

Planar Strife (incomplete draft)

by Rome Reginelli

There was no doubt about it. The glowing sphere in front of him was not a figment of his imagination. At least, if it was, it was a *very* realistic one. It didn't just emit a powerful glow, but it seemed to radiate a palpable energy. It also hummed louder than a swarm of angry wasps.

Erik rubbed his eyes, less from his incredulity than from the way the glow stung them.

The mysterious light had appeared as a dot that resembled a star embedded in the forest instead of the sky. It had dispelled that resemblance when a second later it swelled into an eight foot sphere, shining with a powerful light that flickered violently.

Erik reached to the hilt of his sheathed hunting knife and looked around him. He didn't want to be caught off guard by whatever abomination would use the light to trick him. He turned back to the sphere just in time to see a black speck appear in the corner.

The speck grew in size quickly, and soon Erik could see that it actually looked like a person walking toward him from far away. In a moment that was brief yet seemed to last much longer than it did, the speck became a person who stepped out of the sphere and stepped down from it to stand in front of Erik, followed shortly by several more. The first two were women, dressed elegantly in dark green robes and with oddly colored hair. The next two were men, attired similarly but with more natural hair colors. After the four of them had emerged, a huge spotted cat came along, the like of which Erik had never seen. Its spotted coat was predominantly a grayish tan color, and its eyes sparkled with a glow that Erik had seen in all the others', and could only be described as magical.

As Erik looked over the five, they returned the favor. Standing in front of him, Erik could see the probing expression on their face as they silently evaluated him. There was something else in those eyes as well, though. Erik could see from the darkened area surrounding their eyes and the barely noticeable downturn of their mouths that there was something else there as well. Their inquisitive faces failed to fully mask a gaunt raggedness in their expression, a melancholy expression that hinted at having experienced immense pain and suffering which had not yet been overcome. Their garb, however, was nonetheless clean and nearly iridescent.

The first stranger introduced herself. "Greetings.. My name is Erina. We have come to seek.." She paused, as if searching for the most polite term, then finished, "...aid."

Erik was at a loss for words, but after a brief moment he responded, "I am a woodsman... please call me Erik." He thought about the situation for a moment, but couldn't convince himself it was a hallucination. Finally he decided what he ought to do. "Since you are probably in a hurry to receive aid, I'll take you straight to the city. You can speak with the governor there."

Erina nodded, but the second woman preceded her in speaking. "The governor is your superior?"

Erik paused a second, then nodded.

"Alright. We shall follow you, then."

Erik nodded again, then began to walk toward the nearest road, glancing back to make sure they were following. They walked after him, in the order they had emerged from the glowing sphere, which, he realized, was no longer visible. Just for safety's sake, he kept his knife hand ready.

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I looked around the crowd to see their reaction to the arrival of the woodsman Erik and his 5 guests. Princess Selinia was looking curious, as usual. Her bright blue eyes examined inquisitively the slim strangers who seemed very ill at ease, and then her gaze came to rest upon the cat. Its eyes glowed with an intensity that made her youthful ones seem as dim as the Nurn slums. Selinia's father was understandably less interested. His hair was much more gray than the last time I'd seen him, and much of his former vitality had dissipated. It wasn't entirely gone, though, and he took account of the guests with a gaze that held less than menace but clearly not amity. I wondered at King Fernas' probability of offering "aid" to the foreigners, but I realized that it was such a broad term that nobody could predict the likelihood of them receiving it. I also noted that while the King held an amount of power that was not by any means laughable, he might not be the deciding force here.

Thus, I subsequently turned the attendees whose combined influence would exceed his. The Chancellors of the Provinces held varying expressions on their faces, but I counted those with no readable expression at all as the most dangerous. Among this number were Thulius of Harrena, Resta of Incious, and Janis of Kero. Thulius was known for his vicious attacks on costly endeavors of any sort, save those that directly benefited his own Harrena. Resta was usually more subdued, but since she governed over the populous province of Incious, her decisions carried a great weight with them. Her masterful control over her emotions was just an added bonus, albeit a big one. Two seats to her left sat Janis of Kero. Since he was governor of my home province, I had met him before, and though he said the right things at the right time, he always seemed a

bit removed, as if he was not really thinking of the matter at hand but rather the next one. I seemed to be one of the only one to hold that opinion, because Janis was consistently one of the most influential Chancellors.

I heard the doors to the meeting hall close, and I turned to see who had been the last to enter. It was Joan of Cannebra and her aide. She was dressed in more practical attire than most of the other female Chancellors, but from what I knew of her, that wasn't a rarity. While many of the attendees to the hearing were wearing spectacular or gaudy outfits that emphasized their figures; or plain, ceremonial robes, Joan wore a simple tunic and trousers, a pairing that I myself was wearing. Somehow it seemed to fit Joan's demeanor, and I immediately felt a sort of kinship with her. If I was on a battlefield, I wouldn't turn my back on any one of the other politicians, but I just felt like I could trust Joan. That was a good thing, too, because no doubt this council meeting would turn out to be a battlefield of its own sort soon.

With Joan's arrival, King Fernas called the meeting to order. The dull hum of Chancellors and aids conferring with their guests died down, and all eyes came to rest upon his withered visage. Pausing theatrically, Fernas surveyed the room. Satisfied that he had everyone's attention, he began to speak. "Gentlemen and Gentlewomen of the provinces, I welcome you to this council in the capital city of Nurn!" Given the king's aging appearance, I had not anticipated the vigor with which he would speak, and I was caught off guard. Even so, I managed to listen to what he was saying. So far, it had all been ceremonial, but it was just the beginning, so that was to be expected.

"I have gathered you here because of a plea for help from some very special travelers. If you will listen, they are ready to explain."

The room remained silent, and the five mysterious travelers walked to the front of the council meeting room. The men took positions behind and to the side of the two women, and the cat lay down regally in the front, their overall position forming something of a V shape. Before I could wonder at this organization, though, one of the women began to speak. "Greetings... thank you for welcoming us into your realm. My name is Erina. We come from the realm of Narcis. We have come to ask you for help. Our world is being destroyed." She paused, and though it didn't seem to be intentional, it added substantially to the effect. The entire room was dead silent, which was better than I would have expected had it not been such a grave message. Even Erina's peculiar use of short, simple sentences was overlooked because of the magnitude of her message.

Erina took a step back, lining herself up with the two men. The other woman, now in the front, continued the speech. "My name is Venli." She took a short pause, then continued. "Two years ago, our people lived in peace. Then, from some unknown source came a scourge, called the N'Rith'k. They attacked our villages, and destroyed them. No one who remained is alive any longer. Their attacks only intensified from there; with just the use of their natural weapons, they began to steadily encroach upon our borders. Now, the N'Rith'k have destroyed all but two of our settlements, which, even now, are in grave danger. We implore you to take action and save us from utter destruction. Whatever troops you can offer would be greatly appreciated. In return, we will do anything that is within our power to help you."

The council remained silent for a few moments, during which I sat, awed. Something crept into my mind, and it bothered me just a little - *why had Erina spoken first,*

while Venli was clearly the more proficient speaker? I dismissed it for the time being when I caught wind of a shout from Thulius.

"Balderdash! Absolute bilge! I don't know what your plan is, but if you think I'm going to believe that poppycock, then you're all a bunch of lunatics!" Even knowing that Thulius would burst did not prepare me for the fury with which he would attack. I was thankful the assault wasn't targeted at me, and I watched intently to see the response.

The Narcissians weathered it relatively well. Little expression showed on the women's faces, but the big cat stood up and growled at Thulius. Erina had to place her hand on its neck to restrain it. The man on the far left stepped forward, and with a trace amount of resentment on his face, he spoke. "I can assure you that we have spoken nothing but the truth, sir."

"I don't believe it," Thulius replied more calmly but with, if anything, more spite than before.

Before one of the Narcissians could make a reply, Graman of Hiskare stood up. "You fool! They come from another world and ask us for their help and you don't believe it? You are a fool, Thulius. Didn't you hear them? Their people are dying this very moment! If something is powerful enough to kill these people who can travel from their world to ours, what's to stop that something from coming and attacking us?"

"You merely prove my point, Chancellor of Hiskare. How can they expect us to believe that they came from another world but ask us for help? It's all lies, lies!"

The reply came from another direction. "Even the most fertile field will burn if set aflame; so too can a primitive force destroy a sophisticated one if certain conditions are met." Janis' words were wise, as always, and

I found myself nodding in agreement. Still, I wondered what the motive behind this was. I wondered if Janis might have more of a heart than I gave him credit for.

Resta stood up and took the opportunity to reply, "I have to wonder. Couldn't they, by coming here, have led the N'Rith'k to us? If the N'Rith'k are really as bad as they tell us, they may have just brought upon us the very scourge they are trying to avoid!" Graman stood up. "Then it is all the more imperative that we help them now, instead of waiting for the N'Rith'k to overrun them and then turn on us."

Voices rallied around him in support, but Thulius' voice cut through the cheers like a sword slicing through cobwebs. "You are all fools! What if the N'Rith'k never come to us? You haven't considered that, have you? Even if we did send troops, these things would probably ravage them. What would we do then? Our neighbors wouldn't balk at suddenly attacking our weakened country. We'd fall into ruin, and what if the N'Rith'k came then? With our remaining troops defeated by foreign armies, and foreign armies weakened by conquest, there would be no one to stop their invasion. No, we cannot, must not, commit troops to this ludicrous endeavor. Mark my words: if we do, the Empire will fall."

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"Kelf!"

I turned around at the sound of my name. It was Lieutenant Merisse. I couldn't help noticing that her light auburn hair seemed to glisten in the tent's flickering light. I hadn't expected to see her in the tent that was serving as the military's headquarters during the council hearings, but she wasn't prohibited from entering, so I stifled my surprise.

"So, how did the first meeting go?" she inquired. Her tone was far more optimistic than mine would have been, but that's just my cynicism.

"It went basically as we expected. The travelers asked for military aid, Graman supported them, and Thulius was his usual aggravating self."

"Does it look like we're off to war?"

I shook my head. "Hard to tell, really. The Council seems torn between helping them and putting ourselves in danger. Thulius pointed out that the raiders might increase their attacks if they found out that the main part of our army was gone. He even went so far as to suggest that one of our neighbors might launch a full-scale attack."

Merisse shook her head. "Figures. Only he forgot that they're so busy fighting amongst themselves that none of them have the resources to launch a major assault."

"You know that, I know that, and I suspect Thulius does too, but the important thing is that most of the other Chancellors don't."

Merisse let out a disgusted sigh. I shrugged. "I guess we'll have to wait until tomorrow to find out whether the other senators are as gullible as Thulius thinks they are."

I sighed at my helplessness. Even though I had been invited to attend the council meetings as Military Supervisor, I was not allowed to join the debates of my own accord; custom dictated that I had to be brought into the conversation by the king or one of the Chancellors. The princess was likewise excluded from talking, as were the aids and a number of other miscellaneous people who attended. I didn't complain, though, because doing so would likely just ensure that I didn't show up to any of the following meetings, either.

I started to get hungry, and considered getting up and heading down to the mess tent, but I realized that since

we were in the city it was likely that a more interesting lunch could be found. Then it struck me that I should ask Merisse to come with me. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get any words out a messenger poked his head into the tent.

"Commander Kelf... I have an urgent announcement," he began.

"What is it?" I asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

"There's trouble. Something's going on in Norvam, but nobody knows what. Two peasants are dead -- and it's gruesome."

I cursed under my breath. Just as I had thought I had a break, something happened. Norvam, being a small neighboring town, didn't have much excitement. Yet something was starting there. At that moment I got the chills, because I had a feeling in my gut that it was something BIG. Little did I know how big it would be.

I immediately went into what I like to call "cataclysm management mode." I walked out the door, forgetting about lunch, mind racing, shouting for my three best captains.

"Synscoth! Hemphley! Irkis!"

Within moments, Synscoth and Irkis were standing before me. Hemphley was nowhere in sight, though. I asked Synscoth and Irkis, "Where's Hemphley?" but they shook their heads. A passing soldier stopped and called my name. "Kelf?" When she saw that she had my attention, she continued, "He's in the city. I think he went for lunch."

At the mention of lunch I realized that I had ignored Merisse as soon as the messenger had given the announcement. I turned around toward the tent to find Merisse behind me, without the indignant look I had been expecting to see on her face. I shot her a quick look of

apology and called her over. I also motioned for the soldier, a second lieutenant whose name I recalled was Liurn, to stay, and began to address the four.

"Alright. Here's what's going on: there's something happening in Norvam; I hear there's a real mess of a scene. Synscoth, Merisse, Liurn: come with me. We're going to look into it. Irkis: stay here and keep an eye on the camp. I should be back by nightfall."

Synscoth, Irkis, and Liurn resolutely nodded their agreement. Merisse also agreed, with a reassuring wink and a smile.

And so it was decided. I stepped back into the tent to grab my jacket, and in a few moments we were off to Norvam on horseback.

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As we rode into Norvam it was starting to snow. Our breath was visible in the brisk winter air and everywhere I looked was grey. Most of the houses had small plumes of smoke protruding from their chimneys. The chill, I decided, was not welcome. The air was dry and the sense of foreboding that emanated from the little town was all too palpable.

We rode in past the first few houses, and made our way to the largest pillar of smoke snaking up into the dismal sky, at whose base resided the Town Hall, busier than usual because of the enigmatic deaths of the two townfolk.

We stopped in front of the hall, dismounted, and tied our horses up in front of it before ascending the steps to the entrance.

Inside, the first thing I noticed was the heat from the fire whose smoke we had seen from the edge of the town.

The heavy cedar door slammed shut behind Synscoth, the last to enter, with a whine. The fire was on the far side of the room; between it and the door was a large red table encircled with wooden chairs. Several visibly old men, as well as a few men and women whose age was not as readily apparent, sat around it talking. They stopped as we entered and what looked like the oldest stood up to greet me.

"Welcome, General Icaris, to Norvam. Please make yourself comfortable. I am Arathe, town elder. These," he gestured to the others behind him, "are the town council members." After that, he introduced them one by one, but I can't remember the names he listed, since none of them spoke more than an intermittent phrase that day.

"Call me Kelf. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Elder Arathe."

"Yes, yes. Now, shall we get on to... err... business?" I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was not overly enthusiastic about proceeding to the matter at hand. In fact, I thought I detected a hint of something else in his voice, a deep reluctance that implied that it was not something that was easy to talk about.

My suspicions were instantly confirmed when he resumed speaking. "It's... well... I think it would be easier just to show you."

I nodded in agreement, and he motioned for another, younger council member to stand. "Greos, please escort General Kelf to the... scene."

Greos replied, with a small bow of respect, "Yes, Elder." He strode toward us and stepped out the door, holding it while the four of us walked through.

"We thank you for coming," he began as he mounted his horse, and we did likewise.

"Nobody here knows what to think of it... but I am

sure it is not good. I hope that no worse tidings may come to Norvam in the coming days..."

He broke off, and I surmised by his expression that we were nearing the scene.

Again I was right. We turned around the corner of a cottage on the northern edge of the villiage, and were immediatelly confronted by what must have been the town sheriff, sitting on a log and carving something out of a birch branch, apparently trying to ignore the scene behind him.

The "scene" was more grizzly than I had imagined. Two bodies - at least, that's what I assumed them to be - lay dismembered and unrecognizably mangled on the ground. The corpses were deeply gashed, and the way their midsections had been ripped open suggested that whatever had killed them had started to eat their innards. I shuddered. Someone - Merisse, it sounded like, though I wasn't paying enough attention to be sure - threw up.

I didn't know what to think. Aside from old stories, I had never heard of a beast that would do this. I didn't even want to consider that the killer had been human.

The whole situation seemed impossible, like it was not from this realm. Suddenly my mind strayed back to the Council meeting. The visitors. Their story... a story from another world...

My train of thought was interrupted as Greos began to speak. "They were found this way this morning. Judging from the way the blood has dried, they were killed sometime last night. The gashes weren't made with a metal blade - the wounds aren't that clean, so it must have been something more blunt. Possibly a sharpened rock, though it seems to me like it was teeth, or claws."

Everything he said coincided with what I had gathered from my first glance at the bodies. I doubted

anyone could come to a different conclusion.

I turned to the sheriff, who hadn't so much as looked up since Greos and my company had arrived. "Don't bother with an autopsy. Just put these poor souls to rest." The sheriff responded, "Yes, sir," without so much as a nod of agreement. I wondered if he had even heard, but I dismissed the thought.

Liurn asked the questions that I, in my musings, had forgotten to ask. I made a wry grin to myself - *So this is why she's a ranking officer*, I mused. *Steadfast, procedural in the line of duty, no matter what.* "Who were these people? What can you tell us about them?"

Greos paused for a moment, seemingly unable to decide how to phrase it. "Well... Aerinn and Karkos Scharwimm... a relatively young couple... He a farmer, she a housewife. No children, though she was expecting within the next couple months. The fetus is gone, as far as we can see."

I cringed as he said that last part. "As far as we can see" was pretty far, from the condition of the bodies; from where I was it wasn't even possible to tell which was which.

"Any idea why someone would have wanted them dead?" she inquired further.

"None so far as we know."

I hadn't expected any.

Then I noticed a faint trail of blood leading away from the bodies and the town. I gestured to it, and asked Greos, "That?"

"It ends about 50 yards into the woods. Not really any other signs of travel, past there or along the way."

"Hmm..." That was interesting. Whoever or whatever killed it had left into the woods, without leaving a trace. It was stealthy, then, to the extent that it move through the

forest without leaving a trace. I decided, however, to inquire further along those lines some other time. The sun was reaching the center of the sky, so it must have been almost noon. That meant that the council meeting would be soon, and that meant I had an excuse to get away from the scene that still made me want to retch. I used it.

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King Fernas rose again, sternly calling the Council meeting to order, and still with that same surprising vitality I had noted in him earlier.

