

LORDS OF MIDNIGHT



Chronicles



LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

The Trilogy

The Lords Of Midnight



CHAPTER ONE LUXOR AND MORKIN

Luxor stood at the doorway of the hut, gazing into the white gloom of the forest. A thin scatter of erash, the fine powder-snow of the new moon, was floating down onto the frozen ground. It was time, thought Luxor, it was time. An icicle of fear touched him and shivered through him. He drew his cloak tightly around himself, as though it would warm the chill in his heart, and turned from the forest.

"You are troubled, my Lord," said Morkin. The boy looked up at Luxor, his face a mirror of the man's sadness.

"The world is troubled," said the Forest Keeper. He threw another log onto the fire and sent a flock of sparks flying into the smokey darkness of his hut.

"Come and warm yourself by the fire, my Lord," said the boy. He stood up and offered the stool he was crouched on.

"No, Morkin, we must go. The Solstice is nearly upon us and Doomdark is already waking from his slumber. We must reach the Tower of the Moon by tomorrow yet our ride promises to be long and hazardous."

"The horses, my Lord?"

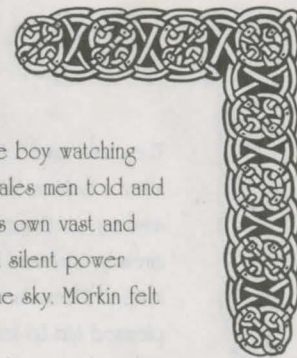
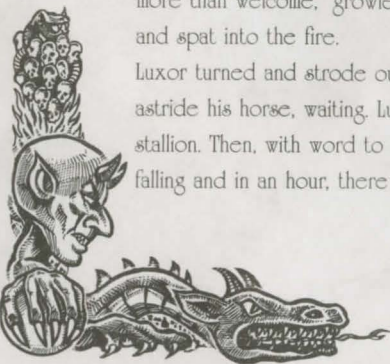
"Yes, fetch them and let's be on our journey."

The boy scurried out. Luxor turned to the Forest Keeper.

"Your fire and shelter have been a precious gift, Keeper. I thank you."

"If you and your young squire can keep Doomdark's scum from my trees, you're more than welcome," growled the Keeper. Then, grudgingly, he added, "My Lord," and spat into the fire.

Luxor turned and strode out of the hut into the crisp forest air. Morkin was already astride his horse, waiting. Luxor swung himself up onto the saddle of his white war-stallion. Then, with word to the horses, they rode off into the trees. Erash was still falling and in an hour, there was no trace of their passing.



For many hours they rode in silence, Luxor lost in his thoughts, the boy watching the forest in a mixture of fear and fascination. He had heard the tales men told and couldn't quite believe they were only tales. Yet, the forest had its own vast and lonely beauty, its trees standing still as stones but each drinking a silent power from the earth that could thrust them, as tall as towers, towards the sky. Morkin felt smaller than he had ever felt.

As darkness neared, the boy grew bored of the forest and turned to speak to his Lord. Luxor was gazing into the distance as though in a dream.

"Why does the Solstice trouble you, my Lord?" asked the boy.

Luxor turned his head slowly towards Morkin. For a few moments he said nothing and then, as though he had suddenly remembered, he began to speak.

"Our world wasn't always white, Morkin. You've heard the legends of Summer when the land was green and teeming with life. Ten thousand moons ago it was, so long that men barely believe such a time ever existed. Yet the Wise remember. They have scrolls that tell of the first snows falling and the first carpets of ice covering the land. Suddenly, all the lands of Midnight were plunged into this winter of ours. Then came famine, a great famine that ravaged our people, and with famine came war."

"But the Solstice, my Lord," insisted the boy.

"I am coming to it, Morkin, I am coming to it. The Wise shut themselves up in their towers and let war take its course. They had not foreseen this winter, yet they knew that war was the only way, for the lands that had teemed with people in the long moons of Summer could not feed such a throng any longer. Only one of the Wise, Gryfallon the Stargazer, stayed with his Lord and gave him much counsel concerning war and conquest. Gryfallon was astute, his advice was well-measured, and soon the Lord he served was powerful throughout the lands of Midnight, no longer a mere Lord but, by conquest, a King."

"Was that Doomdark, then?" asked the boy.

"No, the King was not Doomdark. Lord Ushgarak reigned for but twelve moons before Gryfallon had him murdered and took the crown for himself. The people and the Lords were not displeased, for they knew Gryfallon had advised wisely and they knew nothing of his crime.

They told each other that Gryfallon the Wise would see them through. So he did, after a fashion, but he ruled not through wisdom but through fear and slaughter and sorcery. As the years passed, an icy chill spread through the hearts of those not already enslaved to him. No longer did people call him Gryfallon the Wise but instead Doomdark, Witchking of Midnight. Even this was his own doing, for it pleased him to know so many trembled in fear of him.

"So Doomdark is one of the Wise!" said Morkin, in surprise.

"Who else but they could wield such power?" asked Luxor.

"You could, my Lord," the boy replied, fiercely.

Luxor smiled.

"Your heart speaks louder than your head, Morkin. I would not seek such power, even if I could wield it."

"But, my Lord, what of the Solstice? Why is the Solstice so important?"

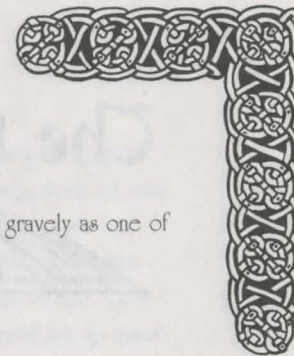
"The Solstice, Morkin, is the deepest, darkest day of winter. The Witchking, by his sorcery, draws his power from the very winter itself; he sucks from its heart the cold that fills his own and turns its icy force to his own will. For many moons now Midnight has known a false peace while Doomdark waits and prepares for the Solstice. Doomdark's last full assault on the Free was moons before you were born, Morkin, and even then we barely held him at bay. When the Solstice comes and winter is deepest, Doomdark will draw more power than he has ever known from its icy heart. Then he will unleash all the hellhounds of Midnight against us and I fear we may not withstand him."

A stricken look passed across Morkin's bright face.

"How so, my Lord? We are the Free and you are the mightiest warrior in all of Midnight!" the boy exclaimed.

Luxor smiled wryly.

"Morkin, you do me more than justice, but even if I were as you say it will take more than swords and strong arms to defeat the Witchking. In the last war he made against us, I slew score upon score of his foul creatures yet always there were more to take their place. But worst was the ice-fear, the cold blast of terror he sent creeping over the land to stab at men's hearts and turn their blood to water. This time it will be as cold as the Frozen Wastes."



"Even they can be crossed, so the legends say."

"Perhaps, Morkin, perhaps."

Morkin was silent for a moment, as though lost in thought. Then, as gravely as one of the Wise, he said, "We'll win, my Lord."

"How so?" said Luxor.

The boy grinned, mischievously.

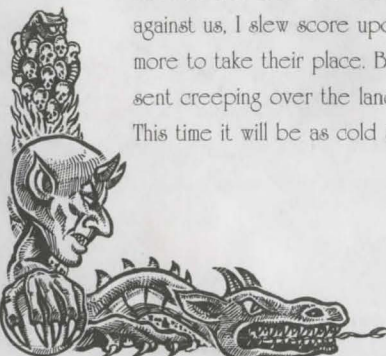
"This time you've got me to help you!"

Luxor looked at the youngster, smiled and then roared with laughter, not at Morkin's ludicrous reasoning but at the enormity of his innocent, affectionate conceit. Morkin, suddenly realising how boastful his words had sounded, burst into laughter too.

"Morkin," said the Lord Luxor, still laughing, "I doubt the ice-fear could ever touch you. There's not a chink it could pierce."

"It couldn't catch me anyway!" said Morkin, suddenly galloping ahead.

Luxor shook his head in disbelief and galloped after his runaway squire.



The Lords Of Midnight



CHAPTER TWO THE SKULKRIN

As darkness seeped through the trees, the skulkrin shivered and grunted. Still asleep in a nest of leaves and bracken, he cowered as he lay there and his tiny hands quivered in supplication.

"O Great One," he whimpered, "Fawkrin would not fail you. Fawkrin is your faithfulest servant."

The skulkrin's long tongue lolled out to lick an absent hand. A cold, crackling voice rang out in the creature's dream.

"Wretch! I would not trust you further than I could kick you!"

As if to demonstrate, Doomdark aimed the toe of his boot at the skulkrin's thin belly. Fawkrin, half-expecting such a response, darted away but not swiftly enough. The blow caught him on the backside and sent him sprawling. Doomdark sneered. "Fool."

The skulkrin picked himself up and dusted the splinters of ice from his ragged tunic. "You're too kind to Fawkrin, Great One. Fawkrin loves to be kicked around. Oh surely, Fawkrin loves a sore backside, oh surely, too kind!" said the skulkrin, adding under his breath, "Great mound of flatulence."

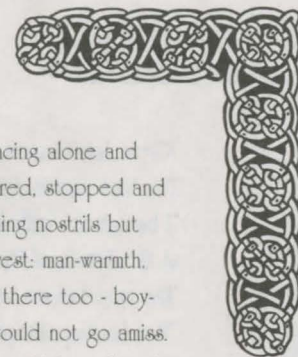
In a withering voice, Doomdark whispered, "Go."

Fawkrin cringed as the Witchking's frozen breath rolled towards him, trailing a glittering cloud of ice as it clawed through the air. Fawkrin shrieked, shook and woke.

"Must find Luxor," he muttered to himself, "Surely must."

Shaking himself as he stood up, the skulkrin pawed at all his bodily parts to make sure they were still there, then scuttled off into the murk of the forest.

Fawkrin moved swiftly, skipping over the crisp snow where the ground was even, dropping to all fours when fallen trees and stray boulders made a mountain range of the forest floor.



For a few moments, he imagined he was a young skulkrin again, dancing alone and carefree through the white wilderness, but presently he remembered, stopped and sniffed. The simmering breath of the trees streamed into his twitching nostrils but then a different warmth mingled with the resinous gloom of the forest: man-warmth. The skulkrin shivered and sniffed again. There was another warmth there too - boy-warmth! His long tongue slavered out over his lips. A bite to eat would not go amiss. Fawkrin found his quarry in a clearing. There was no fire, else he would have found them sooner, and the man and the boy were huddled under a makeshift roof of branches and ferns. Quiet as a snowfall.

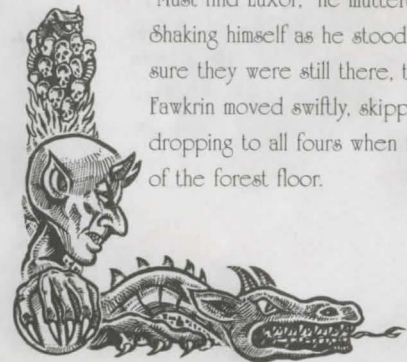
Fawkrin crept into the bivouac. He pawed around in his tunic and from the grubby depths he tugged out a small pouch of matted fur. From it, the skulkrin poured a heap of glowing white dust into his palm which he quickly sprinkled over the sleeping faces of the humans. Even so, Fawkrin felt a frosty numbness gripping his fingers like a glove of ice.

He muttered to himself, "Rotten Doomdark magic. Could make magic that don't hurt Fawkrin, surely could." Then he shook his clawed little hand until he felt the blood trickle back, whimpering softly all the while.

It seemed that stars had fallen from the sky to settle on the faces of the man and the boy. One by one, each glinting speck faded and disappeared as the sleep-frost melted into their skin. Fawkrin waited until the last glimmer had died, then edged closer to the man. He sniffed at the man's tepid breath, his nose wrinkling and twitching as he tested its warmth and texture. Then he giggled in delight. "Khlee-khlee-khlee! The great Lord Luxor! Khlee-khlee! Now He won't kick Fawkrin on his backside, surely not."

The skulkrin knelt down, brought his mouth close to Luxor's ear and in a mellow, soothing voice that seemed absurd from such a creature, he whispered, "Lord Luxor, great Lord Luxor, brave Lord Luxor, why have you come to the Forest of Shadows, tell me, Oh tell me where you are bound?"

Luxor stirred. Eyes still closed, his arm rose mechanically and his hand wavered towards the knife in his belt. The skulkrin scurried away with a squeak of terror but Luxor's arm fell back, lifeless, to the ground. Fawkrin crouched in the darkness a full minute before he found courage enough to crawl back to Luxor. In truth, even this was simply the courage of necessity, his fear of Doomdark reasserting itself over his fear of the warlord.



"Great Lord Luxor!" sang the skulkrin, "Tell me where you are bound?"

This time, Luxor did not stir. He spoke in a faint, weary murmur.

"I have been called by the Wise," he slurred, "I have been called to their Council at the Tower of the Moon, summoned."

"But why, tell me why?" crooned the skulkrin.

"The Solstice. Doomdark grows stronger yet. We must act. I know no more. The Wise keep their own counsel."

Fawkrin guessed this was the truth. Though a great warlord of the Free, even Luxor would not be privy to the secrets of the Wise.

"Bah! Great war lump. Might as well tell Doomdark the sun will rise tomorrow. Sore backside for Fawkrin."

Then a thought struck the skulkrin and he grinned a jagged, twinkling grin.

"O great lord, how do you think of the Witchking? Is he not greater than you?" hissed the skulkrin.

"Doomdark is hag-spawn, a foul pestilence, a piece of scum adrift on the fair waters of Midnight. If he fought like a man, I would slay him in two breaths."

The skulkrin convulsed in tremendous giggles. Though he shivered at the thought of Him, there was nothing more deliciously exciting than to hear Him insulted. Suddenly, a cold breath trickled down Fawkrin's neck. His laughter stopped just as suddenly and he clenched his hands together.

"I wasn't laughing, O Great One, oh no! Surely I wasn't."

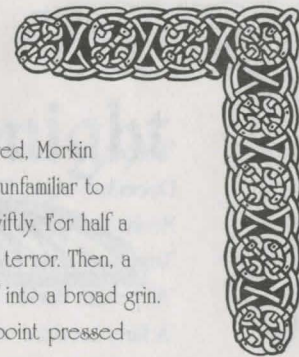
Only silence and the gentle whisper of the trees was the reply. The skulkrin sighed and smiled crookedly.

"Silly skulkrin. Can't hurt you here, can He?"

He swivelled round and turned to the sleeping boy. He snuffled at his face and shoulders and chest.

"Mmmm. Fresh! And so warm!" he declared.

Morkin was lying on his side, towards the skulkrin, with his bare forearm hooked in front of his face. Fawkrin tugged another pouch from his tunic and poured some more white powder into his palm. Sparingly, he sprinkled it over the boy's arm. No melting glow could be seen for this time the white dust was more mundane; it was salt. Fawkrin opened his jaws wide and ducked eagerly forward.



Just as the skulkrin's fangs were about to sink into the morsel prepared, Morkin opened his eyes. Had the skulkrin been turned to ice, an event not unfamiliar to Doomdark's servants, he could not have stopped in mid-bite more swiftly. For half a moment, Fawkrin was at a loss and could only stare in amazement and terror. Then, a half-moment more and his gaping bite had suddenly transformed itself into a broad grin. "Hello, young sir!" the skulkrin gulped. He gulped again as a knife-point pressed sharply against his throat.

"If you so much as twitch, little furry one, you'll twitch no more. What's your business with us?" said Morkin.

"Nothing, young sir, nothing, surely. Fawkrin only seeks warmth and shelter. Gets fine hospitality too. Knife at his throat. Questioned like a criminal. Fine hospitality, surely."

"Oh!" said Morkin, mockingly, "Hospitality in your country stretches to becoming a meal for your guests. Fine hospitality that!"

"Oh no, young sir, oh no! Fawkrin is a good skulkrin. He would not eat such a fine, strong, handsome, kind boy."

"The salt, then, is for good luck, I suppose."

"So clever, young lord, surely. Yes, good luck. Course!"

"I ought to make your end now but I fear you have worked some doomish spell on my Lord. He sleeps strangely and has not stirred. Wake him and I'll spare you your skin and bones."

"Only the light of day can do that, young sir," whimpered the skulkrin.

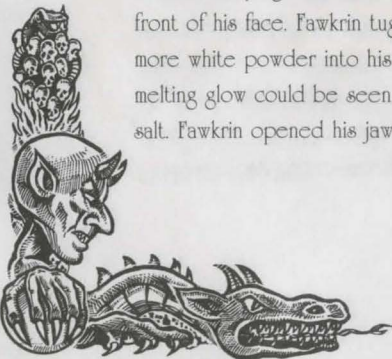
"You're lying, fur-thing!" said the boy angrily. He prodded the creature's throat with the knife-point. Fawkrin winced.

"It's dangerous, young sir, dangerous, surely."

"More so if you don't," said Morkin, prodding more firmly with the knife.

"I think, perhaps, I should try to wake him young sir," squeaked the skulkrin.

With his knife-hand, Morkin waved the creature towards Luxor. Fawkrin took yet another pouch from his tunic and waved it to and fro under Luxor's nose. Languidly, the man opened his eyes. For a moment, Morkin's gaze left the skulkrin. The skulkrin bit savagely at the boy and, instinctively, the boy lashed out with the skulkrin clamped to his hand. The creature crashed through the thin branches that sheltered them. His jaws dropped open at the shock of impact but his flight continued, out into the forest towards a particularly prickly clump of brambles. He scrambled to his feet and raced off northwards, plucking out thorns as he ran.



"Armour," he muttered glumly, "That's what Fawkrin needs, armour on his bum. Rotten Doomdark magic. Don't even work on food. Fah!"

Morkin was gently shaking Luxor.

"Luxor, my Lord, are you hurt?"

"At peace, Morkin; I was only dreaming. What's amiss?"

"A furry creature was about to make a meal of my arm before I stopped it at knife-point. It had put you under a spell, my Lord."

"Did it speak?"

"Yes; it said it was a skulkrin."

"A skulkrin! Then Doomdark senses something. The skulkrin rarely come so far south. Did you tell it anything, Morkin?"

"No my Lord, but it was speaking to you when I woke."

Luxor sat up and peered at the folds of the cloak where his head had lain. A few specks of glimmering dust lingered on the dark fabric.

"Sleep-frost! Morkin, did you kill it?"

Morkin shook his head.

"No, my Lord. It escaped."

Come, we must ride! You did well enough to wake, though how you did that after sleep-frost I cannot fathom."

Luxor grasped Morkin's hand firmly. Morkin winced and Luxor felt the warm slick of blood.

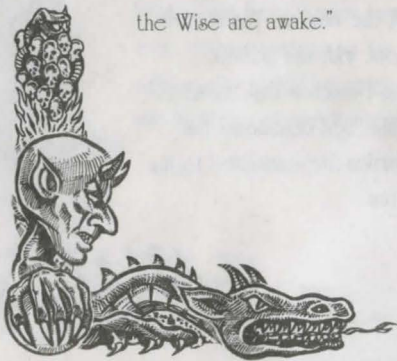
"You're hurt Morkin."

"It's only a bite, my Lord."

"A skulkrin bite turns foul in hours," said the man.

"Then must I cut it open and suck out the poison?"

Luxor laughed. "You listen to too many ale-tales, Morkin. No, a few leaves of sweet flame will clean the wound. We will ride now and gather some on the way, but we must find the skulkrin. If we do not, I fear Doomdark may get untimely warning that the Wise are awake."



The Lords Of Midnight



CHAPTER THREE CORLETH THE SEY

Upon the forest hung a sparkling frost. The air was cold and thick. If a twig snapped it would crackle for miles around but only the muted whisper of the trees could be heard. Above, the Moonstar hovered bright and clear in a deep dark sky. The Moon itself was not even a sliver, just a deeper darkness blotting out the glistening haze of the Roads of Light.

Near the forest's tangled heart lay a glade where the darkness moved strangely, dancing over the pale snow like mist in a squall. The skulkrin paused at the clearing's edge: though darkness was his daylight this was beyond his ken. Nameless fears urged him to turn and run but his muscles would not move nor his eyes unfix themselves from the dancing shadows.

As he watched, his fears seemed to drift away as though they were just brief clouds that had enshrouded him and were now passing into the far, far distance. The skulkrin edged forwards into the glade. He felt a beautiful, glowing glory shiver through him. He was completely bewildered; never, not even as a young skulking, had he been happy like this. Unaccountably, he felt good and kind and gentle. The feeling gnawed at him like an aching tooth. In a daze, he wandered to the centre of the glade and as the shadows danced around him he peered up at the Moonstar. Its bright needles of light pierced him with wonder. His mind had never before grasped what beauty was and now the strange, intoxicating experience overwhelmed him. In a gentle, lilting voice, he began to sing a song he had never heard.

The forest filled with the skulkrin's fleeting song. The smaller creatures of the night hearing only the deadly burr of a skulkrin, however well-disguised, fled to the burrows and nests. The larger creatures paused, as bewildered as the skulkrin itself, and then quickly passed on their way, suspecting some devious skulkrin trap.

Yet there was one who heard and understood. Waking himself easily from his walking sleep, Corleth the Fey turned and made his way towards the strange singer. His long, flowing strides carried him swiftly to the glade. There, at the edge of the clearing, Corleth stood and watched the tiny man-thing as it sang from the bottom of its illused heart.

In a soft deep whisper, Corleth added his own voice to the refrain. Then, as if prompted, a breath of wind murmured through the trees and the whole forest seemed to hum with joy.

Gradually the skulkrin's song shrivelled to silence. The creature stirred from his dream and looked around himself. The dancing shadows had gone but across the clearing he spotted a tall, dark figure clad in a cloak that seemed to shimmer with stars. Corleth stepped forward, laughing gently.

"Now, little skulkrin, you know what it is to be a child of the earth, not just a spawn of the Ice Lord."

Fawkrin smiled foolishly. Not knowing what to say in reply, he scampered up to Corleth and stroked his cloak of midnight blue, gazing in wonder as tiny pinpricks of light glistened in the gaps between his fingers.

"Come, little skulkrin, tell me on what mischief you are bound?"

"None, my Lord," lied the skulkrin automatically. Then, having said so, he suddenly regretted it. A longing to be truthful stabbed so fiercely at him that he cried out with a squeal of pain. Even so, his

skulkrin ways were not so easily abandoned and the most he could bring himself to say was, "None of my own, Fey Lord."

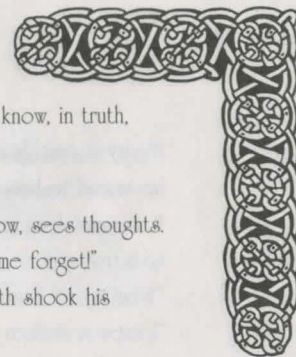
"I need not ask whose," smiled Corleth.

The skulkrin shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I have been bad, my Lord. I sprinkled sleep-frost on the Lord Luxor and found out where he was bound. And the boy who served him . . . well, I was hungry . . . even skulkrin have to eat, my Lord. He was a nasty boy anyway. He prodded my throat with his knife."

Corleth's eyes lit with sudden anger. The skulkrin realised his mistake and babbled away in fearful haste.

"I only gave him a nip on the hand. I didn't eat him. He was a kind boy, a nice boy, surely he was," whined the skulkrin.



"Be at peace, little skulkrin," said Corleth, "To each his own way. I know, in truth, you are but a tool in the hand that made you."

The skulkrin began to fidget nervously.

"The Cold One will frostify me for sure. He sees thoughts, you know, sees thoughts. Can't escape him. Make me forget, Fey Lord, surely you can make me forget!"

The skulkrin looked up at Corleth with wide, pleading eyes. Corleth shook his head.

"I cannot save you from the beauty of the world. I can make you forget this forest, this glade, but you have tasted the sweetness of life and that is beyond my powers to dispel. Besides, how could I bring myself to steal such a remembrance from you? Better kill you than cripple you again."

"Very kind of you, surely, but I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," said the skulkrin.

Corleth laughed.

"You have a wry tongue, skulkrin. It may save you yet. Here, a small gift for you before I leave."

Into the skulkrin's hand, Corleth dropped a small amber crystal. The sphere lay in Fawkrin's palm like a tiny sun, glowing with its own soft and soothing light. The skulkrin gazed on it and smiled; he felt it was very precious. A single tear trickled down his cheek. No one had ever given him a gift before and Fawkrin was sure this was peerless amongst all gifts that had ever been given.

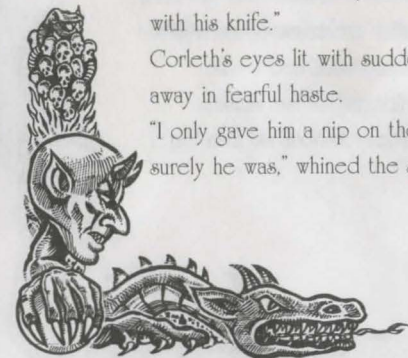
"Thank you, my Lord!" he gasped and tore his gaze from the jewel to look at Corleth. Corleth was already disappearing into the dark of the forest.

