



shadow of the UNICORN



SHADOW OF THE UNICORN

by Dale and Shelley McLoughlin

In this book I have put the things,
That man and beast would most demand,
To keep them from the prying eye,
And wrest them from the grasping hand.
But in this book there lies a trap...

STATION OF THE UNICORN

by John and Susan McLaughlin

In the forest I found the unicorn
That had long hair and a horn
To keep him from the evil eye
And when I saw him in the wood
That in the forest he was found



The Unicorn

By John and Susan McLaughlin
Illustrated by [Name]



The Unicorn is a mythical creature
with a horse's body and a single horn
It is said to live in a forest
and is often used as a symbol
of purity and grace

SHADOW OF THE UNICORN

Written by

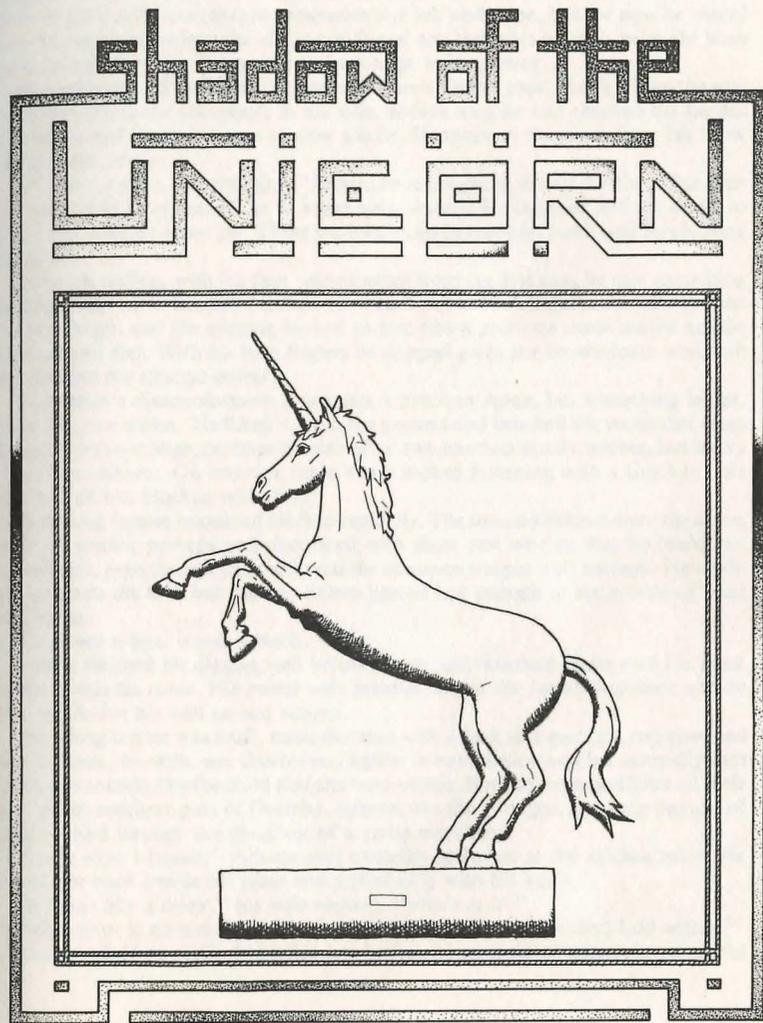
Dale and Shelley McLoughlin

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CHAPTER ONE

Athron took the rusty old spade in his hand and began the arduous task he had set himself for that day. It was hard work and he could not truthfully say that he enjoyed it, but it had to be done. When finished he knew that he would feel the warm glow of self satisfaction that accompanies any job well done, but for now he would have to put his mind into the effort and forget any thoughts of what he might have been doing otherwise. It was not to be a large hole anyway.

The spade moved swiftly in his powerful hands, biting great chunks from the soft earth and piling the soil neatly at his side. Before long he had reached the harder clay below and his pace began to slow a little. He mopped the sweat from his brow and decided to rest.

"If I were a troll," he thought, "I could have this done in half the time! But then the sun would have turned me to stone long since!" He laughed and sat down to take a sip from his water jar. There were no trolls in real life, but it was an amusing thought.

As he sat resting, with his face turned away from the hot sun, he saw something glinting in the earth beneath his feet. He would not have thought much of it but the sun was bright and the glinting looked to him like a precious stone buried amidst the mud and dirt. With his bare fingers he scraped away the brown loam which all but covered the strange object.

To Athron's disappointment it was not a precious stone, but something larger, like a box or a casket. He lifted it from the ground and brushed the moist dirt from its top. It was not large, perhaps the size of his two hands cupped together, but heavy for such smallness. On one side there was a locked fastening with a tiny key hole that was all but blocked with dirt.

The young farmer examined his find carefully. The top and bottom were the same, made of leather perhaps and decorated with signs and writing that he could not understand, even though he could read the common tongue well enough. He could not unfasten the lock but the two halves parted just enough to see a little of what was inside.

It was not a box, it was a book.

Athron finished his digging well before sunset and returned home with the book tucked inside his tunic. His pretty wife greeted him at the farmhouse door and he went inside for his well earned supper.

The young farmer was a tall, muscular man with a dark skin and fair, sun bleached hair. Innosar, his wife, was shorter and lighter in complexion and her normally slim figure was rounded by the child that she bore within. Both of them had lived all their lives in this southern part of Oronfal. Athron was the youngest in a long descent of farmers, and Innosar the daughter of a cattle merchant.

"Look what I found," Athron said excitedly as he sat at the kitchen table. He placed the book beside his plate and poked at it with his knife.

"It looks like a diary," his wife replied, "who's is it?"

"Mine now, if no one else will claim it," he said, "but what shall I do with it?"

Innosar made no reply, but when her husband had finished eating he set about

the lock with his knife, prising and prodding, but all to no avail. The book was firmly shut and resisted all attempts to gain entry. It was almost as if some magical force protected it since the binding was not strong enough on its own.

The next day Athron set off to market with a wagon load of potatoes, four young puppies and a strange book, all to sell for the right price.

The small farm was situated near the smith town of Morath. This old settlement had stood for years on the flat plain south of the Redmier forest. It was walled like a fortress, though nobody really knew why, with a tower at each corner of its square perimeter. At the centre of the town stood the tall Morath Tower, which was always topped by the banner of Oronfal. The tattered old flag would flap wildly in the slightest breeze, much to the amusement of the local inhabitants.

The land close to the town was fertile and flat, ideal for the growing of crops and the raising of lesser animals, like cattle and sheep. A pleasant green landscape spread for miles around, broken only in autumn by the ripening crops, and sometimes in winter by a light snowfall. Every year brought a bounteous harvest of wheat, barley, corn and root crops and the Morath markets were always filled with the bustle of buying and selling.

Yet it was not for its market that Morath was famous throughout Oronfal. The town was named after the blacksmiths who plied their trade within its wall. They were the most skilled men in all the land, and farmers would travel from every corner of Oronfal for a Morath plough or scythe. Nowhere else could such fine blades be found, nor the men capable of producing them.

It was only a few miles from Athron's farm to Morath but the old oxen that pulled his cart travelled at their own leisurely pace and the journey took over two hours. When he finally arrived the market was busy already and Athron set up to sell his wares in a corner of the old trading square, beneath the Tower. Business was good and the potatoes were sold in no time at all, mostly by the sack load but sometimes in larger lots. All but one of the puppies was gone and the other was promised to an old friend in return for some seed in a week or two.

Only the old book had gathered no interest, although Athron was not really surprised. He had shown it to some of the passers by. Some were curious and others not. Some seemed scared of it, though Athron could think of no reason to be. Still, there was something about the book which made even him unsure. It seemed to burn a hole where it lay in his tunic, as if it did not wish to remain there. Yet Athron himself was almost overcome by curiosity, desperately wanting to know what was inside that old binding.

At the end of the day he left his oxen tied to a watering trough and joined his friends for a jar of ale and an hour of gossip at 'The Market Inn'. When he arrived he found a seat with his old comrades who poured him a drink and bade him stay. At first they spoke of the weather, the market and business. Most of them were farmers, one was a smith and another a shop keeper, but all had known each other for many years and had shared in each others' lives.

At last Athron produced the book. He wondered what they would think of it. Perhaps one of them would know it, or of it.

"I've no time for books," said one.

"Does it have a story," said another.

They all showed little interest and Athron mentioned it no more, but all the while he was drinking and making merry with his friends he had just one thing on his mind. Only a Satyr sitting alone nearby seemed to prick up his ears with interest, but he said nothing to the men, and Athron was too polite to trouble one of the Amarin race with so trivial a matter.

Several days passed by without much ado. Athron went on with his work as usual and life seemed much the same as before. The book had lost some of its hold over him and he was not so troubled by it as he had been at first.

Then one evening he returned home at the end of a long day to find Innosar waiting for him, almost dancing with excitement.

"A Satyr, a Satyr," she said, almost unable to speak, "he came here. He wanted you!"

Athron could not believe his ears. He knew none of the Amarin and he had seen only a few. They seldom troubled themselves with the lives of men; they had no reason to. And Athron was not concerned with the Amarin either.

"And what did he want, this Satyr?" he asked, not really knowing whether to believe his wife.

"He brought you this."

The woman held out something small between her finger and thumb. Athron could not see what it was until she dropped it into the palm of his outstretched hand. It was a key, a small silver key that shone in the setting sunlight and seemed to dazzle with what little luminance there was.

Then Athron remembered the 'The Market Inn', and the Satyr who had sat nearby, and the book. Yes the book. It had a small keyhole set into the leather fastening at its side. A keyhole just right for a small silver key.

Athron rushed to the chest where the book now sat, still a little dirty, but just as mysterious as when he had dug it from the ground only a few days before. The key fitted its tiny lock but would not turn. Again and again the young man twisted the small sliver of bright metal. He turned it this way and that, sometimes using all his strength, but it would not release the lock.

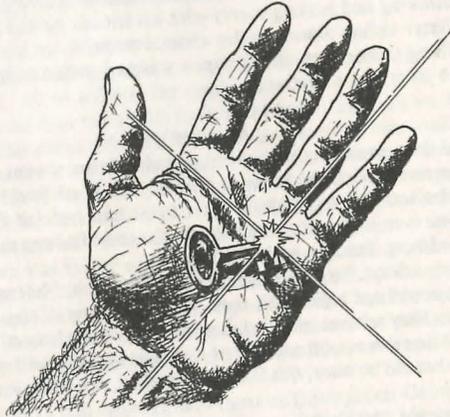
At last, in frustration, Athron threw the book on the floor, cursing and swearing in his temper.

The old tome landed at Innosar's feet. For a moment she looked down at it in silence. Then she stooped to pick it up. In her innocence she tried to accomplish what strength and force had failed to achieve.

The silver key turned quietly between the young girl's fingers and the book fell open at its first page. Then Athron saw what his wife had done and he snatched the prize from her hands, knocking her backwards with the force of his swift movement.

Innosar lay on the floor and looked up at her husband. He seemed to have changed. Something seemed to take hold of him and lead him away from the path of goodness that he had followed for all his life, taking him instead into a world of evil that had never been known before in this world.

Athron hesitated for a moment and then began to read.



At first the words were foreign and he could not understand them, but as he stared at the old paper, the writing seemed to reform itself into the familiar patterns that he knew. As if by magic he saw himself within those pages, and the world that he knew. He saw that life could never be the same again, neither for him nor for any other mortal being on his small planet. He understood more than any man had ever understood before, and he knew more than he could ever have dreamed possible.

But what he read was not good, and as he read it his world began to change around him. Suddenly, where there had been happiness there was now suffering, and where there had been kindness there was hate. For in reading those pages Athron released all that was evil upon his world. Hatred, Greed, Jealousy, Pride and Anger were set loose to roam free, and the once idyllic land was turned against its inhabitants. Man was turned against man, and all the beasts and races of the world were set in conflict with each other.

And when he finished reading, the words of the book slowly dissolved away, leaving only the empty pages from which they had come. Yet one word was left behind and Athron read this aloud, "Hope" it said, and that was all that remained in a sea of emptiness.

The Royal Palace of King Theltiem stood just a few miles from the river Milfair. To the south west lay the bridge that joined the island of Oslar to the eastern bank of that great waterway. The palace itself, called Oronoman by its people, was a grand and elaborate building built of great white stones which had been hauled across the river from the Storm Land to the west. That had been an astounding feat of strength and courage, but had taken place many hundreds of years in the past and was now little more than a legend. Only the building itself remained as testimony to those who had laboured in its construction.

Oronoman was the royal seat of the rulers of the land of Oronfal. Theltiem could trace his line back through the ages, even to the time before his palace had been built. In those far gone days mankind had been in his infancy and the other mortal races had ruled the world with a greater potency than now. They were still respected of course, but it was said that their time was gone, that they no longer held the awe of men and could demand no more respect than a man of equal standing.

But even King Theltiem was not so young now. Though his name meant Brave Heart, his people now called him Emasar, or White Hair. It was not said discourteously, but used as an endearment since he was loved and respected by his people and under his rule they had all prospered and been happy. He had lived in this world for over three score years, and ruled the kingdom for most of those. He was known for his fair speech and good humour, but in recent years age and ill health had taken their toll and left his body withered and bent.

His only child, a son and heir, was Mithulin, Treasure Seeker. He was a tall, strong lad of around twenty years, who was also liked by the people and respected for his views, despite his age. He had inherited much of his father's character and would often sit at the King's right and counsel him when required. Sometimes he would even offer advice without being called upon.

Theltiem thought that it was good to give Mithulin kingly duties before his time. Yet he did not overburden him with them. Instead he took careful measure of all his son's duties and tried to guide him through a happy youth towards a fruitful life.

One day Theltiem was at his court, giving judgement on a case of dispute, and Mithulin sat by his side.

The King spoke authoritatively but not harshly. "Then Fillen, you say that the fence is upon your land."

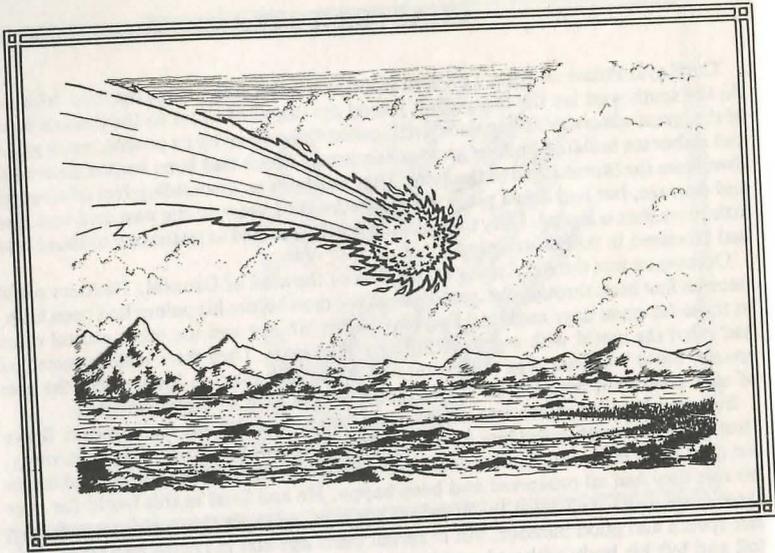
"It is, Your Majesty. The land is mine and was my father's before me."

"And can you prove it to be so?" Mithulin enquired.

"I can," came the reply and the farmer began to produce a paper from his jacket; a small deed tied with a ribbon and sealed with red wax. But he had no opportunity to read it to the court.

Suddenly a great booming sound was heard outside the palace, like a roll of thunder that can find no place to rest, but louder and mightier than any that had been heard before. Its noise was deafening even to those inside the throne room of Oronoman. It made the stone of the palace shake and the bells in the tower ring from its vibration.

And when the sound was gone there came a blinding flash of light. It hurt the eyes



of those who were working in the fields and made the white stone of the palace glare like a thousand torches lit suddenly on the darkest night.

But when the light was gone there came the darkness and the wind. It blew trees from their roots and people from the ground and in the darkness you could see nothing beyond your own hand. The air was heavy with a stench like rotting flesh which made the people retch and vomit.

Then suddenly, as it had come, the horror vanished and everything appeared peaceful as before. But life could never be the same again for any man present, for King and Heir, for farmer or servant, because the powers of evil had been set loose upon the world and had taken hold, however slightly, in every mind that lived and breathed. It was the beginning of a new age.

At the edge of the Deep Pool the old washer woman sat pounding her clothes against a smooth rock and singing as if no care could ever wrinkle her brow. Her song was one of simplicity and innocence; she had been taught it as a child, and had since sung it to her own children and now to her grandchildren.

Awaiting by the water's edge,
I saw a maiden sitting there.
And as she washed the clothes she had,

A gentleman came passing by.
'Good day' he said, and sat him down
Beside the girl who smiled at him.
And as she rinsed the clothes she had,
He looked at her, so young and slim.

The music rang out sweet and clear, but the song was not finished that day.

Suddenly a great ball of fire appeared in the sky, travelling at an enormous speed and unlike anything the old woman had seen in all her many years. It flew like the swiftest bird, yet higher than any beast could hope to reach. It went like a shooting star, with a tail reaching out far behind, but it was bigger than any comet yet seen from this land.