"I welcome you, Chancellors of the twenty-two provinces, to the second day of our emergency council proceedings. Since the primary issue has been explicated, and our each of you has had time to ruminate on the matter, today will be the primary day of deliberations. With that, Councillor Janis has requested to be the first to speak today. Are there any who would contest his right to commence the debate?"

None voiced any disapproval, and I was slightly surprised at that, but I figured that nobody wanted to spend time making a fuss over who would speak first, and allowed my curiosity to pass.

Janis stood. "Greetings, Chancellors, guests, and aides." He paused, drawing in a breath. "Yesterday we were confronted with a request for help, from foreigners of another land, far away. They asked for military aid. Today, arguments will be heard for--"

Ukor, a young Chancellor from Epharia and one of the more hotheaded Chancellors, interrupted rudely, "We all know the procedure! Get on with it, Janis."

Janis, unflustered by the interruption, having undoubtedly dealt with such interruptions innumerable

times before, straightened his posture and continued. "Very well then. If the Council would prefer a less elegant speech, I am prepared to give one."

The look on Ukor's face was such that I could hardly restrain myself from laughing. Janis had insulted him, and losing face in the Council meant losing influence.

Ukor's outburst reminded me of Thulius, so I looked his way but saw nothing in his expression. As vehement as Thulius' outbursts were, he was not as brash as Ukor, and he only unleashed his emotions when it suited him. At this moment, Thulius was simply sitting, quietly, looking almost inquisitive but I could see in his eyes something, almost like a tiger waiting patiently for his time to strike.

Remembering his attack yesterday, I inwardly shuddered, realizing how apt it was to compare him to a tiger.

When, predictably, support for a simplified speech failed to materialize, the king gestured to Janis with his hands and said, "Go on, *Orator Provinciae*." The term he used was the traditional ancient language phrase which literally translated to "Speaker of the province."

Accordingly, Janis nodded and began to speak again. "I wish to bring something to the Council's attention: the province of Kero, since it is a border province, will need to keep a strong guard against invasion." My heart sank, but only until Janis continued, "However, we have no immediate worries of an attack from our neighbors; therefore I would recommend that half our standing forces to aid the foreigners."

I was nearly ecstatic. Half our forces! That was more than I had expected. It was surprising, that I found myself so enthusiastic toward the foreigners' cause, but I found myself sympathetic and even just a little eager to be off to work again. A warrior whose job is done can become a dangerous force if the lust for battle remains aflame in his

heart, and my own desire for battle, if I were honest with myself, had not yet been quelled. Yet, the outer states' encroachments had been rebuked by already, and neither the Council nor the people would support a war of outward expansion, which left my army doing training exercises restlessly and aimlessly. Since I couldn't voice my opinion, I simply watched and waited for a response.

It was hardly a wait. The tiger pounced.

Thulius' words were not loud, nor were they rude like yesterday; no, today he spoke with a slow, deliberate, contemptuous tone, with a sinister rhythm like the thumping of a heart.

"You forget, Janis, that the standing military is the property of the King and the Council, not of the provinces. You cannot assign your troops to this conflict which we haven't even deemed necessary to enter. If you were to commit troops to it without our consent you could drag the entire Filian Empire into the conflict unnecessarily. Besides, if you're so willing to give out your troops I'm sure there are other provinces which could put them to better use."

I expected Janis to be dumbfounded, but, I remembered, Janis was never at a loss for words, and replied, "Better uses, you say? I suppose you mean in provinces like Harrena? Of course, interior provinces, safe from invasion, wouldn't need troops unless there was some kind of... civil unrest?"

I nearly laughed out loud at Thulius, but managed to contain the smile to just a momentary lapse, which it looked like nobody noticed. Then I realized that Janis seemed a little less detached than usual. I wondered at that.

Thulius prepared to reply, but was cut off by Resta. "There are... other concerns to deal with." In the pause that followed, one that Resta must have taken for emphasis, I

remembered the scene of the crime I had seen earlier that day. It was in Incious, all right, and my suspicions were confirmed in a moment when Resta continued. "Last night, two peasants were killed, and dismembered. At this time, we know nothing more, except that whoever did it is highly dangerous. There's no way I can sacrifice the safety of my people for some affair that doesn't concern us."

I didn't really like the twist Resta had put on it, but I had to admit that she was right, having seen the site myself. I wouldn't want to be giving away my security blanket - the troops - while whatever it was that had killed those peasants was still on the loose. I half expected Resta to call on me to confirm her statement but she didn't; I realized that she must have been worried that by asking me, and thereby drawing me into the conversation, that I might not agree with everything she said and I might become more of a detriment than an asset. *Oh well*, I thought, and waited for the next speaker.

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She entered the room in a daze, stumbling and bracing herself on a piece of furniture that it took her far too long, she thought, to recognize as a desk. She knew something was wrong with her, but she could neither figure it out nor remember what had happened to her. The room was dark. A little light filtered in through a small window placed high on the wall to her left, but only just enough to see by. She couldn't see outside, so she looked around her for some other way out, her eyes eventually centering on a door almost directly ahead of her. It seemed to be the only way in or out, though she was pretty sure she hadn't come in that way. She tried the handle. It was dusty, but it moved, and the door creaked as she nudged it open. Strange indeed, that she had not come into that room

through the door; if she had then the handle or the handle wouldn't be dusty, and yet there were no other entrances. A corner of her mind told her that that wasn't supposed to happen, but somehow it had. She walked through the door and was confronted by a dark corridor, with less light than the room, but a little light around a corner a ways off. She saw no doors between where she was and where the light seemed to be coming from. She walked straight ahead, intent on finding the source of the light, setting it as her goal for no reason other than she could not remember anything that would allow her to pick a better goal...

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I blinked drowsily, back in my tent. The rest of the day's meeting had been a bore, with Resta and Janis battling it out, and nobody but Thulius able to get a word in edgewise, on the whole. Nary a word had been heard from the four visitors, or five, I reminded myself, if you counted the cat. It was a strange animal, that was for sure - it looked like a grey forest cat, but nearly twice the size. I wondered why they had brought it along; I supposed I'd likely never know.

Presently there came a voice just outside the tent; it was Merisse. "Kelf?"

"Come in!"

She pushed aside the tent flap and stepped inside, followed promptly by a man I suddenly recognized as Greos from Norvam. It took me a moment to recognize him; he was haggard, his tunic and pants caked with dirt, sweat, and blood. Thick lines ran down his face from his forehead, tracing the path of the sweat, blood, and tears which had flowed down his face. He seemed old, strangely, because I realized that he was probably about my age -- in his early

twenties, that is -- but he looked easily 30 or 40. He was panting for breath, and looked as if he had only just reached here after an exhausting ride. I scrambled to find a skin of water to offer him, but he took a long, messy chug out of one he had apparently just received upon his arrival at camp. Merisse sat to the side, nearer me than him (I didn't blame her; he reeked of perspiration) and waited for him to start explaining. After a final draught he took a very deep breath, sighing it out, and began.

"I come by way of Harkin. The refugees from Norvam are there, now."

I started to ask what he was talking about, but he put a hand up as he took another pained breath, signifying that he would explain in a second. During this moment my stomach squeezed itself thin with anticipation; I knew the explanation would have something to do with the horror from the day before, but the premonition of such bad news was maddening. At length, he started up again. "I came straight to you because I don't trust the Council with the facts. They can talk to me later. For now, you need to know what happened."

He paused and took another labored breath, then continued, "They came just before midday, out of the forest. There were so many of them! We weren't prepared at all.

"They were not just beasts, but monsters, like from the ancient Tales... they were fierce and blindingly fast. They knocked down doors, ripped the houses apart..." His gaze suddenly became unfocused and haunted. "...and their occupants, too. Our militia was hardly able to get half a dozen women and children out of the town in time. Somehow it started burning. There is nothing left."

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She stumbled around the corner to find herself facing another long hallway, again with no doors on either side. It should have seemed odd to her, she knew, but yet, somehow it felt natural. With nowhere to go but forward, she looked far ahead as she started walking, looking to see what was at the end of the corridor. She could just make out something dark at the end of the tunnel, but the torchlight was so sparse its exact nature was impossible to make out. It looked like there were other things along the way, dark specks denoting the presence of someone or something, but they too were too distant to see, always at the edge of her vision, and they flitted about like spirits. She convinced herself that they were just an illusion.

As she walked past another torch, she noticed for the first time its heat on her skin, felt the little hairs on her arm pricking up as the heat caressed them. Then, as she passed out of the light from the torch, she felt her skin tighten, felt the air coming through her robes grip her, and realized she was cold. She wanted to turn back, to hide in the torch's loving warmth, but she knew that if she stopped she would get nowhere, so she moved on. A minute later another torch's warmth tempted her but she passed it too, shivering as the cold ensnared her again. Her robes seemed so thin now, so porous that the air rushed in and pricked at her like icy needles. It slowly dawned on her, as she watched the next temptuous torch flicker toward her approach, that the torchflames were creating a convection current flowing back to the room where she had been, feeding all the little flames along the way. The breeze was becoming stronger all the time, starting to turn into a wind, trying to tug her backwards, enticing her by reminding her of the warmth of the torches which almost seemed to be spreading out, but still she kept on, now knowing that to stop for a moment would be to stop forever, and she would never leave the comfort of the heat and the light. At last she saw it ahead. The light was even less present than before, but she saw it, she was sure now. It

was a pair of doors, dark and huge and foreboding. They were wooden, she saw as she got closer, covered in a varnish so dark it almost made them seem black in the light. Little patterns, though their significance was lost on her, were carved on their surface and riddled it with intricate mazes of shapes that seemed to crawl as if they were alive, as shadows from each other cavorted across the door.

She kept walking, looking for a doorhandle, trying to banish all thoughts of heat or cold from her mind and and concentrate only on the door, almost succeeding, but not quite, dark shadows of thoughts flickering around in her mind, eluding her... just as the door was eluding her. She had been walking down the hallway, steadily quickening her pace, and yet she did not seem to be getting any closer to the door. She began to run, as if by moving faster she could gain on the door that was moving away from her as fast as she moved toward it, but still it got no closer. Finally, in desperation, she screamed.

o o o

I kept my silence after Greos finished, to try and absorb the news that, in less than an afternoon, Norvam had fallen to an unknown enemy with unknown motives. It seemed impossible, yet the man who stood before me was clearly no liar. His sombre expression stared at me, as if waiting for a response, and suddenly his face clenched up, and he doubled over coughing. I saw a drop of blood come from his mouth and with a word of support I was out of the tent shouting for a doctor. As one started over, I ducked back into the tent and saw Merisse hunched over Greos checking to see if he was all right. I realized that again I had forgotten completely that she was there, but she looked up as I stepped back in.

"He's not doing so well. He's not coughing now,

but..." Her voice trailed off.

Great, I thought to myself. Don't die, Greos.

The medics arrived momentarily, and carried Greos off. I gave him a grim smile before he left, and he returned it with a feeble wave.

I tried to fathom the news I had just received; if Norvam had fallen so quickly, its militia so soundly routed, then we couldn't afford to be unprepared; it was less than a day's ride away, and Greos had already gotten here -- the attackers could have been in the city already. I started planning to ready the troops, and my mind strayed back to the council hearings. I pitied the foreigners, whose cause would probably be lost with the present state of events. Then I wondered if their attackers might be the same as ours. What could that mean? Had they unwittingly led the... the N'rith'k to us? Or were the N'rith'k simply done with their realm and moving on to ours? Neither boded well for either the Narcissians or us.

Merisse stood up and looked at me like she was going to say something, but she didn't. She was shaken, visibly.

"I'm scared..." she said, finally. "It seems bad. I'm a soldier. I shouldn't be scared."

"Yes, yes you should be. You should always be scared before a battle, before a confrontation. The fear keeps you alive. If you don't fear death, you'll throw your life away. Just control your fear. If you let it take over, you're even worse off." The speech suddenly came to me; my habit giving pep-talks like that is, I think, one of the reasons I was promoted to General. Merisse looked a little relieved, but still unsure. I let her go off, back to her own tent, guessing she wanted some time to herself.

Little did I know that I was exactly wrong.

She screamed with anger and frustration and despair, at the top of her lungs. With nobody else around to stop her, she let it all out, and it came. She finally stopped, out of breath, and did not scream again. The negative emotions released, she felt better. Clear headed and confident, she realized that the cold was no longer bothering her. With her newfound confidence, she decided to resume walking forward, because somehow she knew that nothing could stop her from getting to that door. Whatever it took, she was ready to do it. She started forward.

She found, to her surprise, that she made progress. The distant door became larger in her vision, more clear, and she could make out some of the specifics of the pattern carved upon it. She kept walking, picking up her pace to a brisk walk, then a jog. Soon she was running full-out, confident not only that she could reach the door, but that she could recover her lost self, could know how she had come to be in the odd room at the end of the strange hallway, dazed and confused. All her uncertainty faded from her and she found herself standing before the door. She touched it, just to be sure. Solid oak. The real thing.

She stared up at the door, which went up and up and up until it faded into darkness. Though its height was incredible, with only torchlights further back lighting the hall, the top of the door was shrouded in shadows, and that only made it seem larger, like it went on and on into the sky, never having a top. Air whistled underneath it and through the cracks all around the door, feeding the convection current caused by the torches that had tortured her so.

For a moment, she simply stared at it, examining the intricately carved, symmetrical patterns inscribed on it. She tried to see between the cracks, but there was only darkness.

She raised her hand to knock, to see if someone would answer, and to her surprise it opened... before her hand had even connected with its wooden surface.

o o o

The council meeting was over, and it was time for a meeting more my style: I had called my top military leaders together to discuss the case of the Norvam situation, and what we would do.

Sitting clockwise around a short, round table in the center of the command tent, sat Mick Irkis, Sid Synsoth, George Hemphley, and I. On the table was spread a map of the provinces, and various papers regarding the reports of the Norvam refugees who had made it to Harkin. Now that everyone had seated, I started the meeting.

"Welcome. You've probably heard the rumors of what's going on in Norvam and Harkin. Some of you have more of an idea, because you came with me yesterday." I jokingly gave Hemphley a disappointed look at the last comment. He shrugged in his defense. "Let us begin by stating the facts, as far as we know them. Two nights ago, a pair of peasants were murdered and grossly mutilated--" here I paused, and shook my head to try and get the image out of my mind. "They were killed and very little trace of the murderer was left behind; just a trail of blood that led to a dead end.

"Yesterday evening, we received news that Norvam had been attacked. A mysterious bestial enemy, matching our guess of what had murdered the peasants, devastated the town militia and killed all they came upon. The last members of the militia and a few refugees escaped to Harkin. None of the attackers followed them to Harkin, but no other refugees have come in from Norvam, so we have

to assume that the rest of the population there is gone.”

I looked around the room. Synscoth had a grave expression on his face; Irkis looked just a little sick. Hemphley looked nothing other than determined. *Good, I thought, No surprises.*

“Now, our issue is this: we have to figure out when, where, and how these... things... will attack, and, more importantly, how to stop them. Any ideas?”

Synscoth began. “I think there’s something in the fact that they didn’t attack Harkin. If they were mindless murderers, they would have just continued on after the refugees. This suggests there is some pattern or plan to their assaults.”

“That’s a bit of a disappointment, then, isn’t it? Mindless killers are much easier to predict,” Hemphley said almost jovially.

I chuckled a little at that, though it wasn’t very funny. I guess it was just a nervous reaction, something we do to cope with a serious situation.

“I’m with you there. I think there’s definitely something going on here that we just can’t see, yet. Why didn’t they attack Harkin?”

Silence. Irkis and Hemphley shook their heads, saying without words that they had drawn a blank. Hemphley had a contemplative look on his face, but said nothing.

Finally, Irkis spoke. “If we can’t answer that question, then perhaps we should find the answers to some simpler questions.”

Hemphley nodded, catching on to Irkis’ lead. “Yes... Like, where are they coming from? What are they?”

A chill struck me as my mind flashed back to the description that Venli had given of the N’rith’k... “I may just have an idea,” I said slowly.

“Really?” Synscoth replied enthusiastically.

"I wonder what has happened with the foreigners who were here for the hearing. I think we ought to talk with them."

"Yes! A lead!" said Synscoth.

"Keep it down!" I reprimanded him, in a muted exclamation. "This is a confidential meeting, remember?"

"Mm. Sorry."

Unable to fully contain my grin, I acknowledged his apology and closed the meeting, "We'll meet again to talk with the foreigners. Be ready by dusk."

Each of them sent me a salute, and left.

o o o

The doors slid open before her fingers, elusive to her touch, as if they were squeamish. As they groaned and parted, a blinding light flowed out of them, emanating from a central glowing shape, which resolved itself from an orb into a human figure, glowing brighter and whiter than any bonfire and clothed in mystical luminescence, as if its garments were made of pure light, textureless and illuminescent. Then, she recognized the figure.

It was herself.

It spoke.

"Welcome, and congratulations on making it here." The glowing duplicate floated there, mid-air, spectacularly, but waited, as if expecting a response.

It got one. "Who are you?" she asked, befuddled.

"I am nobody, yet I am everybody. But that is not what you truly want to know."

"I do not understand."

"Nor should you. But what you really want to know is, Who are you?"

She stared at the floating figure, a duplicate in the flesh

right down to most minute variations of her flesh: she saw one or another thing the floating figure, and then noticed for the first time, the same on herself. She became more unsure. "Am I... you?"

"That may be, but it is not a question I can answer. You alone may do that."

"Then why did you ask the question in the first place?" Indignant, a crack in her voice betrayed her stress.

"I merely stated the question. I did not ask it. It came from you, though you did not speak it aloud, or even think it; it rose out of your soul and asked me, the Great Answerer. But it was needed that I speak it aloud, for you shall not find its answer easily; by only time and trials of will shall you come to know." With that, the floating figure stood up, still in the air. "My time draws thin, however. It is time for you to give in your weakness for strength, for that is the real reason I have met you here."