"Wait, my Lord, wait!" cried the skulkrin.

A deep and distant voice called in reply, "Farewell little skulkrin, and be gone swiftly; I suspect the wrath of the Lord Luxor will not be far behind you."

The skulkrin looked nervously around the glade, as if Luxor might burst out of the darkness at any moment. Then he clenched his fist tightly around the glowing heartstone and scurried to cover. Though he was fearful of his return to Usharak, return he must. This time, he had a glimmer of hope to comfort him: the marvellous discovery that there was another being in the world who cared about his fate.

Corleth did not resume his own journey but instead followed the skulkrin's old trail southwards. It was a difficult path to follow if you were not a skulkrin and Corleth made slow progress. At length, he emerged onto a forest road.



His eyes quickly scoured the width of the pathway for hoof prints and finding none, he smiled to himself, seated himself on a nearby tree-trunk and waited.

It was not long before the riders he expected appeared. Luxor slowed his horse to a trot and approached Corleth with his sword drawn. Corleth stood and smiled.

"What's your business, tall one?" said Luxor.

"I know a skulkrin who shows me more courtesy than that," laughed Corleth.

Morkin reined in beside Luxor and drew his sword swiftly from its scabbard.

"He must be one of Doomdark's, my Lord," hissed the boy, in what he imagined was a whisper, "Let me slay him."

Corleth laughed again, a long languorous laugh that rolled through the night air like a gentle mist.

"You may try, Morkin, if you wish," said Corleth. He tugged a cord at his neck and the cloak of midnight blue fell away from him, revealing a shirt of mail so finely woven it seemed like a skin of silver. Corleth rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and waited. Morkin looked astonished, but nevertheless he frowned, bared his teeth in an attempt to look grim and fearsome, and urged his horse towards Corleth. As Morkin's sword scythed down, Corleth stepped lightly aside and caught the boy's wrist in his hand. Both Morkin and his sword tumbled into the snow. At once, Morkin scrambled towards his dropped weapon but Corleth was quicker. He took up the sword and held its point against the boy's chest.

"I will not yield," blurted out Morkin, red and angry, "You must kill me first!"

"Then it seems I must yield, for I would not kill you," said Corleth. Then he reversed the sword and handed it, hilt first, to the boy.

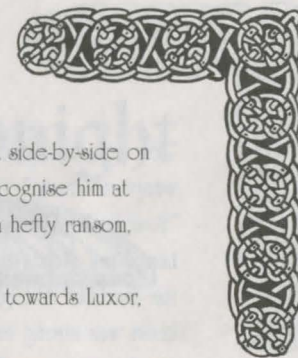
Morkin jumped to his feet and held the sword uncertainly against Corleth's shining shirt of mail.

"Will you give quarter, young knight?" asked Corleth with only a hint of a smile breaking on his lips.

"Only if you give your word that you will not try to escape," answered Morkin.

"Luxor, my friend, you have a bold squire!" laughed Corleth.

"Friend?" said Morkin.



"Friend indeed," said Luxor, striding up beside Morkin. "We fought side-by-side on the Plains of Blood in the last war against Doomdark. I did not recognise him at first, but this is Corleth the Fey. This prisoner of yours will fetch a hefty ransom, Morkin!"

Morkin dropped the point of his sword to the ground and turned towards Luxor, his face burning.

"How was I to know that? You let me make a fool of myself."

Luxor placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"No, Morkin, Corleth was testing your spirit: it is better to know your comrade's mettle before the real battle begins, is it not?"

"And you made no fool of yourself," added Corleth. "You did what any true warrior would."

Morkin frowned and sheathed his sword. "Truly?" he asked.

"Truly," said Luxor. Morkin beamed with pleasure. He turned to Corleth.

"You fought quite well too, my Lord," he said, magnanimously. Then the man and the boy and the fey all laughed together.

Morkin lent his horse to Corleth and sat afore Luxor as they rode north along the forest road. Luxor did not wish to lose more time than necessary and didn't mention the matter of the skulkrin until they were on their way. When he did relate the tale, Corleth remained silent until Luxor had finished. Then, at last, he spoke.

"I met this skulkrin but an hour past," said Corleth.

"Why did you not say?" asked Luxor incredulously, "We must find it and silence it."

"At peace, my friend: you must give some quarter even to skulkrin. Are they not creatures of flesh and blood? His only crime is knowledge and you cannot slay him for that alone. Who knows? Perhaps he will not tell Doomdark of his knowledge."

"Perhaps snow is not cold," said Luxor bitterly.

"Perhaps it is not," said Corleth. "Would you believe that I found this skulkrin in a glade of shadows, singing his heart out to the Moonstar? Would you believe that he told me truly of his deeds this night? Would you believe that when I made him a gift of a heartstone, a tear rolled down his cheek?"

"If any but you had told me, I would not," said Luxor.

"Then believe me when I say we must let him live and find his own destiny. If we do not, why are we fighting Doomdark?"

"Yes, you are right, my friend." said Luxor wearily. Then he added darkly. "The cold wears me down."

"Your heart is strong enough. Believe that too." smiled Corleth.

Luxor fell silent, remembering earlier days when they had ridden together across the lands of Midnight with cares that seemed as light as falling snow. He hoped his heart was strong enough. Then hearing the gentle snoring of Morkin asleep before him, Luxor seemed to hear all the peoples of the Free slumbering innocently while incomprehensible dangers gathered about them and knew he must be strong. He shrugged the coldness from him and rode on towards the Tower of the Moon a little more gladly.



The Lords Of Midnight



CHAPTER FOUR THE TOWER OF THE MOON

Dawn approached stealthily, running swift fingers of light over the Lands of Midnight. Far to the east, it touched the grim Keep of Utarg with a brief golden haze: the Targ sentries yawned and looked around only to see if the next watch approached to relieve them. The dawn moved on, trembling over the Downs of Athoril, cloaking them in scarlet and saffron. The hills which had seemed hunched herds of vast menacing creatures in the absence of light, seemed now to draw apart and unfold.

The daylight spread further westwards, painting the Plains of Dawn first crimson, then amber, then a deep glowing yellow so that they looked, for a fleeting moment, as they did at any noon of the Long Summer, clad in wheaten gold. In lonely hamlets scattered across the broad plains, villagers stirred and smiled to see the warmth of daylight return, then bent themselves to their daily tasks.

Over the Forest of Thrall sped the hand of the sun, shooting bright arrows of light into the sepulchral darkness of the trees, and then further west to caress the sheer walls and tall towers of the Citadel of Shimeril. As the first blaze of sunlight fell into the Courtyard of the Kings, the great horn sang out over the city. Twelve times the great horn bellowed its simple fanfare, a short, deep boom followed by a longer, more strident note. A-wake, a-wake, it sang and then fell silent. The city roused itself dreamily, with creakings of shutters, rattling of doors and the growing murmur of feet on its cobbled streets.

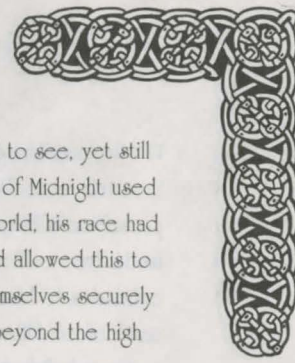
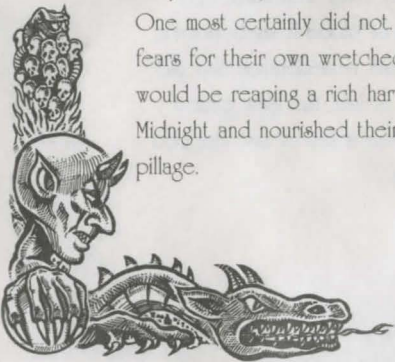
The dawn did not linger but hurried on its endless journey, ever westward, ever westward till the world ceased to spin. Across the Plains of Blood it shed its own, brighter blood. What men moved there shivered in reluctant remembrance and did not pause to gaze upon the colours of the sunrise. Then, at last, the light grazed the edges of the Forest of Shadows, rose up and flew over a sea of mist-wrapped trees to touch the high stones of the Tower of the Moon.

From its crowning dome of Looking-Crystal, Rorthron was watching. Through the mists of the forest, he saw a wind of light blow away the darkness and speed towards him over the leagues and leagues of trees. And though he would not have cared to count how many dawns he had watched from his solitary post, he smiled as he always did when the sun rose in full glory over the green rim of the forest. Rorthron turned and looked to the west where the light still advanced inexorably upon the dark army of trees. He sighed. Such a brief summer this starved sun brought each day. He had been not much more than a boy at the height of the Long Summer. Then, the great disk of the sun seemed to fill the sky; a day seemed to stretch forever as the languid hours glided by; and people sought cool shade, not crackling fires. It did not seem ten thousand moons ago.

Rorthron shook his head as if to deny that the Long Summer had ever existed. He roused himself from his memories and set his gaze beyond the horizon. He looked first to the north, to Ushgarak, the eye of his mind not seeing pictures but instead absorbing a crowd of thoughts that clamoured in the far, far distance.

There was much commotion in the great Citadel. Men, and fouler creatures, were preparing themselves for war. The captains of Doomdark were tallying supplies, marshalling their war-bands, bustling to and fro in the Winter Palace with last-minute orders and requisitions. Their thoughts were only of victory; already they were exultant at the havoc they would wreak, the vast slaughter that lay at their command.

The lesser minions of the Witchking were less sanguine. Though they too had no doubt of the final victory, they knew equally that they might not be granted the privilege of enjoying it, knew that their lives were the coinage of war to be spent wantonly as their cold master decreed. Some were filled with disgust at themselves that their weakness and abject fear had brought them to this, fighting in the service of the loathsome Doomdark. Others, more pragmatic, simply counted themselves lucky that they, at least, had a chance to survive whilst the enemies of the Cold One most certainly did not. And there were some, of course, who despite their fears for their own wretched lives took comfort in the knowledge that soon they would be reaping a rich harvest of death and pain across the battlefields of Midnight and nourished their uncertain courage with lurid visions of rape and pillage.



Rorthron turned away. He had seen nothing he had not expected to see, yet still it filled him with infinite sadness to see the people and creatures of Midnight used thus. The Wise had failed. So long ago, in the very dawn of the world, his race had been charged with its guardianship. Now, their complacent folly had allowed this to happen and all they could bring themselves to do was to lock themselves securely in their towers and choose to forget that the world still existed beyond the high stones.

At length, Rorthron turned this mind-gaze south-east to Corelay and the Citadel of Xajorkith. Here was a different commotion; children playing in the streets, waggoners foddering their horses, market-sellers calling out to early customers, inn-keepers pouring the first ale of the morning into great jugs, blacksmiths stoking their forges. The city was at peace, its people content. And if there were vague fears for the future itching in the depths of men's minds, they were forgotten in the brightness of morning, each dawn a new hope, a new beginning.

One day from the solstice, Corelay still had an air of summer about it. The sadness lifted a little from Rorthron's thoughts. While Corelay was free, there was still hope and goodness in the world and he must bend all his powers to preserve it.

Rorthron walked briskly to the stairway and descended from his eyrie to greet the riders approaching out of the Forest of Shadows.

Luxor, Corleth and Morkin were greeted warmly by Rorthron. They bathed first after their long journey and then joined Rorthron to break fast in the High Hall. A blazing fire was burning in the great stone fire place and they sat before it with Rorthron to eat and drink. There were many tales to be told but as the day grew older, Luxor turned to more serious matters.

"When does the Council begin, Rorthron? Surely, there is much to discuss."

"My friend, it has already begun. I am guilty of a little deceit; no others of the Wise will stir themselves. They think I am a foolish old man with a hopeless dream and will have no part in the coming war against Doomdark. They wait for better times, as if better times will appear by magic out of nowhere," said Rorthron wearily.

"This cannot be so!" cried Luxor, aghast.

"It is so, my friend; I am the Last Council of the Wise."

Corleth laughed. "Then at least we can hope for unanimous decisions. Besides, one of you, Rorthron, is worth a score of the rest. We should not be troubled when the hopeless desert us."

Rorthron smiled gratefully, Luxor nodded his reluctant acceptance of the truth and their talk turned to Midnight and the realms of the Free. In the east, the Targ still preserved a fiery independence. The Utarg of Utarg would suffer none to cross his lands, Free or Fey or Foul and though the Witchking was known to have sent embassies to him, only one ambassador had been returned, flayed alive. To the north of the Plains of Targ, Kumar had not been invaded for many moons. On its northern borders, the Forest of Whispers had swallowed many a doomish war-band and to the west the Marshal of Kumar kept a strong watch on the Mountains of Ithril. West of the Targ, Marakith remained free, though war-bands had been spotted on the western plains scurrying for the cover of the Forest of Thrall. Further west, the Plains of Blood had become a dangerous place for the lonely traveller, though still passable by a strong troop. The Marshal of Shimeril sent frequent raiding parties north into the plains. Many of the Foul had been slain but with each passing day their strength grew and the Gap of Valethor could no longer be reached without an army to clear the way.

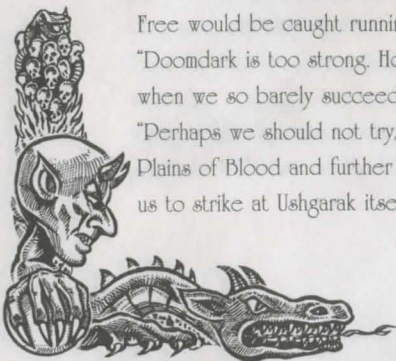
Around the Forest of Shadows itself, there was little to be seen of Men, Foul or Free, yet further south on the Plains of Gard, Doomdark kept a strong raiding band that had even ventured to the walls of the Citadel of Gard. Of all the lands of Midnight, only Corelay remained untouched by Doomdark's cold hand.

None of them doubted that Doomdark would deploy his main strength on the plains of Valethor and once again attempt to force a passage south across the Plains of Blood. To the east the Mountains of Ithril were too formidable a barrier for the numberless armies of the Witchking to be supplied across, let alone to march across. To the west, the bleak passage between the Mountains of Ashimar and Dodrak was too narrow a road for him to risk.

But could they hold Doomdark this time on the Plains of Blood, as they had done so many times before? If not, Doomdark could choose from many roads after gaining the Plains; he could strike out at his leisure in any direction and the armies of the Free would be caught running to one breach after another. Luxor was not hopeful.

"Doomdark is too strong. How can we hope to hold him now on the Plains of Blood when we so barely succeeded the last time?"

"Perhaps we should not try," said Corleth. "If we let him move his hordes onto the Plains of Blood and further south if necessary, that would leave the way open for us to strike at Ushgarak itself."



"To do that, we would need to pass through the Gap of Valethor ourselves," said Luxor. "We could not do that with Doomdark camped on the Plains."

"Have you forgotten Ithron, my friend? Is not the Citadel of Ithron still free?" asked Corleth.

"Tenuously so," said Rorthron, "The Marshal of Ithron is sorely pressed."

"From Ithron we could strike north without the Mountains of Ithril to block our way, then turn west at Droonhenge and approach Ushgarak by its back door."

"And what of Marakith and Shimeril and Corelay? Are we to leave them defenceless in the face of Doomdark whilst we ride off on a hopeless sortie? No, Corleth, I will not do that," shouted Luxor.

"Is it any less hopeful than defending the Plains of Blood? Either way, all may be lost, but if we should take Ushgarak, Doomdark would be finished."

"At what price?" asked Luxor, angrily.

Rorthron got to his feet and stood before them.

"At peace, my friends. All ways are perilous but we must not exclude any if we are to defeat Doomdark. His greatest weapon is fear and confusion. We must not think that any task is hopeless - and it is not! Even Doomdark was once flesh and blood. Now he is more ice and water, how much easier should it be to defeat him" said Rorthron, smiling benignly.

Luxor was still bitter. "I know you are not senile yet Rorthron. If your words are meant to comfort us, they are ill-chosen."

"Perhaps you need more than words," said Rorthron calmly. He reached out his hand towards Luxor and opened it out, palm upwards. "Perhaps you need this." There, in the palm of the Wise, lay a ring of red gold into which was set a single jewel as round and smooth as a pearl but of a clear, sparkling blue that flashed and flickered like lightning.

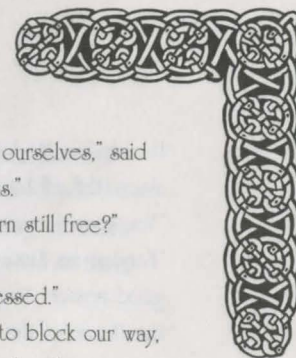
"I have rings already, Rorthron."

"Not one like this, my friend," laughed Corleth. Luxor looked curiously at Corleth, wondering what joke this could possibly be.

"I never thought to see it. I'll wager no Man or Fey has seen it in our lifetimes.

Luxor, this is the Moon Ring, the last of the Great War Rings of Midnight!"

Luxor turned his gaze again to Rorthron's palm and looked in wonder at the legendary ring that lay there. The mists of despair that had clung to his thoughts for many moons seemed to clear and fade away as he watched.



Beside him, Morkin was craning his neck so far forward to get a better view that he almost fell off his seat. Luxor looked up at Rorthron.

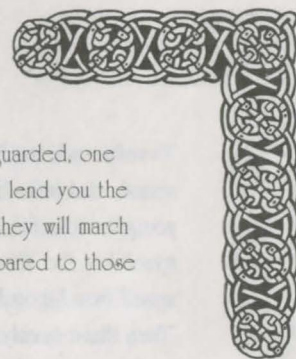
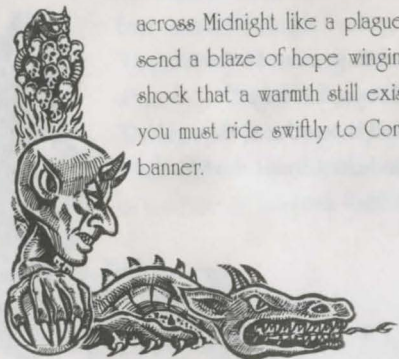
"You know I cannot take this, Rorthron, it is not my right."

"Forgive me, Luxor," said Rorthron, "I have kept this from you too long, but with good reason. You are not simply Lord Luxor of the Free, you are the last heir of the House of the Moon. You, my Lord Luxor, are the Moonprince and this ring is yours by right, to be worn only in circumstances of gravest peril. Once slipped on your finger, it cannot be removed until you are dead or the peril has passed. It will give you the Power of Command and the Power of Vision over those lords and subjects loyal to you, even at great distances. With the Power of Vision you will be able to see through their eyes what they see. With the Power of Command you will be able to urge them to undertake any task they would willingly perform for you. And more than this, it will echo the warmth and strength of your mind and send forth a tide of hope across the cold lands of Midnight. It is yours. Take it, and use it with care."

Rorthron the Wise stepped forward and dropped the Moon Ring into Luxor's hand. Luxor was quite speechless for a while. Then, at length, he spoke.

"Thank you, Rorthron the Wise; this is a gift beyond gifts. Yet, I do not understand why you have kept all this from me so long. Surely, in the last war against Doomdark, this ring would have been a help beyond price?"

"Yes, Luxor, it surely would but the Wise have their reasons. The Solstice is the peak of Doomdark's power. Defeat him before that and he will return as surely as the snow will fall. Defeat him at the pinnacle of his power and he will never return, never blight the lands of Midnight again with his foul schemes. Nor could I tell any of your true ancestry for fear that Doomdark would gain the knowledge too and hunt you down like vermin. Even now, he suspects nothing and when the morrow comes, the Solstice itself, he will expect all its glory for himself. From Ushgarak will issue forth an ice-fear the like of which has never been seen, rolling its terror across Midnight like a plague. Tomorrow, at dawn, you must don the Moon Ring and send a blaze of hope winging across the land, melting his ice-fear, stabbing him with shock that a warmth still exists that can resist him and filling him with doubt. Then you must ride swiftly to Corelay and rally all the peoples of the Free to your banner."



You must challenge Doomdark everywhere; leave one pathway unguarded, one chink open and a flood will pour through. The Moon Ring itself will lend you the power to guide the forces of the Free and under your guidance they will march against Doomdark as one. The Captains of Cold will be blind compared to those whose way is lit by the War Ring of the House of the Moon."

"And a plan?" asked Luxor, "Are we not to have a battle-plan?"

Corleth grasped Luxor's arm firmly.

"Of course, Luxor," he said, "But don't you see? This time, this war, the Moon Ring lends us the power to change our plans at a moment's notice. No longer must we stake all upon a single throw."

"Yes, of course," mused Luxor, still dazed at his new-found inheritance.

"There is one matter we have not yet considered," said Rorthron, a note of warning thrumming in his voice.

"What is that, Wise One?" prompted Corleth.

"The Ice Crown."

Even Corleth seemed to pale at its mention. Morkin tugged gently at Luxor's sleeve and whispered a question to him. Rorthron smiled and turned to the boy.

"Fashioned of the purest, coldest crystals of ice, forged in the Frozen Wastes on the bleakest of nights by Doomdark himself, the Ice Crown is the source of all his power for it enables him to suck from the heart of the Winter all the bitter forces of cold and bend them to his will. He keeps it in the Tower of Doom, north of Ushgarak across the Plains of Despair. Few have seen it and lived, yet all have felt its bitter touch."

"Do you think we could seize it?" asked Luxor. New hope had dawned in him now and he could almost begin to believe that even such a desperate folly as this might succeed.

"I think we must try," said Rorthron, "If we succeed and destroy it, Doomdark's power will be shattered. Even if we fail, the attempt will distract him and thus help our armies to prevail."

"We cannot spare more than a few for such a perilous task," said Luxor.

"No, indeed. And no more than one for the final journey to the Tower of Doom, one who can resist the ice-fear that streams from it as sunlight streams from the sun. It is your choice. Moonprince."

"I cannot lay such a task on another's shoulders. I must go myself."

"Bravely said," said Rorthron, "But that cannot be: the Moon Ring throws forth mind warmth -that is its boon and its bane. Doomdark would sense your presence before you got within fifty leagues of the Ice Crown. You must choose another. I would go myself but the Wise have too much knowledge of each other: I could not hide myself from Doomdark any more than he can hide himself from me."

"Then there is only Corleth," said Luxor reluctantly, "No other than he can resist the ice-fear at its coldest, no other that I know of."

Luxor turned to Corleth. The Fey looked troubled. He turned his eyes away from Luxor, then rose silently and wandered towards the colonnade that circled the High Hall. He stopped by a slender column and gazed out through the Looking-Crystal over the Forest of Shadows. The others remained silent, waiting for him to decide. After a long while, Corleth returned and stood before them all in front of the great fire.

His eyes were heavy and his face drawn.

"There is another," he said. "One stronger than I could ever be in the face of the ice-fear."

"Then who?" asked Luxor, puzzled and frustrated by the riddles of the Fey.

"If I could keep this from you, my friend Luxor, I would, but in truth I cannot. The old songs say that one will be born, half-fey, halfhuman, whom the ice-fear cannot touch, armoured with the laughter and lightness of the Fey and the wild fire of Men, the ice-fear will roll from him like drops of rain in a summer shower."

Corleth paused and his eyes glazed over as he tried to imagine what such a summer, what such a shower would be like. Then he blinked and forced himself to continue.

"My Lord, my friend, Luxor, Moonprince - he sits beside you!"

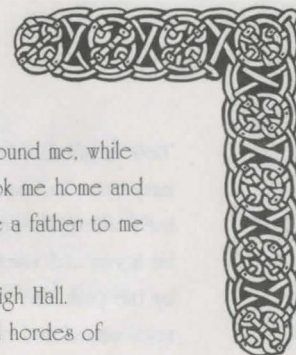
The Fey bent his head and gazed at the floor: he could not bring himself to look Luxor in the eye. The silence was profound.

"Me?" whispered Morkin, "How can it be me?"

Corleth lifted his head and turned his deep eyes towards the boy.

"Tell me what you know of your father and mother, Morkin," said the Fey gently.

The boy looked startled.



"I know nothing, my Lord. I was only a babe when my Lord Luxor found me, while hunting boar in the Forest of Thimrath. He gathered me up and took me home and cared for me, as he has cared for me ever since: he has been like a father to me all my life."

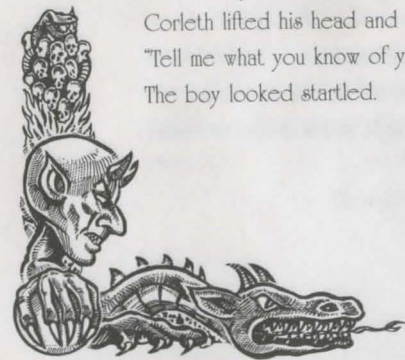
Corleth smiled and looked up towards the distant ceiling of the High Hall.