Then it ceased its movement across the sky, turning downwards now to head straight towards the ground. It looked to the old woman as if she would perish as the ball came closer, but instead it went towards the pool and plunged at full pelt into the cold water.

A great torrent rose from the surface as the meteor went down and the rain that fell from it was hot. It blistered the woman's skin and made her cry out from the pain. Fortunately it did not last long and was followed only by a yellow mist that stank venomously and hung in the air for hours afterwards.

The old woman did not wait to see what might happen now, and she fled home screaming. But her life was changed, and so was that of her children, and of her grandchildren.

In the Palace of Glass, Holdin Belanshar, Captain of the guard, reviewed his men as they paraded in the setting sunlight. This was part of the army of Falforn, the Storm Land, though it was a small force and had fought no battles and won no wars. It was an army in name only and performed just the ceremonial duties of the Queen, since there were no disputes with neighbouring kingdoms or uprisings of the populace to control.

Even so, they were a proud band, and skilled in the arts of war, though there had never been a need to employ those skills.

They paraded to show their prowess at drilling, to display their shining weapons and polished gear. They marched up and down, wheeling this way and that, halting and saluting as they went. Holdin was pleased with them all, and proud, and happy.

Then, as they stood silhouetted against the reddening sky, something entered each of their hearts. They all felt a yearning that they had never felt before, and a desire came over them which each had perhaps stifled for a lifetime, not wanting to admit its existence. Or perhaps they had just been unaware of its true meaning. Suddenly their minds changed and a force of evil took control of them. Each soldier produced his sword with only one word upon his mind.

"Kill!" they all shouted, almost in unison.

Their swords worked with swift and deadly accuracy and when the bloody massacre was over only one stood alive, bewildered and regretful.

Holdin Belanshar stepped over the bodies of his troops and fled from the Palace, afraid for his life and not understanding what had happened to him and his comrades.

CHAPTER THREE

The Dwarf Hall of Rimersel, or Lofty Dome, had stood at the southern boundary of the Storm Land for over a thousand years. It was a great lofty building topped with a giant dome, from which it received its name. It was said that the dwarves had built it in mockery of the domed heavens, and as a way of strengthening their alliance with the rock of the land. It also showed a defiance of the other races which had arrived at the same time as the dwarves but had since been more prosperous. They had been endowed with powerful minds and more intricate skills of craft than the dwarves and had quickly come to dominate the land on both sides of the river.

To the south the tall mountain range of Orosema spread for miles, its snow capped peaks ending only at its western edge in the impenetrable desert of Kora, and to the east at the River Milfair. Dwarf legend told of how the first of their race had come from below those very mounts and had spread northwards across the plains and hills, eventually crossing the river itself to settle in all parts of the land. That had been many thousands of years ago and they had since retreated towards the place of their making. Most dwarves were now to be found living close to Rimersel.

Yet still the mountains were impassable to any living being, either dwarf or man. The peaks reached for miles into the sky and though the lands about were hot and dry the tops of the mountains were always snow-covered and cold.

The dwarves did not care much for their human neighbours, who tended to live further to the north. Still, they were friendly enough, trading when necessary but otherwise keeping themselves to themselves. It was a way of life which suited this sometimes secretive race and though they would treat a human visitor with kindness, any dwarf would try his best to hasten a man's departure.

Men generally considered the dwarves to be rather simple folk, though this was not really true, being based more on a lack of understanding for their way of life than actual knowledge. The dwarves were stout hearted, trustworthy and strong, and the length of their memories was matched only by the length of their beards. However, it paid to remain on good terms since an angry dwarf would be foe indeed, and despite their lowly stature each could inflict a blow worthy of two or three men.

Sharmek Helm Head was leader of the dwarves living in the domed palace of Rimersel. It was he who decided their policy and politics. He controlled their production and consumption, and he was commander-in-chief of their own army.

The army had been only recently formed, since it was decided that the increasing numbers of men and other creatures living in Falforn might pose a threat to the continued existence of the dwarves at Rimersel. Whether this was true could not be confirmed, but there had been rumours of dwarves being persecuted at the court of Queen Rolquin. It was a risk that Sharmek had decided could not be taken and so a strong army was recruited and armed, just in case.

The formation of the army, and the general unrest among the dwarves, was an indication of how life had changed in recent times. Their society had become corrupt. Dwarves were caught stealing and vandalising, something which would not have been dreamed of in the past. The punishments had been strict too and resulted in dwarf killing dwarf for the first time in all their history. But the times were changing at

an alarming rate and the tide of progress seemed to have turned back to give way to a ruthless, violent age.

Yet this had not been a gradual process. To an outsider it would have seemed obvious that dramatic changes had taken place almost overnight, but to the dwarves themselves there were no detectable differences in their lives.

It was early one morning when Sharmek sat with his captains. They met every morning to discuss the coming day and plan their manoeuvres.

He was a rough and crude dwarf, even when compared to his companions. Yet he had become even harder since the day Athron had released chaos upon the world. His temper was now quicker than ever and no-one dared to countermand his order or question his decision.

"It is some time since we had word from Oslar," Sharmek began, his gruff voice echoing around the council chamber of Rimersel.

"It is," replied Kirkmere, picking the remains of his breakfast from his beard. "I have a fear that the news will not be good when it does come. There are more rumours about. I have heard this very morning that the men of Oronfal have taken Ilis Clair for their own and threaten to carry her to Hail-an-Hes. And the Amarin have taken arms and are moving west from Harvena."

Some of the others nodded in agreement and a discontented mumbling circulated around the oval table, ending only when Sharmek rose to his feet and hammered against the wooden board.

"Then we must act," Sharmek said, even more sternly. "We cannot afford to waste time. The army of Queen Rolquin can move faster than us and it would be folly to ignore these rumours. No doubt she will take heed of them and act to protect her interests. In that case we must send an army north, to show our strength and resolve. And to teach the men a lesson they will not forget."

"But what if the rumours are not true?" Kirkmere asked.

"Then we are a dwarf band on a journey to see Ilis Clair, to seek her judgement and ask for her blessing in the future."

Sharmek looked around him with a malicious glint in his eye. None of the captains spoke again and with that they all departed to muster their divisions and to prepare for the march ahead.

To the dwarves of Sharmek's army the news came as a relief. Many of them had been spoiling for a fight since their first day at arms and only now did it appear that there might be some action. Just a few were a little apprehensive, but it was not within a dwarf's character to show any fear or trepidation. It was a foot soldiers lot to die for his comrades and his leaders, if need be, and none of the Rimersel folk would dare to break the oath of allegiance which each had sworn:

"For glory, for good, for dwarf folk, for life,

In battle, in service, to give and to die."

It took very little time for the army to prepare. Every soldier had kept his weapons polished and sharp. And like the rock from which he had come, a dwarf could live on little food and water.

Nearly ten thousand set forth from Rimersel that day. There were so many that it was an hour between the first and last to depart. They all travelled on foot, not at speed but resolutely setting one pace after the next, never seeming to tire and never

slowing. They carried all the weapons of war that could be mustered. Some brought only the scythes that they used in the fields, though that was weapon enough in such strong hands, whilst others carried great two handed battle axes forged by the most skilled smiths in all the world.

The dwarves were more skilled than the men of Morath when it came to working with metal and stone. But, unlike the Oronfal men, they chose not to exploit their talents for gain. Instead they treated their smithing like an art form, taking great pride in the strength and quality of their products. It was the nearest that the dwarves could come to expressing any emotion in their creativity.

Some of the soldiers wore crude armour made from sheets of tin shaped roughly around their bodies. Others had vests of chain-mail, heavy and cumbersome but undoubtedly effective in combat. As these dwarves walked their garb clanked and creaked, sounding like a multitude of rusty gates left swinging in the wind.

At the head of the column strode Sharmek, with Kirkmere, Askorn, Ilvar and other captains at his side. They would lead their followers northwards across Islanvir, the Green Glenn, past Mount Telquin and on to Tar Gelfay and the bridge to Oslar. There they would do whatever was necessary to safeguard the interests of dwarfdom and protect Ilis Clair from the ravages of men.

Not one among them doubted that there was a battle to be fought. It was something for which they had all been preparing in the past weeks and not to do so would have brought great disappointment. An army is for fighting, they thought, and Sharmek would not be leading them on this great journey if not to join in war.

Their minds had been changed so much of late that they often turned to thoughts of war when once they would have planned the sowing of crops or the mining of ore. And now they were actually setting off to take part in what would have been unthinkable such a short time ago.

The first day of marching passed with little incident. They strode onwards, rarely stopping for rest or drink. When they did halt finally for the night the sun was already well set. They made camp under the clear starry sky and lit great bonfires of brush wood and sang songs of killing and victory.

The early battle songs of the dwarves were crude and unmelodic. Theirs was not a musical race, but they would sing in their deep, gruff voices when the mood took them. What their chorus lacked in tune was more than equalled in volume. The ten thousand voices rang out for most of the night, though not always in unison, and they had no desire for sleep. At times they would practice their battle skills, cutting and thrusting into the air. Sometimes friends would make mock battle against each other and not a little blood was spilled in that manner during those hours of darkness.

When morning came bright and clear the dwarf horde set forth once more on their quest. They were an awesome sight; twenty thousand heavy boots raising the dust as they trod the north road towards the island of Oslar.

By noon of that second day they reached the village of Olindel. This was a small place inhabited mostly by men who had been friendly with the dwarves of Rimersel. They sold some of the ore and precious stones that the dwarves mined from the mountains and gave in return cloth, skins and food from various parts of the land.

The army that arrived that day was like nothing any man had seen before. They were all tired and hungry and descended upon the village like a plague. Dwarves seemed

to come from every direction. The men of Olindel thought that it was an invasion force come to steal and destroy. Some of them ran this way and that, shouting warnings to their neighbours, whilst others hid in fear from the gathering crowd of strangers.

Sharmek had not intended to cause such alarm, but he chuckled a little to himself when he saw the effect that his troops had on the humans. So he called the elders of the village to meet him and he reckoned to have a little sport at their expense.

The people were led by a man called Ismark who was old and grey, but wise and stern. He greeted Sharmek and his followers as best he could, though he clearly doubted the good intentions of such a large band of travellers.

"Well Ismark," Sharmek began, "do you have food enough for my faithful friends?" He laughed in a cruel way that made the old man shudder.

"Dwarf Lord, you know that we could never feed such large numbers. And if we were able, it would only be on fair payment." Ismark tried to show a little defiance, though he knew that he was powerless against such a force.

"Well is this payment enough," bellowed Sharmek, taking his axe in both hands and throwing it blade first into the ground at Ismark's feet. "I have had wind of the deeds of men hereabouts and I will not stand for insolence from one such as you. Be gone, and take your folk with you."

Sharmek flung his arms about him and Ismark took flight as best he could on his ageing legs. But the dwarf army seemed to take their leader's actions as some kind of signal and a kind of madness began to take hold of them.

Many of the dwarf soldiers took up their weapons and ran through the village, shouting and screaming at the tops of their voices. They herded the humans, men, women and children, out of their homes where most had been hiding in fright. Others kindled torches and began to set light to everything that would burn.

Some of the braver of the men took up spades and sticks and began to beat at the dwarves as they passed. One or two had swords or axes of their own and they wounded a handful of the attackers. But such actions only inflamed the violent passions of their assailants and the orgy of terror grew worse.

The dwarves began to make use of their weapons against their human captives. They ran through the groups of people hacking at them with their axes, wielding them round and round above their heads and chopping anything that came within reach. The red blood of men and boys ran along the dusty road and the washing holes were filled with the blood of their women folk.

Only a handful survived the terrible carnage and when the killing was done the dwarves piled the mutilated corpses into a huge mound and set them aflame. The stinking bonfire burned for a day and a night and was a beacon of death seen throughout the south of Falforn.

As the fire burned the madness that had overtaken the dwarf army seemed to subside a little and some of them began to realise what they had done. Never before had such an atrocity been committed here and the blood of it would stain the land for many years to come.

Sharmek himself could not understand what had happened, or why, but he did not betray his true feelings to anyone. He had to remain the hard commander at any cost, so he carefully hid what little emotion was left within his shining armour.

CHAPTER FOUR

The kingdom of Falform was divided from neighbouring Oronfal by the great River Milfair, named after the large white birds that swam gracefully along its length. The river was a fast flowing waterway which had carried many a man and beast away to the south with its raging current. In its centre lay the long, narrow island of Oslar, home of Ilis Clair and looked on by many as the seat of all wisdom in the land.

Legend told of how Ilis Clair had been set upon the land before time itself began, and of how she had formed the mountains and the river, the forests and the glens. She had peopled the land too. She brought forth the dwarf folk first, making them from the rock of the mounts of Orosema, and then the Amarin, the Sandinid, the Topil, and finally Men. She had been helped by others though, the Zim Farinid, who had worked with their magic to mould the minds of the lesser beings and teach them how to live in the new world.

At the very north of the land the great forest of Clor Tarangarl spread from west to east as far as anyone had travelled. It was a dense, inhospitable woodland which seemed to change from day to day. No-one dared to venture far into those treacherous, tree covered slopes and valleys. Tales had been told of men and Amarin lost for days among the pines and elms, not knowing that the forest's edge was just a few miles away. Only the Sandinid could be found wandering freely in Clor Tarangarl, but they were the Green Men of the woods and were afraid of nothing that grew from the ground.

Near the western edge of Falform stood the great mountain range of the Brondith, or West Rocks. This group of peaks was smaller than Oresema to the south, but none the less impressive. It lay along a line roughly north to south, almost cutting off the Temple of the Innocents and the town of Elin from the rest of Falform. Only a narrow pass through the centre of the mounts gave access to those places, except for the long, arduous routes to the north and south.

At the southern tip of the Brondith stood the old ruins of Glowist. This had once been a magnificent castle; the pride of all the Storm Land, standing as it did at the centre of that kingdom, majestic and strong. But two centuries ago the ground had shaken with a mighty earthquake and reduced every dwelling in the area to rubble, including Glowist.

To replace that royal mansion the people built Noman Sith, the Glass Palace. That was further south, among the foothills of Golan; away, it was hoped, from the ravages of the trembling land.

To the north of the West Rocks, and only fifteen miles south of the Great Forest of the North stood the tall Sky Rock, Cliardith. This steep sided tor had long teased the men who tried to climb it. For most of its history it remained unconquered, but eventually a road was cut into its side, winding round and around the craggy rock, rising ever upwards to finally reach its high summit.

Then they built a great fortress on the flat top. They called it Clarooth, Tower of the Sky, and from there the king of the day could survey much of his country and rule his people from high above.

The tower itself was tall, almost the height of a hundred men. It was stepped as

it rose, each of the three terraces being narrower than the one before, although the citadel flared outwards slightly below each one. There were few windows in the thick stone walls, and these were only narrow slits. The wind at that height was strong and biting and sometimes the tower would be enshrouded by the lowest of the clouds. In truth it was a cold and forbidding place and only tradition stopped it from being abandoned as uninhabitable.

It was at Clarooth that Queen Rolquin held her flamboyant court. She was the reigning monarch of the line of Fornkayd, the Storm Kings, who had ruled Falform since the first man had stepped from the word of Ilis Clair. In fact Rolquin claimed to be a direct descendent from that first human and a family tree had been drawn up tracing the line of kings and queens for ten thousand years into the past. Whether it was a true pattern none could say, but there was no doubt that Rolquin was the latest in a long line of royal descent.

The Queen herself was a powerful woman, quite able to command the men who assisted her in her sovereignty. She was in her fortieth year and had never taken a husband, though she had borne a daughter ten years ago to a father unknown to her people. Her looks were stunning and she did not show her age, looking always like a young girl with long flowing hair, a fair skin and a glint of mischief in her eye. She was a clever woman who could not be tricked or fooled. She knew all that happened in her land and used her powers to the full. She would delegate little and often ignore the advice of her elders and advisers. She was a fair ruler, quick to reward but unforgiving if crossed. Her people liked her well enough and she took a keen interest in the ways of ordinary folk.

Sometimes Rolquin would dress in the clothes of a servant and walk among the commoners as they worked and played. She liked to hear the gossip first hand and see the effects of her administration on the people around her. She would listen to the stories they told, and watch the way they went about their work. She believed that it made her a better monarch to keep in touch like this, rather than set herself apart and never meet the commoners.

The Queen was dressed in this way when the news from Noman Sith arrived. For several days there had been rumours circulating through the palace, though no news had reached the Queen's ears from official sources. They had started at the same time as a great wind had come upon them. That gale had raged for days, beating against the stone walls of Clarooth. No-one had dared to set foot outside because of its force and the biting cold that it brought.

When the wind had died down a little, messengers began to arrive. They brought news from many parts of Falform, as was Rolquin's command. Much of it was mundane and uninteresting, but there had been some unusual sightings and happenings.

From Holath came news of a strange shooting star that had come with the setting sun. At Ormead there had been a sickness that was claiming the lives of the Topil there. But it was the messenger from Noman Sith, the Glass Palace, who brought the worst tidings.

At first it started as a rumour. The women in the market hall were talking in low whispers. Rolquin could barely hear what they were saying as they huddled together in small groups, jostling and pushing to hear the news.