She tried to respond, but her voice wouldn't come out. Suddenly very frightened, she was completely helpless as she watched her mystical duplicate glow brighter and brighter, searing her eyes and her burning its impression into her mind. It dove straight toward her, as a wave roils and crashes forward. The diving figure impaled her, and she felt her muscles tighten and grow hot, so hot she felt they would implode. Then suddenly the sharp fiery pain reached a climax, and vanished all together. All along behind her, she heard a whoosh as torches extinguished themselves. Strangely detached, she turned around and watched her mirror self retreating into darkness.

"Wait!" she called out, to no avail. "What did you do to me?" Still no answer. "Do I at least have a name?"

Mirai, said a voice in her head, and with that the vision vanished into the gaping maw of darkness.

Alone now in pitch black, she repeated it. "Mirai..." Then the darkness consumed her.

I had, following the midafternoon meeting, gone to see Joan of Cannebra to procure the information of where to find the visitors. I went to Joan because unlike most other Chancellors, she did not often attempt to hold me to doing favors for her, explicit or implied, in exchange for her information; I tried to avoid such shallow bonds as much as possible. As far as I knew, also, Janis of Kero did not ask for such bribes, but I avoided him nonetheless, because something about his manner always set me on edge.

Regardless, I found out from Joan where the Narcissians were staying, and that it would, at least in Imperial etiquette, be perfectly acceptable for my associates and I to pay them a visit, so long as it was not an official interrogation and they were not compelled by "any manner of force or threat" to answer. *Politicians!*

All that was fine with me, so at dusk, I met with my lieutenants, and we headed to the guests' quarters which were temporarily occupied with the Narcissian delegates. I wondered, now, what they might be doing, or how long they planned to remain here; and so I hesitated when at length we came to the door which led to the guests' quarters.

I overcame the lapse of purpose quickly enough, however, and knocked twice, strongly, on the door. A moment later it opened, and revealed the face of one of the Narcissian men, whose name I didn't recall having heard. He had a perplexed expression, for a moment; then a wave of recognition flowed over his features. "Hello... You are silent one... name?" He seemed to be trying to remember what mine was; frankly, I didn't remember hearing it once in the Council hearings, so I supplied him with the answer.

"Kelf. Ikaris." I nodded in greeting.

"Kildam Naricissae. Why are you to here?"

"I have a few questions that I was hoping you might answer. May my friends and I speak with you?"

"You may." He stepped back. "Please... enter."

I did, as did Irkis, Hemphley, and Synscoth. The inside of the guests' quarters where they were staying were remarkably unremarkable; the furniture was dull, the decorations were sparse, drab, and forgettable - I have, in fact, forgotten what they were exactly - but overall the contents of the guest rooms, doubtlessly supplied by some beaurocrat who thought himself quite ingenious in coming up with a decor that would offend nobody, but the problem was that it impressed nobody, either, except possibly the beaurocrat himself.

In stark contrast to the room however were the occupants themselves. They were all radiant, their eyes possessing an otherworldly luminance, and their garb seeming flawless and unwrinkled. I was suddenly startled to notice the big cat laying, paws folded under its fluffy breast, on the couch in the central room. As we walked inside I saw its gaze lift from a the floor in the front of a wall to rest on my company, singly observing each one, and finally ending on me. At the sight of the huge, tan ball of fur, an irrational part of my brain urged me to dash over and stroke it, but another impulse held me from it; I didn't like the idea of the cat becoming unfriendly and swatting my head off my shoulders. Besides, I had a job to do.

I saw, in the back of the room, one of the women who had spoken in the meeting, Venli, if I recalled correctly, reading a book which was fairly hefty and looked to be written in Erchiva, the language of the ancients. At our entrance she looked up and waited a moment, I suppose to see if her lingual skills would be needed. She

beheld us with friendly looks, as if our presence did not make her the least bit uncomfortable, which, though I took it for merely an act of appearances, made me slightly less uncomfortable at barging in. I smiled back, a polite, fake smile, but it seemed to do the trick. She put a bookmark in her book and walked over to a small, round table surrounded by uncomfortable-looking chairs. She pulled aside one chair and sat down, then gestured for us to sit. "Please. Do sit down."

Not to be impolite, I sat down, and found that I had been quite correct in my assessment of the chairs, but I made no motion of discomfort. Kildam sat down next to Venli, and to Irkis' right, and in short order I found myself being forced over around the small table until I was seated just next to Venli, instead of across from her. I angled my chair so that I could face her.

"I'd like to ask you some questions. You see, it hasn't been reported yet, but one of our towns has been attacked by an unusual enemy.

"In essence, we need to know if we are facing the N'rith'k, and if so, we need to know everything you can tell us about them."

I wondered what Venli and Kildam would think of my request; I could see that Kildam was slightly troubled, and a little perplexed, possibly wondering how the N'rith'k had followed them here, and worried at both what might befall us because of them, and what retaliation might occur back toward the Narcissians in lieu of the attacks.

Venli, on the other hand was calm, peculiarly so. I assumed that her approach was that she would not worry until we were sure that it was the N'rith'k.

I nodded to Sid, who had, on my request, gone and interviewed some of the Norvam refugees, to learn as much about the attackers, in both actions and appearance, as

possible. He withdrew from his jacket a small page of parchment, which he looked over before he began.

"So far, this is what we know about whatever it was that attacked Norvam. First, physically they appear as sort of beast, definitely not human, somewhat resembling wolves. Do you know what wolves are?"

Venli nodded curtly, but said nothing, the focus of the conversation remaining on Sid.

He continued. "They have thick black, sometimes dark brown fur. They also have sharp teeth and claws which are their primary weapons. They are primarily bipedal; their rear knee joints bend backward, like those of wolves. When running, in fact, they often drop down on all fours."

Now he stopped for a moment, and asked the fateful question. "Does this resemble the... N'rith'k?"

Venli didn't respond immediately; she thought for a few moments, and in those moments I witnessed her calm demeanor crumble, quickly and only for a short time, but it was enough. First her perfectly neutral lips began to quiver, ever so slightly. The edges of her mouth turned down, but I saw her fight back the urge to yell out in anguish. Her eyes looked downward, as if to avoid seeing the rest of us and being reminded of those whom she wouldn't see again. She regained her composure quickly, nevertheless, and answered, though I thought I detected tiny squeak, an inconsistency in her voice.

The words came out slowly, distantly. Venli avoided eye contact as she said it. "Yes. It does."

Her words struck like thunder, and had I been one for cheap dramatics, I would have added a lightning strike right there, for all the weight Venli's statement carried. That one word, "Yes," was crushing. That word, it can be said, foretold the doom of not only the city, nor even the

country, but our whole civilization, if we couldn't do something that the Narcissians hadn't been able to do.

And, I reminded myself, they're the ones that have come to us from another world, seeking our aid. Yet, if they could traverse worlds, traveling through a sphere of light, then why did they need our help? The N'rith'k were little more than violent, persistent beasts, as far as I knew, so I was lost as to how they could so utterly defeat the Narcissians, who seemed to possess amazing otherworldly powers...

I could have mused on, but I filed those thoughts aside for later, because my true purpose here was not to assess the Narcissians' powers, but to figure out what I could about the N'rith'k... Unless...

I broke the moment of dead silence following Venli's heavy response. "How did you get here?"

Venli seemed confused for a moment, thrown off by my sudden change of topic. To her, and Kildam - heck, even to my lieutenants - it must have seemed random, spontaneous, senseless. To me, however, it made perfect sense.

Recovering, Venli replied, "Well... I am slightly unconfident with how I may describe it... I suppose I had better start at the beginning."

She paused, took a breath.

"In Narcis, our people possesses abilities which stretch beyond our bodies' natural functions, a sort of power to manifest our will from a distance. For example, one could create a flame spontaneously in that fireplace over there." She gestured to the fireplace, which was unlit, and remained so.

"As a matter of fact, I do think I am getting cold." She got up, and went to the fireplace. At the same time, Erina came out of one of the doorways leading to separate rooms, and sat down on the couch, next to the cat, which

yawned and stretched, then rested its head on her lap. Erina scratched the big feline under the chin gently, but didn't comment on our presence. She seemed content simply to listen.

Presently Venli began to talk again, as she stacked logs up in the fireplace.

"If I am not mistaken, there is a word for this power in your language: 'Magic.' We often use it in applications such as healing and finding that which has been lost, but it has also been used for transportation, education, construction, and even entertainment." Then she added, in a darker tone, "Magic can also be used to destroy."

She placed the last log on the fire and reached over for some smaller kindling, which she began to place carefully in the middle of her wooden tower.

"There is a type of magic called *portas*, which... connects two distant places. What your woodsman described, the sphere in the forest, is a such a type of gate. However, it is a special one, which links two very different kinds of places.

"To be truthful, I don't fully understand the difference between this place and Narcis, but to put it simply, our world and yours are not connected by any distance of land or sea, and the same rules do not apply in both places."

"The rules like your 'magic,' right?" Irkis added.

"Exactly. Here, we can't use magic, because this world's rules don't allow for it."

"So how do you get back?" Irkis inquired.

"Well, the gate through which we got here, was created from Narcis. We will get back the same way, through a gate created in Narcis; simply put, fourteen solar days from our arrival, our fellows will open another gate for us to come back through..."

I nodded, understandingly. Venli's explanation made sense, though I was still a little unsure on how 'magic' worked. I was curious, though, because I wanted to know just how the Narcissians had used magic against the N'rith'k.

Venli had an odd look on her face now, though. "What is it?" I asked her.

"Well... in Narcis, we usually light fires with magic..."

It hit me with a chuckle - she didn't know how to set the fire! I tried to conceal my amusement, but it was obvious that she saw me grin, because she flushed in embarrassment.

I looked around; Synsoth was still at the table, looking over his notes with Hempley. I figured on getting some gibes from them later for "flirting" with Venli, but it was all in good fun. Besides, I could always get back at Hempley by reminding him that he had been "out to lunch" while we were in Norvam.

Kildam seemed suitably confused, and Erina still seemed barely there, petting the big cat. Irkis was looking around, as if searching for something, but then he focused in one direction, on a cabinet off to my left a few feet. He walked over, and picked up from a tin on top of the cabinet, three matches, which he tossed to me. I caught them, and struck one alight on my boot, holding it up for the Narcissians to see. Kildam at first flinched when the match lit, which surprised me because I had thought that one who was used to fires spontaneously lighting by magic would not be awed by a simple match. Venli just stared at it with fascination.

I shook the match out before it could singe my fingertips. Handing one to Venli, I suggested she try it. She was not wearing boots, I noticed, so I suggested that she light it on the fireplace's screen. She tentatively scraped it

along the screen, but the match refused to light, so I told her, "No, strike it faster, like this." I made a flicking motion with my right hand, without the match. Venli tried it again, but this time she flicked overzealously and scraped her knuckles without managing to light it. I noticed that she had worn the head off her match, so that it was useless, so I passed her the last match. She managed to light it on the first try, and gently tossed it into the kindling, lighting the fire. I smiled, and out of the corner of my eye, saw Synscoth and Hemphley smiling too, but theirs were a different kind of smile - a smirk.

o o o

Reawakening, she stood again, looked around. The room she was in was a huge amphitheater, and she was standing center stage. The huge doors through which she had entered were behind her, off to the side of the stage. No longer lit unnaturally, but also no longer pitch black, the room was dim, though not like the corridor. Light streamed in from huge rectangular windows reaching up toward the lofty dome ceiling, which was surprisingly simple, in a pleasing way. The whole room was given a cool, grey tone from the clouds in the windows. In front of her were row after row of stone benches, and in the center of the arrangement there was a hole, an arched tunnel which led forward, then turned a full right angle outwards. From the unseen outside there streamed more grey light, and a calm breeze flowed in through that tunnel and back to the ornate doors, whistling, barely audible, lonely, insecure.

She brushed her hair back out of habit, and realized that the action must have been a remnant of her old self. With no place to go but forward, Mirai took one step, then another, toward the arched passage, her boots causing hollow

reverberations as she walked.

o o o

It was getting darker, cloudier outside; I expected a thunderstorm soon. The fire was blazing well now, and we had once again sat down in the uncomfortable around the table to discuss the N'rith'k. Synsoth had fetched a quill and a bottle of ink from his knapsack, and was ready to start taking more notes on the Narcissians' response to the N'rith'k's attacks. Erina had seated herself at our table, between Venli and me, and the cat was sitting at her feet. I noticed her hand stray down to scratch it behind the ears from time to time, making it seem a remarkably tame creature for one so large.

This time, Venli informed us that Erina would speak; I began to realize that the four Narcissian ambassadors each had a different purpose in having come here; Venli was a linguist, I guessed. Erina, meanwhile, seemed to be the leader, but I wondered why she would be the one to talk to us about the battles.

With little ado, she began. "The N'rith'k's first attack caught us unprepared. They attacked a small villiage. It was in the borderlands. The village fell in one day. There were no survivors. We did not get a firsthand account."

She paused; she seemed to be looking for the right word. "We did not know for what they attacked." This line prompted me to look at Venli, to see if she had caught the awkward phrase. Her expression, however, was unintelligible. Erina continued. "When they attacked again we were still unprepared. Two days after, they attacked a city Girnath. Girnath was the center of our military. The troops in that city held out for nearly a week. They used hot oil and magical fire. They dropped those things from

flying ships. The N'rith'k learned to build catapults. They threw their troops over the walls at night. They opened the gates from the inside. Then we lost Girnath. From there, nothing was good."

Though Erina's broken speech patterns were hard to follow, I was affected gravely by her story. It worried me, especially because I sensed a pattern. In Narcis they had struck first in an unprepared small town, then hit the largest military target. In the Empire, they had also struck suddenly at a small town. If they were to follow the pattern, which was a reasonable guess if they didn't know about the Narcissians coming here, then the N'rith'k would strike next... here, Nurn, the capital of the Empire, where right now our army was encamped...

And yet something else nagged at the back of my mind, a dangerous, poisonous thought. What if the Narcissians led them here? Intentionally or not, it might be their fault that we were now under attack, and if was... if it was, then the N'rith'k would know they were here, and would be prepared for us to be prepared for them... I pondered the possibilities until Sid snapped me out of my daydreaming.

"Kelf... Aren't you going to ask them anything else?"

I waved him off, absent-mindedly. "Well, I don't really have anything else to ask... You go ahead and ask them whatever you can think of."

And so, my lieutenants went on to ask all kinds of detailed questions, like "How high were the walls at Girnath?" and "What did they make the catapults out of?" Hemphley had most of the questions; this was not a huge surprise, since George was the most defensively-minded one of the group. I didn't really have much to say; I just stared around detachedly, at the cat, the fire, or the dull furnishings, or just observing the Narcissians' movements. I

pondered everything they had said in the Council meetings; it still amazed me, how all the senators had taken in stride their background and their message; neither of the two had seemed like something to be considered likely. Just the way that they could travel between worlds seemed amazing. I began to wonder... What proof has there been that they are from another world? The woodsman's testimony, though a woodsman was likely a simpleton, easily duped; the big cat, which did not seem native, but could have come from a far-off country, not from a different world; and the there was the thing with their eyes. Somehow, their eyes still seemed to possess a supernatural lustre. I wondered if, had we turned out the lights, the Narcissians' eyes would have glown in the dark. I dismissed the thought, when another, unbidden, popped into my head. For the second time in one day, I found myself blurting out a question seemingly at random.

"What do the N'rith'k do with the cities they capture?"

Neither Venli nor Erina replied immediately. Venli suddenly had a strange look on her face, like one who has just realized what she had forgotten. Erina, too, was uncertain; the two shared a look of questioning among themselves and Kildam, and then Venli replied, "Well... I don't know."

Erina clarified her response. "They... None have returned. They go. They do not come back."

Following this, there was a long silence in the room. At length I stood up.

"Thank you for your time and all your help. My lieutenants and I have received enough knowlege; we must now decide what to do with it." I took a breath. "If there is anything we can do to repay you for your cooperation, come see me. I am presently encamped just outside the

city; I'm certain you can find someone who will direct you there. If we have any more questions, perhaps we shall call again. Oh, and how much longer will you remain here?"

"Eleven solar days," replied Venli.

"I will be off then. Good day."

Sid, George, and Mick spoke their thanks and farewells, and the three Narcissians replied in kind. Followed by my lieutenants, I walked out the door, and shut it quietly behind me. As I took one last peek into the room, I could've sworn I saw the cat nod its head at me with an expression that seemed to say, "Goodbye... for now."

o o o

Mirai stepped out of the shade of the colosseum, and into a mystery. Looking around her, everything seemed wrong. The colosseum - she couldn't think of a better word for it - sat in the middle of a clearing. The clearing was devoid of activity, save a few grass stalks blowing in the wind. The clearing, abnormally circular, was surrounded by a uniform collection of trees, all pines; here and there were rocks or saplings or part of a fallen tree-stump, but, she noticed, there were no hills, either in the clearing or in the distance; the entire area was peculiarly flat. She couldn't see far into the distance, either.

Then the strangest part of all made itself apparent in her consciousness: there were no animals, anywhere. Aside from herself, she could see no living things but plants in the area.

Nor could she hear them. No birds chirped resoundingly. No crickets cricked, no frogs croaked, no snakes hissed nor squirrels chattered. The clearing and the land surrounding it were a barren land, and yet so lush with foliage that it seemed almost as abnormal. She was surrounded with a place as lonely

and solitary as death itself.

Then, she began to wonder, What if this really is death? What if I'm dead? She shook her head. It doesn't matter, she told herself. I'm here now, and I need to know why. I need to move on.

With that, Mirai began to walk on, out of the clearing.

o o o

I had a plan. It was risky, but I was interested, and it was worth a shot. Besides, since when was being in the military *not* risky?