"It was many moons ago," he said, "We had prevailed over the foul hordes of Doomdark on the Plains of Blood, but the price was heavy. Many were slain, more were shattered in mind by the last tide of Ice-fear he sent against us. After the battle, a host of our faithful warriors wandered lost and demented across the bloody fields, their hearts empty, their minds full of horror. There were so many that those who had survived unscathed could not hope to find them all before they took their own path to peace or simply wasted away in the cold, bitter nights."

"Such a man, wounded to the quick in body and mind, found his way into the depths of the Forest of Thrall. It was there, exhausted and close to death, that one of the Fey, the fair Aleisha, found him. She dragged him on a trestle of branches to her tree-home and there she nursed him to health again. As his strength grew, so did his enchantment with Aleisha and so did her enchantment with him."

"When he was fully strong again, his mind healed by her comfort and words of peace, his body mended by her subtle, feyish skills, they made their love complete. Yet Aleisha was troubled. She knew their love, however strong, could not last, for he was a mortal Man and she a Fey. She said nothing to him but let the days and nights of their love linger on until she could bear it no longer. Then, gathering all her courage, she freed his mind of every memory of her, not wishing him to bear the pain of their impossible love. She led him to the southern edge of the Forest of Thrall and watched him dwindle into the distance as he walked out across the Plains of Iserath towards the Mountains of Morning and his distant home."

"Some moons later Aleisha bore a child, a rare child, his child as well as hers. Her delight almost overwhelmed the pain of parting but even in this moment of joy she thought only of him. Out of love had she made him forget yet she knew she would not forego her own memories, however painful. She was determined that he too should keep something of the harvest of their love. And so, barely a moon later, she journeyed south with her babe across Iserath and Rorath to the borders of Corelay."



"How many times had he told her of hunts he rode in the Forest of Thimrath, how many times had he pictured in her mind its winding paths and gentle glades. She knew where he would be. As dawn approached, she listened for the hoof beats of his horse and when she was sure, she bundled the babe in warm furs and laid him by the path. She dared not linger for fear that she would cry out as he approached and run to his arms. So, with a parting kiss for her child, she turned back to the north, never to see her son or her lover again."

"That son was you, Morkin. Your father is my friend, Luxor."

Rorthron the Wise sniffed loudly and dabbed at his eyes with the long sleeves of his gown. Luxor, for the second time that morning, was dumbfounded. But Morkin, brimming with joy, leapt to his feet and flung his arms around the Moonprince.

"You always have been and now it's true," he said. In some confusion, Luxor smiled and returned his son's embrace.

"It is all I could wish, Morkin," he said, then added, "Save that all secrets were as happy as this when revealed - and revealed sooner."

Suddenly, Morkin whirled round on Corleth.

"Yes! Why did you keep this secret from . . . from my father? You are his friend."

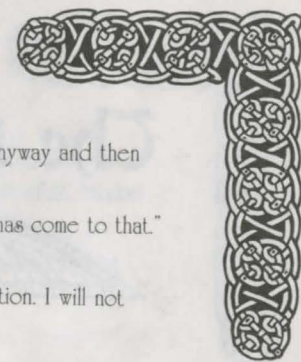
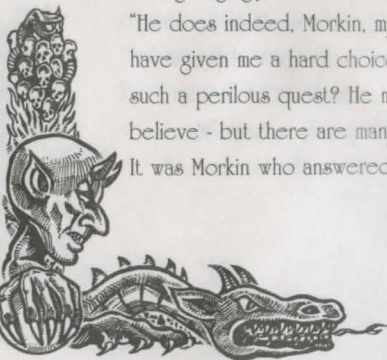
"And yours too, Morkin. The Fey have long suspected that the House of the Moon still survived. The Wise are not the only guardians of knowledge. I could not be sure until today when Rorthron held forth the Moon Ring, but since I have known him, I have harboured a secret hope that your father was the Moonprince. I did know, as Rorthron did, that Doomdark suspected nothing. To have revealed your kinship would have placed you both in double jeopardy as it does even now. My words may yet be your death, Morkin. I pray you will forgive me. These are dark times."

Morkin looked subdued.

"I suppose you did right, my Lord Corleth. It is I who should be sorry, not you," he said grudgingly. "I hate Doomdark. He spoils everything."

"He does indeed, Morkin, my well-named son," said Luxor. "Corleth the Fey, you have given me a hard choice. How can I send a boy, even if he is my own son, on such a perilous quest? He may be able to scorn the ice-fear—that I can well believe - but there are many other dangers on the road to the Tower of Doom."

It was Morkin who answered first.



"You must send me, Father. If you do not, Midnight might be lost anyway and then what would become of me?"

"The boy is right," said Rorthron, "We must take every chance. It has come to that." Luxor nodded slowly. He clasped Morkin's hand.

"If you wish it Morkin, seek the Ice Crown and attempt its destruction. I will not send you, but you may go if you wish."

There was fire in the boy's voice and a gladness shining in his eyes.

"Of course I will go, Father! Don't wish me luck: it's Doomdark who will need it!"

The Lords Of Midnight



CHAPTER FIVE THE SOLSTICE

Lt was a strange dawn. The Sun seemed reluctant to shake off the shackles of night and soar over the rim of the world. When it did, the rays it sent spinning across Midnight seemed cold and pallid. From the north a frozen mist was seeping over the hills and forests and plains and the dawn was silent, the air empty of birds, the earth untrodden by the chattering creatures of day. Even to Corelay the coldness spread and a nameless chill gripped men's hearts as they rose to greet the new day. Old warriors, in dread, whispered of Doomdark, for they had been touched like this before, but the rest simply shivered and tried, with small success, to shrug off their unreasoning fear. This was only the vanguard of the ice-fear that gathered in the north. Around Ushgarak, the mist was so thick and high that the city still lay in darkness, though the rest of Midnight was bathed in light. Then, like a storm driven by the winds of the tall sky, the great mist began to roll south over the Plains of Despair. Even Doomdark's creatures quailed and shivered as it passed. The mist fanned out as it moved ever southwards but it did not seem to thin or diminish: rather, it grew thicker and taller as it devoured the waking landscape.

From the Tower of the Moon, Luxor the Moonprince rode out to meet the dawn. At one side of him rode Morkin, his face eager and shining with the fire the dawn seemed to lack. At the other side rode Corleth the Fey, a hint of unbidden laughter playing round his lips. Luxor turned first to Corleth.

"My friend, we must part now but I will be with you. I know your people are loathe to fight but this is more than a war of Men. Ride north to the forests of the Fey and gather those you can to our banner; we will have need of you and all your kin before this war is done."

"The Fey will fight, my Lord Moonprince, though at times you may not notice how. I will raise more than a war-band, I promise you. Fare thee well, my friend."

Then the Moonprince turned to his son. He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "This parting has come too soon. I fear your task may be the hardest of all, Morkin: take no risk without need. You risk enough already."

"Have no fear, Father. I will return. You risk more than I and it is you who should take care: do not orphan me again."

Luxor smiled.

"I will try not to! Farewell, my son."

The Moonprince turned to the south-east, towards Corelay. He took the Moon Ring and slipped it on his finger. In his mind, the distant murmur of battle seemed to grow and a warm fire burned in his blood.

Suddenly, the horizon seemed to expand and fly away into the distance as into his mind flooded all the hopes and fears of the peoples of the Free. He drew his sword from its scabbard and held it aloft, then spurred his white stallion towards the Forest of Shadows and distant Corelay.

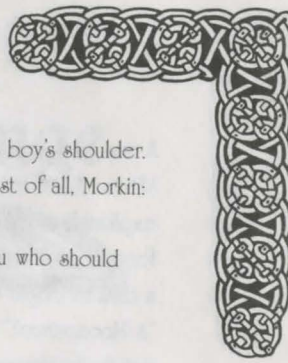
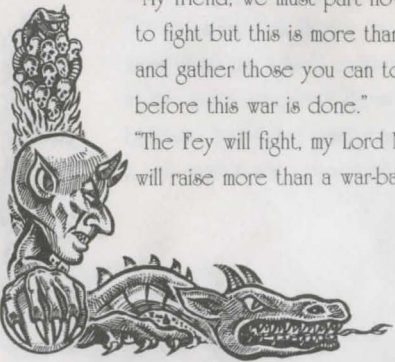
"Arise, Midnight!" he called as he rode, "Arise the Free! Peril and doom lie at our gates. Waken your valour, arm yourselves with courage! We ride to conquer Doomdark forever! Arise Midnight, arise!"

His war-cry rang out across the still dawn, flying over the forests and hills, whispering over the plains, in the distant citadels of the free, in Ithorn, in Marakith, in Shimeril, in Kumar and in Grad and in Xajorkith, men paused and looked about themselves, imagining they heard a faint echo whose words they couldn't quite catch yet which quickened their hearts and made their blood race.

Then, as if swept away by a sudden wind, though the air stayed as still as the mountains, the dour mist that lay over Midnight vanished northwards, shrinking back towards Ushgarak. The full dawn broke suddenly over the land, showering it in a blaze of warmth and light. A wave of hope rippled outwards from the Forest of Shadows across the country of the Free, to far Corelay, to the Plains of Dawn, to the Mountains of Morning, warming chill hearts and bringing a glimmer of gladness to Midnight that had too long been absent.

In the Winter Palace of Ushgarak, the frozen mist that should have been flowing out in an endless stream was rushing back in. Doomdark flailed his arms through it as it thickened about him.

"Back!" he cried, "Back! Fly out, out!"



It was to no avail. The ice-fear rushed homewards and sank back into his cold flesh. When all had returned and the air cleared, there was worse a warmth, an explicable warmth seemed to touch his mind. The Witchking grimaced. He had almost forgotten what pain was like. A spore of doubt buried itself in his thoughts and like a canker, began to grow.

"A Moonprince?" he mused, "No! It cannot be."

But far to the south, already Luxor the Moonprince sped through the Forest of Shadows to rally Corelay and the Free. The War of the Solstice had begun.



Doomdark's Revenge



CHAPTER ONE PEACE

The way was obscure but he moved onwards, little caring what he moved towards. The trees thickened and the darkness of the forest closed in upon him yet he hardly noticed; his thoughts were frozen; tomorrow unimaginable, today forgotten, yesterday a strange dream that had happened to someone else - if it had happened at all. Now that the thing was destroyed, what else was left to do? All the fear Morkin had held at bay for so long, because he had to succeed, was unleashed with that success. His mind was just a wilderness now, bleaker than the Plains of Despair.

Elsewhere, time still moved. The burden of the Witchking's cold dominion had lifted from the lands of Midnight like a sudden waking from nightmare. At first not daring to believe that their ordeal was over, people simply took quiet and solitary pleasure in the respite. Then, as dawn followed dawn and the dread did not return, the day of tidings came. Doomdark is finished! The Witchking is dead! Rejoice, we are free! Borne on the wings of whispers, the message took flight and sped across Midnight, bringing laughter and song to hearts that had too long been empty of all but despair.

In its wake, the warriors of the Free made their weary way home, welcomed as heroes in each village or hamlet on the Way, yet longing beyond all for the welcome of their hearth fires and the glad faces of their kin. South from Ushgarak, Luxor's great army trudged a desolate path, at Kor the army turned and plunged into the Forest of Dreams. No signposts marked their way but the Fey, gathering magically out of the gloom of the trees bearing lanterns and firesticks, lit a deep road into the darkening forest to their hidden fastness, the fabled Citadel of Dreams.

The victorious army made camp beneath its shimmering walls. The city was in turmoil as it set about to prepare a vast feast of celebration.



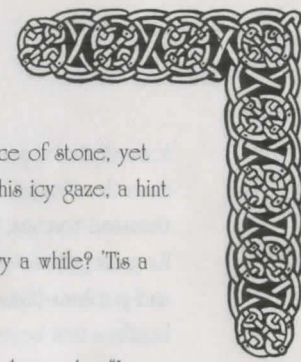
All through the encampment ran rivers of children, festooning the soldiers with garlands and ribbons and begging tales of the war. Still, a sadness lingered, the memory of friends irrevocably lost, of brothers' spilt blood, of the cold implacable Ice Fear that had stricken so many good men.

Tarithel did not remain at the feast. As night fell and the city put on all the raiments of light it could find, she slipped quietly into the forest. Her father would not notice; with all the grand and puissant Lords of the Fey and the Free gathered here, he would scarcely have a moment to spare.

He would expect her presence, but he would not notice it. Though there was no doubting the greatness of the triumph, what part had she in a warrior's carnival? In the silent, dreaming glades, lit only by starlight and with the song of the forest as the only fanfare, Tarithel would whisper her thanksgiving to the dead and the living and the dying.

The deep shadows of the forest wrapped the girl in long gowns of grey and she slipped through the twilight like a wraith, swiftly, silently trailing between the colonnades of trees. Far from the clamour of the city she wandered, letting the forest lead her down its secret ways, letting her mind mingle with the slow and ancient thoughts of the dreaming trees to catch glimpses of Midnight's long-forgotten summer, the birth-pangs of its green dawn and the dark dance of death auguring autumn. Gradually her pace slackened, as if the rhythm of the forest had seized her lithe limbs and urged a gentler motion upon them, until she halted at last in a deep glade. There she stood, flanked by tall towers of green, waiting and watching just as the forest had waited and watched down the long ages. Gently she swayed, a young sapling in the midst of its elders, till softly the dew gathered like stars in her sweeping tresses and bedecked her green cloak with glistening jewels. The boy rode past her like a ghost, unmoving, unseeing. Tarithel called out to him but he did not turn. Then, suddenly struck with fear for him, she whispered a strange, wordless song, swift of rhythm yet slow at heart and as clear and broad of melody as the wind rushing through the tall grasses of the open plains. The boy's horse lifted its head, turned and cantered up to her, nuzzling into her cloak as it stopped beside her. The boy himself stirred too and turned his puzzled eyes upon her.

She saw him then, as the moonlight struck down through the trees and bruised his face with its stark brilliance, lost in desolation.



His eyes were as cold as death, his mouth a thin scar frozen on ice of stone, yet Tarithel seemed to see behind this mask and sense a greeting in his icy gaze, a hint of laughter in his barren eyes. She smiled warmly.

"I bid you welcome, sir, to the Forest of Dreams. Will you not tarry a while? 'Tis a long and lonely road you follow."

The boy was, silent for a moment and then he laughed bitterly.

"I follow no road, I simply ride," his harsh words softening even as he spoke. "I go where my horse takes me; if he has led me here I should be thankful, for fairer vision than thee I have never seen."

Suddenly, the boy's marble face was lit by the faint fire of a blush and he turned his eyes from Tarithel to gaze intently at the snow on the ground. Tarithel shivered inwardly, sweet delight and bitter apprehension mingling and clashing within her as his words touched her open heart, his gauche compliment, his hopeless statement of no intent, his simple and unbroken pride. She loosened her mind to let his dreams flow into her yet she felt nothing but the slumbering, ageless reveries of the forest. Somehow, he had sensed her intention and had drawn into himself so swiftly that his mind was intangible. She gasped with wonder.

"Come," she said, "Let us find shelter. The night grows long and cold."

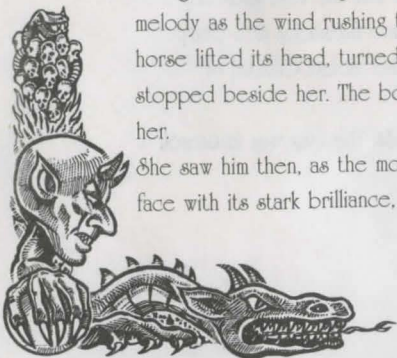
The boy smiled. "Then you must ride with me; I cannot ride and have you walk."

Tarithel laughed softly.

"And can you not walk?"

"I can," he replied, then lowered his voice, "But I would rather we rode, together." With a nimbleness that surprised him, Tarithel took two swift steps, grasped his arm and leapt up behind him onto the horse. Wrapping her warm arms around his waist, she brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "The path to the left, gallant knight."

Suddenly, the boy spurred his horse forward; like an arrow unloosed from a taut bow, they galloped across the frozen glade into the deeper darkness of the Forest of Dreams. The boy laughed in delight, the girl clung tightly to him, knowing he expected her to, and the stallion snorted with pleasure, stretched out its swift legs and ran for sheer joy after so many days of dreary wandering.



It was but a few minutes before they broke out of the forest again and saw before them the Citadel of Dreams, its high towers glimmering like amber in the glow of a thousand torches, its sheer walls bright with the banners of the Fey and the Free, its great gates decked with flags and lanterns. Before it lay another city of tents and pavilions that shivered and shimmered as the air trembled in the heat of bonfires that bejewelled the dark plain. The boy reined in his stallion and gazed in awe.

"What is this place?" he asked. "Why this carnival? How can they?"

Tarithel felt the boy's muscles stiffen and begin to tremble. His growing fury was unmistakable.

"How can they do what?" she asked, gently.

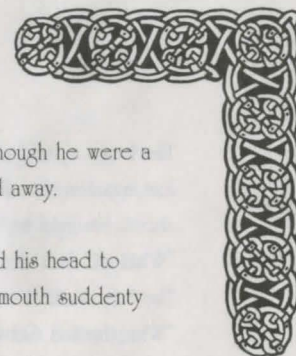
"How can they rejoice, how can they rejoice?"

"This is the Citadel of Dreams, stronghold of the Fey, Imlath Quiriniel, Jewel of Midnight."

"Before you lie the armies of Luxor the Moonprince, bearer of the Moonring, the War Ring of the House of the Moon. They have journeyed here from the gates of Ushgarak itself. They rejoice - surely this much you know - because Doomdark is defeated, slain by the sword of Prince Luxor himself!"

The boy slumped forward, buried his face in the stallion's long mane and began to sob uncontrollably. Tarithel leant forward to try to comfort him, whispering gentle questions and words of solace, but he would not speak or listen. At length, she dismounted and led the boy and his stallion across the open snow, through the ranks of lanterns and bonfires and merry-makers, through the high arches of the Gate of Dreams, along the bustling streets, to a deserted courtyard deep within the Citadel.

In the midst of the courtyard stood a green oak. Lamps flickered in every branch, casting dancing rainbows on the worn cobbles under its vaulting canopy. Beyond, a fountain tumbled molten silver into a shivering pool and, further still, on a plinth of marble, blazed a bowl of green and golden fire that sent a trembling mist of light and warmth throughout the stillness. The peace of the courtyard seemed to fall upon the boy and his sobbing slackened. He slid down from his horse, letting Tarithel take his hand, letting her lead him to the side of the fountain pool, then letting himself down to rest beside her on the sitting stones by its bank.



Tarithel wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, as though he were a small child who had grazed his knee. Gradually, his sobbing ebbed away.

"Tell me what ails thee," she whispered.

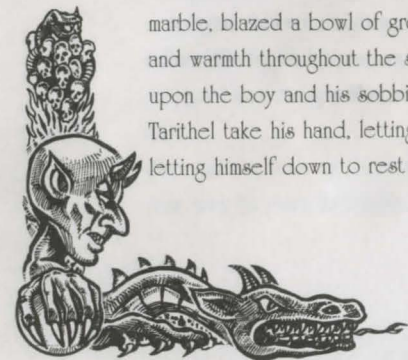
The boy eased away from her. He took her hands in his and raised his head to gaze at her steadily. His eyes were sparkling with gladness as his mouth suddenly creased into the broadest of smiles.

"I thought he was dead," said the boy in a rush of words, "I thought the war was lost and Midnight doomed. Rejoicing! I thought they were rejoicing for Doomdark's victory. I thought I'd found it and destroyed it all in vain. Too late to help, too late for anything. I don't know where I've been since. What did it matter? If the Foul One had won, nothing mattered anymore; everything would be wilderness. Why bother finding haven? There would be no haven, there would be no peace, there would be no warmth, ever. I thought he was dead, but he lives!"

"Who? Who did you think was dead? What did you destroy? You talk in riddles that I cannot fathom," said Tarithel, but the boy seemed not to hear.

"When I cast it into the lake, it shrieked and screamed as it dropped towards the water. Even the air about it seemed to thicken, as though the thing was trying to save itself by freezing the very wind. It fell so slowly, like a knife dropped in syrup. I thought it might stop. Then, when it touched the water, came a crack of thunder as it shattered and flew apart. Suddenly, the lake erupted with boiling clouds of steam that caught and melted the fragments even as it burst asunder."

"I leapt and danced for joy. It was gone, forever. The task was done. It was over! Then, as the lake stilled and the clouds of steam thinned away to nothing, a rolling peal of laughter boomed from the North and an icy yet velvet voice spoke to me. "Fool," it said. "You are too late, you puny child. Luxor is dead. His mighty armies are maggot-fodder now. Xajorkith has fallen and burns even now; Corelay has been ravaged and every man, woman and child put to the sword - if they were lucky! The Fey fawn at my feet. All you have done me is a favour. It is so tiresome having to dispose of obsolete possessions." Then the laughter rolled again and slowly dwindled away. For days, perhaps moons since, I've just wandered aimlessly. There was no point after that, no point at all."



The boy's eyes glazed over as he remembered. Another moment and he would be lost again in the silence of his long ride. Taking his shoulders in her hands, Tarithel shook him until he was joggled back to wakefulness.

"What did you destroy?" she insisted.

The boy looked at her quizzically, as if this were no puzzle at all.

"Why, the Ice Crown of course."

For the moment, Tarithel was aghast. Then, she shook her head and laughed softly.

"That is the sweetest answer I have ever heard. "Why, the Ice Crown of course". A mere bauble, a deed of no more consequence than . . . than casting away an old cloak. You must be Morkin then, son of the Moonprince."

Tarithel looked at the boy as though he were a dream that might suddenly vanish. He gazed back at her, wistfully.

"Yes, I am Morkin," he said, "But your name I know not."

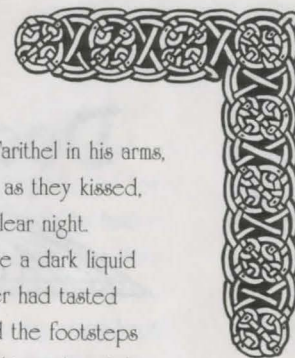
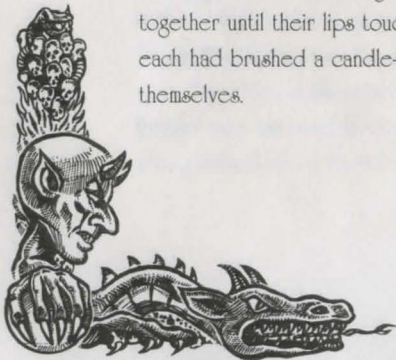
"I am Tarithel, the daughter of the Lord of Dreams and Lady of the Forest, since my mother relinquished the right on the eve of the solstice."

"But you are so young and the Forest - I have wandered in this Forest for days - it seems to have no end!"

"I am as old as you, my Lord, and though you be but a boy, you have travelled half of Midnight on your quest. Was that an easy task?" said Tarithel, fiercely.

Morkin laughed and shook his head. He looked up slowly and fixed his eyes upon hers. He could not believe the completeness of her beauty, still less the longing and love that shone in her face, no more than Tarithel could believe the rapture with which he beheld her. Neither could look away, neither could speak, so fierce and tender was the fire they saw kindled in each other's glistening eyes.

Blindly, their hands touched and twined. Morkin seemed to melt inside as he felt the warmth of her slender hands seeking and finding his. Tarithel felt a fresh, cool wind blow through her as his firm but yielding grasp closed up on hers and slowly, like two branches bending towards the same brilliant light, they drew closer together until their lips touched in the gentlest of kisses, to part swiftly as though each had brushed a candle-flame. They looked at each other, bewildered by themselves.



Then, suddenly overwhelmed by longing and delight, Morkin took Tarithel in his arms, crushing his lips against hers. They clung to each other tightly and, as they kissed, they seemed to become one fire, one flame burning in the cold, clear night.

Though the stars span overhead, though the night seeped away like a dark liquid running from a crystal goblet, their thirst for the heady wine neither had tasted before stayed unquenchable. As the sounds of feasting waned and the footsteps of homecomers rang in the cobbled streets, Tarithel led Morkin within and took him along the winding corridors to the Western Tower.

Doomdark's Revenge



CHAPTER TWO THE FROZEN EMPIRE

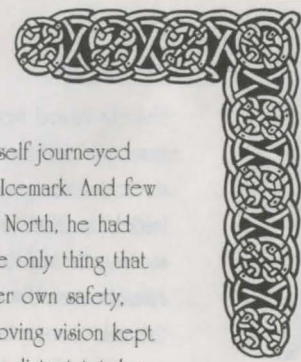
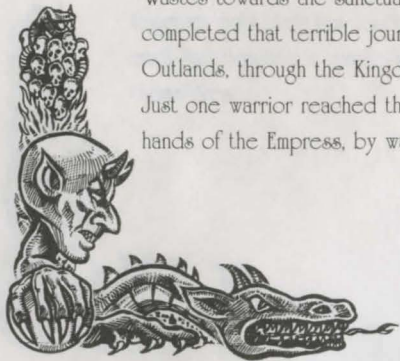
Kahangronn rang to her cries. Though she raged and screamed for her slaves, none dared approach her. The messenger who had brought the news had been disembowelled on the spot and her hands were still bloody with his entrails. She stormed at the thick stone pillars of the great hall and clawed at their unyielding flesh as if she would tear them apart and bring the tall roof crashing about her.