"All dead they said," she heard one trader saying, "over a hundred, killed with

battle axes."

"It was the dwarves," said another, "a great army of them."
Rolquin could not understand what they were talking about. There was no dwarf army. They were a peaceable race. There had never been any trouble from the south of Storm Land. Who was it that could be dead?

She waited a little longer to see if there was any more information to be gleaned from the folk in the market, but in the general hubbub she could make out little. The people were becoming excited and the strange stories would soon become exaggerated out of all recognition.

The Queen made her way up through the Tower of the Sky as quickly as she could. The royal residence was at the very pinnacle of Clarooth and it was quite a climb. Stairway after stairway had to be ascended and each one seemed longer and steeper as she hurried to reach her throne room.

When at last she came to the state room, she paused at the door just long enough to don a long fur robe to cover her plain clothes. Then she entered the chamber and strode magnificently up the purple carpeted stairs to her seat of office.

A messenger awaited her.
"Well, what is the news?" she said, trying to hide her panting breath and arranging her long hair as she spoke.

"Your Majesty. I bring you tidings from Noman Sith," the courier began, removing his hat and bowing low before his Queen. "I have been sent by the Marshal of the Glass Palace. Three days ago the royal guard were parading at the setting sun when a great madness overtook them. There was a mighty battle and everyone was slain, save the captain of the guard whose body has not been found. The scene was terrible to behold and the Marshal fears that evil work is afoot."

"The army was all slain you say?" Rolquin sat back in amazed shock. She could hardly believe what the man was saying; it all seemed too impossible to have really happened. After a few moments of silence she began to question the man. "Then who did the slaying? Was it the dwarves of Rimersel?"

"No your majesty, it was not the dwarves. There was no enemy in the battle; that is what the Marshal cannot understand. The guard seem to have killed each other, though why we cannot say. No-one saw what actually happened, but there was no sign of another soul. There were none but human corpses, though they were hard to recognise, and all of them were from the guard themselves. There were no footprints of intruders nor clues of any kind. It was a foul deed and a great puzzle to us all."

"And what does the Marshal counsel?"

"He asks that an army be sent to Noman Sith to protect the palace from whatever evil has been set upon it. There are only a few soldiers left there, and no captain to command them."

"Very well," Queen Rolquin replied, "return then with this message. Say that I will send as many men as my guard can spare, and with all haste. He knows that my army is small and I can relinquish only a little of it. Reinforcements will follow as soon as can be."

With that the messenger bowed low again and departed from the throne room. Within a few minutes he was on horseback, speeding along the road to Noman Sith bearing the words of his Queen to his immediate master.

Queen Rolquin sat back in her golden chair and thought for a few minutes.

The state room was an enormous chamber at the very top of the Tower of the Sky. Its high ceiling was decorated with a superb frieze depicting the conquering of Cliardith and the building of the Tower itself. But the picture's bright colouring was almost lost in the dim lamp-light of the windowless room. Around the edges of the chamber tall columns supported the ceiling. These, together with the high walls, were also decorated, but this time with more abstract forms; geometric shapes, stylised animals and the like. The floor was bare stone except for a long strip of purple carpet laid from the main doorway to the throne itself, which was at the top of a short, wide flight of steps. At the door stood two guards dressed in shining armour and carrying long pikes. Apart from these two men Rolquin was alone, an almost insignificant figure in the grand throne room.

Suddenly the Queen clapped her hands. "Call for my council," she shouted, and at once one of the guards left the room to do as she commanded.

Within a few minutes several men and women entered the throne room, each bowing low as they came before the Queen. When all had assembled Rolquin motioned for them to sit.

Among those present were the Lord Chamberlain, Ilsarind, and Lairmath, captain of the Clarooth army.

"My loyal servants" Rolquin began, "I have grave news for you from Noman Sith, though I think you may have heard rumour already." Then she explained all that she had been told of the happenings at the Glass Palace, and of her reaction so far.

"I am sending one thousand of my men to Noman Sith. They are to leave immediately with you, Lairmath, at their head. Ilsarind, I expect you to provide me with an army ten thousand strong. They must be armed, provisioned and ready for me to lead them south within a week. The remainder of my regular army will stay here to guard this Tower. There are dark deeds afoot and we cannot afford to tarry in our response."

With that she signalled for them all to leave and go about the work that she directed.

Lairmath went straight to his quarters where he donned his full uniform. He was a striking figure in his gold braided army tunic, taller than any other man in all of Clarooth and strong in mind and body. He was an ideal leader of men. They all looked up to him, both because of his height and because of the esteem in which they held him. He was popular throughout the ranks and his command would be followed to the letter since every man knew that it would have been made only after careful thought and judgement.

From his rooms the captain went to the barracks of the army. This large group of chambers was at the very base of the mighty Tower and took some time to reach. The men of Lairmath's army were stationed around the entrance way to Clarooth. The Tower had only one door to the outside world, a great wooden portal which had not been closed for many years, a fact which even now was preying on Lairmath's mind.

Just inside the entrance way was an enormous covered courtyard and around this were the rooms that comprised the army barracks, armoury and stables. The soldiers of Clarooth were great horsemen and it was on this fact that their future might now depend. It seemed that great haste was called for and Lairmath intended to make the best use he could of their riding abilities.

When at last he reached the giant hallway of the palace he began to issue orders. Some men were detailed immediately to repair the hinges of the mighty doors that had rotted and rusted through the years of disuse. He commanded that others should set off through the whole of the Tower and find whatever they thought could be used as weapons. The smiths should stop all other work, he said, save for the shoeing of horses, and concentrate on the production of swords and spears.

He detailed his officers to muster a thousand men, over half the army, and have them ready to ride in one hour.

Then he left the courtyard again and set off for the upper levels once more. He wanted to say goodbye to his wife and there was very little time left in which to do so.

When the army of Queen Rolquin set off from Clarooth they were a magnificent sight. One thousand men of the finest cavalry ever seen in all Falforn rode quickly out of the enormous gateway and down the winding road that encircled Cliardith. They went at full gallop with banners unfurled and flapping in the wind. Their tunics were of the brightest red and gold and their badges shone as the sunlight glinted from their upheld spears.

They rode on and on along the dusty road, gradually pulling further and further from sight.

At the head of the army rode Lairmath, his white stallion carrying him with ease as they sped across the foothills that surrounded the West Rocks. His long brown hair flowed out behind him and his halberd pointed upwards towards the sky.

Before too long though their pace slowed and they reduced to a trot, but still they travelled another five miles with every passing hour. The horses' pounding hooves stirred the dust as they went and behind the column of beasts and riders a great cloud rose into the air, which only dispersed an hour after they had passed.

By the end of that day they had passed the Temple of the Innocents, but they did not stop to pay their respects. Instead they camped for the night five miles to its south. It was a cold bivouac since they had come without tents or shelters. They had need for speed and were weighed down already with weapons and food enough for their journey to Noman Sith. The men endured it well though and at day break, after a meagre breakfast, they set off once more.

On that day they passed by Elin. They filled their water bottles at its fountain and the townsfolk gave them whatever food they could spare. When they moved off again the people cheered and chanted.

"Long live the Queen," they called, and "Victory to the Army of the Storm Land." But no-one knew what victory that might be, or even who they would be fighting, if there was any fight to be had.

That night they all camped in the shadow of Amarnil. The old pyramid towered above the soldiers and their mounts, staring down at them as if it did not care about the way life had changed in its land.

No-one knew who had built Amarnil. It had stood since before men's history had begun, and even the dwarves had no recollection of a time when the edifice had not existed. It was a huge stone structure with no entrance and no windows. There were many stories about it but the truth could never be discovered. Some said that it was

the burial mound of the first dwarf lord, others that it was a machine that counted the years as they passed by. When at last time ran out the great building would collapse and bring down all the land with it. Another theory was that it contained the brother of Ilis Clair who had been entombed to contain the evil with which he had threatened the world in a far gone age.

Whatever the truth, it did not change the fact that it was a magnificent structure and a marvel of the ancient engineering that had produced it. Many an architect or builder still envied its fine lines and neatness of construction. The joints between the massive stones were all but invisible to the naked eye and its three edges were straight beyond compare. Only the wind and rain had eroded the hard rock and spoiled the meticulous design, yet it was still the greatest monument known to man.

That night was a little warmer than the one before. The great pyramid offered some shelter from the wind and the southern lands were always more temperate.

At dawn Lairmath and his men rode off again for the last day of their journey to Noman Sith.

CHAPTER FIVE

Noman Sith, the Palace of Glass, was an oddity among the great buildings in this land. It was the newest of the royal palaces, both of Falforn and Oronfal, being just over a century old. It had been constructed in a variety of styles, taking a little from each of the previous mansions, and combining them all with the fashion of the time.

Its main theme was the glass and iron work that comprised the central hall. This was a wonder of its time. The smiths who wrought the metal had learned a lot from the dwarf craftsmen who, unusually, had given their knowledge freely. The men manufactured huge girders and columns, and built a latticework of iron between which they hung magnificent plates of glass, the finest that had ever been seen. But all this had been at great human cost. Many men had died in its making and the king of the time decreed that no other building should be erected in this style again.

The central hall of the palace was flanked on each side by tall towers of stone while its own arched roof reached a hundred feet into the air. Sometimes when a strong wind blew, huge sheets of glass crash down to the ground and the holes they left were almost impossible to repair. It took great skill to walk across the narrow roof beams to reach the gaping breaches, and then they could only be patched with animal skin or canvas. No glass could be brought to such a height now.

At the front of the palace a large paved terrace spread outwards. Its large hexagonal slabs were white for the most part, except in one area where they were newly stained brown by the blood of a terrible massacre.

It was here that Lairmath and his troops halted as the sun began to set at the end of their third day from Clarooth. As the great orange ball sank behind Noman Sith it shone through the glass of the palace, casting a huge geometric shadow across the courtyard, and scattering a myriad of rainbows on the flat stones.

When he saw them approach, Lord Erathel, Marshal of the Palace, came to greet the army.

"Hail Lairmath," he said as the captain dismounted, "your journey was swift."

"As the Queen commanded, my Lord," Lairmath replied. "We have been on the road for three days and halted only for darkness. Do you have lodging for my men, and stabling for the horses?"

"Aye, though simple it is for we had no time to prepare for so mighty an army. Some of your men may use the old barracks, we have little need for them now. The rest must billet in the great hall. For you, Captain, there are quarters in the south tower. Your horses must sleep under the stars, though that should not worry them overmuch."

With that Lairmath ordered all his men to dismount and see to their steeds. Only then could they rest themselves and feed upon whatever fare could be mustered. Sentries were posted and scouts were sent to spy out the land all around, though they could hope to find little before the sun set fully. Lairmath thought that Holdin Belanshar might still be close by, or that his body might be found.

When all was seen to, Lairmath himself retired for the night. He slept well in the feather bed that the Marshal provided and his room in the palace was warm and pleasant. He had suppered to his fill and drank a glass of wine, or two, and fell into a deep

sleep as soon as he lay his head on the soft pillow.

He was awoken with a start. It was still dark and a guardsman stood over him with a dimly burning lantern. It took Lairmath a while to recover his senses, but when he did he sat up and spoke to the man.

"What is it? Is there trouble afoot?"

"There is a messenger, Captain," the soldier whispered in reply. "A man has come from Olindel bearing news of terrible deeds in that town. We thought that you should be awakened to hear his tale at first hand."

Lairmath arose immediately, quickly dressed and followed the man to the Marshal's chambers.

They found Erathel sitting with another man who was dishevelled and raggedly dressed. He had an open wound on his arm and was clearly distressed and shocked. And yet he had come nearly a hundred miles across the open plain without food or fresh water, drinking only from the rain puddles and animals' watering holes.

"This is Narlen of Olindel," began the Marshal. "He has come with a terrible tale. I think you should hear this Captain." Then he turned to the frightened man and spoke in a kind, soft voice, "Now tell Lairmath what you have told me."

"Very well," Narlen began, his voice quivering with fear and horror as he remembered the terrible events. "It was yesterday, no the day before, that we were working in the smithy at Olindel; my father, brother and I. My brother was shoeing a horse, and I beating a scythe blade from a hot ingot. It was around noon and we were about to stop to take lunch when there was a commotion outside.

"The village square was filled with people; not just men, but dwarves too. We all thought it very odd that there should be so many of the dwarf folk there. But soon we noticed that they were not craftsmen or traders, but soldiers. It was a huge dwarf army that had marched into town. They were all shouting, and pushing the men and women between them, laughing and teasing the people with their rough hands and cruel voices.

"My brother is... I mean was," he swallowed quickly and then continued. "My eldest brother was a quick tempered man and he set about a dwarf with his shoeing iron. At first the soldier ignored him, but suddenly he took out his axe and struck my brother with it. He took the blow full on his shoulder, and the dwarf's blade was sharp. My brother died in an instant and when my father rushed to help, he too was slain without a thought.

"Before long the dwarves were running amok throughout the village. They herded the men and women and then slaughtered them where they stood. It was an awful thing; I have never seen anything like it in my life, and wish to see no such deeds again. They killed even the children and the babies."

Then Narlen fell silent, hanging his head and sobbing loudly.

"And how did you come to escape?" Lairmath asked.

"I don't know, my lord. I jumped upon the horse, and rode off. The dwarves could not catch me, though some of them tried hard enough. One threw his axe and it caught me on this arm." He held up his left arm. The wound on it was long but not deep and the bleeding had stopped.

"I rode and rode," he continued, "galloping all the way without stopping. We must have gone for miles, until the animal could go no further. When I looked back

I could see Olindel in flames and the dwarf army moving off once more along the road to Oslar."

"To Oslar!" Lairmath stood up, hardly believing his ears. "The dwarves intend to take Oslar and Ilis Clair for themselves. I should have guessed that it was something of that sort. The dwarf folk have long since wished for power beyond their means, and they intend to get it with the aid of Ilis Clair. We must stop them before they destroy all that is good in this land. I'll wager that it was the dwarves who had a hand in the evil doings at this very palace."

Erethal spoke more quietly. "Calm yourself, Lairmath. You may be right, but we must not be hasty in our judgement. I would counsel that we wait for more word before we begin a war which we might never have the power to win."

"No," Lairmath spoke loudly, ignoring the words of his superior. "We must go at once and head off this column of death. To wait would be folly, and might bring our downfall more finally than a swift response in force."

He turned to Narlen, "How many dwarves were in this army?"
"I could not say," came the reply. "There were more dwarves there than I have ever seen men. There must have been a thousand at least."

Next morning a rider departed for Clarooth carrying a message for Queen Rolquin. It was written by Lairmath and carried his seal of office. It read thus:

"Your Royal Highness, I am in receipt of grave news from Olindel. A dreadful massacre has taken place there, perpetrated by a dwarf army from Rimersel. The dwarves are marching on Oslar and it is my belief that they intend to take Ilis Clair and use her against the human race. It is my intention to take eight hundred men and intercept them before they reach their goal. I would humbly suggest that you lead your army south east to meet us at the bridge across the Milfair. I remain your faithful servant, Lairmath, Captain of the Guard."

Erethal did not give his sanction to the Captain's decision, but neither did he try to stop him. It was not the Marshal's place to comment upon military matters and he considered that it would have been foolish to quarrel further with the Queen's own Captain.

Lairmath hoped to meet the dwarves before they reached the river. If they managed to cross onto Oslar, his small band of cavalry would be powerless to stop them. If they destroyed the bridge across the river he would be unable to reach them, and if they spared it they might be able to hold off any attack with ease. His only hope was in the speed of his riders, and he would press them to the limits of their endurance to succeed in his plan.

So eight hundred riders took flight from the Glass Palace. They took with them nothing but their weapons and they galloped with all their might to reach Oslar before the dwarf horde.

Lairmath led his men once more, but this time with a greater passion burning in his breast. He had vowed to himself that he would avenge the people of Olindel. He would make the dwarf army suffer in the same way as those poor folk had done. The earth creatures should be taught a lesson, he thought, and it was his task to see it done.

They journeyed along the eastern road, mostly going through the flat plain between

Noman Sith and the River, a total of a hundred miles as a bird might fly, and longer by the road. But they could manage that distance in less than two days, perhaps even a day and a night if the sky was clear and the moons were full.

"If the dwarves left Olindel two days ago they might be at Oslar by now," thought Lairmath. "But they will be marching, and slowly at that. I think it will be a close race."

Sharmek Helm Head marched doggedly onwards, leading his troops along the north road, continually placing one heavy boot in front of the other, even though his legs seemed to have lost most of their strength. It had been a hard journey and his army was tired and restless. Since the incident at Olindel they had all been quieter, perhaps a little afraid of what they had done. Sharmek had feigned anger with his troops, but inwardly he was pleased with their performance. It proved to him, and to all those here, that the dwarf army was a powerful fighting force. And it was one which even men could not beat, for all their learning and wisdom.

They had come many miles since then and now their goal was almost in sight. They were level with the forest of Tar Gelfay, and the bridge to Oslar was just a dozen miles away. Its proximity tempted Sharmek and his captains, but they could push their soldiers no further without some rest. So they stopped at the eaves of the forest and rested a while.

