



*Part Ten*

*The Multitude Stirs*

*This foulness, this mass of half-dead corruption..... which was caused by my Illustrious Predecessor (who was Eleneai but is known in these Times as the Black Magician).... I have caused Them to be removed to the Far Reaches of Within, and there I have placed a Barrier to restrain them.*

Ahransal  
Third Fragment  
The Book of Shadows

*And the Barrier which was forged using a great Power, can be put down only by the use of great Power..... (which) I have caused to be contained in a Talisman in the (form of) a Key*

Ibid





# I



## THE MULTITUDE STIRS

THE WHITE beast stalked down the long corridors of its mind. Its huge paws pressed heavily on the floor, leaving blurred red imprints. Its breath whistled through its long muzzle, and saliva dripped from its teeth. Its eyes glowed. It turned its head this way and that, glaring down the gleaming corridors, glaring into any side turnings. It growled deep in its chest, and echoes bounced wearily against the walls. They fell quickly silent as the white beast paced by.

The corridors curved and twisted, climbed and dropped, intersected unexpectedly. They were empty now, but the beast growled again when it thought of the power which could be raised there. Which it could raise there. The power would spark somewhere in the depths, flare brightly, and then mushroom upwards in a fireball. It would be guided by the cool marble walls, guided by the will of the white beast, and eventually aimed outside to do what it was designed to do.

The beast snarled, glaring at the corridors, trying to bend them to its will. Sometimes the power did not do what it was supposed to. Sometimes no power came. Occasionally it came without warning, unexpectedly booming down the corridors, caroming out of control against the smooth walls. The white beast knew that its control was imperfect, intermittent. But its red eyes exuded such force that the corridors began to twist slowly, slowly. After periods of months, of years, the corridors were beginning to form into the fantastic, convoluted pattern that the beast instinctively wanted.

One place always flared brightly, lit by memory. It was the first place, and the beast, imperfectly, could remember how it came to be there.

Externally, it flinched, convulsively folding a forepaw inward, scraping at hard ground. Its eyes were turned up inside its head.

Those nearest in the multitude gathered beneath the cold sky backed away, unnerved by the aura of tension and power surrounding the huge creature.

2

It had been hunting, and its muzzle dripped cold red blood. The prey, one of the lesser *halfen*, had led a long chase across the rocks despite its damaged limbs. Now the beast was in unfamiliar territory, far from the places where it usually laid ambush. It was crouched on the edges of a gigantic plateau. The wind screamed across, scouring the land clean of earth or sand, leaving only smooth polished rock. From far away came a constant tumultuous booming as the wind was rebuffed by the barrier and was forced back on itself. It bounced crazily along the barrier, throwing accumulated rocks and earth high into the sky, before itself slipping upwards to vanish in the Cold Heights.

The beast knew nothing of this. It lay with its bloody muzzle deep in the body of the *halfen*, where it would stay until it had emulated the wind and scoured the bones clean. It knew nothing of the wind, or of the barrier. It vaguely knew it was in an unfamiliar place, but it felt no fear. It was one of the greater *halfen*, half man, half dog, and by some circumstance beyond imagining was twice the size of any other. It had no reason to feel fear. In any case, its brain had no capacity to feel anything but the same fiery, primitive need for survival which burned in every *halfen*.

Despite the kill, and despite having gorged twice already on the white corpse, the beast still felt the urge to hunt. So it was on its feet in an instant when a faint, unnatural sound made itself heard over the roaring wind. Something was there. Something must have been hiding behind the rocks bordering the plateau.

The beast stepped forward, growling deep in its throat. The sound was not repeated, but if something was there the beast was not going to be denied its kill. It took another step forward, stretching out with its massive human leg; then another. And then it happened.

Instead of feeling the cold, smooth rock underfoot, the beast felt something metallic and no less cold. Whatever it was, it gouged upward and the beast reflexly curled its foot. It would have jerked away altogether but a blazing light had burst in its brain and

somehow it knew - it knew - that if it moved away, then the light would die.

It was the first time the beast had ever *known* anything, and that was something else it knew.

And if the light died, then the blackness of the hunt would descend again, forever shrouding the cold metallic.... thing.

Both in the past and in the present, the beast threw back its head and howled in pain and ecstasy.

The light burst through its brain, pushing and gouging even as the hard thing underfoot pushed and gouged into its foot. New links were forged, new pathways. Understanding bloomed. Pure, straight corridors of thought sliced through the beast's consciousness, as straight as the path of light. Its inner eye, opening on new vistas, saw the bright glow of discovery turn slowly into memory as time passed.

It coughed deeply, an inhuman sound of satisfaction, as the pain of *knowing* receded. Confident now, it stepped off the metallic thing and bent forward, huge paws scrabbling at the rock. Eventually it straightened and looked with glowing red eyes at the thing which had unlocked its mind.

It was a key.

### 3

It passed the bright place of memory and padded downwards, curving into the depths. Its shadow stretched out ahead, red-black on the white floor, bobbing and shifting then vanishing entirely as the bright place became concealed by convoluted walls.

The beast moaned and dribbled. It had come to a place where blue light filtered through a barred door, and the blue light hurt its eyes. This was the place of pain, which had to be passed if it wanted to go any deeper. The cursed witch girl.... the cursed witch girl.....

The beast *remembered* how it had sensed the wielding of power, like a strange new scent drifting into the haze of the hunt. It remembered how it had welded the two, the knowledge, and the hunt. It remembered how it had wrought its own form of power and sped, light as a spirit, across the face of Within. The alien power had been coming from a place secured by rock, centred in fire, and the beast, still driven by the hunt, had *gone in*. It had emerged, in some unknown form, in a dark cave filled by warm creatures. One had tried to deny it, and it had killed and eaten hungrily of the departing

life. It would have killed more. It would have killed all the warm creatures, if only.....

the cursed witch girl

it *remembered* the pulsing, pushing force which had forced it back into its own confines. It remembered the implacable will which overcame its struggles as easily as he overcame the lesser *halfen*. It felt again the torture as every particle of its being was subjected to an irresistible force and was sucked, screaming, back through some mental fold, back into its physical form.

For days afterward its eyes had been blinded, and when it could finally look, it found that the passageway had been barred forever.

It mewled and howled with remembered pain and the beginnings of a new concept. It teetered forwards and backwards, trying to gather momentum enough to propel it through the blue light. Through the pain. And beyond the concept, which was fear.

Those nearest in the multitude shifted uneasily, shrinking away from the huge beast as it roared and clutched at its own visage. Bright blood dripped from its paws, but its eyes remained unseeing. None in the multitude remembered that this had happened before. The beast itself was the only *halfen* with the gift of memory. Some hissed or growled in mindless response, but none approached the beast. Memory did not play a part in the instinct for survival, and that instinct clamoured that nothing which disturbed the beast would survive.

The multitude eddied. The black-garbed form of a true man emerged. He won through to the edge of the clear area and paused, brushing down his long cloak. A cloud of dust erupted into the dusk as he slapped his broad-brimmed hat against his leg. His sardonic eyes swept over the press of *halfen*, cowing them. This time the instinct for survival clamoured that here was a power which could sweep aside mere physical threat. Again logic had no part to play, but it could have pointed out that the man had to be very sure of himself to appear, apparently unarmed, at such a place and time.

The multitude surged and jostled for as far as the eye could see. Giant fires raged at irregular intervals, licking the sky as it darkened towards night. Both the fading sun and the strengthening stars flickered through the spectrum as ice rimed the Cold Heights.

The white beast had carved a circular area in which it paced, and writhed, and snarled. Blood and saliva sprayed the hard earth,

turning it to red-tinged mud. Scuff marks and scrapes patterned the muck, mute evidence of how the beast relived events during its howling fit.

The man stepped forward. Cold mist issued from his mouth as he breathed.

"Gorg?" he asked, deferentially.

4

The beast had negotiated the barred door and now scoured the dark depths, searching for the source of power. Its eyes cast red light, but the darkness was so intense that still it blundered and lurched, banging against the walls of its own brain. Down and down it crashed, for down there was the ultimate source of which control would be the ultimate power.

*Gorg?*

It blinked as the sound melted walls. It became aware of its body and a wash of cold. The corridors receded, shrank, diminished to a black spot against the redness of its closed eyelids. It became aware of a susurating roar, the snarls and yelps of the multitude. It heard crackling as the nearest fire blazed. It felt the presence of another power, and knew that the man had come again. It remembered now that it was the voice of the man which had pierced through the fit, and it growled.

It opened its eyes.

"Ahh," it rumbled, and raised its paws to lick at the blood there. The rents on its body were already closing, a tangible result of power conferred by the key. It reared and peered down at the small figure of the man. So small, so easily crushed. It realised that the man had not responded.

"Ahh?" it interrogated.

The Envoy wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and smiled tightly, aware that the expression would mean nothing to the beast.

"The old man has found them," he said softly.

"And?"

"They come."

"They! Come!" exulted the beast.

It tilted its head and roared at the stars. Its power blazed so strongly that the fire flickered red and the careening sparks became drops of blood. They spattered down on the multitude, and the *halfen*

shifted and whined uneasily. The beast loomed over the man, and in its mind felt bones breaking between its paws, flesh tearing, blood spurting between its jaws.

"It won't be easy," said the man.

The beast roared again, confused. Did the man mean he could resist? That it could be prevented from tearing his body apart?

"Even here.... even here...." said the man softly, drawing his cloak tighter, "her power will be great."

The beast subsided. The red haze which had clouded its reason swept away. It saw now what the man meant and it remembered, too, that the man had power of his own. Probably he *could* resist. And until now he was the only being able to pass through the barrier.

Until now.

"I suggest," murmured the man, "that the time has come to start redressing the balance."

The beast evinced puzzlement, leaning forward and putting its giant face inches from the man's. It saw this as an opportunity to put its ally to the test.

"What? Then?" it articulated, saliva flying.

The man did not step back, aware that doing so would be interpreted as weakness. "Put down the barrier," he said. "Let the brethren loose!"

The beast sat back, satisfied. The man, then, was a true traitor.

"So," it coughed, deep in its throat. "It. Is. Time?"

The man relaxed, his eyes fixed on the tiny key hanging on some sort of chain around the neck of the beast.

"Do not neglect to replace it," he warned. "So that only they may come."

The beast growled.

"Yes," agreed the man, eyes flicking to the restless multitude. "Yes. It is time."

## 5

After a moment the beast whirled and plunged away. Howling, it forged its way across the plateau. Lesser brethren scattered frantically to either side, but for once it was not hunting. It was running towards the place which only it knew, which had meaning only for the bearer of the key. It was running to fulfil that part of the process which it and the Envoy had planned so long ago, which



would visit horror and death throughout Within. It was running to start the beginning of the end.

The man watched sardonically as it ran. He pulled down his wide-brimmed hat, shading his eyes against the glare of nearby flames. Then he turned and seemed to melt into shadows, and was gone.

## 6

The multitude heaved almost as one when the sound started - heaved, then froze in place as a grating squeal crashed around the dark sky. For an endless moment only echoes thundered, diminishing, then the grating roar began again, more firmly, as if it had learned its purpose. It did not fade away a second time, but boomed and grew, making the very earth vibrate. Boulders became dislodged and bounced down slopes where before there had been only level ground. Still the sound grew, beating around the dome of Within, as if something immeasurably huge and impossibly heavy was forcing itself into the solid rock.

The multitude remained unmoving, even when rocks smashed into its ranks, killing and maiming. The multitude, sensing with one mind, knew that its time had not yet come.

A fetid wind blasted across the Cold Heights as the greater part of Within sucked hungrily at the lesser. The winds spiralled across the night to fall in far places, and if people were there, they covered their faces until the foulness of the air had passed.