"I will bathe in his blood! I will feast on his flesh! How dare he? How dare he usurp me?" she ranted.

Flecks of froth flew from her lips and she span round and ran the length of the hall to the heavy oak doors. She flung them apart as if they were mere matchwood, then sped through the dark corridors and up the twisting stairways to the battlements of the Fortress of Kahangronn. Standing on the southern walls, staring like one demented into the blue distance, she shrieked forth a storm of filthy curses. Shareth the Heartstealer, Empress of the Ice-mark, dread ruler of the frozen Empire, was distraught.

The object of her invective was Prince Luxor, Lord of the Free and Moonprince of Midnight.

Though it was two moons now since the War of the Solstice had come to a sudden end with the fall of Ushgarak, the news of Doomdark's defeat had travelled north at a snail's pace as the last cohorts of the Doomguard struggled across the Frozen Wastes towards the sanctuary of Ice-mark. Only six out of six hundred men had completed that terrible journey but fewer still survived the road that led from the Outlands, through the Kingdom of the Giants, to the borders of the Frozen Empire. Just one warrior reached the gates of Kahangronn, only to find death there at the hands of the Empress, by way of thanks for his travail. *



None but the Wise knew that Doomdark, in earlier moons, had himself journeyed through the northern wilderness and found the ice-locked land of Ice-mark. And few even of them knew there, in brief union with a cold Queen of the North, he had spawned a daughter. She was called Shareth and was, perhaps, the only thing that Doomdark had ever loved. The Witchking left her in Ice-mark for her own safety, fearing that some would seek to use her against him, but his long-roving vision kept watch over her. As she grew and matured in evil under Doomdark's distant tutelage, she gathered about her the trappings of power and came to rule a kingdom if anything, more foul than his.

When she learnt of Doomdark's death at the hand of Luxor, she was not stricken with grief, for grief was beyond her. Her consuming fury sprang from other sources. Someone had dared to touch her father, had dared to challenge and destroy her flesh and blood. To Shareth, it was almost beyond belief that a pitiful prince of the Free had the temerity to take that pleasure from her, so long had she planned in gruesome detail the murder of the Witchking and the seizure of his domains. Doomdark had tutored her too well in his own ways, for her to feel anything but delight at the thought of disposing of one whose power outweighed hers. The insistent ache for power and dominion burst to sharp pain when she learned that the Moonprince now ruled Midnight. Midnight was hers! Midnight was hers! Though Doomdark might not have planned it so, believing foolishly that his only daughter loved him in return, and crying out even with his dying breath, "Avenge me, Shareth, avenge me!" she was about to wreak a terrible revenge upon the Free and their Moonprince.

The battlements of Kahangronn darkened as the storm clouds gathered, summoned from the ice-barriers of the North by Shareth's wails and shrieks. Safe in their watchtowers, the soldiers of the Iceguard tried to joke.

"The she-hag's brewing up a hurricane!"

"Someone's going to catch it, mark my words."

"Nothing like a good dose of plunder and frightening to clear the air, that's what I say."

"I'll wager two-to-one it'll be the snivelling Dwarves who get their come-uppance this time."

"Nah! Haven't you heard? Some nancy prince from south of the wastes has tickled her fancy - she's blowing him a kiss, that's all!"

Shareth raised her long arms to the sky and cried into the wind, uttering words no man could understand. The storm, however, seemed to leap and swirl as her strident voice pierced through the air. Across the Frozen Empire, from Fangorn to Imriel, the dark sky became a boiling turmoil. Then, as Shareth shrieked, the great storm gathered itself and sped southwards across the Ice-mark.

Shareth turned and fled to her tower, her fury spent for a while. Her private room there had no walls or windows or ceiling, only mirrors. The Empress flung herself upon the silken sheets of her bed and looked up at herself. She liked what she saw. The anger of the past hours had brought a rare flush to her cheeks and now that she had set her revenge in motion, her marble-sculptured face had softened to perfection. With slim and nimble fingers, she smoothed the white satin of her gown. "I am so beautiful!" she cried. "I will make the whole world love me!"

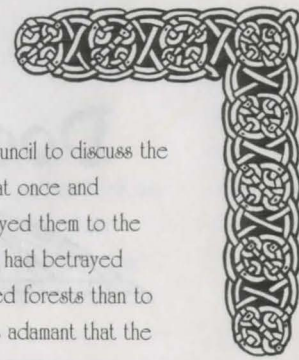
She smiled seductively at herself and then turned to look in a different mirror. Like her father, the Witchking, Shareth had only ever loved one thing in her life and followed his example faithfully; he loved Shareth, so did she. Night after night she fell asleep surrounded by her own ravishing reflections. Even in dreams she did not escape herself, and she woke each morning feeling more beautiful, more irresistible than ever.

"I will journey to Talorthane tomorrow," she whispered to herself, "And have the Giant for a while. His praises are so clumsy but he loves me so much!"

The arch Empress began to giggle like a maiden. Dreamily, she stroked her long, white arms and wriggled from the bed. She approached one of the mirrors closely, blowing a soft mist of breath onto its polished surface, then watched entranced as the mist melted away and her own image took form again before her. She twisted her face into a grimace and bunched up her shoulders.

"Your hair is like an eagle's nest, my love and your nose is as cold as a mountain," she bellowed at herself, finally collapsing back on the bed in fits of laughter at the wit of her parody.

Night fell swiftly upon the Ice-mark, hastened by the storm that flew from the North. From the great City of Varangrim, a motley battalion of Giants gathered swiftly together at the approach of the storm clouds and marched towards the borders of the Frozen Empire, hoping to forestall the onslaught that such foul weather was apt to carry in its wake. Likewise, from Carudrium and Carorthay, the Dwarves sent forth their warriors towards Fangorn to challenge, if needs be, the marauding Ice-guard.

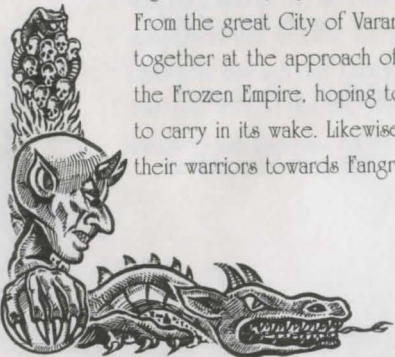


Further south, in the City of Imorthorn, the Lords of the Fey met in council to discuss the import of the great tumult in the sky. Some were for raising the alarm at once and marching on Thigrak and Glormane, fearing that the Dwarves had betrayed them to the Heartstealer. Others were waiting, reasoning that even if the Dwarves had betrayed them, it would be better to fight the Ice-guard in the deep and tangled forests than to march forth onto the open plains. The Lord of Imorthorn, however, was adamant that the storm was destined for other lands.

"You will have heard by now, surely my Lords, of the war that has been raging in the lost land of Midnight far, far to the southwest of our Ice-mark. Though it is now two moons since its conclusion, the news of the Moonprince's victory has travelled slowly. Rumours of a secret traffic betwixt the Heartstealer and the Witchking have come to our ears for many moons now. Indeed, on the eve of the solstice itself, did we not waylay a band of dark and foul warriors riding north from the Gate at Varenorn? I know it is many, many moons since any of our number has dared its terrors but that is the only passage we know of that still leads to Midnight. I am sure the Heartstealer sends the storm not against us but against this Luxor, this fabled Moonprince of Midnight. Look, even now the storm turns southwest!"

The Lord of Imorthorn raised his arm and pointed to the tall windows of his hall. The council turned and looked out at the dark, flying clouds. There was a murmur of agreement and then confusion as they argued what they should do if this was indeed the truth of the matter. At length, they agreed that their brothers in the land of Midnight, the Fey of the legendary Forest of Dreams and other forests now long forgotten, must be warned of the peril that approached them.

Meanwhile, they should make ready for war, for there was no foreseeing Shareth's plans. If she had designs upon Midnight, the route of her armies might well pass through the Kingdom of the Fey and there was small hope that such a passage would be peaceable. Accordingly, as the night deepened, the Lord of Imorthorn climbed to the Tower of Hawks and took his swiftest bird, a white falcon, from the mews. Round one of its jesses, he wrapped a thin strip of parchment, fastened it there with hot wax and pressed his seal upon it. Then, unhooding the falcon, he spoke softly to it and lofted it into the turbulent sky. In a moment it was gone, winging its way towards Midnight and the Citadel of Dreams.



Doomdark's Revenge



CHAPTER THREE THE COURT OF THE MOONPRINCE

Tarithel and Morkin tarried long in the warmth of each other's company before they rose to meet the day. Then, side by side, they rode out through the Gate of Dreams towards the pavilions of Luxor and his Lords. The crowds of soldiers and towns folk parted, with a flurry of whispers and questions, and closed in again behind them, staring in wonderment. But when they dismounted at the doorway of Luxor's pavilion, Morkin found the way barred by a sentry.

"You cannot pass, sir. Prince Luxor is in council and will not be disturbed."

"I fear he will be if you bar the way to his son, good soldier. Pray let us pass."

The whole assembly turned as they entered and the Moonprince leapt to his feet at the unasked-for intrusion. At first he looked puzzled, not expecting to see such slight and slender figures approach. Then, suddenly recognizing the boy, his countenance lightened and filled with joy. He flung his arms out high and wide.

"Rise, my Lords!" he shouted, "My son has returned!"

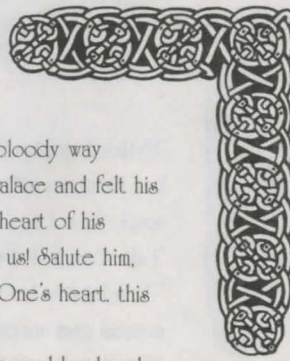
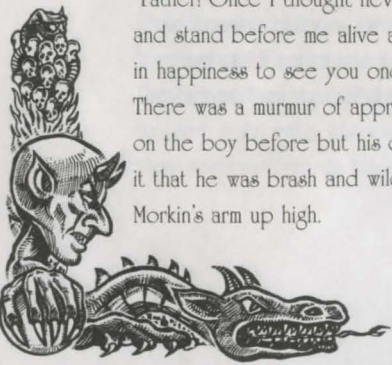
Shining with pride, Luxor cast aside his chair at the high table and rushed to greet the boy as he climbed, hand-in-hand with Tarithel, the steps to the dais. He stared fondly at the boy for a moment, then clapped a hand to his shoulder.

"Morkin, my boy! Others would return haggard and drained from such a quest as yours, but you have thrived! Is it two inches or four that you have grown?" laughed the Moonprince.

Morkin smiled, suddenly rendered speechless. Then, finding his tongue, he said,

"Father! Once I thought never to see you again but you have won the great victory and stand before me alive and well. I may have grown in height but not so much as in happiness to see you once more!"

There was a murmur of approval at this from the gathered Lords. Few had set eyes on the boy before but his courtesy warmed their hearts to him. Rumour, which had it that he was brash and wild, they now put aside. Luxor turned to them and raised Morkin's arm up high.



"This is the boy who saved us at Ushgarak, who, as we fought our bloody way through hordes of foul creatures to the gates of the Witchking's palace and felt his cold breath clawing at our strength and our courage, smashed the heart of his dread power and lifted the burden of the Ice Crown's terror from us! Salute him, my Lords. Though mine was the sword which plunged into the Foul One's heart, this is truly the hand that slew him!"

The assembled warriors lifted their swords high into the air and cheered loud and long.

Morkin tried to tug his hand down, but Luxor kept a firm grip until the applause had dwindled. Then the Moonprince turned back to the boy.

"My son, I would thank thee for simply being still alive, but now we all have cause to give thee our thanks. If there is a gift that lies in my power to grant, name it and it shall be yours."

"Father, do not praise me so; the victory was yours! You slew the Witchking, your armies took Ushgarak, your skill and vigour brought him to his knees," said the boy fiercely.

"Your part was as much," insisted the Moonprince, "More! Do you imagine we could have succeeded without you? I speak not now as your father, Morkin, but as Moonprince of Midnight; name your wish. The Lords of Midnight will not countenance your refusal."

"I fear it is not yours to grant, my Lord," said the boy.

"How so?" asked Luxor, puzzled and disturbed by this strange turn of events. "Tell me your desire!"

"The hand, tomorrow, of this fair maiden who stands beside me: Tarithel, Lady of the Forest of Dreams. That is my wish, Father."

Morkin looked up steadily into the eyes of the Moonprince, as if daring him to say aught against his ambition. Amongst the assembled Lords, there were more than a few swiftly stifled guffaws and the company was suddenly beset by an outbreak of coughing and clearing of throats.

Luxor stayed impassive, as if he had not heard the words his son had uttered. Then Morkin turned to Tarithel and Tarithel turned to him. The smiles that passed between them left no doubt as candour of the boy's resolve. Stiffly, the Lord of Dreams rose to his feet and began to speak.

"My Lord Moonprince," he began. "This is my only daughter who stands before you. Her hand may not be yours to give but, if she wills it, I would give it gladly to your son."

"I do, Father, I do!" cried Tarithel suddenly.

"Then let this be a token," said the Lord of Dreams. "That the Fey and the Free are now as one under the protection of the House of the Moon. My consent is given."

With that, the Lord of Dreams sat down again. There was turmoil, then, amongst the gathered company, loud cheers and congratulations filled the long pavilion. The Moonprince smiled and waited till the tumult died away.

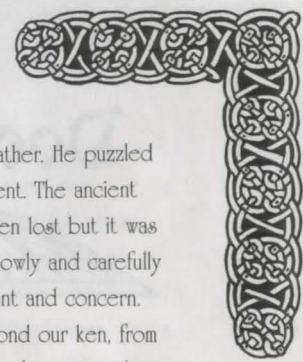
"Your wish seems granted, Morkin, and a fairer daughter I could not hope for. Yet you are both so young. Think upon it, both of you, before you tie a knot that all of time cannot undo."

His words were hardly from his mouth before they both answered, almost in unison, "We have, my Lord!"

The Moonprince turned to his council and laughed, as if in appeal to them.

"What can I do, my Lords? I have given my word," he said. Then turning back to face Morkin and Tarithel, he softened his voice and added, "So it shall be. On the morrow you shall wed. All that remains now is to celebrate this happy, unlooked-for moment. Come, sit with me, and we will talk of the things that have passed 'fore the new feast begins - a feast this night of love, not war!"

Many tales were told that day, many battles fought again by tongue. Luxor's high council, summoned to decide the fate of Doomdark's old dominions, put aside its purpose and fell to reminiscing. The mead flowed, brave deeds grew braver, terrors waxed more terrible yet and the day drew slowly on. Yet, before evening fell, a strange event came to pass. A white falcon flew in through the open doorway of the pavilion, circled thrice above the high table, then came to rest on the shoulder of the Lord of Dreams. As the rest of the company stared in amazement at the bird, Tarithel reached a gentle hand towards it and nimbly untied its jesses. Then, at a soft word from her, it took flight again and disappeared from the pavilion.



Tarithel handed the message attached to the leather thong to her father. He puzzled at the seal for a moment, then broke it apart to unravel the parchment. The ancient Fey runes he found there surprised him; his skill in them had not been lost but it was many moons since he had needed to use it. He read the message slowly and carefully before turning to Luxor. His expression was a mixture of astonishment and concern.

"My Lord Moonprince," he began, "This message hails from lands beyond our ken, from the cold Ice-mark which has been severed from Midnight for a thousand moons and more. A Lord who calls himself Imorthorn writes it, addressing himself to his brothers Fey of the Forest of Dreams. It warns of a great storm flying from the North towards Midnight and of the evil designs of one he calls the Heartstealer upon our fair land. He also calls her Empress of the Frozen Empire and hints that she may have made some pact with the Witchking before his demise. I know not what to make of it but one thing is certain - it was indeed written by the hand of a Fey. The ancient runes are known to few of us and none, to be sure, of others."

The Moonprince shook his head slowly, as if lost for anything to say. A heavy burden seemed to have fallen on his shoulders. At length, he spoke.

"If this message bears the truth, then it seems our long struggle is not over yet, but surely this Imorthorn cannot be right. The Frozen Wastes lie between us and the lost land of Ice-mark. Why else was a falcon sent to bear these ill-tidings to us? I cannot see how any Empress of the North, however evil her intent, can threaten the peace that now befalls Midnight. The Wastes would destroy armies a thousand times stronger than Doomdark's before they ever reached our borders. As for warning of a storm, should we sharpen our swords, wax our bowstrings and prepare to do battle against the wind and snow? This message makes no sense," said the Moonprince, wearily.

"We can at least tighten the guy-ropes of our tents and wear thicker cloaks," shouted the Lord of Ithron. "Perhaps this Lord Imorthorn is a dealer in furs and cannot find market for his wares!"

The company of Lords broke into laughter at this. More ribald suggestions followed and the portent of the strange message was forgotten in the general merriment. Yet Luxor remained troubled. He drew the Lord of Dreams aside and spoke to him quietly.

"My friend, see what more you can discover of this matter. Though I cannot see how, I fear this message is more timely than we imagine."

Doomdark's Revenge



CHAPTER FOUR THE STORM BREAKS

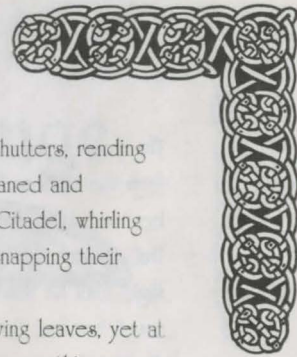
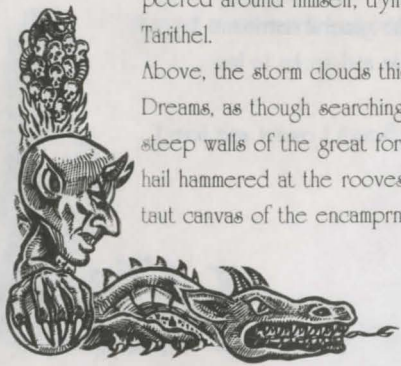
A dark and starless night fell upon the Forest of Dreams as, high overhead, the vanguard of Shareth's storm gathered. Long past midnight, the feasting finished and the two cities of stone and of cloth fell silent under the lightless sky. Though the parting would be brief and tomorrow he would be joined forever with Tarithel, Morkin could not sleep. He wandered restlessly around the encampment, pausing at the dying campfires to gaze into the embers and wonder what the future held for him and his beloved Tarithel.

In the distance, he heard the vague rumble of thunder and instinctively drew his cloak more closely about him. He thought of the strange message from the Icemark. Turning to the North, he peered into the chasm of the sky where soft-flickering flames of lightning lit the heavy clouds. A shiver ran through him; this was no ordinary storm; there was something unnatural in the way it moved, in the far distance churning swiftly southwards yet overhead almost motionless.

An urge suddenly betook him to see once more the sweet glade where Tarithel had found him.

In a few minutes, Morkin was on his horse and riding slowly through the blackness of the forest, his way lit only by memory. Whether it was Morkin or the stallion who truly found it is difficult to say, but eventually he emerged into the broad clearing where the snow glowed on the frozen ground like a pale, phosphorescent pool. The stallion walked to the heart of the glade and waited there while the boy peered around himself, trying to conjure out of the darkness his meeting with Tarithel.

Above, the storm clouds thickened and deepened and circled over the citadel of Dreams, as though searching for something. Thunder cracked and lightning raked the steep walls of the great fortress, scouring the stone with its blinding fire. Sheets of hail hammered at the rooves and windows of the tightly huddled houses and the taut canvas of the encampment.



The wind wailed through the empty streets, tearing at slates and shutters, rending proud banners, flinging itself at the tall wooden gates till they groaned and shrieked at the onslaught. The turbulence flew outwards from the Citadel, whirling through the ancient trees of the Forest, stripping them bare and snapping their stout limbs.

Into the clearing where Morkin sat rushed a flurry of debris and flying leaves, yet at the very centre of the glade the air remained unruffled. Suddenly everything grew still. Then, a moment later, a torrent of sharp and icy hail sliced down. The stallion, not waiting for command from its master, started for the shelter of the trees but before they reached the edge of the clearing a single bright tongue of blue fire licked down from the tormented sky and seared into the ground before them. The stallion reared, throwing Morkin into the snow, then rushed off into the darkness.

Stunned and half-blinded, the boy clambered to his feet to go in search of his terrified steed. Once again the lightning struck down ahead of him, so close that he could feel its heat on his face, feel his skin tingle and tremble as its power crackled through the air about him. Then the storm loosed off bolt after bolt after bolt until the boy was trapped in a circle of raging, incandescent fire.

So fierce was the raw power that danced around the boy that his very muscles seized and locked. Helplessly frozen there by the lightning, he could only stare into its blinding blue flame until consciousness fled him.

Suddenly, the storm relented, the lightning stopped abruptly and the unconscious boy slumped to the ground. Above, the towering clouds simply melted away and the bright stars gleamed in the sky once more. The calm that followed was profound; the Forest seemed to hold its breath and wait, as if suspecting that the slightest whisper would bring the terrible tumult raging through it again.

Morkin lay unmoving, wrapped in strange dreams. A woman stood before him beckoning gently. Somehow he knew he was hopelessly in love with her. As she stood there smiling, radiant in her beauty, he ran towards her open arms yet he seemed to draw no closer. Her deep, crystal eyes mocked him. You must run more, swiftly to catch me, my love, she seemed to say, you must run more swiftly.

As he ran, the ground gave way beneath him and he began to tumble down a dark chasm. The wind rushed swiftly past him and he seemed to fall for hours before he saw a tiny point of light glimmering in the yawning space beneath him.

The point grew and grew as he fell until it became a room into which he was falling from the dark and open sky. Upon a silkstrewn bed lay the woman who had beckoned him, her sheer and perfect beauty now naked to his enraptured eyes. But, as he tumbled, an invisible hand seemed to reach out and slow his downward flight until he hovered above the sleeping figure, almost able to reach out and touch her, but not quite.

So the dream ran on, the woman who had beckoned appearing again and again, each time her beauty more ravishing and voluptuous than before, each time the boy seeming to move inexorably towards her open embrace but never completing that final distance.

Morkin woke with no memory of the night that had passed. His mind felt black and numb. A tall stallion nuzzled him as he lay in the cold snow, trees that were high, bare and broken enclosed him, but beyond that the boy knew naught. Only a single, urgent thought filled his mind. North, it whispered, North! You must ride swifter than the wind. In a daze, he hauled himself onto the stallion's saddle. He looked around himself bemused, then, shaking off the last shackles of sleep, urged the horse forward. Northward they galloped, and were quickly lost in the deep tangle of trees.

Doomdark's Revenge



CHAPTER FIVE

THE GATE OF VARENORN

Morkin was not seen again. No word of him was heard, no trace of him could be found. Three days later, Tarithel disappeared as well, taking with her one of her father's swiftest mounts. The prince despatched messengers far and wide but of the fate of Morkin or Tarithel not a whisper returned. The armies camped 'neath the battlements of the Citadel of Dreams dispersed and wound their way southwards to home and hearth and kin. Only Luxor remained with a thousand riders of his Houseguard, waiting for news. For three moons, none came. Then, out of the North rode Rorthron the Wise, bearing ill-tidings. When news of the boy's disappearance had reached him, he had ridden to the broken city of Ushgarak and then West across the Plains of Despair to the Tower of Doom itself, hoping to find some clue to Morkin's fate. In Ushgarak he had found nothing but at the Tower he had unearthed a letter addressing itself to "My dearest Father, Doomdark, Witchking of Midnight," and signed, "Your ever-loving Shareth, of the Frozen Empire."

His suspicions roused, Rorthron had turned his far-reaching vision Northwards across the frozen wastes to the land of Icemark, but he could not penetrate further than the southern borders of a grey and desolate domain he imaged must be the Empire spoken of. Shareth, it seemed, had powers too. In the swirling mists at the grey borders, she conjured up an image of herself, radiant with cold and piercing beauty. She challenged him fiercely to try his powers further and when he refused, she laughed scornfully.

"You are all so puny and pathetic! Soon I will have you all in my power," she had crowed. "Tell this to your precious Moonprince: I have his son in my grasp already. The boy is mad with love for me and lies at this very moment locked in one of my less pleasant dungeons, pining piteously for my embraces."



When I am ready, I shall set him at the head of my armies and send him back to Midnight to shatter the peace you snivellers are so fond of! Seven moons from now I, Shareth, Empress of the Icemark, will ride forth to avenge Doomdark, my beloved father. The Frozen Gates I shall tear down. Midnight I shall lay waste and through the portals of Xajorkith I will pass, triumphant. All shall adore me and despair! Or, if the Moonprince prefers, let him ride to hammer at my door and find defeat more swiftly!"