They had not been still for long when they heard the blowing of a trumpet in the distance. They did not know what it was, and none among them could guess, but suddenly a great band of riders appeared over the horizon. It was an army of men.

Sharmek sprang to his feet. He called out, "Dwarves, arm yourselves. The enemy are upon us."

At once every dwarf fighter took up his axe, or whatever weapon he had brought. Most of Sharmek's army formed themselves into a great semi-circle in front of the forest's edge. Others retreated beneath the trees, to act as a rear guard. A few more advanced towards the human riders, swinging their axes and shouting for the blood of men.

Half of Lairmath's men charged towards the dwarf enclave, their spears pointing forwards for attack. The others rode left and right, trying to trap the advancing dwarves in the jaws of their movement.

When the first of the foes engaged they inflicted heavy casualties upon each other. The dwarves suffered bitterly from the fast moving, horse borne attack. The men, and especially their horses, were killed by the dozen as the dwarves stood their ground and repelled the charge. Few of the advancing dwarves made any mark though. They were quickly out-manoeuvred by the skilled horsemen who weaved between them, turning this way and that and inflicting terrible injuries with their long spears.

Soon both sides fell back to count the cost; the dwarves to within the woodland and the men north, across the two roads that met nearby.

When the retreat was complete and all was quiet, Sharmek went forward again with a small number of his guard, to count the dead and assess their situation. He was surprised that such a small number of men had inflicted such casualties on his troops, but he had not reckoned on the ability of the cavalry. They could out-perform a dwarf in all respects, except for steadfastness and physical strength. Yet these virtues

were of little help if the enemy could outrun you in both the attack and retreat. Sharmek wandered among the corpses that lay on the muddy, hoof trodden ground. He looked mostly at the dwarf folk who lay there. Some he recognised as loyal subjects, some as friends, but all as members of his own race. He felt sad that life had come to this and that the old ways had been forgotten so easily. Then he turned his attention to the men, feeling for a moment just a little pity even for them.

Then he noticed the badges that they wore. These were not men from Oronfal and this was not the army of Theltiem. These were men from his own land. They came from the north, from the army of Queen Rolquin. He realised at once his mistake. He had led his dwarves north to fight a foe from another land. Despite the fact that they disliked all men, it had not been his intention to begin a war with the humans of Falforn. Whatever he might think of them, they would have to remain his allies in the foreseeable future. The men far outnumbered the dwarves and to battle against them would be extremely foolish. He realised that the fighting would have to stop if there was ever to be peace again with dwarves taking their rightful place in the world.

Sharmek immediately sent forth an emissary to Lairmath's army. He knew that he would have to beg forgiveness from the Queen and he would lose her honour in doing so, but these were dark times and even Sharmek would have to suffer for the sake of his people.

So a lone dwarf, carrying a red banner, stepped gingerly forward, repeating in his mind the message from his lord to the leader of the men.

"Sharmek Helm Head sends this message to you, my Lord," the dwarf said haltingly when the horsemen pushed him through their camp to Lairmath. "He asks that you show him mercy and forgiveness for the error of his ways. He says that his quarrel is not with the people of Clarooth, nor any in Storm Land. He bids that you meet him to discuss ways in which we may further our mutual interests. If you will come, then I shall take your reply."

Lairmath thought for a long time without speaking. At last he said, "Very well, take this reply to your master. I will come to meet him where the two roads join. He may bring a dozen of his soldiers, and I will do the same. But be warned, my army will be poised, and if I do not return within the hour, or send word, they will destroy all that remains of dwarfdom in this world."

With that the dwarf messenger was sent on his way and the captain of men prepared to meet his enemy.

At the fork in the road Lairmath and Sharmek sat on the grassy ground to discuss their alliance. Around them twenty four soldiers eyed each other with suspicion and watched for trickery and deceit.

Sharmek spoke mostly and Lairmath replied to him only when he thought it necessary.

The dwarf leader told of how the men from Oronfal had taken control of Oslar and were using Ilis Clair against them all. It was this power that had tricked the dwarves into killing the people at Olindel, and had forced these two allies into fighting against their will. He said that they should join together to combat the true evil force in the world; the men of Oronoman and the Amarin that aided them in their deeds.

Eventually, after giving it much thought, Lairmath consented to the dwarf's plans.



He knew that in reality he could not hope to defeat such a massive number of fully armed dwarves. He decided to comply with Sharmek's wishes, at least for the moment, because there seemed no other choice open to him. To begin fighting again would be sheer folly, and they could not retreat without losing any respect, or fear, that the dwarf army might have for them. His only hope was that Rolquin might arrive with her ten thousand men and, if Sharmek was lying, they might be able to overthrow him then.

In any case, if what Sharmek said was true and the men from the east had conquered Oslar, then they would have to act to rescue Ilis Clair, for the good of all the peoples of Falforn.

And so the two armies reformed their ranks and began the last part of their journeys together. Lairmath and Sharmek went at the head of the line and their respective troops followed behind, a division of men followed by a similar number of dwarves, with the bulk of that army behind them. At the rear came the wounded of both sides. Those who could walk did so, and the rest were carried on the backs of horses or makeshift litters. The dead were buried within the bounds of Tar Gelfay, in two mass graves. One for men, the other for dwarves.

But they were not a happy army now. Each side resented the decision of their leader and the dwarves and men looked on each other with disdain. Every one of them had lost a friend or relation in the fighting, and they blamed each other for their losses. But they marched on since they knew it was all that could be done.

Before too long they came to the River Milfair, where the road crossed it by an old stone bridge.

The Milfair was a magnificent sight. Many of those present had never seen it before, and they gazed in wonder at the rushing water as it sped past on its southward journey. The river was nearly half a mile wide here and almost as deep, so it was said, and the current was so fast that no man could swim from one shore to the other. Only the bridges could be used to cross the mighty waterway, and there were only three of those, two from each bank to Oslar and one much further north, near Holath.

Slowly the military procession crossed the long, narrow bridge. They could go only six abreast and it seemed to take an age before all the men, dwarves and horses were safely on the island.

But the sight that met their eyes was nothing like they had expected. There was no army from the east, no battle to be fought and no sign of evil work. Only Ilis Clair stood, as she always did, a fine sight outlined against the darkening sky. The Silver Singer. The Statue of the Unicorn.

CHAPTER SIX

Holdin Belanshar had left the Glass Palace far behind by the time he regained his senses. He had wandered aimlessly among the hills of Golan for many hours, not understanding his own thoughts and completely blind to all else around him. All the while he wrestled with his consciousness and for a long time he seemed to have no control over his mind, or his body. But every so often he would have a short respite, in which he momentarily saw himself as a small figure in a huge, empty landscape, before being overwhelmed again by the strange force.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the evil was gone and his mind relaxed in a sudden ecstasy of relief.

At first he could not believe what had befallen his men just a short time before, but he knew that he had seen it with his own eyes, and that the truth of the matter was more horrible than any nightmare. And now they were all dead, or so he presumed, and he was the only survivor. He wondered how it could be that he was still living. What force had saved him from the terrible madness that had overtaken the sane thoughts of so many men? He felt guilty for being the only refugee, and he was afraid for what might happen to him in the future. Perhaps the awful insanity would return and reap its revenge on him.

Eventually, in the dead of night, he stopped his wandering and sat down on a grass topped hill and wept. The tears ran down his face as if they would never stop and he remembered his friends and comrades who were now gone. He mourned for them all, and his life seemed empty and hollow without them.

But after a while he could cry no more and his mind began to turn to more logical thoughts. He tried to think clearly, to void his mind of the emotions that had almost consumed him, and to find a solution to his problems.

He could not go back to Noman Sith, that was certain. He felt that he would be blamed for what had happened. In fact he could not be certain that it was not truly his fault. It seemed too much of a coincidence that he was the only survivor. And because he was the only man left living, the others, his superiors, were bound to attach some sort of blame to him. He was the commanding officer and should have been able to control his men, though he did not know how.

He did not really know what had happened, or why, and until that time he would never feel completely free. There was something in his mind which troubled him greatly, like the shadow of a stranger who cannot himself be seen. He had to find the truth of the matter and release himself from this mental bond.

As he sat in the cold night he decided that the first thing he needed was some shelter. If he could keep himself warm and find just a little food he might survive for longer and have time to think what to do. He could not remain here on these exposed hills for long.

When morning came he set off in a north easterly direction towards the southern end of the Brondith. He thought that he would go to the old ruins of Glowist. There would be shelter there and he might find animals and edible vegetation too. He carried his sword and a knife, a flint to make fire, and a full water bottle. These would see him through for a short while at least.

It took him two days to reach the lower parts of the Brondith where the ruins stood. He became lost on more than one occasion, only being able to use the sun for navigation, and it did not shine for long each day. There were black clouds gathering and they threatened a storm, but it held off while he was travelling, something for which he was most grateful.

Holdin was a short, stocky man of great strength, both physical and mental. While in the Palace of Glass he would exercise to keep his muscles firm and powerful, and he would hold long philosophical discussions with his close friends and companions. He and the Marshal of the Palace would play games that taxed their minds and each would try to outwit the other in methods of strategy and tactics.

Belanshar was unusual among the captains of the army; he had risen through the ranks to reach this position, whereas most seemed to gain such honour by inheritance or luck. This man had worked hard though, starting as a foot soldier and treading the beat of a palace guard for many years before eventually being promoted to lieutenant. From then on life had been a little easier and when his predecessor died Holdin had been the Army Council's unanimous choice for the post.

It was the Army Council that decided on the overall day to day running of the army of Falforn. Only they stood between Holdin and his peers and the Queen herself. Yet the Council had no say in the strategy of the army and the three captains of the Storm Land were in command. Only Rolquin could interfere in such matters, which she often did.

When at last Holdin came to the ruins of Glowist the dark clouds had parted and allowed the sun to break through with fleeting beams of brilliant light. It shone brightly against the peak of Molaktar, the southern most point of the Brondith, and the tree covered mount seemed to glow with a spring green of new growth.

The ruin itself was much as it had remained for the last two hundred years. For the most part it was just a huge pile of rubble. Great square stones that had once formed the most regal castle in all Falforn were now piled here and there in tall, shapeless mounds. What had once been shining towers of marble were now heaps of crumbling rock that glistened in the sunlight like a million shards of broken glass.

Yet the destruction had not been absolute. Here and there amongst the broken fragments a shelter could be found. Perhaps a room not totally crushed by the force of the earthquake, or a recess created as the stonework fell in upon itself.

The captain strode wearily across the undulating plain towards the ruins. He was tired and hungry. He had not slept since the day of the massacre, and food had been scarce on his wanderings. Once he caught a rabbit and roasted it on a spit. Another time he found a soylok bush loaded with fruit. He had picked the red berries as though they were the last food in the land, and when he had eaten his fill he brought with him as many as he could carry. But a man cannot live on sour fruit alone and his stomach ached from a surfeit of them.

Finally he came close to the old castle. In an instant something knocked him bodily to the ground. It was as if a great weight had come hurtling towards him and pushed him backwards onto the hard earth. Yet he had seen nothing, and there had been no sound.

And worse was to come. He found that he could no longer stand up at all. The invisible weight seemed to have landed full on top of him and he could not push it

aside, though he tried with all his might. It was impossible to even lift an arm or a leg under the force, and the immense pressure seemed to push him into the firm ground where he lay.

Then there came the voice. It was a hideous, ugly voice that hissed out its words and seemed to spit into his ear, like someone whispering into a dream.

"Who are you?," it said. "What brings you to the ruins of the Old House?"

Holdin could not answer though. There was barely enough air in his lungs to breathe; he could spare none for talking.

The voice repeated its questions, and then the heavy pressure eased a little and the man was able to rasp out a reply.

"I am Holdin Belanshar, I mean no harm, I did not knowingly commit the crimes of which you accuse me. I am an innocent man."

He almost pleaded with the unseen adversary, and though it charged him with nothing, the guilt that welled within his own mind made him say things that he did not mean to.

"Then why do you come here?" continued the voice.

"I seek only shelter from the elements. I mean no harm to you, or any living soul. I wish to find help for myself, and my people. There are questions to be answered, and I cannot find a way to do so. I need time to think and be alone."

Suddenly the mysterious weight was gone and Holdin found that he was able to stand again. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, then filled his lungs again to counter the effects of the crushing they had received. Then he realised that he was alone and he began to wonder what had happened, and who the invisible creature might have been.

He was about to set off towards the ruins once more when a man appeared over a gentle ridge in his path. He recognised the figure at once, not because he knew him but because he had heard of his kind and knew of them well. This was not a man at all that walked slowly towards him, it was one of the higher mortals, the Zim Farinid. Holdin could tell by the way he walked, the slow stooping gait, and by his clothes, and the staff that he carried.

The old man wore a grey robe that came almost to the ground, and a tall hat that covered most of his head and face. His long wooden staff was old and gnarled; it looked as if he had used it to walk for a thousand years, and always along the most dangerous paths. His face, though old and lined, was kind and welcoming.

Holdin had never met one of these old wizards, but he had heard many tales about them. He knew how they had helped Ilis Clair to shape the land, and to teach the men and other creatures how to live in it. They had saved the world from the creeping plague and even now watched over all things to see that no evil could overwhelm the peaceful life that they all enjoyed. They were a kind and benevolent race who would harm no-one and brought only good to all they met.

"Good morning to you, sir," the soldier called out, almost amazed to see him there.

"Good morning you call it," the old man replied grumpily, "I would call it no more good than a cold wind on a summer's day. What brings you here to trouble me? Cannot the men of this world leave me in peace? Have I not done enough to help your lot that I must be bothered at all times, whether I wish to assist or not?"

Holdin was a little taken aback by the mighty one's attitude. He had expected soft talking and swift aid, but it seemed that he was wrong, and that all the old stories he knew had confused the real nature of this powerful race.

"Forgive me, sir," he said, hanging his head. "I meant no harm to you, and I did not wish to bother you with my problems. I did not seek you out, but came here by accident. If you will let me on my way then I will go and leave you to yourself." He turned as if to go, but the old man called after him.

"Holdin," he said, "do not trouble yourself with my ramblings. I see that you are in need of rest and shelter. Come with me and I will help you as best I can. I'll warrant that a good meal would not go amiss."

With that he turned and beckoned that Holdin should follow.

They walked solemnly over the low hills to the old stone ruins. Holdin followed a few paces behind, perhaps a little afraid to come level with the old man. He was held somewhat in awe of him and he dared not risk his disfavour. He seemed to have a mood about him that would not suffer the discourtesies of a man.

Holdin also found that although his companion seemed to walk with an agonisingly slow pace it was very hard to keep up with him, even though his own legs were stepping out as quickly as they could and taking strides that any soldier would be proud of. There was clearly truth in the stories of the Zim Farinid's magical powers.

When at last they halted, Holdin found himself deep within the ruins of the old palace. The wizard had set up a den beneath a huge slab of ancient stone that was supported at each end by the remains of giant pillars. Underneath this strange roof was a chair, a table and an old chest.

The chair and table were ordinary enough, but the large box looked mysterious and out of place. It was made of the most beautifully carved wood that Holdin had ever seen. On its lid was a picture of Ilis Clair herself, but not in the pose that the Statue now took. Instead she was running, like a horse in a gallop, her white mane streaming behind her head and her silver tail swishing from side to side. He could almost picture her moving in this way, not a Statue at all, but a living unicorn running wild and free across the great plains of Falforn.

"Well Holdin, sit yourself down and rest." The old man pointed to the chair, and then sat down himself on another seat that the army captain had not noticed before.

"In a while I shall prepare some food, but might I suggest first that you wash and tidy yourself. Those stains upon your tunic look to me like the blood of men. I will not trouble you at the moment as to why they are there, though I would like to know sooner rather than later, but it would be better if they were changed before we partake of a meal."

For the first time in days Holdin looked down at himself. He had not realised until now what a mess his clothes were in. The blood of his men had indeed spilt upon his battle dress and his hands and face were dirty with the days of travelling.

"Thank you sir, I will wash myself gladly, but I have no other garments to wear."

"Then trouble yourself no more," said the old man, "I will find you something." He went over to his trunk and began to rummage around inside. Then he produced a grey cloak similar to his own, but looking perhaps a little newer. "Here, take this," he said gruffly, "and will you stop calling me 'sir'. I am known to men as Avarath the Health Giver, and I will thank you to use that name from now on."

Then Holdin washed in a bowl of warm water on the table, though where that had come from he could not guess, and he took off his bloodstained army tunic and put on the cloak that Avarath gave him. It was warm and comfortable.

They dined on a meal of roast beef, hot potatoes and a variety of green vegetables, but again Holdin could not see how they came to be there. The old man certainly did not cook them and although he did not simply produce them from thin air, it seemed that he did employ his magical powers in some way to obtain the food.

There was much about Avarath that Holdin did not understand. He seemed to be a person of many opposing moods, but always willing to help. But for all his misgivings he could see that the old one would be a powerful friend, or a terrible foe.

Once Holdin had satisfied his immediate hunger, Avarath began to question him about his purpose and his reasons for being so far from his home. He seemed to know that something was amiss, although that must have been fairly obvious from Holdin's state when he first arrived. But it was more than that. Avarath had a sense for the truth and he wanted to hear the captain's story in full.

