling to cooperate with us."

The white robe turned and looked at Dhonlaa, the recollection of her trauma with the Slayers jarring something within her. Then her brown eyes glanced at the others in the room. She was suddenly confused and her demeanor meek, so much unlike what she had been just moments before. Then Lhynette cast her eyes to the floor, lowered her head a bit and left the hall.

"Strange," said Athar absently, "how very strange."

"Yes," echoed Rhenycyn. "Well, gentlemen—and lady," he smiled a sarcastic smile at Dhonlaa, "how would you have us proceed?" The Prince had his own ideas of course, but wanted to hear the opinions of the others.

The Ministers, excluding Delfyn, all shared the same sentiment. They saw the connection between the appearance of Uriel and the Slayers, Khyrhelle's murder and the disappearance of the Rune as too much to attribute to coincidence. Delfyn, unsure of Rhenycyn's position, argued a watered-down version of the same.

Athar, bolstered by the views of the Ministry, vehemently argued his case to the King. "From when I was first made aware of the presence of this mysterious sorcerer my intuition led me to believe that this... person is the one whose return we have feared

for centuries. The correlations to the Sacred Scrolls are undeniable. He has demonstrated his ability to perform rare and extremely complex magics such as the Ritual of Renascence. SoulSlayers, which had been heretofore dread rumors, scourge the countryside in the north. Qhen Khyrhelle, one who so deservedly wore the grey, has been taken from us, thought to have been murdered by one from within the Towers itself. And now the Rune. Must he be at the walls of Bhel'Ehzz with his False Legions before our eyes view the truth of whom we are dealing with? Let not another life fall before him. Let us not give him another day to grow strong. Let us summon him to Bhel'Ehzz and require him to stand in judgment before us."

Nherycyn pulled at his beard and addressed his Ministry. "Does anyone wish to take issue with Athar?"

"Yes," replied Rhenycyn, "I do." The King turned his head away and sighed with disgust. Members of the Ministry all began talking at once. The Prince silenced them. "Just hear me out. That is all that I ask."

"You have had your chance, my Prince." Dhonlaa used her words as weapons. "Had it not been for your previous interjection in this matter, we might not have had to meet on the morning of this, the last day of the MidSummer celebration. We would not now be discussing SoulSlayers, missing Runes and death." Then to the King, "Perhaps many of these issues may have been avoided had this been brought to the Ministry at the outset."

Before Rhenycyn could respond, Fulnhyx, the Minister of Commerce, spoke. "I must agree with Dhonlaa, Prince Rhenycyn. I believe we have heard enough. I propose a vote." This was a strong statement by a halfling who was known for his ability to work out compromises and agreements.

The Prince implored the King's intercession. "Father?"

The King ignored his son. "All those in favor of summoning Uriel to Bhel'Ehzz and allowing Athar and Tomhylhen to conduct a formal inquisition where he is concerned?" Six Ministers voted in favor. "Opposed?" Only Delfyn sided with Rhenycyn.

The King was not obligated to follow the direction of the Ministry. However, if he had any political savvy, he would not disregard their decisions very often, only when he deemed it crucial in important matters. And in those cases, he always had the King's Advisor to support him. Should Nherycyn side with his son and go against the Ministry's vote, Athar, though he voted in Tomhylhen's place for the inquisition, would stand next to his monarch. But it was all unnecessary speculation.

The King was the most decisive as he had been in years. "So it will be. Athar, I hold you responsible for this charge. Word the summons in such a way that there is no room for interpretation. Send it telepathically, informing the witches that he is to arrive by regular means. I do not wish him to suddenly appear here without our knowledge. Demand that he be accompanied by a witch of some ranking, a Council member or preferably the High Witch herself. She has some answering to do. I am not accustomed to the treatment this witch has displayed here today and I believe they are in need of being reeducated in the politics of Khaballe." He paused to consider something, then went on. "Tell them that if they do not arrive by the Journey of Homage, I will dispatch you with your wizards and a company of knights to escort them here. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," his Advisor replied. "Your command will be carried out to the letter."

"Good." Then to his Ministers, "Does my decree meet with

your approval?" They all, in one way or another, indicated their concurrence. "Is there anything else?"

"Should the public be informed?" Dhonlaa asked, afterwards supplying her opinion. "I believe they have a right."

Teserher was next to comment. As Minister of Finance, he was utterly ruthless when it came to any matters concerning *pennhutz* and was an unyielding negotiator. Though his appearance did not suggest it, being quite old and very rotund, he was the main reason that the kingdom was financially sound. At Valdhon's death, he had become the elder statesman of the Ministry. "Dhonlaa," he wheezed, "you know your father and I were close friends and I do not mean to take issue with you but I am afraid that the public disclosure of this information would have an adverse effect on the economy."

"Yes, Teserher," Ghanharl added, "I would tend to agree with you though my reasons differ. It would be difficult at best to maintain some semblance of normalcy should this become public knowledge."

The other Ministers shared like opinions and they decided to keep things quiet, at least for the time being. It was hoped that with the cover of the Journey of Homage, they could get through the inquisition and dispense justice without the public knowing what transpired.

With the Closing Ceremonies of MidSummer rapidly approaching at midday, the meeting of the Ministry adjourned. As they left the hall Athar voiced the fear that they all felt. "I only hope we are not too late."

Rhenycyn remained in the hall. He wanted to take a trip to the battlements but didn't have the time. So he settled for a view out of the window. He reflected on all that had come about over this

most joyous occasion of the year. He felt misunderstood. He felt manipulated. He felt that someone was carefully maneuvering all the pieces into place, just as an expert *dhorsoghi* player would. But most of all he felt the calm before the storm. Just as the branches stirred outside to the strong breezes. Just as the approaching clouds obscured the bright skies. So were Bhel'Ehzz and all of Khaballe before the ill winds that he felt blowing.

CHAPTER XXV

As the suns made their appearance on the final day of MidSummer, the Council of the Witches of the Moons was in their Chambers. Save for Lhynette who was in Bhel'Ehzz, they were all present, each looking exceedingly distressed. After Arhyvhynne had been informed of the disappearance of the Rune by her sister, she gathered the other Council members and investigated the Sanctum of Destruction.

They found little in the way of clues or evidence. Qenthyeffe had awakened from her magically induced sleep but was quite confused and disoriented. All she could tell the High Witch and Council members was that earlier in the evening she had felt a strong proclivity to surrender herself to sleep. She had not seen or heard anything.

Xenyssa had been the first to notice the fragments of a badly burned object upon the grey pedestal within the barrier. None of the witches, however, could identify what it had been. There was some conjecture that it might be the Rune itself, but that theory was quickly dismissed. The Rune of Destruction had existed within the barrier for more than a thousand years without incurring any damage.

Eyrmysse initially was the one who realized the barrier, though still active, had somehow been reversed. And by the condition of the Sanctum, they could ascertain that something had gone wrong with the attempt to reverse or penetrate the barrier. The scorched floor, walls and shattered black column led one to believe that a bolt or bolts of lightning had been released from the

barrier. But if that were the case, what had happened to them? They were not thought to be something that would naturally dissipate. And the lightning could not have been loose very long because the damage had been relatively minimal for such potent magic. Not to mention that Qenthyeffe had remained uninjured.

Their search also failed to reveal whether the perpetrator had even survived the crime. Based on the absence of the Rune, they could only assume that he or she lived long enough to at least leave the Sanctum. But there was no trace or indication that anyone had left the small, circular room at the very top of the Towers.

"Let us move away from Uriel for the time being and explore other possibilities. I think we should begin with ourselves," Arhyvhynne said. The conversation in the Chambers had deteriorated to the level of accusation and alibi.

"Why?" asked Dhynelle. "It is obvious that he is responsible for this. He is in one way or another responsible for everything that has happened of an uncommon nature since he has arrived."

"Connected, perhaps. But we are far from discovering who has ultimately been responsible for what has been happening," said Xenyssa. "Is there anyone we could logically exclude as a suspect?"

"The only one amongst us that we may presume innocent is Lhynette," remarked Wyxotte.

"Not necessarily," countered Dhynelle. "She could have performed a teleportation."

"Highly unlikely," replied the dwarf.

Dhynelle persisted. "But not impossible."

Wyxotte threw up her hands. "I do not understand you. First you profess your conviction over Uriel's guilt and now you go out

on a limb where Lhynette is concerned."

A little smile played at Dhynelle's lips. "I am simply trying to be thorough," she said in an innocent tone.

"Yes," said Xenyssa. "Let us be thorough. Where were you this past evening?"

Dhynelle's bright green eyes turned dull. She did not appreciate the turnaround from accuser to accused. She did not appreciate Xenyssa, either, for that matter. Before the death of Khyrhyelle, the Council's white robes were a relatively weak group who relied on the wisdom and intervention of the High Witch a great deal. But Xenyssa had changed that. She had a commanding presence about her and had an annoying habit (at least as far as Dhynelle was concerned) of being able to get to the heart of matters. The black woman frequently spoke her mind and there was a high correlation between what Xenyssa said and what the actuality of the matter was.

"If you must know," Dhynelle answered spitefully while using her right hand to flip back her long black hair, "Qelharre and I spent the evening together." She immediately turned to the dark elf. "Is that not right?"

Qelharre had already raised an arched eyebrow. She craned her neck a bit then ran a hand through her red hair. "Yes," she said finally, "it is true."

Quickly redirecting the suspicion, Dhynelle returned the favor. "If I may ask, where were you Xenyssa?"

"I was in the library for a time and then retired," answered the white robe.

"Alone?" questioned Dhynelle.

"Of course," responded the black woman. "I seldom subject *my* Soul to the control of my lower nature. When I do, however, it

is not merely because I am unable to resist unsuppressed desires nor is it some perverse coupling with one of my Sisters." As an Adeptus Exemptus, Xenyssa was religious about her vows and adhering to her abstinences.

Dhynelle fumed inwardly then cut off Qelharre as she began to say something. "So you have no one who can attest to your whereabouts?"

"As I have already told you, no."

Dhynelle turned to the dwarf. "Wyxotte?"

"Like Xenyssa, I was doing what one typically does at that hour of the evening—sleeping by myself," the old white robe caustically answered. "What about you, Eyrmysse?"

"I have explained my actions earlier," she replied.

"Yes, I know. But you neglected to tell us if you were alone or not."

There was not even a pause before Eyrmysse responded. "Yes, I was alone."

"And though none of you has asked, I, like most of you, was alone, sleeping," added the High Witch. "This has not brought anything to light," Arhyvhynne complained. "Is there anyone else any of you can think of that might be able to help us in any way? That we might want to question?"

The witches were quiet for a few moments. Then a couple of the Council members mentioned a few names, but they were shots in the dark with nothing solid to warrant their questioning. Until Eyrmysse spoke up. "Though it pains me to say this, I think we ought to talk to Jukhuule."

"Why?" asked her sister.

Eyrmysse began playing with a curl. "As I am sure most of you know, I have been working on a book concerning barriers.

Most of the information is what I retained from... the Trials. I have also been teaching a section on them for the last month or so. Jukhuule is in the class."

"I am not sure I understand the connection," Wyxotte commented.

"Some of what I saw in the Sanctum closely relates to what I have been teaching. The reversal of the barrier, for instance. And I think that whatever is inside the barrier was fashioned from lead and used to penetrate it without receiving any adverse effects."

"You were teaching them how to destroy a barrier?" Wyxotte was incredulous.

"I am teaching them construction as well as destruction. Offense as well as defense. Are not the white robes always saying that they are the advocates of teaching balance? Besides, most of it was theory. We did very little experimentation. And what we did find was inconclusive."

"Why do your suspicions focus on Jukhuule?" questioned Xenysa. "Why not any of the others in your class?"

"Because Jukhuule was not in her room when I went there."

Qelharre's eyes squinted, struggling with a memory. When it came to her, she turned to Arhyvhynne. "Is this not the same one that was with you when..."

Arhyvhynne nodded gravely. She summoned Ghemella to her from outside the Chamber. "Please find Jukhuule and bring her to us," the High Witch directed the Guardian. "Do not allow her to do anything. Escort her here immediately. Then return to her room and search it."

Within minutes, Jukhuule was sitting in the presence of the Council. Ghemella had found her in her room, sleeping. They had decided to allow Eyrmysse to do the questioning as they might

receive more cooperation that way.

"We have brought you here to answer some questions for us," Eyrmysse began. "We are trying to gather some information and hoped you could help us."

"This is about the Rune I take it," said the grotesque black robe.

"How did you know?" asked Eyrmysse.

Jukhuule shrugged. "Talk spreads through the Towers very quickly, Mistress."

"Very well." Eyrmysse decided to forgo the pretenses. "Let us not play games. I checked your room earlier. You were not there. Can you tell us where you were?"

One brown eye and one hazel eye stared back at Eyrmysse, betraying no emotion. "I had left the Towers. I went to the Sacred Grove to do a moons meditation."

"You went alone?"

"Yes, Mistress. It was not a group meditation."

"Did anyone see you?"

"If someone saw me I am not aware of it."

"Did you see anyone?"

"I saw no one."

Eyrmysse suggested that Arhyvhynne check with the Guard Station to see if anyone was seen leaving the Towers. "How long were you gone?"

"No more than two hours."

There was a knock at the door and Qenthyeffe was allowed entrance. "I am sorry to disturb you, High One, but there is something I felt I you would want to know."

"Go on," encouraged Arhyvhynne.

"I am not sure if it is something I remembered or maybe my

imagination," the elf said. "But I seem to recall waking briefly and seeing a face. It was hideous. Oh, and something black."

All eyes shifted to Jukhuule. The black robe remained implacable. "Can you describe the face?" asked Arhyvhynne.

"No. I only remember that the sight of it frightened me."

"Do you remember what you saw that was black?" Xenyssa questioned.

"No. I have tried but..." the elf trailed off.

Dhynelle wondered about the color itself. "Are you sure what you saw was black?"

"No, not really. Maybe it was just something dark. But it could have been black. I am not sure."

"Could it have been grey?" It was obvious to all where Dhynelle was going with this.

"Yes, I suppose."

"Do any of you have any other questions?" asked the High Witch. There were none. "You may go Qenthyeffe. And thank you for bringing this to our attention." As the elf was leaving, Arhyvhynne stopped her. "Do you by chance know who had Guard duty at the Station last evening?"

"No, but Ghemella should know."

"Could you find out for us who it was and if they saw anybody leaving the Towers late in the evening or early morning? Inform us as soon as you know." The High Witch dismissed her for the second time and the attention of the Council returned to Jukhuule. "Does anyone have anything else for Jukhuule?" asked the High Witch.

"May I?" asked Xenyssa. With the High Witch's consent, the black woman began a barrage of questions. "What has Eyrmysse instructed you on in your barrier class?"

"The construction of various types of barriers," the black robe answered.

"And the destruction as well?"

"Yes."

"And what of reversing barriers?"

"We have conceptually discussed it."

"But have not experimented?"

"In very elementary ways."

"Have you discussed what objects might be able to penetrate a barrier?"

"Yes."

"And what conclusions were drawn?"

"Although we are far from certain, we think something of a pointed nature, made from lead."

"Was that theory tested?"

"No."

"Outside of the witches in the class, was anyone else made aware of these ... theories? Uriel, perhaps?"

Jukhuule paused for a moment but did not look at Eyrmysse. "I would not know. I can only speak for myself. I discussed it with no one."

Though her expression remained unchanged, inwardly Eyrmysse allowed herself to relax. She was not sure if Jukhuule would mention finding Uriel and her together. If that got out, a bad situation would probably get worse for Uriel.

There was nothing further from any of the witches so Arhyvhynne offered the black robe the opportunity to add anything. "Is there anything you would like to say, Jukhuule?"

The black robe stared directly at Eyrmysse and answered, "I have told you all that I know."

Jukhuule was dismissed and the Council discussed what they had heard. Eyrmysse was asked if anyone else in her barrier class would be worth questioning, but her feeling was that there was not. Xenyssa suggested Arhyvhynne perform a mind scan on Qenthyeffe which the High Witch agreed might prove to be very revealing. Ghemella reappeared and informed the Council she had found nothing incriminating in Jukhuule's room. The dark little witch was then directed by the High Witch (reluctantly) to locate Uriel and escort him to the Chambers for questioning. Shortly after Ghemella left, Qenthyeffe returned. The elf told Arhyvhynne and the others that the Guardian on duty during the late shift had not seen anyone leave or enter the Towers.

Arhyvhynne asked Qenthyeffe if she would allow herself to be submitted to a mind scan. Though a bit afraid of what she might see, the elf consented to it. The High Witch took the Guardian by the hand and led her to the fireplace where they sat and got comfortable. Arhyvhynne recalled doing the same thing with Albera only months before, though it could have been years for all that had happened since then.

The High Witch forced herself to focus on the present, as this would most likely be a difficult scan. Not only had Qenthyeffe been asleep, but it was a magically induced sleep. Attempting to differentiate between the clouded perception of reality and the indistinct world of dreams could be very perplexing.

Though Qenthyeffe was familiar with the process, Arhyvhynne still went through her explanations. When she had finished, both the High Witch and Guardian began to regulate their breathing. Then they entered their trance-states and Arhyvhynne began scanning Qenthyeffe's mind. She started where the elf began to feel the urge to sleep. The High Witch saw

nothing unusual, though the feelings of mistrust the elf felt over Uriel's visits to the Sanctum disturbed her. What came to disturb her even more was when Arhyvhynne saw the reminiscences that Qenthyeffe had concerning her little incident with Uriel upon their first meeting.

But that passed and soon Arhyvhynne saw Qenthyeffe fully under the effects of the Spell of Slumber. The High Witch waded through the strange visions and illogical events that comprised the realm of dreams. A long time passed and Qenthyeffe's concentration began to waver. Arhyvhynne, however, managed to keep them going though she herself was expending a great amount of energy trying to decide what were dreams and what were the beginning fragments of reality.

Then the white robe saw a face which caused her blood to run cold. And what troubled her most was that she recognized the face. It was the face of a creature with close-cropped hair and beard, three horns protruding from its head and eyes of fire glowing hideously. It was the face of the demon she had met during her second Trial.

Arhyvhynne almost lost herself amongst the memories of that Trial. She relived the torment her decision had caused her, heard the wailings of those she had disappointed. Though she did not know how, she suddenly knew that the demon who was to beget demonspawn on her was named Satarsmyt. And that it was the same one whom she had read about in the histories and the Scrolls.

Despite the terror in her heart at the revelation, the High Witch desperately fought to cling on to Qenthyeffe's stream of consciousness. If Arhyvhynne completely lost her contact with it, she would be unable to guide them out from the ethereal world

where they now existed. The result would find both witches eternally lost in an astral wilderness.

Another person would most likely have been subjected to that end, but Arhyvhyne's power of mind prevailed. She once again became linked to Qenthyeffe and she saw something black, fabric perhaps, at the corner of the elf's vision. She heard the Spell of Slumber, but the Words which the voice uttered sounded distorted, as if they were echoes emitted from a cave. Then they slipped back into the ambiguous impressions of dreams and Arhyvhyne carefully brought them out of the trance.

Both the witches looked drained as they returned to the Council. Arhyvhyne thanked and dismissed Qenthyeffe after which the Council informed the High Witch that Ghemella was outside with Uriel. Before admitting Uriel, Arhyvhyne related to the Council the perils of the session and what she had discovered from the elf. "The face that Qenthyeffe saw was not that of Jukhuule," she stated.

"Thank the Goddess," remarked Eyrmyse.

"Who was it?" asked Dhynelle. "Was it someone you recognized?"

The High Witch sighed. "Yes, it was. I assume you are all familiar with one named Satarsmyt?" The witches were aghast over Arhyvhyne's revelation. "It was him," she somberly stated.

After the initial shock wore off, Wyxotte asked, "Are you certain? How do you know it to be him? Surely you have never encountered that demon of Thaum?"

"Unfortunately I have," Arhyvhyne responded. "It was during the Trials. Though I am incapable of relating the circumstances by which I met him, I will never forget it. Or him." She paused, shivered. "I harbor no doubts."

Eyrmysse shot Arhyvhyne a look and Xenyssa questioned the black robe. "Eyrmysse?"

Eyrmysse shrugged her shoulders and curled a black lock around her index finger. "I did not share all of my sister's experiences during the Trials," she explained.

"Is it possible that you saw the demon as a part of Qenthyeffe's magically induced sleep?" Xenyssa asked the High Witch.

"No, I was very careful in separating the dreams from actuality," responded Arhyvhyne. "I am certain it was that creature of the abyss I saw in the Sanctum."

"What of the dark object Qenthyeffe saw?" inquired Dhynelle.

"I am not sure what it was. It may have been fabric. It could possibly be the veil in the Sanctum. It was just within the periphery of her vision and she was beginning to be affected by the spell again."

"So it was grey?"

"I was unable to tell. It was as Qenthyeffe said. It was dark."

The Chamber grew quiet as the witches dwelled on what Arhyvhyne had told them. "I suppose this gives us a strong indication as to who is behind the SoulSlayers and that someone within the Towers belongs to him," said Qelharre.

"Uriel," added Dhynelle. As Arhyvhyne began to counter the black robe's comment, Dhynelle raised both her hands, palms out. "I know, I know," she said.

At the mention of Uriel's name, Arhyvhyne remembered he was waiting outside and had him brought in. As before, Ghemella was instructed to go through his room and report any unusual findings.

Uriel made his way to the bench and sat down. Dark smudges from lack of sleep were below his eyes. He was withdrawn, anxiety and strain clearly etched into his face. There seemed to be more grey mixed in with his dark hair. He surveyed the Council with the furtive looks of a captured animal. He felt much like he had the first time he entered these Chambers. Except that this time he had Eyrmysse for an intimate ally.

The High Witch started by explaining that something had happened the previous evening and that they were questioning people to discover any information concerning it. Her first question sent Uriel reeling. "Could you please tell us where you were during the night?"

It immediately became apparent to Uriel that Eyrmysse had said nothing of their relationship. Uriel looked to the black robe, but she turned her cowed head away and averted her eyes without drawing attention. His heart sank and he felt the muscles in his stomach constrict. He had been abandoned.

The silence grew loud while Uriel tried to come to grips with the emotions that besieged him. He was crushed that the fierce passion he and Eyrmysse had shared had been cast aside so coldheartedly by her. Sudden guilt over his now imagined betrayal of Lynn and Danny laid its heavy hand upon him. He experienced remorse over his decision to embrace and study the teachings of *The Black Lodge*. And he felt renewed fear of the entire situation. But before the panic completely controlled him, Uriel latched on to a desperate hope. A hope that Eyrmysse had not, in fact, abandoned him. That she knew what she was doing. That she would protect him. And that their lust and learning would continue unabated. "I was, uh, sleeping. In my room," he finally answered, a little shakily.

"Alone?"

"Yeah, of course," he said, giving Arhyvhyne an incredulous look.

"Did anyone, per chance, see you there?"

Uriel quickly wondered if anyone checked his room while he was with Eyrmysse and found it empty. He figured he had to take a gamble. "No. At least I didn't see anyone. If someone came by, I didn't hear anything. I was pretty tired," he told them though he knew that the way he looked didn't exactly support a night of undisturbed rest.

The questioning continued in that manner for quite a while. Eyrmysse did not come to his rescue, neither did she utter a word or ask anything. Uriel did a reasonably good job of subverting their inquiries.

Until, that is, Dhynelle dropped a bomb. "Do you have an explanation for your regular visits to the Sanctum in the past few weeks?" The black robe's emerald cat eyes shone and she fought to conceal the smile that played at her lips. It was evident she was quite proud of herself.

Uriel was bewildered. He could think of nothing that would even sound remotely plausible. He was about to offer a lame excuse when Eyrmysse spoke. "Uriel and I had spent a short time together studying some metaphysical works and he became interested in the Runes. I told him we had one here and suggested that he meditate on it on a regular basis in order that he might receive a better understanding of them." Her explanation was designed to provide answers to the question of the Sanctum as well as any that might arise over Eyrmysse and Uriel having being seen together.

Dhynelle was disheartened. "You did not mention this to us

before."

"I did not think it was pertinent," responded Eyrmysse.

"How could you think that a matter involving the Rune would not be relevant?" Xenyssa lightly chastised Eyrmysse.

Arhyvhynne intervened at that point. "Are there any other questions for Uriel?"

In the interim, Ghemella returned and quietly informed Arhyvhynne that she found nothing out of the ordinary in Uriel's room. Afterwards, Xenyssa advised the High Witch that she thought a mind scan would be in order for both Uriel and Jukhuule. "It would certainly go a long way in establishing guilt or innocence."

Uriel flinched at the suggestion. Dhynelle added to his distress. "And as I have before proposed, it should be performed by a team. In that way we would not have to concern ourselves with one person's interpretation."

"We are speaking of the High Witch here," Xenyssa said. "Arhyvhynne is unquestionably the most suited for this. There is absolutely no need to involve anyone other than her."