I was going to go see what was going on in Norvam. The N'rith'k had captured it two days ago; by now, if they were going to do anything to it, it was time for them to start. I wanted to spy in on the goings-on, and that meant getting close. I was worried about what the Narcissians had said, but it would only get worse if I sat and waited for them to show up. Nurn, despite being the largest city in the Empire, could not easily put up with the presence of several thousand soldiers within its walls, and the walls themselves were horribly designed for a military seige; Nurn was a city that thrived on trade, a central locus of activity around which other cities gravitated. Defense of the Empire occurred far away from Nurn, on the borders of the country, not in the heart of it. The Milunite River, which flowed directly through the city, was notoriously hard to blockade; in short, Nurn was anything but a fortress, and to try to hold off the N'rith'k there would be a disaster. The only reason the army was stationed in Nurn was that, being the most popular city in the Empire, it was where most of the army came from, and most of the Chancellors figured that it was appropriate to keep the army there, on account of tradition if nothing else.

Consequently, I called together my head lieutenants and told them the plan. I said that I'd need some of them to remain here and garrison the troops for an invasion, and I'd need a smaller force, no more than a few dozen, to come with me to Norvam. I also had it in mind to organize several smaller companies into scouting parties and temporary guards for the various towns in the vicinity, in case we were wrong about the attackers being N'rith'k, or, more likely, that they would not follow the same pattern as in Narcis.

Specifically, my plan for defense went as follows. Nurn would be geographically and militarily the centerpoint of our defense. The largest part of our forces, probably about half, would remain therein. The surrounding towns Ciros, Harkin, and Lilom would each support a garrison of approximately one tenth of the army; two roaming scout companies would patrol the area among and around the towns, and I with my small force would head directly to Norvam.

The moment an enemy was sighted from any group, they would send a trio of mounted messengers to inform the nearest of the four locations, which would go to join them and also dispatch their own messengers to the other groups. Half of each garrison force would be relayed to a city nearer the attacked one, so no area was totally undefended but no force would move too far; each city would retain a portion of its guard in the case of a two-pronged assault, or a feint maneuver. Our men were to resist the N'rith'k's entry into any of the cities, but not attack first, on the off chance that they might attempt to negotiate.

I assigned Irkis, Synscoth, and the lieutenant who had gone with us to Norvam, Liurn, each to a surrounding town. Hemphley I left in command of Nurn itself, and to

the scout companies I assigned two promising young officers, Weston Harshek and Inalie Moebi.

That left my party. I gathered a group which I had overseen in the past, Jin Battalion; it was as close as the Empire's army got to having an elite battalion, and I had once been a member of it myself, before I left it to become General. It was short a few members, since a couple men had gone on leave since we had arrived here in Nurn, and they had not been replaced; also, Hemphley was its usual commander but he would not be coming; but I filled his spot, so it was not an issue. I gave out my orders and preparations began.

o o o

We set out early and made good time; by midday we were more than halfway there and we had seen no sign of the N'rith'k. As we neared the point where Harkin would be visible over the horizon, we were in high spirits. No N'rith'k had been seen, and the weather was perfect.

That all changed quickly as we reached the town. It was burning. Plumes of putrid, pitch-black smoke stretched up to meet the already soot-filled clouds. The smell was awful; the air reeked of charred flesh and ruined crops. From a distance we could see dark figures running around in a gross parody of children's games, chasing and hiding and fighting.

I reined in my horse, Pegasus, and motioned to the rest of my company to halt. Sitting and watching would be cowardly but I knew that to go in unprepared would likely be worse.

One of the soldiers rode his mount up next to mine. "What are we going to do?"

I didn't respond right away. There were a lot of

possibilities. Riding in and fighting back would be very dangerous: we didn't know if the N'rith'k were prepared for a counterattack; getting ourselves killed trying to save a few refugees would be the height of stupidity. Running away, on the other hand, would be a moral quandary which would leave us with the guilt of knowing that we could have done *something* and we hadn't.

During my planning, I stared absentmindedly at the town. I became fixated on the surreal vision of a pitiful figure fleeing a merciless pursuer, chased and hiding behind a burning hut. As the figure backs slowly away from his pursuer, suddenly another monster springs up behind him. For an instant, a single mind-numbingly clear image etches itself in my vision: the cowering figure realizes that he has backed into an enemy. He turns, too late, right into the incoming hand, a huge claw visible against the backdrop of fire and smoke. Then his belly is sliced open by the claw, its bloody, runny contents flowing out of him as he collapses, trying to hold them in, failing, dark fluid spewing out of him by the bucketful. This scene engraved itself in my memory. In my life in the military I have seen many things, and among them still I can see the man cornered, attacked, collapsed as if it were right before my eyes. Like all memories of war, I doubt that I will ever forget it.

In the end the decision was made for me. Someone in my group snapped, when he saw it, charged without thinking. Our presence betrayed, no matter what the rest of us did, we had no choice but to attack -- I called two of my quickest riders over and sent them back to Nurn with the warning, and then I joined the charge.

Pegasus caught the charge easily; like his namesake, he seemed to fly across the ground more than run. We drew up into the town and the smell of the sickening smoke and carnage worsened; I pulled up the collar from

my tunic to use as a mask. Pegasus whinnied, complaining about the fire and ground, but I knew that he wouldn't panic; he was a well-trained steed. I drew around a torched home, whose half-fallen mud brick walls were but a ridiculous parody of the structure it had once been. I heard moaning from inside, so I brought Pegasus around and dismounted, then looked inside. There was a woman, bathed in blood and soot, cradling a child, who was shaking with convulsions and a choking sob. I kicked aside a fallen, burning timber in the doorway, and stepped inside.

"Leave me be!" she wailed. "Just leave me be!"

I was not surprised at this burst of noise, the like of which I had heard many times. I doubted if, at this point, blinded by agony and smoke, she could tell the difference between me and a monster.

"I can help," I said softly, trying to distinguish myself from an attacker.

"I'm beyond help!" she spat.

"Your child..."

She sobbed more, and suddenly the child broke out with a stark cry. "Let me at least help your child!" I insisted.

She didn't do anything, or say anything, for a moment. Finally, she shifted, her posture, changing from hopeless but protective to resigned. She held out the child, and I took him from her arms, crying his ear-splitting lament.

"His name is Naota," she said in a whisper.

"Naota," I repeated. I held out a hand for the woman. "You come too."

She didn't take it. Instead, she just stared at the wailing Naota. "Be safe," she said. Then she collapsed.

Immediately I reacted, checking her pulse, her breathing. I could find neither; she was dead. *She must have been saving her energy just to protect the child*, I realized.

"He will be," I said in reply, too late but hoping she could still find me somewhere. "He will be."

Out of the flaming wreck that had once been a house, I stepped. With the child in one arm, I climbed my mount, and started off.

o o o

Mirai looked around warily as she walked. The trees were not thinly spread, and there were no paths, not even deer trails. She wondered at that. What kind of unnatural place can survive without animals? Is it even possible? Perhaps with magic, she thought to herself, finding it strange that she remembered what magic was, but in her memory could not seem to remember ever having seen it or used it, though she could not deny that she had either. It was all so frustratingly unclear. She pushed on, faster now, as if some unknown danger might suddenly jump out of the brush at her. The trees were thinning. The daylight was waning. Soon, she realized, she would have to find a place to weather the night. Without any provisions, she had to find some kind of natural shelter, or a settlement, or she would be sleeping outside, exposed, vulnerable. Despite the continuing lack of local fauna, she didn't like the idea. She pressed on, in the same direction, across what must have been miles of perfectly flat, uniformly-thick, entirely uninhabited woods. The absurd conformity of the whole thing was unnerving.

Suddenly, for the first time since she had entered this forest, Mirai heard movement, the sound of something not far off, coming toward her. She froze. Before she could recover, it came through a break in the trees to her right.

A horse.

With a saddle.

I rode out through the burning city with the child Naota, who was now so exhausted that he had stopped crying and had fallen asleep. I hoped it was a good sign.

The smoke was choking; it burnt at my eyes and throat. Pegasus, too, was coughing and hacking with it, so I reined him off from the thickest part of the smoke where we could breathe. The activity in the city seemed to have died down, and I couldn't see any N'Rith'k -- assuming that's what they were -- anywhere. One soldier pulled up beside me, and looked out silently. I bit my lip.

He eyed the child. "Found a survivor?" he asked, hesitantly.

"I hope he will be," I said, wistfully. More soldiers came back; a few of them were bringing other survivors. In a few moments, we seemed to have gathered everyone.

"Where are they?" I asked. "They... disappeared?"

A couple shrugged; others mumbled or said nothing. Nobody seemed to have an idea of what had just happened, other than that the city was now empty, and razed to the ground.

It wasn't a fun sight.

"We're heading out. We'll make one more pass of the town and get back on the road. Norvam is only a ways away, but we'll set up camp a few miles out. Now, let's go!" I had decided there was nothing more to see in Harkin; the town was gone, and I had already sent the message back to the other cities. I definitely didn't want to stay too close to the burning town, though. We were just one group, and Harkin was a caustic mess of burnt-out buildings by now; we would be surrounded by ashes and the still-raging blaze if we remained, not to mention that we would be vulnerable to an ambush. As it was, I assigned guards on

every flank in case the enemies came up and attacked us.

It troubled me that they had just let us go, though. They had burned the villiage, killed the inhabitants, and then vanished. *Are they afraid of us? Or do they want us to go this way? Are we waltzing right into a trap?* I kept asking myself, to no avail.

"Keep a look out for tracks," I added, though just after I said it, the situation changed. The sky, red with sunset and flame, was suddenly speckled with dots of snow.

What a strange sight it was, delicate fresh snow of the early season falling wistfully on sombre riders and bloodstained ground! The chill was setting in, though. *This is going to be a long winter*, I thought to myself. The child on my saddle stirred. *A long winter indeed.*

After an uneventful night in camp, we were ready to set out again. Morale was not exactly soaring, but I figured we just needed to buckle down and get on with it. Norvam was now just an hour or two away, or what was left of it was, anyway. The snow had been light, only an inch or so, but it made for a pristine landscape as we broke camp and started away. It also made for a chilly morning.

It was just before noon when I heard the crack of a branch being snapped. I thought it might just be one that had collected too much snow, but there were other noises. I held Pegasus back, and looked in the direction of the sound.

Soon there was a yell from the right-rear guard: "Enemy incoming!"

I didn't have to wait long before I saw it for myself. There were dozens of them, suddenly, huge wolf-like creatures bounding through the trees and over hillocks, snarling and growling. They had huge fangs, very visible in their wide-open mouths, and huge claws on their handlike paws. They were covered in shaggy, thick fur, in a range of

browns and blacks. One grey led the pack and from the almost-intelligent stare he shot me, I knew he must have been the leader.

I had already drawn my sword; others in the company were firing their bows into the oncoming pack, but those who were hit seemed to bear no mind, except for the occasional yelp of one who had been struck in a vital spot. Most of them, though, pay no heed to the arrows embedded in their haunches or chests or torsos.

The brunt of the pack draws near to the foremost row of riders, who set their horses into a counter-charge, and the two sides hit as waves in opposite directions, with blood spraying like sea brine upward at the collision. The formations break quickly and the fight has become a free-for-all; I lose myself in the battle and ride wildly through it. Pegasus leaps over fallen comrades and monsters, and I cut down the wolf-monsters, hacking at limbs, bludgeoning skulls, flitting in and out of the melee wherever I can. I do not know how many my sword took, nor do I count; boasting of glory is something for other men. I simply fought because I had to and because *I loved it!* The furor of the battle, the heated sensation of the body, living in the very second, thinking two steps ahead yet hardly thinking at all. War is a horrible thing, but to say that I do not revel in the bloodlust of combat would be to lie. After the battle there would be time to mourn the losses of the day, but for now there was only the insatiable chaos of the war-gods.

Then I find Pegasus and myself standing before the grey from the head of the charge, a leader of demonic beasts, with gore on his claws and death in his eyes. He, or it, has killed one of my men, the torn flesh of the man's abdomen on the beast's claw, and he looks at me with a vile grin and a look in his eyes that tells me he takes glory in his kill. His yellow, slitted eyes do not show fear or pain,

despite the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from his shoulder blade. Instead, I see in them only one thing: a challenge.

We stood for a moment, staring each other down, not an act of intimidation but one of respect for the other's skill. At that moment, it occurred to me that I could die here. My foe was one not known well to me, but who had quickly proven himself -- or itself -- deadly. I did not sway my course, though: every battle, every day, I could die. It was natural. There was no escape from this battle. I knew that it was inevitable: leader against leader, a duel to mirror, though mayhap not determine, the outcome of the battle. I tightened my grip on the saddle and steadied my sword hand. Then, at the same time, we charged.

He came leaping like a hound over the others, men and beasts parting before him. I charged straight forward, Pegasus soaring over the fallen and the fighting. I gripped my sword with two hands, and prepared to drive it into his chest. His limbs outstretched, he bounded upward and I was just able to deflect his claws with my blade, a shrill ring sounding out over the battlefield. The force of his blow knocked me from my saddle and Pegasus bolted, hitting another enemy with his hooves but not staying near me. The grey, only slightly rebuked from my attack, came in again, snarling, and spat warm blood at my face. He tried to pin me on the ground, but I parried his blow and rolled to the side, arching my sword over my head as I leaped to my feet for a counterattack, but he was swift and my strike hardly touched flesh. He was behind me now, and I whirled around to swing at his oncoming claws, and this time I felt my sword slash the fleshy pads in his paw-palms. He snarled and lunged forward, his putrid breath clouding my nostrils, and his hind legs reared up and clawed me down the ribs. I fell back a little, wincing from the pain, and he

came after me even more fiercely, slashing left and right. I deflected his blows with my blade, but there were so many, and I was raked down the side again. I fended off the most lethal blows, but was left bruised and battered. He lunged, attempting to place the final blow, but I held up my sword, catching one of his arms just above the elbow. I felt the edge of my weapon strike bone, and I saw thick, dark red blood begin oozing through the grey fur, staining it dark. He snarled again, and I felt drops of saliva hit my face. I shoved upward with all my strength and forced him off of me, then ran in for my own attack, a thrust toward his abdomen, but he deflected it and suddenly I lost my grip on my sword, which went whirling to the side. I lost sight of it in the midst of the crowd of combatants, and the beast paused a moment as if to gloat over his victory.

He had not won yet, however. Pegasus came in from one side, and knocked him astray, and I dove headlong toward the off-balance monster. I got behind it and reached my hands around the thick fur of its neck, squeezing tight. It thrashed, but I held still and shifted my weight to keep him down. It was a violent few moments, but eventually he stopped struggling. I sighted the glint of steel and quickly dove for my sword. I picked it up, and held it over him a moment, looking at the face turned to the side. He wasn't completely dead yet: he shifted ever so slightly, blood starting to cloud his vision, to try and see me. With a respectful nod to my fallen foe, I drew up my sword and thrust it downward into his head. I didn't want to make the mistake of aiming for his heart and missing.

I looked up. The battle still raged around me, and with the challenger vanquished I now was starting to feel the ache of my wounds. My leather was soiled, incarnadine, and my tunic shredded from his claws. Muddy snow covered my back and legs, and my hands felt frozen to the

bone, but the battle still raged around me. I began to feel dizzy, detached, and I knew that I had to get clear of the heart of the fight. We were not faring well; all too many of my men had not fared as well as I had against their foes, though the ground was littered with bodies from both sides.

Suddenly, above the din of the raging maelstrom of fur and steel, there came a single note, a soothing voice, ethereal, which washed over the battlefield. Men dropped their swords, the monsters drew back, and everyone sat dazed. I looked up, and saw her on an untarnished hillock of snow overlooking the carnage: an angel.

o o o

She was surrounded in a glowing storm, floating in the air and looking out over a turbulent vortex of shapes crashing and rocking. Cries came up from below, as the little shapes hit each other and bounced back and broke apart, abstract conglomerates of color and life crashing upon each other like waves upon a rocky sea cliff, and the voices sounded so real, yet she couldn't understand a word they were saying. It sounded so meaningful, like they were just trying to tell her something, but she couldn't quite grasp it. The waves of emotion surged up to her and she felt the shapes' emotions. It seemed odd that shapes could have feelings but she knew it was true, felt their sadness and their hurt and fear, and also their hope and their love, and even their hatred and their passion.

Suddenly she heard a song on the air, in a voice that sounded like her own. Without even realizing it she began to sing along, and all the passion and the hope and fear and everything else found their way into each note, and the strange song echoed out over the pearly void in the language she couldn't understand, but somehow she knew that every word

was meaningful in a way that ran deeper than its definition. The waves of sound washed out over the collage of shapes and soothed the riot, and the uproar grew quiet, watchful, and she felt a new emotion flow into her: wonder. The crashing subsided and flowed back into calm, and she was alone in the void. Yet, then, for a reason she couldn't understand, she was overflowing with tears, joyful, beautiful tears dripping down her face and she couldn't control them, nor did she want to, no, no, they were true tears of joy, and she let them flow freely.

The light faded and she felt herself again, and she felt the coarse grass poking at her through her robes, and the heat of the new morning's sun beating down upon her, combatting the chill of the thin winter air, and something else... something warm and wet... which smelled bad. Opening her eyes, she saw what it was. The horse was nudging her with its nose, trying to get her to move, to stand up. She complied, and it prodded her again, even looking back at its saddle to encourage her, to tell her that it was here for her to ride. She grasped the reins and with a careful pull upon them she lifted herself into the saddle, and looked out across the land. It was as barren as ever, full of foliage but devoid of movement, except for her and now the horse, yet for some reason she felt different. She was happy. She smiled and pulled gently on the reins, noticing how easily it came to her to ride the horse. It was another clue to her former self. Hopeful and ready, she rode forth.

o o o

She was beautiful: a slender, surreal figure, smooth-skinned and pale, wearing a cloak of pure white, her hair long and golden, floating loose in the sky, feet aloft and bare, and with a face no mere mortal, I thought, could match. She sang her beautiful melody, and the waves of sound and light from her radiance silenced the battlefield.

Those who were fighting dropped their weapons; those who were wounded stopped moaning. What had been an image of conflict became one of serenity. Then, as mysteriously as she had appeared, she was gone, fading out of vision like a ghost. Yet, before she was gone, I thought I saw her crying.