Fearing that Shareth's words were not an idle boast, Rorthron had ridden East with all haste and came at last to the Tower of Lorgrim. There he learnt that the Frozen Gates had cracked open at the last new moon. A lonely figure, riding northwards, had plunged into the dark caverns beneath the barrier ice before a sudden, thunderous ice-fall had closed the Gates once more.

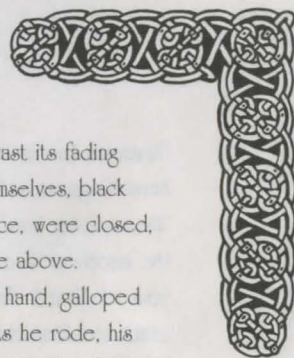
Rorthron tarried no longer but sped south to the Forest of Dreams.

To Luxor, everything now grew clear, the strange warning of the white falcon, the murderous storm that heralded the disappearance of Morkin, even Tarithel's sudden absence so soon after the first vanishing. She had surely guessed Morkin's peril, as surely as she divined the slow, slumbrous songs of the dreaming trees. Though doubtless many leagues behind, she would have followed, listening for the distant whispering of his bewitched and troubled dreams. The Moonprince hardly paused before deciding upon the course of action that must be taken.

Northwards at once they must ride; any delay would only serve to allow Shareth time to gather her power more fully. Against failure, the lord of Dreams would remain in Midnight to marshal the Fey and the Free but Rorthron would ride with the Moonprince to the Frozen Gates.

Swiftness was the watchword, to strike at the Empress while she felt safe and secure. Before the hour had passed, the riders of the Houseguard of the Moon thundered north towards Lorgrim with Luxor and Rorthron at their head. Banners swirling, helms and spears gleaming in the clear noon sun, they swept through the Forest of Dreams like a torrent.

They rode without pause, passing Droonhenge at Midnight, reaching the Plains of Fadraith by next morning. Never had an army ridden so swiftly. By nightfall of that day, the Tower of Lorgrim rose before them, flanked by the grim wilderness of the Icy Wastes. Only at the foot of the Frozen Gates did they come to a halt.



The jagged ridge of ice gleamed blood-red as the westerling sun cast its fading brilliance on the cold towers and barren pinnacles. The Gates themselves, black and cavernous mouths that led to secret ways beneath the glacial ice, were closed, blocked by mountainous shards that had toppled from the ice-ridge above. Few hearts did not quail, but Rorthron, seizing his staff in his right hand, galloped forward and charged at the great bergs that stood before them. As he rode, his deep voice boomed out across the wilderness, quelling the insistent wails of the North Wind and echoing back in a thousand fragments from the endless walls of ice. His words held no meaning for those who heard them, but all could sense they were Words of Power. The army waited breathlessly for fire to leap forth from his staff. No such spectacle ensued; instead, the ice seemed to turn to molten glass and sink back into the precipitous face of the barrier ridge, parting like a curtain as it slithered backwards. Suddenly the jaws of the Frozen Gates were revealed and Rorthron, now a mere speck in the distance, rushed into the throat of their age-long darkness.

The Moonprince and his riders cheered and sprang forward after him. Swiftly the darkness swallowed them and there, in the mouth of a broad tunnel, they paused to look one more time upon the fair land of Midnight. Rorthron's commanding voice spurred them to swift motion again.

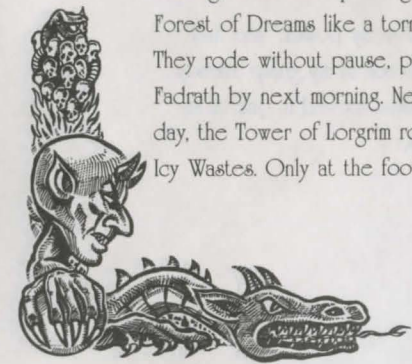
"Ride swiftly, my friends, ride swiftly! The spell will not hold! If we tarry, the Gates will come crashing down upon us."

Now, at last his staff burst forth with fire and Rorthron launched himself into the black depths beyond like a blazing comet. The Moonprince and his riders galloped after the fleeing light with as much speed as they could muster. The crack and thunder of exploding ice that followed them as they rode left no doubt in their minds as to the truth of Rorthron's words.

Though soon safe in the bowels of the earth, the cohorts of the Moonprince pressed on with all speed. The last road to the Icemark was dank and malodorous, broken, slithery and pitted.

Curses and oaths filled the rank air. Tired beyond mere exhaustion, none wished to pause. Finally after many hours of dark passage, the army emerged into the clear night of the Icemark.

Luxor turned and looked up at the deserted towers and walls of the Gate of Varenorn, guarding the northern entrance of the road to Midnight. He smiled.



"It seems our haste has not been in vain, Rorthron. The witch looks not to guard herself against us," he said.

"Perhaps, my Lord Moonprince, perhaps, or perhaps she has simply left the door of the coop open to entice a fox. It was your hand that slew Doomdark, it will be your death she desires most of all, even though she lusts after all of Midnight," cautioned Rorthron.

"If I fall, so be it; the safety of my son is paramount."

"If you fall, Luxor, so will Midnight. Creatures such as Shareth feed on their own success and quaff the power of their victims. She will be unassailable, I fear, if her vengeance is assuaged."

"Then do you advise me against this course, Rorthron?" asked the Moonprince.

"No, my friend. The boy must be rescued; 'twould be unthinkable to leave him in such foul hands, even were it not that the Heartstealer has the power to twist him and use him against the land of his birth. We are caught in a cleft stick, I fear."

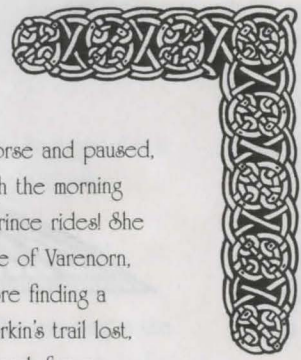
"Rorthron, we must strike at the source of her power, at her stronghold, wherever that may lie. I have no doubt you speak truly, yet her arrogance may still be used against her. If she expects anything, she will expect us to attempt no more than a rescue before fleeing from the Ice-mark. Let us instead strike at the vitals of her cold Empire! While Doomdark's daughter lives, Midnight will remain in mortal peril. Let us rid ourselves of this pestilence in a single stroke!" said Luxor forcefully.

"Indeed, my Lord, I see no other way. Nothing would more imperil Morkin's life than an army hammering at the gate of his prison. But come, we must all rest before the day breaks. We are strangers in this land and may be forced to follow unforeseen paths before we win through; we must find friends as well as enemies."

When dawn broke, the Moonprince mounted his charger. He took once more the Moonring, last of Midnight's great Rings of War, and slipped it on his finger, where it had not rested since the slaughter of Doomdark. Then, he lofted his hand to the sky, the Moonring blazing there like a fragment of the rising sun. As its glad power shone out, a rousing cheer came from the long ranks of riders.

"For Midnight!" cried Luxor. "For Midnight and the Free! Hear me, Shareth Heartstealer; we ride to tear the Frozen Empire asunder!"

Rorthron whirled his staff about his head, flinging a storm of golden fire into the chill air, the trumpets of the heralds blew a proud fanfare, and the cohorts of the Moonprince rode forth from the Gate of Varenorn into the Ice-mark.



Far away, in a deep and dreamless forest, Tarithel reined in her horse and paused, listening with her mind to the whisper of hope that rippled through the morning mists. The Moonring is unveiled, she thought to herself, the Moonprince rides! She too had travelled the dark road that led from Midnight to the Gate of Varenorn, searching for many days along the ridge of the Frozen Gates before finding a crevice that would let her through. Now, with all hope of finding Morkin's trail lost, she was journeying towards rumours of the City of Imorthorn in search for any scrap of news, in search of any person who might remember his passing. Though she had seen the new

moon turn to full and wane again, she had found no trace of him. Despair had worked its way with her and she rebuked herself constantly for keeping her fears to herself when she rode off in pursuit of her Morkin, even though at the time those fears had been so vague and formless that she could not have put word to them. Only when it was too late to turn back for help did she realise the immensity of her task, and feel the cold, implacable power of the Heartstealer's dreams.

The thought, now, that Midnight was roused and that its mighty Lords marched upon the Frozen Empire warmed her like a fire. She put aside her doubts and despair. "Morkin. I will find thee, my love," she whispered. "No ice, no storm, no sword or shaft shall keep me from thy side, no hagwitch's twisted dreams shall come between us. Let her fling a thousand foul armies in my path, still I will find thee!"

Tarithel rode on towards Imorthorn. The webs of time shook softly and a shiver trembled across the land of Ice-mark. Many tears were about to be shed, much blood to be spilt.

The wind howled.



The Citadel



CHAPTER ONE THE MINSTREL

As the smouldering dusk fell, the Citadel of Xajorkith towering above them on the opposite bank seemed lit by a great fire in the west. Luxor the Moonprince gazed up at the Great Tower where his banner fluttered in the gentle breeze. Already the torches were being lit and the slender windows of the Tower were filled with a bright glow. He turned to his grandson. "Well, Corleth, I would not yearn for adventure too much. Only fools seek danger eagerly."

"Grandfather!" said the boy in exasperation. "I only want a little excitement. Father was younger than me when he set forth to destroy the Ice Crown."

"Those were desperate times, Corleth. If that sort of excitement comes your way, I dare say it will be as unexpected as it is unwelcome. Come, let us return now before the feast starts without us," said Luxor.

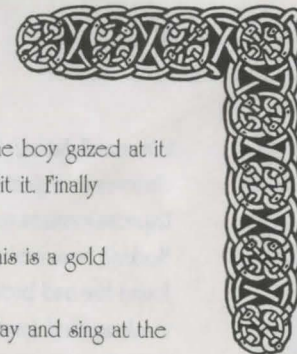
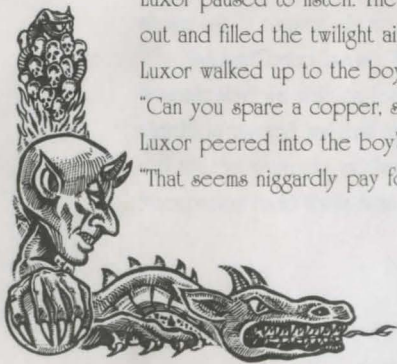
The pair set off again along the riverbank towards the Bridge of Whispers, a stone's throw upstream. A last caravan of carts and wagons and packhorses was making its way across the bridge and through Dawngate into the city. As they approached the bridge, Luxor noticed a ragged, barefoot boy sitting on the stone wall, cradling a lute. Beside him on the wall was a cap with a handful of copper coins in it. The boy looked dejected but as Luxor and Corleth drew closer, he looked towards them, gave a dazzling smile and began to play. After a few notes, he began to sing.

Luxor paused to listen. The boy's voice was pure and golden and his song swelled out and filled the twilight air. Then the song was over and the air seemed empty. Luxor walked up to the boy, who slid off the wall onto his feet, cap in hand.

"Can you spare a copper, sir?" said the minstrel boy.

Luxor peered into the boy's cap. Five small coins lay within.

"That seems niggardly pay for such song, lad. This is more fitting, I'm sure."



Saying so, the Moonprince dropped a gold piece into the cap. The boy gazed at it in astonishment. Then, coming to his senses, he picked it up and bit it. Finally convinced he looked up at Luxor, puzzled.

"Begging your pardon sir, but surely you've made some mistake. This is a gold piece!"

"No mistake my lad, and there'll be another three if you care to play and sing at the Moonprince's feast tonight."

"I'm hardly dressed for a feast sir," said the boy.

"Some new clothes, a hot bath, a good meal and a bed for the night in the Great Tower, that's the rest of the bargain," said Luxor.

"I don't mind new clothes sir, nor meal nor bed - that's plenty generous - but a bath?"

Luxor laughed.

"You never know, you might even enjoy it," said the Moonprince.

The feast was in honour of Luxor's old friend, Lord Blood, who was visiting Xajorkith with his eldest son, Arin. The feast was in the open air, in the courtyard of the Great Tower. There were seven at the Moonprince's table. To Luxor's right was his son, Morkin, then Morkin's wife, Tarithel the Fey, then Tarithel's father, Araeth, Lord of Dreams. To Luxor's left was Lord Blood, then Arin and finally Morkin and Tarithel's son Corleth. At the other tables, a hundred guests or more were seated.

Luxor and Lord Blood, both white-haired now with age, talked of old battles, of how they had stood side by side on the Plains of Blood to hold back Doomdark's foul hordes for just a few days and gain time for Midnight to be roused, of the desperate retreat to Shimeril with the enemy at their heels, of the long march north to Ushgarak and the great battle there that sealed Doomdark's fate.

One by one, Prince Morkin, Tarithel and the Lord of Dreams were drawn into these reminiscences. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the Ice-mark and the war against Shareth the Heartstealer. For once, Lord Blood fell silent while the others told their tales. Tarithel still shuddered as she remembered her long struggle through the dark labyrinth of tunnels beneath the Ice-mark, searching for a way under the frozen wastes that ringed and guarded Kahangron, the Heartstealer's great fortress.

Luxor and Araeth spoke of the many battles on their way north, of the rallying of dwarves and giants and fey to their banners as they heaped defeat on the Empress's armies and of the great battle when Shareth herself was slain. Morkin's memories were vaguer, but he spoke of his joy and confusion when Tarithel found him and broke Shareth's spell with a single kiss. And then they all spoke of the long hard journey back through the Frozen Empire to the Gate of Varenorn and Midnight.

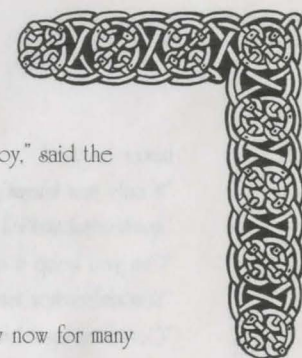
Arin and Corleth, having heard these tales a dozen times or more, or so it seemed to them, paid little heed and fell to boasting to each other of their moments of glory in the hunt, in sword practice and in courting. Meanwhile, in the centre of the courtyard, there were acrobats, jugglers, a dancing bear, fire-eaters, clowns, dancing girls. Finally, the minstrel boy came on, washed and scrubbed and wearing fine new clothes. Quietly, almost unnoticed, the boy began to play. Then, when he sang, his voice soared like a lark and a hush fell in the courtyard as people stopped talking and turned to listen.

The minstrel's songs were old ballads that everyone knew well but his golden voice gave them each a new lustre. The boy's final song, however, was different. The melody was strange and haunting, the words spoke of cities and kings that no one had heard of.

"...Then he plucked the glittering ring from the sand
And took the Eye of the Moon in his hand.
A ring for his wedding, a wife for his bed,
Sherehar and Asim now could be wed."

It was the end of the song. The gathered throng broke into rapturous applause, but Luxor looked startled. The boy blushed at such applause and then bowed before his audience. As everyone clapped and shouted, the Moonprince quietly slipped away from the feast.

Luxor waited by the players' entrance for the boy to return. When he did so, Luxor simply beckoned him to follow, then silently led him a winding way through torchlit corridors and up spiralling stairs to a small, terrace garden high in the Great Tower. The garden was deserted and lit only by the moon and stars. Luxor sat down on a stone bench close to the tower wall and motioned the boy to sit beside him. From here, you could look out over the river to the Plains of Corelay beyond and Luxor would often come here to sit and watch in peace.



"Your singing was wondrous yet I do not even know your name, boy," said the Moonprince.

"I am called Derim, my lord," said the boy.

"Tell me, Derim. You are not of these parts, are you?"

"No sir. I have wandered through many lands."

"I guessed as much. Midnight has been a land of peace and plenty now for many years and I do not let my people go ragged and hungry, even wandering minstrels. And your speech has strange accents. Where are you from then, Derim?" enquired the Moonprince.

"I am of Coromand, my lord," said the boy.

"Coromand! That is a faraway land indeed - or so I hear."

"Very far, my lord, and none I would return to."

"What befell you there?" asked the Moonprince.

"I was apprenticed to a songmaster and we travelled from town to town. Each time my singing earned him enough for a flagon of wine, he got drunk and then beat me for no reason, so I ran away."

Derim loosened his shirt and turned his bare back towards Luxor. Even in the moonlight, Luxor could still see the old scars on the boy's back. He winced.

"So would I have," said Luxor. "Those are more like warrior's wounds. How long ago was that?"

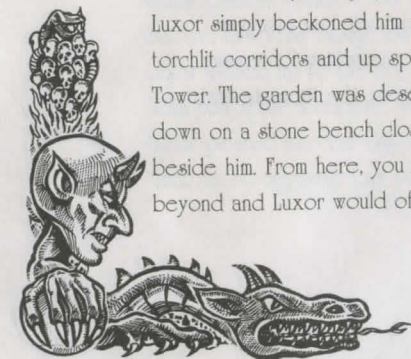
"More than a year. I knew a song that told of the wars of the Moonprince and the melting of the Frozen Wastes and the opening of the land of Midnight to the world again and how beautiful and abundant and peaceful Midnight was. So I headed north out of Coromand and into the Blood March where I knew he'd never pursue me," said Derim. "I've been travelling ever since, stopping in each place for few days and then moving on before they grew bored of my songs."

"And that last song you sang, where did you learn that?" said Luxor.

"In Coromand, sir. The ballad of Sherehar and Asim is famous there. Did you not like it, sir?" said the boy, puzzled.

"The opposite, lad, quite the opposite. It was an astonishing song, especially the last verse."

"The last verse? That always makes the ladies reach for their handkerchiefs but - begging your pardon - I think it's a bit soppy. It would be much better if it ended with Asim bloodied and victorious in battle, his enemies cowering at his feet."



Luxor laughed.

"If only you knew!" said the Moonprince.

"Knew what sir?"

"Can you keep a secret, Derim?"

"Yes sir, my lips are sealed."

"Centuries ago, before Midnight had been sullied by Doomdark and trapped in endless winter, Midnight had a great war-ring to keep it safe. That was the Moon Ring and on it was set the most precious of jewels, the Eye of the Moon."

Luxor opened the neck of his tunic. There, against his chest was a golden ring, hanging by a slender golden chain.

"This is the Moon Ring," he said. "I keep it with me all the time."

"But the Eye of the Moon is gone!" said Derim, grasping the mystery. "And that last verse of Sherehar is a clue to where it might be."

"Exactly. If your song be true, it seems the Eye of the Moon has been found again and set in another ring."

"It's true sir. A ring called the Eye of the Moon still lies in the King's Tower in Coromand. No one but the King himself is allowed to touch it."

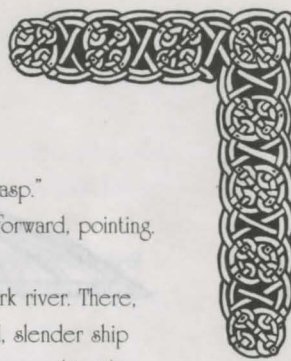
"It would be better if none were allowed to touch it. When Asim took it from the sand, he held a thing more dangerous than any sword or lance. The Eye of the Moon lent dread power to the Moon Ring and doubtless will lend the same to any other ring in which it is set," said Luxor.

"How was the jewel lost sir?" asked Derim.

"By foolishness. Rarnor the Unlucky was Moonprince then. The Moon Ring has such power it should only be placed on a finger in times of war and great peril, but Rarnor was unlucky in love. One night, in frustration, he donned the Moon Ring to impress and enchant a pretty maiden. He did so with some success, but in the morning, when he woke, the maiden was gone and so was the Eye of the Moon, plucked from the ring on his finger as he slept. Neither maiden nor jewel were ever seen again."

"Will you try to get it back, now you know that it's been found?"

"I must," said Luxor. "I fear that the Eye of the Moon in the wrong hands could be turned against Midnight and put the land in the greatest of peril. And there is another reason too. The Eye gave the Moonprinces of old fleeting glimpses of things to come. I am growing old. Before I die, I would dearly love to know that this is a lasting peace that Midnight enjoys."



"When will you leave, sir?" said the boy.

"On the morrow! If a moment is not seized, it may slip from your grasp."

Luxor rose to his feet and went over to the battlement. He leant forward, pointing. "Look, Derim," he said.

The minstrel boy came to Luxor's side and peered down at the dark river. There, moored alongside a wooden jetty further upstream, was a beautiful, slender ship rocking gently as the current curled around it. In the moonlight, it seemed to the boy that it was made of silver.

"There lies the Cormorant, swiftest of my fleet," said the Moonprince.

"Tomorrow, bearing rich gifts for the King of Coromand, we'll set sail down the Milvir towards the Last Mountains and the Blood March."

"Will you take me with you then?" asked the boy eagerly.

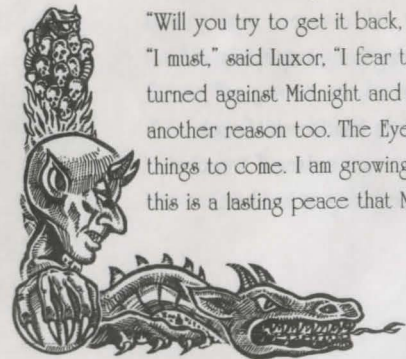
"Nay lad! You have done enough already and suffered many hardships to bring me this tale. Rest here, where there is laughter and joy. Besides, the minstrel to the Court of the Moonprince must stay here in Xajorkith and compose new ballads for my return."

"Minstrel to the court?" said the boy, suddenly a treble once more.

"If you will accept the post," said Luxor.

"Gladly, my lord!" said Derim.

In the moonlight, Luxor did not notice the boy blush.



The Citadel



CHAPTER TWO THE CORMORANT

Corleth paced the quarterdeck, his face flushed with anger. "It is for the best," said Luxor quietly, "You are too young." And you are far too old, thought Corleth but did not say it. He stopped and glared at his grandfather.

"Only yesterday you were warning me not to be over-eager for adventure but you and Lord Blood have been up half the night, happy as larks, plotting this expedition! You still thirst for adventure, Grandfather. Yet you will not let Arin and I quench our equal thirst. Is that fair, Grandfather?" said Corleth, impassioned.

Luxor paused for a moment, thinking. The boy's words had truth.

"Your father would be furious," said the Moonprince, stalling.

"Father is furious already. He says that you and Lord Blood are behaving like a pair of headstrong children and would that he were sailing to Coromand in your place."

"I know. He said as much to me," said Luxor, sighing.

"In any case, I have already asked him."

"What did he say?" asked Luxor, taken by surprise.

"He said that I could go if I wished and you granted your permission."

"That was all?"

"No," said Corleth, hesitantly.

"What else? Tell me!"

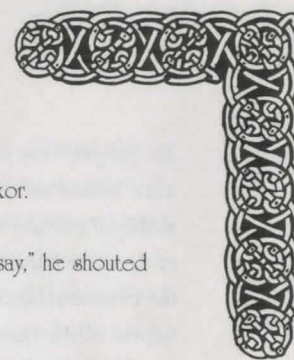
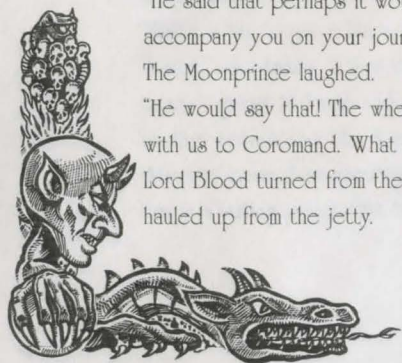
Corleth looked embarrassed.

"He said that perhaps it would be better to have someone with a bit more sense accompany you on your journey."

The Moonprince laughed.

"He would say that! The wheel turns! Very well then, Corleth, you and Arin shall sail with us to Coromand. What say you, Lord Blood?"

Lord Blood turned from the rail where he had been watching provender being hauled up from the jetty.



"Eh?" he said, cupping his hand to his ear.

"What say you to Arin and Corleth joining us, Blood?" shouted Luxor.

Lord Blood smiled.

"Try stopping 'em and we'll be here forever arguing, that's what I say," he shouted back.

Corleth grinned and then hugged the Moonprince.

"Thanks, Grandfather, many thanks! You'll not regret it, I promise. I shall go to tell Arin."

Corleth broke away and ran off.

"Don't forget to pack some kit!" shouted Luxor after him.

Corleth turned briefly.

"It's packed already - and stowed down below," he added before rushing off again.

It was late afternoon before the Cormorant was finally ready to sail. A small crowd had gathered on the riverbank and on the jetty, Prince Morkin and Princess Tarithel had come to say their farewells.

"May your quest go well, Father," said Morkin, "Return swiftly and safe!"

"I shall, my son, I shall," said Luxor.

Then Luxor moved his hands behind his neck, unclasping something, and drew forth the Moon Ring on its golden chain. Smiling, he pressed it into Prince Morkin's hand.

"This must be in your keeping now, Morkin. Guard Midnight well whilst I am gone!" said the Moonprince.