After hearing Xenyssa's initial suggestion, Arhyvhynne turned introspective, becoming somewhat suspicious. The High Witch remembered the comments Uriel had made to her the day before, that he wanted nothing to do with enhancing his magical skills. Something was not quite right. The High Witch looked at Uriel and saw his eyes pleading with her to not subject him to the mind scan. Then she turned her sapphire eyes to her sister's violet ones. There was a defiance there and a smaller version of the well-known smile on her lips, daring her. Or threatening her.

Arhyvhynne could not determine the reason behind Eyrmysse's willingness to defend Uriel. But she decided what she

would do until she could find out more. The High Witch interrupted an ongoing discussion by saying, "I am afraid that it is a moot point, at least for the time being. I doubt that I will be able to do a mind scan for the remainder of the day. As I explained earlier, the previous one with Qenthyeffe was quite demanding and I do not anticipate regaining the energy necessary for performing a scan until tomorrow, or at the very earliest, this evening. Should I feel up to it I will inform all of you and have Uriel or Jukhuule returned here at that time." Then she spoke directly to Uriel. "Until then, I suggest you stay in your room. Ghemella, escort Uriel back and make sure he is not disturbed."

The Guardian left with Uriel and he left with mixed emotions. He was relieved that he didn't have to go through a mind scan—at least not yet. While it could prove his innocence where the Rune was concerned, it would at the same time reveal his relationship with Eyrmysse. On the other hand, he was not exactly ecstatic over being confined to his room and being guarded by Ghemella. Arhyvhynne's words did not fool him in the least. His status in the Towers had changed again and he was a suspect—if not the primary suspect—in the disappearance of the Rune.

After Uriel's departure, the High Witch summoned Padxyffu, a white robe who was an expert in telepathic communications. Arhyvhynne constructed a terse message and instructed her to send it to Bhel'Ehzz informing them of the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction. Following that, the Council returned to debating the guilt or innocence of their suspects.

Uriel and Jukhuule were at the top of the Council's list. Wyxotte suggested that Satarsmyt might have absconded with the Rune without any assistance. The mention of Satarsmyt brought a

comment from Xenyssa. "I think we are all missing the point. I think we should be more concerned with *why* the Rune has disappeared and *why* these other things have been happening as opposed to who is doing them."

The High Witch expressed similar feelings. "I agree, Xenyssa. I fear that the scope of this is much greater than any of us had originally anticipated. In addition, it might provide us some insight if we approach this from another angle."

"So where do we begin?" asked Wyxotte.

"Where else," Arhyvhynne asked rhetorically, "but at the beginning?"

The Council reviewed the events that had led up to the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction. They even tried to incorporate any suspicious events which predated Uriel's arrival in Khaballe, but could only come up with the rumors of the SoulSlayers in the north. So they surmised that Uriel either instigated or precipitated the events.

Next, the Council examined the circumstances surrounding the coming of Uriel. The event was of such proportion that FireQueen had innately known of his appearance. Someone had deemed him important enough to construct a huge barrier to confine or protect him in conjunction with the SoulSlayers either coming after him or for him. To support the theory that the Slayers had been after Uriel, Arhyvhynne brought up Khyrhyelle's encounter with Ahrokh and Uriel's confrontation of him. But Qelharre pointed out that it was a non-contest. Neither Uriel nor the Slayer were ever seriously in danger. Uriel had not been attacked at all and the Slayer had only taken a hard fall.

There was also the wizard's inexplicable ability to perform the Ritual of Renascence on two occasions without need of a

replacement. It was obviously the reason that Uriel was secured within a barrier when Khyrhyelle was killed. But the identity of the murderer remained a mystery as did the reason behind it and the real reason behind the barrier. Was Uriel imprisoned so that he could not bring Khyrhyelle back or was it a convenient explanation as to why he was unavailable to perform the ritual?

Finally, there were the Trials, of which both the High Witch and Eyrmysse could testify that Uriel was somehow a part of. Based on Arhyvhyne's Trials and the scan of Qenthyeffe, they could now assume that the SoulSlayers had been sent by Satarsmyt, that the demon was a known factor in the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction and was most likely involved in Khyrhyelle's death. But even so, it was generally thought by the witches that the demon had the assistance of someone within the Towers.

What the Council derived from their speculations still left them very little to go on. They could say with relative certainty that Uriel had appeared in Khaballe either to confront the evil that was taking place or assist it, knowingly or not.

Khyrhyelle might have been eliminated for several reasons. She could have been getting too close to Uriel for someone's liking, perhaps interfering in their plans. The former High Witch could have known or had suspicions of what was happening. Or maybe some things which needed to happen were unlikely to as long as Khyrhyelle ruled at the Towers.

More disturbing than even Khyrhyelle's death were the questions of why someone wanted the Rune and how it was tied in with the other events, if indeed it was. It was possible that someone was trying to discredit the Witches of the Moons or Uriel. The reasoning behind the former theory was not very stable.

The witches could not think of a reason why anyone would want to cast them in a bad light. However, if it was Uriel they were after, making him appear responsible for all that had been happening would certainly serve their purpose. But that only led to other questions. Who were they? The witches knew Satarsmyt was involved, but did it go beyond him? Had Thaum somehow returned? Had the confiscation of the Rune been the first step in their return and the domination of Khaballe?

That was as far as the Council could get. Too many answers eluded them. They did agree to keep a close watch on Uriel and Jukhuule through the Guardians. Dhynelle and Qelharre had sought a more strict restraint, arguing that a Guardian had been stationed in the Sanctum and that it had done little good. But Arhyvhynne, Xenyssa and Eyrmysse felt that it might be too extreme. The Council also decided to reconvene later in the day after they had a chance to do a more thorough investigation of the Towers and give the situation more thought. Arhyvhynne would also let them know at that time whether she would be up to performing a mind scan on either Uriel or Jukhuule.

When the meeting adjourned, both Qelharre and Dhynelle made a point of leaving with one another. But neither said a word to the other until they were away from the Chambers and alone in one of the less-travelled hallways. The dark elf grabbed Dhynelle by the arm and swung the witch around to face her. "What was the meaning of all that?" Qelharre questioned harshly.

"The meaning of all what?" Dhynelle responded irritably.

"Do not play games with me! Why did you tell them we were together last night?"

Dhynelle pulled her arm free with a jerk. "To divert any

suspicion they might have away from us and unto the wizard. Besides," she added, "it is not like they do not know that we are occasionally together."

Qelharre rested her pink eyes on Dhynelle. "But we were not last night."

"So?"

The elf sighed. "What is going on Dhynelle?"

"Nothing. I told you, the more the evidence points to the wizard, the better. Now if we can get Arhyvhynne to conduct a mind scan, we will find that he has been behind everything from the beginning. But I do not trust her. Remember, he saved her life. She may psychologically suppress what she sees. Or she may not be truthful with us."

"Just as you have not been? I was in my room. Sleeping. Alone. Where were you?"

"How could you even ask that?" Dhynelle said in a hurt voice. And with that she turned and headed off down the hallway.

Qelharre called out to her, but the other black robe continued down the corridor, leaving the unanswered question and the elf behind.

CHAPTER XXVI

Uriel was staring out of his window, drawing parallels between the bright blue sky turning dull blue-grey and his life when he heard a knock at his door. Eyrmysse entered and closed the door behind her. After a moment of hesitation, they fell into each other's arms.

"Thank you for helping me out back there," he told her. "Though, to be honest, you had me guessing for a while."

"Thank *you* for not saying anything. I am truly sorry I did not support you earlier. But I felt it best that on the surface it appear that we are not involved. Even so, I fear that my sister is becoming suspicious," Eyrmysse said.

"Why? Anything happen after I left?"

Eyrmysse filled him in on the Council's attempts to make some sense out of everything that had been going on. Afterwards, an awkward silence fell upon them which Uriel finally broke. "I'm so glad that things haven't changed between us. I was kinda afraid that you... well, you know."

Eyrmysse kissed Uriel and, for the time being, drove his insecurities into obscurity. Things progressed nicely until another knock on the door interrupted them. Uriel went to the door, opened it and was confronted by the High Witch.

Arhyhynne looked past Uriel, saw her sister and entered the room without saying a word. Eyrmysse, also without offering comment, stared at her sister with cool, violet eyes, similar to the look she had given her in the Chambers. Uriel could only stand there, very uncomfortable, thinking that this had not been a very

good day for him and waited for it to get worse.

Finally, the High Witch broke the tension. "I would ask what you are doing here, sister, but I am not especially interested in hearing any of your clever excuses." Neither witch had taken her eyes off the other and Arhyvhynne continued to look at Eyrmysse while she spoke to Uriel. "Would you please show Eyrmysse out, Uriel? There are a few things we need to discuss and I wish them to be confidential."

"Any particular reason why these issues were not addressed before the Council?" the black robe questioned. But when Arhyvhynne did not even offer a response, Eyrmysse inclined her head in a deferential manner and exited Uriel's room, leaving the door open.

Ghemella, stationed outside, watched Eyrmysse slowly wander down the hall and then closed the door. The Guardian was somewhat surprised at the exchange. Arhyvhynne was not, after all, known for her strength of will or imposing it on others. She made a mental note to be more professional and act accordingly around the High Witch.

Inside the room, Uriel was thinking like thoughts. Though probably more by force than choice, it appeared that the young white robe was rapidly growing into her position. And the thought of Arhyvhynne losing that freshness and innocence saddened him. In that vein, he started out by trying to appease her. "We were just—"

"Enough, Uriel." The High Witch grimaced, unhappy that she had lashed out at her one time savior. She walked over to the window, looked out of it, then turned and leaned against the adjacent wall. "I am sorry, but these circumstances have not been easy to contend with."

Uriel stood in the middle of the room, his hands clasped behind his back. "I can imagine."

"If you can imagine, then you must understand my position." Arhyvhynne did not wait for any acknowledgment. "I have some difficult questions for you."

Uriel went over to his bed and sat on it. The situation reminded him of when he first came to Khaballe and the initial visits from Khyrhyelle. "Go ahead."

"First of all, did you take the Rune or were you in any way a part of its disappearance?"

"No, Arhyvhynne," Uriel responded emotionally. "I swear to you. I had nothing to do with it. Honest."

"You must believe me when I say that I want to believe you. But I am High Witch now and my first priorities are to the Sisterhood and Khaballe." Uriel nodded and Arhyvhynne continued. "Why had you been spending so much time at the Sanctum?"

"It's just as Eyrmysse said." Arhyvhynne cocked her head and gave him a slight frown. "It is. Really."

"Why has she suddenly taken to defending you?"

Uriel hesitated. "We kinda came to an understanding of each other. She's not really the way I made her out to be." The High Witch's expression did not change and Uriel tried to tell her more without telling her much of anything. "It's the truth, Arhyvhynne. She showed me a side of her I haven't seen before. Your sister is very intelligent and can be very understanding. She was able to help me out with some things on a couple of occasions."

"I do not question Eyrmysse's actions, Uriel. Regardless of what happened in the Trials and her behavior thereafter, I love my sister very much. I would be the first to cite her positive qualities.

What concerns me, however, is her motives. And how they concern you."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Uriel said the words slowly, becoming wary.

"In what ways did she help you, Uriel?"

Uriel got up from the bed and began to pace. "Just with some of the histories and things. Nothing much, actually. The Runes for example."

"It was just yesterday when you emphatically assured me that you were not studying anything of a magical nature." Arhyvhyne closed her eyes for a moment. *What are you trying to hide, Uriel, and why are you trying to hide it?* The High Witch decided to voice her thoughts.

"I'm not hiding anything," Uriel replied.

Arhyvhyne was still leaning against the wall, very cool, very composed as she said, "Then you should not object to submitting to a mind scan this evening."

Uriel stopped in his tracks. He slowly turned and looked at Arhyvhyne. "I rather not."

"I know—although I would venture to say that you greatly understate the case. It was painfully obvious in the Chambers that the thought of a mind scan frightened you terribly." The High Witch pushed herself from the wall and walked over to where Uriel was standing. "My mother went to great extremes to protect you and I will do the same. I will never forget what you did for me. But you must tell me what it is that you are concealing, Uriel. Please."

He gave her request serious thought, but something deep down told him that it would crush her if she found out he had been with her sister. He couldn't explain why. Arhyvhyne had never

really intimated that she had any feelings other than gratitude for him. But he somehow felt that she did. And he knew that he harbored a tinge of guilt concerning it. "All I can say is that it has absolutely nothing to do with the Rune or any of the other stuff that's happened. It's just something personal."

"Does it in some way concern Eyrmysse?"

Damn! "No," he lied.

"What is it you think I will see that frightens you so?" Arhyvhyne's voice was small and her deep blue eyes reflected the innocence that was there. "Is it the way you feel about me?"

Hearing her and seeing her like that tormented Uriel. She had practically laid her emotional self bare before him. The tinge of guilt suddenly turned enormous. There was a catch in his voice as he said her name. "Arhyvhyne, please. I can't. It wouldn't do anybody any good."

A dismayed Arhyvhyne studied Uriel, but he couldn't tell if it was from the lack of expressing his feelings or submitting to a scan. "I don't want to have to force you, Uriel, but the Council may not allow me an alternative." The High Witch was about to add something when a knock at the door stopped her. She went to the door, opened it a few inches and sternly reminded Ghemella that she did not wish to be disturbed.

"I am sorry, High One," the Guardian apologized, "but Padxyffu is here with me. She has some rather urgent news that she felt should be delivered immediately."

Arhyvhyne pushed the door open farther and saw Padxyffu standing back a little from the door. "Excuse me a moment," she said to Uriel. She instructed Ghemella to stay with Uriel and then left the room, closing the door behind her. She spoke quietly to Padxyffu. "I take it you have received a response from Bhel'Ehzz."

"Yes," the middle-aged halfling with short red hair responded. Padxyffu went on to relate the message from the capital. Upon hearing it, Arhyvhynne took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was quiet for a moment before she thanked Padxyffu and informed her that she would send for her when her services would again be required.

The High Witch collected herself before she returned to Uriel's room. She opened the door but remained outside. Her eyes betrayed the concern she felt as did her voice. "I am afraid there have been some new developments which require my immediate attention. I will be by later to continue our discussion."

The High Witch turned to leave but Uriel called to her. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

Arhyvhynne walked up to him and took his hands in hers. They were ice cold. "There is a related matter which I must bring before the Council." She gave him a poor attempt at a smile. "We will talk when I come back."



The High Witch knocked on the door and waited for an answer. When none came she knocked again. She was about ready to leave when the door opened. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank the Goddess. I was hoping you would be here," she said.

"Arhyvhynne," Xenyssa said with surprise. "I am sorry. I was finishing a meditation when—is something wrong?" The black woman immediately noticed the concern on the High Witch's face.

Arhyvhynne explained the situation regarding the summons to Xenyssa and asked for her advice. "I did not want to go to the Council without some sort of direction, without a course of action.

And I am afraid that I might not be as objective as I should."

"Forgive my asking, but why did you come to me instead of your sister? I am but new on the Council."

Arhyvhynne sighed and sat down on Xenyssa's bed. "The truth of the matter is that I have decided what must be done and I wanted to hear your thoughts before I presented mine to the Council." The High Witch wrung her hands. "I plan to heed the summons. I will travel with Uriel to Bhel'Ehzz."

"I am not sure how that relates to Eyrmysse."

"My intentions are to bestow the rule of the Towers to her in my absence."

Xenyssa gave her a questioning look. "Technically, it should be Wyxotte, should it not? She is the eldest."

"Yes, I know. But Eyrmysse is better suited for what I am afraid the future may hold and hopefully, it will improve our relationship a bit. It has not been the same since the Trials. In any case, I do not anticipate any problems. My recommendation will pass through the Council. Dhynelle and Qelharre will of course approve. With your support my vote will give Eyrmysse the majority without involving either her or Wyxotte. And even if Lhynette were here and thought differently it would not change the outcome," she added as an afterthought.

The black woman sat down next to Arhyvhynne and took her hand. "I suspect there is more. You have not told me everything."

Arhyvhynne smiled sheepishly. "You are so wise. So much like mother was."

Xenyssa shook her head. "Thank you. That is very kind. Though I would be fortunate were I half the woman your mother was."

"Well, I think you are." Arhyvhynne released Xenyssa's hand.

"Anyway, I feel there is something between my sister and Uriel. I am not sure what. And I do not know if it is related to any of the things which have transpired. But I came to you instead of Eyrmysse because I want you to keep her in the lights of the moons while I am gone."

Xenyssa was surprised for a second time. "You wish me to keep watch on your sister? What do you suspect?"

"I am not sure," replied the High Witch. "She is my sister and I love her, but I also know her. Do you have a problem with it?"

"I am obligated to always carry out your will, High One."

"You did not answer my question."

"Yes, I did."

Arhyhynne nodded her satisfaction. "Good. Now tell me. Do you think I am doing the right thing?"

"The summons leaves you little choice. There are no alternatives regarding Uriel. He must be sent. Anything short of his arrival at Bhel'Ehzz will risk a major conflict with the crown. As far as you are concerned, either Nherycyn or Athar, whoever is behind the summons, makes it very clear he prefers you to accompany him." Xenyssa turned thoughtful. "Though why he wants you present when Lhynette is already there puzzles me."

"Yes, that bothers me as well. I would, however, accompany Uriel regardless of who the King had requested."

Xenyssa fidgeted a bit. "Arhyhynne, may I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do your feelings for Uriel go beyond protection and gratitude?"

"I have really been too busy to allow myself to think about such things." The High Witch's answer was too flippant for

Xenyssa's liking and the black woman gave her a look which said as much. After a long pause, Arhyvhyne lowered her head and quietly said, "I am not sure. All I can say is that I have feelings now which I have never before felt. Whether they are of the nature you speak, I cannot say. I have never really become involved with anybody seriously, so I have little to compare to."

Xenyssa took her by the hand once more. "Please be careful, Arhyvhyne. I have always been fond of you and do not wish you to come to any harm—physically or emotionally."

Arhyvhyne was telling herself as much as she was Xenyssa when she said, "I have a feeling it is too late for those concerns. I am afraid I am bound to Uriel and the circumstances surrounding his arrival in Khaballe by stronger ties than any of us know."



After the midday Closing Ceremonies of MidSummer, Arhyvhyne gathered her Council and met in the Chambers. Though she had been High Witch for a few months now, she still dreaded Council meetings and making decisions. She was always afraid that she might slight someone or be unfair in her judgments. And when her actions were questioned it lowered her self confidence and caused her none too little agony.

The Council received the news from Bhel'Ehzz with mixed emotions. Wyxotte saw it as an opportunity for the witches to rid themselves of a difficult dilemma. As Arhyvhyne took on more of the responsibility for her position, the dwarf began to slowly revert to her old self, becoming somewhat complacent of late. Xenyssa was her usual stoic self, not letting on that she had any prior knowledge of the message. Dhynelle and Qelharre were just

short of ecstatic. This was what they had been pushing for since Uriel had arrived. But Eyrmysse was visibly upset, almost angry, something both Arhyhynne and Xenysa took note of.

"You *are* going to obey the summons, are you not?" questioned Dhynelle.

"I do not see that we have any choice in the matter," the High Witch responded. "I intend to comply with King Nherycyn's summons completely."

Arhyhynne's statement seemed to take all the air out of her sister. Images from Eyrmysse's fourth Trial forced themselves into her mind and the torment she felt just from the recollection of it caused her to close her eyes and draw a shaky breath. "Is that wise, Arhyhynne?" the black robe managed to ask.

The High Witch regarded Eyrmysse with steel in her eyes. "What would you have me do?" It was not so much a question as it was a challenge.

Eyrmysse did not accept. She left the question unanswered but then got a sudden glint in her eye. "I believe you are all overlooking something," said Eyrmysse. She had her smile back in place and a black lock wrapped around her finger, but it seemed as if it was forced. "Earlier, we had decided that Uriel had been sent to Khaballe for one of two reasons. If he was sent to deliver us from the evil contaminating Khaballe, we may be making a disastrous mistake by sending him to Bhel'Ehzz. I have heard that there is a growing level of unrest in the capital. They may only be looking for someone to sacrifice, in which case we would be handing over our only hope for standing against Satarsmyt or perhaps even Thaum. I question whether we should send him."

Dhynelle and Qelharre were appalled and speechless. Wyxotte seemed surprised by the black robe's position as well.

Xenyssa played devil's advocate. "You paint a rather bleak picture Eyrmysse, and you have used only one canvas. What if you are wrong?"

"Then we should question who accompanies him. If I am wrong, we are the entrusting the safety of the High Witch to the one we fear the most." Xenyssa caught the infrequent use of Arhyvhyne's proper title. "But my mother wore the grey and she trusted Uriel as does Arhyvhyne. I am convinced he is innocent."

"You were also convinced that you would emerge from the Trials as High Witch," remarked Wyxotte.

Eyrmysse stood up and pointed a finger at Wyxotte. Tiny white sparks flew from her hand as she vented her frustrations on the dwarf. "You are nothing but a pathetic excuse for a witch. Your entire life has been one of continuous failures and unrealized potential. The massive weight that your body carries is equal to the excess this Council must bear because you are a part of it. You have contributed nothing in the wasted years you have unrightfully occupied a chair in these Chambers. We have no need for you. No one has any need for you. Death's contempt for you is so great that *it* will not even take your miserable Soul. But I warn you, push me and I will not only deliver you to Death's door, I will force you through it!"

Wyxotte had developed a thick skin over her many years of verbal battles with Qelharre, but the black robe's scathing words had a very sobering effect on her. As it did on all the other members of the Council.

It was quiet for several moments before Arhyvhyne spoke. "I just want to let all of you know how much I value each and every one of you. All of you have always been very helpful to me and I would not exchange any of you for any others." The speech

had little effect and the High Witch paused before she asked, "Is there anything else before we vote on my recommendation?"

"Yes," Eyrmysse said scornfully. "Who would reign here in your absence? Surely, not that one?" she asked as she indicated Wyxotte.

Arhyhynne was entangled in a very touchy situation thanks to her sister. If the High Witch left Eyrmysse in charge it would be as if she acknowledged Wyxotte's incompetence. It would cause the old witch a great deal of pain which might have long term effects. If she went the way of tradition and chose Wyxotte, there was nothing to keep Eyrmysse at the Towers. Eyrmysse would be more effective, especially if the imminent future became darker. But in her heart, she knew that the responsibility of the position had been a tremendous strain on Wyxotte in the short time she had it previously. "I would still reign, Eyrmysse, but I would ask that you bear the burden of running the Towers in my absence."

The request didn't fool Eyrmysse a bit. She clearly saw herself being maneuvered and despised it. On the other hand, she was also not foolish enough to decline the opportunity. The black robe was not the type to sacrifice the entire war for a battle. *And that is all this is, one battle.* "If that is your desire, sister."

The Council briefly explored and discussed other options to Arhyhynne accompanying Uriel and Eyrmysse ruling the Towers. Valid points were brought up over both matters, but the two people who could have forced the issues remained apathetic. Eyrmysse knew she had been cleverly manipulated and to put up a fight would be futile. Wyxotte had become completely depressed, resigning herself to resembling Eyrmysse's remarks as closely as possible.

Arhyhynne conducted the resulting vote person by person.

She started with Dhynelle and Qelharre who voiced their affirmation for her plan. The High Witch next went to Xenysa, who also approved. Her own vote gave her a majority and made it unnecessary to have to petition either Eyrmysse or Wyxotte.

"Though we have agreed on this course of action, remember that we are only responding to the Crown," said the High Witch. "This is not a conviction of guilt. If my sister and I are correct, the guilty party in all this will still be at the Towers after Uriel and I have departed. Keep that foremost in all your thoughts." Arhyvhynne then called in Qenthyeffe who was standing guard outside the Chambers. She asked her to send Padxyffu and Ghemella to her and take the remainder of the Guardian's shift outside Uriel's room. While she waited, Arhyvhynne composed a response to be sent to Bhel'Ehzz.

A few minutes later, both the halfling and dwarf were before the High Witch. She instructed Padxyffu regarding her response and then apprised Ghemella of what she and the Council had decided. "There is less than a month before the Journey of Homage. If we are to arrive in Bhel'Ehzz by then, we will have to leave tomorrow. Please see to it that everything we will require is ready by the rising of the first sun." When the Guardian did not leave, Arhyvhynne asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, there is, High One," said Ghemella rather reluctantly. Though there was no formal position as Captain of the Guardians, Ghemella had promoted herself to that fictitious rank and acted accordingly. Part of the charge of her imagined position was a personal responsibility towards the High Witch. "Forgive my presumptuousness, but in light of our previous encounter with the SoulSlayer and all that has transpired of late, I do not feel the High Witch should be travelling without proper escort. If I may suggest

so, I would like to offer you my services in that regard."

"What a superb idea," remarked Xenyssa before the High Witch could put forth an objection. "I am sure we would all feel much safer for Arhyvhynne with you in her company. After all," she added as an aside to the High Witch, "you are not exactly well travelled or a person of the streets."

Though Arhyvhynne did not feel Ghemella's presence would be necessary, the Council voted it through and the dwarf was aglow with pride. "Are there any other outstanding issues?" asked Arhyvhynne.