The edge of the plateau cracked and lurched. Shards of rock screamed into the air, while in other places it was forced down and inward, compressed upon itself. Unable to escape, it began to glow and melt, running away in streams of molten fire.

The wind across the plateau lessened and came down from the heights as the barrier itself came low. When the *halfen* felt the wind on their backs, when the roar of the descending barrier became a deep-throated rumble far beneath their feet, when their collective instinct sensed that the time was right - then, the multitude stirred. On the far reaches, where before there had been nowhere to go, *halfen* stepped forward, questing, slavering. Their minds could not fathom or even remember what had happened, but they registered the fact that something was different. The first of them moved away and down. More followed.

The sounds made by the barrier drummed into silence. The earth steadied, but showed its wounds where rock had been stripped away, revealing fresh rock beneath. The molten streams became sluggish, then still. Dirty grey smoke billowed from countless sites where it cooled, hissing. Stars glimmered from behind the scum and ash as it spread across the sky.

Somewhere, a *halfen* howled, and in an instant it was joined by a cacophony of screams and snarls. The centre of the multitude moved restlessly. More *halfen* spilled across from Far Beyond, across the gaping wound where the barrier used to be. Then the rich air of Within billowed back across the multitude, bringing with it scents which no *halfen* could ever have smelt before.

The howling grew to a dreadful shriek as the press of *halfen* forced outwards. The wind now in their faces, they poured across hard-packed earth towards the Greenlands beyond.

## II



### THE NEW REALITY

IT WAS cold.

The two young men sat facing each other, each busy with his own thoughts as the light strengthened. Philip raised a hand to rub at his cheek, numb from the biting wind. Michael drew his cloak more tightly around his shoulders and pressed back against the rocks. He shivered, then yawned uncontrollably. He looked up as Hirlog approached, and accepted water and cold gruel with a wry expression.

"No fires," grunted Hirlog.

Michael made no reply. He appreciated the need not to draw attention to their presence well enough.

Philip stood, stretched, and moved across to Lurien, who was spooning out more of the unappetising gruel.

"Will the noryx eat it?" he asked, straight-faced. Lurien nodded blandly and said:

"The noryx have already eaten, my young warrior. One of the rules of travel is always to feed your mounts first. It is their legs and strength you may have sudden need for, not your own." He passed a cracked bowl to the Sage, who took it without much enthusiasm. "This - " Lurien stabbed at the gruel, which made a slurping sound " - this is what the noryx left."

The Sage looked up, aghast. Lurien met his gaze expressionlessly. Philip laughed, picked up his own bowl, and walked back towards Michael. He sat, groaning at the unaccustomed stiffness of his limbs, and started on his own frugal breakfast. The gruel was slimy and unpleasant to taste. Philip wondered whether Lurien had, after all, been telling the truth.

Overhead the sky grew brighter as the sun fired. The freezing wind had hustled the clouds away, but the ground was still damp

from overnight rain. They had ridden through the night, the Sage on his own mount, and the brothers sharing those of Hirlog and Lurien, who had borrowed noryx from the Dark Caves.

Michael shifted uncomfortably and rubbed at his back. "I don't like noryx," he said, with the air of coming to a well-considered decision.

Philip raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "The noryx are all right. It's the riding of them which I don't take to."

"You'll get used to it," put in Hirlog. "But it does take some getting used to, I'll grant you that. Why, I remember a young mercenary by the name of.... by the name of.... well, I forget his name, but the point is that he could ride better than anyone I've ever seen. Even you, Lurien."

Lurien nodded absently. Hirlog took a long draught of water and belched.

"So what?" asked Philip.

"What do you mean, so what?"

"This mercenary, so he was good at riding. What does that prove?"

"Ah." Hirlog tapped the side of his nose knowingly. "The point is that, until he was twenty, he had only been on a noryx twice. And had fallen off both times. But then he had the fortune to meet up with a lady of.... shall we say, delectable charms but debatable morals." Hirlog tapped the side of his nose again, and winked. "Our young mercenary was...."

He broke off as Lurien rose, gathered in the bowls, and started to scour them with a piece of old leather.

"Uh.... was *visiting* this lady, when her father and brothers returned from wherever they had been. Five brothers, as I recall." The dwarf-man fell silent again as he pondered this point. "Anyway, our hero had to leap on a nearby noryx and ride off at some speed in order to effect an escape. Or he would have had his neck stretched."

"And?"

Hirlog looked surprised.

"Isn't it obvious? He found in himself an unexpected ability to ride. He saved himself, riding away from all six pursuers, and became the expert rider I have already described. Or was it five pursuers and four brothers?" He frowned.

Lurien, packed the bowls into a bag, and stood looking at the scene ahead. Small jumbles of rock were scattered over hard-packed earth; occasionally a thorny bush clawed for life in an otherwise barren landscape. The wind whistled behind some nearby rocks and blew a cloud of dust into the air.

"We ride," said Lurien.

Michael sighed and clambered to his feet.

"Shouldn't we.....?" began Hirlog, but fell silent. He looked from Lurien to the wide spaces of Wilderness beyond.

"Help me up, Philip," said the Sage. Philip took his gnarled hand and pulled him, groaning, to his feet. Once upright, he stamped about miserably, trying to rub some warmth into his thin arms. "Too cold for these old bones," he muttered, and with a shock remembered Wendi, who used to say the same thing.

"Shouldn't we what?" asked Lurien.

"Hole up during daylight," said Hirlog. He gestured at the way ahead. "It looks bare out there."

"No." Lurien's reply was curt. "We've been through this. This is their kind of territory and I want to get out of it as quickly as possible."

It was no more than Hirlog had expected. He nodded glumly and mounted his noryx, which came fully awake with a surprised snort. The other two beasts mewled nervously and came down onto their forelegs. The Sage clambered wearily into his saddle; Lurien swung lithely into his.

Michael climbed up behind Hirlog, barking his knuckles on some rough saddle-leather. He sucked them ruefully and glanced at Philip, who had mounted up behind Lurien.

"If this is what you mean by the new reality," he mumbled, "then I don't think much of it." Philip grinned.

Lurien kned his noryx into a walk, and the party moved away from the scant protection of the rocks. The wind blew at their backs, knifing through clothes as if they were nothing. Speech became impossible as the wind whipped words away. In any case, none of the travellers felt much like speaking. They all hunched into familiar riding positions and sank into their own thoughts, except that Lurien, out in front, kept an eye on where they were going and watched for any other creatures in the wilderness around them.

Michael's thoughts drifted back to the Dark Caves. They had departed from there only hours ago, but already it seemed like a lifetime of uncomfortable riding. He remembered how the descending barrier boomed across the sky, how a sudden deluge of rain swept across the clearing outside the Caves. The Sage, after screaming his anger, had turned white and slumped down with his head between his knees. From down the slope the cries and shouts of consternation died away. Seconds later, Callios and the mercenaries came running up the hill, through the pre-dawn darkness. Their hair was plastered to their skulls, and water ran down their faces. In a brief, shouted conversation, Philip told them what was happening, though it was no more than they had already guessed. The Sage did not look up. Michael had thought how tired and depressed he had looked.

He stole a glance now at the old man seated comfortably on his noryx. Comfortably! How did he manage that? Michael thought he seemed a little better now - still tired, but less dispirited, as if the fact that they were now on the road with a definite purpose had given him new heart.

He leaned against Hirlog's broad back and let his thoughts drift again.

Eventually the sounds made by the barrier had died away. As if worked by the same mechanism, the rain also stopped. Footsteps came from behind, through the dimness. Carn Adur joined them, and Borris.

Michael had blinked with surprise. Borris was dressed in tough leather armour, and his face was grim. He looked different, now, from the old man they had met standing outside the Dark Caves. He looked now like the sort of man it would not be wise to cross, like the sort of man the Sage had indicated he might be, when Lurien and Karenar had suggested taking him on.

"It's come then?" Carn had rasped, and Michael had started at the change in his voice. The weaponmaster was still dressed in white robes, but all trace of humour had left his face.

The Sage did not look up, but nodded wearily.

"Go, then," urged Carn. "Go quickly. Take some noryx and leave now!"

Lurien, perplexed, had looked uncertainly from Carn to the Sage, and back again. He had frowned. Michael remembered that he too

had been put off balance when he had discovered that the Sage and the weaponmaster were, despite appearances, on speaking terms.

The Captain asked: "Go? Go where?"

The question dropped into the night and for a few moments remained unanswered. Then the Sage straightened his shoulders and at last looked up.

"Arnwath," he had said quietly. "We must go to Arnwath. I must take the boys there, and meet up with Sarah. Come with me if you like, but if you will listen to an old man....."

The Captain had not answered, but tilted his head attentively.

"..... go back to the manors and towns. Go to the villages and travellers taverns. Gather fighting men together. Gather as many as you can, and meet us at Arnwath. It is there, I fear, that we might lose - everything."

"But you...."

The Sage shook his head once, sharply, and said: "We'll manage."

The Captain did not look as if he agreed, but he had dropped the subject. Instead he turned to Carn Adur and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"We stay," the weaponmaster had said, spreading his hands. "There are few enough of us, and Rivermouth has no walls."

Callios thought for a moment, then nodded. He turned to his men. "All right. This is what we will do. Lurien and Hirlog, you go with the old man and get the boys to the witch town...."

*The boys, remembered Michael. He called us the boys.*

"Kar, you come with me. We'll go back to all those damned places.... make sure the people are behind walls.... gather some men together. You'll be there before us." This to Lurien. "Hang on, won't you?"

The mercenaries had clasped hands briefly, then the Captain had clapped the brothers' shoulders and turned to Borris. "You said something about noryx?"

Borris nodded. He beckoned to the Captain and Karenar, and all three disappeared into the gloom. The rain started up again, freezing drops spattering down from unseen clouds above. Michael had shivered. Philip caught the movement and grinned.

"But this is real, isn't it, Mike? This night, this wind... this damned rain.... it feels real, doesn't it? All that's happened since we

were here - I remember it, or most of it, but it all seems like a dream. Do you know what I mean? This is a new reality."

He had known what his brother meant, but he had not replied. He had stood gazing into the darkness towards the caves where Callios and Karenar had vanished. The new reality, as Philip called it, forced him to wonder if he would ever see them again. *He called us boys*, he thought sadly. Not many would do that now. Only the Captain. And the Sage, who was, after all, their great-grandfather.

The present came upon him in a rush. He found himself nodding sleepily behind Hirlog in spite of the cold and the awkward, patient lurch of the noryx. The sun was stronger now, promising warmth if the wind ever dropped. He straightened, trying to unwind some of the kinks in his back.

The Sage coughed, shifted, and caught Michael's eye. He smiled, and Michael grinned back. He felt a sudden rush of affection for the old man. It was somehow difficult to remember that he was actually their great-grandfather, that he would actually know their parents and grandparents and other relatives back at home. Michael suddenly felt dizzy at the thought of it, at the realisation that the Sage was a link to their own world but that neither he, nor Philip, nor the Sage himself had ever mentioned it. He closed his eyes, trying to clear his head, and succumbed to weary sleep.

The Sage turned his gaze forward again, checking that Lurien was still alert. He trusted the scout to look out for physical threats: he himself kept watch for any signs that they were being obstructed by any form of power or art. So far he had detected nothing, which did not particularly surprise him. It must have taken a vast amount of power to put down the barrier, even with the help of the key. And unless he was mistaken, the beast would almost certainly raise the barrier again, once the *halfen* horde had passed into Within.