"It was two days ago, or was it three?" Holdin began. He didn't know where to begin, or what to say. "I am a Captain of the army of Falforn, at least I was. Now my army is gone and I am a fugitive from my own masters."

"We were parading at the setting sun, as we do every day, and all was well. The sun shone across the plain, the men were in fine form and drilled well. I was proud and happy, for them and for myself. We were a true and loyal band and I could not have wished for a finer body of men to be under my command."

"When the parade was nearly over we stood on the square at Noman Sith and I was about to make my address when something happened. I cannot say what it was, or why it should have been. I can only describe the way that I felt and how it affected me and the others."

"At that instant in time I seemed to feel all the bad emotions of mankind swelling inside my head, as if to make it burst. They came from all about, from within me, and from without. They echoed around inside my skull until I could almost bear it no longer. Time seemed to stand still for that instant, as if a year had passed by in the blinking of an eye. I remembered my mother as she died, and felt the sorrow of that day. I saw my brother kill a sparrow in the garden where we grew, and I flushed with the anger that had enraged me as a child. I felt the frustration of a baby who cries but is never heard. And I felt the wanting of a material wealth that could never be mine."

"All those things took hold of my mind for such a short time, but they have left me scarred for the rest of my life. I shall never forget that moment and the visions that went before my eyes."

"And then came the truly evil thoughts. These were worse than any that had come before. There was a lust for killing and a hatred for all living things. Every man in the land was chasing me, calling for my blood, and my only chance of escape was to kill them all first and run for my life. Then there was anger that they should be doing this, that they had chosen me to be the vent for their own stifled emotions."

"That is when the killing began."

Holdin stopped speaking, he could go on no more.

When Avarath saw what distress the recollections were causing the man he raised his hand and placed it upon the soldiers forehead.

"Be gone," was all he said, but Holdin could feel the power that was Avarath flowing along the outstretched arm and into his soul. It bathed him in a warm glow and seemed

to lift a weight from his shoulders as it went. As the strange force flowed downwards through his body he could feel every muscle relax like it had never done before. It made his skin tingle and his heart beat slowly in a gentle, hypnotic rhythm. But before the power of that magic reached the extremities of his limbs he was asleep; in a deep, dreamless sleep of healing and rejuvenation.

Holdin did not awake until the next morning. When he did finally stir into life he felt better than he had for a long time. His mind was easier now and the horror of past events seemed to have dimmed a little, like a childhood dream that is all but forgotten. He was still in the ruined castle though, and Avarath was at his side.

"Ah, you have decided to arise today after all," the old man mocked. "I thought that you were going to sleep the full day and night. This will not do if you are to assist me in my work."

Belanshar rubbed the sleep from his eyes and thought for a moment about what Avarath had said. He did not recall offering his help to the old man, though he would give it if asked. He thought rather that he had come here to find help of his own, though not necessarily from one of the Zim Farinid.

"Er, I don't understand, Avarath," he said at last, "of what aid can I be to you."

"Well I have yet to decide that," said the old man patronisingly, "but do not get ideas above your station. Whatever tasks you undertake will be menial compared with my own. But no doubt you will have your part to play in the scheme of things."

This did not help Holdin, who still had no idea of what was afoot.

Eventually, seeing the look of puzzlement on the captain's face, Avarath began to explain his part of the story.

"You have guessed already that I am one of the so-called 'Higher Mortals'," he said. "A silly name I must confess, since we are neither high, nor mortal, but it will do for the moment.

"Well, I must tell you now that there are evil things abroad in the land. Something which we all hoped would never be, has at last happened; though what that is I'm not quite sure. There have been strange rumours of trouble throughout Falforn and Oronfal, and yours is just one more tale to add to the many I have heard already. I too have detected an evil presence in the land, though I cannot say what form it takes. There is an evil age ahead of us all and no creature is safe from it. Not even me!" He laughed in a low chuckle, and then his face became straight and stern again.

"If this force has reached as far as Noman Sith then it is worse than I feared. I had set myself here to shelter from the ways of men for a time. I thought I might not be found, since I have need of quiet to gather my thoughts and plan my moves. Unfortunately it appears that I was wrong. Hence we must move on, and go with all haste for time is not our ally. If we are quick then we may make our mark before it is too late."

The way Avarath spoke filled Holdin with fear and dread once more. He did not understand all of what the old man said, but what he did understand sounded bad. If anything were to upset the peaceful manner in which all the races of the land had lived, then these would be dark times indeed. Until now those races had been finely balanced, depending on each other for their living. But if something were to tip that equilibrium one way or another then no-one could foretell the consequences.

And so the two companions set out almost at once, at first with Avarath leading,

as he had done before, and Holdin trailing behind. They went northwards, towards the gap between the West Rocks and away from the comparative security of Glowist.

When they had been going for an hour Holdin called out, "Avarath, will you not slow your pace a little so that I may walk beside you?"

The old man replied, "Oh, very well, but you will have to do better than this if we are to reach Ormead in time."

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Avarath and Holdin were a little way from Glowist, the old wizard turned back and raised his staff high into the air.

"Vayn lief math erat in folar," he chanted, loud and clear so that the words echoed from the nearby mountain side. Then he turned to his companion. "Our hiding place will be safe from all but the most persistent of inquisitors," he said.

Then they moved off again.

Their journey to the Temple of the Innocents would take them almost due north for fifty miles before they could then turn west through the gap between the West Rocks at Elin-Mer. It would not be an easy route though. Avarath thought they should conceal themselves, though Holdin could see no real reason for it.

So they kept close to the mountains all the way, hiding behind the foothills and craggy slopes as they went. It made the going slower but the old man seemed to think it worthwhile. He was afraid of something, but Holdin could not guess what, and the Healer would not say.

By the end of the first day they were past Molaktar and into the lower, rocky region that cut off that mount from the rest of the Brondith. These lesser peaks, some of them no bigger than a large boulder, stretched for fifteen miles before the mountains themselves took over once more. They went on for another thirty miles, breaking again at the pass to Elin.

They made their first night's camp here, between two outcrops that satisfied Avarath's need for concealment. When they had eaten supper, which was again provided by some unknown means, they settled down to sleep. Within minutes the old man was snoring loudly but Holdin lay awake for hours, restless and cold.

He fancied that in the night he heard strange noises. There were animals abroad that he had never heard before. Strange hootings that came from no bird that he knew, and a low murmuring that was not the wind. The noises frightened him, together with the thoughts that ran through his head. He considered what Avarath had said; the evil forces that were let loose upon the land and what they might be trying to do against them.

Eventually his tiredness overcame the activity of his mind and he slept a while before dawn came, bright and early.

That day they travelled another twenty miles or so and by the time they stopped again, the pass through the mountain range was almost within reach.

This time their bivouac was more exposed than before. Again Holdin thought he heard strange sounds as he tried to rest in the pitch blackness of night. Sometimes they were louder, and once or twice he could hear a rustling noise as if some creature had come close to them as they lay on the cold ground.

In the morning there were fresh footprints in the soil nearby, but they were not from a man, nor a satyr or dwarf. They were small, no bigger than a child's, but looking like the toes in it were webbed, like a water bird's, and clawed too. But it had not been a bird, of that Holdin was sure.

When he showed the unusual impressions to Avarath the old man only said, "It is as I feared, they are about once more," and then he fell silent and would not speak

for a long time.

Yet after that morning Avarath seemed more cautious than ever. He was always looking about him as they walked, especially behind, and he would start at the slightest sound, or the sight of a merest movement in the rocky landscape. Once a bird flew up and he raised his staff in alarm, but he quickly saw that it was harmless and calmed his nervous brow.

Later that day they entered the pass of Elin-Mer. It was a green, flat valley that cut a swathe between the tall peaks of the Brondith. It was about five miles wide and twenty long, a beautiful vale of grass and heather that beckoned for them to enter and cross from one part of the land to another. It was a sunny, inviting place and it made their hearts lift to enter it after travelling for so long in the dark shadows of the mountain range.

Within the confines of the valley there was little shelter though, and the two travellers had no choice but to walk in the open, exposed to whatever might be against them. The only alternative would have been to climb into the mountain slopes and skirt around them for the duration, but even Avarath considered that an undesirable hardship when they could make good time across the flat grassland.

They had been going that way for several hours when they saw a great deal of movement ahead, both in the valley and on the mountain slopes which met it. From where they stood it looked like an infestation of ants scurrying down the steep banks and spilling into the hollow of the vale, almost filling it from one side to the other with a black sea of apparently random movement. By their thousand they came, from north and south, and they moved swiftly and noisily. But insects they certainly were not, unless they were monsters that had grown to half the size of a man. These were warm blooded creatures, and they did not look at all friendly.

Holdin cried out when he saw them, "By the Statue, Avarath, what is that in our path?" "They are the Nalesh, and we must try to escape them," cried the old man as he hastened forward. "They will overrun us if we are not swift in our actions. Take care to follow me and do nothing unless I bid it. Do not raise your sword to them for the smell of even their own blood will set them into a frenzy, and we will not keep our lives if that should happen."

With that he thrust his wooden staff high into the air, pushing it forward as if it lead the way, and moving faster than Holdin had ever seen before. The captain had to run to keep pace with his fellow and together they swept forwards towards the Nalesh horde.

"This is madness," thought Belanshar as the two foes sped towards each other with increasing speed.

Within a minute they met at the valley's centre. The vile little creatures surrounded the two travellers and hissed and spat at them with breath that stank of rotting flesh, showing their red stained teeth and tongues, and their sickly, gurgling throats.

These awful beings were, as Holdin had guessed, about half his size in general, though as they became angry some would inflate their chests to become twice their normal size. They were ugly and obscene, but each was different in some way from the next. Some had large gaping mouths, bulbous eyes and teeth like razors. Others were one eyed with featureless faces that gazed up in blank stares. Most had spindly limbs and dark, leathery skin. Some were armed with swords and short spears, but



all looked fearsome and wild. Many were dressed in ragged clothes taken from men or dwarves and these were blood stained and tattered. Holdin shivered with the thought of what these terrible animals might have done to obtain such apparel.

The noise they made was deafening and crude. Some of the sounds of their language were familiar to Holdin; he realised now that he had heard it during the past nights and that these creatures must have been following them for some time. It was frightening to think of what could have happened in those dark hours as they rested, unaware of the danger that awaited them such a short distance away.

As the dark ranks of terror closed around Avarath and Holdin, the old man held his staff still higher and rushed forward with even greater speed than before, if that were possible. But as he did, the crowd of the Nalesh parted in his path and they seemed to calm a little as he passed between them. The evil creatures were scared to come within reach of Avarath, and his power kept them at bay as he and the army captain sped through.

At last they came free of the pressing horde, but still Avarath kept going as fast as he could. The Nalesh did not follow, but he wanted to reach safety before the power of his spell was broken and the spriggan-like multitude were released to continue their pursuit.

Finally, when the Nalesh were far from view, Avarath halted and allowed Holdin to rest for a while. The old man seemed to be hardly troubled by his high speed retreat,

but his human companion was nearly exhausted by the ordeal, despite his strength and vigour.

When the captain eventually regained his breath he said to Avarath, "What were those creatures? I have never seen the like before, and never wish to again."

"I am afraid that we have not seen the last of the Nalesh," the old man replied, "but I think we have escaped them for the moment." He stopped for a while as if thinking and then he continued. "They have not been abroad for many a year. I hoped that we had seen the last of that kind in this land, but I was wrong again.

"They are creatures of evil that once roamed the world before the coming of man and the taming of the elements. It is thousands of years since we banished them to the Other World and it was said then that they would never return to Falforn or Oronfal. It seems that our powers were not enough to contain them for all time, and they have come to reap revenge upon the usurpers who have since ruled their old home.

"It seems the evil is getting worse by the moment. I suspected as much when you saw those prints in the mud this morning, and I have heard them speaking in the night."

"Then you knew before this?" Holdin asked, although he knew what the answer would be.

"Oh, yes, young man," said Avarath sadly, "I have feared their arrival since before you came to me. It is but another episode in the story of evil that is unfolding even as we speak. Come, we must not tarry here. There are many miles to travel and the Nalesh may find us again if we are not careful. I have fooled them once; it may not be so easy next time."

They journeyed on as best they could, well into the night even, and they stopped only when they reached the end of Elin-Mer. They hid in the valley's northern slopes for the remainder of the dark hours, but neither slept, and in the morning they set off north again.

"Should we not visit Elin itself?" Holdin enquired when they turned away from the town.

"I think not," Avarath replied sternly, "we have troubles enough without visiting that place today. If the Nalesh have been there already the people will have problems too great for us to assist. If not, I have no desire to lead them there. If we are lucky we may not be followed at all, but I think that the Nalesh may be after us even now and we must reach Ormead without delay."

So on they went for the fourth day since they left Glowist.

This was the final leg of their journey and they strode onwards with great speed once again. Holdin had learned to keep up a little better with the speedy ambling of his leader, and they reached the Temple before supper on that day.

The Temple of the Innocents, Ormead, was an ancient place. It had been a seat of great learning since the beginning of time, connected as it was with the Zim Farinid, though none of the Higher Mortals dwelt there now. Yet this had once been their home, according to the old stories that mothers now passed on to their children. This building was the first structure that they had put upon the land, even before the mountains had cooled and the river had begun to flow. It was from here that they had planned the ways and laws of the creatures that Ilis Clair brought forth, and it was from here that they had ruled in those first disorganised years of creation.

How much of this was true, Holdin could not say, and Avarath was unwilling to make any comment on the legends of old.

"It is not my place to confirm or deny," he had said when pressed, "so mind your words so that you do not blaspheme against the creators of your land."

But there had been a glint of mischief in his eye and Holdin did not know whether to take his meaning in earnest.

The Temple itself looked very old, like the great pyramid at Amarnil, and perhaps in a similar style. Its lines were straight and geometric and there was little detail on its flat, well built surfaces. It was built to resemble a perfect cube, but one top corner of that massive square was damaged, like a die that has been chipped against a hard stone floor. Some said the wound had been caused by one of the many storms that tormented this land, but it had been that way since man was first born and no-one knew the truth.

Still, Ormead was a magnificent testimony to an age long gone, but not forgotten.

The people that lived there now came from all parts of the land and represented all the races that could be found in both the kingdoms. Amarin, Dwarves, Men, Sandinid and Topil all lived in harmony here. They were the teachers and the learned ones who came to Ormead to study, and to show others the wisdom of their thinking. It was a place of tranquility and peace, friendship and understanding.

It was here that Avarath hoped to enlist some help in his quest.

The great wizard and his friend approached Ormead from the south west. It was a splendid sight, a great right-angled megalith against the evening sky.

But when they came close enough to see any detail upon the scene Avarath turned to Holdin with a heavy heart.

"I fear that we are too late," he said with a look of pain and disappointment. "There is something amiss at the Temple."

"But all looks well to me," his companion replied.

"Does it? Then look again man. Do you see any sign of movement around the Temple square? Is there smoke rising from the fires to cook their evening meal? Are the animals grazing in their pens?" The old man pointed towards the great building that stood ahead of them, casting a long, almost rectangular shadow as the sun set at its side. "No, there are none of those things. Quickly, we must see what is about."

Avarath ran towards the enormous doorway of the old hall. Holdin lagged some way behind because the old man went with such swiftness that he could no longer stay with him. It was the first time that he had seen him really run and he reached a speed that the best human sprinter would envy. Even so, he did not move like any other man but seemed to glide along, as if he was floating just a little above the ground. Holdin wondered whether this was in fact what the wizard was doing, but he could see nothing of his legs because of the old cloak that reached down so low.

When they entered the Temple all was quiet. Nothing stirred and there was no sound. Holdin's own footsteps echoed around the old stone rooms as they went from one to another searching for any sign of life. In one place they found some blood on the floor, not a large amount, but enough to show that there had been a fight. Avarath said that it was the blood of a Satyr, though to Holdin it looked much the same as any warm blooded animal's; red and thick, as if it was that substance alone which gave life to all things.

In other places they found furniture scattered and broken. In the kitchens a huge barrel of apples had been split open and the soft fruit spilled across the floor.

"The Nalesh eat no fruit," said Avarath. And when they found a dead goat, with its throat ripped open and its body half devoured, he said, "This is more their style."

Then seeing the desolation in Avarath's face, Holdin turned to him and said, "I am sorry, my friend, for all the wrong that has been done. What is it you suggest we do now?"

Avarath looked up. His face seemed older and more withered now.

"I don't know," came the sorrowful reply, "I just don't know."

CHAPTER EIGHT

It did not take long for news of the invasion of Oslar to reach King Theltiem and his court. Since the terrible day a week or so before, when the palace had shaken and the sky darkened, they had all been prepared for some evil deed.

The army of men and dwarves took them all by surprise though. Theltiem had always considered Falforn to be his ally, and Queen Rolquin his friend, and he did not expect them to begin an era of war and wanton destruction without great provocation. And, as far as he knew, there had been none. That they should take Oslar to be their own, and hold Iliis Clair as if she was some worthless piece of stone, was unforgivable. The King was determined that they should not be allowed to continue with their evil plans.