"I feared you might give me the Moon Ring, Father. Take it with you, I beg of you.

You must travel through wild and troubled lands to reach Coromand and, likely as not, there will be times when you will be glad of it," said Morkin.

"And leave Midnight unguarded? I could never do that!" said Luxor.

"These are times of peace. What threat can there be to guard against?"

"Who knows? But ravenous wolves strike without warning."

"Have it as you will then, Father. I will guard Midnight well, be sure of that. Guard yourself well, Father!" said Prince Morkin.

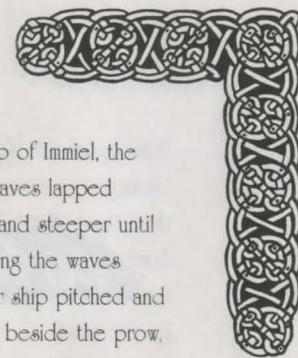
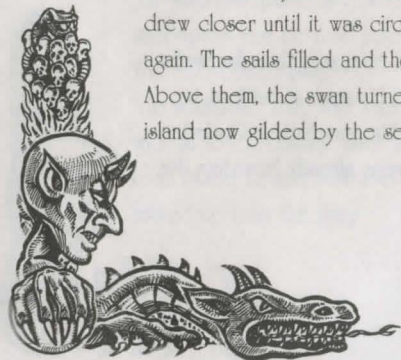
Then, with fond embraces, Luxor, Corleth, Lord Blood and Arin, said their farewells to Morkin and Tarithel. As Morkin wrapped his arms around his son's shoulders, he whispered in his ear to take good care of himself and of his grandfather. Corleth smiled and nodded, then turned to join the others who were already boarding the Cormorant.

The gangway was hauled on board. At a shout from the captain, the mooring ropes were loosed and the great sail unfurled. The light breeze rippled over the sail, shaking it out like a curtain at first, then catching it tight and filling it. To the cheers of the crowd, the Cormorant swung slowly out into the stream. Then, as if it knew, the breeze stiffened and the Cormorant gathered speed. To Corleth, leaning over the rail of the quarterdeck, the cheers of the crowd grew thin and distant, the figures on the jetty dwindled to specks and the great Citadel of Xajorkith slid away, its white towers gleaming like snow in the afternoon sun, its bright banners flying in the gathering wind.

The Imilvir meandered lazily across the Plains of Corelay before turning south towards the Last Mountains. The ship's crew knew the river well and the Cormorant made all speed, sailing by moonlight and starlight as well as by sun. By dawn of the next day, they had reached the Castle of Corelay and by noon they had raced through the breach that the Imilvir carved through the Last Mountains into Erifel and the Blood March. It was the first time that Corleth and Arin had ever journeyed beyond Midnight and their eyes were lit with excitement as they watched the gentle plains of Erifel glide past.

Without pause, the Cormorant sped through the Witherlands. By the third day, they had reached Glimormir, a lake so broad that Corleth and Arin fancied they had come to the Great Ocean already. As they sailed away from the rivermouth, the shoreline became a dwindling thread on the horizon until there was no land to be seen at all. The eye wearied of gazing at water without end for hour upon hour and when, as dusk grew nigh, the Isle of Immiel rose up on the horizon before them, a shout of joy came from all alike, from captain to sail-monkey.

The wind fell away to a soft breeze and the Cormorant drifted slowly towards the distant island. As the sun drew down in the west scattering golden fire upon the lake and the sky darkened in the east, Corleth spied a white swan against the ink blue sky above Immiel, winging swiftly towards them. Gradually, the swan drew closer until it was circling above them. Then, suddenly, the wind sprang up again. The sails filled and the Cormorant leapt forward, flying across the water. Above them, the swan turned and flew eastwards, as though leading them to the island now gilded by the setting sun.



The sun was blood-red in the west as they rounded the western tip of Immiel, the white swan still ahead of them. Tall trees lined the shore and the waves lapped against gentle beaches but, presently, the shoreline grew craggier and steeper until towering cliffs loomed over them. The wind grew stronger too, lashing the waves against the dark rocks and hurling the Cormorant along. The slender ship pitched and shuddered as it crashed through the swell. Standing on the fo'c'sle, beside the prow, Corleth gripped the rail tightly and laughed as the spray splashed over him. At his side, Arin was white and silent and tight-knuckled but stood his place even though there seemed a greater turmoil in his belly than in the thrashing waters below. At length, after they rounded a headland, an inlet came in sight. The captain, fearing the weather might worsen, steered the Cormorant towards it but the swan had already turned and was at the inlet already. The Cormorant hurtled between the rocks and cliffs but no more than a hundred yards into the inlet the waters calmed and the wind dropped away. The ship slowed and slid smoothly through unruffled waters. Arin, for one, breathed a sigh of relief and a little colour came back to his cheeks.

Soon, the inlet gave way to a broad bay, a natural harbour. The mouth of the bay was still flanked by rocks and tall cliffs but at the far shore a golden strand sloped gently into the water. Another ship was already moored there, its sail furled. The swan they had followed all the way circled at the shoreline and landed on the still waters just off the beach. The light was failing as they neared the shore. As they drew closer, Corleth and Arin spotted figures moving towards them along the beach, bearing torches and brightly coloured lanterns. Then a herald's voice hailed them from the shore.

"Luxor the Moonprince, Prince of Midnight, my lord Galahar, Lord of Immiel, King of Glimormir, bids thee welcome to the Golden Isle!"

"The Moonprince bids thee to thank the Lord of Immiel most kindly for his welcome!" came the loud reply.

The Cormorant hove to and dropped anchor. Then seven small boats pushed out from the shore, each with a lantern at the prow, and came alongside the Cormorant. Rope ladders were slung out over the rail and, one by one, the occupants of the rowing boats climbed aboard. The first to step on deck was a tall, slender fey clad in white and silver and blue. A golden circlet studded with sapphires sat upon his golden hair. Luxor was there to greet him.

"I am Luxor the Moonprince. Welcome aboard the Cormorant, stranger."

"Stranger no more. Galahar the Calm, Lord of Immiel am I and for thy welcome, I thee thank, Moonprince."

Saying so, Galahar the Calm bowed deeply. Though he disliked too much ceremony, Luxor felt obliged to follow suit. Then he smiled warmly at Galahar and clasped him by the hand.

"Come, we'll spend no more time in introductions. The day grows old. Let us repair to the quarterdeck where food and drink aplenty are being laid out as we speak. This eve, you'll sup of the best fare that the abundance of Midnight can offer." Corleth, watching, smiled to himself.

Grandfather must be hungry, he thought. Usually he strings out the introductions for ages.

"Well said, Luxor!" said Galahar, with a laugh in his voice. "To keep such matters brief often for the best it is. More than a little hungry am I also, I must confess. The Cormorant didst we expect a little sooner."

"Then news must spread swiftly in these parts, indeed!" said Luxor with some surprise. "Since we left Midnight, we have travelled fleet as the wind without a stop or break!"

"A white swan is the device upon the shield of Immiel," said Galahar, obliquely.



The Citadel



CHAPTER THREE GALAHAR'S TALE

The feasting was done and the songs had drawn to an end. Luxor and Lord Blood were talking with Galahar but this time, unlike the feast in Xajorkith, Corleth and Arin were listening eagerly. These were new tales.

"We have heard much over the years about Midnight, Moonprince, but I fear thou knowest little of the Blood March. There is an evil that stalks this land, an evil more potent than Doomdark and all his brood and minions," said Galahar, dropping the courtly convolutions of the fey and speaking simply now, in the manner of men, to drive his point home.

"Here, in Immiel, we yet live in peace," he continued. "The powers I still possess are sufficient to keep Glimormir safe and make the Golden Isle a sanctuary against darkness and evil. Yet if we venture beyond our realm, the powers of the Golden Fey wane and wither and we become as weak as children. And it is beyond our realm that the dark storm gathers!"

"Indeed, we have heard nothing of this in Midnight! Yet the Blood March lies upon our borders. How have we not heard of this?" said the Moonprince, frowning. "What is this evil that you speak of?"

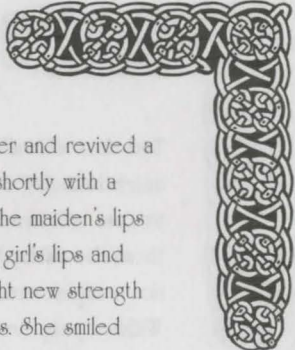
"Fear, Luxor, fear keeps it secret. Though they do not rule it yet, the Dark Fey hold the Blood March in terror. They have spies and assassins everywhere save Immiel. It is a brave man who speaks a word against them and a lucky one who does so and lives to tell the tale."

"The Dark Fey?" said Luxor. "The Fey are a goodly people. The world over, they are untainted by evil."

"Yes," said Galahar. "It was always so, and so it used to be in the Blood March..."



In Eldmark, the Eldrin weave with nimble hands
The silken threads that frame the fate of other lands,
The Long Dwarves in the Mountains, the Athelings in the Lee,
The Arakai in the Last Northing gazing out to sea,
The Uskarg in the Fallows free in the hills to roam
The Giants in the Delve hewing out the stone,
More Dwarves in the Deeping, their digging just begun,
In the Gelm, the Gelmings basking in the sun,
The Kith in the Witherlands seeking lands more fair,
In Arungor, the Dragonlords riding through the air,
The Golden Fey in Immiel amidst the shining lake,
The Dawn Fey in Dawnwood where the sun first breaks,
In Weirdwood, the High Fey under the shimmering trees,
In Ravenwood, the First Fey taking their ease.
The First Fey were the eldest and noblest of us all," said Galahar, "No one could have foreseen the darkness that overtook them."
It was nigh on four hundred years ago, when Coronoth the Fair was King of Ravenwood. The land was at peace and was abundant. In the forest, the trees grew tall and shady and bright flowers carpeted the floor. There was little need for toil and the people made songs and told tales, there was laughter and joy morning, noon and night. One summer's morn, Coronoth had been strolling through the forest and was resting a while in a glade beside a rushing stream, watching a kingfisher dive into the clear water. Then, behind him, Coronoth heard a faint moan. He turned to see a young maiden stumble from the forest into the glade. She was barefoot and in rags, her dark hair matted and bedraggled, her face and arms and legs begrimed and scratched but even so, Coronoth saw at once how beautiful she was. The girl stumbled a few steps more and then collapsed upon the grass.
The young king leapt to his feet and rushed to the maiden's side. Gently, he lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the bank of the stream. He laid her down on the soft turf, making a pillow for her head with his tunic. Then, tenderly, he bathed her face with cool water. As the grime and blood were wiped away, Coronoth could see her skin was as soft and smooth as silk. The girl opened her eyes and they seemed deep, dark pools into which he was drawn. The girl, likewise, gazed at Coronoth in wonderment.



From the king's cupped hands, the girl drank of the cold, clear water and revived a little. Biding her to rest, Coronoth went into the forest, returning shortly with a handful of dark, red merilberries, the richest fruit of Ravenwood. The maiden's lips were a rose. One by one, Coronoth put the berries between the girl's lips and she ate them hungrily. Swiftly, like a potion, the sweet juices brought new strength to her tired limbs and some colour returned to the maiden's cheeks. She smiled and thanked him.

"How comest thou here in such distress?" asked Coronoth.

Tears welled in the maiden's eyes.

"I am in mortal peril, sir. They have been hunting me for five hundred leagues or more," she replied.

Gently, Coronoth brushed a tear from her cheek.

"Fear not, I prithee, here in Ravenwood thou art safe from all peril," he said, "But who art those that hunt thee?"

"Warriors from the north," replied the maiden, sobbing, "Their prince desired me but I could find no fondness for him in my heart. I rebuffed all his advances to no avail. One night he used his witching ring to cast an enchantment upon me and took me to his bed. In the dark hours of the morning, waking from his spell, I fled, realising with loathsome horror what had befallen me. But before I fled, I vowed to repay him for his wickedness. While he slept, I prised from the ring on his finger the stone that gave it power. His warriors and hounds have been hunting me ever since as they would a wild beast. I fear for my life sir."

"These cowards shalt not find thee in Ravenwood, I promise," said Coronoth, "All they will find is my steel through their craven hearts. Dray, tell me thy name, sweet maiden."

"Arithel, my lord," said the girl.

"And I am Coronoth, at thy service, my lady," said the king.

Then Coronoth, kneeling beside her, placed a single kiss upon Arithel's lips. It is said that he was in love with her from the first moment he set eyes upon her and she likewise. In any event, before the moon could wax and wane again, the twain were married in the Golden Citadel of Maranor and there was great rejoicing throughout the land.



Two days after Coronoth found Arithel in the glade, warriors from the north did indeed reach the borders of Ravenwood and, on the king's command, were allowed to pass unhindered into the forest. Then lost midst the towering trees, they found themselves surrounded by the king's host and were slain in a hail of arrows. Not a single warrior escaped. Thus was the king's promise kept. Within a year, Arithel bore Coronoth a son, Careth and two years later, another son, Boroth. The two princes were fine and handsome boys, Careth golden haired like his father, Boroth dark like his mother, and they grew strong and sturdy. When Careth was twelve, however, there was an accident in the forest. The brothers had been firing arrows at apples to bring them down from the branches. Boroth's arrow had missed its apple, striking a branch instead and staying there, so the boy climbed up the tree to fetch his arrow back. Boroth crawled out along the branch, reached down and tugged his arrow free but as he did so, he lost his grip and slipped from the bough. Careth, watching from the ground, ran to catch his brother who tumbled into his outstretched arms, knocking Careth backwards. Boroth scrambled to his feet unhurt, but in the fall his arrow had pierced Careth's shoulder.

"Bo! It's stuck me!" Careth cried out in pain and shock.

Boroth watched in horror and disbelief as a red rose of blood blossomed at the shoulder of his brother's white shirt. He knelt down beside him, sobbing.

"Car, th'art bleeding!" he wept.

"Don't cry," said his brother, fighting back his own tears, "Twas no one's fault. Just take out the arrow, it hurts me badly."

Boroth wiped the tears from his face with his grimy fingers, leaving streaks of black beneath his eyes.

"That will hurt thee even more," said Boroth.

"Then do it quickly," said his brother.

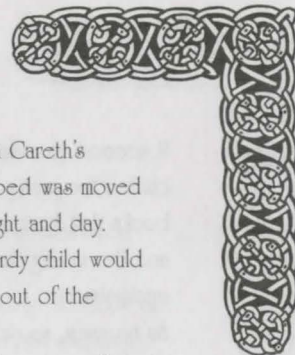
Trying not to tremble, Boroth gripped the arrow tight.

"Thou art the best brother in the world," he said, "Thou shouldst have let me fall."

Then, closing his eyes, he ripped the arrow free. Careth screamed and fainted.

Weeping afresh, Boroth cut away the sleeve of his brother's shirt with his hunting knife and bound the wound with the blood-soaked sleeve as best he could.

Then, finding a strength he did not know he had, he hoisted the older boy over his shoulder and stumbled homewards through the forest.



Though the healing arts of the First Fey were famous, the wound in Careth's shoulder festered and the boy grew weak and feverish. Careth's bed was moved into the Queen's bedchamber so that Arithel could tend to him night and day. Three days passed and each day the boy grew weaker. A less sturdy child would have been dead by now, the healing master told Coronoth grimly, out of the Queen's hearing.

Arithel was sitting at the boy's bedside, gently wiping his brow with a damp cloth. In a corner of the room, Boroth was idly exploring his mother's jewellery boxes, trying on her rings and bracelets. Then, in one box, he found a large bright stone, sitting alone unadorned by gold or silver. With an unvoiced gasp, Boroth knew that this was the witching stone of which he'd heard, the magical gem that the wicked prince of the north had used to ensnare his mother. His thoughts leapt ahead. If the stone could charm, perhaps it could also heal. His heart racing, Boroth took the witching stone from its wooden box and clenched it tightly in his small hand.

"I wish my brother were healed, I wish my brother were healed," he whispered, over and over again.

Then, quietly, Boroth placed the stone back in its box and closed the lid. He stood up and walked over to his brother's bed, beside the window. Standing at his mother's shoulder, he gazed down at his sleeping brother.

"Is Careth better yet, Mother?" he asked.

"Nay, child, the fever still has him," said Arithel, quietly.

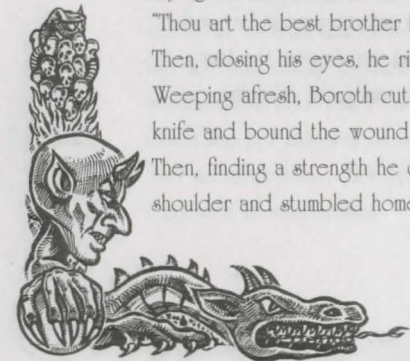
But at her words, a glimmer of sunlight fell upon the boy's face and Careth stirred, opening his eyes and smiling up at her.

"Have I been sleeping long, Mother?" the boy asked.

The fever had passed and, mysteriously to all save his brother, the boy's wound had healed. In the Golden Citadel, there was much rejoicing that day and happiest of all was Boroth. But this deed, done in all innocence and out of his love for his brother, was the beginning of Boroth's downfall into darkness."

Galahar paused, a deep sadness in his eyes.

"As the years passed, Boroth returned to his mother's chamber again and again to take the witching stone from its box and hold it in his hand, whispering a boyish wish, a fine hawk for his brother, a sunny day for his father's return from the Gelm on the morrow, a silken dress from Coromand for his mother. Each time, his wish was granted, but each time the witching stone took deeper hold upon him.



It seemed to others that he had become studious and where his brother was chided for paying little heed to his letters and lore, Boroth was praised. But the books that Boroth read most avidly were ancient books of magic arts and spells and the writing that the boy most loved to do was all of sorcerors and their enchantments.

As he grew, so did his knowledge of the magic arts. There was one book that he longed to read, the Last Book of the Wise. All the other books referred to it and a dusty copy of it lay in his father's library but it was written in the ancient tongue and script of the Wise which the boy could not decipher. Determined not to be thwarted, Boroth set out to learn the ancient tongue.

He studied until his head ached and his eyes throbbed but, try as he might, he could not understand. Each new word seemed to have a dozen meanings, each part of speech a thousand rules. Each night he sobbed with frustration and his head span. One evening, his mind in a daze, he threw his books against the wall and flung himself on his bed, weeping. Careth tried to console him.

"Rest thine eyes, brother," he said, "Tis a dry old tongue that no one speaks any more. Come to the dancing with me and we'll study pretty maidens instead."

But Boroth shook his head and refused. Careth left him and his misery deepened. It seemed to the boy that he understood less than when he started. Finally, angry and confused, Boroth turned to the witching stone for help. For the very first time, he found himself wishing for something for himself.

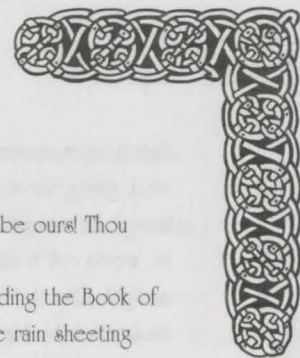
"I wish I could understand the tongue of the Wise," he wept, clutching the witching stone tight in his hand, "I wish I could understand!"

He repeated himself again and again, waiting for something to happen but nothing seemed to. Then, with astonishment, he realised that he had been whispering not "I wish I could understand!" but "Ara darith uranar garak tha-ithill" over and over again, without even thinking.

"Du-aran aral" he yelled in joy, I can speak it!

As his words rang out, there was flicker of lightning at the window and, with a roll of thunder, a mighty storm broke over the Golden Citadel. Boroth ran to the window and leaned out. Down below, in the courtyard, the dancers were scurrying for cover as the rain lashed down. He spotted his brother and called out to him.

"Car!" he shouted.



Careth, running for shelter, stopped and looked up.

"Du-aran aral" shouted Boroth, "Car, I can speak it! I can speak it!"

Careth grinned and shouted back, "Well done, Bo! This night must be ours! Thou hast won knowledge, I a maiden's sweet heart!"

The storm raged all night. Boroth sat beside his open window, reading the Book of the Wise by candlelight, glancing up from time to time to watch the rain sheeting down over the roofs and the lightning flicker across the forest. By daybreak, the boy had just reached the last page when his brother burst into the room and flung himself down on the bed, full of smiles.

"Hast thou finished the book already, Bo?" he said.

Boroth looked at him, his eyes red and weary but filled with wonder.

"Yes, every page," he said.

"I fancy I learnt sweeter secrets last night," said Careth.

Boroth smiled at his brother.

"What secrets? I thought thou werest asleep in bed, Car."

"I was in bed but not in mine and I swear to thee I slept not a wink."

Boroth laughed in delight. He was thirteen years of age and the thought tingled.

"Idronel, ara b'ka e irin ur-anar!" said Boroth.

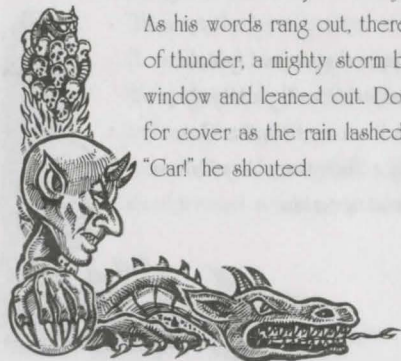
"Bo! Thou canst speak that tongue, but I canst not," said Careth.

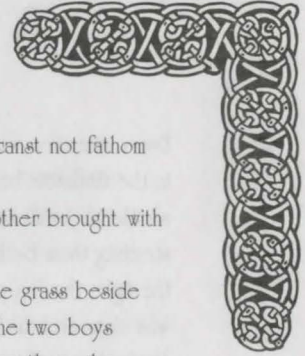
"I said, brother, I shall have sweethearts too!" replied the younger boy.

"If they like reading, I suppose thou shalt," said Careth, laughing.

"Oh that! I am done with that! That's the last book I shall ever read. Th'art telling me always that I study too much. Well I'm not going to study a thing more, even if I'm beaten for it. Now I'm going to enjoy myself, for ever and ever!" said Boroth.

The boy was true to his word. Careth was amazed and joyous at the change in his pallid, sore-eyed brother. It was high summer and for day after day, the two brothers were blissfully happy together, hunting in the forest, swimming in the river, wrestling in the long grass, making rope swings in the trees or just lazing in the sun, talking and laughing. The colour quickly came back to Boroth's young face and his eyes grew clear and sparkling once more. Of an evening, the two would go down to the courtyard together for the dancing and it was not long before Boroth caught the eye of a young girl as pretty as his brother's sweetheart.





The summer seemed to last forever. Yet the witching stone preyed upon the boy's mind, giving him strange, unsettling dreams. He felt uncomfortable without it, as though he was naked, and took to carrying it everywhere with him. In idle moments, he would roll it about in the palm of his hand, watching it glisten and sparkle in the sunlight. Careth thought nothing of it, imagining it was just a glass bauble given to his brother by his girl, as a keepsake.

Unfortunately, it was not, as Careth was soon to find out. One late afternoon, walking homeward through the forest, the boys were set upon by five tall warriors, wearing coats of mail and armed with swords. In a flash, Boroth realised the prize they sought and clenched the witching stone in his hand. Unarmed, Careth had been gashed already and flung to the ground. One of the warriors was towering over him, his sword already slicing downwards towards the boy's neck. Another two of the men were closing in on Boroth, but Boroth darted between them, crying "Garog ithar-harak!"

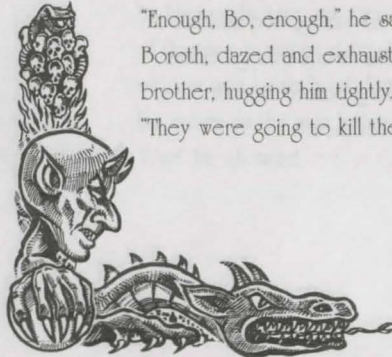
For a moment, the warrior attacking Careth froze and the boy rolled clear just before the gleaming sword thudded into the ground. Then Boroth leapt upon the man, tearing at his neck with his bare hands. The witching stone fell to the ground, but its power was already burning fiercely in Boroth. With strength unheard of, the boy's fingers stabbed deep into soft flesh. Blood spurted from the man's neck and, in a frenzy, Boroth ripped out the man's throat with his bare hands. The warrior fell to the ground, writhing in agony and terror.

Then, whirling round, the boy plucked the warrior's sword from the ground and ran at the other warriors, shrieking as he ran. As men would when faced with a callow boy, they stood their ground but the sword in Boroth's hand was just a blur of silver slicing through the air. Wild-eyed and drenched in blood, the boy cut through the warriors as though they were naught but straw and as they lay dead and dying on the ground, still he hacked at them. At last, Careth grasped his brother's wrist and stayed his hand.

"Enough, Bo, enough," he said quietly, leading the boy away.

Boroth, dazed and exhausted, let the sword fall to the ground and turned to his brother, hugging him tightly.

"They were going to kill thee," he wept.