He swallowed nervously at this thought, and pressed his hand against his eyes. More than any other in the group, perhaps more than any other Within, he knew what the lowering of the barrier meant. He comprehended the vast numbers of *halfen*, knew of their burning, unreasoning hunger. He knew that horror was inevitable, that even fortress walls would only provide protection for as long as it took the *halfen* to pile up in heaps of death and then clamber remorselessly over the rotting piles. He knew because he was the Sage and it was part of his learning, part of his power, to know.



He wished with all his heart that he was not the Sage. He would infinitely have preferred to be quietly dead. He no longer had any desire to be this alter ego, this fetch. He had no desire to die twice, especially if the second time was as painful as he imagined it might be.

He desperately hoped that they were doing the right thing. It was Lurien who had pointed out that the quickest way to Arnwath was across the Barren Reaches, one of the most desolate areas of Wilderness, and then through the Deep Forest.

"Not all the way through," the scout had added. "But if we cut across the corner.... well, it would save weeks. And the mountain route runs cursed close to the barrier."

The Sage had reflected that even a corner of the Deep Forest could prove difficult enough, but said nothing. Of all the party, he alone had travelled in the Forest and, on balance, he thought that Lurien's plan was probably the best. Time was of the essence. Passing close to the barrier was not in his opinion an important consideration. They were as likely to meet up with *halfen* in the Forest as anywhere else. But time was most definitely of the essence, and anything that cut time off the journey was almost certainly right.

He hoped that it was right, and he hoped that they met no *halfen* on the Barren Reaches. Even he would be hard pressed to overcome them there, with so little cover to assist the manipulation of power.

He swallowed again, and thought that at least he had some inkling of what they faced. None of the others truly knew, especially the children. Yes - children, his mind insisted, in spite of their capabilities. They had come of their own free will, true enough, but they had come because he had asked. And if they had known all the reasons - if they had known what was going to happen and what they would have to face - would they have come at all?

He remembered that night, so long ago, when he had put the question. What had he said?

*"Yes, we must tread a path between worlds, and time. Will you come? There is need; great need. There is also great danger, but you are our only hope. Will you come?"*

Something like that. Something he had rehearsed, over and over, and had forgotten now he no longer needed the words. And they had come. Nearly two years ago, they had come, and since then almost nothing had happened in the way he thought it would.

He shifted in his saddle as his thoughts turned down that familiar spiral. Why now, two years after he had brought the children to the damned world? Why had the beast waited, no doubt as counselled by his true and faithful follower, the Envoy? It had waited and waited, and only now released the horde. Surely it could have done so long ago - two years ago - or three, before anyone had the faintest thought of bringing outworlders to Within? And now Sarah had gained immeasurable power, and the boys their full strength. It made no sense!

The Sage shook his head, filled with frustration and fear. Try as he might, he could not read the mind of the Envoy, could not understand what he thought he had gained by delay. He did not try to understand the motives of the white beast, or rather, he did not need to. The beast was *halfen*, and it wanted to kill. That was plain enough. But the Envoy was human, and his strategy should be based in human logic. Should be, but the Sage could not fathom it out.

His lips curled with contempt as he thought of the Envoy, at the thought that any human could consort with the beast. Contempt mixed with pain and humiliation, for was not the Envoy of his own blood? If the children only knew.....

He felt a sudden churning, gut-wrenching sensation, and immediately sat up straight to make urgent gestures at the rest of the group. A subterranean roar began deep beneath their feet, and the noryx might have started but for the fact that their riders were forewarned. The sudden roar became a prolonged rumble, grinding out the noise of the wind. A tremendous grating squeal came from a long way ahead.

All in the group knew that the barrier was being raised again. All could sense that the operation was smoother than when it had been put down. The booming roar sounded easier, as if there was less obstruction to the path of the barrier as it heaved upwards, out of the earth. And all of them shivered as they realised that, for the first time in living memory, the *halfen* horde would be on the wrong side.

The group did not pause. They were nowhere near the barrier, and could do nothing about it even if they had been. They rode on across the Barren Reaches, under the booming sky, hoping against hope that they could reach distant Arnwath before it was overrun.

### III



### COOL WATER

DURING THOSE hours when Within was undivided, *halfen* poured out from Topside, streaming like pus from a wound across the broken, smoking places where the barrier used to be. Hundreds were killed in the migration. They fell down chasms, drowned in unfamiliar streams, were crushed underfoot by vast numbers of their own kind. But their number was beyond counting, and still they came.

Small animals fled in all directions. Most escaped, being too fleet of foot for the human-legged *halfen* to pursue. Some had the misfortune to run straight from one part of the horde into another, and those did not escape. Still the horde poured onward, howling, screaming, slaving to kill.

They came down off the great plateau and encountered ogres in their own territory. For a short time the ogres held their own by swinging huge clubs and climbing pinnacles of rock. But the *halfen* kept coming, and even ogres tire. Eventually they were torn down, roaring, into a bloody mêlée of fang and claw, and were overcome. Other ogres saw what happened and fled before the horde, scrambling down the mountains into Greenlands.

*Halfen* flooded into the rocky fastness of Far Beyond and there came upon one of the last rock giants. For two hundred years the giant had lived, alone and undisturbed, in the roots of an unnamed mountain. Only recently had it emerged to escape the underground damage caused by the machinations of the barrier, and found its world filled by swarms of screeching, red-eyed *halfen*. The giant was more than thirty feet tall, and its skin was hard and tough. It flailed grimly at the *halfen*, smashing them down, smearing them against the rocks. It bellowed with rage and moved into the horde, clubbing with gigantic fists and stamping ferociously with rock-like feet. The

horde parted, swirled, closed behind the path of the giant. Scores of *halfen* leaped from rocks onto its back, its head, its shoulders. Others clung to its arms as it hammered past, and began mindlessly to bite and tear. Still others clawed at its legs and hauled themselves upwards.

The giant roared with pain and tried to swat away the *halfen* swarming all over its body. But they weighed down its arms; they lapped eagerly at blood streaming from countless wounds; they tore and ate at the living flesh and muscle. Eventually a questing claw dug deep into one of the eyes of the giant, sunk in and rooted. The giant vented an impossibly high pitched screech of agony and, in shock, fell headlong into the multitude. Its weight crushed scores, but many more clambered swiftly onto its bleeding body, resembling nothing so much as a mass of maggots writhing on a corpse. Soon the giant ceased to move. For a while its body caused an eddy in the flow of the horde, but after a time it was picked clean, and the horde passed smoothly, uncaring, over its splintered bones.

Still other *halfen* came down from the Cold Heights into the Ice Mountains. There they met their first reversal, at the hands of a traditional dwarf clan. The traditional dwarves scorned others who had moved away from mountains, who lived in dwellings other than caves, and who had taken to other occupations than crafting rock. The traditional dwarves lived in deep caves whose entrances were sealed by doors so close-fitting that, as the saying went, not even the nails of a gnome could get through.

The *halfen* knew that there was red, living meat behind those doors. They battered and pressed, howling, against the rock. Many died in the crush as those behind forced forward, died and were scavenged by the mob. Many others died as the traditional dwarves, themselves howling in a frenzy of hate and fear, rolled rocks out of crevices high in their cliff-homes, to slam down on *halfen* flesh and bone.

If the horde had stayed until its dead piled up to the height of those crevices, then the dwarves would have died. But the sweet wind still blew in the faces of the *halfen*, promising red food, promising, promising.

As if governed by a single, simple mind, the multitude swept past the rock stronghold of the traditional dwarves. Down past the

foothills, into the grass and woodland of the Meadow Hills, and towards human habitation.

2

The elders of Waterdown had an inkling of what the dreadful sounds in the night portended. The barrier is down, they said. We are exposed to Topside. The *halfen* will come.

And others, younger, stronger, less knowing, said: so what? We will drive them off.

We have no walls, protested the elders. No weapons.

We have forty strong men, said the others. We have the walls of our houses. We have pitchforks, knives. Some of us have swords. If the *halfen* come we will drive them off and they will pass us by.

The elders shook their heads, uneasy. Listen to us, they said. Listen. We will have to fight, for there is nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go. Perhaps we should have built walls; our elders suggested it when we were young and strong.

Perhaps, agreed the others. It is too late to worry about that now.

Yes, said the elders. Too late. Listen. Take all of your loved ones inside. Lock your doors. Bar your windows. Listen! At least listen to this, for if you do not, the *halfen* will tear you to pieces.

The others laughed, but uncertainly, finding that fear was contagious. Of course we will lock ourselves in, they said. It takes no great lore to know to do that. It is only common sense.

The elders shook their heads, thinking: yes, but will it be enough? Then they went back to their own homes, locked their own doors, and barred their own windows. So did every inhabitant of Waterdown. The village waited.

Carl Andsun was the first to hear the susurating roar that heralded the approach of the *halfen*. He was the son of Bars Andsun, the blacksmith, and he was lying nervously in his own room near the top of their house, peering through a knot-hole in his wooden window shutters. Their house lay at the margin of the village. Carl could glimpse only two or three other dwellings, then woodland beyond.

"I hear them, pa!"

His voice quavered. He remembered his mother using *halfen* as a threat, as bogey-men, whenever he misbehaved. *Go to sleep now or the halfen will come and get you.* When he was older he had been

astonished to find that the bogey-men were real, trapped high in the mountains by an ancient spell. It had sounded like a fairy tale, and yet..... and yet the bogey-men were coming. Coming to get him and everyone else in Waterdown.

"Quiet, now," said Bars gruffly, trying to keep the fear from his own voice. He too had been brought up on tales of the bogey-men.

The roar came closer, became clearer. It became possible to make out snarls, howls, deep coughing grunts, all underscored by a continuous rumble of countless feet. It was the rumble that grew louder and closer with frightening rapidity. The ground trembled. Ornaments and crockery inside the village houses jiggled on their shelves and toppled to the floor, the sound of their breaking unheard in the hideous approaching roar. The wooden walls of the houses themselves rattled and shook. Some cracked open to reveal the terrified faces of the occupants inside.

Carl Andsun saw a crazy flash of white and brown bodies hurtling through the trees, down the slope towards them. His mind could not take in the snarling, tumbling numbers of them, and refused to take in the tortured variety of their forms.

"Pa!" he shrieked. "They're here, pa!"

His father's reply was drowned as the horde burst from the trees and flooded the village. The *halfen* knew that there was blood behind the wood walls, and they crashed and battered against every house. Those where the walls were cracked went first as *halfen* squirmed and thrust through every hole. Human screams mingled with inhuman howls of triumph as the *halfen* killed and ate or simply overwhelmed and ate without regard to whether the prey still lived.

A woman with a young child leaped desperately from a window and tried to run from the village. *Halfen* scrambled and dropped from the window behind her; others already on the ground whirled and followed. In seconds she was overhauled and brought down. Both she and the child disappeared beneath a heaving mound of drooling *halfen*.

Carl vomited.

Downstairs he could hear the walls of the house giving way - the *halfen* did not comprehend that doors would break more quickly. He heard his father bellow something, and his mother shriek some unintelligible words. Then there came a terrific crash and the floor of his room buckled. He heard his father shout "Carl!" After that

there was only a mad, scrambling noise, over which he could hear horrific screaming and yammering from outside as the village was slaughtered. It all sounded a long way away. A fetid stench drifted up the stairwell, and Carl thought he could hear wet, tearing sounds. He vomited again, and staggered weakly to his feet.

*So quick, he thought. It happened so quick. Too quick. And he thought: you were right, ma; here are the bogies even though I was a good boy.*

He laughed hysterically, tears dripping from his eyes, and wrenched at the window shutter. The slap of feet on the stairs told him he didn't have very long. He wrenched again, feeling something in his shoulder give. Then he remembered.....