He was afraid that they might not stop at the river either. His own home was less than twenty miles from the bridge across the Milfair and if the western horde should decide to march upon that too, then he would be utterly defenceless.

So Theltiem mobilised his people, and set his son Mithulin at the head of his new army. Every man who lived near Oronoman was armed with whatever weapons could be found, though there were precious few of them. A few swords and spears lay unused in the Royal Palace and these were issued within hours of the first aggression. But their best defence lay in the bows that some men used for hunting. Those that could, quickly made more. And arrows too, by the thousand.

Men who had never taken arms before were swiftly trained. Most took up their new bows with pride, and quickly learned to use them with great skill. There were a few who preferred the idea of close combat, and they chose swords and daggers as their chief weapons.

While the people of Oronoman prepared for war, messengers were sent to all parts of the Royal Land to enlist help. They went on swift horses and carried letters of appeal, signed by Theltiem and sealed with the royal warrant.

One rode east to Harvena. His aim was to enlist aid from the Amarin who dwelt there, but his would be a long, arduous journey and the King could expect no reply for many days. There was no road that the rider could take, and the Castle of Joy was surrounded by tall mountains that could be passed at just one point, near the very eastern edge of the land. In any case they could not count on receiving military aid from such a peace-loving race.

Another envoy was sent south-east, to Morath and Fathrain. The smiths of Morath were instructed to cease all their other work and make only armaments of all kinds. If necessary they should melt down the ploughs of their neighbours to fashion swords and daggers, battle-axes and arrow heads, for the war that was to come.

A third emissary went north, towards Hail-an-Hes to seek out the assistance of the people there. His road would take him through the forest of Brantiem, or Dark Heart, and he was instructed to enquire of the Sandinid and bring back news of their loyalties in the matter.

Every region was asked to send all the menfolk they could spare, and any women who were willing to fight for their King and country. These were dark times and Theltiem Emasar hoped to raise an army twenty thousand strong to rid Oslar of the insurgence

from the west, and to protect his own land from any threat that might come from that direction.

When the messengers had left there was little else that could be done, except practice their fighting skills and wait. Mithulin set his men as a guard around the Palace, though they could hope to do nothing but delay any force of attack. There were less than three hundred armed men in all, more than half archers, and few of those were properly trained. No-one in all the land had any experience of real warfare.

The old King seemed to withdraw from his people after the attack on Oslar. He would shut himself away for long periods and see virtually no-one, except his only son. It was as if he blamed himself for the happenings of the last days, though he would not admit openly to such thoughts. This had been a trying time for them all, and none more so than Theltiem.

One evening Mithulin came to his father's bed chamber and spoke with him.

"My Lord," he began, showing the respect which he still felt for his aging parent, "the guard is set and the Palace is as secure as we can hope for, but I fear for your safety. Would it not be wise for you to travel east to Harvena, I am sure the Amarin would give you protection, whether they fight at our side or not?"

"No," replied the old man quickly and sternly, "I will not desert my people at this time of crisis. My place is here, with them. It is the King's duty to lead his people, whatever the hardships that may lie ahead. I will not shy from such responsibility, and it is foolish for you to demand anything else."

"Then father, I would counsel that we send a mission to Oslar. What news we have thus far is only rumour and hearsay. We should confront Rolquin and demand that her forces withdraw from the island at once. That would demonstrate that we have not ignored their trespass and are willing to fight them if need be."

"And with what would we fight them, Mithulin?" came the reply. "Your hotch-potch army would last no more than a moment against a thousand cavalry spears and five thousand battle axes. No, we must wait until we are ready, and then we shall strike, at the very heart of Rolquin and her evil ways."

As he spoke the Queen's name his face became pale and his lips trembled as if he might cry.

The he said quietly, "Now, be gone my son, for I have need of meditation and sleep."

With that Mithulin bowed low and left his father's presence, but his heart was heavy and troubled. He had never known his father to speak and act so strangely in all his years. It was as if another man now wore the crown of Oronfal, he had changed so much. In the past Theltiem would have done all in his power to avoid a confrontation with a neighbour, not least with Rolquin who had been his friend since she took the Storm Land's throne. Yet now the old man was openly encouraging war between the two sides, and he would not listen to advice which might help to assuage the situation.

Mithulin himself was not one to follow the path of violence. In the past he had preferred to seek justice through reason and logic than resort to such barbaric means. But he was not a cold, unemotional man. Though he wanted to improve the lives of the ordinary people, he would not stand for disloyalty or dishonesty. He saw that his father was right. Rolquin had gone against the unwritten laws of the land. She had taken something that did not belong to her, and in so doing had cheated all the other races and peoples.

Theltiem did not have any particular desire to improve his peoples' life styles, but that was more through ignorance than design. He had not taken a great deal of interest in what went on around him, except within his own small court, and life had changed little for the ordinary man in his forty years of monarchy. Thus it was that there were still landlords and aristocrats who owned much of the wealth of Oronfal, while the majority possessed nothing and had to pay taxes from the little that they could earn.

But still the people were content. Because there had been such little change in the thousands of years past, no humble man could foresee any different way of life and each would take his lot as it came, be it good or bad. Nobody starved and every family had a roof over their heads.

Only the Amarin and Sandinid escaped the rule of the King to any degree, and no man dared to demand fealty from them. They set themselves apart, perhaps even above the human race. But they caused no trouble and all the races had been able to co-exist peacefully for many years.

But Mithulin could see a change coming in the future. When he was king, he vowed, he would see that all men gained from their own work and none had rights over another, unless the servant chose to serve in return for good pay and fair conditions.

It was for those reasons that the heir to the throne disliked his task as leader of the army. But he would do his father's bidding and forget his own feelings for the good of the nation. It might be the only way they would survive.

Several days passed before the first of the new armies arrived at Oronoman. They came from the south, mostly men from Morath and Toranstar, with a band of female warriors from Tordil. They called themselves the Raydon, Sword Women, and there were over a hundred of them, some recruited from other villages as they travelled northwards to their King.

In all, over a thousand fighters arrived that day. They carried more than enough arms and were all fit and strong. With them came some of the metal workers from the Smith Town, and they set up forges in the palace grounds where they worked day and night to produce whatever weapons they could. They made fine long swords with blades that could cut through a tree trunk, and axes that would cleave a solid rock with one blow.

With them came a man named Naylim. He was called a genius by his companions, and under his direction they built a terrible weapon of war the like of which had never been seen before. It was a great machine that could take a dozen men inside, with wheels beneath and armour all about that would stop the swiftest arrow or the heaviest axe blow. They called it 'The King's Engine' and painted it all black, with Theltiem's heraldic arms on its side. It took a week to construct, but when done it looked the most fearsome sight imaginable, like a huge beetle that crawled slowly across the land on its destructive path.

Naylim also made a new kind of armour. It was light, yet strong and made of a new metal that glistened like diamond. But every plate of it took a whole day to fashion, and time was too precious to waste on such innovations.

Every day of that week more troops arrived from all corners of the Kingdom. A thousand came from Hail-an-Hes; tall, strong men with long beards and quick tempers.

They were disliked by many, but were better as allies than foes.

From Fathrain and the southern-most villages came almost ten thousand in all. They were a badly equipped, motley bunch for the most part, who seemed to know nothing of war and fighting. But they had come as their King commanded. Some were almost boys, and others too old to fight. Still, they were high spirited and willing, though tired from the journey that had brought them such a long way.

Near the end of the week a solitary Sandinid came to Oronoman seeking audience with the King. He had walked from Brantiem, the Forest of Dark Hearts, and came to give advice to Theltiem, if he would listen.

This strange race of Green Men had always been something of a mystery to the human inhabitants of the land. They had existed since before the first man, but had changed little in all that time. They were seldom seen about the land, and would socialise with men even less. They were tall and lean, and their pale greenish skin gave them a ghostly look that would send a shiver along the spine of the bravest man. They spoke little, and when they did the words would come in a slow, deliberate manner, as if the language of men was not their true tongue.

All the Sandinid lived in the forests of the land, and most within the confines of Brantiem. They seemed to have an affinity with all plant life and there was an old saying among farmers; 'Where the Green Man walks, the harvest will be good.' But virtually the only place nowadays that the Sandinid would be seen walking was towards the dead forest, where Promath the Death Keeper would await their dying breath.

When eventually the forest dweller came before King Emasar he bowed his head in greeting. Mithulin was attending to his duties at the army's head and the old King sat alone in his throne room.

"I trust that you have come in response to my message," said the King. Even though he was ruler of all Oronfal, he still held a great respect for the Sandinid and they were just as mysterious to him as to the next man. "It is a foul deed that has taken Ilis Clair from our reach and has turned the races of the land against one another." He hoped to further his cause by reminding the Green Man of the true purpose of the battle that was to come.

"It is so. And yet it is not," said the Sandinid enigmatically. His voice was quiet and the old King could barely hear him. "I bring you greetings from Brantiem. My name is Vilyan and I have come to offer the advice of my people to you, Theltiem. You may not heed our warnings, but not to do so would be folly indeed, and might spell the end of all mankind in this land."

Theltiem was taken aback by such words. His attitude towards the visitor began to change. The King had set himself apart for too long now and would take little notice of any advisors, especially one who came from another race and had no knowledge of the politics of men.

Vilyan went on. "Your reasoning is wrong, Your Majesty. Ilis Clair is not taken from us, not by any of this land. The men from Falforn mean no harm; they have been misled by the same evil forces that have deceived you into following this warlike path. It is not your fellow men who are the enemy, nor the dwarves of Rimersel. There is some other evil afoot and you must join forces with all your neighbours to combat that influence."

Almost inexplicably, Theltiem rose to his feet, his face red with rage and his fists

clenched as if to fight.

"I will not listen to this foolhardy talk," he shouted, so loudly that two guards rushed into the room to see if all was well. "I know who the enemies of this country are, and not you, nor any of your kind, have the right to come to my palace and say what I must and must not do. I am King, and you will do as I command."

"But we will not fight for you in this madness," said the Sandinid, still quiet and unflustered by the human's outburst. "We shall not fight for any side in such a war. If that is your will, then so be it. But do not expect help from the Sandinid, for we shall not give it."

With that the Green Man turned as if to go, presenting his back to the already enraged King.

"Hold that creature," Theltiem called to the soldiers that stood by the open doorway. "He is a spy for our enemies and will betray us and our cause. Take him away and lock him in a cell from where he cannot escape to report to his masters."

So the guards took hold of the forest man and dragged him away. As they went the King called after them.

"And give orders that the others of his kind are to be detained as well."

When at last Mithulin's army set out from Oronoman it comprised fifteen thousand soldiers all told. Every one was human; no Sandinid joined the ranks and the Amarin of Harvena had not even sent word of their allegiance. The young heir led the great column from the Royal Palace. At his side was his long standing friend Amortin. These two had grown up together, fought each other as children, and confided in each other as youths. Now they were off to war as companions at arms.

The leaders were followed closely by the 'King's Engine'. Naylim's magnificent machine was pushed from beneath and behind, and pulled with ropes from the front. It caused murmurs of wonder, and some of doubt, from many of the soldiers who had not seen the monster until now.

After that came the bulk of the army, with the warrior women of the Raydon at its rear.

Theltiem remained at the palace. He did not even emerge to wish them well as his people went to fight, for him and for what he saw as being good and right. Mithulin was disappointed at the apparent lack of blessing from the King. It was surprising after the words that he had spoken just a few days before in his bed chamber. But the young heir tried to understand how his father might feel. With his only child sent off to war, perhaps never to return, the old man was bound to feel tremendous guilt and sorrow at the parting. It may be wisest to conceal such feelings from the people.

There was such an air of excitement that no-one else seemed to notice the King's absence. The soldiers marched proudly from the Palace courtyard. The horses of their leaders danced forward, holding their heads to the sky and whinnying with delight. It was strange that even the dumb animals could detect the thrill of their departure.

Crowds of women, children and old folk lined the road leading from Oronoman. They cheered and shouted words of encouragement to the passing army. The young ones played games of violence and death, and no-one checked their enthusiasm. It seemed that all of mankind was there, and everyone was filled with the excitement and wonder of going to war.

Not a single person considered the horror of what was about to happen. They journeyed slowly and it took a day and a half to reach the bridge from Oronfal to Oslar. But they were a happy legion and they believed that their cause was just. Not one of them doubted that victory would come swiftly and easily to their side.

They arrived as the sun was at its noon high and the shimmering water of the river flowed from north to south as far as the eye could see. The bridge across the Milfair was long and mightily built, and the army of Falforn defended it heavily.

In the time since the first invasion of Oslar, the men and dwarves from the west were reinforced by Queen Rolquin's army from Clarooth. She had come with ten thousand men and had sped across the great plains of the Storm Land to meet her regular army on Oslar. There they had set up strong defences and prepared to repel any counter attack from the east.

Sharmek and Lairmath now took their orders from the Queen herself, which was probably just as well. The dwarf and man did not get on together, and if they had been left alone for any length of time their two armies would probably have begun fighting amongst themselves again. But both the dwarves and men looked to Rolquin with some respect, and perhaps a little fear.

So the people from the west began to turn Oslar into a fortress island. They dug trenches across Ilis Clair's green fields and they brought all the terrible tools of war that they could find. The dwarves set traps with a new powder that would explode when compressed. They filled buckets with the odious mixture and set them into the ground so that a passing horse or cart would set off its destructive power. But a light man could pass unscathed because his weight was not enough to crush the tiny crystals.

Thus it was that the armies of east and west found themselves facing each other across the wide river, with only a bridge between them.

The battle began almost immediately.

The bridge itself was guarded mostly by dwarves. They had at first tried to destroy the old stone viaduct with their exploding powder, but it had been built too strongly and their powder became damp so close to the river. Instead they blocked the roadway as best they could with rocks and other debris, and then set themselves in row after row of living barricades against intruders. They stood like that now, their axes ready and shields raised as the fighting commenced.

Behind the dwarf ranks were the cavalry, poised on their chargers, ready to run amok with any enemy that attempted to pass the bridge. Then behind them, on Oslar itself, were the foot soldiers. They carried weapons of all sorts. Short and long swords, daggers and axes, spears and pikes. Many had farm scythes or labourers' picks, but all were sharpened to perfection, and deadly.

Rolquin kept to the rear of the lines to maintain overall command, sending messengers to her officers when she wished to intervene in the proceedings. At the Queen's command, Sharmek and Lairmath went forward together to oversee the general running of the battle.

Mithulin sent his archers ahead at the onset of battle. They let loose salvo after salvo of metal tipped arrows which fell by the thousand upon the Storm Land army. They came from the sky like a deadly rain and took a terrible toll of the dwarves that stood on the bridge. Their bodies fell this way and that, some into the river where

they quickly disappeared downstream, and others adding to the piled obstacles on the road. But they were helpless to retaliate and could only stand their ground. Even their shields were useless as defence and the speeding darts went through all but the thickest armour.

Next Mithulin sent forward the 'King's Engine'. It seemed to move at a snail's pace towards the army that waited on the bridge. Some of them began to run forward to meet it, but were quickly mown down by another hail of arrows. When the fighting machine at last reached the bridge, Theltiem's army followed behind it and they pushed onwards towards the short, bearded creatures that defended it so doggedly.

But the engine itself was next to useless in a fight. The men beneath its shell found that they could do little against their foe. They could hardly see what was happening outside and they could not reach to inflict more than the slightest wound from within its protective armour. In any case they could not carry it past the obstructions that blocked the road. Finally they came across one of the dwarves' traps. A huge explosion rocked the bridge with an ear-splitting boom. The great black beast seemed unmoved by the force of the blast, but every man beneath its frame was instantly killed.

When Lairmath saw the terrible carnage that was taking place on the bridge, he turned to Sharmek. He was forced to shout above the noise of battle.

"This is madness, Sharmek. You must bring your dwarves back from the bridge. If you will clear the way, my cavalry can go forward and rout the attack."

But Sharmek ignored the advice and pretended that he did not hear. His fighters stayed steadfast in their positions and would not allow Lairmath's riders through their lines. Only when more than half were dead or wounded did the dwarf ranks part enough to allow the horsemen forward. But by then it was, perhaps, too late.

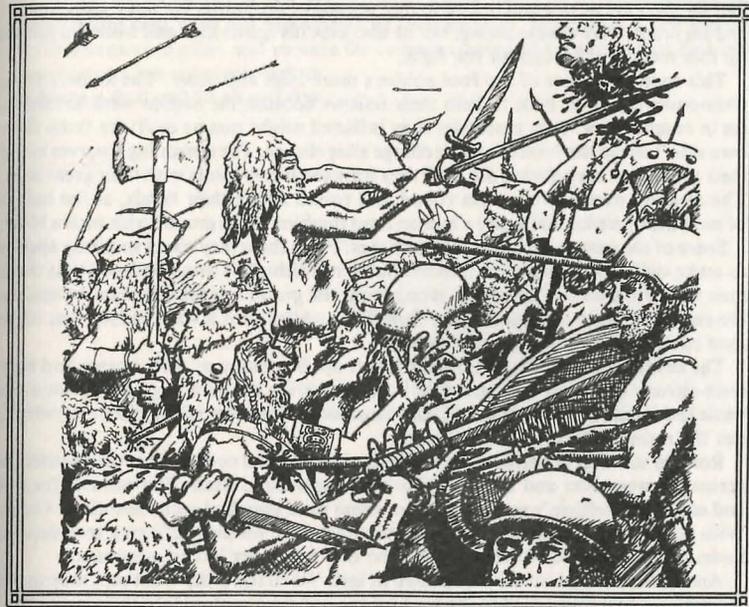
The cavalry of Lairmath also found that the defences on the bridge were their undoing. When they tried to come forward to the aid of their compatriots, their mounts became trapped between the heaps of rock and stone, and the piles of corpses that grew with every minute. Eventually the horsemen were forced to leave their steeds behind and take to their legs like the rest of the foot soldiers. Many of the horses were slain too as they wandered unwittingly into the paths of arrows and misjudged sword blows. A few even fell foul of the traps of their own side.