I steadied myself, and stood unsure of what to do. The monsters, N'rith'k perhaps, shuffled off the way they had come without putting up a fight. My men wandered in a daze, but I felt as I knew they must, not desiring to fight. I was emotionally drained, yet pulsing with happiness. Pegasus sauntered over to where I was, and I climbed into the saddle. It then occurred to me that the child who had been riding with me was no longer here: he must have fallen off, sometime during the battle. I should have felt a knot in my stomach at the possibility that he had died during the fight, but somehow the worry failed to materialize. Then, I heard a crying noise, and there he was, sitting up among bodies and armor, with his hands rubbing his eyes. He was safe, somehow. I smiled.

Others, however, were not. Many lay on the ground in worse shape than I, though of the monsters I saw none who still lived. Later I would find that those who had survived had actually been seen being carried off the battlefield by the others. I ordered my men to take at least one of the dead things and keep hold of it, so when we returned to Nurn, someone could take a look at these things on the inside. They took a couple of the furred bodies, and we buried the remaining ones in a large unmarked grave.

At the same time, we took care of our own. Those who were dead were given their final rites, and those who still lived were treated as best they could be. Though there were medics in Jin Battalion, they were not surgeons, and

they were limited in their tools. Some of the wounded would be very lucky to survive. All told, nearly half of the battalion was either dead or seriously wounded; most of the rest had plenty of bruises and scratches; it had been a tough fight, and Jin Battalion was some of the best the Empire had. That did not bode well.

We had finished the sombre task of cleaning up after the battle. It was time to move on, though I didn't much look forward to it. I worried about what was going on back at Norvam: by now, the monsters might have launched an attack on Nurn, or one of the other settlements in the area. They had only sent a small group after us; it made me wonder why. Were they just testing us, to see if we, as a real military division, were better prepared to fight them than the town militias? Perhaps they had thought they would be able to take care of us with that group - *They almost had*, I realized with a shudder, *except for the intervention of that angel...* I had to be better prepared next time, to know how to better fight them, because I knew I couldn't count on another miracle like that. I tried to think of strategies we could utilize to fight them. I couldn't think of very much at the moment, so I promised myself I'd brood over it later.

It was hardly a long ride at all before we were within sight of Norvam. As soon as we could see it, I paused the troops. Withdrawing a viewing glass, a new tool provided by the gadgeteers in Nurn which let things from far away be seen as if they were near, I took a closer look. I could hardly tell that the city had been there at all: the smaller huts had been razed to the ground and the ashes buried. Only the crushed rubble of the stone town hall remained, and there were shapes of N'rith'k (for I had decided to call them that, whether they were the same or not) crawling over it and carrying the rubble throughout

the city in strange patterns.

A soldier on my right, a young officer named Kazik, pointed something else out to me. Around the borders of the town, where the fields had been, things were being dug up and others planted. Numerous N'rith'k were moving like ants in and out of the central area of the clearing, carrying things I couldn't see very well from the distance. Everything seemed to be done with utmost care, as if an exact plan were being carried out: indeed, the manner of movement for the beasts was very different than it had been during our earlier encounter with them.

Then came into sight something amazing. There were gasps from all around. It was a monster like the dragons of legend: a huge, reptilian beast, standing several times the height of a man and with wings that, outstretched, reached so far that they shadowed what would've been city blocks. It seemed to be stalking around the town, perhaps directing activity. I couldn't tell for sure. I felt the pulse of my heart strengthen and quicken; it was an intimidating sight. I could only hope that no dragon-monster would come to fight us. I would have to ask the Narcissians about it later. *If I survived for later, that was.*

I weighed the options: we could remain and look on, to try and better figure out what they were doing, but the risk of being detected loomed larger, and, already weak from the first fight, we didn't want to have to fight that giant serpent; yet, without knowing what they were really doing, it weakened our trip's purpose. I decided that we ought to stay a while longer, carefully looking on, but leave early enough that we could be well away before nightfall. But, the decision was made pointless: because just then, I saw the dragon's head turn straight toward me, and I felt it looking me straight in the eye.

It was one of the most blood-curdling experiences I

had ever had. The dragon was enormous: it towered over the N'rith'k, and could've easily picked them -- or me -- up with one tortuously sharp claw. Its wings were black, leathery things that could have come from a creature of the underworld. Its belly was a reddish color, with the texture of a snake's underside. Its mouth was full of huge, sharp teeth and there seemed to be steam emitting from its nostrils. Worst of all, though, the thing had yellow, sinister, slitted eyes, nearly as tall as I was, and they were staring straight at me. I shuddered.

It shifted its weight forward, stretched its wings out to their full length, and took to the air. I was stunned. *What could I do?* There was no way I could fight something like that, but it could fly faster than me, and from the air it could see me wherever I tried to hide. Not only I, but my entire group, was trapped. There was no escape. We would be shredded by its claws, battered by its tail, engulfed by its fangs... perhaps even torched by its fire, if it breathed flame as did the legendary creatures it resembled.

I realized that there was no room for such thoughts, and that if I were to continue wasting my time thinking them, they would come true. I realized that if we ran, we would just be picked off one by one. Our only chance was to stand up to it: perhaps as a group, even one so wearied as we were, we stood a chance, if only a small one. I lifted my blade laboriously from its sheath, then held it at arms' length and pointed it straight at the thing coming at us. With more vigor than I felt, I said, "Bring it on."

The crew behind me drew up their bows, those who had them, and steadied their aim. The dragon approached. It arced upward, preparing for a dive, then soared downward toward us with such furious speed that the archers barely had a chance to fire before it was upon us. Those who did get their arrows off saw measured success:

many shots flew wide, but just as many hit their mark. A few lodged themselves in its wings or between the plates of its underbelly. Too many, however, simply bounced off the thing's glinting scales. It came down at me with its claws, and at the last moment I dove to the left, trying to spare myself the full force of the attack. It still hit me; even prepared as I was, I bore such force from its strike that Pegasus and I were knocked aloft, in an arcing spin from the lopsided impact. One of its claws raked up my right arm, pulling flesh wide apart and leaving my sleeve in tatters. I think my sword clipped a few scales off its toe.

In my catastrophic flight I pushed myself away from Pegasus, so he wouldn't land on me by accident, and I held my sword out and down so it would strike pointfirst into the cold ground. I hit, scraping the back of my shoulders, and by digging my sword into the dirt I controlled my spin. The snow cushioned my fall just a little; I may have broken a rib, but my body was mostly intact. Pegasus hit not far from me, very hard. I heard the dreadful thump of his impact and felt droplets of snow spatter my face as they were knocked upward. Looking over, I saw more arrows shower the thing ineffectually, and others were pulled from the saddle. One rider, I saw, was not as lucky as I had been in avoiding the full force of the dragon's claws, and his front was literally sliced open. He had plenty of time to scream and gurgle before his head was yanked from his body.

I steadied myself, and stood, waveringly, though I didn't know what I could do. The dragon, having finished its first run through the battalion, came around for a second pass. The pain of my right arm had almost numbed it, and my cold fingers could no longer hold up my sword. Feeling helpless, I shifted the sword to my left hand and shouted a command: "Try to hit its head! Wait for my

command, then fire!”

It came around again, and I waited. I waited until the last possible second, then shouted at the top of my lungs, “NOW!”

The arrows went flying, and a good number of them hit it, gouging its nostrils, or lodging themselves somewhere on its visage. I reached into my belt loop, and withdrew a tiny vial, which had been protected by a metal sheath. I sprinkled the liquid inside on the sharp of my sword, my trembling hand spilling all too much on the ground, and then when the dragon had just about reached me I hurled my sword pointfirst with all the strength that remained in my muscles. Blood poured from my right arm, where a tendon, already slit, snapped. Yet somehow, using my right arm to aim and my left to apply the leverage, I managed to get the thing flying right at the oncoming dragon. It picked up speed aloft and the explosive liquid I had poured on it caught fire from the friction with the air. Then, a blazing torch, it pierced the plates of the dragon’s underbelly. I knew I had struck home when I heard the dragon roar in surprise. I hoped I had hurt it seriously, but it didn’t halt its flight. The thing did pull up, however, and flew back in the direction of the flattened Norvam. I wondered if it was just coming around for another pass, but it didn’t.

Thank the gods! I thought. It had been a long shot, using the *Ignis* fluid to light my sword on fire and use the heat to spread the dragon’s armored plates, made stiff by the cold. I knew the dragon wouldn’t be dead: if it were anything like the creatures of legend, it would be an extremely hardy enemy, but perhaps I had startled it just enough to give us a chance of escape.

“Grab whatever and whomever you can, and let’s go!” I shouted. “We can treat wounds when we’re farther

away from here!" I looked around for Pegasus and saw him standing up tentatively. He was shaky, and so was I, but I knew that we had to go, and he knew that: he looked confident enough to ride, so I lifted myself with great effort into the saddle, and shouted to him to go.

Most of the rest of the way back has erased itself from my memory; I think I passed out for part of it. I don't know how, in such bad shape, I, Pegasus, and the rest of my crew made it back to Nurn alive and intact, but somehow we arrived at the capital city of the empire with no further trouble.

o o o

I awoke in a sick ward, doubtlessly having fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood out of my right arm. That arm was wrapped in thick bandages, and it was too numb to move. I had a number of bandages on my chest and legs as well. "You're lucky you didn't lose that arm," said a nurse, carrying in breakfast. "It was ripped open down to the bone."

"Thanks," I said, taking the tray of food from her. "but I couldn't lose the arm: it's not in my job description to be crippled." I chuckled faintly, though she didn't.

"You are not invincible, you know," she scolded me. "You should be more careful."

Indeed, I thought to myself. *One must be careful not to fight dragons*, only partly sarcastic. "How are the others?"

"Those who returned, are mostly going to live, though there aren't enough of them back to be happy about it. Just what were you doing out there?" she replied.

"You don't want to know," I said, and bit into a warm bun from the breakfast plate.

"I suppose not," she said. "Anyway, you look like

you're on the mend. Just ask me if you need anything."

"Alright," I said, with a nod, taking another bite from the biscuit. She walked off to check on other patients, presumably.

I looked around, and was surprised to see Greos wandering through the room. "Greos!" I called out.

"General Kelf?" He seemed surprised to see me. Then again, I hadn't expected to be in the hospital ward at this point, either. "What happened to you?"

"It's a bit of a long story." I saw his face droop, and realized that he must have been reminded of his own story. "I see you're doing better."

"Indeed. I was just a little banged up," he said, though I got the feeling he was simplifying things. There was a pause, and he once again averted his eyes from me. After a moment, he spoke one word, questioning.

"Norvam...?"

I wanted to say, "It's just fine! It was a misunderstanding!" or "They left it as it was. Not everyone is dead!" but I couldn't. There had hardly been a trace of the city at all. I could do nothing but slowly shake my head.

o o o

It was an odd journey for Mirai through the empty forest, and a dull one. Her steed seemed to have its own direction and since she didn't have any better idea where to go, she let it take her where it would. They trotted at a meandering pace through a thin deciduous forest, the ground littered in the brown leaves of late autumn, and the light of the cold sun spattering the ground and the foliage. Along the way, with little else to do, Mirai pondered the question of who she had been, how she had reached where she was, and what she had become since meeting the apparition in the stone building. Her entire

life seemed surreal, like a dream that never ended; yet she had never, in a dream, fallen asleep and had another dream. Of course, she couldn't remember any instances of falling asleep at all, or any dreams she had had before, but somehow her current situation felt more real than a dream, yet not quite actual.

She wasn't sure at what point it first happened, but at some moment Mirai became aware that there were living creatures about in the forest. As if waking from their nightly slumber -- an absurd thought, since there were always creatures abroad and awake during the night -- little animals were making themselves known around her. She realized that she was hearing the chirping of birds, as one solitary bird-voice was joined by another and another until there they were, a beautiful chorus of sound-making coming from every direction at once. There were soprano chirps and baritone caws and dozens of voices in between. Squirrels and chipmunks, in surprising numbers, scurried between the trees collecting acorns and chattering to each other. The whole forest, which had before been an impassive, rocky cemetery, had sprung up into a riotous city of activity.

At some length, she came upon a break in the trees, and found herself paused at the top of a ridge, overlooking a deep valley which slumbered below. Yet, in the middle of the valley, she saw a startling sight: a settlement.

o o o

There certainly is no rest for the weary. As one of the weary, following my somewhat unsuccessful exploration of Norvam, I was able to attest to that. My arm was still doing pretty bad -- I could hardly move it, it was so weak -- and I was still quite heavily bandaged, but I was very busy with preparations. After all, the N'rith'k had attacked two towns

now, both before a real guard could be mounted. If we weren't ready by the third attack, the entire Empire could be in peril. It wouldn't just be from the N'rith'k directly, but also the border countries, which, though recently defeated, might see our distraction as an opportunity to take back lands they had lost. Thus, I was back and forth across Nurn, and constantly in communication with the leaders of the different groups: Synscoth was taking care of Lilom, and Liurn was in command of the forces at Cyros. With Harkin destroyed, Irkis' division had been made into another mobile scouting division, to keep close to Harkin without getting too close, as my Norvam expedition had. Hemphley was still in charge of the defensive strategy for Nurn, but there was plenty of work to be done, so I was kept plenty busy coordinating things and also, to my dismay, with meeting with Chancellors to discuss the various provincial militias' role in the Empire's defense. It certainly was a grueling task.

I took a break from these preparations by paying another visit to the Narcissians. They had, after all, encountered the N'rith'k before. I knocked on the door and was pleased to see Kildam promptly open the door. He smiled at me, and urged me, "Come in." I did so.

The room was as it had been before. I noted a fire crackling in the furnace, providing some heat in the ever-colder air of the late year. Almost unsurprisingly, there lay curled up near it the cat which had accompanied the Narcissians. Sitting on a couch, much more comfortable-looking than the chairs, was Venli, still reading the same book as last time, though she was much farther in than before. She looked up as I walked in, and I waved in greeting, and smiled. "How goes it?" I asked, looking off in the direction of the other rooms to see if Erina or the much-elusive other male Narcissian, whose name I hadn't

yet learned, were around.

She shrugged. "It goes, I suppose. For you?" she replied.

"I've had better days," I said, glancing at my bandaged arm. She didn't ask how I had gotten wounded, which was a relief. "The others?"

"Erina is out, exploring the city. Jikkam is accompanying her." As she spoke, I looked around for a place to sit. I looked at those uncomfortable chairs, and figured that it would be proper to pull one up next to the couch. She, however, called me to sit next to her. Hiding a grin, I wondered if she did it to save me from the stiff, awkward chairs. It was quite considerate of her, if that was what she was thinking.

I sat, and tried to make myself comfortable, resting my weak arm on the couch and sitting turned inward a little to face her, and keeping a respectable distance. Kildam just sat quietly at another chair, looking at the fire. Venli seemed about to inquire why I had come back, so I answered in advance: "I've encountered the monsters. I think they are the N'rith'k. But, I also saw something... unusual. Have you ever encountered a 'dragon'?"

"A dragon?" repeated Venli incredulously. "Like the..."

"A monster of our legends. Huge, serpentine, flying."

"I did not believe in such things, though I have heard stories of them even in our own world. I still do not believe it," she countered, then added "It is not, you understand, because I think you're lying. I just can't believe that such a thing exists. You must be mistaken. Not even with magic could we create such a thing."

Not to be dramatic... okay, well, to be dramatic, I unwrapped part of my arm and pointed to it. "This is the wound I received from the dragon I encountered at Norvam."

Venli was shaken by the scar, a thick line of red-black, scabbed blood, the skin around it pale and sickly, veins visible criss-crossing it, black stitches running up and down the arm. I couldn't say that I looked easily upon it myself -- it hurt, too. Finally she said something: "Where did you say you got this scar?"

"Norvam. The attacked town."

"Where the N'rith'k invaded, you say?"

"Exactly."

She seemed surprised and depressed, though starting to accept the possibility. "We have never seen one. If the N'rith'k really have dragons on their side now, we are truly doomed."

I started to wrap up my arm again. "You have no idea how to stop them?"

"None."

I swore under my breath. *How does one fight a dragon?* I wondered. My own strategy had been lucky enough to give us time to escape, but I doubted it had wounded the dragon seriously. Finishing re-wrapping my arm, I said, "Well, I'd... I guess I'd better go, unless you have any other helpful ideas."

"Wait."

"What?"

Then, to my surprise, she leaned over and gave me a sumptuous kiss right on the lips. I started back. "What the? What was that?"

"A... good luck... charm. Think of it as a custom of my people. After all, you're going to need it," she said with a sweet smile that made me want to lean forward to kiss her back, but I restrained myself. I was still taken aback by the forwardness of her action. I tried to dismiss it as just a custom, but it hadn't exactly felt that way.

I lifted myself from the couch. "Thanks, then... I

guess," I mumbled, then turned around to find myself face-to-face with Merisse, who was red with embarrassment. Suddenly I was red, too.

"What are you --" I started.

"They're attacking!" she blurted, and then suddenly ran off like a child through the door I hadn't heard open. She dropped a note on the ground, which, when I opened it, gave me the chills: the N'rith'k had been spotted on a fast approach to the city and would probably be hitting the outer encampments of troops any moment. I swore again, this time out loud.

I turned back to Venli, and said somewhat awkwardly: "It looks like I'm going to need your luck..." She just nodded, though she looked very scared. Then again, now she knew that the N'rith'k were bearing down upon her again, and I couldn't really blame her, having finally encountered them for myself: they were indeed scary foes.

I started quickly to the door, holding the ominous note, and Kildam came up to shut it behind me. Before I left, I asked, "Is there such a custom?"

"No," he said simply, and shut the door.

Completely confused, I started at nearly a run to the outer walls.

o o o

I reached the outside air, which was blowing with a cool, icy wind and thin air. On that wind I caught a strange smell, which stirred up memories of our recent fight with the N'rith'k: they were on their way, and fast. As a few half-crushed leaves from the nearly-bare oak trees rustled between cobblestones and past my feet, I looked left and right for a sign of Merisse, but her familiar figure was nowhere to be seen in the bare streets of the city. Here and

there I caught sight of a small group rushing toward the city walls to watch for the oncoming enemy, or a more prudent person running the other way, ostensibly to prepare their household for a siege. It didn't really matter which way they ran, though -- if our defenses didn't hold out, they'd all be dead soon.