"There is the matter of informing the sisterhood... and Uriel," said Eyrmysse.

The High Witch considered a moment before she addressed the Council. "Inform the sisters we will make a formal announcement of all that has happened when we gather together for dinner this evening. Make sure everyone is present. As for Uriel, I will speak with him when we have finished here, alone."

Eyrmysse, once again persecuted by vestiges of the Trials, could only silently curse her sister.



Outside Uriel's room, Arhyvhynne stood with Ghemella, Qenthyeffe having been sent to see to the preparations for the journey to Bhel'Ehzz. "I do not wish to be disturbed under any circumstances," the High Witch told the Guardian. Then she proceeded to knock on the door.

Uriel had spent the day in an uneasy state. After Arhyvhynne had left him in the morning, he could only pace and worry. He had not been allowed to participate in the MidSummer Closing

Ceremonies and his window did not afford him a view of it either. With his nerves wearing away and being up a good part of the night, Uriel decided to try to get some sleep. It came slowly and was fitful but at least it gave him some rest and passed some time. Soon after he awoke, his anxiety began to mount. When the knock on the door came it brought with it a mixture of relief and trepidation.

Uriel opened the door, hoping to see Eyrmysse. Instead he found Arhyvhynne and admitted the High Witch. "I apologize for the long wait. I know it must have been difficult for you, waiting like this. But I assure you it could not be avoided."

Uriel closed the door and they both moved to the center of the room. "I understand." Actually, he didn't. He felt that she could have at least permitted him to attend the Closing Ceremonies. "Are you able to tell me what's going on now?"

"Yes, I can." Arhyvhynne hesitated, then said with a smile, "There is an old saying among the peasants. 'With the beauty of the moons also lurks the darkness.'"

"Which means?"

"I have some good news but I am afraid I have some unfortunate news as well."

A thousand possibilities rushed through Uriel's mind. "Go on."

"You will not have to go through a mind scan, at least not in the immediate future."

"But..."

The High Witch moved to the window and gazed at the approaching clouds. "We have received some communication from Bhel'Ehzz, the capital of Khaballe." Arhyvhynne turned around to face him. "King Nherycyn wishes to speak to us

concerning the disappearance of the Rune."

Uriel was alarmed. "The King of Khaballe is coming here?"

"No, Uriel. I am afraid you do not understand. He is not coming here. We are going to Bhel'Ehzz."

Uriel's shoulders slumped forward and he stared at the floor. Then he picked his head up and let his eyes wander aimlessly around the room. Finally, he asked, "They think I took the Rune, don't they?"

"I do not know what they think, although it is likely that you could infer that from the summons. But that is why I will be with you, so that nothing of an adverse nature may happen to you."

Uriel suddenly thought of Eyrmysse. "Who else will be going?"

"Only Ghemella will accompany us."

"Oh," said Uriel dejectedly.

"Was there someone else you would have liked to have travel with us?"

Uriel tried to disguise his despair but did a poor job. "No. I was just curious, that's all." He tried to keep the conversation going, hoping it would settle his nerves a bit. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow, at sunrise," Arhyvhyne said. "It will take us most of the remainder of the month if we are to reach Bhel'Ehzz at the appointed time."

That sent a shock through his system as well. Uriel thought he would be able to spend a little time with Eyrmysse, that somehow she might be able to change things, alter some plans. Now he would only have one night with her. He was angry, scared and hurt. All the old fears were rising as was his self doubt.

"I know this must be very upsetting to you, Uriel. I am truly

sorry that we have to do this, but we have no alternatives." Arhyvhynne walked up to Uriel and faced him. "I promise that I will stand by you the entire time and do everything in my power to insure you are treated properly and safely." The High Witch felt she was doing a poor job of relating everything and had not reached the balance of authority and comfort she sought. She tried to take his hand as she said, "I would be more than happy to stay with you if you need me to."

Uriel pulled his hand away and eyed her coldly. "What I need is to be alone." He hoped that with Arhyvhynne gone, Eyrmysse would be able to visit him.

"Very well," said Arhyvhynne sadly. "Perhaps that is best for now. Do not hesitate to send for me should you need anything."

"It's obvious that what I need is Khyrhyelle. Your elevation to High Witch and presence here at the Towers doesn't bring the same respect as it did for your mother. Maybe it would have been better if I had brought her back instead of you."

Though the words hurt Arhyvhynne badly and she believed much of what Uriel said, the High Witch tried not to show it. "I am sorry you feel that way. I can only hope that the future gives you cause to change your mind."

Arhyvhynne left Uriel's room and closed the door behind her, almost in tears. But when the High Witch spoke to Ghemella it was with quiet authority. "Under no circumstance are you to allow anyone save myself to enter or gain access to this room by any means until we leave for Bhel'Ehzz. I mean no one. Not another Guardian, not a Council member, no one. If you encounter any difficulties, refer them to me. If they persist, persuade them to desist, but use discretion."

Ghemella smiled, then remembered herself and wiped it from

her face. "And should Uriel request to leave?"

"He may not."

The Guardian was a bit embarrassed to ask the next question. "What if he must use the... facilities?"

"Search his room before he leaves and then lock the door. Escort him there and wait for him. No, go in with him. When you return, search his room as before."

"As you wish, High One. No one will enter while I still draw breath. You have my oath as a Guardian."

"Make note of anyone who seeks to visit Uriel and any requests that he makes himself." The High Witch began to walk away, then stopped. "Should anyone inquire as to my whereabouts, I will be with Xenyssa until dinner. Afterwards I will spend the remainder of the evening in my room."



Hours had passed and Uriel was lamenting everything from his trip to Bhel'Ehzz to the lack of having his expectations for a visit from Eyrmysse met. He began to have doubts concerning everything, including the black robe. It drove him to desperate measures and he requested that Ghemella send a message to Eyrmysse. But the Guardian informed him that it would serve no purpose. He was not allowed to have any visitors.

That made him crazy. He demanded to see Arhyvhynne, but Ghemella told him she was unavailable. Uriel ranted and raved and made wild threats, all of which went unheeded by the Guardian. He even tried to lay a guilt trip on the dwarf, recalling to her their encounter against the SoulSlayer. Though Ghemella felt genuinely sorry for Uriel (which she was loathe to admit), she

remained unwavering in her duty and Uriel was forced to resign himself to an evening of solitude.

As dusk settled upon northern Khaballe, Uriel was fighting a deep depression when he thought he heard voices outside his door. He jumped up from the bed where he sat and rushed to the door. His heart leapt with joy when he heard the unmistakable sound of Eyrmysse's voice.

"What do you mean I am not authorized to enter? By whose order?" asked Eyrmysse.

"By order of the High Witch," Ghemella responded.

Eyrmysse took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "As of the fifteenth hour, I now rule these Towers and I command you to allow me to enter."

Ghemella hesitated. Eyrmysse *had* been given the authority to run the Towers. By Arhyvhyne. But the Guardian held her ground. "I am sorry Mistress, but my instructions were explicit. I cannot."

Malevolence was in Eyrmysse's violet eyes. A glamour came upon her that made the black robe frightening to behold. "You do not want a confrontation with me."

It took all the Guardian's discipline not to cower. "No, I do not," she admitted. The dwarf was scared. Ghemella knew exactly what Eyrmysse was capable of, having been a student in several of her classes. "But this door I will guard until I draw my last breath."

Though Eyrmysse shook with anger, she gradually brought herself under control. Unleashing her force on someone who was only performing their duties would not be viewed sympathetically. Especially for reasons unknown. "You have done well, Ghemella. But do not ever stand against me again. For any reason. Or you

may find yourself the Guardian of the Abyss." With that, Eyrmysse turned and left.

The remaining hours on the last evening of MidSummer passed quietly.

At hearing Eyrmysse's departure, Uriel hung his head, knowing now that he might never be in the comfort of her arms again. He threw himself on his bed and let out his grief. Which turned to guilt and led to anger. The cycle endlessly repeated itself and Uriel spent a sleepless night in the clutches of his own misery.

On the other side of the door, Ghemella had waited until Eyrmysse was out of sight before she took a deep sigh of relief. The Guardian gratefully spent the rest of the night at her post without incident, her only visitors being Qenthyeffe and the High Witch.

Arhyvhyne had cuddled with a book, alone in her room. She left only once, to check on Ghemella. On the way back, the High Witch stopped at Xenyssa's room to inform her of Ghemella's episodes with Uriel and Eyrmysse. Afterwards, Arhyvhyne returned to her room and retired, in anticipation of the long days ahead of her.

Eyrmysse had retreated to her room, to plan how she could best exploit the time that she would have control of the Towers. But after going nowhere with it, she decided to spend some time at the Sacred Grove to clear her head. On her way, she saw her sister and, without being noticed, followed her to Xenyssa's room. With the assistance of a Spell of Hearing, it was there she divined how she could make the best of the unfortunate cards that fate had dealt her.

CHAPTER XXVII

A steady drizzle fell from a bleak sky which was colored various shades of grey. The terrain was nondescript except for a few trees and some sparse brush. Light fog hovered near the ground. The small party had set out half an hour before and little had been spoken to this point. Each person was caught up in their own private world, dreading the trip which they had just embarked upon.

Ghemella rode in front upon a young grey and black Spyhr, the chosen horse of the witches. The horse was bred more for its demeanor, speed, intuition and intelligence than its ability to bear heavy packs. But they had a strong constitution and Ghemella's did not seem to mind the added burden. On the other hand, the Guardian was already bending under her burden. Though she volunteered, demanded actually, to be the High Witch's escort, it did not diminish the amount of responsibility she felt. Her nerves were on edge, tired from the long night outside Uriel's door and the confrontation with Eyrmysse. Upon their departure, the other Guardians cautioned her concerning the probable appearance of SoulSlayers. She didn't have to be reminded. That was all that occupied her mind.

Arhyhynne followed behind Ghemella, also on a Spyhr. Hers was completely grey with a black mane and had been with her for many years. The High Witch reflected on the meeting that would take place in Bhel'Ehzz and what the possible outcomes could be. She was having a difficult time with her own Council where Uriel was concerned and expected even more opposition in

her audience with the King, Athar and probably Tomhythen. She was making this trip more for Uriel's sake than anything else. Had the King requested her presence and not Uriel's, she would have come up with a way to excuse her absence or send somebody in her place.

Uriel was beside Arhyvhynne, riding Ullyna. The High Witch thought it might help Uriel's case if he entered the capital on the back of a unicorn. She also figured they might need the animal's magical abilities before the journey was over. While Uriel usually enjoyed being with the unicorn he brought back from death's door, this morning he was oblivious to her, wrapped up in self pity. He dwelled on all his misfortunes since he arrived in Khaballe, but focused more on his absence from Eyrmysse. He had not seen the black robe the entire night and when morning came, he was conducted about without consideration of his personal desires. He had hoped to catch a glimpse of her at every turn, but Eyrmysse had been nowhere to be seen.

As the threesome had prepared to leave, the Council gathered outside the Towers along with most of the other witches. They wished Goddess' protection for their High Witch and her party. The witches hoped they would see Arhyvhynne again, but thought that it was the last time they would behold the wizard that had disrupted their quiet lives.

The assemblage of witches outside the Towers was the first and last time Uriel saw Eyrmysse. Though no words were spoken, their eyes never left each other. Then, just before Uriel departed, Eyrmysse turned and disappeared into the Towers, the others following her. It was that scene that Uriel kept playing in his mind, taking comfort in the anguish it brought.

The party headed west, planning to skirt the Thaum

Mountains and ride the fringe of the Sylvan Forest. They would follow that route until they ran across the road leading from Qyntes'ah to Sevher'tah. Taking that road south, they would stop at Sevher'tah if need be before moving east to Bhel'Ehzz. Ghemella, however, was not in favor of stopping in Sevher'tah. She knew it to be a dangerous city and felt they should bypass it if at all possible. To that end, she had packed extra provisions, hoping they would suffice until they reached their destination.

They were still riding in silence, but before another ten minutes passed, they all drew up when Ghemella hissed a vulgarity.

"Ghemella, was it?" Arhyvhyne asked worriedly.

The Guardian did not speak. Instead she pointed up at the sky to the south. Uriel followed her outstretched arm and looked up into the falling drizzle. "What the hell are those?"

"Vhultards," Ghemella said with loathing.

"Like I said, what are they?"

Ghemella explained. The vhultard was a large bird, its wingspan normally in excess of fifteen feet. It was entirely black with eyes the color of blood, which coincidentally, was their preferred liquid for quenching thirst. The head resembled that of a hawk with a wicked, curved beak. The vhultard's body was a full four feet in length and solidly built. Both arms and legs ended in hands and feet with powerful talons. It also had a tail which was an additional three feet long. The appendage was segmented and had a poisonous tipped end similar to that of a scorpion. If their appearance was not frightening enough, the fact that they were only known to inhabit the Thaum Weald usually was. "They travel south," she told Arhyvhyne and Uriel. "To Daath Ul Thaum."

"Why? How do you know?" asked Uriel.

"Because they are not only birds of prey," the Guardian answered. "They have also been known to act as carriers or messengers. Their presence here explains some strange reports. Some of the other Guardians, particularly those with above average eyesight like Qenthyeffe, had sightings of things flying in the distance since your arrival. So had our Scout, Vento. Until now we did not know what they were."

Uriel did not appreciate the connection. "But how do you know they're going to Daath Ul Thaum?"

"It would appear that they were sent here to keep an eye on the Towers, or more specifically, you." Ghemella's words unsettled Uriel even more than he already was. "My guess is that the news of your departure from the Towers is being eagerly awaited by the SoulSlayer, Ahrokh."

"Or perhaps Satarsmyt," Arhyvhynne added quietly.

"Whatever the case, we had better pick up our pace," suggested the Guardian. "We are at least a few days ride from Sylvan Forest. Hopefully that is enough time to get there before the Slayer or whoever is able to overtake us."

"Why don't we just go back to the Towers?" Uriel thought this could kill two vultards with one stone.

"It would work against us," replied the High Witch. "If we went back, then whoever is waiting for us would know that we plan to leave and be able to lie in wait for us. It would be almost impossible for us to leave again. This way, at least we have gained some distance and time. Ghemella?"

"I agree, High One. We should make the best of our small advantage."

The party set off once more and quickened their pace, though the drizzle was beginning to fall harder, making the going a little

tougher. Not much time had passed when Ghemella shouted another obscenity.

"Now what?" a distressed Uriel yelled ahead.

"Two vhultards have separated from the flock and follow us," the Guardian called back as she kept riding.

Uriel looked around. He had trouble seeing into the rain and fog, but was able to spot the huge birds, who were looming nearer. "They're gettin' closer," he hollered.

Arhyvhyne and Uriel rode faster and caught up to Ghemella. "What can we do?" asked the High Witch.

"How about a teleportation or a barrier?" questioned the Guardian.

Arhyvhyne shook her head. "Not enough time. They are closing the distance too quickly."

"Then we better stop and face them before they snatch us right off our mounts," suggested the Guardian. "Besides, the horses and Ulyna are becoming skittish." Ghemella looked for a place that was defensible but there was nothing remotely close in the grassland. They came to a stop and dismounted. "They are intelligent birds," the Guardian told them. "They will have a plan of attack. Stay together and follow my lead."

The group moved away from the unicorn and two horses. Ghemella thought it unlikely that the vhultards would attack a unicorn and as long as the horses stayed close to the magical animal they in turn would be safe. They stopped at a spot fifty feet from the animals.

Uriel held tight to his staff with growing apprehension while the Guardian methodically pulled out a longsword and dagger. The High Witch withdrew a sword from a concealed sheath. Both Uriel and Ghemella looked at Arhyvhyne, first with surprise then

skepticism. The white robe read their expressions. "It is purely for defensive purposes," she explained. "The sword is charmed with a Spell of Protection." But neither of them took much comfort in it and waited for the birds to make their move.

The two vultards circled high above their heads a few times, appearing to disregard the animals for the time being. They issued shrill cries which caused the party to shudder as one. Then the birds suddenly dove, talons outstretched.

The small group repelled the first attack easily. However, it seemed the vultards had only made a half-hearted attempt, trying to ascertain what type of defense they might see. When the birds came the second time, it was in earnest.

The vultards drove down at the little group with their talons. Ghemella was able to fend off one of the birds and the other was turned away by Arhyvhynne's magic sword. The birds decided to stay close to the ground and abandoned their diving tactics. It was difficult for the two large vultards to move when they were close together and so they tried to separate the group. One concentrated on Ghemella, the other on Arhyvhynne.

When attacked, Ghemella lunged at the vultard with her sword, deftly striking the bird's underbelly. But the Guardian's elation turned to dismay, when the strike had no effect. The bird's underside was of the same armor-like hide as the tail and next to impenetrable. The vultard, sensing the advantage, landed on the ground and began attacking with its talons and flicking its dangerous tail.

Ghemella maneuvered Uriel behind her and took a defensive position against the bird. But the vultard drove them backwards and Ghemella lost her footing on the wet ground and went down.

The vultard, though, was intent on Uriel and attacked

viciously. Uriel could see its face clearly now, the hawk-like features and gleaming blood red eyes fixated on its prey. He managed to put his staff in front of him to try to ward the bird off but it did little to slow the attack. Uriel was forced to one knee and made a mental plea for assistance.

Just then, Uriel heard thunder from the ground followed by the vultard's shriek. He looked up and saw Ullyna who had the vultard on the end of her horn. Ghemella quickly jumped up and hacked with her sword at the head of the bird until it was severed and dropped to the ground.

Both Ghemella and Uriel stared with disgust at the black ooze which exuded from the creature's decapitated body. Then a cry brought their attention to Arhyvhyne. The High Witch was prone on the ground, the remaining vultard dangerously close. The bird's poisonous tail was flicking at Arhyvhyne when Uriel screamed, "No." He pointed his staff at the vultard and quickly spoke the Words to a spell. A series of bolts took the bird full in the chest, reducing it to a scattering of singed feathers. Were it not for the devastating effect, it might have appeared comical.

Uriel and Ghemella ran over to the High Witch and were relieved to find her unharmed. After they helped her to her feet, Arhyvhyne gave Uriel a level look. "You have disappointed me greatly," she told him.

"Disappointed you? What the hell was I supposed to do? Stand there and watch that... thing kill you?"

"You misunderstand me, Uriel. I am indebted to you for saving my life. Again. However, I am not pleased that you have lied to me."

"Lied to you? What are you talking about?"

"Did you not tell me that you had not studied magic, that

Eyrmysse merely assisted you with the histories?" the High Witch questioned.

"Yeah. I told you. That's all it was."

"The spell you used to... dispose of the vhultard is that of a black robe. Is it necessary that I ask where you learned of it?" There was no need for Uriel to answer, Arhyvhynne saw the truth clearly in his eyes. But before she could press the subject, a sharp intake of breath by Ghemella drew her attention to the Guardian. "Are you all right?" Arhyvhynne questioned with concern.

Ghemella suddenly looked weak, appearing to have lost some of the color from her ruddy complexion. She applied pressure to her left wrist with her right hand and wavered as she stood. "It is nothing, Mistress."

"If it's nothing, then what happened to your arm?" asked Uriel.

Upon the Guardian's left hand was a one inch long welt that was turning black. "It is just a scratch."

"It may only be a scratch but its effects are serious," said the High Witch. "Could it be from the vhultard's tail?"

"I suppose. It could have happened when I fell and the bird attacked Uriel." Ghemella was trying very hard to be nonchalant. "If you would perform a small healing, I am sure I will be fine," she said.

"Ghemella, if that wound is from the vhultard's tail, you are in grave danger. Their poison is very strong and spreads quickly." Arhyvhynne thought for a moment then declared, "We should return to the Towers."

"No. I assure you I will be fine. I am certain this is from one of the talons as the vhultard crossed over me. The skin is not broken. A minor healing is all I require."

The High Witch was not convinced. "Are you sure?" The Guardian nodded and Arhyvhyne, more skilled than most among those who did not make healing their profession, worked a low level healing. Ghemella took to it in a short time and regained most of her color, though the welt itself looked no better.

With the Guardian apparently on her way to recovery, the party set out again, riding for several silent hours in the light rain. Uriel thought Arhyvhyne would immediately come back to the matter of the spell he used on the vultard, but the High Witch remained in her own world. For the first time, doubt entered her mind where Uriel was concerned. And she did not know how to handle it. So she kept to herself, trying to consider all the angles, trying not to draw any conclusions.

It was lunchtime when Arhyvhyne noticed that Ghemella was showing signs of not being completely restored to health. They had stopped for a quick meal, their first break since leaving the Towers and their encounter with the vultards. Though the Guardian tried to hide her obvious discomfort, she was beginning to look pale again and had a slight fever. Arhyvhyne reprimanded her for not saying anything and went to work on another healing, this one being more potent. The healing, in conjunction with some food, helped Ghemella to feel better. Before long, the threesome set out again, reluctant to spend any more time than was necessary for food or rest.

Ghemella rode at a brisk pace and Arhyvhyne kept a close watch on her, looking for signs of a relapse. Uriel tried to concentrate on his riding but was unsuccessful. Aided by the steadily falling rain and repetitive scenery, his thoughts kept straying. First there was Arhyvhyne. Uriel felt terrible about his sharp words to her back at the Towers on the previous day, but

was too stubborn to apologize. Especially now that he was on the defensive. He thought she was beginning to suspect what his true relationship with Eyrmysse was. Then there was the black robe herself, his anger at being away from her equal to his longing for her. He also thought of Khyrhelle, of what might have been and felt some guilt that he had been with one of her daughters. And whenever he had an attack of guilt, memories of Lynn and Danny were not far behind. Overshadowing all his thoughts, however, was his fear that he was riding headlong into his own demise.

So the hours drifted by with only an occasional trifling word or comment until Arhyvhynne pulled up and stopped the party. The High Witch wanted to check the Guardian and it was for good reason. Ghemella once again showed indications of being affected by the welt inflicted by the vhultard. Though the weather was warm and muggy, she was shaking and her flesh was cold and clammy. It was apparent she was in need of further treatment.

Arhyvhynne surmised that Ghemella must have come in contact with the vhultard's tail and received a small amount of poison. The question was what to do about it. She wanted to teleport them back to the Towers, but Ghemella opposed the idea. The Guardian wanted nothing to do with anything that interfered with their mission. As they had discussed before, a return to the Towers could make things difficult for a subsequent journey.

Though it went against her better judgment, the High Witch decided to continue on. But before leaving, she performed another healing on the Guardian, this one being more complex and straining her a bit. Since they had already stopped, they ate their evening meal and left as soon as Ghemella felt well enough to ride.

By modifying their route slightly, the party could travel to the

elven city of Qyntes'ah. There, Ghemella might receive care from professional healers. But it was a four day ride to the Sylvan Forest and an additional two days to Qyntes'ah. Arhyvhynne hoped her healing skills would hold out till then. The Sylvan Forest was a haven that was magically protected by the elves, not to the extent of the barrier that encompassed the Towers, but potent enough to limit the advance of most evildoers. Once within the confines of the forest, they would be safe. But she feared four days could prove to be too much time to sustain Ghemella and ample enough for another encounter with the vultards or even SoulSlayers.

They rode on for several more hours, well into the evening, taking advantage of the long days of MidSummer. The terrain and weather remained unchanged and they had not seen any signs of the vultards, either. Just before dusk settled down on the northland, the rain tapered off to a drizzle and finally stopped altogether. The Guardian searched for a suitable place to make camp but could find nothing that afforded any shelter. They ended up settling near some brush.

Ghemella wanted to take watch for the entire night, but Arhyvhynne declined her offer. Though the Guardian seemed to be holding up well, the High Witch felt that they would be able to manage between Uriel and herself. Arhyvhynne took the first watch after she cast a minor healing spell on Ghemella to help her rest through the night.

It was a warm and uncomfortable evening. Arhyvhynne's watch passed without incident, but midway through Uriel's watch, his senses tensed. He had been watching Arhyvhynne in her sleep with mixed emotions when he noticed something overhead. A silhouette was visible against the passing clouds that were

illuminated by the light of the moons. He couldn't make out what it was and he didn't know if it was worth disturbing Arhyvhynne or Ghemella. His first thought was that it was a vhultard, however he had seen and read about so many strange beings and creatures in Khaballe that he didn't want to jump to any conclusions. But the shape seemed to be circling their area, getting closer with each circuit. A shiver raced down his spine as Uriel could finally see that the bird was quite large and had a long tail. Uriel sat motionless, his heart beating wildly, trying to decide what he should do. He wasn't even sure the bird had seen them and did not want to do anything that might draw its attention. But the vhultard only circled a few more times before it gained height and departed in the same direction it had come, the southeast.

Dawn approached, bringing with it overcast skies and fog. The party arose and Uriel mentioned his sighting during the night. They discussed the matter for a while and decided to move out quickly. The party began their second day of travel after they ate and Arhyvhynne renewed the healing spell on Ghemella. Soon, each of them retreated to the silent world of their thoughts. Ghemella was brooding over getting poisoned and having it affect their mission. Uriel was still angry with Arhyvhynne for separating Eyrmysse and himself but he also wanted things to be normal between the white robe and him again. Arhyvhynne, her energies somewhat spent from her healing attempts on the Guardian and only half a night's rest, thought about Uriel. Or to be more precise, what he was hiding.