"You bastard, pa!"

Remembered that his father had nailed the shutters closed. *Safer that way, son.*

The footfalls were closer now, and Carl turned in time to see the shaggy form of a half-dog loom in the doorway. Fool! Why hadn't he closed the door? There was no time for thought. He leapt for the door and slammed it shut, feeling a thunk! as it crashed into the *halfen* creature and, from the sound of it, sent it tumbling back down the stairs. Trembling, he yanked his bed across the door as a makeshift wedge.

*No locks or bolts on inside doors, he thought to himself with a weird calmness. How very understandable.*

Seconds. He had only seconds. *Only seconds to live?* asked his mind. He ignored the thought and cast around the room, looking for something to use as a lever. Anything.

*Nailed me into my coffin, pa.*

Something hurled itself against the door and part of it splintered inwards. At the same moment he caught sight of an iron bar fixed almost underneath the window. He stared at it, wondering what it was for. Another crash opened a bigger hole in the door, and he could hear the panting of some creature outside. Absently he wondered whether it was the dog thing, or whether some other *halfen* had taken up the attack. The edges of the hole in the door were tinged with red.

*Towel rail, he thought. How absurd, how wonderful. It was possible that a towel rail was going to prolong his life. He ran forward, heaved it from the wall, and jammed it between the*

shutters. As he put his weight on it, the top half of the door gave way and a *halfen* sprawled through to land on his bed. With a tortured squeal the nails in the shutter pulled out and the whole thing banged open.

*Is there time?* wondered Carl's brain, mildly interested.

He whirled and flung the metal bar, which caught the *halfen* across its distorted face and made it stumble backwards. It was enough. Carl dived headfirst through the window, thinking that if he landed on a mass of *halfen* then he might just as well have stayed in his bedroom.

He landed solidly on an area of grass, half on his chest, half on his injured shoulder. The breath was driven from his body, and his sight went hazy.

*Get up, he told his legs. You don't need air. Run. You don't need to see to know which way to go.*

He got up. He ran. Pain flared in his shoulder and all the way down his left side, but he ignored it. His lungs flamed, fighting for air, but he ignored that too. When he finally forced breath back into his body, he found that he was sobbing and crying like a baby as he lurched towards the trees. Behind, he could hear the slapping, scrambling sounds of pursuit. In his brain burned the picture of the woman and child jumping, running, going down. Now he was running, and although the trees wavered closer, he knew in his heart that he was going down, too.

Why should the trees afford protection, anyway?

His feet splashed through water. He staggered across the shallow reaches of the Meadow River, across the ford which had given Waterdown the reason for its existence. Came out on the other side; began to struggle up the slight slope which led to the trees. Momentarily he felt a ray of hope - perhaps the pursuing *halfen* would miss the ford.....? He glanced back and the hope died. The *halfen* were too close on his heels, far too close to veer significantly from his own path. There were about a dozen of them, all bounding forward on their human legs with frightening speed. The first of them was already at the water, close enough that Carl could see its glowing eyes.

His foot slipped sideways into a hole and wrenched agonisingly. He fell full length, sobbing: he felt the gritty taste of earth between his teeth. He was dead now. He knew it, and his mind cast back



frantically over his fourteen years, savouring them. If he was going to die, then he wanted to die remembering his family, sunny days at school, picnics by the river. He remembered forbidden snacks, birthday parties, building a tree house with his friends. He made the pictures flash across his mind, forced them into being, while his body tried feebly to push itself onto its knees to continue its hopeless flight, and the muscles on his back tensed and quivered in awful anticipation of the final, rending pain.

"Ma?" he whispered, choking out earth. "Pa?" His fingers scrabbled helplessly.

Then a miracle happened.

A blast of fiery air came from ahead, from within the trees, and a deep booming rumble echoed through the ground, different from the rumble made by the multitude. Carl rolled into a ball, making himself as small as he could. The pursuing *halfen* stopped, uncertain what the approaching phenomenon might mean. The booming became louder. Trees on the edge of the wood suddenly torched alight and sent clouds of smoke into the air and across the intervening space. Out of the wood, striding calf-deep through the ground, came Groat.

The *halfen* mewled angrily, fearful that this black, smoking figure was going to deprive them of its prey. Groat did not pause. His yellow eyes flared in the sunlight, perceiving not Carl but only the broad expanse of the Meadow River. Water, cool water in which he could bathe his burning body; cool flowing water which could soothe away centuries of pain.

Where his feet sank into the ground, grass sizzled and blackened; the earth smouldered. Air crisped away from his body so that the fearful booming of his footfalls was accompanied by the crackling, burning sound of fire. Groat passed within feet of Carl Andsun, who still lay curled in a trembling ball, and the boy felt an awful wave of heat pass over him, scalding his face and fingers.

Groat saw the *halfen*, and his limited intellect recognised them as creatures which might try to attack him, might try to prevent him reaching the water. He roared. The *halfen* yowled in response, and rushed closer, not realising that here was a power that mere numbers could not overcome. Groat lunged forward, scything with his huge, smoking hands; three *halfen* were crushed in his embrace. Five others evaded his arms and leaped onto his body, only to burst into

flames, screeching, and drop as charred embers marking the path of the ancient monster.

The remaining *halfen* turned and fled, forgetting their intended prey.

Groat roared again, and waded through the soft earth to the river. He paused at the edge, as if relishing the moment, then strode forward. He missed the ford by some yards, and sank almost immediately to his waist. Tremendous gouts of steam hissed into the air, and the surface of the water bubbled, boiling. Groat took another step, and was submerged up to his chest. Superheated water blasted upwards, but Groat felt the coolness of fresh water coursing downriver, sweeping across his body. He exhaled, a gasping groan which echoed eerily over the river, and took a final step. The waters closed above his head. For a moment bubbles of air mingled with the boiling water, bursting up into the clouds of steam. Then they ceased. The violent motion of the water began to ease. The steam dispersed.

Groat was at peace.

### 3

Carl Andsun put a fist to his mouth and watched blackness eddy into the waters of the Meadow River. Slowly it expanded, drifting. Soon all the water below the point where Groat had vanished was black. Not oily, not greasy, but black as though the finest coal-dust had somehow fallen and mixed into the sweeping river.

Carl lifted his eyes and saw the remains of the village beyond. The houses were destroyed, bludgeoned. It looked as if a killing wind had swept through the village, overturning and breaking everything in its path. The horde had already passed on. Now only a few *halfen* remained, scavengers picking over the bones of Waterdown. Tears trickled from Carl's eyes. He wiped clumsily at his face with the back of his hand.

He had survived. So far. Grunting with pain, he crawled the last few yards into the sanctuary of the blazing trees, into the concealing darkness of woodsmoke. Then he staggered to his feet and moved as quickly as his battered body would allow away from the murdered village, away from Waterdown and the *halfen* horde, away in the direction from which the black monster, his saviour, had come.

## IV



### TO THE DEEP FOREST

THEY RODE for three more days, stopping briefly and infrequently to make cold camp. The Deep Forest became visible at the dim limits of the horizon, and hour by hour appeared to climb slowly down towards them, down the curve of Within. Philip and Michael were awestruck by its sheer size. More than a day after it first came into view, it was still unreeling at the margins of Within, and it spread as far to the left and right as they could see. Soon Within seemed to be split in half. In front was the massive, green-black vastness of the Deep Forest, and around and behind them stretched the grey-green emptiness of the Barren Reaches.

Philip was right, thought Michael. Now that they had full possession of their mind and memories, these strange scenes on this strange world seemed sharper, more real. The wind seemed colder, the nights darker. The weird, upsweeping curvature of Within seemed suddenly so different, so wonderful, that he ducked his head in a spasm of giddiness. Then he looked up again at the threatening spread of the Deep Forest, and experienced again a sudden thrill as he realised that he was here, now, in the reality of this fantastic place.

He glanced at Philip. Their eyes met, and he instinctively knew that Philip, too, was experiencing a similar sense of wonder.

On the morning of their last day in the Barren Reaches, Lurien raised a warning hand, then pointed to something far away under the firing sun. It was very early. The sky near the sun was a deep orange colour, but further away it merged gradually into black so that behind them, stars still spangled from the darkness of night. The air was cold with the chill of dawn, but it was dry and the wind had dropped. It promised to be a warmer, friendly day.

Far off at the edge of the forest came an unexpected movement which Lurien had seen before any of the others.

"Smoke?" asked Philip, doubtfully.

"No," said Lurien. "Stay still."

A gout of dust and sand was billowing up into the dawn sky, turning it an ominous blood red. It moved rapidly into the Barren Reaches, angling slightly away from the watching group, further into Wilderness. Behind, the dust cloud hung for long minutes above the ground. The effect was of a long, red wound torn in the sky of Within.

"An omen, an omen," whispered Hirlog, his big hands unconsciously knotting themselves into a shape designed to be a ward against evil. The Sage noticed. He laughed, despite overwhelming tiredness.

"If it is, dwarfman, let's hope we see all other omens from a similar distance, eh?"

Lurien smiled faintly, but Hirlog did not look amused. The scout raised his hand again, and the group started forward, breaths misting in the cold air. After a while, Philip spoke again.

"*Halfen*? Is that what it was?"

Hirlog grunted an assent.

Philip exchanged a glance with Michael. Both of them thought back to that time, imperfectly remembered, that they had spent behind the barrier. But neither spoke.

"Here," said the Sage, catching the glance. "They were a long way off."

Unexpectedly, Lurien turned in his saddle and frowned at the old man. "They were this time," he said brusquely. "Don't try to soften it. We're going to meet up with them some time or other." The Sage evaded his gaze. "I'd just as soon it wasn't here, in their kind of territory," added the scout, "but meet up with them we will, and there's no point in trying to pretend otherwise."

"All right, all right," muttered the Sage.

Satisfied, Lurien turned back in his saddle. They all rode on steadily, each thinking about their first, faint brush with the *halfen* danger, and each of them carrying in his mind an image of the raw wound left in the sky by the passing horde.

All that morning and into the afternoon the trees of the Deep Forest loomed closer. The Barren Reaches reluctantly gave up some of its area to grass and scrub and, imperceptibly, the jumbles of rock smoothed out until the ground was almost flat. In late afternoon, the party rode past a few stunted trees. The great mass of the forest was only a short way ahead, thick with greenery and shadow. Because Within curved sharply upwards, trees deeper in the forest were visible above those standing at the edges, giving the impression of ranks of taller and taller trees, all clustered closely together, fighting for air, draining light from the sky.

"It's... dark," commented Philip as the group came to a mutual stop. He looked around, frowning. The scar on his forehead puckered whitely.

"In some places it is known as the Dark Forest," said Hirlog. He reached out suddenly as the Sage swayed in his saddle. "We've got to stop, Lur. We're out of the cursed Reaches now. If we don't rest, well... if we don't rest I don't give much for our chances of getting any further."

Lurien sighed, but nodded. Hirlog dismounted and helped the Sage from his noryx as the rest of the party also climbed wearily from their saddles.

"There." Lurien pointed. A number of trees stood out like a promontory from the main body of the forest. Lurien led his noryx across and tethered it to a branch. He looked around and nodded again.

Michael followed, scuffing his feet through the patchy grass. For some reason he was reminded of the garden back in Scotland, with its tall firs and carpet of needles. But the trees here, even at the edge of the forest, were much more massive, and reached up to dizzying heights. Michael consciously refrained from looking up. He did not care for the sight of the tall trees, rank on rank of them, curling above his head like a green-black wave.

"A small fire, I think," said Lurien. "When it is dark. See to that, will you, Hirl? I'll hunt while the light holds." He turned to go.