Thus I hastened to the ramparts, and upon reaching one of the large stone staircases I looked around for a familiar face. I asked one soldier, running the other way, if he had seen Hemphley.

"That way," the man said breathlessly, pointing behind him and down the ramparts the way I was going.

With a quickly uttered "Thanks," I quickstepped my way up the rest of the stairs and picked up my pace. As I ran along the top of the walls, I looked to my right, searching the outer lands for a trace of the N'rith'k, but they looked the same as always. Plains of tall yellow-green grass swayed in the icy wind, trees speckled the landscape, scattering their worn-out leaves into the air and the grass, and here and there a farmhouse sat at the edge of a well-tilled field, providing what little agriculture the Nurn area delivered; farther north, the river Milunite flowed through the city's august arch, the entry to the port area at the northern tip of the city; the wide, relatively shallow area of the river abounded with docks, tethered to which ships exotic and plain floated in the gentle ripples of the peaceful river. The western fields were mostly obscured by the tall stone-plated rooftops of the city's larger buildings, though over the thatched roofs of the smaller buildings I could spot the foothills of the Llenian Mountains, quilted in a mixed forest which gradually became more coniferous at higher altitudes. Off south, with the belltower of Nurn's famous All Saints' Church in the foreground, lay the grimmest part of Nurn, just outside the old walls: the slums.

Smoke from dozens of crude campfires wafted upwards in clumps, and all sorts of shanties, tents, and other makeshift refuges were planted in the muddy landscape surrounding the downstream end of the Milunite. The river itself seemed polluted by the destitute district, becoming darker and thicker as it sloshed slowly through the muck.

Heading in that direction, I spotted Hemphley's silhouette against the late-afternoon sky. I called out to him, and he turned toward my direction, waving as he recognized me. I reached his side and gazed out to where he was again looking, over the walls and to the southwest side of the city. The words "They're out there," drifted slowly from his mouth. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Funny?" I asked.

"It's been a generation since Nurn has been attacked. The last crisis of the Filian Empire."

"The Llenian Rebellion. Our forefathers' greatest challenge," I replied, recalling the tale my own father had passed on to me as a child. "I still don't get what's funny."

"Funny that we have our own fight now. Every generation has their own fight."

A gust of wind blew my hair back from my forehead. "Such is human nature, I guess."

Then I answered myself, "But these aren't human."

The sun was getting lower, and it was hard to see out into the distance now, as sundown drew nearer, but it wasn't long before movement was spotted in the distance. They were a few miles off -- only a dark sea of moving shapes could be discerned from the walls surrounding Nurn -- but when viewed through a viewing glass, there was no doubt that they were coming.

I said to Hemphley, "Well, it looks like what rest we had is over. Time to get the final preparations into place."

He grunted. "Those things could've at least had the

good will to leave us a day off. It's such a pain, fighting at night."

I joked, "They're probably coming at night because they're too scared to face us in daylight. After all, then they would have to look at your ugly mug."

"Hmmpf! They couldn't withstand my handsome charm, I'm sure," he retorted, heading off to bark orders at the legion commanders in charge of digging in around the slumside gate.

"I'll catch you tomorrow morning to discuss our imminent victory," I shouted as I went looking for the divisions in charge of mounting the ballistae on the walls. I filled my words with a nonchalant bravado I didn't really feel inside.

"I'll count on it," Hempley responded with equal sentiment.

o o o

The ballistae were in working order; it had taken a lot of manpower to dismantle the mobile artillery units and heft them up the stairs to the ramparts, but they were being put into place rapidly. The trebuchets were being likewise set up, and oil and water were being heated to be dumped from the walls. The camps themselves, which had in the past week been restructured from a freeflowing mass of living units into two concentrated defenses around the open areas by the river's entrance and exit from the city, were filled with tense preparation. Bows were tightened, restrung, practiced; swords were whet with stone or forged by fire; wooden javelins were carefully honed to point-tipped perfection; and everywhere the murmurs and mumblings of what lay ahead were passed and respun; truth mingled with speculation, speculation with

exaggeration, things heard about the council hearings, those things experienced by Jin battalion on my expedition, and worst of all the ancient tales circulated, given new life by the invasion of the monstrous N'rith'k.

I did little to stop the tales; it is a hopeless endeavor, to try and fight superstition in an army before a battle. I merely ensured that the rumors did not interfere with the fighting. More importantly, I had to ensure that the city's secret weapon, a device which had only been revealed to me a matter of days before, would be in working order. The new *machina* had to be carefully prepared; it was a delicate device (a characteristic which is never less than a serious liability in war) and I needed it to be prepared. Worse, no soldiers had yet been trained to use it; yet it was the unwritten law that the gadgeteers who built it and tested it would not be forced to use it in war.

As I reached the Academia, the second-tallest building in Nurn, I was greeted by an eager man who spoke quickly. He greeted me excessively and made a little too much talk as he showed me in the doors, but all went silent when we came upon the room which held the newest invention.

It stood tall, a contraption with huge canvas-like wings stretched tightly from copper bars which composed the frame. It mocked a bird with a tail that moved like a ship's rudder, but vertically, and a nose with a hooked metal tip. In the center, there was room for one person to ride and there were straps for holding different cargo, including, hopefully, *ignis* bombs. Glinting with the twilight filtering in the Academia's windows, like skeleton of a giant hawk it perched in its stone nest: *The Aernavis*.

o o o

The town was not very big; there were a couple of houses on the outside, with patches full of vegetables, though not even enough to call them farms, really. As Mirai rode into the town, wondering if she would even be able to talk to whomever inhabited such a place, she passed their gardens and saw several neatly-tilled rows of vegetables, but no one in the garden. She saw no one between the houses, either. After all this, she had travelled by herself through all that empty land, and then for her to come upon a settlement only to find it totally devoid of life seemed a cruel joke, something taunting her loneliness, even after she had already been isolated from her past, from anyone she might have ever known, and yet from even herself. Mirai was nearly overcome with despondency.

Yet the horse she rode went on, further into town, and Mirai thought she could hear a faint sound, something melodic and interesting. She wondered what it might be, and it grew more distinct. Soon she recognized it as a voice -- no, more than one voice. It was wonderful to hear; she couldn't know whether she had ever heard such a thing, but the sound was so beautiful that she reveled in it, and might have even been glad, just a little bit, that she had lost her memory, if it allowed her to feel like this. The voices were coming from a building in the center of town. She rode up, and dismounted her horse. Tentatively stepping up to the door, she placed a hand on the latch, and turned it.

o o o

A gadgeteer, who was overseeing a group polishing the Aernavis and tightening bolts, rose to greet me.

"General Icaris. How good that you have come to see us!"

"I trust that you are doing well, yourself, Master Rumford," I replied politely. "But I wish my reasons for coming were more innocent. The situation has worsened."

He looked grim. "Worsened?"

"They're on their way here. They will likely be here in hardly more than an hour."

Master Rumford was shocked. "So soon! And directly here, too." He looked me directly in the eyes and softly said, "Should I be worried?"

I took a deep breath, and then said very quietly, "Yes."

He looked down. "I'll do what I can. But we have not trained a soldier to fly the Aernavis."

"I know," I said. "We must start immediately. If I were to send one here now, could you begin?"

He thought for a moment. "It is a matter of priorities for you, General Icaris. The ones who would be training him are the ones who are preparing the machinae. Which are you willing to give up?"

It was a tough decision. The Aernavis, untested in war, would be a gamble; but a trade of some of the lesser tools for it might pay off. Either way, I realized, I would later question the choice, wondering if it would have saved more lives, if it would have held them off longer, if it would have made the difference. I decided that, after the rough fight on the way to Norvam, it would take more than just standard tactics to beat the N'rith'k. I had to take the risk on the Aernavis. I opened my mouth to say that to the Master Gadgeteer --

But someone else's voice rang out, "I'll do it!"

Master Rumford spun around, to see one of the younger mechanics standing up with a resolute expression. "I'll do it," repeated the young man. The others gawked at him.

"You'll do what?" asked Master Rumford.

"Pilot the Aernavis. I was already trained to do it."

"You can't!" he said. "It's not your place to use it as a

weapon."

"It is a dangerous precedent," I added. "If one gadgeteer is used by the military, then why not another? I do not want to be responsible for the corruption of the gadgeteer class."

"Then I'll quit being a mechanic and enlist in the military. Master Rumford, you hear me? I'm done."

"What?!" he sputtered. Then, seeing that the young mechanic was not changing his mind, Rumford calmed down and said, "Accepted. You are hereby expelled from the Academia."

"Thank you."

"You realize you are putting yourself in great danger?" I asked him. "Being in the military is not a safe occupation."

"Yes, sir." He swallowed, a little nervously. "It's just that... I don't want to see all of this lost," gesturing to the big room in the Academia building.

"What makes you think this city is at risk?" I questioned him.

"I've heard the stories. Those visitors from far away -- they were all but wiped out by the N'rith'k, weren't they?"

"You have a lot of information," I commented.

"I have a friend who's the aide to a Chancellor. I won't say which, lest he be punished for sharing too much information."

"For your sake, I won't inquire." I let him be. He was clearly nervous, but he was doing a very brave thing. There was no reason to punish him. "What's your name?" I asked him.

"John Mackenzie, sir," he replied, offering a hand.

I shook it. "Welcome to the armed forces, John. And thank you."

It was a relief having the problem of the *Aernavis* solved, though only time would tell whether the *machina* would prove useful. There was not much more time before the N'rith'k would be at the city's walls: less than an hour. Hemphley had the outer preparations set, as much as they could be, and I wasn't exactly in fighting condition, so the only way I could spend my time was dealing with military politics, a situation which irked me to no end. Of all the ups and downs of being a General in the Filian Empire's army, politics were the worst part. The problem is, I consider myself to be a pretty honest guy -- but honesty doesn't get you anywhere in politics. But, I had the advantage of rank on my side now, so I only had to put up with a few superior or equal-rank officers. One such problematic man was General Jarvok, one of the other two Generals and one of the most frustratingly self-important men I have ever met. If I had been given a choice, I would not have involved myself with him at all, but the current crisis demanded all the military power we could muster, and Jarvok's legion was still stationed near the northern border, taking over for my group after the raiders' uprising had been put down. It would not be popular with the northern provinces, taking away their guard from the continuous border raids, but the security of Nurn was foremost in my mind as I sat down to write the letter the Council had bid me to write, ordering Jarvok here.

It really didn't sit well with me -- I hated the guy, and it shouldn't have been my job anyway; orders to a General should have come down from the King himself, but Fernas was ailing again (he had of late seemed a stark contrast to the lively King who had proceeded over the Council hearings when the visitors first arrived) and a sick

King delegates. In this case, the unhappy task had been appointed to me, and I tapped my pen impatiently as I tried to think of a way to start the message, while all the while I could hear in my mind the rumbling footsteps of the N'rith'k bearing down on Nurn. Finally I got a start on the letter. I didn't mince words, or try to be too polite -- it's not like the man had ever been polite to me, anyway -- and I had the letter written pretty quickly. It was a simple missive, no fancy comments or language, but that's best when writing a military order, I suppose.

Sealing up the envelope and marking it with my stamp, I stood up from my personal tent and walked outside, where the sounds of soldiers preparing for the final assault echoed through the twilight air. I found the messenger who would take the message to General Jarvok, riding the river Milunite northbound as far as he could go and then covering the rest of the distance by horse; it would be a few days' journey, but without much notice, it was the best we could do.

While writing the letter it had occurred to me just how strange the situation was, after all. Here we were, the largest empire in the known world, and, it seemed, a rational people, not given to superstition or gullibility. Yet, we had accepted with few questions the story of the travellers from Narcis, that not only were they from a different world, but they had travelled to ours because an enemy unknown to them had nearly wiped them out. We accepted that they had powers of "magic" as well. Most strange of all was that, when we had encountered the N'rith'k ourselves, we did not doubt at all that it was reality -- we had just accepted unquestionably that we were being attacked by monsters the like of which we had never seen.

And then there was the dragon itself. I had relayed

my tale accurately to the Council, and they seemed to have believed me too. Not even Thulius, whose skepticism was renowned, had flat-out called me a liar. It disappointed me, a little, to be believed so easily. It worried me, too, that such an outrageous story could simply be accepted as fact. *Did they place so much faith in my character? What if I had been tortured, bribed, hypnotized? Would they have still believed me? Had it all been a dream, after all? Perhaps,* I wondered, *that explains it. Perhaps this was all a dream, after all.* But the pain in my arm twinged again, and I knew it couldn't be a dream. I unwrapped the bandages again, and looked at the black, crusted scab. It was real, for sure. I realized that the series of events recently were really taking a toll on me. They were probably taking a toll on everybody, it occurred to me. *The entire city is in a state of shock,* I realized. *We're just going along with everything because we don't have the energy to disbelieve.*

"We're tired," I summarized aloud.

o o o

My preparations were over. The *Aernavis* had a pilot and the message to General Jarvok had been sent. My sword arm, nearly immobile, would be no use in battle, and I was left with little to do. Then it occurred to me that yet again I had forgotten about Merisse. She had vanished from sight when she ran away, and vanished from my mind when I picked up the message she had been delivering. *Why had she been delivering the message?* I wondered, then figured that it must have been to see me. *How wonderfully that worked out.*

I was wandering through the city, as I tried to sort out my thoughts. But, as thoughts are prone to do, they would not simply make sense, and they tugged different

directions. Just what was between Venli and me? What about Merisse? The only thing I was sure about was that I wasn't sure. It confused the hell out of me, and I started looking forward to the upcoming battle, where I could lose myself, become entirely occupied with fighting, and such troubles would leave me. Some people hated battles, but I found refuge in them sometimes: I could set myself on autopilot and escape from my troubles when I was fighting.

Then a bolt of pain threaded its way up my arm, reminding me that my sword arm was, at the moment, useless. I cursed inwardly, that I would get no chance to participate in this battle. I consoled myself in the thought that I would still be organizing the battle, and I hoped I would be far too preoccupied with tactics to think about relationships. *Simple pleasures are best*, I assured myself, though I did not trust myself to be right.

From behind me I heard the dull clang of bells from the All Saints' Church. Looking back, I couldn't see it, but at this moment, hundreds of people would be pouring in quietly to the church, for the evening mass. They would walk in with heads bowed and spread themselves out among the many pews of the church. The more affluent would wander up big red-carpeted staircases and rest themselves on special seats in the upper tiers, as they looked down on the mass of citizens in the golden decor of the church building. Below the grand chandelier, they would see the priests in big, flowing robes come out of the back rooms and stand at the front pedestal, the Holy Saints Book grasped firmly against their bodies as they bowed their heads in prayer to start the mass. I remembered the scene perfectly, despite having been gone so many years from the church: I didn't attend any more, except on special occasions. Had I not been busy on that day, I might have gone back to try and find some peace, but there was

no time for peace. I would find my peace neither there nor at war.

I headed back to the city gates. One of the soldiers there called out to me, "General Icaris! It's a good thing you're here! We were about to shut the gates for the last time before they get here."

I waved back, "Good to know things are under way. Just let me squeeze past and then you can shut them!" I walked on past the gates and immediately the soldiers loosed the huge metal latch that held the gate mechanism in place. As I walked outward to the front row of the defenses, I heard the gears screech and grind as the cranks were turned and the gate was lowered. As I turned around I saw the ostentatious design of the gates as they closed: huge, quarter-circle wood-and-metal gates with engravings of wings, as they rotated down from an outstretched position, almost as if they were wings curling around the body of an angel, embracing it and warding against the outside world, and with a final crash, they came together, sealing off the city from the lands around it. I heard a muted rumble and clang as the other grand gate shut, and a dissonant groan as the waterways were shut off with huge, solid bars, as if jailing the city in a huge cage. The river could not be kept from entering the city -- but the invaders could.

At least, I thought as I walked to the outermost trench, that is our hope.

At the outermost trench, I met up again with Hemphley, who was talking to a few lower-ranking soldiers making sure everything was ready. "Yo," I called out casually, waving my unhurt hand.

"That's all you have to say? 'Yo'?" he taunted me.

"What, did you expect a speech or something?"

"Well, yeah."

I sighed, as if I hadn't been planning to give a speech from the beginning. "I suppose I can..." I let out, with mock-annoyance.

"Hooray!" shouted one of the other soldiers, making my face flush a little. "The General is gonna give a speech!" Attention started gathering around us, though it had actually started before I had said anything. Of course, I had entirely expected this, but I still got a little shy when I was supposed to give a speech in front of hundreds of people. I banished my fears and began:

"Men and women of our fellow country: I bring words of encouragement and words of caution. We all are about to face a dire enemy. A few of you have seen it: for most of you, it is something unknown, strange. For you, I have a warning: this will not be a battle like you have fought before. The... *N'rith'k*," I sputtered out the word, still not wanting to believe it, "... they are not a human enemy. They do not fight like humans. In my first encounter with them, we saw mercy, but by a miracle. I have no hopes for such a miracle again." The gathered crowd was silent.

"But we can win!" A cheer. "We have the tools of the gadgeteers in our command! We have the swords, the spears, the bows in our hands! And most of all, we have the unfailing resolve in our hearts! We will fight them on our soil for the sake of our people. Some of us will die; some of them will die too. But we will win, because we must win! Be ready, and may the gods be with you."

The crowd's noise, which had been a growing murmur, erupted. Spears and feet stamped the ground, and the uproar echoed off the distant trees. I stood on the mound of dirt from which I had given my speech and I turned my attention outward from the city.

They were there. At the edge of vision, a solid line of black shapes came nearer. A mad whisper flew over the

crowd, hushing it like a wave of wind over the grass, the grass that stood between us and the enemy. It seemed that the entire army sat still for an eternity as the black shapes grew ever closer. They were not rushing, this time: their wolf-like forms sauntered bestially towards us. They were a pack of wolves encircling their prey. Menacing faces became visible, and a seemingly endless hoarde of them, hundreds easily, lined up no more than 100 yards away from us. But they did not charge. They were waiting.