The fighting raged for an hour on the bridge. Swords and axes clashed over and over again. The clanking and ringing of metal against metal was eclipsed only by the sound of shouts and screams as men, women and dwarves fought and died for control of the narrow strip of road across the Milfair.

The Raydon fought as bravely as any of the men, if not more so. They hacked their way through the enemy as quickly as their swords would swing from side to side. But many of them fell too, as the battle took its toll of both sides. The blood ran across the cobbled road and into the river, making it flow red for miles to the south and staining its muddy banks all the way.

Gradually though, the force from the east pushed across to Oslar and by late afternoon they had cleared the bridge of every living dwarf and Clarooth man. When this was done the fighting subsided for a while and both sides took stock of their losses.

Mithulin had lost a thousand men in that first encounter, but the Storm Land had lost two thousand dwarves and nearly that many men in trying to keep the bridge. They had found that the bridge itself had been their worst enemy and their style of



fighting had not succeeded in such an enclosed area. Rolquin and her captains could only hope that the second phase of the battle would go more their way.

And so the fighting began again, perhaps even more intensely than before. Now the east army could smell victory close by, but those from the west knew that they must keep whatever they still held, or the battle would be lost.

Mithulin and his captains decided to try to push the invaders back across the next bridge, away from Oslar and into their own land. They hoped to use the advantage of the bridge again, once they had cleared the island of the enemy. But that would be the most difficult part.

The young man found that commanding the army in action was not an easy task. Too often he would send orders to his officers only to see the messenger killed as he sped away. Sometimes the men at his side, that he had trained and lived with for the past weeks, were slaughtered in the fight. He had to defend himself with his own sword whilst trying to oversee the battle's grander strategies.

Mithulin survived the battle more by luck than judgement, and he owed his life on more than one occasion to the quick reactions of another. At one point, as they began to push inland, a dwarf knocked the sword from his hand. Theltiem's heir had found himself defenceless until Amortin threw a knife to him and Mithulin had used it against the foe, thrusting it hard into his chest until the dwarf struggled no more.

Amortin was a true friend in this terrible hour of need. Not only did he save Mithulin's

life, he also gave advice and helped in the running of the battle. He was a good soldier and his orders were always sound, but he also kept his spirits high and Mithulin leaned on him mentally throughout the fight.

This round was that of the foot-soldiers more than any other. The archers from Oronoman could do little to help their fellows because the armies were so closely set in combat now. Any casualties they inflicted might just as easily be from their own side. Instead the footmen made charge after charge. The remaining dwarves stood their ground, as they always did, and they inflicted heavy losses with their great axes. The dwarves would swing them round and round above their heads, at the height of most mens' necks, and many a human head tumbled to the ground with such a blow.

Some of the westerners hid in their trenches. From these they could suddenly appear to make swift and unexpected attacks. Some of Mithulin's army believed that these men were the ghosts of the dead, rising from the ground to take vengeance against the enemy. A great fear came upon them for a while, until it was realised that these men could be slain just like any others.

The cavalry of Falforn attempted to regroup, but many of their horses and men were already dead and they could do little but harass the invading horde. Soon the battle had spread over almost all of Oslar. Small skirmishes were taking place everywhere, but the main conflict was all but over.

Rolquin saw that her army was close to decimation and ordered that they withdraw across the west river and fall back into the Storm Land itself. She was not foolish and saw that Theltiem's army would not cease until they had reclaimed all of Oslar. With her cavalry almost gone and the steadfast dwarves also suffering tremendous losses, she decided to withdraw while she had any army left to command.

And so the Falforn invasion retreated at last. When the order went out, they made their way as best they could to the west bridge and then crossed into their home land and safety. Mithulin's men still fought them as they went, but they did not enter Rolquin's country to continue the war. It was enough for them that they had taken Oslar and regained Ilis Clair for themselves.

When all was done a great cheer rang out from the Oronfal troops. But three thousand of them were dead, and a thousand more wounded. In all ten thousand people died that day for one small strip of land. And for Ilis Clair.

And what of Ilis Clair herself?

She stood as she always did, but silent and cold as the battle raged. If she had not been made of stone she would have cried that day; long, sorrowful tears for the way that Hate, Greed, Jealousy, Pride and Anger had overwhelmed all life in her world.

When the battle was over, the men of Oronfal set about burying the dead of both sides. Night was beginning to fall as they threw the bodies into the deepest of the old trenches. But when darkness came there was a terrible noise, like children crying and animals screeching. Suddenly thousands of ugly little creatures appeared as if from nowhere. They swarmed all over the island, and when the men cut them down with their swords and axes, they seemed not to care. It was as if they were in a frenzied trance and they could not be swayed from their purpose.

The vile animals carried away the bodies of the dead. Some they even devoured

where they lay on the blood spattered ground. It was all the men could do to defend the wounded that were still bleeding from their injuries. But within a few minutes the creatures were gone, and so were the corpses of men and dwarves that had been so numerous just moments before.

It was a foul end to an evil day.

CHAPTER NINE

Avarath and Holdin stayed at Ormead for only a few minutes. Avarath did not wish to tarry in case they met the same fate as stay either, but more because the old temple seemed an eerie and fearful place. They had found no sign of life at all, and very little indication of what might have happened there.

"What do you think has befallen the inhabitants of this place?" asked Holdin as they wandered through the many rooms of the great building. "Have they all become victims of the Nalesh?"

"I hope not," replied the oldman, but his voice revealed what little chance there really was. "Perhaps some of them will have escaped, either to Elin or Clarooth. If not, then this is a dwelt the most learned minds in all the land. If they are gone then there is very little hope for our future."

"Then it seems that hope is all we have left."

"Yes, you are right, Belanshar. Perhaps in more ways than you realise."

So the two travellers set off again. They went north once more, this time to the Tower of the Sky, the seat of Queen Rolquin. Avarath reckoned that the time had come to enlist help of a more practical kind. So far they had achieved nothing and only succeeded in wasting precious time. He hoped now that they might find some of his own friends, and seek aid for the Queen. He guessed that she would be willing to assist in defending her own kingdom from these evil powers, though what could be done directly against them was difficult to determine.

It seemed to Holdin that the old Zim Farinid had a plan of sorts, but he could not guess what it might be. Every so often Avarath would talk about some kind of secret document, and what he called the 'Assembly of the Three', but who or what they were he would not say. It was all very puzzling for the Captain.

But there was something worse happening as far as Holdin was concerned. Sometimes he would find that his mind began to wander. It might occur once or twice each day, but he would realise that he could no longer concentrate on what he was saying, or thinking, and strange thoughts would come unbidden into his mind. It reminded him of that evening outside Noman Sith when he had lost his mind completely for a time, and it made him extremely worried and more than a little scared. He did not mention it to Avarath for a long time, but eventually he had to say something.

"Avarath," he said as they strode purposefully northward, "there is something I must tell you."

"And what might that be, young man." The old wizard had a way of speaking that often made Holdin think Avarath already knew whatever he was about to tell him.

"Something troubles my mind," replied the soldier. He spoke slowly because he could not find the words to express his feelings. "Sometimes I feel as though my mind is wandering, in the same way as it did that day at Noman Sith. It worries me for what I might do if the power should overwhelm me again, and I am defenceless against it. I have tried to fight it, and though I think I might have succeeded this far, I cannot hope to beat it forever."

Avarath thought for a moment, then he said, "I have felt it too, though it has affected my mind in different ways. We must watch each other, lest the magic that

protects us should fail and allow us to fall under the evil spell that has taken so much good from this world."

"But what magic is it that protects us?" asked Holdin, puzzled by the matter-of-fact way in which the old man spoke about such things.

"Why, my magic, of course," boomed the wizard, raising his voice and seeming to grow in stature with it. "Do you doubt the powers of the Zim Farinid, for if you do I shall show you our capabilities. Look, there!"

He pointed at a small bush which grew at the roadside. Suddenly its green leaves burst into flames. Sparks and burning embers flew in all directions and Holdin could feel the heat of the fire from where he stood. Then the flames quickly died, but the bush had not been consumed at all and it remained as green and fresh as before.

"Is that proof enough?" said the old man, now a little more calmed.

"Yes..., yes, I think it is," stammered the shocked Belanshar.

Avarath and Holdin travelled around the northern edge of the Brondith and reached Cliardith within two days of leaving the old Temple. At journey's end they wearily climbed the spiralling road that led to the Tower of the Sky, and they were not challenged until they reached the great wooden doors that were now firmly shut.

Outside were some guards and they called out when they saw the two travellers approach.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Avarath replied first. "We are pilgrims who come in search of aid. We seek audience with Queen Rolquin in a matter of great urgency. Will you take us in and send word to her that Avarath and a companion are waiting at her command?"

"No. Be off with you," the soldiers shouted. "In any case, Her Majesty is not here. Go away."

"Then we will see her Chamberlain," said the wizard as they drew closer to the guards. There were six of them and they seemed none too friendly and certainly unwilling to help.

"And I am Holdin Belanshar, Captain of the guard at Noman Sith," the old man's friend added, "and I order you to let us pass."

With those words the guards looked at each other with darting eyes. Suddenly they took the two strangers in tight grips. One of them said, "Then enter you shall, but not by your order, Captain. I think that Ilzarind will be only too pleased to see you again."

A whispered password had the Tower gate opened from within, and the soldiers dragged Avarath and Holdin inside. The old man made no attempt to escape, but Holdin struggled all the while, until eventually they were thrown into a cell off the main courtyard.

They took the Captain's sword and knife, but let Avarath keep his old wooden staff. The guards did not seem to recognise the Zim Farinid, or realise the importance of that token of power. They obviously thought that he needed it only to lean on as he walked. How wrong they were.

"That was not the welcome I envisaged," remarked Avarath as the door was slammed shut and locked behind them.

"But we should have guessed," said the captain. "They must hold me responsible

for what happened at Noman Sith. It is just as I feared. Even if it is not at the Queen's own bidding, then the men here will still blame me. We should never have come, or you should have come alone."

"Do not speak like that," said the old man, trying to disguise the fact that he tended to agree with what Holdin said.

The cell was dark and damp. Only a dim shaft of light entered from a high, barred window that cut a way through the thick stone walls. There was straw and dirt on the floor. It had once been a stable, but the horses were gone and Clarooth now had more need for gaols than horse boxes.

When their eyes became accustomed to the dim light they realised that they were not alone in this dark prison. Huddled in one corner was a girl. She was pretty and young, not yet twenty Holdin guessed, and her clothes were ragged and torn. It appeared that the guards had not treated her with any respect and she sat on the filthy floor crying floods of tears that seemed like they would never stop.

Holdin went to her and tried to soothe her as best he could. At first she pulled away, but he spoke kindly and gently. After a while she lifted her head from her hands momentarily, so that her face was visible. Holdin saw that she was beautiful indeed. Her eyes were round and dark, and her black hair flowed long and straight across her slender shoulders.

"My name is Holdin," he said quietly, "do not be afraid. My friend and I mean you no harm. We too are prisoners, like you."

She stopped weeping a little and looked up, first to Holdin and then Avarath. When she saw the old man she seemed to wince, as if he reminded her of some painful experience, and he looked down on her but made no expression.

"What is your name?" Holdin asked.

"Fethrol," she replied, still sobbing but a little calmer now.

"And why are you here?" the old man interjected with a tone that did not sound too sympathetic.

Fethrol turned to him and said, "I stole from the market, and they threw me here. I have been in this room for days now, with little food and no visitors. Only the guards have come here..." She broke off and began to cry again, leaning this time on Holdin's shoulder and hiding her face from view.

When she stopped again the Captain gave her a drink from his water bottle and the maiden seemed to cheer a little and spoke to them some more.

"It was after the Queen went away, and I was in the market with no money and nothing to trade. I took an apple from the stall of a friend, or one who I thought was a friend, but as I walked away a soldier came and arrested me. I was brought here and have remained since then, forgotten and unwanted; except by the men of the new army." She stopped again and then added pleadingly, "Please help me, for I cannot stand it any more."

"We will do what we can," said Holdin.

Eventually, after what seemed like years instead of hours, some men came and took Avarath and Holdin from their prison. They marched up and up, through the many levels of the tall Tower. They went higher and higher until at last they came

to the very topmost storey of Clarooth, where the Royal chambers were situated.

In the state room they found Ilсарind, sitting, incredibly, on Rolquin's throne as if he were king. The soldiers forced their captives to bow low and then moved them forward to the base of the stairs that led to the royal seat.

The Chamberlain of Falforn eyed Avarath with interest, he clearly suspected that there was more to him than met the eye, but he spoke first to Holdin.

"Well Belanshar, what brings you back to Clarooth?" His voice was commanding, quite unlike the toadying servant the Captain had known before. "I thought that you would have gone long since, perhaps east to the land of your masters."

Holdin did not understand. It sounded as if Ilсарind was accusing him of some kind of treason. Why did he mention the 'east' in such a malevolent way? He decided to say nothing for the moment. It seemed that he might incriminate himself if he was not careful with his replies.

"Well, answer my question. Have your lessons in evil left you dumb as well as stupid."

Holdin could barely contain himself at that. His face reddened with anger, and had it not been for the guards that stood beside him with their swords poised, he would have leaped at the Chamberlain and blackened both his eyes.

Instead Avarath spoke, trying to defuse the situation.

"Where is Queen Rolquin?" He asked, simply and quietly. He did not like the way in which Ilсарind seemed to have taken control of Clarooth. In the Queen's absence he had changed beyond recognition. He now wore the fur cloak of a monarch and sat where no commoner should dare. The guards offered him undue fealty and he was issuing commands which were outside his jurisdiction.

"Of what concern is that to you, old man." Ilсарind turned his attention to the wizard, which had been the desired effect, and Holdin was able to calm himself a little.

"You obviously do not know who I am," said the old man. His voice began to rise, as it had the day before when Holdin himself had upset his friend. It seemed that this Zim Farinid disliked those who had no knowledge of, or faith in, his powers.

"I am Avarath, the Healer, and none shall detain me, or my assistants without my consent, not least a usurper to this throne!" With that he raised his staff high into the air, as if to strike a blow at Ilсарind.

The soldiers reacted at once. One unsheathed his sword and thrust it towards Avarath. But the old man was too swift for even the best of attacks, and his staff sent the weapon spinning across the stone floor. Another quick blow sent the guard backwards, clutching his aching stomach while his comrades hesitated for a moment, stunned by the actions of one who appeared so old and frail.

Then a blinding light flashed high above them, near the magnificent ceiling of the throne room. For the first time in hundreds of years a beacon as bright as the sun shone into the chamber, illuminating the fantastic paintings that decorated its walls and roof with a glare that they had never seen before.

Only Avarath was not affected by the brilliant glow and he took Holdin by the hand, leading him quickly from the throne room and out into the twisting passages and hallways of Clarooth.

"Follow me," said the old man, and off they went with Holdin bringing the rear, not for the first time since the two had met.

They went with great speed through the maze of corridors and stairways that led

downwards within the giant castle. Holdin had visited this place many times before, but he would have become hopelessly lost had it not been for Avarath leading the way. It seemed that the old man knew these ways better than the Captain knew his own chambers at Noman Sith.

They turned this way and that, running along dim corridors and through strange chambers. Sometimes, when they saw gatherings of people or soldiers ahead, Avarath would dart off to one side and take a lesser passage that still took them in the desired direction. Some of these were unlit, but the wizard conjured an eerie glow from his staff and they saw well enough to pass without mishap.

It seemed to take an age, but at last they came to the lowest level of the Tower, near the cell in which they had been imprisoned.

"Wait," called Holdin, out of breath. "Wait, old man, we must release Fethrol from that awful place. And I would like to have my sword again if we can find it."

"Very well," said Avarath, "but we must be quick. And I will thank you not to call me 'old man'!"

They had come from the top of the palace with such speed that word of their escape had not yet reached the army's courtyard. So it was almost without challenge that they made their way to the guard room that adjoined the prison cells.

The guards there recognised the prisoners, though at first they were a little puzzled at why Avarath and Holdin should be roaming free. But the soldiers quickly realised what had happened and set about the escapers.

Avarath tried to keep the assailants at bay. At once his staff turned into a flaming torch and he swung it all around so that the men could not reach him with their weapons.

Holdin's trusty sword stood in one corner of the bare room. He grabbed it with a rapid movement that surprised even him, took the blade from its scabbard and quickly joined the fight. One of the guards singled him out and they fenced for a few moments, the bright edges of their weapons clashing in deafening blows that echoed around the stone walls.