"Only dead branches," advised the Sage. He coughed, grimaced, and looked up at Hirlog quizzically. "Not wise to damage the trees of the Deep Forest," he added.

Hirlog nodded and Lurien, who had paused to listen to this exchange, disappeared into the edge of the forest.

Dusk fell quickly, as if the grasping trees leached away lingering daylight and dragged down the darkness behind. Hirlog lit a small fire which gave out only a thin trickle of smoke, all but invisible against the backdrop of the trees and the dark sky. Lurien returned with two small animals which resembled rabbits, but which were apparently called *arryon*. It was not long before they were skinned and spitted, roasting slowly over glowing embers.

Both Michael and Philip stretched out luxuriously on the soft grass.

"Don't get used to it," murmured Lurien, although he too was lying comfortably.

"First time I've been warm for days," said the Sage.

It was true. The cold wind had dropped to a breeze, and the promontory of trees provided shelter from even that. The dense, matted forest only yards away seemed to exude warmth, and it was the first time they had considered it safe enough to light a fire since leaving the Dark Caves. The Sage sighed blissfully and let his eyes close. He was feeling better already.

Lurien looked up sharply at the dim shape of Hirlog, standing watch. "Hir! What's that you're doing?"

Hirlog mumbled vaguely, fidgeted, and sidled behind the trunk of a tree.

"You're smoking that damned pipe again, aren't you?" rasped Lurien.

"Ah....ummmm...." said Hirlog, sounding pleased with himself.

"What's that?" The Sage opened his eyes and jerked upright. "You've got tobacco? You've got tobacco and never told me?" His voice sounded distinctly menacing.

Hirlog edged nervously close to the camp and handed over a small leather pouch. The Sage helped himself and tossed it back, muttering something about turning the dwarfman into a frog.

Hirlog backed away hastily and returned to his post. Lurien watched with a dismal expression as the Sage filled his own pipe.

"Could you do that?" asked Michael with interest.

"Hmmm.... what?"

"Turn Hirlog into a frog. Could you really do that?"

"Hmmm....." The Sage got his pipe going and leaned back contentedly. Puffs of foul-smelling smoke drifted across the tiny

camp. "Well. I don't know. I've never tried. Make a damned huge frog, wouldn't he?"

"Ha!" laughed Michael. "Almost like a - "

He fell silent. He had been about to say *almost like a half-man*, but on reflection that didn't seem very funny. An awkward pause descended over the group.

"Difficult, isn't it?" murmured the Sage. "It's a nice night, a nice camp..... quiet company, food on the fire." He sucked ruminatively at his pipe and looked across at the brothers. His eyes glinted in the firelight. "Difficult to realise the danger, difficult to think about what must be happening at other places. All around."

The others did not speak. The fire hissed as fat from one of the arryon dripped down. Lurien leaned forward and turned the makeshift spit.

"And is it happening?" he asked. "Is there no defence?"

The Sage shook his head.

"Hirl!" called Lurien. "These are ready!"

"Some places will hold out, no doubt," said the Sage. "For a while, anyway. Some of the stronger fortresses and rock towns. But....."

"Ah!" Hirlog sat down and sighed expansively.

"..... they'll fall in the end, I'm afraid. You know the history and the first words as well as I do."

"What's that?" asked the dwarfman. He looked from the Sage to Lurien, who shrugged.

"The *halfen*," said the scout. "Apparently nothing can stop the cursed creatures." His gaze fell on Philip and Michael. "Well, unless....." He fell silent.

"Exactly," said the Sage. "Unless."

Lurien leaned forward again and this time carved at the meat with his hunting knife. He handed slices around and all the members of the group set to appreciatively. After a while Philip remembered something he had meant to ask earlier, when they had seen the red dust trailing through the sky. And perhaps earlier than that, during the time when he could not truly call his thoughts his own.

"What exactly are the half-men, or *halfen*, or whatever they're called? Where do they come from?"

The Sage snorted.

"A good question," remarked Lurien.

"Indeed," said Hirlog. "I take it, then, that nobody has thought to tell you the story of the Black Magician?"

Philip shook his head.

"Well then," declared Hirlog with evident satisfaction. "It was....."

"Here," interrupted Lurien, somewhat anxiously. "Do you think we ought to talk about such things?" He looked at the Sage, who evinced surprise.

"Eh? Oh, talking about them isn't about to bring them rushing here, if that's what you mean. Talk away."

Lurien cursed under his breath.

"Well....." began Hirlog.

"The Black Magician, eh?" interrupted the Sage. "Listen to this, you boys. Parts of it might sound somewhat.... familiar."

### 3

"Well," began Hirlog again, "the story goes that to start off with, there was nothing but power. There were no *things*. No worlds, no stars, no creatures. Nothing but power in what was otherwise a complete void. Or so the story goes," added Hirlog complacently. He belched and wiped the back of his hand with his mouth. "I enjoyed that."

"So it would seem," murmured Lurien.

"Nothing but power," prompted Philip. "Do you mean magic, or something like that?"

"Er.... something like that," agreed Hirlog. "What is power, eh? That's an old chestnut! Perhaps the Sage could, er....."

The Sage sighed. He wished he could claim a hot meal for every time he had been asked that question. "Nobody really knows what power is," he said. "It's just there. Magic seems to be one way of tapping into it and using it. The art used by the teachers of Arnwath is another way. There are others. The beast, for example, uses a key to.... to...."

The Sage pondered.

"... to physically *manipulate* a spell. I wonder...." He fell silent.

"Ah. Hmm." Hirlog raised his eyebrows and glanced significantly at Michael and Philip.

"What?" said the Sage. "Oh, I think I may have given myself an idea." He blinked. "Yes. Magic, and art, and physical means. Sarah,



now, seems to draw power straight from the source, wherever that might be. That's very unusual and extremely powerful. I wonder....?" He drifted into silence again.

"Yes," said Hirlog. "Well. To start off with, there was nothing but power, whatever it is. And then from the power, the Black Magician made himself."

Michael looked up. "But - "

Hirlog held up his hands, one of which still clasped his pipe. "I know, I know," he said quickly. "I have...er, difficulty with this concept myself. But that's the way the story goes. The first happening was that the Black Magician created himself."

"But how - ?"

"I know!" repeated Hirlog impatiently. "Or rather, I don't know, and I don't suppose anybody does. I'm not a philosopher, I'm...."

"..... just a storyteller," murmured Lurien. Hirlog glared at him. Lurien smiled and pretended to study something of great interest in the remains of the fire.

"Made himself," said Hirlog grumpily.

"Was he a man?" asked Michael.

"Well, that depends on who tells the tale. Men say he was human. Is human, I should say, for as far as anybody knows, the Black Magician still exists somewhere. Dwarves think of him as a gigantic dwarf, dressed in black, forging works of power in an enormous smithy. No doubt elves thought of him as some sort of elf, but who knows?"

"I know," said the Sage. "They did. They even gave him a name - Eleneai."

Hirlog raised his eyebrows. "So? I never knew that."

"Ahransal wrote about it in *The Fragments*, where he referred to his predecessor, Eleneai, the Black Magician." The Sage smiled wryly. "Ahransal was good, but presumptuous," he added.

Hirlog puffed at his pipe for a few moments, assimilating this new information. The Sage lay back and closed his eyes.

"Anyway," continued the dwarfman, "after creating himself, the Black Magician started to create other things. He created the stars, and worlds, including Within and wherever you come from. He created *matter*, using power from the void. And it took seven days from start to finish, from the time he made himself, to the time that

all things - not life, you understand, only *things* - had been created. Seven days."

The Sage briefly opened one eye and looked across at Philip and Michael, but made no comment.

"Then he went to sleep," said Hirlog.

"He went to sleep!" exclaimed Philip.

"Well, why not?" asked Hirlog. "He was tired and needed a rest. Is there any reason why the Black Magician shouldn't need sleep like anyone else?"

Philip shrugged. "I suppose not."

"That's how the story goes, anyway," said Hirlog. "Power, then himself, then matter, then sleep. And while he slept, matter gradually changed and became the places which exist today. I mean, the original Within was probably some sort of empty shell. But as time went on, matter gradually....er..."

"... evolved," supplied the Sage, without opening his eyes.

"... yes, evolved into the same rocks and trees and water that we see today. But - " Hirlog held up a finger. "But there was no life. Not here. Not anywhere. Just worlds and stars full of matter but nothing else. And somehow the Black Magician realised this." Hirlog mused. "Don't ask me how; that's another philosophical question. How do you notice that something is missing, when that something has never even existed before? Eh? It's like noticing that the colour zurk, which has never existed, isn't anywhere around. But anyway, the Black Magician realised that *life* was missing from..... well, it was missing. So he created some of the smaller, more primitive life forms...."

"Like dwarves?" asked Lurien.

"The story goes," said Hirlog with dignity, "that the first created life was some sort of insect in the sea. And while the Black Magician experimented with other creations, the original life forms also evolved. Yes. Just like matter did."

Hirlog ruminated.

"Some hold that all life forms evolved from those original insects, but I think that goes too far."

"Just so," said the Sage gravely.

Hirlog squinted suspiciously at the old man over the bowl of his pipe, but decided to continue.

"The point is that the Black Magician experimented with different life forms. The story goes that when he wanted to create

intelligent beings, he started off with a race of men. But they would not live properly, and he damaged all of them trying to find out what was wrong. These are the...."

Hirlog realised that the night was quiet, and dropped his voice.

".... the first sort of *halfen*, the walking dead."

Michael had a sudden, vivid picture of the first *halfen* they had seen behind the barrier, the limping, bloody creature which had come upon them from behind a rock. He remembered how the blood on its body had seemed dry, crusted. He remembered how Philip had once said that it *looked as if it had already done its bleeding*, and swallowed, tasting bile.

"I remember," Philip said. "I remember thinking that most of the white creatures were injured. Broken."

"Well, they're more than that," said Hirlog briskly. "They're dead."

Michael choked. He put a hand to his mouth and turned aside, shoulders heaving. Philip reached out in concern.

"Ahh... I'm - I'm all right. It was just the thought of...." He lapsed into silence. The Sage looked across at Hirlog and said:

"Don't forget these boys have already seen the creatures, were almost caught by them. Best be careful what you say."

Hirlog, his broad face creased with anxiety, accepted the reproof. He nodded. "Sorry. Perhaps I was too..... blunt."

"No, it's all right. It's not the story, just what I remembered. The first *halfen* we saw.. from behind the rock when we woke up. D'you remember?"

Philip nodded, his eyes unfocussed.

"Now that they've been mentioned," said the Sage, "the walking dead, I mean, it's as well to remember that just injuring them won't stop them. You have to burn them or remove their heads."

"Or their legs," remarked Lurien.

"True." The Sage barked a sour laugh. "Even the walking dead can't walk without legs, eh?"

Michael smiled, and tried not to think about what the old man's words took for granted - that he and Philip would inevitably have to fight the unspeakable creatures. He looked at Hirlog. "But where do they come from?"

"Don't know," admitted the dwarfman. "There's a lot about the Black Magician that nobody knows. One theory is that he put all his

mistakes into a rubbish dump somewhere. But somehow a rift opened between the dump and Within...." he spread his hands "...here they are."

"The other *halfen*, they're mistakes too?"

Hirlog nodded heavily. "So it would seem. When he discovered that the first men failed to work, he started to experiment with mixtures of men and animals. That didn't work, either. You've seen the results. And there's another theory that the Black Magician also experimented with what you might call half-beasts, creatures with human bodies but with animal limbs. Who knows?" Hirlog shrugged. "Perhaps he did, and consigned the results to a different rubbish dump. Or perhaps he never even thought of it. Who knows?"