The scene was othewordly: golden-red sky, painted with pale-red clouds, overlays a gnarl of fur and fangs, a mass of stinking furred bodies. Behind us, the city, entombed in its stone walls with angels' wings and prisoners' gates. Our own army: a sea of heads, spears, bows drawn taut and angled across the plains. Between, a void: knee-high tufts of grass stirred in the wind, the color of the sunset staining them golden brown. A perfect standoff in the fading light of a breezy autumn day.

Then there was a *twang* and the sharp whistle of an arrow soaring through the air. I looked back, saw nothing in the sea of soldiers, then up: and there it was, a lone arrow in the sky, flying toward the N'rith'k in a long, lazy arc. For a time, nobody moved, except to crane their heads and stare at the arrow. It seemed to hang there, suspended, while I received far too much time to contemplate its meaning. *What if it had not been fired?* seemed to be the question the wind whispered out in the arrow's flight. *Would we have somehow negotiated peace with them? Would the future be irreparably changed for the worse, just by one arrow? Did it, since the arrow was fired by one of ours, mean that we started the war? No, not the war, but the battle...* But the question which fixated everyone was simply: *Would it hit?*

I never found out if it hit anything. Even while the

arrow still hung in the air, its spell was broken. The N'rith'k charged, and I realized suddenly that I was on the front lines of a battle I could not fight, right as the two opposite seas began to churn and pour forth, preparing to collide in one epic clash: and I was being swept along...

o o o

The door opened before Mirai. Inside was a fair-sized room, with smooth hardwood floors, the kind that spoke not of expensive workmanship but simple dedication and hard work. Near the center of the room was a fireplace constructed of mortar and rounded stones, suggesting that a stream ran nearby. A couple logs crackled under a cozy fire in that hearth, and as Mirai noticed this she felt the cold air slipping into the room, the warm air escaping, and the sensation gnawed vaguely at her memory. She cautiously stepped into the room, shutting the door out of courtesy.

All this time a melodic circle of voices danced in the ups and downs of human conversation. As the door shut, the encircled her and she saw them now: a small group, no more than half a dozen people, were gathered around a table. A few of them sat, while another was standing, laughing as he handed over a glass of foaming liquor. A few drops hit the table, and nobody paid them any notice. Among the others was an old

man with a tattered hat, singing jovially and hardly stopping to take a draught of his beverage and a plump woman who looked a little red in the face, laughing more than singing, though she tried. There was a serious-looking younger man with an expensive-looking coat, trying to talk over the others, and looking like he was grimacing. He looked up at Mirai as she walked in.

Suddenly feeling shy, she backed up against the door

as if she was going to open it and dash back out of it. She mumbled, "I'm sorry..." though nobody seemed to hear her over the noise.

The grimace became a real frown and Mirai realized that his grimace might have been a half-failed attempt to maintain the serious expression which had now taken over his face again. He stood up, a hand on his chair, and said out loud...

Something which she couldn't understand. It came out as a bubbly series of sounds, friendly in tone but completely unintelligible. She realized then that she didn't understand what that was being sung, either. *Surely I have not forgotten language itself!* she chided herself, but the man spoke again and she understood nothing.

"I cannot understand you," she said again, and by this time the older man and the others had mostly quieted their song; one old man continued waving his arms and mumbling almost-musically with his eyes closed, until the young girl next to him tugged on his shirt and he looked up to see Mirai.

The people seemed to be staring at her, and she shrunk back against the door even more, trying to hide herself in the cowl of her robe, which she now realized was an extremely plain garment. "I'm sorry," she said again, to which the serious young man replied again with garbled nothing-words.

Then the eyes of the very old man widened, and he stared at Mirai. His aged tongue finally let out, in a language Mirai could understand:

"An angel!"

o o o

The N'rith'k poured into the outer ranks of the army

in a frenzy. Tearing, biting, clawing at cloth and flesh, they stormed over us. Our men fought back with steel, wood, and screams. As the world around me erupted into a boiling turmoil of bodies, I tried to reach for my sword arm, only to find that my arm would not move: it was in a sling, and the stitches dug into my sinews, my fingers twitching with the sudden painful reminder of my injury. Hemphley shouted at me from across the way, "Kelf! Get out of here!" before lodging a blow firmly in the back of a N'rith'k, and then I couldn't see him because another soldier was blown back by a leaping wolfish body.

With my left arm, I reached to a vial of *lapis* fluid, another one of the rare tools to which I was entitled as a general. Crunching it in my fist, glass shards sliced my palm, but the black fluid which spread out from the crushed glass washed the glass splinters away as it spread out beyond its normal volume, reacting with the air and climbing up to my elbow as a black crust. It solidified into obsidian, and even as I was slammed in the back by the maimed body of another soldier, I whirled around and caught the monster that had hit him with a crushing blow to the skull. The thing yelped and fell back, but I did not take the time to finish it. Instead I wove around the tangle of bodies, stepping lithely over the already-fallen bodies, many of them not dead but merely on the doorstep, faces smeared in blood and tears, clothes torn by a fatal gash, or coarse-furred limbs severed by a sharp sword; the carnage was indiscriminate, and for some reason I felt bad for the dead N'rith'k; they so resembled dead dogs, as they lay tainting the grass and wheat fields with black blood.

Bashing enemies left and right as I backed away, I finally reached a point where no enemies had reached. I was partly relieved, and a young soldier -- he could not have been older than sixteen years, I saw -- helped me back

to the walls of the ramparts, from which I could oversee the battle and direct the regiments. I thanked him most kindly, and bade him luck as he went back to the battle. I was just reaching the top of the rope ladder, thrown down from the ramparts for me, when I looked back to see the back of his neck pierced by a stray arrow from one of our own fighters.

I cried out, "No!" with an unsteady voice, but it was too late. He turned, as his body fell forward, and his tear-stricken eyes stared up at me hauntingly, but the boy's smiling face silently mouthed two words, for which I still remember him with pity and fondness, even though I hardly knew him. With those lips, from which already life was fading quickly:

Good luck, he said.

Standing on the ramparts, I saw the battlefield in all its savage glory. It did not look good.

The N'rith'k were advancing their line far too quickly for comfort. The confused mass of combatants between the two armies was stained a dark purplish crimson, but I could see that the snarling beasts were dealing out a lot more punishment than they were sustaining. I saw one with no less than four different javelins embedded in its body, yet it still raged and killed across the battlefield.

They're just too durable! I bemoaned to myself. Immediately I focused my attention on formulating a plan to turn the tables. *Their weakness is that they lack missile weapons. As long as we can hold them back, we can pick at them from afar and wear their numbers down.* But the question was not whether to hold them back, but rather -- *How?* The trenches had hardly slowed their onrushing numbers, as the agile things leapt over crevices more than a yard across, without hardly losing a stride. As I saw another beast shrug off a slashing cut, its thick fur seeming

to pad the attack, an idea began formulating: *Perhaps we can use that fur against them.* I turned around, mentioning hastily to the nearby archers that I would return, and I dashed down the stairs.

When I arrived at the Academia, I banged hard on the door with my still-obsidian-covered left arm. When the stiff-cornered stone left a marking on the ornate wooden door of the old building, I felt a little regret, but brushed the concern out of my mind as the door swung open behind my knocking fist. I nearly clobbered the gadgeteer who opened the door with the stone weapon.

"General Kelf! Watch it, there!"

"Sorry," I said, blushing a little. Then, mustering up a more official attitude, "You need to take me to Master Rumford. I need something made."

"Something made?" the gadgeteer asked.

"Yeah. Something to use against the N'rith'k."

"I'll take you to one of the Designers, then."

I nodded and followed him inside. We passed through the same corridors I had been through many times before, then the gadgeteer took a hard left down a hallway I hadn't been down for a long time: the home of the expert gadgeteers, the Designers. I caught worried looks on different gadgeteers on the way through. A couple of them even seemed hostile: then again, it was a well-known fact that the association between the Academia and the military was tenuous.

We came to the door of an office, at which the junior gadgeteer knocked. A muffled voice from inside shouted out, "Just a moment!" and I heard the sound of a stack of papers falling off a desk onto the tile floor, and then the door opened, revealing a man in the Academia's senior uniform, a grey and red robe, matching the color of the man's mustache and his hair, still dark but with its

color somewhat faded. In his arms he carried a stack of papers, and it was visible behind him in his small office that a good half his stack had fallen to the ground.

The junior gadgeteer (his own uniform a much more comfortable trousers and red tunic combination) conferred with the older man, for a moment, as he stacked the papers high in the grasp of the older man. The man looked up from crouching over his fallen papers, then his eyes widened a little as he took a double-take on me. "General Kelf?" he asked, as if it were a dream that I would come by.

"Designer Arkvold! Is that you?" I asked, as I suddenly recognized him.

"Of course it's me, you silly boy. It's excellent to see you again. Now, ex-excuse me, as I set these pa-papers down on the desk," he stuttered characteristically. "Though I suppose in times like these, you ha-haven't come to" -- he coughed -- "to visit for old times' sake."

"Sadly, in times like these, that's a luxury I am not afforded."

" 'Times like the-these,' is it?" wheezed the old man. "It's hardly been a week. But, when there's an attack, some people overreact."

"We'll see soon enough whether they're overreacting," I said, less sure than he was.

"Well, that's the way it is. I guess we'd best not t-take things too lightly, anyway," said the old man. "So what is it you need from me?"

"I need a special tool made. A weapon to use against the N'rith'k. Or rather... very many of them."

"I see..." said Designer Arkvold, and we began discussing the details of my idea.

o o o

It hadn't been a complicated job, and Arkvold had promised me that he'd have the first batch of them done by the next morning, despite how busy the Gadgeteers all were, preparing all manner of tools and weapons for our battle. In the meantime, I didn't have a lot to do. I was nervous about the battle, though. Even though it hadn't been very long, I was becoming anxious to get back to the battlefield. It's a sort of irrational habit of mine, but if people are fighting and I'm not there, I start imagining all the unlikely things that could've happened: maybe our troops were surrounded, maybe the gates have broken open... or, worst of all, maybe the dragon had come. It wasn't as if my presence alone would stop any of these things from happening, but nevertheless I hurried back to the ramparts, looking for Lieutenant Hemphley.

I did not see him when I reached the top of the ramparts: I saw only a mess of archers still firing arrows into the farther ranks, taking careful aim with each shot now, rather than firing in volleys. I still was amazed that they could have any accuracy firing into the frenzy below: it was a scene I was familiar with, to be sure, but the N'rith'k moved among our own with such startling suddenness to their actions, moving with leaps and bounds, that it seemed impossible to aim at one before it had moved out of the way. On the other hand, I noticed that the archers on top of the ramparts were, for now, surprisingly safe: the N'rith'k had no long-range attacks of any sort, and so long as nobody fired their bows the wrong direction by accident, then no danger could reach them.

I was at least relieved that none of the catastrophes I had foreseen were actually happening. The battlefield looked not much different than when I had left it: it looked only more soiled, less arrayed, but the walls were holding. It didn't seem that the N'rith'k had even moved in the

direction of the water gates. We knew that they would never hold up, rusted things that they were, but the N'rith'k must not have been smart enough to figure it out. For that, I was thankful.

Then I caught sight of Hemphley, barking at a medic to get out of the line of fire, as the medic tried to soothe the huge scratch marks of a soldier, whose whole torso was ripped open by a slashmark. It hadn't gone as deep as it could've, though, so I maintained a hope that the soldier would live. Hemphley was also right, though: the medic was right in the way of two archers. "Move him back, so the bowmen can fire!" I shouted to the medic and the soldiers near her.

Hemphley turned around at the sound of my voice, "Kelf! I knew you couldn't stay away from a battlefield for long. It's in your blood."

"Don't comment about my blood right now," I said, half-joking. I noticed that the medic still wasn't moving. "Come on, move!" I said to her.

"I'm sorry, but if I move him, it could kill him. I have to keep his back straight," she explained.

"You've already moved him this far -- just get him the rest of the way to the infirmary!" I said indignantly.

"No, she hasn't," Hemphley corrected.

"What?"

"He got that up one here," Hemphley said, and as his words sunk in I couldn't do anything but stare at the claw-made gash.

"What?! How could he have gotten it up here?"

"One of them made it up here," Hemphley said grimly. "Killed another one straight out, and got him in the chest like that."

"But how did it get up here?" I insisted, refusing to believe it.

"Well, we were lowering a ladder so she could get back up here," he gestured toward the medic, "and, well, it hopped right in front of her and leapt right up."

I swore under my breath. "We'll have to be more careful with the ladders, I guess."

"Tell me about it. It's not looking good, I tell you."

I grimaced. "I hope they can't see in the dark," I said. "If they can, it'll be less than an hour until we're all doomed."

"They can, according to Irkis' report, but Master Gadgeteer Rumford already has a team of engineers setting up bonfire material. We're going to catapult them out there and then light them with *ignis* arrows," he explained.

"Then couldn't the N'rith'k put them out?" I asked.

"With what? They don't have any buckets to carry the riverwater over there. I doubt they could, anyway."

"True. Well, in that case, I guess it'll do."

"I'm afraid that it won't do enough, though," Hemphley added grimly. "They're just too hardy."

I swore under my breath, especially because I knew it was true. I had seen it myself on the way to Norvam. The N'rith'k were not easily stopped by arrows, were too fierce, too fast, for close-range combat, and too mobile to evade. Our men, not used to fighting them, were losing. I felt a tightening in the bottom of my stomach, a heavy knot that was familiar to me, because I had felt the exact same thing more than once lately: at the sight of the massacred couple from Norvam, at Venli's confirmation of the N'rith'k's identity, at the sight of the dragon. It was the feeling of certain, impending, unavoidable doom, that feeling that something awful was imminent and it was too late to avoid it.

"No. I refuse. I will not lose this battle," I said then, surprised at my own determination. "They can be defeated."

They can be held off. I refuse to let them take Nurn."

"I'm with you," said Hemphley solemnly. "We will do whatever it takes."

And with that, there was silence. The only sound that passed between us was the mad raving of a world falling apart.

o o o

It was a long night.

The first of the light-pyres was lit as the final fading remnants of the light were retreating, leaving our men fighting by moonlight against beasts who saw as if it was daylight. It was a nightmare scene, our lines falling back, our defenses getting pushed closer and closer to the walls of the city they defended. But there was a beacon of hope, a beacon of torchlight keeping watch over the catapult that would launch the ball of tinder and oil into the battlefield.

Our own cleared the area of its intended landing, while the N'rith'k passed in and out, not staying because there were no soldiers to fight -- to kill -- within that space. But when the catapult was finally released, and the carefully-bundled package of combustibles arched into the night sky, they cleared its path as well. Even before it had touched the ground, before it had depressed into an odd-shaped mound, the *ignis* arrows flew, arrows dipped in liquid fire, and met their marks. The ball soared to the ground, crashed with a crack, a *whoomph* and an explosion of sparks and kindling. The dry, dying autumn grass around it curled away in blackened supplication to the lordly fire, and *we saw*.

The bonfire lit up the night, casting strong, flickering shadows around it, and black smoke rising into black night above it. Then, in minutes, another was dropped, and

another, and an entire constellation of burning, land-ridden stars dotted the ground outside Nurn, outshining the sky, and I saw the scene begin to change. Lines which had slowly been falling back slowed more, than held their place. N'rith'k caught in the fireballs' landings squealed inhumanly at the anguish of a scorching death. We had not turned them back, not yet, but the evil of the night had been dispatched: we were on even ground again.

As I saw this, participated vicariously in the battle, the elation welled up inside me, and finally, at the impact of the final pyre, it escaped, a guttural roar of triumph, and around me I was joined by Hemphley, by the archers, by a dying man with an arm held in place only by a tendon and a bandage, and the cry raced into the heavens, filling the sky with triumph as we had filled the ground with *light*.

But our triumph did not hold the whole night; it couldn't. The pyres burnt out, and were replaced, but our men were growing weary, sore, and the N'rith'k kept on, inexhaustible. I saw our losses piling up, the battle slipping away again, and just as I was about to lose hope, I saw it on the horizon: daybreak.

Finally, as day started to show itself again, the N'rith'k pulled back their attack. I saw it first: Hemphley noticed quickly.

"Look!" I shouted in a whisper. "They're stopping."

He squinted, as if he didn't trust his tired eyes, and then he yelled, as hoarse as me from our prolonged vigil, "They are! I knew they couldn't go on forever. They may not be human, but nothing can go on like that forever."

I nodded, and watched the phenomenon across the whole battlefield. It didn't seem like a command had been given, but from all over the N'rith'k were turning around, slowing down, fighting backwards and separating themselves from us. They retreated several hundred yards

away from the city walls, and quietly planted themselves in place.

"Finally, a break," I said to Hemphley. "We survived the first wave. We can do it again. We can win."

But he had finally fallen asleep.

o o o

Feeling a little tired myself, I decided to go back inside the city and see if there was a place for me. I had given up my own permanent home there a long time ago, when I had joined the army, and there were sure to be few empty spaces, with the army camped around the walls. Still, I needed to get away from the scene out there. There were too many bodies, too many nightmare scenes out there, and I only felt pity for those who had to stay among them.

I suppose I might be joining them after all, I thought to myself after wandering for an hour through the city, with no luck. People were going about their daily business, but with a chill that I hadn't seen before. Even the anticipation for the attack had been nothing compared to the hollow gaze which haunted the steps of everyone in the streets. They smiled, but I could see that the smiles were insincere. They kept glancing over their shoulders, or down the street, wherever the nearest wall was. And, I also noticed, there were no inns, no spare rooms, and no bed unoccupied. It seemed that even the guest halls in the palace had been taken for housing anyone who could afford to pay the price... and the military certainly had enough sons (and even daughters) of nobles who could.