"Thou didst save our lives, that's for sure," said Careth, "Though I canst not fathom where thou didst find such strength."

"Twas the witching stone," said Boroth, "The witching stone that Mother brought with her from the north."

Then Boroth turned and pointed at the gem gleaming brightly in the grass beside the fallen warrior. Boroth pocketed the stone again and, wearily, the two boys headed home. Along the way, Boroth explained everything to his brother, who listened in wonderment. Then, as they approached the gates of Maranor, Careth turned to his brother.

"Bo, say naught of the witching stone when we speak to Father. He would be furious, thou knowest. Place it back in the jewel box, but do not touch it again after that. There is something wicked about it, I fear. Promise me," said Careth.

"I promise thee, Car! I felt it burning me inside," said Boroth.

"Tell me one last thing, Bo, what didst thou shout at the one who nearly killed me?"

"Oh that! It was a spell to turn him to stone, but I think I missed a word out," said Boroth.

Boroth did as his brother suggested and did not touch the stone again. The witching stone, however, had tasted blood. Summer turned to autumn. Ravenwood grew golden and misty. But the land was at peace no longer. The king, hearing how his sons had so narrowly escaped death - or some part of that tale at least - posted guards at every border and had patrols ceaselessly criss-cross the great forest. Yet no attack came and no more murderous brigands were found. The king's fears receded and he stood down the patrols, although keeping the watch on the borders of Ravenwood.

Late in the month of the squirrel, the two brothers were in the forest gathering conkers, more for Boroth than for Careth, who had already begun to put aside the games of childhood. Seemingly from nowhere, a thick fog gathered, so thick that the boys were almost touching before they could see each other. So as not to lose each other in the cold, clinging fog, Careth took Boroth by the hand and they tried to make their way home. Although they both knew the forest well, quickly they became lost, stumbling deeper and deeper into the endless trees.

Every direction was white. Boroth's eyes ached with peering into the mist and, faint in the distance, he fancied he heard a voice calling to him. Then, through the smothering whiteness, he saw a light glimmer. He tugged at his brother's hand, steering them both towards the flickering light. Then suddenly, as they approached the light, the fog parted like a curtain and they emerged in a glade where the air was clear and the sun shone brightly.

At the heart of the clearing, an old man was sitting hunched by a campfire. He looked up and greeted them kindly, beckoning the boys to join him. Cold and weary, they did so gladly. The old man gave them each a warming drink from the pot boiling on the fire and the brothers told him of their plight. The old man smiled sympathetically and told them not to worry, saying that the mist would soon lift and then they would find their way home with ease. Careth, stretched out beside the fire to warm himself, grew drowsy and presently fell fast asleep. Boroth's eyes felt heavy too, but he felt strangely uneasy, so uneasy that could not let his eyes close. "This clearing is like an island in an ocean of fog," said the boy, looking hard at the old man, "How can that be so?"

"Oh! Come now! I think thou knowest that! Th'art the one that dabbleth in the the witching arts. Thy brother sleepeth and thou dost not, yet that draught I gave thee would put a whole kingdom to sleep," said the old man, "No other would keep awake like thee. Yes, th'art the one I seek!"

"If 'tis I thou seekest, then wake my brother! He has done thee no harm," said Boroth.

"Oh I shall! Of course I shall! Twould be such a pity not to! But first, give me the stone!" said the old man.

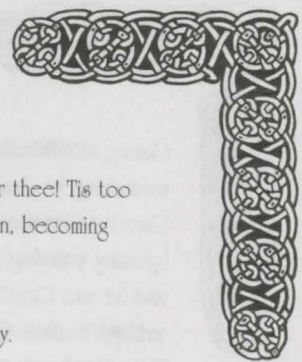
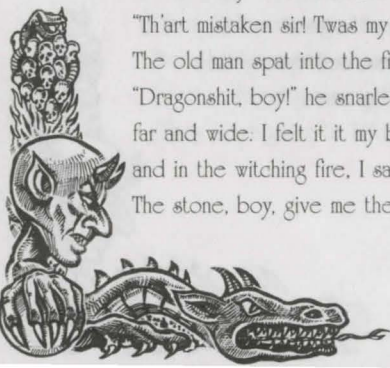
"What stone?" said Boroth, trembling.

"What stone!" laughed the old man, "Why, the witching stone whose powers thou didst usurp but three moons ago, slaying five stong and battle-hardened warriors, one with thy bare hands, boy!"

"Th'art mistaken sir! Twas my father's houseguards that killed those men."

The old man spat into the fire, his spittle sizzling on the bright embers.

"Dragonshit, boy!" he snarled, "When a witching stone is used, the ripples spread far and wide. I felt it in my bones, I sniffed it in the air, I heard the stone sing out and in the witching fire, I saw the bloody deed! Twas only thy face I could not see. The stone, boy, give me the stone!"



"And if I do not?" said Boroth.

"Oh come now! Let us not bicker so! The stone is too powerful for thee! Tis too great a burden. Let me lift that burden from thee!" said the old man, becoming gentle once more.

"Tis not mine to give thee," said Boroth.

"If thou hast used it, then 'tis thine to give," said the old man, softly.

"But if I do not?" asked the boy.

"How many midnights are there in a day, boy?" said the old man.

"Only one, sir," replied Boroth, puzzled.

"Precisely!" said the old man.

"But if I do not?" Boroth persevered.

"Ah! Twould be such a pity not to wake thy brother, such a good boy, such a handsome boy," said the old man, shaking head his sadly.

Boroth grew hot with anger and his thoughts grew black with hatred.

"Do not even think of it," said the old man, "Try to harm me in any way and thy charming brother will sleep for ever. The spell guards against such things, in a quite intriguing way. Of course it does! Now be good and give me the stone."

To demonstrate, the old man drew the blade of a knife across the back of his hand. His hand did not bleed but Careth cried out in his sleep. When Boroth turned to his brother, he saw that the back of Careth's hand was bleeding instead.

"I do not have the stone with me," said Boroth.

"Such a wise boy!" said the old man, soothingly, "Go then and fetch it. Oh yes! And be back before the sun sets or I shall worry so much I might forget how to lift the spell."

Then the fog that surrounded the glade rolled away and Boroth recognized, at last, where he was. He stood up, looked at his sleeping brother and then ran off through the forest. Lest he be spied, he entered the Golden Citadel by a secret passage that led to the old well under the king's tower. Boroth fetched the jewel box without mishap. Then, leaving the Citadel by the same route, he slipped at the dry bottom of the old well, tumbling forward onto his face. The jewel box fell open and the witching stone rolled out, glowing softly in the darkness.

Gazing into the stone, Boroth could see what was about to happen. He saw Careth awakening, he saw himself handing the stone to the old man, he saw himself helping Careth to his feet, he saw the old man swirl around upon them, laughing, blue lightning crackling in his cupped hands. The old man flung the lightning towards them and he and Careth were struck down by blue tongues of fire that sizzled into their writhing bodies. He and Careth rolled about on the ground, screaming in agony. Then they grew still and quiet. The blue flames died away, leaving two charred and lifeless shapes on the ground.

Boroth knew why the stone had let him see this, knew that it was trying to grip him in its power, trying to persuade him to use it in anger once more but he also could see that there was little reason the old man should not do such a thing once the witching stone was his.

Whispering softly, in the tongue of the Wise, Boroth spoke to the stone.

"Stone, let all wickedness from thee drain!

Let only the goodness within thee remain!

And if aught wouldst use thee to work some harm,

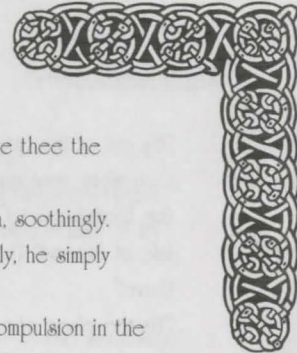
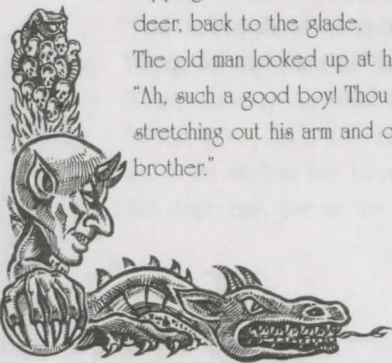
Upon him instead turn the evil charm!"

The stone shrieked aloud and burned with a terrible crimson brightness, deafening and blinding Boroth. Beneath him, he felt the bowels of the earth rumble. A gust of hot, fetid air rushed against his face, so foul and putrid that the boy's stomach churned and he almost vomited. Then all grew still and cool and dark again.

Trembling, the boy scooped up the witching stone into the jewel box again and closed the lid. He clambered to his feet. His head span. He felt weak and shiverish and his skin was damp with sweat. He wanted to turn back and lie down in his cool, soft bed but he forced himself onwards into the dark passage under the Citadel. By the time he reached the open air again, the strength had returned to his limbs and he felt a new vigour, as though his blood was tingling. The sun was already dipping down towards the tree-tops and Boroth ran through the forest, fleet as a deer, back to the glade.

The old man looked up at him, smiling.

"Ah, such a good boy! Thou hast brought me the stone! Well then," he said, stretching out his arm and opening his hand, "Give it to me and I shalt wake thy brother."



"Nay, old man, thou shalt wake my brother first. Only then wilt I give thee the stone," said Boroth coldly.

"Oh come now! Would I break my word to thee?" said the old man, soothingly. There was a flicker of anger in Boroth's eyes, but calmly and quietly, he simply repeated, "Wake my brother."

The old man shivered and withdrew his hand. There was a deep compulsion in the boy's words and, somehow, he did not doubt that boy would give him the stone. Yet the boy had spoken so gently, not as the old man would have done if he were wanting to compel. Uneasily, the old man turned to Careth, laying his hand upon his brow and whispering an incantation.

In a few moments, the sleeping boy woke. He looked at Boroth and smiled. Boroth smiled back and beckoned him. Careth sprang to his feet and went to his brother. When he reached Boroth's side, Boroth tossed the jewel box to the old man who caught it nimbly in his hands.

"There, thou wizened old fool, have thy bauble!" said Boroth, his voice bitter and dark with anger.

The old man rose to his feet, turning his back on the boys. He opened the box, taking from it the witching stone and let the jewel box fall to the ground. Then suddenly old man swirled around upon the boys, laughing, blue lightning crackling in his cupped hands. The old man flung the lightning towards them but the lightning curved around, back towards him. The old man screamed as he was struck down by blue tongues of fire that sizzled into his writhing body. He rolled about on the ground, screaming in agony. Then he grew still and quiet. The blue flames died away, leaving his charred and lifeless shape on the ground.

On their way home, Boroth told his brother of all that had passed, laughing darkly when he touched upon the old man's death. His brother looked troubled but said little save that he wished the witching stone were a thousand leagues from here. Boroth agreed, saying that he feared that wickedness might still remain within the stone despite his command to it. Then he suggested that on the morrow they ask their father's permission to make a journey to the Isle of Storms at the eastern tip of the Delve and there, secretly, cast the stone away forever into the Great Ocean. On their return, they mentioned nothing of the old man and on the morrow, Careth put the question of the journey to his father. Coronoth would hear nothing of the idea.

"It's out of the question!" he said, "Tis but three moons since both thy brother and thou were near murdered in cold blood not a league abroad and now thou hast the foolishness to ask this! And why, for pity's sake, wouldst thou want to visit the Isle of Storms? There's naught but rocks and waves and mumbling giants there!"

"Tis the place where the Great Ocean rages fiercest, Father," said Boroth, "Where the shore is strewn with ancient wrecks and dead men's bones and treasure lies drowned in the creeks and bays."

"A treasure hunt is it? Are not the riches of the Golden Citadel enough for thee, Boroth? Dost thou lack of anything here, Careth?" said Coronoth.

"Only adventure, Father," said Careth.

Coronoth sighed wearily. He remembered his own youth and that same unscratchable itch.

"I know," he said, smiling, "I know how adventure beckons, but I cannot allow it. You are my only sons."

A black anger boiled up within Boroth.

"What's that got to do with it?" he shouted, "Th'art our only father, yet thou wouldst march off to war if the need arose. Thou dost scorn danger yet wouldst tuck us safely away like babes in our cots!"

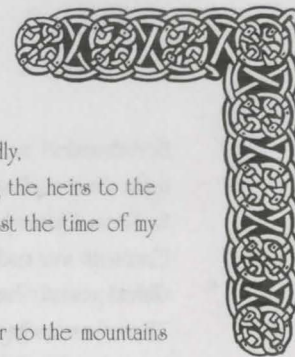
"Enough!" commanded the king, "Get thee to thy chamber, Boroth, and do not show thy face until thou canst speak more civilly!"

Careth tugged at his brother's arm, saying, "Bo, let it be!" but Boroth shook himself free.

"No, I shall not! I will not leave until thou dost answer me, Father. Answer my question!" said Boroth, hotly.

"Thou wilt obey me!" said Coronoth, striking the boy across the cheek with the back of his hand but Boroth stood his ground, a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Art thou afraid to answer my question?" goaded Boroth, a dark fury in his eyes. Careth looked at his brother, aghast. Coronoth raised his hand again but then paused. The boy's forehead was beaded with sweat, his face was deathly pale and his eyes dark-rimmed. Did the boy have a fever? He must have a fever, else he would not speak in such a manner. The king laid his hand gently on Boroth's shoulder but Boroth twisted away, glaring.



"Very well, Boroth, thou shalt have thy answer," said Coronoth mildly.

"Being king, I must march to war if the need arises. Likewise, being the heirs to the kingdom, thou and Careth must keep thyself safe and well against the time of my passing from this world. Surely thou dost understand this?"

Grudgingly, Boroth said, "Yes, Father, I know all that, but..."

"Perhaps a smaller adventure could be arranged, a journey upriver to the mountains of the Deeping on our eastern borders," said the king, smiling.

Then the king took Careth aside and said to him, "Take Bo to his room. Then fetch the doctors. He is not himself and I fear he has a fever."

The king was right, it seemed. The doctors confirmed that the boy indeed had a fever but their salves had little effect. By the next day, Boroth was delirious, writhing and twisting in his sleep, mumbling nonsense and, from time to time, screaming out in pain. His brow was like a furnace to the touch and the boy sweated so much that his bed was drenched, needing fresh sheets three or four times in the course of a day. In Boroth's every breath, there was a fearful stench. Incense from distant Coromand burned ceaselessly beside the boy's bed to sweeten the air.

Day after day the fever raged. Occasionally Boroth would still and wake. Then, weakly, he would take a little nourishment before slipping back into his delirium.

One day, when Careth was sitting alone at his brother's bedside, the boy awoke and, for the first time since the fever began, spoke lucidly.

"Car?" he said, blinking against the light.

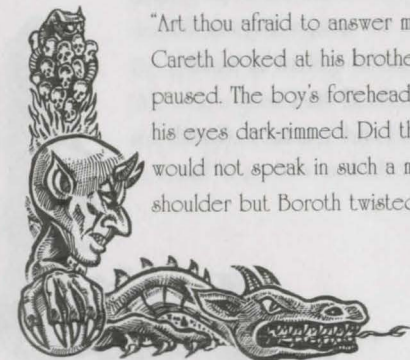
"Yes, Bo, 'tis I," said Careth.

"Car, 'tis the witching stone! I can feel it! It burns me terribly, inside, like hot irons in my head and in my guts," said Boroth.

"Hush now, Bo, th'art feverish," said Careth, taking his brother's hand.

"Nay, 'tis no fever, Car, 'tis the witching stone! Please, please believe me," said Boroth, tears welling in his eyes, "Take it and cast it into the Great Ocean as we planned, take it far away from me, 'tis killing me, Car!"

"In truth, I think I do believe thee, Bo," said Careth, squeezing his brother's clammy hand, "Fear no more, before dusk the witching stone will be gone from here. I will not let thee die."



Boroth smiled weakly, squeezed his brother's hand in return, then closed his eyes again. Careth pleaded with his father once more to be allowed to make the journey to Great Ocean but this time told him of Boroth's meddling with the witching stone. Coronoth was much afear'd and swiftly agreed, although not before admonishing Careth roundly for not telling him of this sooner.

"There is a trading ship, the Green Mermaid, moored in the river and it sets sail this very noon for Coromand," said Coronoth. "I'll get thee to the Great Ocean far swifter than foot. Within the hour, thou must take passage for upon the Green Mermaid. Six of my houseguard will I provide thee with for thy safe keeping. 'Tis no journey for a callow boy to make alone."

And so, that very day, Careth set sail into the east upon the River Falthrang and watched the Golden Citadel of Maranor dwindle into the distance, not realising that he would never set eyes upon it again.

As the day drew on, Boroth's fever began to wane and his sleep grew less troubled. Upon the following day, his brow was cool, he sweated no more and he sat up awake in bed. Still only permitted soup, he ate it hungrily. Within a week, the boy was fit and well again and was allowed from his bed.

To be sure the boy was strong and healthy, the king waited a month before he called Boroth to his chambers to talk of the witching stone. Coronoth listened patiently to what his son had to say.

Finally, sighing, he said, "It was a dangerous thing to do, to use the witching stone to stay thy brother's fever but 'twas well meant and done in kindness only. It seems, indeed, that thou didst save Careth from death. I cannot chide thee for that. But the rest! To use such a thing as a toy and to dabble in magic arts! I can barely believe it, even now. By thy foolishness, thou hast enticed evil men into the very heart of Ravenwood! For this alone, thou knowest I must punish thee, Boroth, though it pains me to do so."

From a wooden clothes chest, the king drew a leather belt and bid the boy bend himself over the table he was standing by. Boroth drew back, furious and defiant. "Thou shalt not! I did no wrong. 'Twas the witching ring, thou knowest that!" shouted Boroth. "Don't touch me!"

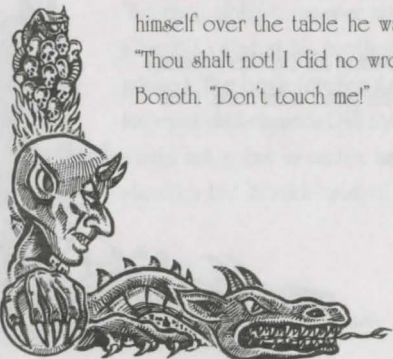
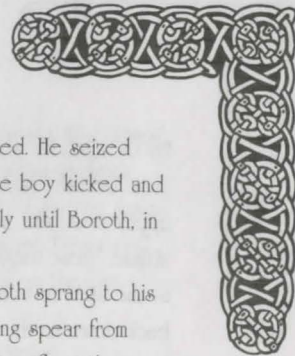
But the king was coldly determined that the boy should be punished. He seized Boroth and flung him across the table, pinning him there. Though the boy kicked and struggled and screamed and cursed, Coronoth thrashed him soundly until Boroth, in exhaustion, grew still and quiet.

Then, as the king turned and went back to the wooden chest, Boroth sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing with dark fury, and snatched his father's hunting spear from where it hung on the wall. With all the force he could muster, the boy flung the spear at his father. It struck the king between the shoulder blades and pierced him through, bursting out of his chest. Coronoth fell forward onto his hands and knees. In agony, he managed to push himself upright and then, still on his knees, the spear through him, he turned and looked in horror at his son. He tried to speak but only blood bubbled from his mouth.

"I warned thee not to touch me, Father," said Boroth calmly. "Now I shall be king and do exactly as I please."

With a mighty effort, the king pulled the whole spear out of his chest and staggered to his feet. Then he lunged forward at the boy, who was too amazed to move. Boroth fell backwards, borne down by the weight of his father who tumbled down on top of him. Coronoth's hands closed around the boy's throat but there was no strength in them now and in a moment they fell away again, lifeless. Boroth struggled free and stood up, drenched in his father's blood.

Boroth knew he must act quickly now, for if he were caught in this, neither his rank nor his tender age would offer him protection. He stripped off his bloodied clothes and boots and washed himself at the bowl on his father's table. After scrubbing himself clean, he wrapped himself in an old, torn cloak that his father used for hunting and which would draw little attention if he were to be seen in it. Then, to hide his crime completely, he sprinkled the room and his father's body with lamp-oil, took a burning brand from the fire and flung it onto the bed. The bed began to blaze merrily and then the flames caught the oak-panelled walls. Smiling, Boroth took one last look at the burning room before fleeing to his own. He encountered no one on the way. Then, safely in his own room, Boroth put on fresh clothes and cast his father's cloak onto the fire. Boroth left the tower by the secret way, out by the old well under the citadel and went deep into the forest. Eventually, he rested by a stream. He ate some sweetbread, drank of the cool, clear water and presently fell to sleep.



By the time he woke, it had grown dark but in the sky to the east, there was a red glow. Boroth leapt to his feet and scrambled up a nearby tree. As he reached the upper branches, in the distance he could see that all the Golden Citadel was ablaze, great tongues of flames leaping up into the sky. For a while, he just gazed at the sight in wonder and amazement. Then, coming to his senses, he scrambled back down to the ground and began to run back through the forest towards the burning city.

When he reached the approaches to the Golden Citadel, he was tired and filmed with sweat. People were pouring from the gates hauling carts and barrows, some laden with possessions, some with the sick and the injured who had been charred and burnt and who screamed terribly. Beyond, in the city, the rooftops were ablaze and flames gushed out of the windows of every tower.

Boroth made his way against the flow towards the Eastgate but a soldier standing at the roadside, took him by the arm.

"Nay, lad, there's naught that thou canst do!" said the soldier, gently.

"Unhand me, I am the king's son!" said Boroth, whirling round on the soldier. The soldier looked at him in astonishment and let go.

"The powers be praised! Thou art an' all! Why, we thought thee dead and burned, my lord! 'Tis a miracle!" said the soldier.

"Where is my father?" said Boroth.

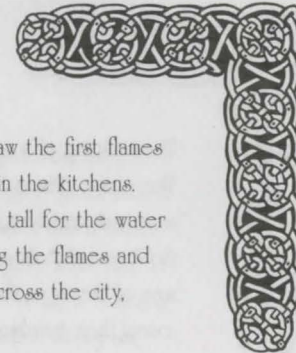
The soldier shook his head sadly.

"No one knows, sire. Some are still searching for him in the city. The Captain of the Houseguard has taken charge in his place. See that tent over yonder, at the edge of the forest. That's his headquarters," said the soldier, putting his arm around the boy's shoulder to comfort him, "Come, lad, let me take thee to the Captain. He will tell thee more than I can. This is a terrible night."

Boroth let himself be drawn against the soldier's side and began to sob convincingly.

"There, there lad," said the soldier, kindly, "There's yet some hope."

In the headquarters tent, Boroth was seated at the Captain's table. A soldier brought him a warm drink and another wrapped a blanket around his shoulders against the chill of the night air. Boroth listened gravely to Elireth, the Captain of the Houseguard who had known the boy since he was knee-high. Tears streaked Boroth's face.



"The fire began in the king's tower," said Elireth, "Some say they saw the first flames of all leap from thy father's own windows but others say it began in the kitchens. They had the pumps working within minutes but the tower was too tall for the water to reach all but the lower windows. Then the wind blew up, fanning the flames and scattering burning cinders across the rooftops. The blaze raced across the city, Boroth. There was naught that anyone could do."

"What of my father and my mother?" asked Boroth, a tremble in his voice.

"They have not been seen or found. Darts of the city we cannot reach until the fires die down, but I must tell thee, we fear the worst," said Elireth.

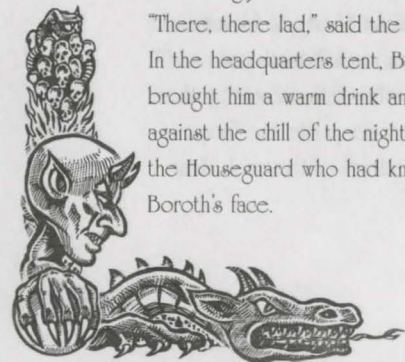
Boroth covered his face with his hands and fell forward onto the table, weeping afresh with renewed vigour.

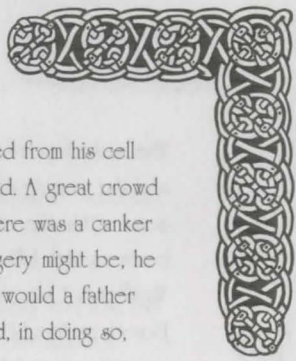
"Thank the good powers, thou art safe and thy brother abroad in Coromand," said Elireth. "Come, to bed with thee now. Let us see what morning brings."

The city burned for three days more, leaving no more than a smouldering, blackened ruin. At length, when the searchers could reach the king's tower within there was just a tangle of charred timbers and bones. All hope of finding the king or queen alive was lost. Elireth broke the sad tidings to Boroth, who seemed overcome with grief. Then, on the morrow, there were more ill-tidings. A ship had just sailed upriver, coming from the south, with news from Coromand. In a storm, the Green Mermaid had foundered off the coast of Coromand and no survivors had been found.