"Who cares?" grunted the Sage. Hirlog gave him a sour look which was wasted because the old man was lying flat on his back with his eyes closed.

"Where is he now?" asked Michael, yawning.

"Eh?"

"The Black Magician. Where is he now?"

"Wait a minute," grumped Hirlog. "Let me finish. After the *halfen*, and other mistakes which are neither as numerous nor as dangerous, the Black Magician finally managed to create intelligent life. Not very intelligent, to start off with. Ogres, trolls, dragons, that kind of thing. But he got better and eventually made dwarves, elves and men."

"In that order?" asked Lurien.

Hirlog scowled. "It is said that the *reason* he created intelligent beings was because...." the dwarfman looked slyly at his audience "... because he wanted someone to talk to."

The Sage snorted without moving.

"And did he? Or does he?" asked Philip.

"Not so far as I know," responded Hirlog. "After creating life, and generally making a bit of a bodge of it, he did the same as he did after creating matter. He went to sleep. And he sleeps still, for all that anyone in Within knows." He cleared his throat. "Sury Dedira put it like this:

In a fold of time  
In the dark of not knowing  
He sleeps.

When we see his golden eyes  
Then will be the dawn of dawns  
And day everlasting."

Michael yawned again. Lurien shook himself, leaned forward and brushed earth and dust over the remains of the fire.

"That seems an appropriate moment to call a halt," he said. "Sleep. We'll all need it, to be alert tomorrow. Hirl, first watch. Philip and Michael, take the second. I'll take the third. We move out at dawn."

The Sage noticed absently that he was going to get a full night's sleep. He didn't argue. He started a thought which was going to be *age should bring some benefits, after all*, but fell asleep before he finished it.

4

The Sage dreamed that he lay in the bowels of Within, lying in blackness, dressed in black clothes. He was alone. He lay jittering and jumping, turning and twisting. His breath came in gasps and sweat burst from his body. Thoughts that were not his own tumbled through his mind, images of strange creatures, a gigantic white beast looming over him, a swirl of unfamiliar stars. His young, strong fingers scrabbled frantically at the rock.

*Who is that?*

He jerked up, eyes rolling whitely in the darkness.

*Who is there?*

Fear of the white beast coursed through his brain. A vision of the enormous creature imprinted itself on the blackness, moving remorselessly closer. The eyes of the vision flared with the fires of hell, and its muzzle and paws were soaked in blood. He knew that it was using power, because the key dangling on its chain was giving out a sick, greenish glow.

*It's found me! It knows me! It comes for me!*

Suddenly the vision shrivelled and changed into that of an old man with a long white beard. The old man was looking around, searching. At one point he put up a hand to shade his eyes and seemed to be staring straight into the blackness beneath the rocks.

The Sage jolted, recognising himself. He flew up from the rock bed and back into his own body. For a moment he glimpsed that

other figure, now lying still, wrapped in a black cloak. As he watched, its eyes sprang open and looked directly at him -

- and he awoke, sweating in the night. The air felt fresh after the suffocating depths of the cave. The trees of the forest were black shapes against the star-spangled sky. It was very quiet.

The Sage yawned and stretched, the dream already fading. Just before he fell asleep again he wondered rather smugly whose turn it was to be on watch.

## 5

When Lurien awoke them at dawn a chill, clinging mist obscured both rock and trees. Everything was damp. Everything was grey and insubstantial. They sat and chewed cold meat, washed down with water, and silently considered the tangle of bush and branch which was the Deep Forest. At least the mist covered the tops of the trees, hiding the upsweeping curve of those crowding behind, something for which both Philip and Michael were grateful.

"I have heard stories about the trees," said Hirlog. "I have heard that they can move, and some will try to catch you with their roots."

The Sage raised his eyebrows. "In a very few places, the trees are odd," he said. "Not evil or dangerous. Just odd. Mostly they are just what they seem - just ordinary trees. I never heard of any of them moving." He paused. "It's not the trees you have to worry about, although you damage them at your peril." The old man grinned slyly, aware that what he had just said sounded like a riddle.

"Trolls," said Lurien.

The Sage's face fell, as if Lurien had managed to spoil a surprise. "Yes. Normally they're the most placid of creatures, but damage a tree and they become.... upset. I once saw a troll take on a whole family of ogres and chase them clean out of the Forest into the Greenlands."

Lurien looked curiously at the Sage. He had not known that the old man had travelled in the Forest.

"And there are some places," added the Sage slowly, "where even the trolls fear to go. Old places. Deep places where remnants of old power linger on. Some may still be inhabited - by the living or dead - and others may just be empty echoes of past events." The Sage shrugged. "Who knows?" he said, in unconscious imitation of Hirlog the night before.

Philip shivered.

"Well." Lurien gave a crooked smile. "You'll all be glad to hear that we don't have to brave the trees or the trolls just yet. I saw the stars last night. We can afford to go along the edge of the forest for another day, maybe day and a half."

The mist swirled, thickening.

"Just gives us more time to worry about it," grunted Hirlog.

Lurien grinned briefly, then stood and rolled up his sleeping gear. Michael squinted. It was difficult to see in the faint dawn light and the grey fog.

"Come on," said Lurien, and strode away into the murk.

## V



### ELSEWHERE 1

JAMES FELT his heart hammering and realised that he was clutching Mary Richards' hand. He mumbled something apologetic and tried to let go, but she tightened her grip without looking round. He found that he was grateful. Her trembling fingers provided an anchor into the real world.

"So - "

He tried to speak, but all that emerged was a dusty croak. What had been happening to them? He coughed violently and tried again.

"It's all true, then?"

Nobody answered. There was no need to answer. The sky still bulged, a blackness coated with stars stretched taut above their heads. The one, single tree in front of them was bent far over, so that two of its branches trailed on the ground. It was as if it had been caught in a fearful storm and then frozen in time. None of the other trees in the garden looked in the least bit out of the ordinary. And behind..... James shivered. He knew that *behind*, prosaic electric light would be shining out through the patio door. Through that door were the armchairs of the sitting room, and past them lay the open door into the hallway. He shivered again. To his mind, the blackness of the hallway was the worst thing of all, the most frightening aspect of this terrible night. The dark hallway, and the old man with the piercing eyes and uncanny power who had come from there. He had been dressed in an old-fashioned suit, James remembered, which had been worn at the elbows and hung loosely on his gaunt frame. Funny how the mind worked. He could recall almost every crease and thread and button of that suit, and almost nothing of the old man himself. Perhaps that was because he did not want to remember.

"What shall we do?" he croaked.



He did remember the children tumbling in through the door. Then there had been some conversation, which escaped him now, before they had all returned to that damned icy hall.

He felt Mary Richards stir, as if released from a thrall.

"What is it?" he whispered to her, and only then found the courage to look up again at the deformed and straining sky. "What's going on? I...."

He became aware that his voice was rising, hysterical. Mary Richards seemed not to have noticed.

"Within, I suppose," she said. She started suddenly and turned to James. "You said the boys have.....?"

Perversely, James refused to finish the sentence for her.

".... gone?" She loosed his hand and instead clasped both her own at her throat.

He nodded. "An old man came," he said simply. *I should have shut the door*, he thought. Then he laughed helplessly and shook his head. "None of this is happening, you know. Can't be. It's all impossible." He carried on laughing, and wondered at the same time why he found it so funny. He'd seen the boys go, hadn't he? And Sarah had gone with them. Why was that funny? He knew without asking that they could search the house from top to bottom and find no trace of the children.

"Stop it!" called Stephen Saunders. His voice cracked across the lawn like a whiplash. "Quiet. Listen."

James turned away from the others to wipe his eyes. He stifled his hysteria and listened. Gradually, he realised that he could hear nothing. No wind, no distant traffic, no night noises at all. He closed his eyes and held his breath, and still the silence pounded at him.

"We're in some sort of limbo" said Saunders softly.

"But why?" asked Pamela. "What's happening?"

James thought sourly that he had asked the same question some time before, and nobody had bothered to answer him. But the seconds passed, and again nobody replied. He realised with something of a shock that nobody knew the answer.

"I think we wait," said Stephen Saunders. He looked up, and everyone followed his gaze. Still the starlight fell in a shimmering haze from the bulging fabric of the sky.

Carl Andsun fled away and up.

At first he blundered along the trail left by the black monster, crabbing along awkwardly as his shoulder and something in his chest flared with pain. He dragged through layers of ash, stumbled into impossibly deep footprints. But all the time he was putting distance between himself and the horror which was - had been - Waterdown.

His mind insisted on replaying images of the attack. He kept seeing the streets swarming with snarling creatures. He kept hearing the savage roars and howls and desperate human screams. He saw again the woman and child overrun by a seething, tearing mass of *halfen*.

He moaned as he lurched along. His eyes were unfocussed, unseeing. He screamed himself at some remembered scenes, not realising that he did so. He blundered out of the shelter of the trees and angled away from the charred path left by Groat. Unknowing, he started up the slope of foothills leading into mountains, prodded by some unconscious instinct which equated *up* with *safe*.

More terrible in his mind than the remembered scenes were the imagined ones. He imagined his father smashing his great hammer into the first of the *halfen* as they crashed through the wall. He imagined them leaping at him, on him, over and past to overwhelm his mother pressing back against a corner.

He heard again the wet, tearing sounds. He sobbed and shouted wordlessly.

And he imagined Myrina, with her parents and little sister in their house in the middle of the village. In his mind he saw the walls buckle, saw the *halfen* flood into the neat house and saw.....

He howled, and climbed; he sobbed, and climbed. He *remembered*, and climbed. When the pain became too great he fell onto hard rock and crawled on. He cut himself, scraped himself, tore his nails - but he climbed on. Then, all at once, energy drained away from him utterly, and he lay still.

It was then, as he lay there on the cool mountainside, that he felt the rumbling deep in the earth. His ears registered the sound. His body confirmed that the mountain was shaking, that pebbles and rocks were sliding and bouncing around him. But his brain was too numb from horror and shock to realise what was happening.

The barrier was going up again, now that the multitude had been turned loose. And it was going up behind him.

## VI



### THE ENVOY WORKS A MAGIC

THE ENVOY cursed and banged his fist in frustration against the rough planks which formed his bed.

"Where are you, old man?"

His voice echoed strangely around the rock walls, in the darkness.

"Come on," he whispered. "Come *on!* Where are you?"

The Envoy was in the place where he lived, in deep caves without light, far beneath the crust of Within. He had discovered the caves by accident many years ago, while exploring little-known routes through and beneath the Ice Mountains. He had wandered through many dark caverns and wriggled through innumerable tiny gaps in the living rock, before he had come at last to the network of lightless caves. And there he had almost died, because at that time he had been exploring not only the geography of Within, but also the limits of his own strength. He had discovered just the secret place he had hoped for, but he had forgotten and did not know how to find his way back out. It was only the unexpected burgeoning of power, bursting from his exhausted and hallucinating mind, which had saved him, when he had travelled, in a manner which he still did not understand, up through the intervening tons of rock, up out of the caves to the Meadow Hills above.

Now he stood and paced angrily in utter darkness.

"Show yourself!" he shouted. His voice echoed again. Momentarily the sound grew in volume, but then faded as it bounced crazily away through the interconnected caves. The Envoy had in the past imagined his voice travelling for days under the roots of the mountains, perhaps emerging at the far side as a sudden shout, disturbing nearby creatures. The thought had made him smile, but there was no trace of amusement in him now.

"Curse you!" he screamed.

The echoes mocked him: ....*you*..... *oooo*.... *oo ..oo*

Suddenly he realised the futility of his anger. He strode back to his bed, unerring despite the darkness. He sat down again, then lay back and composed himself. He would have to think this matter through. He stilled his breathing and let the cold, dead silence of the caves wash over him. His mind drifted.