The fog lifted by midmorning but a light drizzle began to fall around noon. The party went through their established routine of eating a sparse meal after which Arhyvhynne reinforced Ghemella's healing spell. Though the spells were not overly

taxing, they were gradually having an effect on the High Witch due to the necessity of her repeating them on a regular basis.

Though the day wore on without any indication of the vultards or SoulSlayers, Ghemella insisted that she could feel them being tracked. They rode hard through the nagging drizzle that had slowed their pace for most of their journey, trying to put some distance between them and their pursuer. The showers finally ended by the time they paused for their evening meal. Then, later, just before dusk, a break in the clouds revealed a breathtaking sunset. Bright blue skies divided the heavens with the departing grey clouds which became tinged with pinks and purples.

When it became too dark to travel, Ghemella had them settle next to a copse of trees for the night. Arhyhynne and Uriel again split the watch with Uriel taking the first shift this time. It was as warm as the previous evening but not as humid. Uriel passed his time by taking short walks, star gazing and worrying (but mostly worrying), causing his mood to darken as did the night. He kept looking to the south at the Thaums, thinking that it was there that he made his appearance in Khaballe. So much had happened, most of it too incredible to be really occurring. There were the different races and animals, the differences in nature itself and the presence of magic, permeating every aspect of life. He wondered at it, questioning if any of it was an aspect of reality at all. But he soon grew weary with the weight of his thoughts and settled down next to a tree. He closed his eyes, promising himself it would only be for a minute.

Uriel heard Ullyna and the horses rustling and came suddenly awake, startled. He wasn't sure how long he had dozed off and quickly looked around to insure that everything was all right. But

he had less than a second before he saw the red eyes that focussed on him. Directly in front of him, perched upon a low hanging branch, was a vhultard.

"Shit!" Uriel yelled. He scrambled up and away from the bird and managed to back right into something. He yelled again and turned only to find that the object obstructing his retreat was a tree. Meanwhile, Arhyvhynne and Ghemella came awake at his shouts and stood beside him. The High Witch held the charmed sword in her hand, Ghemella her curved dagger. They waited for the attack.

The vhultard had made no move, however. It had remained on the branch, content to observe its prey. Then the large bird threw its head back and an eerie cackling issued from its throat, making a noise that sounded like demented laughter. Moments later, the bird shrieked and took off, flying in the direction of the Thaums.

Unsettled by the visitation and thinking their pursuer was closing on them, the party decided to set out. They were still more than a day's ride from the Sylvan Forest and feared they might not make it before being overtaken.

By the time the second sun rose on their third day of travel, the party was already tired and fatigued. However, the bright summer day lifted their spirits a bit and they travelled on with grim determination. But the beauty of the day soon wore off. Uriel, Ghemella and Arhyvhynne finally turned to each other to relieve the boredom of travel and tension that mounted from constant apprehension.

Uriel remarked to the High Witch about the gradual change that they were witnessing in the countryside as they got farther away from the Thaums. Though the terrain had remained flat, the

grass in this region of Khaballe was two or three inches longer and colored bluish-violet. They also noticed that there were more trees, most of them having bark of a similar color to the grass and many-pointed pink leaves. They were also not of the great height that Uriel had seen nearer to the Thaums.

They had not encountered much animal life in their trip thus far. Excluding the vultards, they had seen few birds. They had spied only a handful of groundhogs, rabbits and such. On one occasion they had seen a large animal, similar to a moose in the distance. It frightened Uriel, thinking it might be the Slayer, but the witches assured him it was no cause for alarm. One other time they came across a huge reptile, a lhukardhil, which looked like a cross between a snake and a lizard. The horses became skittish but Ulyna managed to convince the lhukardhil to explore elsewhere.

They continued to talk of the geography, scenery and wildlife of northern Khaballe, apparently willing to disregard their mutual discomforts with each other in order to settle their nerves. But the question of Uriel's knowledge of black robe spells was ever in Arhyvhyne's thoughts as well as Ghemella's and Uriel wondered how long it would be before the truth would be known.

The warm afternoon gave way to a pleasant evening and the exhausted party prepared to make camp for the night. Though tired, their spirits were high, knowing that by this time tomorrow they would be in the relative safety of the Sylvan Forest. But before they could finish their meal, Ghemella spotted a large shape approaching in the darkening pale blue sky. They scrambled for their weapons, but it was unnecessary. Content with having located the party, the vultard turned back towards the Thaums.

The sighting of the vultard dampened their mood and the party spent the remainder of the evening in unspoken concern.

They were unable to properly rest but they were also too tired to go on. It was a long, stressful night with the sounds and shadows of the northland seemingly becoming intensified and sinister.

Dawn eventually rescued the party from their overactive imaginations and they made out for what they hoped would be their last day of travel in the open for a while. Ghemella was holding up rather well. The welt was not healing but with the aid of Arhyvhynne's healing, the effects of it were minimal and under control. The High Witch herself was somewhat withdrawn. The burdens of the summons, Uriel's concealment, journey, healings and lack of rest were exacting a heavy toll on the young witch. Uriel was a jumble of emotions and nerves. He was beginning to obtain a defeatist attitude, feeling that there were simply too many things stacked against him.

Their fourth day of travel was as nice as the previous one, though a bit warmer. Midway through the day, the party stopped and ate a hasty lunch, their anticipation equal to their trepidation. Uriel complained most of the afternoon, bemoaning the fact that the forest had still not come into sight. Then shortly after an early dinner, the party noticed the grass was getting shorter and greener and they began to see a proliferation of trees. They also saw the horizon darken far in the distance and assumed they were nearing the Sylvan Forest. Their mood brightened considerably knowing they would make the forest by sunset.

They rode on for another half an hour before Ghemella saw a rider coming towards them. Arhyvhynne presumed the rider to be an elven messenger or sentry from Qyntes'ah. But as he approached, the horses and Ullyna became excitable. Ghemella heard familiar shrill cries from behind her and she wheeled her Spyrh around only to see a flock of eleven vultards descending

upon them. A group of the birds settled on the ground a distance behind them while the remaining ones circled above. Then she detected a rank smell in the air. The Guardian turned back to see a skeleton with rotting flesh falling from it, coming towards them at a full gallop.

The SoulSlayer pulled up ten yards before them and stopped. The glare of the setting suns off the black armor blazed at Uriel along with the eyes of fire. "So we meet again, mortal," said a thousand dissonant voices. "I have waited a great many days since our last encounter. I trust you will not disappoint me as you did before." Ahrokh's voices laughed and the stench overwhelmed and weakened Uriel.

"You!" The multiple-voiced entity pointed to Ghemella. "I remember the taste of your Soul and will drink fully of it today. And you, High Witch." The clawed hand moved towards Arhyvhyne. "They would not allow me to take your mother, the grey slut of the witches. But you, you I will defile and violate beyond your worst nightmares. I will fill you with my essence before I consume yours."

Uriel, sickened by the Slayer's words as much as the creature itself, made a feeble attempt to raise his staff towards Ahrokh. But the SoulSlayer made a backhanded gesture and Uriel was thrown from Ullyna and landed on the ground. Ghemella charged and another move of the Slayer's arm put both Guardian and horse on the ground. All at once Ghemella became nauseous and feverish. The black welt on her left hand began to slowly spread. Meanwhile, wild neighing could be heard as Ahrokh's skeletal mount took Ghemella's steed.

The SoulSlayer turned its attention towards Arhyvhyne and attacked her with a barrage of spells designed to weaken her. The

High Witch was prepared, however, and fought a solid defensive battle. She slowly raised her level of concentration until the Slayer felt the power and force of her mind begin to exert itself against him. But then Ahrokh played his trump. Mental images of Arhyvhyne's second Trial crept into her mind. Once again she saw she had Ahrokh's life in her hands. And as she relived that Trial and its outcome, she faltered. The voices of the SoulSlayer laughed in triumph.

Uriel could see that Arhyvhyne was under extreme duress. He grabbed his staff, pointed it towards Ahrokh and spoke the Words of the most powerful black robe spell Eyrmysse had taught him. Bolts of fire erupted from Uriel's staff but this time the SoulSlayer was alert and turned them aside with little effort. Without leaving its mount, the Slayer used his left clawed hand to magically clutch Uriel by the throat and suspend him in the air. Then he used the right hand to deliver a vicious slap across the face. Uriel flew thirty feet before he landed, screaming in agony at the pain from the slashes in his cheek magically inflicted by the SoulSlayer's claws.

The SoulSlayer dismounted and moved towards Arhyvhyne, who sat helpless upon her Spyhr clutching her magic sword. He snatched her off her horse and pulled her to the ground. Ahrokh was about to have his way with her when the twang of bows sounded and arrows sang through the air. In a matter of seconds, three arrows struck the Slayer in the chest all in the exact same place, piercing the black armor. A fourth took him in the stomach. Ahrokh staggered back and howled in pain. He grabbed the shafts and broke them as he tried to pull them out. The arrowheads, however, remained embedded in the skeleton. Slowly, very slowly, the Souls imprisoned within the Slayer began to escape,

bleeding out from the wounds created by the arrows.

The SoulSlayer looked up with hatred burning in its eyes and saw two riders approaching, bows in hand. Ahrokh held his chest with one hand and pointed the other at one of the riders. The claw turned into a fist and the rider gave a dreadful scream before he was taken by the SoulSlayer. Then three more arrows buried themselves in the Slayer's face. Ahrokh managed to stumble back to his horse and mounted it. He called for the vultards to attack and then rode off, hoping to salvage his many Souls.

The attack came from the poisonous birds that were airborne. The lone rider made short work of them, expending no more than one arrow apiece on six vultards, putting the shafts through their skulls with precision. The remaining five took flight.

The rider, an elf, went first to Arhyvhyne and inquired as to her well being. Satisfied, he returned to his companion. He spent a moment grieving silently before he secured the body to the horse. Then he returned to Arhyvhyne. She was with Uriel, hunched over Ghemella.

"Your friend?" Arhyvhyne asked with concern.

The rider shook his head solemnly then dismounted. "He is... was my squire," he said with a tear still in his eye. "Though I would count him as a trusted friend as well." The elf looked at Ghemella. A good portion of her hand which still held the curved dagger had turned black and she was delirious with fever. "Your friend does not appear at all well, my lady."

Neither did the High Witch for that matter. She was ashen and weak. "She had been stung by a vultard three days ago. I have been working some healings but I am afraid this encounter with the SoulSlayer has greatly jeopardized Ghemella's health and she is beyond my capabilities."

"We must get her into the Sylvan," the elf said. "We have some healers who may be able to slow the poison's progress. Upon success, we can continue on to Qyntes'ah where she may be cured. But we must hurry. I, too, am afraid her time is short."

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was a short ride to the Sylvan Forest and the party arrived just before nightfall. Within minutes of entering the lush woodland the elf guided them to a guard post which was about a half mile into the forest. The post was a small treehouse, high in an elm and well concealed amidst a maze of branches and leaves. It would be almost impossible to discover unless one knew exactly where to look for it. Though the forest itself was dense, somehow moonlight was able to filter down through the canopy of leaves. It was populated mostly by large pines but had a fair amount of other varieties as well. Here, the majority of the bark was brown and leaves green, though there were touches of reds, oranges and yellows in both. The aroma of the woodland was intoxicating and one could not help but feel an abundance of peace and serenity. An ever present soft wind drifted through the woods whispering ancient ballads, the lyrics and their meanings just beyond comprehension.

Here, two sentries, both of whom were elves and adequate healers, were enlisted to work on Ghemella. There was some disagreement, however, between the sentries and the elf that had come to the party's rescue. But the discussion was a short one. The elf directed the sentries to perform their duty and dismissed them using words from the old elven tongue.

Arhyhynne walked over to where their benefactor stood, Uriel following her like a puppy. "I am sorry," she told him, "but I have not had the opportunity to offer you our sincere and deepest thanks. Were it not for you, I am afraid we may have all met a

very... undesirable end."

"No thanks are necessary, my lady. I only hope that we have arrived in time to save the young lady. The cost has been high already."

Arhyvhynne gravely nodded her head. "Was there a problem back there?"

"No," the elf responded. "Just a simple misunderstanding."

They were silent for a moment before Arhyvhynne remembered something. "I have been most discourteous. Allow me to introduce myself and my company. I am Arhyvhynne," she said, then added almost as an afterthought, "High Witch of the Moons."

At that, the elf dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "It has been my humble honor to have served you, High One."

"That is completely uncalled for," Arhyvhynne said, embarrassed. She bade the elf to rise and continued after he complied. "This is Uriel, a... wizard. The one the others are working to heal is Ghemella, one of my Guardians. You are?"

"I am Syrqundyl, Marshall, Warrior of the Wood, son of Lyrquldyn, Sovereign Prince of the Wood and ever at your service." Though the elf had an easy manner, he had an air of self-assurance about him which made it obvious that he was completely comfortable with authority. As a Warrior of the Wood, his responsibilities were to the protection first of Khaballe and secondly Qyntes'ah. Syrqundyl was a tall, thin, dark elf with strawberry-blonde hair. He was dressed in greens and browns which blended perfectly with the forest. Uriel noted that if Syrqundyl did not move or speak, one might not notice him, even were he standing next to him.

"I am honored to be in your presence, Syrqundyl," said the

High Witch. "Though I have never had the good fortune of meeting your father, I have heard from many, elven and not, that he is of strong character and quite a distinguished statesman."

"Thank you. I am sure he would be pleased to hear that his name has reached the ears of one placed as high as yourself."

"And his son is an exceptional bowman, though that does not surprise me, being elven." The High Witch then looked puzzled. "However, I must ask you how you managed to harm the SoulSlayer? To my knowledge, only a high level spell can affect them."

"The arrows I had the fortune to have with me were magical, my lady." Syrquyndyl pulled one from his quiver and handed it to Arhyvhynne who admired the fine craftsmanship. "These are fashioned from the argentree, the shaft being made of their wood and the arrowhead from the silver of the leaves. We have less than five score of them for we may gather and use only branches and leaves that have fallen from the great trees as a result of nature. As I am sure you know, the woods are sacred to us and it is considered sacrilege to bring harm to any living thing in this forest without due cause." Arhyvhynne handed the arrow back to Syrquyndyl. "In any event, since rumor of the foul Slayers had reached Qyntes'ah, I always carried with me a score of the arrows whenever I ventured out of the Sylvan. I was hunting when I happened upon your distressed party."

One of the sentries called Syrquyndyl over to them and he excused himself. Arhyvhynne spoke quietly to Uriel. "Is this not one of the most beautiful places you have ever seen? It is so peaceful. And there is a sense of..."

"Being at one with nature," Uriel finished for her.

"Yes," she smiled at him. "Exactly."

It had been a long time since Uriel had seen her smile. Especially at him. It made him feel guilty about the way he had been treating her, about the way that he was acting in general as of late. So he repressed those feelings and changed the subject. "I don't understand something. I thought only the Witches of the Moons and the ten wizards were allowed to practice magic. But that elf guy said that the arrows were magical."

The High Witch explained. "Witches and wizards are the only ones permitted to practice high magic. Healers and some elves, dwarves, halflings and even humans practice what we term low magic. Low magic entails using the innate qualities of an object to perform some act."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Arhyvhyne shook her head. "Witches and wizards use their own energies to command, control and make use of other objects, those objects being supplemental to the process. The opposite is true of low magic."

Uriel shrugged his shoulders. "I guess."

Syrqyndyl returned and informed the High Witch that Ghemella had stabilized. The healers had stopped the spread of poison and the fever was now only low grade. He cautioned that her condition was still serious and she was in need of the professional healers in the elven city. But he wanted the Guardian to rest for a couple of hours before they set out to Qyntes'ah.

After two hours of the best rest they had gotten since they left the Towers, the party, consisting of Arhyvhyne, Uriel, Ghemella and Syrqyndyl, left for the elven city. They rode through the Sylvan at a good pace following the lead of the elf. He took routes that were known only to the elves, staying off the one main road that led into the city, explaining that his route would be much

quicker.

The journey to Qyntes'ah took them a little more than a day and a half. Due to the tranquility of the forest and the ever present mystical chants on the breezes, the time passed quickly. The High Witch and the elf spent most of the time conversing upon matters of witches and elves. They also took turns reinforcing the healings that were performed on Ghemella. Though Syrquyndyl was not as learned as even Arhyvhynne in those arts, they managed. Uriel did a great deal of soul-searching but drew few conclusions and made fewer resolutions. Even this most serene of forests was unable to ease his mind and quell his fears. He had even become inexplicably jealous of the rapport Syrquyndyl and Arhyvhynne had developed and had remained aloof the entire time. Ghemella remained in a semi-conscious state for most of the trip, secured to a horse provided by the elves and still grasping the curved dagger which she refused to surrender.

By mid-morning of their second day of travel, their sixth from the Towers, the party noticed the forest beginning to thin. They were still travelling at a quick pace for Ghemella's benefit when they neared Qyntes'ah and began to see dwellings both on the ground and in the trees. They were all fashioned from wood and were exquisitely done, each exhibiting a touch of the famous Qyntes'an crystal used in unique ways to accentuate their homes. The visitors marveled at the way the crystal was situated in each structure, somehow managing to catch and weave the threads of sunlight into iridescent rainbows. In some it was through the use of a small window above or on the sides of an entryway or alcove, in others it was in the metaphysical emblems or designs that were combined with the woodwork and still others in decorations such as crystal trees or animals. Syrquyndyl explained that the history of

an elven family could be deciphered from the intricate crystal and wood detail of an elven house.

It was soon after that they came upon the city of Qyntes'ah proper. The elven city was located in a clearing encompassed by the Sylvan, near the Strait of Kho Rhon'ah. The large clearing was of an irregular shape and was caused by a dragon attack at the time of the FireHunt. Before that memorable event, the city resided in the forest itself. But a battle here saw a large area of the forest destroyed. In the aftermath, the elves decided to rebuild the city amidst the destruction. They cleared away the vestiges of the battle, salvaging a great deal from which they began construction of the new city.

If the visitors had been impressed with the dwellings on the outskirts of Qyntes'ah, then they were left breathless upon beholding the city. The wood and crystal structures were magnificent as they stretched to the sky. The colors and textures of the woods were blended to perfection. Sparkles, shimmers and rainbows glimmered off the exquisite crystal, bathing the city in an array of lights that was almost too beautiful to look upon.

The party took what to the visitors seemed like poorly laid out streets to Qyntes Estates, the elven city hall at the center of town. Syrquyndyl revealed that the streets were laid out in precise patterns that, when viewed from above, depicted various symbols of esoteric meaning to the elves. The elf also discussed the commercial side of Qyntes'ah, relating that the majority of all wood and crystal products came from the city. They were surprised to find out that the elves did a fair amount of business in furs and perishables as well, using but not abusing all that the forest had to offer.

Long before they came to its doors, the party had been able to

admire the delicate crystal spires and minarets of the Estates. They reached high in the sky, a beacon for those travelling to its doors, a landmark for all to see and appreciate. Before they arrived at the large building, they were met by a dragoon and formally escorted to the Estates. Upon arriving, they stood at the ornately carved doors for a moment, savoring the beauty of Qyntes'ah, but more especially the Estates.

The interior beauty of the building did not pale in comparison to the exterior. An atrium had been constructed around an elm, the only tree left standing in the clearing after the encounter with the dragons. Here, the party was received by Lyrqyldyn, Sovereign Prince of the Wood, his wife Lhelqerra and the city officials.

The Sovereign Prince of the Wood was tall and thin, traits of the elven race. His hair was entirely grey except for a hint of red. Lyrqyldyn's complexion was darker than Syrquyndyl's. He had strong, angled features and his face was deeply lined. He was dressed in the customary green and brown attire of the elves with the jewel of his office on a golden chain around his neck. Lyrqyldyn functioned as Lord Mayor of Qyntes'ah. Though his title was that of Prince, it was honorary and conferred upon the ruler of the elven people.

Lyrqyldyn's wife was also a dark elf who was not quite as tall as either her husband or son, but was equally thin. Lhelqerra wore a pale green dress and a circlet of leaves adorned her head. It was obvious that Syrquyndyl got his strawberry-blonde hair from his mother. As with most elven woman, it was futile to attempt to discern Lhelqerra's age by her looks.

A herald announced Arhyvhyne. Lyrqyldyn took his wife by the hand and both genuflected then bowed their heads. The rest of the gathering followed suit. "It is with the highest honor and great

pleasure that I receive you, High One. Welcome to the elven city of Qyntes'ah."

The High Witch knew better than to be informal. Arhyvhyne traced a crescent moon in the air which coalesced and glowed. "Goddess blessing on the house of Lyrqyldyn and the city and holdings of Qyntes'ah." The white robe motioned for them to arise. "I extend to you greetings from the Towers of the Moons and my sincere personal thanks. It is with regret that I visit this fair city under duress and am only here through the great efforts and unparalleled bravery of Syrquyndyl, who, disregarding his own welfare, saved my life and those of my attendants by delivering us out of the grasp of a SoulSlayer."

"I am sure you are in desperate need of repose after so harrowing an experience," said Lyrqyldyn. "Please, let us retire to my quarters."

The group followed Lyrqyldyn past hallways that stretched in all the directions, to the main one which lead to his office and quarters. There, the highly polished wood and elegant furnishings gave one a sense of being in a familiar, comfortable study. The touches of crystal were just enough to add the perfect accent to the atmosphere.

Once behind closed doors, Lyrqyldyn allowed himself to give his son a warm greeting. Then he stood back a step and held his son's hands in his own. "I have heard the reports. I share your grief over your squire. I know the two of you were close, but I am grateful you are the one that stands here before me. Were it the other way..." Syrquyndyl nodded his head in understanding.

Lhelqerra was next to embrace her son. Her face betrayed her relief at seeing her son was unharmed. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. After their brief reunion, Lhelqerra turned to the High

Witch. "You are much like your mother and I suspect equally wise."

"Thank you," responded Arhyvhyne, "though I am afraid I will walk this Path many times before I will have my mother's wisdom. You knew her?"

"Yes. She passed this way on several occasions and once honored us with her presence at MidSummer. We became very close in the short time she spent with us. We were all very saddened to learn of her departure." Lhelqerra paused a moment then asked, "How fare our cousins Qelharre and Qenthyeffe?" The elves referred to all those of their race that were not direct blood relatives as cousins.

"They are well. Both talked of visiting here after MidSummer, but I fear circumstances have changed all that." Arhyvhyne seemed to debate something internally then went on. "I do not wish to be discourteous, however, the sole reason we are here is that Ghemella, one of my Guardians, is in dire need of your healers. She has suffered encounters with both a vhultard and a Slayer. It was only through the assistance of your sentries that she has managed to get this far."

Lyrqyldyn was distraught. "Forgive us, High One. We were not aware. Let her be attended to immediately. Where is she?"

Ghemella had gone unnoticed among the High Witch, Uriel and several guards. She was brought to the forefront by a sentry who was careful not to touch the blackened left hand. The Guardian looked terrible and was unable to stand on her own.

Lyrqyldyn's face turned to stone. "I am afraid we will not be able to accommodate your request, High One."

Arhyvhyne was confused. "I do not believe I understand."

"We cannot treat her," Lyrqyldyn said bluntly.

"Why not?"

The Sovereign Prince of the Wood looked uncomfortable. It took several seconds before he responded. "She is of dwarven blood." Syrquyndyl was about to protest but a look from his father quelled him.

Arhyvhyne was beside herself. "You cannot be serious. She will die if she is not treated soon." Lyrquyldyn gave her a look of regret and the High Witch pressed the matter. "Besides, she is only partially of dwarven blood."

"It is forbidden."

"By whom?" Arhyvhyne demanded.

"It has been that way since the time of the ancients."

Uriel, silent until this point, spoke up. "Then why was she treated by your sentries when we entered the forest?"

Lyrquyldyn's face turned crimson with anger and Uriel thought he might never see Bhel'Ehzz. But the elf turned to a guard and said, "Find the sentries who have disgraced our ancestors and bring them to me."

"Do not bother," Syrquyndyl told the guard. "I ordered it, father. They were unwilling to perform the healing but I gave them little choice."

Lyrquyldyn was livid. "How could you have permitted this? You know what the Tenets state. Worse, you know that many elven lives were lost as a result of the StoneWood Wars, including that of your great grandfather."

"I thought it foolish that something that happened seven hundred years ago and cost so many lives then should be the cause for yet another casualty now."

Lyrquyldyn wanted to lash out at his son but somehow managed to control his temper. He sighed, then said, "High One, I

pray you ask of me anything else and I will assure you it will be done."

"I do not ask a second time should I be denied the first. And should you deny me this, you will force me to take measures I would rather not."

Ghemella, noticeably weak and feverish, pointed her black hand that held the dagger at Lyrqyldyn. "Though I knew that somewhere in my lineage I had some dwarven blood, I have never considered myself dwarven or any other race until today. But now I say to you all that I would rather die a dwarf than be indebted to the likes of you."