On hearing this news, Boroth grew angry, saying that his brother could not be dead, that he would know if Careth were dead, that he would feel it in his bones if he were dead. He screamed at Elireth to cut out the tongues of all that had told this wicked lie. Elireth, for his part, fearing that the boy's mind had become unhinged by sorrow heaped upon sorrow, tried to calm Boroth, saying that he would deal with them. Then, he went to the captain of the ship and commanded him to begone with all haste. Yet, when he returned, Boroth was calm and composed and mentioned nothing more of his gruesome demand.

As time went by, all remarked how nobly the young prince bore his grievous loss. A new city of tents sprang up beside the old one and, as the days began to grow bitter with winter, Boroth went amongst the people, consoling those who had lost loved ones in the great fire and giving food and winter clothing to those in need.





The building of a new citadel upon the ashes of the old had already begun. The young prince had asked that it be rebuilt in black marble, in memory of those who had perished, and all were struck by the thoughtfulness and decorum of this. So it was that Boroth, son of Coronoth, became king of Ravenwood at the tender age of thirteen. Stone by stone, Maranor was rebuilt. And how well the people loved their handsome young king! People began to refer to him as Boroth the Good, Boroth the Kind. But Boroth had killed, and had enjoyed the killing, his blood burning and tingling, his mind reeling in ecstasy, and the killing did not stop. Yes, the boy had drained the wickedness from the witching stone, but it had seeped into himself and into the very ground on which Maranor stood. And yes, the stone had been killing him but only because of the goodness that remained within it.

Year by year, the evil in the land grew, but none suspected that the fount of it was their good, young king. Children would mysteriously disappear in the forest, their bodies to be found weeks later, mauled and torn beyond recognition. Pretty maidens would be ravished in their beds at night and found of the morning, their throats slit. Strong warriors keeping watch atop the battlements in the small hours would be found the next day at the foot of the walls, disembowelled, their ears lopped off, their eyes gouged out.

A great fear fell upon Maranor. At night, people locked their doors and barred their windows and did not venture out. Children were kept at home, bored and listless and the streets emptied of their laughter and carefree games. Even the warriors kept watch in threes or fours and kept awake no matter how late the hour. The young king imposed a curfew and announced a generous reward for the capture any of these fiends.

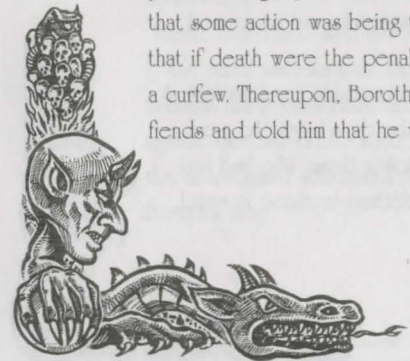
The penalty that Boroth set for breaking the curfew was death. Erieth, still Captain of the Guard, protested that this was too harsh, that more innocent souls would perish than guilty but the king was adamant, saying that the people must be shown that some action was being taken. Erieth refused to have any part of it, replying that if death were the penalty, he would not order the Houseguard to impose such a curfew. Thereupon, Boroth accused Erieth of being in league with the murderous fiends and told him that he would pay with his life.

And so, the executions began. The following day, Erieth was dragged from his cell by his own guards and taken to the marketplace, gagged and bound. A great crowd had gathered there. The young king made a speech, saying that there was a canker in the very heart of Ravenwood and that, however painful the surgery might be, he would cut it out. Weeping, he said that he had loved Erieth as he would a father but that his beloved captain had refused to impose the curfew and, in doing so, had revealed himself to be in league with the evildoers.

The king said that he could show no mercy, even to those who were his friends, that this evil must be rooted out. The crowd, much moved, applauded, some weeping in sympathy for the king, others cheering wildly. Then, weeping afresh, Boroth drew his sword and severed Erieth's head with a single blow. As though distraught, the king turned from the crowd, his head bowed and let himself be led from the dais by one of the guards. In truth, however, Boroth was merely trying to contain his laughter.

As Boroth had planned, his harsh measures appeared to work. Within the first month, twelve curfew-breakers were publicly executed, each by the king in person, who declared that since it was his edict, he alone must bear the heavy weight of carrying it out. And, able to sate his bloodlust openly now with a crowd to applaud and cheer him on, Boroth abandoned killing in stealth. The murders ceased and the king's reputation grew further. No longer did the people call him Boroth the Good or Boroth the Kind. Now it was Boroth the Ironheart or Boroth the Strong. He was but seventeen years of age.

Unsurprisingly, curfew-breaking dwindled quickly but the people wanted more blood. It pleased Boroth greatly to assuage their thirst. A steady stream of informers came to the king's court at handsome reward and the slightest whisper of any evil intent was enough to have someone hauled away to the king's dungeons for questioning, a sergeant of the guard whose disgruntled underling accused him of making an evil sign, an old woman in whose attic bats had been found, a maiden accused of putting a curse on her lover who died of fever, a young boy who, play-acting, had threatened to kill his friend. All were put to the torture by Boroth himself. Drunk with bloodlust, he would play with his helpless victims for hour upon hour until, to end the unbearable pain, they uttered some ludicrous confession. Then, on the morrow in the marketplace, after repeating their confession urgently lest the torture be renewed, their heads would be severed by Boroth's sword to rapturous applause.

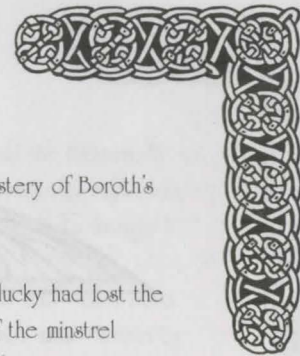
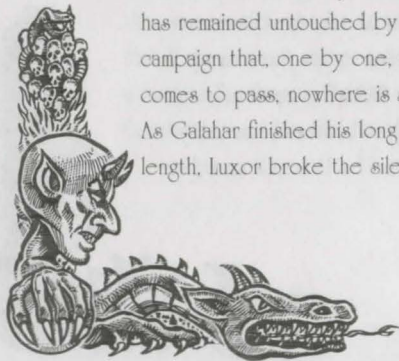


The wicked power of the witching stone was in the very ground under their feet, and the people of Maranor grew lost deep in bloodlust too. Yet still there were some within the city who thought that the king had gone too far, that there had been enough killing, some who began to call him Mad Boroth or Boroth the Wolfheart. One by one, these few were rooted out and put to the sword. But Boroth realised that now, his people needed something more than public executions to slake their thirst for blood. It was time to make war, to let every warrior get blood on his hands, to unite the whole kingdom of Ravenwood in an orgy of killing. He would enslave the entire Blood March and have thousand upon thousand of helpless before him.

So did the long fall of the First Fey into darkness begin. The great forest of Ravenwood was plundered relentlessly for fuel to feed the fires of Boroth's swordsmiths and as the long wars of the Blood March drew on, the land became bare and barren. No longer was the kingdom referred to as Ravenwood but instead the Marish, meaning, in the ancient tongue, the desolate land. And the First Fey, drawn deeper and deeper into evil as the bloodletting went on, became known as the the Dark Fey, the once fair and golden city of Maranor as the Dark Citadel.

There, even now, does Boroth the Wolfheart still keep his reign of terror. Time after time have his armies been beaten back to the borders of the Marish, only to return stronger, more bloodthirsty and more rapacious than before and each time, the realms of the Blood March have grown weaker and more afraid. Now, I fear, we are in the worst of times. In turn, these past ten or twenty years, the Wolfheart has threatened each realm with utter desolation lest they yield to him a hostage of his choice of royal blood or connection and, in turn, to keep a peace with him, each realm has reluctantly complied. Of late, he has demanded further tribute, at first in gold but now in slaves. Year after year, these poor wretches, selected by lot, are sent to their doom in the Dark Citadel. Only Immiel has remained untouched by Boroth's evil and now, I fear, he is planning a grand campaign that, one by one, will crush every kingdom of the Blood March. If that comes to pass, nowhere is safe."

As Galahar finished his long tale, his audience gazed at him in stunned silence. At length, Luxor broke the silence.



"These are ill-tidings, Galahar. I knew naught of this," said Luxor.

"Long have I peered into the past, Moonprince, to unravel the mystery of Boroth's fall into wickedness," said Galahar.

"Yet perhaps I can add a little to your knowledge," said Luxor.

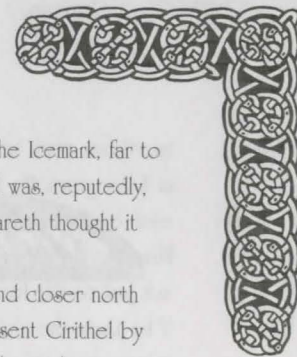
Gravely, Luxor told him the story of how, long ago, Rarnor the Unlucky had lost the Eye of the Moon from the Moonring which bound it. He told him of the minstrel boy's song of Sherehar and the news the jewel still lay in the king's tower in Coromand. Then he told him of how, at this very time, he was bound for Coromand, bearing gifts, to try to reclaim the gem.

"This is surely the witching stone that was Boroth's downfall," said Luxor, "And surely, if the goodness within it near killed him once, it can do so again!"

"So Boroth was right!" exclaimed Galahar, "His brother did not perish in the storm, else the stone would still languish in the ocean deeps! These are fair tidings indeed, Luxor!"

"We must set sail on the morrow, with all speed. If the winds be good, it may be that this Boroth can be thwarted before more evil befalls this sorry land," said the Moonprince.

"May the winds be with thee, Luxor, but beware the Marish!" said Galahar.



CHAPTER FOUR RORTHRON THE WISE

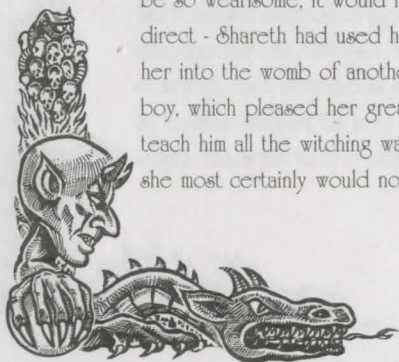
At the time of Luxor's arrival in Immiel, Rorthron the Wise had heard nothing of the Eye of the Moon and the discovery of its whereabouts for he was abroad in the Icemark, his first journey there since the war against the Heartstealer.

His purpose was to visit the Fey of the north and see how they fared now that the land was no longer oppressed.

The Icemark was indeed a changed place. The land was no longer gripped by bitter cold and was green and fertile. In the great forests, the trees towered tall, tinged by autumn gold and between the forests were lush meadows and babbling streams. In the far blue distance, the mountains of the dwarves could be seen, their peaks white with snow. And when Rorthron at last approached the City of Imorthorn, it seemed more fair and beautiful than ever and his heart was glad.

There, he was welcomed most heartily by the Lord of Imorthorn, who had changed little over the passing years. Imorthorn told him of the peace that had befallen the Icemark after the Empress's demise, of how giants and dwarves, men and fey had ceased to war with one another and of how the ice had melted away from the land, year by year, leaving it green and abundant.

But then, Rorthron learnt stranger news from the Lord of Imorthorn. Before she was slain, Shareth the Heartstealer had been with child. To save herself the inconvenience of having to carry it within her womb for months on end - it would be so wearisome, it would ruin her perfect figure and, after all, she had a war to direct - Shareth had used her witchcraft to spirit the troublesome burden within her into the womb of another. She knew, of course, that the unborn child was a boy, which pleased her greatly. She would love him and nurture him and, in time, teach him all the witching ways but suffer the agonies and indignities of childbirth, she most certainly would not.



The surrogate was a young slave-girl, Cirithel, from lands beyond the Icemark, far to the south. She had only recently been brought to Kahangrorn and was, reputedly, of noble birth. Still better, the girl was, as yet, unbedded and Shareth thought it would be most amusing if a virgin were to give birth to her son.

As battle after battle was lost and the Moonprince thrust closer and closer north towards Kahangrorn, Shareth thought to save her unborn son and sent Cirithel by secret ways out through the Forest of Fangrorn, accompanied by three slave-women to tend her and twelve of the Iceguard for their protection. The girl Cirithel now with child and the weather bitter, they travelled slowly. After some weeks, news of the Heartstealer's defeat and death overtook them and the warriors of the Iceguard fled, in fear of their lives. Still the girl and the three women trudged further and further south, seeking safety and shelter. At length, Cirithel now heavy with child, they came to the City of Imorthorn.

The Lord of Imorthorn took the party into his household. Cirithel told him that they were slaves who had escaped from Kahangrorn before Shareth's defeat but said nothing of the origin of the child within her and nor did the other women. Imorthorn was concerned for the girl's health after such an arduous journey, but the birth was an easy one. A beautiful, healthy boy was born, blue-eyed and golden-haired and Cirithel named him Anderlane meaning, in the words of her people, unexpected gift. Cirithel loved and nurtured the boy as she would her own. As the years passed, the longing for home grew in her and, when the boy was but four years old, Cirithel and Anderlane set forth from Imorthorn for the girl's homeland. The snows had vanished, the Frozen Wastes around the Icemark had melted away, there was peace now and the roads south were open and safe. For two years, Imorthorn heard nothing further of Cirithel and her boy. Then, at last, a travelling merchant delivered a letter to him from the girl, saying that they had reached her home safely, that Anderlane was well and strong and thanking him for all his kindness. The three women who had journeyed with her served in Imorthorn's household for many years but, one by one, age had taken them. A month ago, the last of them, on her deathbed, had told Imorthorn the full story of their journey from Kahangrorn, of Shareth being with child, of the spiriting of the child to Cirithel's womb and of the flight to safety escorted by the Iceguard. And when he asked her who the father was, she whispered with her last breath, "Morkin, prince of Midnight!"

Imorthorn, much troubled by this news, sought out others who had been enslaved in Kahangron. He found others who had been handmaidens to the Heartstealer and each confirmed the tale, some adding that the Empress had been much amused to have Morkin father the child - then the boy would be unquestioned and rightful heir not just to the Ice-mark but to Midnight also. Rorthron, astonished, asked Imorthorn if he knew the child's whereabouts now.

"I know only this, my friend," said the Lord of Imorthorn, "Cirithel spoke to me many times of her homeland. Her people were called the Arakai. She had grown up in the Crimson Castle and her ageing father was Lord of the Crimson Mountains. When I said I had not heard of this place, she explained that it lay in the Last Northing, in a land called the Blood March. Still no wiser, I asked where the Blood March lay and she told me that it was five or six hundred leagues south of the Ice-mark, on the shores of the Great Ocean."

"I know of the Blood March. It lies on the southeast borders of Midnight," said Rorthron, "And there, I fear, I must journey and find this boy. So, Luxor has two grandsons now, Morkin another son and Corleth a brother! I only pray that he has none of the Heartstealer's witching ways in him."

"Rest your worries, Rorthron," said Imorthorn, "I'll vouch that there was naught but goodness in the boy! I am a lord of the Fey and such things cannot hide themselves from me."

"Yes, I'm sure that you are right, Imorthorn. None are born evil. They are taught it or tricked into it," said Rorthron, smiling. "Nevertheless, I leave on the morrow for the Blood March and the Crimson Mountains. Though I know not what, I have an uneasy feeling that something deeper turns upon Anderlane of the Arakai than the finding of kin."



The Citadel



CHAPTER FIVE THE MARISH

The Cormorant raced on towards Coromand. The winds were behind it and the weather was fair. Through the Eldmark into Weirwood, then through a deep ravine gouged in the Long Mountains into Dawnwood, the Imilvir carried the swift ship at last to the Bay of Eregoth. For Luxor's small party, it was the first time they had set eyes upon open sea and they gazed upon it with wonder at such an endless expanse.

For many leagues, they hugged the coast of the Fallows until, passing the shores of Doreon, they headed due south into the Grey Sea. League upon league, there was naught but empty ocean all around them. Then, at last, they sighted land again, coming to the easterly headlands of the Delve. Once more they hugged the coast, rounding the Isle of Storms without mishap. Then the wind changed, blustering in from the east, and on the far horizon dark clouds began to gather. Rather than head due south again directly for Coromand, the captain, fearing a storm, kept to the coast and they sailed westwards along the southern coast of the Delve through the Sea of Skulls.

Here, the storm from the east caught them. The waves grew tall and terrible, the wind tore at the sail. The captain did not dare to turn the ship lest it be overturned and the Cormorant flew along on the wings of the storm, deeper and deeper into the west. Then, in the Bay of Ulmor, the wind turned again, dragging them northwards towards the rocky coast.

The sky darkened, thunder exploded all around them, lightning crackled into the tumultuous sea and rain lashed down upon them. As the rocky shore loomed closer and closer, the captain, in desperation, tried to turn the ship. Its timbers creaking hideously, the Cormorant strained westwards again, heaving to starboard as it came around. Suddenly a fiery bolt of lightning struck the mainmast, snapping it in two like a twig and the mast crashed down onto the foredeck, crushing two of the ship's crew.

The raging storm drove the Cormorant relentlessly towards the shore, dashing the crippled ship against the rocks. As the Cormorant broke like a child's toy, crew and passengers alike leapt into the roiling sea. Some were sucked under by the fierce currents, some were smashed against the rocks but a few managed to struggle ashore.

A sorry party gathered on the shoreline. Luxor lay unconscious, having dashed his head against the rocks as he tried to clamber ashore. Corleth and Arin had plucked him from the waves just before he would have been dragged under.

Lord Blood had gained the shore too, together with three of the Moonprince's houseguard and four of the crew.

"We must find some shelter, else we will all freeze to death. What is this place?" said Lord Blood, addressing no one in particular.

"This is the Marish, sir," said one of the crew.

"Accursed storm!" exclaimed Lord Blood, "It has borne us to the Wolfheart's domain!"

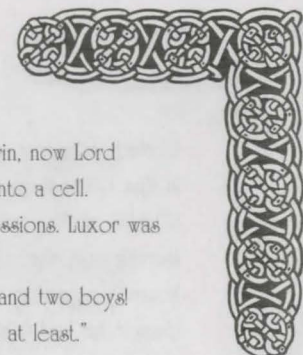
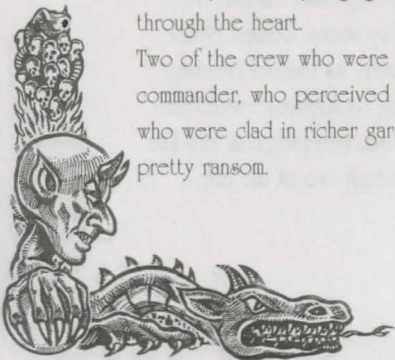
One of the houseguard shouted, "Look, my lord!"

All eyes turned to where the man was pointing. There, in the west against the reddening sky, they saw the silhouettes of dark warriors coming swiftly towards them over the brow of the hill, swords drawn.

"Hell's teeth!" cried Lord Blood, "And we are near disarmed, our coats of mail cast aside, our shields lost. In sword alone must we put our trust. Gather round me. We will die afore our prince is taken!"

Though sorely outnumbered and already weary from battle with the sea, the ten fought bravely, slaying near twice their number, but one by one they fell wounded or dying. Arin was struck on the head by a shield and fell to the ground, unconscious. Corleth was disarmed as the back of his hand was sliced by a sword and then felled by a heavy blow from behind. Lord Blood was the last to fall, a Dark Fey warrior plunging his sword through the old man's chest, piercing him through the heart.

Two of the crew who were wounded were swiftly decapitated by the Dark Fey commander, who perceived they would be valueless, but Luxor, Corleth and Arin, who were clad in richer garments, he spared, guessing that these might bring a pretty ransom.



So it was that Luxor the Moonprince, his grandson Corleth and Arin, now Lord Blood were brought to the Dark Citadel of Maranor and thrown into a cell. Presently, Boroth himself came to the cell to assay his new possessions. Luxor was dragged to his feet by the guards.

"Well, what have we here, then?" said the Wolfheart, "An old man and two boys! Still, by their dress I would venture they have some small nobility, at least."

Luxor, enraged, shook himself free of the two guards who held him.

"I am Luxor the Moonprince, Prince of Midnight! Whomsoever you may be, you will set us free forthwith - if you value your life!" cried Luxor.

The Dark Fey guards moved to strike Luxor down but Boroth, smiling now, raised a hand to stay them.

"Charmed, I am sure!" said Boroth, bowing his head, "How pleased I am to meet thee, Luxor, Prince of Midnight! Of thee, many tales have I heard. I prithee, allow me to introduce myself. I am Boroth, High King of the Marish! I fancy thou wilt fetch a handsome price."

"And I fancy that you will find a mighty army hammering at your gates if you dare to hold me to ransom!" said the Moonprince.

"I doubt that. There is little point in rescuing a corpse. And who, pray, might these two pretty boys be?" said Boroth, still smiling with considerable charm.

"They are two servants of mine. Release them, at least. They will fetch you no ransom," said Luxor.

"And if I do, what do I gain?" asked Boroth.

"I will give you my mark whereby my son will know that I still live, but first I will see them set free and their swords returned," said Luxor.

"Very well," said Boroth, "So be it. Thou art wise, Moonprince, to ease my path. Come, let us to the gates of Maranor and thou shalt see thy servants set free."

It was midnight when Corleth and Arin were released at the great gate. As they disappeared into the darkness, Luxor's eyes were filled with tears. He knew that they were in great peril, that Boroth could, at a whim, send warriors after them and have them slaughtered but he knew in his heart that this was their best chance. Boroth had nothing to gain by their deaths and, even if they were to be hunted, Corleth and Arin were young and strong and could well escape.

Corleth, however, was not about to abandon his grandfather and Arin was with him in this. Once they were safely out of sight, the boys turned back towards the Dark Citadel, circling round it looking for a way back in. Thus it was that the warriors Boroth sent after them along the road to the river could find no sign of them. After hours of stumbling through the darkness, Arin suddenly disappeared from sight. By chance, he had fallen into a stairway hidden by undergrowth that led to an underground passage. He called up to Corleth and Corleth followed him. Feeling their way blindly along the dank passageway, they finally emerged in what must have been an old well, deep in the bowels of the Dark Citadel.

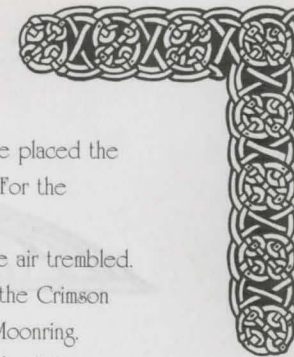
As they climbed out of the well into a stone flagged room, Corleth whispered, "Fear not, Grandfather, we will set you free!"

"And any other ill-fated hostage that we might find!" added Arin.

A swift-winged raven bore Boroth's ransom note to Corelay. It was a simple message: five chestfuls of gold to be sent to Maranor and Luxor would be returned unharmed. If the gold did not reach Maranor within twelve moons, Luxor's head alone would be returned. To leave no doubt, Luxor's mark was set upon the parchment.

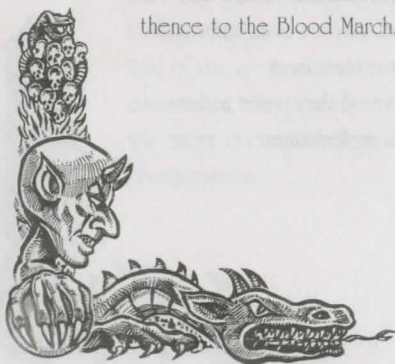
Prince Morkin gazed at his father's signature. There was no doubt it was his, but at the end there was an extra flourish, an extra branch on the last stroke. For a while, it puzzled him and then he realised what it was meant to be. The last stroke was a snake's tongue. Luxor had added a message to his mark, Place no trust in what this letter says. How the tables had turned since the Ice-mark! Now it was he who must free his father!

Although he could muster the mightiest of armies, he dared not rouse Midnight lest this Wolfheart hear of it and slay Luxor. Some stealth must be used and what help they could gather within the Blood March itself. If an army were to rescue Luxor, it could not be seen to come from Midnight. With a handful of warriors, Prince Morkin and Araeth the White, Lord of Dreams set forth for the Castle of Corelay and thence to the Blood March.



When the prince drew within sight of the Last Mountains, at last he placed the Moonring upon his finger, lifted his fist to the sky and cried out, "For the Moonprince, for Midnight and the Free!

Boroth the Wolfheart, you shall pay for this with your life!" and the air trembled. Far, far away, already deep within the Blood March on his way to the Crimson Mountains, Rorthron heard the faint whisper thrown forth by the Moonring. Suddenly, all grew clear to him as he bent his mind towards Luxor's plight. Anderlane of the Arakai, the unexpected gift, of course! Already, away in the Last Northing, there could be help at hand from the Moonprince's unsuspected kin. In his wildest dreams, Boroth would never link the two. Now he knew why he had hurried here. Rorthron looked into the east towards the Long Mountains and beyond them Dilleon and the Last Northing, then hurried on. The War of the Blood March was about to begin.





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