The irony of finding the caves and his form of power at the same time had not escaped him. The cave network spread from deep under the Meadow Hills on one side of the Ice Mountains, to far beneath the Cold Heights on the other. More significantly, the caves stretched beneath the barrier itself - beneath it, and unimpeded by it. The Envoy had often speculated on why this should be so. It was possible that the mage Ahransal had deliberately left the tortuous route untouched, for some reason now unknown. But the Envoy had come to the conclusion that probably the elf magician had never even known that the caves existed. Why should he have done? So far as the Envoy could tell there was no evidence that any life, let alone intelligent life, had ever entered the caves.

At any rate, the caverns allowed the Envoy to pass beneath the barrier. He had become the only being in Within able to pass from one side of the barrier to the other. And at the same time he had discovered his own manifestation of power, which allowed him to travel anywhere he wanted. Anywhere at all. Through the barrier. Into the centre of Arnwath. Across worlds to speak with a young girl in a quiet garden.

"Light and shade," he muttered to himself.

He still did not know whether he had done the right thing, showing himself so early. Time would tell.

"Time," he breathed.

He had continued to use the caves, not as a route, but as a secure and secret hideaway. There in the darkness he could brood and plan. He could experiment and keep watch on events transpiring far above.

But now the old man eluded him. He must have travelled far and fast, and used no power. The Envoy considered how he could force the old man into revealing himself, always remembering the overall strategy and the *halfen* scourge.

"Ahhh....."

The Envoy had passed through a village which had been ravaged by the *halfen*. He had seen the destruction, seen the dead. Now the thought of it slipped smoothly into his strategy. It would be difficult, but he knew at last what he had to do.

He continued to lie there, unmoving.

## 2

High above, the Sage and his companions rode away from the Dark Caves. The beast paced in green limbo, feeling for the right time to raise the barrier. In Arnwath, the teachers convened an extraordinary meeting to discuss what steps should be taken to combat the *halfen* horde. Carl Andsun peered out from his bedroom, while his father waited grimly, nervously below. Elsewhere, Callios an-Dulain and Karenar Baraj approached a small manor not far from Rivermouth, already barricaded and ready to defend itself. Further dayward their erstwhile companions Markus Jegg and the twins walked quickly through the fringes of the Deep Forest, ready to climb at the slightest hint that danger was near.

Still the Envoy lay, unmoving. The cold from the caves seeped into his body and his breath misted faintly as he took each shallow breath.

Time passed.

The beast raised the barrier and emerged again into the real world. Carl Andsun lay broken on a mountainside, his brain and body damaged, his skin a strange red hue. At dawn, Lurien pointed to a distant wound in the sky and far away, Sarah hovered in the centre of a room, giggling at confounded teachers.

Time passed.

The Envoy stirred sluggishly and opened his eyes. Groaning, he pulled himself to a sitting position and swung his legs stiffly out over the edge of his bed. His head reeled. He groaned again and clutched at the planks to steady himself. He had taken no food or water for several days and he was weak and dizzy.

For a while he sat rubbing at his arms and shoulders, trying to dispel the cold. Slowly, the dizziness lessened. He knuckled at his eyes and stretched hugely, feeling his joints pop and creak. Then he lowered himself to his knees. He reached for a pile of tinder, finding what he wanted immediately despite the darkness. Slowly, shivering, he began to build the makings of a fire.

Above, the Sage and his companions woke to a grey, misty dawn. They broke their fast and continued their journey, travelling along the edges of the Deep Forest. Markus and the twins, in a distant part of the Forest, saw what remained of a village and approached cautiously. The beast climbed to a high point in its domain and stood there, trying to scent carnage in the air. In an obscure part of Far Beyond, in deep caves, more *halfen* were already appearing through a strange doorway, and a giant creature watching in silence made no effort to impede them.

The Envoy fumbled together a small pile of tinder and willed it alight. Tiny yellow flames appeared and he reared back, covering his eyes with his arm. He had forgotten how bright the flames would seem after he had spent so long in complete darkness. Carefully, slowly, he moved his arm away so that he could look at the fire. After what seemed like a long time, he saw the dancing flames, a small orange glow surrounded by blackness apart from an area of grey rock visible beneath. He swallowed and stared at it as if fascinated. Then he reached for a small packet and bowl. With trembling fingers he edged the bowl into the fire and again waited, staring.

The flames flickered, curling up against the side of the bowl. The Envoy tightened his fingers into fists and struggled to keep himself upright. He felt the muscles in his stomach cramp, partly with hunger, partly in anticipation.

At last the bowl was sufficiently hot to glow a sullen red. The Envoy swallowed again. Carefully, he opened the small packet and tipped a few grains of some white substance into the bowl. He re-wrapped the package and thrust it behind him.

A trickle of white smoke puffed up from the bowl, then more. Something cracked with a flat, vicious sound. The bowl glowed more brightly, and smoke streamed upwards.

The Envoy leaned forward and breathed deeply. The smoke passed into him, released him. He had already been on the verge of hallucinating as a result of his long fast. Now he was able to slip over normal boundaries, to *come out*. Now he was able to work with power.

Nual ran lightly back through the grass and grinned at Markus Jegg. He bobbed his head and pointed back to the village, turning.

"Wait." Markus looked at him suspiciously. "It's safe?"

Nual nodded again.

"The filth have gone, have they?"

Another nod, impatient this time.

"Wait," repeated Markus. He pulled absently at his lower lip and stared over Nual's head at the ruined village. "Is anyone left alive?"

Both Nual and Nalau looked incredulously at him. Nual shook his head slightly, more in amazement that anyone could ask such a question than as an answer to the question itself. Markus ignored them. He frowned.

"I don't like it," he said. "There's something not right.... I don't know."

Nalau made an exasperated gesture and his brother nodded. They both turned and made off towards the village. After a few steps they looked back inquiringly at Markus.

"Go on, go on," said the bowman. "I'll be along."

The mute brothers trotted off and Markus walked slowly after them, more than happy that they were prepared to go first. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck, as if his subconscious was trying to warn him of some danger. Without thinking about it, he took his bow from around his shoulders and notched an arrow. He slowed his pace, allowing the twins to move even further ahead.

It was midmorning. The sky was a pale blue, tinged with the brown of Topside. The sun shone clearly, but not as brightly as it might have done on a hot summer's day. It was as if the paleness of the sky had washed across the sun, bleaching its usual gold to pristine yellow. A smear of smoke hung low in the sky, drifting slowly away from the village and out over Wilderness.

The ruins of the village stabbed up like blackened, broken teeth. The *halfen* had left no dwelling whole, although some still stood and looked externally as if they were virtually undamaged. From past experience Markus knew that these were the buildings where the *halfen* had by chance pushed and forced their way in through a door or window, leaving the walls largely intact. Inside would be the same



as any other - chaos brought by brutal, ferocious fights and agonising death.

Markus slowed still further and eyed the shelter of the forest behind. He disliked this venturing out into Wilderness, even for such a short distance. But there would be food available in the ruined village - the *halfen* cared for nothing but live prey. The *halfen* cared nothing for plunder, either, and Markus and the twins had filled their pockets with gold filched from battered ruins, or prised from picked-clean bones.

They had eluded *halfen* twice in the last four days, by the simple expedient of climbing high into the trees. They had plenty of warning both times. Once the baying and howling of the pack had come from Wilderness, and they had been able to see the danger coming from a long way off. The second time, the horde had crashed towards them from inside the forest, and again the sounds had given them ample warning. Perhaps if they had been unlucky the *halfen* might have sensed or smelled them, but the creatures did not, and nor did they catch sight of the three trembling mercenaries high in the branches. Each time, they had waited until long after the *halfen* had passed before screwing up courage enough to climb back down to the ground. And each time they had continued wandering up the fringes of the forest, too wary to strike out into Wilderness where there was no cover, and too frightened to venture into the legendary forest itself.

The bowman shivered and came to a complete stop, scant yards from what remained of the village. The twins had already advanced in between the buildings and had split off left and right to see what they could find. Nalau had ducked through a hole in the side of a tall building. Nual was still in view, pulling at something on the ground. Momentarily Markus wished that he had not quarrelled with Karenar, that he was still travelling with Lurien and the big man. And those cursed strange boys. Somehow he did not think that they would be quite so nervous, or so vulnerable, when travelling abroad.

Suddenly a blast of unnatural, icy cold swept over him, leaving him weak with fear. Something was going to happen. He knew it, even though he would not have been able to explain how he knew - just as he had known, he suddenly remembered, way back at the barrier when that black creature....

..... *fornicating hells!* he thought, looking wildly about him. *Not that fornicating.....*

There was no sign of anything in Wilderness, no sound of anything moving through the trees. No sign of the black monster, or *halfen*. But still -

Markus *knew* with a sick, cloying certainty that something was going to happen. The blast of weakness faded and he took a step backwards, away from the village. Then another. Then another.

From inside the building where Nalau had gone came a crash and then a thin, horrifying scream. Markus froze in shock. The screams came again, wilder, impossibly high pitched. Markus knew without a shadow of a doubt that they came from Nalau, who had been mute from birth, and that Nalau was dying.

Nual had turned towards the sounds but as Markus watched something white rose from the ground and grasped at his leg. Nual looked down and tried frantically to pull away. But a second white thing rose higher up and gripped one of his flailing arms.

Nalau had stopped screaming, but now other sounds came from the ruined building, indeed, from all over the village. Scrapes, clicks, dull knocking sounds.

Nual was pulled to the ground. It was all the more eerie because, unlike his twin, he made no sound. Struggling furiously, he was yanked down to the earth and for a moment his bright blood stained the white things which swarmed over him.

For long seconds Markus remained frozen. His eyes saw what was happening, but his brain refused to believe it. How could it be? Bones did not move. They did not click and clack and pull together and then attempt to stand. Skeletons did not suddenly lust to kill.

Markus shuddered and realised that he had not moved since Nalau had voiced his first and last terrible screams. Now he stepped backwards again, quietly, as if it was imperative not to attract the attention of the bones.

*Not to attract the attention of the bones?* he thought. *I must be going mad.*

But he stepped back carefully, carefully towards the trees.

By now the ruins were swarming with bones. Many had clicked together and formed skeletons, or partial skeletons, which wavered upright. Others had gathered into unrecognisable, obscene piles which scuttled about like giant white crabs. Still others lay singly

where they had been scattered by the *halfen*, but even they twitched and jerked as if being compelled to move by some hidden power.

All at once the bones jumped and clicked and skittered out of the village, out into Wilderness. To Markus it seemed as if every single one of them was coming towards him, but in fact they were spreading out in all directions. Markus turned and ran. Somehow the dead bones sensed him and came pouring after him across the grass. The sun shone, and the air was warm; there were no howls, no snarls, no sounds of the hunt. Only a relentless click-clack skitter rising up into the morning sky, turning a sunny day into nightmare.

Markus ran desperately into the trees. He tripped, fell, scrambled to his feet and then even more desperately climbed up into the branches. He clung there, panting and shaking, willing the nightmare to end.

And then, in the last few moments of his life, he discovered something which he had never suspected, not even in his worst dreams.

Animated skeletons, it seemed, could climb trees.

#### 4

"Unhhh....."

The Envoy gasped and shuddered, clinging to consciousness. In the light of the fire his face was pasty, grey. He was covered in a film of unhealthy sweat.

"Where.... are you? Old man?"

He spoke slowly, uncertainly. His tongue was thick, furred, and the muscles in his face were cramped. The smoke from the bowl had lessened, but still he leaned forward, savouring its power.