Lyrqyldyn glared at Ghemella and the situation deteriorated to a staring match. Then Syrquyndyl offered a suggestion. "Father, if the High Witch *ordered* you to have Ghemella healed, you would not have any choice, would you?"

Lhelqerra, who wanted to reach some sort of compromise and gain amnesty for her son, latched on to Syrquyndyl's line of thinking. "Yes, he is right Lyrqyldyn. That being the case, no one could hold you responsible for violating our Ancient Tenets." The Tenets were the teachings and principles handed down from elven generation to generation and regarded higher than the law of the land.

Lyrqyldyn grudgingly admitted the possibility and Arhyvhynne said, in as courteous and respectful a tone as was possible, "I, Arhyvhynne, High Witch of the Moons, order you to have Ghemella healed." Lyrqyldyn frowned and after a moment's indecision, motioned to the guard to take Ghemella away. But Ghemella fought the guard's efforts with what was left of her strength. So the High Witch was forced to order Ghemella to comply, which she did though it was with curses, threats and other

assorted invectives.



"So you are the one of whom I have heard so much," commented Lyrqyldyn.

Uriel was surprised that he had gained notoriety outside the Towers and Bhel'Ehzz. "I'm afraid I am," he replied after a moment.

Lyrqyldyn considered Uriel for a moment but did not embellish on what he knew or how he knew it. They were seated in the dining area of the Sovereign Prince's quarters, partaking of a dinner of elven specialties and delicacies. Lhelqerra, Syrqundyl and a few other elven dignitaries were there along with Arhyvhynne, Ghemella and one of her healers. The conversation had been strained thus far. Since their earlier episode, Lyrqyldyn had not been overly congenial with the High Witch.

The travelers had retired shortly after Ghemella was taken to the healers. They got cleaned up and rested for a few hours before they reconvened at dinner. All were surprised to be joined by Ghemella, who the healers instructed to eat a full meal to aid her in regaining her sustenance. Although the Guardian had been cured, it had come at a high cost. She had lost her left hand to amputation. The healers tried to compensate the handicap by attaching her prized curved dagger to the stump of her wrist. But it did little to comfort her. Ghemella remained sullen, speaking to no one, feeling inadequate as a Guardian and fighting back accusations that the healers had unnecessarily taken her hand. But the remainder of the group (and Ghemella deep down) knew that a healer had no higher or other intention than to do what was best

and necessary for a patient.

Over dinner Arhyvhyne explained their circumstances in arriving at Qyntes'ah, including the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction and the summons by King Nherycyn. Though Uriel felt somewhat uncomfortable over the topic of conversation and the discord between Lyrqyldyn and Arhyvhyne, he had begun to feel more at ease than he had since his departure from the Towers. While Lyrqyldyn kept his thoughts and opinions to himself, his son had gone so far to say that he thought the allegations were ridiculous. Through Syrqundyl's support and belief in his innocence, Uriel had come to like the elf and dismiss his earlier doubts and suspicions, especially where Arhyvhyne was concerned. That was due more in part to the presence of Evhyqelle than anything else, however.

Evhyqelle was the Maiden of the Wood, a title bestowed yearly by Qyntes'ah upon that elven maiden who best exemplified the elven people in her physical and spiritual beauty, talent and understanding of elven history and the Ancient Tenets. She was a light elf with a milky complexion framed by large red curls that fell below the shoulders. Her green eyes were bright and supplemented an inner glow that always seemed to surround her like an aura. Syrqundyl had made Evhyqelle his betrothed during the recent MidSummer celebration.

Small talk continued through dinner and into desert where they partook of traditional elven fare that consisted of berries gathered from the Sylvan and wrapped in leaves from some of the more exotic trees which were then baked. Before they finished, Lyrqyldyn asked the question that was on his mind since his altercation with Arhyvhyne. "When do you anticipate having to leave our fair city?"

Although he phrased it in a manner to encourage them to stay, Arhyvhyne knew the true sentiment behind the query. She finished eating one of the pastries then answered, "As soon as Ghemella feels she is strong enough to travel." The High Witch looked to the Guardian. "What do you think, Ghemella?"

The Guardian had not spoken throughout the entire meal and now absently brushed back the hair from her face with what once was her left hand. The curved dagger that was now there drew blood. Though she only grazed herself, the wound bled profusely and she swore under her breath. Uriel recalled a time when that same dagger cost him some blood, but did not take any pleasure in Ghemella suffering the same fate. The healer moved to help her but she resisted his efforts. When the Guardian finally assuaged the bleeding, she looked straight at Arhyvhyne. "Tomorrow. I will be ready tomorrow."

The High Witch frowned at Ghemella, then furnished the healer with a questioning look. After a moment of thought he said, "She has a very strong constitution. With a night of uninterrupted rest, she should be *physically* ready to make the journey." He did not mention how long it might take the mental scar to heal.

"We will, of course, supply you with anything you may need and have you conducted to the fringe of the Sylvan," Lyrqyldyn offered.

"That would be greatly appreciated," responded the High Witch coolly.

"I will see to it that everything is ready at first light for your departure."

"This is all really very unnecessary," said Syrquyndyl. "Are you not forgetting something, father?" Lyrqyldyn gave his son a dark look and then feigned innocence. "Father and I, accompanied

by five Warriors of the Wood, will be setting out for the Journey of Homage to Bhel'Ehzz in three days time. I insist that you allow us to escort you—especially in light of your recent travails."

It was difficult to tell who disliked the idea more, Lyrqyldyn or Ghemella. Arhyvhynne, though she was a bit unsure about so long a journey with the Sovereign Prince of the Wood, was in favor of the arrangement. It was definitely a better alternative than going alone with Ghemella and Uriel.

"Lyrqyldyn?" Arhyvhynne asked.

"I would be most honored if you would allow us to accompany and protect you on so important a journey," replied the Sovereign Prince of the Wood. Though he did not care for the idea in the least, he was, after all, a politician. He knew it was always better to keep friends than create enemies. Especially where the High Witch was concerned. She was a very powerful person who could become a very powerful friend.

"Are you certain?" she questioned further. "If you do not mind, I would rather leave all pretenses aside."

Lyrqyldyn admired her for that. He reconsidered the question now that he could probably decline without causing a major incident. But he did not change his mind. He tried to sound sincere when he said, "My offer—or should I say my son's offer—still remains and I hope you take advantage of it. There appears to be grave times before us and I fear you and your companions may have need of assistance."

The High Witch gave Lyrqyldyn a little smile and nodded her head once. "On behalf of myself and my companions, I accept your most generous offer."

"As for before, I will admit I was not pleased with your directive. But I must also say that I probably would have done the

same if I were in your position." Then Lyrqyldyn stood up and excused himself. "I have some business to attend to and there is the matter of our departure less than three days from now. While you are here, I urge you to take advantage of the time to visit our city. Syrquyndyl will act as your guide."

Arhyvhyne, Uriel and Ghemella retired early in anticipation of a full night's rest with proper accommodations. During the next two days, they were given the grand tour of Qyntes'ah. Though it remained unspoken, Uriel did not miss the fact that he was being closely watched by Syrquyndyl and others, due to being under summons from the King. Ghemella stayed at the Estates, persistent in her reclusiveness, praying for an opportunity to take out her pent-up frustrations on an appropriate victim.



Time passed swiftly in the beautiful elven city and the morning of their departure had arrived. The party, consisting of Lyrqyldyn, Syrquyndyl, five Warriors of the Wood, Arhyvhyne, Uriel and Ghemella, struck out for Bhel'Ehzz. They left amidst much fanfare, the citizens of Qyntes'ah hoping that their city would fare well in the business and social negotiations. But the feeling among the city officials and those close to matters of state reflected that of Lyrqyldyn. The thoughts among them were of the serious issues to be dealt with and that there would be a dark shadow over this year's proceedings.

The small group was followed through the streets to the perimeter of the Sylvan Forest. There, while the others returned to the city and their lives, two women remained and watched the party pass into the deep forest. Evhyqelle, the Maiden of the

Wood, though she tried not to show it, was sullen with the prospect of parting company with her new fiancè for a month and a half. Neither had Lhelqerra been her usual pleasant self, owing to the separation from the two men she loved most, one of which had just escaped a dangerous encounter. And the added possibility that the trip itself might be perilous did nothing to alleviate their worries. They held each other's hand, both trying to dismiss the fears that it might be much longer than a month and a half until they next saw their loved ones.

But their worries, at least at the outset, were unfounded. The party had an uneventful journey to the capital of Khaballe. The only thing that aroused their concern was the purported sightings of large birds far off in the distance. The elves were blessed with keen senses and renowned for their sight at great distances. The Warriors of the Wood claimed they saw the birds toward dusk every few evenings after they left the comfort of the Sylvan. But they could never be sure what it was they saw, if anything.

The travelers had taken the main road which ran from Qyntes'ah down to Sevher'tah and from there to Bhel'Ehzz. The weather had been pleasant and they made good time. The journey had taken a little over two weeks. Arhyvhyne had occupied most of her time conversing with Lyrqyldyn and Syrquyndyl. The Warriors of the Wood kept each other company with tales of unrequited love and danger as well as songs. Ghemella kept to herself, understandably still shaken over the loss of her hand.

Uriel also remained detached on the long journey. It was the most out of place he felt since arriving at the Towers. He was the proverbial stranger in a strange land and now that he had been on the road for the better part of a Khaballean month the differences he encountered made him feel uneasy and unwelcome. He tried to

tell himself it would be the same if he had travelled to a remote part of Earth, but everything just somehow *felt* different. It was almost as if he was watching himself stagger and stumble through a maze that a child could master. Like knowing where the exit was but not being able to get there. *But I don't know where the exit is*, he would tell himself over and over again. He didn't even want to consider the reasons he was sent here in the first place.

As the group grew closer to Bhel'Ehzz, the conversations lessened. The days began to fill with the long periods of silence attributable to boredom and fatigue. But for Arhyhynne and Uriel, the days were also marked with apprehension.

The High Witch was forced to admit to herself that, regardless of her personal feelings, Uriel's innocence was far from being a certainty. The truth of the matter was that there was a great deal of strong circumstantial evidence against him, that he was hiding something from her and that in some way her sister was involved. If it were not for her mother's belief in his innocence and the words of Qhen Rhyvhelle which she reflected on a great deal lately, it would be even harder for her to plead his case. And there was the emotional side of it as well. He *had* saved her life after all. But while she tried to convince herself it was just gratitude she felt, she could not deny the small fire that kindled in her heart or the pain there over his inability to confide in her.

The ache of Uriel's longing for Eyrmysse had diminished somewhat during the journey. As did his obsession for the pages of *The Black Lodge*. Uriel felt uncomfortable that the two seemed to coincide. Actually, he felt uncomfortable over a great many things. Guilt assailed him on a regular basis. He experienced shame when he thought of Lynn and Danny. It was embarrassment when Khyrhelle crossed his mind. It was

confusion when it came to Arhyvhyne. He tried to believe that this trip might help clear his mind. Instead, it only seemed to complicate matters. And there was the thought that slowly had pressed its way to the front of his mind the closer they got to Bhel'Ehzz. That it all didn't even matter. That nothing really mattered. Because he was going to be a dead man. Again.

The night before their arrival at the capital, the sky turned yellow as a storm approached on the horizon. That peculiar smell of rain was in the air and the winds were so strong that the elves had a hard time setting up camp and the tents. Parts of the moons could be seen through the swaying trees and the rapidly moving clouds. It was nothing short of ominous.

Uriel's mood mirrored the night. Anger, frustration, fear and guilt raged inside of him as the weather did outside. His sleep was fitful, laden with vague images of Ahrokh's relentless pursuit, always just beyond his range of vision yet closing the distance between them. The visions were accompanied by the guttural voice of the Dark Ones assuring him that he had surely failed. He came awake startled, sweating profusely and his breathing heavy. After he sat up for a moment, Uriel picked up his staff and left the tent he shared with Ghemella to search for some form of release. The Guardian was about to follow but, wrapped up in her own melancholy, decided to leave him be.

With the winds whipping around him, Uriel gazed at the night sky and saw the moons had hardly moved, thinking he must not have been asleep very long. He headed off in no particular direction and stopped next to a willow after he put a short distance between himself and the tents. "Why is this happening to me?" he questioned aloud. "Why don't You tell me what to do? Why don't You give me a sign or something?" As if in response, the first

large raindrops began to fall from the heavens. Uriel made no attempt to move or protect himself from the downpour. He just stood there, feeling forsaken.

As the rain fell upon him, so too, did a wave of inspiration wash over him. Uriel had not been overly active in traditional religions in his previous life, but the unbidden thought of the One whom he felt had suffered a similar fate came into his mind. Whether He had been God, Master, disciple or man, all or none of those, was irrelevant. What mattered was the mystical tie that Uriel was experiencing at the moment. Though he felt it was probably blasphemy, he whispered, "So this is what He must have felt like at Gethsemane." He fell to his knees and looked up into the rain, crying in anguish. "Even as I wish it could be someone else, I know this is a fate I have chosen for myself." A torrent of emotion poured from him and it was a long time that his tears mixed with the falling rain. Finally, he bowed his head and said, "All I ask is that You stay with me and give me the strength to see this through. I don't know that I can go it alone."

Uriel got to his feet and trudged back in the direction of his tent. But as he neared the area, he saw a light issuing forth from the tent of the High Witch. He went there without pausing for consideration. "Arhyvhyne," he called out.

The High Witch drew the flap of the tent aside and peered out into the rain. "Uriel!" she said with surprise. "Come in, come in," she urged him as she ushered him in. "You are completely drenched. Whatever were you doing out in the rain? And at this late hour?"

"I... was doing some thinking." He raked his hair back with both hands and dried his face a bit. He fixed his eyes on Arhyvhyne who was wearing a short, thin white tunic which was

designed more for comfort than concealment. The High Witch was acutely aware of his gaze and folded her arms across her chest. Embarrassed, Uriel walked past her a step or two and remained with his back to her. "Arhyvhynne, I'm so sorry," he admitted, his voice cracking. He had been having a hard time controlling his emotions all evening and it was no different now.

The High Witch touched his arm lightly and then softly asked, "What is it, Uriel?"

Uriel turned to her and tears were once again in his eyes. "I'm sorry for what I said back at the Towers. I really didn't mean it. I know you're just looking out for me. You've been so kind, so understanding. I'd do anything for you, Arhyvhynne. Anything. I'd bring you back a million times if it were necessary." Tears spilled down Uriel's cheek and he repeatedly mouthed the words "I'm sorry" though there was no sound to his voice.

"It is all right," Arhyvhynne whispered to him. She held him gently and then pushed away the hair which had fallen in his face. Just as her sister had done. Arhyvhynne was as beautiful as she was innocent and her sapphire eyes shone with an inner light.

As Uriel felt himself beginning to stir, he used the pretense of wiping his eyes to move back a bit. "I know how this must look. The night before we get to Bhel'Ehzz and all. I'm sorry it's taken me this long to apologize. I've just been ... I don't know. I just haven't been myself lately."

"Since just before MidSummer?"

He nodded and decided to tell her what had been going on. At least partially. "I started studying *The Black Lodge*. I'm not sure why. It just sort of happened." The High Witch's reaction was one of bewilderment with a touch of disapproval, though she wanted to understand. Uriel sat down on the ground and Arhyvhynne

joined him. "It was as exciting as it was frightening. There was such incredible power. At times it even controlled me." He began to get lost in his own words as exhaustion from his emotional battles finally took their toll upon him. He rambled on about his feelings, the obsession and the fear. He went so far as to tell her about his failed first attempt at summoning a spiritual entity. Uriel relived the event to the extent that he became overwrought as he retold it. Arhyvhynne tried to comfort him and was finally able to quiet him, getting him to lie down with his head in her lap. She turned out the lantern and ran her hands softly through his damp hair. Within minutes he was asleep.

It had been a rough emotional night for Uriel, but Arhyvhynne's feelings had not been spared either. She had been to the peaks and the valleys as well. Uriel's apology and his confiding in her had gladdened her heart though she was disheartened over his involvement with *The Black Lodge*. But there was one thing that the High Witch could not discount. One thought took precedence over all the others: *Eyrmysse*. Though Uriel had been careful not to mention her name even once, Arhyvhynne knew that her sister was at the heart of the matter. And it disturbed her more than she wanted it to.

Those were the thoughts that the High Witch of the Moons dwelled on as she listened to the steady sound of rain falling on the tent. Suddenly, streaks of lightning brightened the sky. By their light, Arhyvhynne saw the flash of a golden pentagram on Uriel's exposed chest followed by the rumbles of thunder in the distance.

CHAPTER XXIX

Dawn welcomed the travelers with grey skies. As they each went about their business, no one had the temerity to make any disparaging remarks about Uriel apparently spending the night with the High Witch. Arhyvhynne was extremely uncomfortable and embarrassed by the situation. She hadn't expected there to be any consequences from their night together. After all, nothing happened. Nothing *physical*, anyway. She did not know what to think of her discovery of Uriel's golden branded pentagram. It confused her. Worse yet, it scared her. The High Witch had been up half the night considering the possibilities. Her mind was filled with so many thoughts and questions that she could only retreat deeper into herself. She made no effort to explain her actions and mentioned nothing regarding the brand neither to Uriel nor anyone else.

Arhyvhynne, Uriel, Ghemella and the elves quietly set out on the last morning of their journey to Bhel'Ehzz and arrived at the capital of Khaballe shortly after midday. Small crowds had gathered along the main western road through the city to witness the approach of the party. Uriel thought they assembled to get a firsthand look at the elves, High Witch or maybe the unicorn, but before long found it to be otherwise. The people had fear in their eyes. Children cowered behind their parents. The adults pointed at Uriel and whispered amongst themselves. Most made signs of warding at his passage. But no one spoke or made a comment loud enough for Uriel to hear.

Though the Ministry had decided to keep the news of Uriel

and the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction from the public, word had leaked out soon after the completion of MidSummer. Some said there was talk of it even as early as the Closing Ceremonies. Thus, Uriel's arrival at Bhel'Ehzz was fraught with much expectation, apprehension and foreboding.

The party was duly received and welcomed with proper decorum by the royal family when they arrived at the castle. Uriel was presented as a guest of the High Witch of the Moons and even were he blind, he would have felt everyone's eyes riveted on him. The situation recalled to Uriel's mind the similar feelings he experienced when he was first brought before the Council of the Moons.

Though Uriel was surrounded by royalty, it was the King's Advisor of who he was most in awe. The wizard fingered the silver inverted pentagram that hung from his neck as he gazed at Uriel from beneath his raised cowl. He was an imposing figure regardless of the circumstances, but just the sight of the black robed wizard put fear into Uriel's heart, though his fright went beyond mere physical appearance. This was someone that he felt he somehow knew, someone that was inexplicably involved in the very reason for his presence in Khaballe. Uriel involuntarily shuddered from the chill that ran the length of his spine.

King Nherycyn thanked the elves for making the pilgrimage and representing the interests of Qyntes'ah. He then went on to tell Arhyvhynne and Uriel that it was unfortunate that the gravity of the situation required their presence there as well and thanked them for responding to the summons without any coercion. Athar informed them that it would be necessary that Uriel be confined to his quarters until the time of his questioning. The High Witch challenged the order and offered to be held accountable for Uriel.

She did, after all, deliver him to Bhel'Ehzz as requested. But Athar would not retract the directive. The best Arhyvhyne could do was to gain visiting rights for herself, and that was only through Rhenycyn's intervention.

Without further discussion, the visitors were led to their respective rooms. Uriel was placed on a floor by himself with a guard and one of Athar's ten stationed outside his door. Arhyvhyne and Ghemella shared adjacent rooms on a different floor. The elven party was assigned a wing on yet another floor, as were all the other cities' representatives who had journeyed to Bhel'Ehzz.

After the opening ceremony took place at midday of the next day, there would be the ritual commencement of the Khaballean Conclave of 2999. These two events were comprised of nothing more than the formal introduction of all the attendees and the stating of the agenda for the next week. Following, a banquet welcoming the representatives would be served.

The next day would see the King's Contest, a highly anticipated event. This was a military engagement pitting all the assembled forces of the respective cities against each other. Six representatives from each city combated simultaneously against their adversaries on horseback with defeat coming by being unseated. Like the joust and hand-to-hand combat of the *trevhette*, the combatants used specially dulled weapons. After the initial meeting with lances, the knights would then revert to their swords. Two prizes were awarded: the highest prize went to the city whose knights were the last to remain on the field of battle; the other to the city whose knights unhorsed the most opponents. Only Kho Rhon'ah, which was symbolically represented by Athar, and Mhykord'ah, the city of clerics, did not compete in the event

expected to be won by Bhel'Ehzz and the Knights of the Flaming Sword.

After putting their things in order and taking a short rest, Syrqundyl and the Warriors of the Wood left the castle for the Royal Commons. There they examined the field, sized up their opponents for the King's Contest and pitched their tent amidst the others from around Khaballe. The elves erected their brown tent with a green embroidered leaf between that of Sagghez'ah and Mhykord'ah.

Syrqundyl looked at the surroundings, thinking that it felt like it had been more than five years since the last time he had been in Bhel'Ehzz. Everything looked pretty much the same to him as he looked at the other tents, trying to determine who had returned from the previous Journey.

The tents were set up in a circle, beginning with Kho Rhon'ah. The wizard's tent was empty. It was striped gold and purple with emblems of a key and an opened book in the opposite color interspersed on the canvas. Though they were not a part of the battle, Athar and his wizards would view the Contest from here.

Next, Syrqundyl's eyes went to the silver tent with two rising suns on it which belonged to Sagghez'ah. He went over and had shared a few words with his northern neighbors. Their knights, the Militia of the Northern Moor, talked mainly of the many attacks by SoulSlayers to their city in the recent months. The northeastern city was made up of mostly humans and was radically different from the rest of the Khaballean populace in terms of their philosophical and modernist positions. They were the only city who elected all their officials by popular vote on a regular basis and practiced a combination of democracy and socialism.

Syrqyndyl went back to his own tent, sat on the ground and looked over to the tent on the other side of them. The empty red tent had the image of a white, rearing unicorn on it and belonged to the Clerics of the Suns from Mhykord'ah. The city of clerics was situated to the north on the eastern coast. The clerics were made up of all the races and would not participate in the battle. Their presence was critical, however, as it was their responsibility to heal any who were injured. And it was likely, based on past Contests, that they would have a busy day.

The Warders of the Winds from Sevher'tah completed the half circle on the right. Except for a scowl, Syrqyndyl did not bother acknowledging them. They were a motley bunch from a dangerous city to the south and east of Qyntes'ah which welcomed even the most sinister of characters. The knights of Sevher'tah were content in practicing amongst themselves and consuming ale while lazily sitting around their black and white tent on which was rendered the phases of the moons.

The purple tent of Bhel'Ehzz, adorned with the images of a green dragon and a grey castle, was empty. None of the Knights of the Flaming Sword were there as they were performing their normal duties in and around the castle. Syrqyndyl shook his head thinking of the last Contest and the punishment Mharkhel and Setryv had administered to his body. Though the elf had been sore for many days after, he was eager to test himself against them in this rematch of sorts.

As Syrqyndyl moved his gaze to the next tent, his eyes were met by those of Dhankwor. The dwarf was one of the Soldiers of the Stone from Fhon Dhawz, hearty mountain-dwellers who had ventured from their home in the Milkym Range which was to the southeast of Bhel'Ehzz. Dhankwor peered out at his arch-rival

from inside the dwarven tent, which was grey and blue and had depicted three mountain peaks with suns on either side of the middle peak and a moon on the outside of both end peaks.

Dhankwor was big for a dwarf, nearly five foot. He was almost as wide as he was high. His eyes were the same color as his bushy eyebrows and long auburn hair which was separated into two braids and rested on his shoulders. His obligatory beard was combed into three forks, the middle one being braided. He was intent on defeating the elves at all costs. He and Syrquyndyl had battled each other for the entire Contest of 2994 with Dhankwor outlasting Syrquyndyl solely by the intervention of Mharkhel and Setryv who had turned their attention on the unfortunate elf.

Wishing an end to the staring match, Dhankwor tore his eyes away from Syrquyndyl and settled them on the tent next to his own. The tent of Ghlor Nhor and the Ancient Khaballean Company was striped the green and yellow of their fields with a black scythe stitched unto it. Located a little to the south and west of the capital, the inhabitants of Ghlor Nhor were a very traditional agrarian community. It was from here that the more modern thinkers of Sagghez'ah had emigrated after their intense and bitter arguments of centuries before.

The dwarf heard his name called and looked over to the tent of the Home Guard of the Hills from Vhyt Dhaxz. "Are you two going to start now or wait until tomorrow for the rest of us?" one of the halflings asked.

Though Dhankwor tried to keep a straight face, he couldn't help but laugh at the good-natured halflings. The "Little Ones," as they were warmly referred to, were an extremely family orientated people known for their friendly manner as well as their constitution. They were shorter than the dwarfs, seldom attaining a

height of four feet. Neither were they as solidly built. They resembled humans for the most part and had beards but no moustaches. Like Ghlor Nhor, the halfling city was based on an agrarian economy. They occupied a blue, green and brown tent with the design of a wheat seed scattered throughout the brown portion.