Wait.. what about the Narcissians? They're still there, aren't they? But even as I considered asking for their hospitality (rude as it was, I was getting tired) it occurred

to me that they most likely didn't have any spare beds; with five of them, the room might be crowded as it was. I decided not to intrude on them, and tried to think of anyone else I knew with a home in town where I might stay, but there was nobody. I didn't have enough sway with most of the chancellors, and I had all too recently asked for a favor from Joan of Cannebra.

Reluctantly, I turned around and headed back to where I had come from. The lack of sleep was really starting to get to me and I wandered, half-awake, out to the wall and up the stairs. Glancing out on a sea of dead bodies -- no, dead *people* -- was almost more than I could take, but I saw in the morning light that there were people starting to clean up the piles, dragging the heavily-scarred, limp bodies somewhere where they would not be defiled when the battle continued, and they could be identified and their closest kin notified. I slowly wound my way down a rope ladder to the ground outside the city, and found my tent. I stumbled inside.

Before I had even looked inside, a familiar voice rang out: "Kelf! You're back!"

"Merisse," I mumbled, too tired to give her a more suitable reply. "Lemme sleep."

"But, I mean, I wanted to talk... about..."

"I'm tired," I slurred, stepping forward waveringly, then, seeing my bed, I simply dropped back onto it.

"Kelf!" she repeated, this time almost whining.

But I didn't reply. I was already asleep.

o o o

I woke with a start at the sound of a bugle. Rubbing my eyes, I saw, with some relief and some regret, that I was alone in my tent again. I stood up, woozily, and cleared my

head. My arm ached, and I realized that I had probably slept on the wound, aggravating it. *I hate being injured.*

The bugle sounded again, and this time I recognized the tone: dinner. Relieved that it wasn't the all-too-cheery ditty that signaled an enemy attack, I brushed the tent flap open and walked outside. It was late afternoon; I had actually gotten a fair amount of sleep. All around, people like me who had been resting from the wearying all-night battle were making their way to the mess halls. I joined them and found my way to breakfast, where I was served a big, steaming bowl of porridge by a young man who told me, "Enjoy your late breakfast, General." I grinned obligingly and thanked him, then sought a table.

I found an unoccupied one, and sat there, slowly eating the porridge. With my status, I could've had an expensive meal from the city delivered to me, but it was a habit of mine to eat with the rest of the soldiers, so I remained closer to them and could better judge the conditions they had to put up with. By now I had forgotten the protocol to even order the rich meal. The porridge suited me fine, though, and as I ate it, I realized how hungry I had been. Not having eaten the night before, I had been surviving on anxious snackings ever since I had gotten out of the medical ward.

Then Merisse came over to my table. "Good afternoon, sleepyhead," she said, but it sounded fake coming from her under the circumstances. "Mind if I take a seat?"

"Go ahead," I said between bites of porridge. "Sorry about this morning. You wanted to talk about something?"

"Oh, no, that's okay, it's nothing," she deflected, before taking a spoonful of breakfast.

Deciding not to push the matter, I said nothing. It seemed like ordinarily one of us would've said something

jovial, and we'd laugh together, but not another word passed between us. It was strange and awkward; even in the toughest days of the campaigns in the outlying provinces and the border countries, we had been able to joke over a meal.

I found myself looking forward to Synscoth's arrival, since his sarcastic wit and devious smile had often made even the toughest times possible to enjoy. But, I was reminded, he wasn't here; he was in charge of the nearby town Sonos. I wondered how he was faring there, and I wondered also about Irkis at the other city Lunos, and about the two roaming companies. I hoped the roaming companies would arrive soon; we needed the reinforcements, and catching the N'rith'k from behind would be a help, too.

So, I staring at my porridge, and Merisse looking away and around but not at me, we ate in silence, until there came the sound of another bugle, an annoyingly happy song.

Oh, no.

The bugle's melody was unmistakable: it meant an incoming attack. Leaving the last few spoonfuls of porridge where they were, I jumped out of my seat and was the first one out of the mess hall. Running to where I could see, I found my way to the base of the ramparts where a haggard-looking Hemphley was standing around barking orders again. "They're back?" I shouted up to him.

"Out there," he said quickly, pointing to where the N'rith'k had retreated, and where now they were bounding inward. In less than five minutes they would be upon us. "Oh, General, there was a gadgeteer with something for you... I think he was a gadgeteer," he rephrased after a pause.

The weapon I asked them to make yesterday! "Where is

he?" I climbed over the last rung of the rope ladder and stood next to Hemphley.

"He said he would try to find you, and went down there," said Hemphley, gesturing back down to the mass of business around the military tents."

Inwardly I cursed and looked out to see if I spotted a gadgeteer. I didn't see one, when suddenly I heard a voice from below calling my name. "General Icaris!"

I looked down, and then I saw a man with a bag in one hand who did indeed look like a gadgeteer, though he didn't wear the uniform of the Academia. Then I recognized who he was: it was John Mackenzie, the one who had quit the Academia to pilot the Aernavis. "Special Ops John Mackenzie, sir!"

"Mackenzie!" I shouted down in greeting. "Get up here."

He did so. "I've got the stuff you requested from Designer Arkvold," he said, holding up the bag to hand it to me. "And one other thing: the Aernavis is ready to fly."

"Keep the bag, John. You'll be getting it right back anyway. I want you to take it with you when you launch."

"It'll have to replace an *ignis* bomb, though. I can only take a few of them."

"That's fine. If we're lucky, this will be more effective than a dozen *ignis* bombs."

John had nothing to say to that, so he told me, "Let's go," and we started off toward the inner city.

"Good luck, Hemphley!" I shouted back.

"We'll need it," he said ruefully.

o o o

The Aernavis was set to launch from a wooden platform that had been built near the walls nearest the

Academia, which put it near the southern edge of the main battle. Taller than half the buildings in the town and twice as tall as the walls themselves, it sloped gently downward in the direction of the walls. Some of the best carpenters in the city had worked with the best Academian mathematicians to make it sturdy, I knew. The Aernavis had already been hoisted, with a pully system, to the far end of its hundred-pace length. Its wheels were set in grooves that ran the length of the platform, held in place by wedge blocks. A dozen engineers were outfitting it with *ignis* bombs, and testing and preparing it for its first journey. John Mackenzie climbed quickly up the ladder to the top of the platform, and I followed him, trying not to be unsteadied by the surprising height at which the platform held us.

With his arrival, it seemed that they were about ready to go. Mackenzie climbed into the middle of the contraption, where a series of straps held him in place, resting mostly on his stomach. In each hand was a canvas handle, which connected to the wings and let him shift the Aernavis' wings and to allow for turning. Pulling both back at once would let the glider climb, and letting them both slack would allow dip the nose. As we stood on the platform, John tested each one. Then, hooking them in place on the struts that would keep both wings steady so he could use his hands for other tasks, he reached out tentatively, and tested hooking and unhooking the bags that held *ignis* bombs and the bag with my special weapons.

Satisfied that everything worked as well as he'd be able to get it, John gave the thumbs-up to Master Gadgeteer Rumfoord, whom I now noticed, working on the Aernavis as well. He shouted to everyone to get behind the contraption, and I now saw the handholds that would let

this group of men -- some of the fittest in the Academia, it seemed -- to push the Aernavis forward and over the lip of the platform. From there, it would be all up to John.

I joined them as they positioned up behind the craft. Despite my bad arm, I was still in fairly good shape, and I felt it was my duty to do whatever I could to help John launch the machine that he had offered to fly for the sake of the empire, sacrificing his personal position and risking his life. Rumfoord called out a count from five to zero. On his stroke, we kicked away the blocks holding the wheels in place, and started pushing.

The Aernavis' wheels creaked, as if it were screeching a battle cry before takeoff, and it rolled with increasing speed down the ramp. Eventually we couldn't keep up with it, and stood back to watch as it lifted into the air on wings of canvas and leather. It was amazing.

Aerodynamics had long been known about, and small gliders made of paper and light wood had been made as children's toys for years. But nobody, it had seemed, thought it possible to make one big enough to lift a man into the sky, let alone one that could be controlled. Yet, apparently, someone in the Academia had, and on that day, with the still-divided lines below, a battlefield on the brink of chaos, we saw that it worked, a single machine above it all, soaring through the air: not careening about, but actually gliding. I could barely make out John reach up and unhook the wing straps, then tug on the left one; the glider dipped to the left and started turning toward the center of the oncoming N'rith'k horde.

The glider straightened out again; then as it came over them, I saw something fall from it, and where it landed a pop and blast of dirt and smoke as the *ignis* bomb exploded. A few seconds later there was another blast. I faintly heard the inhuman screeching of the N'rith'k on the

wind. I waited tensely, anticipating the use of my weapons... one more *ignis* bomb dropped, then the glider turned again. It had gone past the rear of the N'rith'k horde, and John was bringing it around for another pass. Then I saw it.

A thousand sparkling pieces fell out of the bag that he turned over. Glinting in the low sunlight of a fading afternoon, they cascaded down into the N'rith'k... and nothing happened. A knot building in my stomach, I waited.

They charged on, apparently unfazed by my weapons. The two lines, human and N'rith'k, met, though with less of the force of the first encounter. Immediately the human line was pushed back two paces, and the battle raged in earnest again; Mackenzie turned the Aernavis around for a third pass. Still I waited. Then, spontaneously, I saw a N'rith'k fall over, untouched. Another behind it collapsed. This did little, since the others simply bounded around them as they avoided the fallen humans, but it proved that the poison was working. *So they were vulnerable after all.* Another, and another fell as the *kerimes* worked their way through their fur and pierced the skin underneath.

My weapons, the *kerimes*, were small metal barbs with a potent poison on (and in) them. The key, however, was their shape: each of them a delicate composure of four jointed metal pieces, they were designed to mimic the real thorns of grain and wheat, which attach themselves to fur and fabrics. But, the real key was their ability to work their way through fur and dig themselves into the skin; when I was a boy, I'd had a scruffy dog named Kerimes, and he would roll in the grass all the time, picking up all kinds of thorns. One of them had eventually worked its way deep into his ear and killed him. I had named the weapons in his honor. The *kerimes* turned the thick furs of the N'rith'k into

a liability; that fur held the *kerimes* in place and let them work their way to the skin, where the sharp metal barbs would inject their deadly poison.

But that was all. No more than half a dozen N'rith'k fell from the barbs. There had been hundreds of them in there, and the poison was not available in large supply. *There just wasn't enough coverage*, I realized. Perhaps more of them would step on the barbs like caltrops, but that was too unreliable to count on. *Perhaps they were a failure after all*. The *ignis* bombs didn't all kill that many, either, but they were more intimidating, and *ignis* was the cheapest of the special fluids, derived from alcohol and a few other common ingredients.

But even as I watched, we had bigger problems to worry about. Mackenzie was nearing the rear of the N'rith'k formation, and one of the gadgeteers watching with me shouted, "He's not going to make it back! He doesn't have enough altitude!" and I realized it was true. As it was, no matter how the Aernavis climbed, it would stall out, and it couldn't gain enough altitude to fly back over the N'rith'k a fourth time, making it into safe territory near the walls. A foul word crossed my breath and the Master Gadgeteer's all at once.

"He'll be trapped behind enemy lines..." I mumbled.

"We can't afford to lose the Aernavis!" shouted the Master Gadgeteer. "Not now!"

"Then someone will have to fight their way back there to rescue him," I said grimly.

"But who would be crazy enough to do that?" responded another gadgeteer.

"I would."

"What?!" said Rumfoord incredulously. "You're injured. You can't go through that!"

"I have to," I said. "You said it yourself; we can't

afford to lose the Aernavis."

"There's another reason I need to go." I bit my lip. "John Mackenzie did a brave thing, on my behalf. I owe it to him to go after him."

"Surely you can send someone else!" insisted the Master Gadgeteer.

"Everyone's already fighting. This is something I just have to do myself."

"I understand," Rumfoord said after a pause.

"I'll need to be well-equipped. We're going to pierce straight through their formation and get the Aernavis -- and John -- back. We need to be able to move the Aernavis --"

"Its wheels are as good as anything, to get it back here," Master Gadgeteer Rumfoord asserted.

"Excellent. Then I had better find a medic."

"What for?" he asked, but I was already too far away to answer.

The wind chill was starting to numb my face as I found my way to the back of the battlefield. I spotted a medic, bent over a man in a stretcher, and I walked up to her. It was the same medic from earlier, the one who had been tending to the man on the ramparts. "How is he?" I asked quickly.

"Dead," she replied.

"Then I need your help now. I want you to loosen the bandages on my arm so I can move it freely, and I need an injection to reduce the pain on it."

"But, General Kelf --" she started, but I cut her off with a serious glare. "Yes."

"And I'll need that stretcher."

She took care of my arm, so that with two hands I could at least parry and shield passingly. With her carrying the stretcher behind me, I raced forward to a group of our soldiers who were finishing the last of the N'rith'k in a

pocket of the battlefield. I shouted out to them to follow me, and I started leading them out directly toward the Aernavis' landing spot, barking out an explanation along the way.

A N'rith'k jumped out at me from my right; I caught its outstretched fangs with my sword and shoved it backwards before it could bring its claws to bear on me. A well-placed arrow from the crew behind me pierced its neck and felled it. I encountered another head on; I thrust towards him, but he leapt out of the way, and clawed my forearm painfully in the process. I struggled to swing the sword upward at him, but I was off balance; thankfully, another soldier from behind me stepped in and fended off the marauder. She was a thick, tough-looking woman; I vaguely recognized her.

"Thanks..."

"Vickie," she said.

"Thanks, Vickie."

"Just doin' my duty, Gen'ral. But I think it'd be easier if ya stepped back a little and let us cover yeh better. Yeh don't seem to be up to full strength today, d'ya?"

"Thanks," I said a third time.

Vickie and a couple others formed a triangle in front of me. I directed them which way to go; by now we were well into the ranks of N'rith'k lines, and being assaulted on all sides. I saw two men go down, and another... but then suddenly we were through. The crowd was behind us, and straight ahead lay the wings of the fallen *machina*. I couldn't see John, but there were already two N'rith'k growling between the bars, ripping through the tattered sails, like cats after a mouse in a cage.

I called out to him. "John? Are you there!"

A pained moan returned. "Yeah, I'm here. I guess I don't make a very good soldier, do I?"

"You make a great soldier, John. Now just hold on while we get you out of there." We shoved the N'rith'k away from the *machina* and the group dispatched them swiftly. I was lucky to have picked such a skilled group to help me. Everywhere else, our soldiers were trading with the N'rith'k on a very uneven basis. Only the trebuchets and ballistae seemed to be keeping us from being overwhelmed.

I finally caught sight of John under the tattered folds of the Aernavis' wings. He was still strapped in, and it looked like the machine's weight had landed on his left leg. If it wasn't broken, it would still be sore for a while. John Mackenzie probably wouldn't be flying the Aernavis again.

It took four of us to lift the Aernavis from its side, while the others held back the N'rith'k. I tried not to wince at the pained yells coming from behind me, as more and more N'rith'k turned and came backwards to attack us. Finally, we had John unstrapped and loaded into the stretcher. Then I stopped suddenly.

"How are we going to get the Aernavis back?" Vickie asked out loud.

At that moment, I had just realized: "I don't know."

I looked back. The mob of N'rith'k and soldiers was impassable, especially with a huge, heavy *machina* like the Aernavis in tow. Even if we could fight our way back through the N'rith'k, its wheels would not get it across the bodies strewn on the ground. I looked around at the choices we had. We could either go directly away from the city, or we could make a wide arc around the battlefield, until we came to the river. I did not know if the Aernavis would float. Or, we could just leave it to be destroyed, but I had already lost enough men and women that it would not justify this rescue if we did not bring back the Aernavis.

I made my decision: "Take it toward the river! We'll see if we can get it on a barge, or something. It'll at least be

safer in the harbor than out here!" All those who remained (and weren't carrying the wounded) started pushing the Aernavis. It rolled unsteadily; it hadn't been built for uneven ground like the clumps of grass we had to push it across. A few times, it almost tipped over, but we made progress, slow and steady. The harbor just outside the north edge of the city drew nearer, bit by bit. We suffered little enough interruption by N'rith'k marauders, and after a long, tough trip, we were at the harbor.

"John, are you still okay? We're here."

"I see that," he mumbled.

"Now, how are we going to get this thing back into the city?" I grumbled to myself "Unless we leave it here..."

"It... floats," John added.

"It *floats*?" I asked, astonished.

"Yeah. All the beams are watersealed. And the wings ought to hold it up." Then he suddenly spouted a sharp shout of pain at the medic, who was looking at his leg.

"Sorry," she said quickly.

Ignoring her, I continued my train of thought out loud. "If it floats, then we can send it through the waterway gate to the Inner Dock." The Inner Dock was a small set of docks on the inside of the city, used primarily for the transport of royal ships. If we could get the Aernavis there, it could be safely returned to the Academia and repaired. There was only one problem: the gates were shut.

"I'll be right back," I said to the group. "Stay safe until I return." I dashed off in the direction of the city, with nothing but dock paths between it and me. I saw the edge of the battlefield, thinner on this side. A thin line of N'rith'k was engaged with a somewhat thinner line of our soldiers. I came up on it, swinging my sword with two hands. The N'rith'k I hit first was startled; it hadn't seen me coming. It whirled around, splashing saliva at my face, and brought its

formidable claws into battle.

As I drew up my sword again to deflect them, I heard a voice shout my name out in amazement: "General Kelf!"

I looked over to see who it was: just a soldier who recognized me and was probably wondering what I was doing out here. I tried to reply to him, but my command became a shout of pain as the N'rith'k I was fighting reopened the wound in my arm with a harsh swiping claw. I kicked him back and thrust at him with my sword. The blow which should have pierced his abdomen instead just slit his side, because my arm was too weak to aim. The soldier knocked him back, and I rushed past him, thanking him along the way. I did not stop to help him or fight back, because I needed to get help to the Aernavis, John Mackenzie, and the rest of the group. Even now I wonder if that soldier survived, and if I could have helped him if my priorities had been different.