#### 5

Hirlog held up his hand and they all stopped. The dwarfman wore a puzzled frown on his face as he turned and peered through the fog in the direction from which they had come.

"What is it, Hirl?"

The morning mist had not been burned away by the sun. Instead it had become steadily thicker and darker. And damper. Every member of the party was soaked through with moisture which seemed to form and drip out of the dank air. In some places the fog was so thick that Lurien had ordered everyone to dismount and lead

the noryx, although privately Philip had thought that the beasts were less likely to turn an ankle or slip over a bank than were their riders.

"What is it? *Halfen*?"

Hirlog shook his head. The noryx on which he was sitting flicked its ears and stamped nervously. Lurien's mount pranced in an awkward fashion and mewled.

"Something's coming up behind us," said Hirlog. "I don't know what."

Philip felt an unexpected thrill of fear. "Noryx don't like it," he said.

Lurien hesitated, uncertain. By now he could just hear what Hirlog had already detected - a curious clicking, tapping noise. The fog distorted the sounds, making it impossible to tell how far away they were.

Hirlog swung forward and peered ahead. "There's more up that way."

All of them could now hear the sounds approaching from behind. Lurien and Hirlog were having a hard time controlling their noryx.

"I don't like it," said the Sage.

"Nor do I," agreed Lurien. "But it means the forest, not out into the open. Come on."

He gave his noryx its head and without any prompting it made for the trees. The others followed. If anything it was even damper in the forest. Water dripped from the leaves, and the ground underfoot was heavy going, sodden. But everyone felt more secure within the trees, as if the great boles around them provided some sort of barrier against whatever was approaching.

Lurien dismounted and prudently grabbed at the nose of his noryx, to prevent it making any sound. Hirlog and the Sage did the same.

"What is it?" whispered Michael nervously. He had stationed himself behind a particularly large tree and was looking out into the swirling fog. Philip noticed that he had drawn his sword.

The strange clicking noises were very close now.

Philip saw the Sage sag against a tree, as if overcome by weakness, and at the same moment he glimpsed something moving out beyond the forest. Something white flickered tantalisingly in and out of view as the fog swirled and drifted.

"Get back!" gasped the Sage, pulling himself upright.

Philip looked back at the old man.

"Get back!" repeated the Sage, and beckoned urgently.

Suddenly the colour drained from Michael's face. He pointed with a shaking finger.

A stray breath of wind had pushed the fog away from their vicinity. Philip's eyes widened incredulously at what was revealed. Several skeletons were moving around a little way into Wilderness. They looked almost as if they were casting about, searching for something. Philip saw that there were other, ill-formed masses of bone crawling over the ground. His heart hammered with a rush of fear. What sort of magic was this?

Nervously he moved across to be closer to the others. He wondered whether skeletons could see.

The wind breathed again and dissipated more of the fog. More bones came into view. Some were upright, but many more were irregular, awkward shapes which scuttled over the ground. All of them clicked as they moved.

*It's like a special effects film*, thought Philip. For some reason it occurred to him that there were no films in Within and no-one but the Sage and Michael would know what he was talking about. And Sarah.

"Keep close," whispered the Sage. "If they come for us, keep back and don't let them touch you. I'll deal with them."

"Maybe they won't see us," whispered Michael.

Lurien shook his head. He said nothing, but it was obvious what he meant. It looked as if the bones were searching, and the object of their search was all too clear.

"What are the fornicating things?" muttered Hirlog.

"Bones," said the Sage.

Hirlog frowned but stifled a sharp reply when he realised that this was, after all, no more than the truth. Michael shivered.

"But why are they after us?"

"Because we're alive," said the Sage.

The fog came down again, but the respite was momentary. A genuine wind began to blow, pushing the fog aside. Bones came into view again, closer now, crowding nearer to their sanctuary of trees.

There was a sudden commotion behind, and Hirlog cursed. His noryx had lunged free in a paroxysm of fear. It reared up on its massive hind legs, mewling, then crashed down and blundered away.

It struggled through bushes and branches until it reached the edge of the forest, where it mewed again and galloped out into Wilderness.

With astonishing speed the multitude of bones congregated around the beast. It kicked out with its hind legs, smashing several skeletons, but others closed in and reached out with hard, cold fingers. The noryx reared once, mewling desperately, then was pulled down and overwhelmed. Philip thought the bones were pressing themselves into the very flesh of the beast, bathing in blood. He turned away, sickened.

For a moment, he could not quite take in what he saw.

"Look out!" he screamed.

The larger part of the army of bones had found them. Under cover of the noise made by the doomed noryx, a wave of them had converged, clicking and jerking, on their hiding place.

Philip drew his sword and slashed at bony fingers grasping for him. The fingers splintered, but still the skeletal hands reached forward. He staggered. Michael screamed in berserker rage and leapt at the skeletons, whirling his sword in great arcs. His wild, ferocious technique was more effective against the fleshless enemy than Philip's more precise swordplay. For a moment, he succeeded in smashing away the nearest bones, then Hirlog grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

Philip lurched back too. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lurien fighting to keep his noryx under control. Michael had turned on Hirlog, snarling: the dwarfman held up his hands in a placatory gesture. Scant yards away, the mass of skeletons pressed forward into the forest, cramming bone against bone between the trees. They were silent apart from the clicking of their joints, but still Philip could sense their lust to hunt and kill.

Then the Sage stepped forward. He held both hand aloft, palms facing the skeletal mob. Philip found time to wonder that he did not look any different, any larger or more menacing, while he wielded power. He looked like an old, frail man holding up his hands - nothing more. Certainly nothing immediate happened, for the bones continued to press forward and one even fixed its fingers on the Sage's leg. Dispassionately, Philip sliced it away with a precise blow, thinking: *there isn't much time.*

The Sage spoke. He uttered three or four long, liquid syllables in a strange language, and spread his fingers wide. What looked like a

vast, transparent blanket issued from his hands, spread out and settled over almost all of the skeleton army. And where it settled, the bones stopped, frozen in their tracks.

The Sage started to fall.

With an oath, Lurien leapt to catch him. His noryx took the opportunity to plunge free. It ran out into Wilderness and almost immediately encountered the power laid by the Sage.

"Don't...." The Sage roused himself sufficiently to make sure nobody had followed the noryx. He need not have bothered. They were all staring, awestruck, to where the beast had careered into the glimmering blanket and had instantly frozen in place.

"A form of retrospective magic," whispered the Sage proudly. "It will give us time to get away."

Lurien wrapped a hand in a fold of his cloak. With a grimace of distaste he took hold of the pieces of bone still protruding from the Sage's leg and threw them away. They fell short of the retrospective magic and lay there twitching obscenely, covered with the Sage's blood.

The old man fainted.

## 6

The Envoy too toppled forward, extinguishing what remained of his fire, Utter darkness returned to the cave.

"Found you," he whispered as he fell.

## VII



### INTO THE FOREST

"HOLD THE noryx," snapped Lurien. "You two, watch out for any of the damned bones still moving."

Hirlog and the brothers did as they were told. Michael gazed with renewed awe at the vast array of motionless skeletons. He wondered what kind of power it had taken the Sage to bring such a malignant force to a halt. Come to that, he wondered just what kind of power it had taken to raise the bones in the first place, to force them into such a dreadful parody of life. Was it the handiwork of the beast?

As he watched, an awful connection suddenly became clear to him. Whether or not the beast had made the bones move, the bones themselves had been made by the *halfen*: the array of human skeletons surely represented the results of their attacks on villages and towns throughout Within.

Michael felt bile rise in his throat.

"Look," said Philip quietly. He pointed. Away on the fringes of the retrospective magic, skeletons which had been moving came to a halt and collapsed onto the ground. A spray of mud and water marked each one as it fell. Within seconds all had fallen and lay unmoving in small piles dotted across Wilderness. Only those trapped inside the retrospective magic remained upright.

"What do you make of that?" asked Philip.

Michael shook his head. He touched Lurien on the shoulder and indicated what had happened. The scout straightened and laughed bitterly.

"Too late now!"

Alarmed, Michael looked down at the Sage and was reassured to see him breathing normally, although his face was flushed. Lurien squatted again.



"That fornicating thing clawed him, and it looks as if it was poisoned. Or something. Look. I've already made one cut but it hasn't helped."

The Sage's leg was red and swollen where the skeleton had dug into his flesh. A straight cut marked where Lurien had tried to let some poisoned blood run out.

Hirlog tethered the one remaining noryx and came over. He pressed gently at the wound with his huge fingers. The Sage groaned.

"It feels cold, not hot," murmured Hirlog, puzzled.

"Cursed magic!" swore Lurien.

Hirlog pursed his lips and nodded. "No doubt," he agreed. "We can bandage it and keep him warm. But we'll have to get him quickly to someone who knows how to deal with this sort of thing." He looked up, and his eyes met those of Lurien.

"That means Arnwath," said Lurien.

Hirlog nodded again. Lurien frowned and stared out at the immobile army of bones.

"What happens when that wears off?" he asked. The others remained silent, and Philip shook his head. Lurien sighed. He had not expected an answer. "Well, I suppose we'd better try the forest now. The sooner we can cut across and get to Arnwath the better. Do what you can for him now," he instructed Hirlog. The dwarfman nodded and set to work.

Lurien stood up again and looked pensively at the noryx. Some faint memory stirred. Someone had once told him something about travelling through the forest. He snapped his fingers in frustration, and then abruptly he remembered.

"Fat Brennan told me you can't ride noryx through the forest," he said, still staring at the Sage's mount.

"I heard that too," mumbled Hirlog without looking up.

Lurien came to a decision. "Philip, unload what supplies you think we can manage. Make sure you pack all the old man's... personal belongings."

Philip knew that Lurien meant *anything the Sage might need to make magic*, but that he could not bring himself to say so. He wondered, not for the first time, what grudge the tall scout held against power and magic.

"Michael, you come with me and help cover our trail. I want it to look as if we got here, were attacked, and only one noryx got away.

Into Wilderness - dayward, I think. That's more in keeping with the direction we've been travelling."

"You think we're being followed?" asked Philip.

"It's possible," said Lurien. "I don't like the way all those bones came for us. We can't be the only life in this part of the forest."

"Do you think it was the beast?" asked Michael. "Who sent them, I mean."

Lurien shrugged.

"Don't know. Doesn't really matter, does it?" He looked down at the Sage. "I expect he could tell us."

Philip remembered how the old man had staggered in sudden weakness when the bones had come close. Yes, he had known then that some power was at work. More than likely he knew whose hand had been behind it.

Quickly Philip unloaded the one remaining noryx and took it to Lurien, who led it past the area of retrospective magic and turned it loose. It galloped off into Wilderness, looking somehow pleased to be leaving the embattled party behind.

The fog had lifted completely, and they worked now beneath a hot afternoon sun. Lurien divided what they had to carry into three piles. Hirlog bandaged the Sage's wound and wrapped him in an extra cloak Philip had discovered in his bags. Michael organised their immediate route into the forest, the lessons he had learned from Lurien on the hard mercenary road coming into their own.

At last all was ready. Hirlog hoisted the Sage onto his back. Lurien had a momentary twinge of panic as he remembered how heavy the boys were, and that the Sage too was a stranger. But all was well. Hirlog carried him easily.

The dwarfman moved into the forest, followed by Philip and Michael. Lurien lingered for a moment, checking that nothing had been forgotten. For some reason he thought of Callios and Karenar, found himself wondering where they were, and hoping that they were safe.

Then he too turned and stepped into the forest. The vast array of bones, motionless under the shimmering blanket of retrospective magic, remained behind with Lurien's trapped noryx to keep them company.