Finally, there were the Sentinels of the Seas from Rheg Nhor. Like a few of the other cities, their blue and white striped tent bearing a black anchor was empty. It was assumed that the knights from the southern port city had gone to the river or lake to pass their time in a more familiar environment.

The brightly colored canvasses of the tents could not, however, hide the gloom that shadowed this Journey of Homage. Rumors concerning Uriel and news of the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction were widespread and the faces in and around the Commons and the capital were, for the most part, as grim as the dirty grey skies above. But there was one among the Warders of the Winds from Sevher'tah whose demeanor was more intense than the rest of his comrades or those about the capital. The big man with the strange, detached black eyes was focused on the enormity of the task he would be undertaking the day after next and staying unnoticed until the successful completion of it.



The Khaballean Conclave of 2999 began the following day at mid afternoon. First was an introductory statement by Nherycyn welcoming the group and thanking them for their expected participation. The King tried to paint a picture depicting the realm as stable and the rulers in control despite the recent rumors and

accusations. He wanted it known that the seat of the kingdom was working from a position of strength. This was meant to quell any challenges that might be voiced regarding questions of authority before they were brought out. It was also an attempt to diffuse any alliances that might have been created between the cities to weaken the King and his government during the negotiations.

The formal introduction of the attendees followed. Next, the stating of the agenda for the upcoming week took place. This was marked by the obligatory petty arguments of trying to position certain topics at what were considered more favorable times. Some requests, particularly those by Sevher'tah and Rheg Nhor, were designed to be rejected in order that the refusals could be used as a bargaining point for later negotiations. One part of the agenda passed unanimously, however. It was decided that the first order of business would be concerning Uriel and the disappearance of the Rune of Destruction. After the agenda was finally ratified, the Conclave adjourned until the Welcoming Banquet.

One could say that the business of the Conclave actually began at the banquet that evening. The guests included the cities' representatives, members of the Ministry and the High Witch. Though they were assigned specific seats, it was not long before they broke up into little cliques and began plying each other with ales and wines. Even those who did not necessarily side with each other on certain issues shook hands and patted backs, hoping to chance upon a careless word or loose tongue. Only those diametrically opposed to one another, the elves and dwarves and the moderns and traditionalists, did not bother with attempts of subterfuge towards each other.

The banquet started with a toast delivered by King Nherycyn.

It was a very tense moment as they poured the *Regi Argenti* for the first time since the death of Valdhon. Dhonlaa was particularly disturbed over it and Prince Rhenycyn took sadistic pleasure in the fact that she was. Though there were nervous comments and half-joking calls for water as a substitute, the toast was made and the wine consumed without any adverse effects.

The entertainment during their sumptuous meal was provided by tumblers, jesters and jugglers. After dinner they were regaled by a company of madrigal singers and minstrels who were renown all over Khaballe. Though they called the southwestern forest of Mhakyelle Deep their home, they led the life of the *zhynghyrr*, constantly travelling and performing, living out of their horse-drawn wagons. The group was comprised of six madrigals and six minstrels. The madrigals were each three men and three women while the minstrels were all men. They obliged their guests by playing a variety of accompanied, unaccompanied and instrumental pieces from all the regions of Khaballe. And while all were accomplished musicians and singers, the achingly mellifluous voice of Khaselle, one of the women and heavy with child, caused the listeners to bring handkerchiefs to their eyes on several occasions.

After several encores, the performers were finally allowed to take their leave. The remainder of the evening saw the guests reverting back to the political scheming that began before dinner and taking part in high stakes matches of *dhorsoghi*. The board game was similar in some respects to backgammon but with more of the planning and strategy of chess. As with backgammon, lady luck frequently alternated her preference from one contestant to the other, causing the wagers to increase exponentially.

While she may not have been an accomplished *dhorsoghi*

player, Dhonlaa was far and away the winner when it came to information gathered and influences made. The new Minister of Internal Affairs was not only gaining recognition for herself and her stances, but popularity and support as well. That of course had nothing to do with the fact that she was one of the only women present and, as usual, dressed to kill. She had a talent for planting seeds in people's minds and nurturing the resulting thoughts and ideas so that they believed them to be their own. Where men may normally have felt threatened or perhaps uncomfortable with a woman in her position, they instead accepted her as an influential supporter. The only people she had difficulty winning over were those such as the dwarves and traditionalists who relegated women to more domestic duties and the representative from Sevher'tah who was on to her game before she started it.

Arhyhynne, on the other hand, did poorly in her attempts to gather support for herself in her new position and for Uriel's plight. Her age, timidity and inexperience in these types of gatherings all worked against her. Even her strengths proved to be counteractive. The minds she touched were grossly distorted by alcohol (or perhaps they were the *real* personalities coming out) and led her to aversion. Those who were purely interested in her for her physical beauty disgusted her. Depressed over her lack of garnering support, the High Witch made an early retreat to her quarters.

As the night wore on, the ale continued to flow, wagers continued to increase and money continued to change hands. Dhonlaa, absolutely aglow with her conquests, continued to work to neutralize Rhenycyn. The representatives continued to attempt to maneuver into advantageous relationships. Disguised as stewards, Thenycyn's and Rhenycyn's spies continued to gather

information on who was aligning with whom. As did the women the royal family supplied for the enjoyment of the representatives. Outside, in the city, the knights from the various cities, most of whom were partaking of the local goods, both of a liquid and sensual nature, continued to prepare to do battle the following day. But the big knight from Sevher'tah had grudgingly refrained from the amusements his comrades took part in and continued about his own business in the city. Though his thoughts were also of the following day, it was more to do with his part in changing the future direction of Khaballe than the King's Contest.



Morning brought to the capital the hot suns and dry breezes that were customary for this time of year. Workers had been busy preparing the Royal Commons and erecting the stands for the King's Contest from the rising of the first sun. The knights also rose early, in part to prepare themselves for the Contest and in part to rid themselves of the effects from the indulgences of the previous evening.

By the start of the Contest at midday, the knights were anxious, the clerics grim and the stands full. A great many wagers had been placed by commoners and politicians alike and a small fortune was resting on the outcome. Though Bhel'Ehzz was the favorite to win both prizes, the insiders said the smart money was on the Warders of the Winds.

There were those who knew of the friction between Mharkhel and Setryv and figured it could result in a divided effort. The situation between the knights and the Princess had not changed since MidSummer: Ellycyn would neither speak with Mharkhel

nor commit to Setryv and both knights blamed each other for their misfortune. But some argued, however, that Vhyqyrd would not stand for the knights' personal feelings to enter into the competition. The Captain of the Knights of the Flaming Swords did not demand victory, he simply expected it. After all, Bhel'Ehzz had won the last two Contests under his direction.

With the suns at their zenith, King Nherycyn dropped his handkerchief and the King's Contest began. The combatants charged each other and, after the initial clash, the Contest shifted into more of a controlled melee. The dwarves and elves quickly confronted one another as did the traditionalists and moderns. It was general opinion that those four would eliminate each other as they invariably did in past Contests, leaving the outcome to be decided between Bhel'Ehzz, Sevher'tah, Vhyt Dhaxz and Rheg Nhor.

The first quarter hour of the King's Contest was charged with excitement and ended with the sound of blaring horns from the trumpeters. This signaled an opportunity for the knights to have a short rest and regroup. More than two fifths of the combatants had already been ousted from the field, some grievously hurt even though they used blunted weapons. As had been anticipated, the heaviest losses came from the dwarf-elf and modern-traditionalist engagements. Only two knights of the Ancient Khaballean Company remained while each of the three other adversaries had three. One of the three elves left was Syrquyndyl who had so far proved himself as capable with a sword as with a bow. Dhankwor was one of the surviving dwarves. Of the other four teams, Bhel'Ehzz had lost one knight, the others two each. The surprise so far had come from the Warders of the Winds who had the lead in unhorsing opponents.

By the time the horns sounded for the second time, thirteen more men had been unhorsed and the Ancient Khaballean Company and Militia of the Northern Moor had been eliminated. After a long and bitter struggle, the remaining modernist knight had made a daring move and unseated the last traditionalist. But the glory was short-lived. In the midst of his exaltation, a halfling rode by and put the Sagghez'an to the ground. The halflings of Vhyt Dhaxz were tied with Bhel'Ehzz and Sevher'tah with three combatants left. Only two knights each remained from Qyntes'ah, Fhon Dhawz and Rheg Nhor. And thanks to the tremendous efforts of the big knight with the distant disposition from the Warders of the Winds, they still led the others in the unhorsing category.

Some dramatic changes, however, took place during the third quarter hour. The Warders of the Winds surprisingly became the third team eliminated from the tournament. Though he was wreaking havoc on his opponents, the big knight from Sevher'tah took a questionable fall after only being grazed by a halfling. As the field was narrowing quickly, he decided it was best to exit from the competition before more attention could be focused on him. Especially if it came from Mharkhel or Setryv, who he had been careful to stay away from. With his departure, his remaining cohorts were off their horses soon after. That allowed the Knights of the Flaming Sword to surpass the Warders of the Winds and take the lead in unseating the most opponents. In the overall competition, Fhon Dhawz, Qyntes'ah and Rheg Nhor were left with one knight apiece. Vhyt Dhaxz had two halflings remaining; Bhel'Ehzz had Mharkhel and Setryv.

As the afternoon wore on, the heat contributed to one's debility as much as an opponent did. With only seven knights

enduring past the third quarter hour, it was unlikely the tournament would last to the fourth sounding of the horns. Syrquyndyl and the lone dwarf, Dhankwor, were barely able to stay upon their mounts. They had been at each other the entire afternoon as they had five years ago, without either gaining an advantage. Pyrhyvel, a powerfully built black man of Rheg Nhor, had proven himself worthy of the surviving combatants and was equally exhausted. The two halflings and Mharkhel and Setryv were in better condition, but were still far from performing as they did at the beginning of the first quarter hour.

The last quarter of the first hour began with Syrquyndyl and Dhankwor continuing their personal battle. Pyrhyvel of Rheg Nhor had been tied up with Mharkhel but sensed an opportunity and joined their conflict. Syrquyndyl was unable to defend against both men and went down. The dwarves' shouts of joy quickly turned to groans, however. Dhankwor made an unnecessary strike at his elven nemesis as he was going down, making sure he would be unseated. But the move gave Pyrhyvel an opening and he took it. A moment later Dhankwor was laying on his back beside Syrquyndyl.

In the mean time, the halflings had attacked Setryv when Mharkhel decided to forsake his former best friend and ride after Pyrhyvel. The halflings mixed feints with strikes to keep Setryv off balance. Then, one of the halflings allowed Setryv to engage in battle with him. While Setryv was occupied with him, the other charged. The halfling's horse, a palomino Dhaz, compact, sturdy steeds of the mountains, crashed into the blonde knight's Ghwer and knocked him off balance. The halflings turned on Setryv in tandem and dealt him several strong blows which eventually put him out of his saddle.

The twosome then turned their attention to Mharkhel and Pyrhyvel. They decided it would be in their best interests to get the big knight from Bhel'Ehzz out of the tournament first. So they joined Pyrhyvel and ganged up on Mharkhel. Had he been fresh or his adversaries less talented, Mharkhel probably would have been able to withstand the onslaught. As it was, he made a longer stand than anyone thought possible. But in the end, Bhel'Ehzz, to everyone's surprise, became the sixth team eliminated out of the eight. Vhyqyrd, true to his self, remained stoic and only allowed himself a brief entry in his notebook. But it was plainly evident to anyone who could see beneath the elf's calm exterior that he considered this an embarrassment and took this as a personal affront.

There now remained only the knights from Vhyt Dhaxz and Rheg Nhor. The halflings had a momentary discussion before they moved forward to meet Pyrhyvel. The black man regarded them suspiciously for he knew the halflings to be cunning. Their first attempt was a repeat of the move that had been successful with Setryv. But that very nearly backfired as Pyrhyvel was ready for it and almost unseated one of the halflings.

After some perfunctory fighting designed to test each other's stamina, the halflings withdrew for another brief discussion. Their plan decided, one rode out and engaged Pyrhyvel while the other stayed back as before. After a moment, the other halfling charged. Pyrhyvel, assuming it was yet another try at a collision, readied himself in a defensive position. But he was not prepared for what followed. The screaming halfling, instead of running his horse into Pyrhyvel's, jumped from his Dhaz at the precise moment and grabbed the black man around the neck. The halfling jerked Pyrhyvel backwards and that, combined with the force of the

impact, caused both of them to crash to the ground.

A thunderous cheer erupted from the halfling contingent as the remainder of the team from Vhyt Dhaxz rushed on to the field to congratulate each other and celebrate their victory in the King's Contest. After a few moments the excitement died down and all the participants lined up in a traditional formation to offer each other consolation or congratulations.

The awards ceremony then took place and it was with chagrin that Vhyqyrd accepted the Unhorsed Opponents award for Bhel'Ehzz. The Field of Battle award was humbly accepted by Xumhek, the City Father of Vhyt Dhaxz. The crowds dispersed and the participants of the King's Contest were given the remainder of the day to rest and refresh themselves before their efforts were honored with a banquet at the castle.

The banquet was similar to the previous evening, although there were a greater number of guests, including city officials and Athar's wizards. The city officials rubbed shoulders with some of the representatives and Ministers, attempting to gain some visibility or recognition that might lead to what they deemed more prestigious positions. The wizards, as usual, were left to themselves. They, for the most part, lacked social skills and were not well understood or particularly trusted by the common people. The politicians viewed them as a necessary evil. It was, therefore, a bit unusual that several of the wizards were speaking with Delfyn and Fhyndhella and that two of them, Azarel and Uxzel, sat next to the Minister's daughter during dinner. Throughout the meal, the frail wizard engaged Fhyndhella in conversation, allowing the other to lace her food with a mild drug and cast a minor spell on her without notice.

After the banquet the representatives loosened their garments

and relaxed for a few moments before retiring to the Assembly Hall to begin the deliberations of the Conclave. Fhyndhella rose from her seat next to the wizards and made her way over to Rhenycyn and sat next to him. She whispered something to him which the Prince tried to ignore. When she persisted, Rhenycyn excused himself and the two of them went off a little way to talk. They had a brief discussion after which Rhenycyn gave her a questioning look. Fhyndhella nodded, bringing a smile to the Prince's lips. He gave her a peck on the cheek and the two of them returned to the table arm in arm. King Nherycyn signaled for the members of the Conclave to convene after waiting for his son to return and those who were required left for the Assembly Hall.

The knights and remaining guests had the pleasure of listening to the madrigals and minstrels from Mhaktyelle Deep. After the performance, some of the knights stayed at the castle and, amidst ale and other spirits, cursed the misfortunes they encountered during the afternoon Contest to those who would listen. Others chose to explore the city and drown their disappointments in the consoling arms of some young, starry-eyed paramour.

The latter was the case with the big knight from Sevher'tah. Or so he told his companions. He had been careful to stay out of Mharkhel and Setryv's sight since he had arrived in Bhel'Ehzz. It was not much of a problem during the Contest as he wore a helmet and visor, which he kept on even after the tournament ended and the knights offered each other their respects. But he was extremely uncomfortable at the banquet, though he had wrapped part of his head in bandages and wore an eye patch to disguise his appearance. At his first opportunity he left the castle, making sure that several people heard of his plans to venture into the capital in

search of a one night stand.

He found the person he had made arrangements with the previous evening waiting at the prescribed meeting place, an alley behind a tavern in the lower class part of town. They talked quietly for a couple of minutes, passing time, making sure no one had followed either of them. They both became alert at the faint sound of scraping from down the alley, but upon investigation, found the culprit to be a mangy dog. When he finally felt the place secure, the knight from Sevher'tah held out a pouch and eyed the other man. He was almost as big as the knight, though not quite as tall or muscular. *That's all right*, the knight thought, *no one'll know the difference when I get through with him*. The other man grabbed the pouch and pulled out a knife, all in one motion. He smiled and shaking his head, said to the knight, "*Qyqyx*." But before he could draw another breath, there was a glint of steel and the knight had buried his own knife in the victim's throat. Another knife swiftly entered the man's chest and he dropped to the ground dead, disbelief still in his eyes. The knight quickly swapped clothes with the man and placed his bandages and eye patch on him. Then he proceeded to disfigure him beyond recognition.

The knight from Sevher'tah, now dressed as a commoner, stopped at a nearby tavern and had himself an ale. Then he made off into the night. On his way back to the castle, he thought about the men waiting for him there. They really bothered him. He would have to do something about them when this was all over. Before they did something to him.

When he arrived at the castle, he entered a familiar, small room by means of a concealed door in the outer wall. Two black robed wizards were waiting for him. "How is our replacement knight?" the smaller, frail one asked.

Mhylzul responded with a wicked smile.

"They will be concluding soon. Are you ready?" questioned the other wizard.

"Yeah, I'm ready," the assassin nodded. "How about you guys?" If Mhylzul was waiting for an audible response, he was disappointed. Azarel and Uxzel only smiled.

CHAPTER XXX

The Assembly Hall was a large, spacious, square room with several antiquities and relics from past reigns exhibited on the walls and in cases. Historical maps, significant legislative documents, narratives of wars, diaries, swords and shields—some still with traces of the blood that had been drawn in battle, all drew one's attention to them in their own unique way. But the item that dominated the room was a massive dragon's head mounted above the entryway, preserved from Mhelynycyn's reign and supposedly the first beast the DragonHunter had slain.

Those in the hall wandered to their seats after examining many of the artifacts. Each city of Khaballe was represented in the Conclave of 2999 by their highest ranking official who acted as Lord Mayor (even though they all had different titles) and anyone else deemed appropriate. Most of those participating had made previous Journeys and attended Conclaves before. The High Witch and the Ministry were also present and could voice their opinions as well as be queried but did not have a direct part in the actual negotiations. The representatives were seated around the large table in the center of the hall with banners from the cities hanging behind them on the walls. The other guests were located around the periphery of the room.

Rhenycyn went over his notes, matching them with the faces he saw gathered around the large, highly polished table. He was familiar with most of those present and, through the effort of his spies (especially the females), had accumulated a good deal of information pertaining to what each one sought. Or so he thought.

The first name on the Prince's list was that of Athar. The King's Advisor represented Kho Rhon'ah, though it was not actually populated. This was generally considered to be a tool of the King's; a way to increase his power in issues that went to a vote. As with the Ministry, the King was not obliged to adhere to the outcome of a vote by the representatives. It was generally taken, however, that unless it was regarding a national issue or concerning national security, the King would refrain from using his power to overrule a vote. Rhenycyn was of the opinion that Athar would be out to discredit him, probably in the matter pertaining to Uriel.

The Prince had grouped Athar's name with Tomhylhen's, the High Priest of the Suns from Mhykord'ah, the city of clerics. The self-righteous old man was accompanied by Eybbenna, a young female cleric who was devout and tireless in her work. Though they would be petitioning for an increase in the prescribed wages for their profession as healers, Rhenycyn knew Tomhylhen and Athar shared a common goal.

Zhultanyr, from the dangerous city of Sevherth'ah came next on Rhenycyn's list. Zhultanyr was the cities' Warden, a sly, cunning and sometimes treacherous man. His favor was frequently sold to the highest bidder, which usually required renegeing on deals previously made with others. The Prince looked up from his notes and gave him a cold stare, his mind searching for a plausible reason to dismiss Zhultanyr from the Conclave, knowing that his presence here would eventually lead to difficulties for the kingdom. The Warden returned Rhenycyn's gaze with a tight, calculated smile. It was rumored his primary goal was to obtain the exclusive rights to the lucrative *erhybovo*, a leaf with strong medicinal properties recently discovered in Tanglewood to the

west of their city. But Rhenycyn's operatives uncovered attempts at establishing black market trade of weapons, alcohol and addictive narcotics with other cities.

The Prince shifted his gaze to a black man from the city on the far southern tip of Khaballe, Rheg Nhor. Farhyng was an old salt who was rumored to have been a pirate in his younger days and thought to be in league with Zhultanyr. The Castellan governed the sea port town that was populated by all the races but more so by blacks from what once was a huge castle overlooking the Raffha Sea, hence his title. He had been talking about obtaining more relaxed regulations for shipping, but Rhenycyn suspected Farhyng would be instrumental in Zhultanyr's black market trade.

After a moment, the Prince returned his attention to his notes. *Ydryj Jyr*, he thought and shook his head once as he glanced at the next name on the list. Ydryj Jyr, Ghlor Nhor's Eldar, was a stubborn, narrow-minded man, who was set in his ways and intolerant of other's views or opinions. Being from the city of traditionalists, he was likely to argue vehemently against Rhenycyn's proposals for improvement.

Conversely, Rhenycyn thought he could expect support from the northeastern city of moderns, Sagghez'ah. They had sent their Senior and Junior-Elects, Ptalp and Rhyrt. The Prince was not familiar with either of them. Ptalp was said to be an intense young man, thoroughly dedicated to the proper running of government in Sagghez'ah. Rhyrt was much older and due to his age and experience, a bit more conservative. He had served terms as Senior-Elect on two previous occasions. Together they made a skilled and efficient team. Their foremost interest was in obtaining support from Bhel'Ehzz in dealing with the malevolence of the

SoulSlayers in their area. But Rhenycyn was unable to find out whether they would request it of a military or magical nature. Either way, it would probably fuel the fires of Athar and Tomhylhen against Uriel.

The remaining names on the Prince's list gave him little cause for worry. Lyrqyldyn of Qyntes'ah was a supporter of the monarchy and was seeking to keep the status quo. The elf had hammered out several agreements in the 2994 Conclave that had proven to be very shrewd and profitable.

Fhon Dhawz' Clan Chief of the Stone, Wodhyn, also backed the crown. The interest of the dwarves was in curtailing the widespread illicit production and marketing of non-dwarven ales. The illegally made, watered-down brew was being peddled all over Khaballe and being passed off as authentic dwarven spirits. Similarly, the dwarves were concerned about the number of building contracts being awarded to non-craftsmen who submitted lower bids. The non-craftsmen frequently used different, inferior materials than they had listed in the bids and the result was a reduction in the overall quality of the erected structures. Rhenycyn's only problem with either the elves or the dwarves would be in keeping them from arguing with each other.

The last name on the Prince's list was Xumhek, the City Father of Vhyt Dhaxz. The old halfling was an astute, respected politician who knew the ropes and had developed many friends and alliances over the years. And while he could have used it to his advantage on many occasions, he tried to always act for the best of Khaballe. The halfling city had been able to secure favorable trade agreements during the last Conclave and figured to do so again. After all, Fulnhyx was the Minister of Commerce, and had been tutored by Xumhek for a number of years before

being appointed to the Ministry.

King Nherycyn opened the Conclave of 2999 by restating the agenda and informing them that their goal for the evening was to determine what should be done about Uriel. Then he proceeded to direct Athar to inform the representatives of everything that was known concerning the entire matter. The King's Advisor was dramatic in the retelling, extracting sounds of surprise and disconcerting looks from his audience on several occasions. Athar seated himself when he was finished and was thanked by Nherycyn.

"Arhyhynne," the King said as he motioned her to rise. All, including the High Witch, noticed the absence of her title when he addressed her. The High Witch was generally considered the second most powerful person in the realm next to the King. But she and the Witches of the Moons historically had been relegated to a minor role because of their magical ability, lack of visibility in the kingdom and apolitical stance. Their proficiency in the art of spell casting made others who were not so gifted uncomfortable. That, combined with the fact that there were very few witches who resided outside the Towers, drew some suspicion and caused uncertainty as to their motives. And because they tried to remain neutral in political matters, they were looked upon as not being supportive.

Nherycyn continued after Arhyhynne had stood. "Before I allow you the opportunity to supplement Athar's rendering of what has taken place, I must advise you that I am not at all pleased with the position the Witches of the Moons have taken regarding this matter nor with that of how you view yourselves in relation to the kingdom."

"I am sorry, Your Highness," the white robe responded in a

quiet, shaky voice, "but I am afraid I do not know of what you speak." Nherycyn related the episode with Lhynette and Arhyvhynne was at a loss for words. "I do not understand. That is so unlike Lhynette. Perhaps she was misunderstood?"

The King motioned to his Ministers. Most of them responded by shaking their heads. Dhonlaa vocalized the sentiment. "There is no doubt concerning her statements. She was very emphatic."

"Do you mean to say you do not adhere to that position?" the King asked.

"Your concerns and that of the general populace do not normally coincide with our own. We have dedicated ourselves to following our Paths. To that end, we have always sought to be politically indifferent and remain, to a certain degree, autonomous." Arhyvhynne typically still wore her heart on her sleeve and had not yet mastered the political art of eloquently disguising the truth in her few short months as High Witch. She could tell by the low grumbles and the looks she received that her statement had not been what those present had wanted to hear.

Before things could turn more unpleasant, Prince Rhenycyn spoke up. "I am sure this is simply a question more of semantics than of anything else. Perhaps this is a topic that we should relegate to another time. We are digressing from our stated agenda."

Nherycyn gave his son an undisguised look of displeasure. But when he spoke, he was in agreement. "Perhaps you are right. Let us continue with our original topic." The King turned to the High Witch and spoke to her, again, omitting the title. "Arhyvhynne, have you anything to add to Athar's recapitulation of the events thus far?"

The High Witch tried to paint a gentler, less threatening

picture than Athar's ominous one. She focused on Uriel's bringing both her and the unicorn back from the cold grasp of death and his struggles against that fiendish entity, the SoulSlayer Ahrokh. She ended by stating Khyrhyelle's conviction in Uriel being sent to assist them in this time of foreboding and her own belief in that premise as well.

Arhyvhyne barely finished before Tomhylhen spoke. The High Priest of the Suns was of the same age as Nherycyn. He was tall and thin with long, white hair reaching to the middle of his back and a constant look of fanaticism in his light blue eyes. His voice was strong from many years of delivering sermons on living the righteous life. "Your mother was murdered. Murdered! Qhen Khyrhyelle's death can be attributed to her willingness to believe in the absurd. And you are obviously indebted to this wizard for your life. Not to mention that it appears you are giving yourself to him." Tomhylhen said the last statement with a hint of disgust in his voice, then turned to the others, saying, "So much for an impartial account."

Arhyvhyne was appalled. "I have not given myself to him!" she responded to Tomhylhen.

"Did he not spend the night in your tent the evening prior to your arrival in Bhel'Ehzz?" the High Priest asked.

The High Witch glared at Lyrqyldyn and Syrquyndyl before answering. "Yes, but he came to me regarding some questions he had concerning his studies. We spoke for a long time. It was very late when we had finished and as it was still raining, I suggested he stay."

"This is really of no relevance," commented Xumhek. "She is, after all, the High Witch and can do as she pleases."

"On the contrary, if she has depraved and disgraced herself

with this wizard, it will certainly influence how she presents her story." Ydryj Jyr, an old man with a few wisps of hair and a bony body, jumped at the chance to offer a disapproving remark. In Ghlor Nhor it was unheard of for a woman to have relations before she was married.

"I am not certain that is the truth of it Ydryj Jyr," said Lyrqyldyn, trying to atone for the leak which obviously came from his camp. "The High Witch has travelled with the wizard for many leagues and many nights. If it is as you say, why has she not been with him the entire time? Why only the one night?"

"Maybe that is all he needed," Zhultanyr darkly suggested. The fleshy Warden of Sevher'tah ran a hand through his long, greasy grey and black hair and grinned, showing rotted, yellow teeth.

The High Witch was near tears. "I have told all of you that nothing happened!" she stated emphatically. "I swear it upon my crescent," here she took her medallion in hand, "and my position as High Witch."

"The assurances of one aligned with Thaum are of trifling worth," maintained Tomhyhlen.

Rhenycyn intervened for the second time. "As Xumhek has stated before, we are speaking of the High Witch here. Her relationship with the wizard—which I am sure is nothing more than what she has said—is of no consequence. As is the evidence against him. What little there may be is circumstantial in my opinion."

"It is because of your opinion that we have been forced to gather together and determine how we might best deal with this situation," responded the Prince's father caustically. Nherycyn drew some wary looks from many of those in attendance. This

was nothing like the King whom they had heard had become passive and left the governing of the kingdom to his wizard Advisor. He was letting it be known who was in control and was using his son as an example to prove his point. "I think it best if we reexamine all the material that Athar and Arhyvhynne have presented to us and see if we cannot arrive at some conclusion as to the wizard's guilt or innocence."

The members of the Conclave agreed with their King and began the process of sifting through the alleged facts. Most of the time the discussions were fraught with heated arguments. Better than two hours had passed and they had failed to shed any discernable light on the matter. What had become apparent were the factions that the various representatives sided with. Those with a vote who were against Uriel consisted of Athar, Tomhylhen, Zhultanyr, Ydryj Jyr and Farhyng. Those that believed him innocent, or at least not convinced of his guilt, were Xumhek and Ptalp. Nherycyn, Wodhyn and Lyrqyldyn remained noncommittal, much to the displeasure of the royal and elven sons, Rhenycyn and Syrquyndyl.

Uriel's defense was weak due to several things. First, his biggest supporters, Arhyvhynne, Rhenycyn and Ellycyn, did not have a vote and therefore carried less weight. Secondly, the influence of the Ministry, who were against him, was significant. And finally, the circumstantial evidence regarding the Scrolls, the SoulSlayers and the Rune was very incriminating.

The King cleared his throat and announced, "The hour is getting late and I do not believe there is anything left to be gained by further discussion. Will someone propose a motion for resolution?"

Not surprisingly, it came from Tomhylhen. "I move that we

bring this Uriel before us tomorrow when we reconvene and if he cannot prove his innocence and exonerate himself completely that he be put to death."

Arhyhynne exclaimed "No!" A speechless Rhenycyn turned wide eyes to the High Priest. Eybbenna, the pretty cleric with long brown hair and grey eyes began to say something but was stopped by Tomhylhen. But Nherycyn seemingly continued without notice. "Do I have a second?"

Zhultanyr stood up and simply said "Second."

"Any discussion before we vote?" Nherycyn rolled his eyes as he asked the mandatory question.

The High Witch, Prince and even the Princess pleaded with the assembly to reassess the motion in light of its seriousness. Ptalp, the young man with shoulder-length brown hair and blue eyes, spoke to the same point also. "I do not profess to believe in the innocence of the wizard Uriel. However, I do believe in his right to be considered innocent until we *prove* him guilty. Governing by a guilty before innocent mentality is a thing of ages past. This will eventually lead to subjecting to the dungeons anyone who disagrees with us without hope of a fair hearing."

"Do you think Thaum will be fair?" asked Tomhylhen.

"How can you in good conscience represent the very city which has been ravaged the most by the SoulSlayers?" demanded Ydryj Jyr.

"That is exactly our point," insisted Rhyrt, the Junior-Elect of Sagghez'ah. "Even though we have probably suffered the most from the effects of these ominous events, we have such a strong belief in the universal truth of our premise that we remain steadfast in our convictions—as do the people of Sagghez'ah. We feel it morally and ethically preferable to acquit a hundred guilty

people than condemn one innocent one."

"One life in the scheme of things is as a grain of sand on the beach," commented Zhultanyr.

"The time for discussion has passed," proclaimed the King. "I will now collect the vote in the traditional manner, beginning in the north." The vote would be taken from each representative, beginning with the northernmost city and working its way south. Bhel'Ehzz would be the last to vote. A majority was necessary for the motion to pass.

"How is it viewed in Kho Rhon'ah?" queried King Nherycyn.

"In favor," responded Athar.

"How is it viewed in Sagghez'ah?"

"Opposed," said Ptalp and Rhyrt in unison.

"How is it viewed in Qyntes'ah?"

"Abstain," answered Lyrqyldyn. Arhyvhyne felt betrayed and Syrquyndyl could barely contain himself amidst the several loud whispers and grumblings. But a look from the father suppressed any forthcoming arguments from the son.

"How is it viewed in Mhykord'ah?"

There was no question with Tomhylhen. "In favor."

"How is it viewed in Sevherth'ah?"

Neither was there any doubt with Zhultanyr. "In favor."

"How is it viewed in Fhon Dhawz?"

Wodhyn, the dwarven leader, a stout, squat man with braided auburn hair and a matching beard that went down to his knees, had been uncharacteristically silent through most of the proceedings.

"Abstain," was his vote.

"How is it viewed in Ghlor Nhor?"

As was expected, Ydryj Jyr answered "In favor."

Four votes in favor, only one opposed and two abstentions.

With three votes remaining, things looked very grim for Uriel.

"How is it viewed in Vhyt Dhaxz?"

"Opposed," voted Xumhek.

"How is it viewed in Rheg Nhor?"

"In favor," replied Farhyng.

Though five were now in favor and only two opposed, the outcome truly hung on the vote of Bhel'Ehzz. If the King voted opposed, the difference would be reduced to two. The statutes stated that in cases where the number of abstentions could affect the result, it would become necessary for those who were neutral to change their vote and commit one way or the other. And the general feeling was that both Lyrqyldyn and Wodhyn would vote opposed.

The room was still. Many were on the edge of their seat and all eyes were on Nherycyn. The King paused then said, "It is viewed in Bhel'Ehzz as favorable." There was an outburst of loud whisperings and mutterings and Nherycyn waited for it to subside before he continued. "Six in favor, two opposed, two abstentions. The motion is passed." This was, for all intents and purposes, a decision to condemn Uriel to death.

The King then called for Mharkhel and Setryv who were stationed on either side of the hall entry. After the fiasco of the Contest, Vhyqyrd had assigned the two knights this duty, knowing that it would aggravate both of them and not provide them with an outlet to vent themselves. "You two and one of Athar's wizards," here Nherycyn looked to his Advisor who nodded once in affirmation, "will conduct the wizard Uriel to the dungeons and secure him in a cell to himself and there remain for the duration of the evening. You will then conduct him to this hall on the morrow at the hour we are to reconvene." The King concluded the meeting

with the words, "Until the morning then."

As the assembly dispersed, Rhenycyn did not acknowledge his father in any manner, but pushed himself away from the table in obvious disgust and hurriedly left the Assembly Hall.

Syrqyndyl had words with his father. "How could you abstain? How? You saw him. He was with us the entire trip. He is no more guilty than I."

"Our vote was irrelevant," replied Lyrqyldyn curtly.

"First of all, it was not 'our' vote. It was entirely yours. And it could have been relevant. If the vote were closer, it might have influenced the remaining votes and given the King cause for more reflection."

"In the end," said the Sovereign Prince of the Wood in a tired tone, "it did not matter. And by remaining neutral, we have not made any enemies."

"Tell that to the High Witch," Syrqyndyl sharply retorted.

Arhyvhyne stopped King Nherycyn as he was leaving with Mharkhel and Setryv. "I am sorry that circumstances dictated that we be in disagreement upon our first meeting together."

"Yes, that is unfortunate," the King responded coolly.

"And particularly over a matter as grave as this." The High Witch tried to beseech Nherycyn's mercy one more time. "I truly believe that Uriel has been sent to deliver us from the evils that our threatening the kingdom. So did my mother. If he is imprisoned or... worse," she could not bring herself to say the words, "I am afraid we will be making a grievous mistake and depriving ourselves of our only hope."

"I am afraid you are the one who is mistaken. You are young and naive and lack the wisdom and experience needed to handle matters such as these. You think with your heart and not your

mind."

Arhyvhyne reflected on the King's words, especially the last statement. "Would it be possible to visit him before he is transported to the dungeons? I think it might be a bit easier if I spoke to him first."

Nherycyn's voice was still harsh when he responded. "No. I do not believe it wise to allow you to see him before he has been safely secured and warded in our dungeons. Now if you will excuse me."

As the King departed with the knights, Arhyvhyne was left with the contradictions that were her life. She felt very much alone in the room still filled with people. She felt helpless even though she was probably the second most powerful person in the realm. But worst was her feeling of inadequacy. "He saved my life and I can do nothing to spare his," she quietly reproached herself.

Nherycyn was feeling the best he had in years as he made his way towards his room. His subjects and diplomats across the realm once again regarded him with respect. He was being decisive and firm, wielding the power of the kingdom with an iron hand. *As it should be*, he thought.

He climbed the last set of stairs with the knights a step behind him. When he reached the top of the flight, Nherycyn breathed a heavy sigh at seeing his son waiting for him down the corridor, in front of the doors to the King's royal suite. Nherycyn began to walk down the hallway and then motioned the knights away, instructing them to tend to Uriel. Head bent, he trudged up to Rhenycyn, suddenly too tired to deal with the argument that was sure to follow. Upon reaching his son, Nherycyn looked up, about to discourage any objections. Instead the King wore a look of total confusion. It was then that Rhenycyn grabbed his father by the

shoulder, pulled out a sword and hacked off his head.

Mharkhel and Setryv turned when they heard the commotion and went to the King's assistance. At first they had thought that the King had suffered a heart attack and that Rhenycyn was running down the hall to get a healer. But it was not until they neared the grisly scene that they realized what had actually happened.

Mharkhel dropped to his knees in a state of shock. Although Nherycyn and the knight were not what one would call close, the King had been the only father figure Mharkhel had known. The big knight could neither move nor tear his eyes away from the severed head.

Setryv gave chase down the hall, but Rhenycyn was nowhere to be found. After several minutes the blonde knight returned to where Mharkhel still knelt. "Stay here with the King while I alert the castle!" If Mharkhel heard him, he did not acknowledge it and probably could not have moved if the castle walls were coming down around him.



Rhenycyn entered the abandoned shack on the outskirts of town, making sure he had not been followed. A voice whispered his name and he quietly answered "Yes."

"I cannot believe you are finally here," the voice continued from the shadows.

"It is me, is it not?" he stated as he held out his arms and spun around.

"Where there any difficulties?"

The Prince shook his head, "It was really very easy, actually."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Perhaps the knights when I left, but no one since." Obviously pleased with the answers, the naked figure of Fhyndhella stepped out from the shadows and into Rhenycyn's arms.

The couple made love many times that night. Fhyndhella exhibited the wildness of a first encounter and was completely giving of herself. Rhenycyn, accustomed to women who were more skilled in the art of sensual pleasure, was rather enticed by her inexperience. But in the early hours of the morning, Fhyndhella awoke, startled. Realizing what had happened between her and the Prince and not understanding how, Fhyndhella broke into silent sobs. When she was able to compose herself, the Minister's daughter gathered her clothing and ran off in the night.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Prince, somewhat taken aback by Fhyndhella's absence, began his return trip to the castle early in the morning. Rhenycyn figured Fhyndhella had wanted to get back to her father's estate before she was missed and left without waking him. He re-examined his feelings for Fhyndhella as he rode through the city, but sadly, they remained unchanged. Even though they shared a night of pleasure, apparently it was not the ingredient missing in their on again off again relationship. He felt somewhat guilty about that, but knew better than to try to fool himself into believing otherwise.

As he galloped down the streets of the city, Rhenycyn caught some strange looks from the early risers. More peculiar was the fact that no one hailed him and some even shrank into doorways so as not to be seen. The Prince was trying to determine the reason for this lack of recognition when a detachment of Knights of the Flaming Sword waylaid him. They bound and escorted him the remainder of the way back to the castle as a hostile prisoner and was not informed of the crime he was accused of committing until they arrived. There, he was met by Vhyqyrd, who read the charge to him and had him dragged down to the dungeons.

The Prince was placed in a cell next to Uriel and there guarded by Mharkhel, Setryv and one of Athar's ten, Zomyel. Rhenycyn was in a state of shock, both over the death of his father and that he was accused of murdering him. He sat on the cold stone floor, his elbows leaning on his knees and his head resting in his hands. When he looked up, his hazel eyes were glazed over.

"Mharkhel, what of my sister?"

"We are under orders not to converse with you under any circumstances," Setryv said before Mharkhel could answer.

Mharkhel gave his former best friend a look of loathing and said, "Such was your loyalty to me also." Then he turned to the Prince. "The Princess Ellycyn is under house arrest and confined to her quarters. Let me say, Your Highness, that I do not believe any of this regarding either of Your Highnesses for a moment."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Setryv. "You were right there with me. You saw him take his head. They had to drag you from the body." The blonde knight shook his head. "You have truly lost all your senses."

"Tell me, Mharkhel. Tell me what has happened."

To the discontentment of Setryv, the dark knight went on to relate to the Prince the events of the previous evening. Mharkhel maintained that while the murderer admittedly resembled Rhenycyn, at the distance they had been down the hall, it would be difficult to be positive about the true identity of the assailant. He also explained that Ellycyn had been sequestered because of her support and defense of her brother.

Arhyvhyne had arrived to see Uriel while Mharkhel and Rhenycyn discussed the tragedy that had befallen the Prince. She had been guided through the dungeons by Beleghor, one of Athar's white robes. Upon seeing the High Witch, Uriel arose and reached a hand out between the cell bars to her. But instead, he came into contact with a barrier and recoiled back, screaming in pain. Arhyvhyne noticed the trace of a smile on the lips of Beleghor and thought it inappropriate for one wearing white to react in that fashion and expressed her distaste to the wizard. She then asked Uriel how he was and received a reassuring response.

"I am sorry I could not be here earlier," she told him, "but it was not allowed what with all that has happened."

"Yeah, I thought I was having a bad night until I heard about the King." Uriel lowered his voice to a whisper and gestured ever so slightly with his head. "Do you think he did it?"

"I do not believe so." Arhyvhyne twirled a blonde lock around her finger as her sister sometimes did. "The Prince has been very supportive of you. Do not ask me why, but I think the events involving you and the Prince are somehow related."

"Really?"

The High Witch nodded and they were quiet for a while. Then she asked, "Was it terribly bad—I mean being here all night?"

"You have no idea what it was like. I didn't know what the hell was going on. They just came to my room and dragged me down here. I was surprised they let me take my staff. Then there were rumors about the King and the Prince. It made things pretty tense, pretty scary." Uriel began to reach his hand out to her again and remembered himself. "It's so good to see you. I'm really glad you're here. Having you here makes me feel... I don't know. Like everything's going to be okay."

Arhyvhyne's smile lit up the dungeon as did the light in her sapphire eyes. But both faded quickly. She had decided to tell him. "Uriel, I know of the mark," she said quietly.

Uriel furrowed his brow. "The what?"

"The pentagram," she whispered and pointed to his chest.

The silence was as heavy as the dank air. Uriel hung his head and was trying to figure out how to answer her next question, which he figured would be why he hadn't told her about the brand. But she took him completely by surprise. "Are you the Destroyer?"

"I don't know," he responded after the shock wore off. "Sometimes I wonder. And it scares me. But I swear to you Arhyvhynne, I swear I never hurt your mother and I had nothing to do with the Rune. Honest." The words even sounded hollow to him. "I only know what They told me. I was sent here to save Khaballe. I wish there was a way to make you believe me..."

"Did mother know?"

Uriel shook his head. "No."

"Does anyone else know?"

Uriel could only look at her, the undisguised guilt easily discernible. And Arhyvhynne could only stare back at him, feeling the torment and anguish mix with the cold fire in her heart as she thought of Eyrmysse.

Just then Vhyqyrd appeared with two other Knights of the Flaming Sword. "It is the order of the Regent that you both appear before the representatives and Ministry of Khaballe for a formal inquisition at which time your respective fates will be decided." The Captain of the Royal Guard addressed his knights. "Mharkhel, Setryv. You will escort the Prince. You other two—and you as well," here he indicated the wizards, "take charge of the wizard. If either of them causes you any difficulty, kill him."



A hush fell over the Assembly Hall when Rhenycyn and Uriel were led in. The Prince walked in with his head high, his eyes defiant. Uriel seemed to portray an old beggar, unsure of himself and using his staff for support. They were seated next to one another on a stone bench at the end of the table. Uriel gazed around the room, astonished at the large crowd that was gathered.

Even greater would his surprise have been had he known that a mob had converged outside the castle walls, asking for his head. The rumors that had run rampant regarding the conditions in the north had been confirmed in the minds of the commoners when Uriel arrived at the capital. For them, the solution was always the easiest one—remove the root of the problem and the rest will naturally fall into place.

Uriel strained to find his solitary benefactor among those filling the crowded hall. When he finally located her, Arhyvhyne looked away, pain clearly reflected in her sapphire eyes. Then his attention was inexplicably drawn to a forbidding figure in black robes. The silver inverted pentagram hanging from Athar's neck glowed with a life of its own and the wizard seemed to cast a monstrous shadow which engulfed everything about him. As when he first met the wizard, Uriel involuntarily shuddered.

While being led to the hall, Rhenycyn had wondered who had seized the kingdom's power and ascended the throne as Regent. It disturbed him greatly that his father was barely cold before someone exhibited disdain for the heritage of his family and usurped the throne. Upon his entrance to the hall, the Prince looked to the chair which had been occupied by his father just the night before. There was sheer hatred reflected in Rhenycyn's hazel eyes as he fought down the fury which raged inside him.

After learning of the King's death, the representatives of Khaballe had reconvened within the hour. Their first order of business was to hear reports from Vhyqyrd and Setryv. When it became apparent that the Prince was involved and was nowhere to be found, Ellycyn was summoned. The Princess was not, as one might imagine, in any state to be questioned. She was accompanied by two healers and still suffering from the effects of

shock. When it was revealed that the murderer was most likely her brother, she became completely irrational. She threatened and accused those around her and had to be physically removed from the hall.

With no one left from the royal family to govern, Zhultanyr immediately motioned to appoint a Regent. Ptalp argued that they were once again pursuing a guilty before innocent stance and that, in the end, it may not be necessary to go through the procedure. Xumhek agreed, stating that the evidence against Rhenycyn was far from conclusive. But the motion passed.

Even before the vote, the question some were silently asking was who would be appointed. Tomhylhen would have some support, but he was not desirous of ruling the kingdom. The old cleric was content with his power base in Mhykord'ah and knew that a religious state as he would institute would not be openly welcomed by the general populace. Xumhek, with his appeal and network of connections, would probably be the only other candidate with any significant backing. The others were either of questionable character, had unpopular positions or, in the case of Lyrqyldyn and Wodhyn, of the wrong racial makeup.

But the outcome of this vote had been arranged long before. Zhultanyr left no doubt as to where he stood. He nominated Athar, arguing that the King's Advisor had long been directing the interests of Khaballe and that it was only natural that he continue. Tomhylhen agreed and Farhyng threw in his support. A vote was called for and, with Bhel'Ehzz vacant, Athar needed only a simple majority to be appointed Regent. To the votes of Zhultanyr, Tomhylhen, Farhyng and Athar himself was added Ydryj Jyr which amounted to a five to four victory. And as Athar seated himself in the chair designated for the monarch of Bhel'Ehzz,

Xumhek began to suspect that all was not as it appeared.

So it was that Athar would preside over the hearings of Rhenycyn and Uriel. On several occasions there had been talk of adding another Minister to oversee the judicial system in Khaballe. But as the office had not yet been created, the process of dispensing justice in Khaballe differed from city to city and often from case to case depending on its seriousness. For example, in Ghlor Nhor, Ydryj Jyr decided every case brought to him while in Sagghez'ah, Ptalp operated in a fashion similar to democratic societies by having specially elected individuals who acted as professional jurors. In Bhel'Ehzz, the methods widely varied. Infractions or disputes of minor or local importance were handled by the office of the Lord Mayor. Those crimes that were serious, had national interest or were against the government were handled by the King or the Prince, usually with assistance from the King's Advisor.

The first case to be heard was that concerning the murder of King Nherycyn. The assembled representatives listened to Athar direct the testimonies of Setryv, Mharkhel, Vhyqyrd, Ellycyn and others.

Setryv stated that he had little doubt it was the Prince he saw waiting for the King by the doors of the royal suite. Although Setryv did not actually see the fatal blow delivered, he saw no one else entering or leaving the hallway. Upon giving chase, the blonde knight could detect no trace of the assailant and assumed that he escaped by means of a secret passage, most of which were only known to the royal family.

Mharkhel testified that the murderer could not possibly be Rhenycyn. But when asked to support his statement, the big knight only delivered a sermon on the exemplary character of the Prince

and could not offer any solid proof of innocence. At that point, Athar called attention to the fact that Setryv and Mharkhel had been on opposite sides as of late. When relating his version of the events surrounding King Nherycyn's demise, Mharkhel grudgingly admitted that the murderer wore clothing similar to what the Prince had been wearing and was roughly the same size as Rhenycyn. He also confirmed that no other person entered or left the hallway.

Vhyqyrd stated that he considered Mharkhel and Setryv the two best Knights of the Flaming Sword and that he had no reason to question the accuracy of their accounts. Also, that upon being apprehended, Rhenycyn's clothing showed no traces of blood nor had his sword been marked in any way. But a bloody sword such as the one the Prince carried was found outside the castle grounds. Asked if anything else had been reported to him or if anyone was conspicuously missing, the Captain of the Guard responded that nothing was out of the ordinary. Only that a knight of Sevher'tah had been found murdered in the lower-class section of the capital.

While the King's Advisor had been clever with Mharkhel, he was masterful with Ellycyn. Though he appeared sympathetic, he knowingly let the Princess vent her anger in support of her brother which in turn led to her own disrepute. Athar put forth many questions regarding the Prince's relationship with his father. And after every vehement denial by Ellycyn, he softly chided her into telling the truth. Every time the Princess tried to justify Rhenycyn's attitude it came out sounding like Ellycyn agreed with the Prince's disposing of the King. It was if she cast another spadeful of dirt upon her brother's grave with every remark she made. Ellycyn was so distraught over her failed attempts to vindicate her brother that she broke into uncontrollable fits of

sobbing and had to be escorted from the hall.

Afterward, Athar continued, garnering comments from several Ministers who confirmed the animosity that at times existed between father and son. Athar also questioned some of the attendants at the castle regarding Rhenycyn's whereabouts. The only one able to offer anything of significance was the equerry who said that about the time in question, Rhenycyn, irritable and in a hurry, appeared at the stables and left with his horse.

Athar ordered the guards to assist the bound monarch to his feet. "Does anyone present wish to question Rhenycyn before he is allowed to speak in his defense?"

This was a delicate matter. If one spoke out against the Prince and Rhenycyn was exonerated, it would be a safe bet that one's political career would be over. However, if one supported the Prince and he was found guilty it might look equally bad.

Nevertheless, Ptalp spoke up. "Your Highness could you please inform us regarding your whereabouts at the time of your father's death?"

It had taken enormous self control from Rhenycyn to remain silent during the various testimonies. He was surprised at Setryv and sorry for Mharkhel. He expected no less from Vhyqyrd. Of Ellycyn, he felt anger over her treatment and sorrow over what she must be going through. He knew how she felt and shared much of her anger and frustration. But the Prince collected himself. His initial reaction was to threaten everyone present that if they did not immediately release him, they would themselves be subject to incarceration and investigation. But he realized that he was not in control here and a statement such as that would only enhance his appearance of guilt. Finally he answered, calmly, matter-of-fact. "After leaving the Assembly Hall, I went directly to the stables. I

did not go to my father's room or anywhere else for that matter."

"Where did you go after leaving the stables?" Ptalp continued.

Rhenycyn looked over to where Fhyndhella sat next to her father. She looked like a frightened animal, her teary eyes pleading with Rhenycyn not to reveal their tryst. The Prince thought this one over carefully. If he told the truth, he would ruin Fhyndhella's reputation and, knowing her, she was likely to deny it anyway. She had nothing to gain by her admittance. If Rhenycyn was able to extricate himself from this predicament, Fhyndhella would no longer be an acceptable choice as a Queen, for it would be public knowledge that she would ascend the throne not as a virgin. If found guilty, her only link to the throne would lose his head. Even if she were to admit to being with Rhenycyn, it would not likely do anything in behalf of his defense. It might even be viewed as incriminating. "As it had been a somewhat difficult evening, I just wanted to relax and get away for a time."

"Again I ask you, where did you go?"

"Nowhere in particular," responded Rhenycyn. "Just riding."

"All night?"

"For a good portion, yes. When I tired, I stopped and rested near a glade. Upon arising, I returned to the castle. Or should I say I was returned to the castle." The Prince's last remark succeeded in gaining a few laughs.

"Did anyone see Your Highness?" asked Zhultanyr.

"Not that I know of."

The hall was quiet for a time before Athar asked if anyone else had any other questions. Zhultanyr spoke up once again. But his question was not directed to Rhenycyn. "Lady Fhyndhella, did you per chance see the Prince last evening?"

Fhyndhella, thinking her indiscretion was safe, was caught completely off guard. "W-what?"

Zhultanyr pushed his greasy hair from his face and a cruel smile appeared. "Were you not with the Prince last night, wantonly celebrating his ascension to the throne and anticipating you're becoming Queen of Khaballe?"

Delfyn jumped up from where he was seated, his face red with anger. "You will apologize now, Zhultanyr! Or you will answer to me."

The voice of Athar cut in. "Delfyn, you will allow her to answer."

The Minister of Housing turned on the wizard. "Athar! This is my daughter we speak of. I will not permit this!"

"I will only remind you once that you have no authority to grant or deny permission." Athar's dark eyes showed no mercy when they fell on Fhyndhella. "You will answer the question put forth by Zhultanyr."

"No!" Delfyn interrupted. "I will not stand for such treatment!"

The King's Advisor motioned to two guards. "Take him away," he ordered. There was some confusion and discord while Delfyn was removed and many startled looks passed between those in the hall. When things settled down, Athar spoke to all those present as though his words fell upon ears not worthy to hear them. "So will any of your fates be lest you forget who is Regent." Then he focused his attention once again on Fhyndhella. "Do you wish a cell next to your father's?" The voice was quiet, as if he talked to a child.

Fhyndhella shook her head. Though she had a couple of minutes to regroup, she was not at all convincing when she

answered, "No, I was not with Prince Rhenycyn."

"Is that an attendant of yours?" Athar indicated a young woman sitting next to Fhyndhella. Fhyndhella nodded and Athar said, "Arise. You will state whether the Lady Fhyndhella was in her quarters during the entire evening last night." The wizard fingered his pentagram, adding, "And before you answer, consider your fate if you perjure yourself."

The young woman faltered, clearly torn between her loyalty to her mistress and her fear of the consequences that her loyalty could result in. "Yes, she was," the woman finally managed.

But Athar had already made up his mind. "It is obvious by the length of time it has taken you to respond that the truth differs." The King's Advisor summoned two other guards and ordered the woman to be led away.

"That is enough Athar!" The Prince's words stopped the guards in their tracks and silenced the loud murmurs in the hall. "Leave Fhyndhella and her father and her attendant out of this. This is between you and me."

The wizard stroked his beard slowly. Though he looked to the Prince, he spoke to the guards, his voice just above a whisper. "You will carry out my order or you will find yourselves occupying the cells on either side of hers." Unsure of themselves, the guards decided to adhere to the orders of the party currently in power and led the woman away. They did not even know that the wizard bent their wills to his own.

Then Athar drew himself up and wrapped himself in a glamour. Those in the hall looked upon him with awe. When he addressed the assembly, his voice was strong and compelling. "I have held the position of King's Advisor for a great many years and through many reigns. And while all the Kings and Princes I

have known have had their differences, none were as pronounced nor as serious as those between Nherycyn and Rhenycyn. They were repeatedly at odds with each other over numerous issues, some of great import. It is no secret that the King delegated many of his responsibilities to me instead of Rhenycyn. You are all aware of this and you all know why. Nherycyn had little confidence that his son could adequately rule this kingdom.

"From an early age Rhenycyn has coveted the power of the throne and to that end he prepared himself for it. Alas, he would never be King for he had an older brother. But an older brother who would mysteriously die. There had been speculation as to how Prince Thenycyn died. Some of the healers thought poison to be the cause. But it could never be substantiated. So Rhenycyn's first obstacle had been removed, leaving him as the sole heir.

"As the years passed, he sought to take a more active part in governing Khaballe and urged his father to adopt his policies. And though his father began to relent, Rhenycyn would encounter yet another who would stand in his way. The voice of experience and reason from the Ministry saw that the strategies and schemes of the Prince were designed to enhance his own position, not that of Khaballe. For his dedication and loyalty to Khaballe, Valdhon was murdered on his eightieth birthday. Poisoned. In his own home. Supposedly by a steward belonging to Rhenycyn. A person who was conveniently never found.

"And when everybody took issue with him concerning the proper disposition of this wizard," here Athar indicated Uriel, "Rhenycyn looked to his father for support. But Nherycyn, who had recently seen the error of his ways and sought to regain control of the kingdom from his son, renounced him. Thwarted from realizing his goal and sensing his influence diminishing as

Nherycyn wrested the ruling power from him, Rhenycyn murdered his father. Blatantly. Without any regard for consequence or repercussion. Before two witnesses who are beyond reproach.

"You may be asking why. Why such a desperate act by one who would eventually come to rule this kingdom anyway. The answer lies in the one seated next to the Prince. For he is the true motivator of Rhenycyn's actions. For they are as one." Athar walked over to where Uriel was seated and the eyes of those in the Assembly Hall shifted from the King's Advisor to Uriel as the wizard began the culmination of his argument.

"Ever since Rhenycyn first learned of this wizard he has sought to protect him. Against my counsel, against his father's better judgment, against the Ministry, against the representatives of Khaballe and against those without the castle walls that call for his head. He has ever endeavored to keep this wizard from being brought before us. Though there has been nothing but misfortune since his mysterious appearance in our land. Though he be capable of performing powerful magics not seen for hundreds of years. Though the High Witch Qhen Khyrhyelle had been murdered. Though the vile SoulSlayers ravaged the northland. Though the Rune of Destruction had been stolen from the Towers of the Moons. Though his obvious similarity to the Destroyer in the Sacred Scrolls of the Moons & Stars cannot be disavowed. I now ask if any of you can disregard this." Athar's voice thundered, "Arise you fiend, you vestige of Thaum! Arise and make yourself known!" Uriel had no chance to comply or oppose the directive as two guards pulled him to his feet. Athar suddenly tore the robe and tunic from Uriel's body, revealing the golden brand of the pentagram. At the same time, the liquid crystal at the top of his

staff blazed forth. When the brightness subsided, the crystal had hardened into the form of a pentagram.

Chaos swept through the hall. Cries of surprise, gasps of horror and curses could be heard. Many hastily made signs of warding as they physically shrank from Uriel. Even the guards had involuntarily backed away. Arhyvhyne dropped her head, unable to cope with neither the scene nor Uriel's look of confusion and betrayal. Rhenycyn was in disbelief, though he thought that this was somehow just another ploy by Athar. Uriel could not bear the weight of the accusatory stares. And he could not understand why any of this was happening. He had been sent to save Khaballe. But he could no longer harbor any doubt: he was no savior, he *was* the Destroyer. He had travelled a long, twisted road since he arrived here, clouds ever pursuing him, only for night to descend upon him, only to be subjected to this cruel fate. *He will bear sorrow and pain, hate and distrust.* Uriel bowed his head as would a repentant sinner.

Athar quieted the assembly as he outstretched his arms and brought them down slowly. When they came to a stop at his sides, the hall had been stilled. "What have you to say now, Rhenycyn?"

Seeing the look in Athar's eyes, it became painfully obvious to the Prince what was happening. He could only respond in one way. "You have done a magnificent job, Athar. You have systematically had my father murdered, framed me with the crime, have effectively incapacitated my sister and gained the throne. As for Uriel, I do not know what part he plays in this deadly game of *dhorsaghi* you have cast us into. But if you stand against him, it must surely mean that he is not what you claim.

"You have argued that I have long sought to take my father's place, that I have performed these heinous acts in order to secure

my position. But I think it perhaps has been you all along who has sought the throne. For it is you who have wasted no time in occupying my father's chair."

Athar looked at Rhenycyn and laughed quietly to himself, shaking his head. Then he turned to Uriel. "And what have you to say?"

It took a long moment for Uriel to lift his head and meet the eyes of his accusers. It took him longer still to find the courage to speak. "I don't..." he started and then sighed. "I don't pretend to know what's going on and I can't explain why all these things have been happening. Especially where I'm concerned. All I can tell you is what I know. And that is that I was sent here to save Khaballe. I don't know how. I don't know from whom. Just that I'm supposed to save you."

As the night before he reached Bhel'Ehzz, Uriel received an inspiration. He straightened himself, his eyes shone forth and his voice held conviction. "There's been a lot of allusion to me being the Destroyer that is spoken of in the Scrolls. I'm not going to try to convince you otherwise." There could be heard quiet exclamations of surprise and comments by many that his statement was no less than an admission of guilt. "But I ask you to consider this. One must destroy an existing structure in order that it might be recreated in a more perfect manner. One must destroy the old before the new can be ushered in. And whatever is threatening Khaballe must be destroyed before Khaballe itself is." When he finished, he noticed both the pentagram on his chest and the one on his staff were softly aglow.

Arhyhynne had lifted her head at the sound of Uriel's voice and now looked upon him, her sapphire eyes shining with pride. She felt ashamed that she had doubted him and reproached herself

for overlooking the interpretation that saw the Destroyer as a benefactor. In all her extensive research and internal debates, she had only considered the Destroyer as a force to be eradicated.

Rhenycyn was surprised to find that he also found truth in Uriel's words. As did some others. Particularly Eybbenna, who had been deeply moved by Uriel. The cleric had been searching for a greater exposure to that spiritual light which she felt she had not been receiving as of late. But more found his words to border on sacrilege.

"You blaspheme!" cried out Tomhylhen. "You seek to distort the holy teachings of the Sacred Scrolls."

"No," Eybbenna said to Tomhylhen, shaking her head. "He speaks the truth. You are—"

The High Priest cut her off, yelling, "Be silent!" and slapped Eybbenna across the face.

"He speaks lies," countered Ydryj Jyr. He approved of the action by Tomhylhen, feeling that the High Priest erred by even allowing a woman to be present at these proceedings. And the words that Uriel used regarding the destruction of the old only incited him. "As he has caused the fall of the High Witch Arhyvhyne by his pretending the savior, so does he seek to ensnare us all. Whether you are the Evil One himself or one sent by him, it is you that we need protection from. It is you that we must destroy."

"You don't understand. I may be your only hope," maintained Uriel.

"If I stood where he now does, I, too, would say anything to try to preserve my life," avowed Zhultanyr.

"I have heard enough," stated Farhyng. "Athar, let us proceed."

The King's Advisor turned Regent moved away from Rhenycyn and Uriel and returned to his seat. "It now becomes my duty as Regent to ascertain from the representatives of Khaballe how they view the guilt or innocence of the accused. We have heard recriminatory speeches and false prophecies from the accused but nothing that explains their actions nor exonerates them. We have also heard expert witnesses who have seen the vile deed committed. And we have all seen the Destroyer revealed. Outside the walls of the castle, the loyal subjects of Khaballe urge us to protect them and their families by taking their heads. I now ask you, how is it viewed in Sagghez'ah?" As before, a simple majority was needed for conviction.

Ptalp and Rhyrt quietly discussed their response with one another. Minutes went by before they answered. "Rhenycyn as guilty; Uriel as innocent."

Loud protestations were heard over the vote for Uriel's innocence. Athar silenced them with his hand and continued. "How is it viewed in Qyntes'ah?"

This was difficult for Lyrqyldyn. Though the evidence was undeniable, his family had a long and respectable relationship with the monarchs of the Cyn Dynasty. And there was the matter of his son's opinion and that of the High Witch. After a short internal debate he responded, "Both as innocent."

More disapprovals were voiced from the assembly and once again Athar quelled them. He looked none too happy when he queried the town of the clerics. "How is it viewed in Mhykord'ah?"

"Both as guilty," answered Tomhylhen. Knowing what the answer would be, Eybbenna had vacated her seat at the table. She did not want to have Tomhylhen's vote reflected on her.

"How is it viewed in Sevher'tah?"

Zhultanyr pushed his long, greasy hair from out of his face and smiled. "Both as guilty."

"How is it viewed in Fhon Dhawz?"

Like the elves, the dwarves had good relationships with Mhelynycyn on down. But where Lyrqyldyn saw it as acquitting Rhenycyn, Wodhyn saw it as vindicating Nherycyn. "Both as guilty." Again there were loud remarks. Only one more vote was needed to condemn the Prince. And seeing that Athar had not yet voted, his fate seemed sealed.

"How is it viewed in Ghlor Nhor?"

"Both as guilty." Ydryj Jyr seemed pleased with himself, happy that he be the one to deliver the fatal vote to Rhenycyn. The Prince had not shown any emotion and neither had Uriel, who was now down to his last guilty vote.

"How is it viewed in Vhyt Dhaxz?"

Xumhek showed his disapproval over the results of the vote by shaking his head. "Both as innocent."

"How is it viewed in Rheg Nhor?"

Farhyng replied, "Both as guilty." Uriel only closed his eyes, Arhyvhyne broke into tears.

Athar cleared his throat then announced, "It is viewed in Bhel'Ehzz as both being guilty. The votes declare guilt by seven to two and six to three respectively. As such, it is my decree that the following sentence be duly executed. At midday tomorrow, in the Royal Commons, before the people of Khaballe, you Rhenycyn, are condemned to die by being beheaded, the same fate that you yourself inflicted upon your own father, King Nherycyn. And immediately thereafter, you who call yourself Uriel, are condemned to death by the same manner. Guards, take them

away!"



Azarel and Uxzel made their way down towards the dungeons. Azarel was not pleased at having the black man as his constant companion lately. But it was the will of the Dark Master, thinly veiled as a desire to have Uxzel acquire more knowledge from Azarel. It was more likely a sign that the Dark Master was losing confidence in his highest ranking servant.

The two wizards stopped by a nondescript wall. Azarel spoke a Word then made a sign and subsequently a door magically appeared before them. After making sure no one saw them, they opened the door and entered the room.

The room was medium sized. There were two torches burning, one each on the side walls. Scattered along the walls in various places were five sacks. There was a small table and a chair, the former having the remnants of a meal still on it. Close to the table was a cot in which Mhylzul lazily reclined.

"I see you had no difficulties in gaining access," remarked Azarel. When the assassin disregarded the comment, he made another. "You are getting careless," here he indicated Mhylzul's position of repose.

"I knew it would be you. Besides, I'm never careless." The assassin suddenly brandished a dagger. It was out of his hand, in the air and stuck in the door between the two wizards in less than a second. The two wizards only exchanged glances. "It took you guys long enough to get here."

"We did not wish to take any chances," replied Uxzel. Meanwhile Azarel walked over to where Mhylzul was and

deposited ten bags of gold *pennhutz* on the table.

"I take it I was successful."

"The Prince and the wizard are condemned to die tomorrow," said Azarel.

"And there wasn't any doubt that the Prince killed him?"

"None. The glamour worked just as we said it would, did it not," asked the frail wizard.

"The old King knew something wasn't right. When he got right up to me, he gave me a weird look. I think he knew I wasn't his son."

"It is of little consequence now." Azarel laughed his sick little laugh and Uxzel joined in.

"So, is our business together concluded?" Mhylzul had a strong desire to kill both the wizards then and there, but his first priorities were to get out of the castle and secure his earnings.

"Not quite yet," stated Azarel. "We wish you to remain here until all the issues have been resolved and in the unlikely event that we might have further need of your services."

Mhylzul didn't like it one bit. "How long?"

"Another day, two at most. Are you in need of more provisions?"

"No, I'm fine." The assassin nodded towards the dagger and gave the wizards a look which let them understand in no uncertain terms that any sudden misfortunes would incur serious debts. Wordlessly, the wizards left the room.

Azarel and Uxzel returned to the castle proper and proceeded to the wizards wing. They came to a door and Azarel knocked twice, paused and knocked once as was required. The door opened and the Dark Master bade them to enter.

Though still morning, the room seemed darker than usual and

an eerie red glow permeated the Dark Master's quarters. The two chained women were hardly noticeable in a corner, locked in an intimate embrace. There were some cards laid out in a circle on the massive table where the Dark Master sat and a black candle burned at its center. He arose from the chair at the head of the table and went to his minions. Azarel and Uxzel shuddered as they looked upon the face of a huge fly. "Has our friend from the Khezef Ahf been taken care of?"

"Yes, master," the wizards replied in unison, their heads down, looking away from a thousand eyes.

"Did you instruct him to remain available?"

"Yes, master," Azarel responded. "He is concealed in a room in the dungeons."

"Good."

"Have we received news from the north yet, my lord?" Uxzel asked.

"Yes, I have just concluded a communication with Satarsmyt. Everything has been accomplished. The SoulSlayers have been successful in the elimination of the last of Nherycyn's relatives in Eh-Thern-Ah. Ellycyn has been confined and is being 'treated' for her malady. The meager doses of *vhelheno* she is receiving will give her the appearance of being mad and will cause her to die within a few short days. And her death will mark the end of the Cyn Dynasty.

"With the Rune at Daath Ul Thaum and the three that are secured here, we are now in possession of four of the seven Runes of Power. Only three remain. Only three more. And when I have those in my control, I will be restored to my rightful position. My dominion shall stretch over this wretched land and I will exact my vengeance with unparalleled cruelty.

"I will be teleporting north to join Satarsmyt and my daughter for a most decadent celebration this evening. I will return by the rising of the first sun. Though I am leaving you in charge in my absence, Azarel, no one is to know I am gone. You will inform any requesting to see me that I am indisposed."

There was a knock at the door and the Dark Master's face wavered back to human form. He nodded to Azarel who opened the door and admitted the visitors.

"We have come to formally offer our congratulations," said Zhultanyr. He looked around the room with uneasy eyes, the red glow a bit unnerving. But then he spied the women in the corner and a leering smile broke out across his face. "Everything you predicted would happen has. Just as you said it would, so many months ago."

"Yes, you have justified our faith in you," declared Farhyng.

"And we have faithfully kept our end of the bargain," added Ydryj Jyr. "We delivered the votes you needed."

The Dark Master motioned for the wizards to prepare some glasses. "I am unquestionably indebted to all of you and you have my deepest gratitude. The provisions we had previously agreed upon will be honored. In addition to the various interests you have brought with you upon the Journey of Homage, I bestow upon you the following: Zhultanyr and Farhyng, though you shall both remain in your respective cities, you will secretly assist me in managing the business of the kingdom; Ydryj Jyr, you have expressed a desire to see Khaballe return to the ancient ways. Am I correct?"

"My spirit clings to these old bones in the hopes that I may see those days restored," replied Ydryj Jyr.

"And that is exactly what I intend to do." Glasses filled with a

crimson liquid were distributed among the guests and were raised high in the air. They consumed the bitter contents not knowing it to be blood. And as they looked upon the sadistic smile of Athar, neither did they know he was Thaum, nor that he was the Dark Master nor that the time he spoke of was a thousand years ago, before the Great Mystical Wars.

CHAPTER XXXII

Sunlight poured in from the lone window on the woman sitting cross-legged on the floor. She was in a sparse room at the inn, a place she had occupied for the past month. She was in deep thought, practicing her mental exercises. Though she was clad only in a loose-fitting shirt, sweat ran off her face and down her chest and back. She had been at this for over four hours and her level of fatigue was now high. She exerted her will, pressing her limits, trying to endure a little while longer, knowing she would continue beyond that when she reached her goal.

Her routine had been the same every day for the past month. She would rise early in the morning and go through a physical workout of two hours. She would practice all her movements and techniques in slow motion. She painstakingly insured that every movement was precise, that every technique was executed at the proper time and in the proper sequence. Then she would subject herself to an additional two hours of mental exercises, sharpening the mind as she did the body.

Afterwards, she would allow herself to go downstairs and partake of a light meal. Following which, she would venture out into the city. Sometimes to get the word on the street, sometimes to go to the public library and study philosophical texts. When her mind could absorb no more, she would return to the inn for dinner and then retire to her room for another workout. And wait.

Though she heard the knock at the door, it did not break her concentration. It was another quarter hour before she allowed herself to end the meditations. She stood and padded barefoot to

the door, stripping off her shirt to dry her face and body. Looking down, she discovered a note lying on the floor, just inside of the door. She picked the note up and ran a hand through her damp blonde hair as she read it. She walked over to her bed, sat down and reread the note. She wanted to be sure. When she was, she destroyed it. Then Vhalkhette proceeded to prepare her mail and weapons saying to herself, "This one will be difficult. Very difficult. You had better be right old man."



A herald of the King's appeared upon the battlements and recounted the highlights of the proceedings which had taken place in the castle to the throng gathered below. Then he announced the sentences issued to Rhenycyn and Uriel which were received with a deafening cheer.

As the crowd began to disperse, one among them hurried across the river to the western part of the city. He took a roundabout way to his destination, utilizing back streets and even doubling back on one occasion. All the while he checked to see if anyone might be marking his progress.

Finally the agent arrived at the Guild Hall, a building where several of the guilds held their meetings. But he did not enter, at least not through the main entrance. Instead, he stealthily made his way to the back of the building. He spoke a Word and made a sign. A door appeared in front of him. He knocked on the door three times and waited. From the other side of the door came five knocks. He completed the ritual by knocking seven times and the door was opened to him.

The agent was met by a guard who placed a sword to his

throat. The agent had to give a secret sign and password before he could gain entrance, which he successfully did. After the guard withdrew the sword, the agent informed him that he required an audience and revealed the reasons pertaining to his request. He was caused to wait while the guard disappeared behind another barred door. Moments later, the guard reappeared and ushered the agent into another room and apprised him that he would have to wait until the necessary parties could be assembled. Surprisingly, it took less than an hour for the seven parties to meet at the hall.

The agent was conducted by the guard to an underground chamber where the seven adepts sat on thrones in various places based on rank. Two candles burned on either side of them, the one on the right being white, the one on the left, black. In the center of the chamber was an altar upon which was the Sacred Scrolls of the Moons & Stars. The Sacred Scrolls was opened to the page containing the verse regarding the Destroyer. And resting upon the page was the Rune of Stagnation. Like the other Runes of Power, it was made of gold and silver, shimmering with the essence of its own being.

An adept, wearing a grey robe and matching raised cowl was seated on the largest throne which was situated on a dais in front of the altar. A bench was before the altar and it was there that the agent had been seated. The adept nodded to the agent. He responded by rising, then kneeling and bowing his head. When the agent raised his head he looked directly into the eyes of the adept and declared, "It is him. He bears the pentagram."

The seven adepts shared an emotional silence. Finally, the one on the dais spoke. "One thousand years. One thousand years our brethren have waited. And now we shall see if we are brought to light or enveloped by eternal darkness."

Here ends RuneCraft
Book I of The Seven Runes of Power
Volume II of The Epic Tales of Khaballe

RuneQuest
Book II of The Seven Runes of Power
Volume II of The Epic Tales of Khaballe

will concern itself with the fates
of Rhenycyn and Uriel and the
search for the remaining Runes of Power.

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