Then Belanshar knocked the sword from his opponent's hand and inflicted a deep cut in his arm.

The other man could fight no more, but Holdin was caught up in the excitement of the fray. His mind was lost to the same thoughts that had overcome him at Noman Sith and he longed for the taste of another man's death at his own hands. He held his sword aloft to deal the final blow.

Avarath saw the way in which Holdin could no longer control himself and, whilst still keeping the others at bay, he pushed the Captain's victim to one side with his foot. The sword blade fell with such force that it chipped the stone floor, but it did not reach its target. As the sound of the blow echoed around the room, Holdin regained his senses and turned to thank his friend. But he saw that Avarath was busy with his magic, and winning the fight without the need to harm his opponents.

The wizard motioned towards the open door and Holdin dodged through it. He realised now that Avarath was the more powerful warrior and he trusted the wizard to keep the gaolers at bay.

Between them they pushed the door of the guard room closed and then Avarath cast a spell of some kind. He muttered strange words under his breath and the door was sealed.

"They will not escape from there today," he said quickly, and then turned his attention to the door of the nearby cell.

With a flash like lightning that came from the Zim Farinid's staff, the door lock melted into a pool of hot metal and the door swung open as a breeze might blow a garden gate.

Fethrol looked up in a gaze of amazement and surprise, her mouth wide open showing her white teeth in the dim light of the cell. Immediately Holdin took her hand and the three of them fled across the courtyard towards the main door of the Tower. By this time other soldiers were in pursuit, and more waited by the firmly shut gates. Their situation looked hopeless and Holdin thought that their fate was sealed. There could be no escape.

Then Avarath called out the words, "We shall pass!" as if it was a command to all the soldiers that stood between them and freedom. But none of the guards took any notice and they produced their swords in quick succession.

Holdin could not understand what happened then. He could feel Fethrol's hand in his as he almost dragged her along behind, and he saw Avarath going at full speed ahead of them. But the men that stood in their way did not move apart, and the thick wooden gates did not open. Instead the three fugitives passed through them all, as if the solid flesh, bones, wood and metal that barred their exit had become just air, or something even less substantial. There was no sensation and no sound, only the strange views of darkness and light as they passed from one side to the other.

And then they were out, running at full pelt down the winding road that lead from Clarooth to the plains of the Storm Land. They did not stop, or even slow their pace, but kept going for an hour, and none of them grew tired with the exertion.

When they did stop at last, they all sat and drank from Holdin's water bottle and he finally sheathed his sword. They had not been pursued and it seemed that they were safe, at least for the moment.

But neither the Captain nor the wizard were prepared for what happened next. Fethrol stood up and looked down at the two men sitting on the grassy roadside. As she did, her features began to change. Her long straight hair started to wither and fade to a dull grey. Her pretty face wrinkled and aged before their eyes, and her body became twisted and old. Even her tattered clothes were transformed and she now wore a long cloak, not dissimilar to Avarath's.

"So, I fooled even you, Avarath," she said. Her voice rang out in a high pitched cackle that sent a shiver along Holdin's spine and even made the old man visibly recoil.

But they had no time to reply. Before he could do anything to stop her, the old hag took Avarath's staff from his hand and, calling out some vile words in a long forgotten tongue, she struck the old wizard with his own powerful magic.

As the blow fell with its full force upon Avarath's head, Holdin also lost consciousness and the two men fell backwards to the ground. But the old woman walked slowly away, still clutching the staff and laughing to herself as she went.

CHAPTER TEN

After the great battle for Oslar, Mithulin sent word to his father, the King. A messenger rode swiftly to Oronoman to tell Theltiem that victory was theirs, though the cost had been high. Nearly three thousand men had died in the fight, and a thousand more were wounded. But Ilis Clair was free once more, and the island a dominion of Oronfal.

Mithulin's next task was to set up defences, in case Rolquin sent another attack to retake the disputed land. The young heir did not wish to make the same mistakes as his foe, so he made sure that the bridge to the west bank of the Milfair was strongly defended. The bowmen of his army had wreaked the worst blows upon the enemy, and Mithulin put them on both the bridge itself, and on the island, guarding the way from the river crossing. After a while, the remains of the 'King's Engine' were brought forward and placed in a prominent position, more as a visual deterrent than a practical weapon. It did look fearsome, even though it had proved worthless in the actual battle and was now only an empty, blasted shell.

By morning, the Storm Land army could be seen close to the forest of Tar Gelfay. They had encamped a mile or two from the river, and looked set to stay for some time. Fires burned, lifting long plumes of black smoke high into the air, and a few tents reflected the rising sun on their flapping white canvas. It was too far to see any great detail, but their very presence posed a threat to the comparative peace that lay on Oslar for the moment.

In the first light Mithulin's men were also able to see the bodies of the strange creatures that had visited them early in the night. They were vile things, like mockeries of human children. Their skin was dark, and they had hideously formed faces, long spindly limbs and they wore tattered rags for clothing.

The men carried the awful corpses to the water's edge and threw them into the raging river, so that they were quickly carried away. Then everyone who had touched the sickly flesh washed himself thoroughly to banish the evil smell that was left behind.

When all this was done, Mithulin went alone to see Ilis Clair. He hoped that she would speak to him, though he felt ashamed for what had happened on her land, and within her own sight. He knew that she would be deeply shocked by the carnage that had taken place here, though he suspected that the old Unicorn would have greater knowledge of the affairs that had led to this than any mortal.

He rode the few miles from his own camp to where the great statue stood. When he arrived, he found her unchanged and unmoved.

The King's son slowly dismounted and walked over to touch the ancient white stone. It was cold and hard. It made him shudder a little to think that the old statue had been set on the land so many years ago, by an unknown god, yet he was able to touch her with his own hand.

There were no other men nearby, and Mithulin spoke to the idol.

"The son of King Theltiem brings you greetings, Ilis Clair."

He spoke loud and clear, like one might speak to a child, or to an adult who cannot hear as well as most.

The statue turned her head to look down at the man who touched her base. She was tall and beautiful, carved in the most exquisite way and full of magic. She held

such power that not even a king could imagine; she had created all their land, and every living thing had sprung from her own mind.

"Mithulin, you have come to see me at last, I have been expecting you." Her voice rang out, sweet and soothing, like a mother to all the world. "Tell me what ails the creatures of this world, that they should commit such crimes against themselves? Is it that they tire of their lives? They give them up too willingly for such a small prize as myself."

"I am sorry, Ilis Clair, but to all of us you are not a small prize. We have come to protect you from any who would do you harm. We know your true worth, and none shall take you from us."

"But you do not know what you are doing," her voice was more sorrowful now. "Men must not fight men, nor dwarves, nor any of the creatures that once lived in harmony. There are new enemies that you must conquer. The Nalesh are one of those. You must rid the world of those evil beings."

"Nalesh, what are these things that you speak of?" Mithulin was puzzled.

"You have seen them once, my child, and others have met their deaths at the hands of those vile creatures. They were banished once, and we must do the same again. But it will not be so easy the second time. There are other evil powers that have brought them forth, along with many more demons that will bring equal terror. We must all join forces to combat them, not squabble amongst ourselves over petty disputes that threaten our whole existence.

"Go now, and stop the fighting between your races, before it is too late." As she spoke, the Unicorn seemed to radiate an aura of calm and peace which entered Mithulin and drove the evil forces from his mind. For a short time he was able to see the error of his ways, and of everyone in the land, and perhaps a little of the right way ahead.

"Very well, I will see what can be done," Mithulin replied. The words of Ilis Clair seemed so true to him now. He could see the mistakes that he had made, that his father had made too. They had no quarrel with the men and dwarves of Falforn. There was some other force at work, and they were all its unwitting slaves. It was that evil which should be fought, and quickly too.

Mithulin was about to leave Ilis Clair when she spoke again.

"Young man," she said.

"Yes, Ilis Clair, I am listening."

"Your father needs your aid. The Nalesh are attacking his palace and all is nearly lost."

Mithulin wasted no time. He quickly mounted his horse and rode back to his waiting camp. The previous words that Ilis Clair had spoken were now forgotten. They had seemed so good, and so right while he was in her presence, but the evil forces that roamed freely through all men's hearts broke into Mithulin's mind and twisted even the Unicorn's words. He forgot that his war was truly against those dark powers, all he could remember was the battle, the fighting and his father, the King.

When he reached his own army he took only a small band of men who could travel at speed on horseback. They did not have many swift mounts and it seemed that haste was called for. So he left orders that others should follow on foot, and set one of his captains in charge, a man named Selondath. Then Mithulin, and the four dozen that accompanied him, sped back towards Oronoman.

Amortin was among those that rode off and Mithulin explained what had happened

as they went.

"Ilis Clair has given me warning that there are evil deeds afoot. Those creatures that we saw last night have travelled east to Oronfal and are attacking our home even now. We must go with all haste and defend the King and our families. Nalesh they are called and we must destroy them all."

They went with all the speed they could, riding on and on north-eastwards, ignoring the road that took a longer, winding route to the royal palace. At one point they came upon a small band of the Nalesh, but there were no men with them. A few sword strokes quickly dispatched these few and then the men quickly moved on.

It seemed that the Nalesh were not skilled in fighting, they were stupid little creatures and their weapons were crude and blunt. But their advantage was in numbers, and the way in which they seemed to care nothing for themselves. It was their teeth that had to be avoided at all costs, for a handful of their stinking mouths could devour a living man in a few moments.

Mithulin and his companions came to Oronoman before night fall that same day. They rode straight into the palace and immediately saw the killing and destruction that had taken place. It was unlike anything they had ever seen, and quite different from the Nalesh attack that they themselves had witnessed the night before. Mutilated bodies lay everywhere, but not everyone was dead. Women lay crying, their husbands butchered before their eyes, and the remaining army had been decimated. Those that escaped with their lives wandered aimlessly in a state of shock.

Mithulin and Amortin hurried to Theltiem's own chambers. Here the scene was much the same. The rooms were wrecked beyond recognition. There was blood on the floor and signs of a terrible struggle for life between men and Nalesh.

But there was no King, nor any sign of what might have befallen him.

There was little that such a small number could do to help the wounded or distressed. Mithulin and his friend stood amidst the turmoil and they both wept, the tears running down their faces unhidden in the agony of their sorrow.

Then somebody came forward who recognised Mithulin. It was a woman, one of the King's servants. She was almost hysterical and the young heir had to slap her face to bring her to her senses.

She suddenly calmed from the unexpected blow, and then she said, "It was your father that they came for, my Lord. They knew that he was here, and they wanted him alone. They spared his life and carried him away. Southwards they went, across the plain, but not before they did this." She indicated the scene of terror that was before them and then she ran off, screaming and crying once again.

"What devilry is this," said Amortin, "that they should single out your father from all these men and carry him off. I'll wager that this is not all the work of those simple creatures. There is another mind behind all this, and it is he that we must find and destroy."

But Mithulin could not really listen to his friend's words. He was overcome with grief and hatred. He beckoned that Amortin should follow and then he rushed into the courtyard where the others waited. They wasted no time. Half of the riders were detailed to stay at the palace. Their task was to organise the remaining folk, and to help the wounded. The rest remounted their steeds and although the sun was beginning to set, they rode off again. Mithulin vowed that he would catch the Nalesh that had

taken his father, and he would not rest until they were all dead. But he would need help to fulfil that vow.

And so they headed back to Oslar to meet the foot soldiers that should have been on their way to Oronoman by now, and to enlist more aid if need be.

But it soon became too dark to travel and they had to stop for the night.

In the morning they rode on, but they never met any troops heading towards them. Mithulin did not worry overmuch about it since it would be easy for them to miss each other in the open countryside. If the others had taken the road they would be far to the north anyway, if not they might still pass unseen to the north or south. In any case, if the foot soldiers reached Oronoman soon, they might be able to help the people who remained there after the holocaust had struck.

When they did reach the Milfair though, there was an unexpected reception awaiting them. Armed soldiers stood at the entrance to the east bridge, as Mithulin expected, but when he approached them, they would not let him pass.

"Do you not know who this is at my side?" said Amortin commandingly.

"We do, my Lord, but we will not let you, or your friends onto this island again, nor will we take our orders from him. Now be off, before we drive you away."

Mithulin was stunned. What could he possibly have done to alter his men's view of him so? He had tried to be a fair leader, and though the battle had been tough and had taken its toll of them all, the army had seemed in good spirits when he left. He was puzzled and angry, but there was nothing that could be done. Archers trained their bows on him from afar and the soldiers on the bridge unsheathed their swords menacingly.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked, his voice quivering with the realisation that his own army had turned against him. "Do you not know that your own homes may have been attacked by the Nalesh hordes?"

"We will no longer listen to your false testimonies," came the harsh reply. "Now, be gone!"

Mithulin called out in desperation, "Where is Selondath? Bring him to me."

But the men laughed in reply. "Here he is," they shouted, pointing to the river bank below them.

Theltiem's son followed their gazes. At the top of a blood stained spike was a man's head. He recognised the face of Selondath, racked with the expression of an agonising death.

Suddenly a single arrow whistled over their heads and embedded itself in the ground just behind them.

They had no choice but to turn away and ride off; just Mithulin and the few companions that remained faithful to him.

When he asked them what had happened to their fellows, they could not answer with any more truth than the young leader could guess himself, and he had no idea at all.

So off they rode again, southwards along the road towards Marith, but not really knowing where they might find Theltiem, or the Nalesh horde that had kidnapped him. They had been shunned by their own people and they all felt miserable and dejected.

Mithulin and his aides had been going for two days, and covered fifty miles or

so, when they came across a lone man walking in their direction towards Marith. They were all suspicious at first, not least Amortin, who said that the man looked like a spy if ever he saw one. They had seen no-one on the road since they left the bridge to Oslar and this man seemed very out of place so far from any town or village.

He was a tall, young looking man with muscular arms under which he clutched an untidy bundle, and he strode purposefully along the rough road. He wore a long, blue cloak and a hood which almost covered his face.

"Hail, traveller," called Mithulin when they came level with him. "Where are you going?"

The man seemed to jump with surprise, as if he had not seen or heard the riders approach. Then he said, "I am going south, away from the death and destruction that seems to haunt this land."

"And what have you seen of such things?" asked Mithulin.

"I have seen enough. Just last night there was a group of ugly creatures that passed me in the darkness. They did not see me, but I saw them well enough. There was a single man with them, and they dragged him along with ropes tied to his hands and neck. I have no wish to follow such a path, so I am heading away from Oronfal. You will not find me tarrying in a land so full of evil ways."

The man's attitude was strange. He spoke as though he was above the other men of this land, as if he did not deserve to suffer the injustices that were presently sweeping through it like a broom clearing the autumn leaves. But he did not look significantly different, he wore no crown and carried no staff.

"And where did these creatures go?" asked Mithulin, eager for news. "Which direction did they take?"

Clearly this young man had seen the Nalesh band that had taken Theltiem. It made the King's son shudder to think of his father being treated so harshly, and he wished to pursue them with all haste.

"They went south-east, towards the Mure." The stranger spoke as if he did not care, and he did not ask of Mithulin, or his interest in those creatures.

"We thank you, sir," called out Amortin as Mithulin turned to ride off without speaking any more. But as he did, the other man called out after them.

"I could help you, if you wish."

Mithulin stopped in his tracks and wheeled around. He was angry that anyone should delay them, even if he had given them invaluable information.

"How could you help us. We go to fight the Nalesh, and rescue the King of this land. I should guess that you are just a farmer's son and know nothing of politics and warfare."

"Then you are wrong, Mithulin." The lone traveller stood taller in his old boots. He seemed to grow in height as he spoke. "I am one of the Zim Farinid, and my powers are stronger than any man's. I am more powerful than Ilis Clair herself, and I will prove it, if you wish."

He waved his hands above him, and with a few mumbled words there came a terrible trembling in the ground below their feet. The horses shied and threw some of their riders, including Mithulin, and they landed with a thud upon the vibrating earth.

Then a great opening appeared before them and from it rose a tall creature, like a man, but awful to see. It had only one arm, and its skin was transparent, so that



they could see the blood coursing through its veins and arteries. Even its muscles were visible, flexing in the enormous arm and powerful legs as it stretched like a man awoken from a long sleep.

Then the creature turned towards them and they saw that it held an axe in its hand, which it swung around its head. The mighty blade made a hideous ringing sound as the air parted for it, and the creature opened its mouth in a blood curdling scream.

Some of the soldiers produced their swords, but it did not turn to fight them. Instead it loped off at a good speed, eastwards across the plain until eventually it disappeared from view over the horizon.

Mithulin picked himself up from the ground.

"I do not doubt your powers, wizard," he said, still a little stunned by the terrible monster that had come and gone so quickly. "But why did you bring such a thing into the world?"

"Do not trouble yourself," replied the wizard, "it is harmless really, just a vision that I conjured for your entertainment."

"Then that is not an entertainment I would seek again," said Amortin.

Mithulin asked the Zim Farinid to join them on their quest, saying, "Who do you serve, great mage, for we would like to have your aid in our cause?"

"I serve the true ruler of this land," came the guarded reply, "and I will join you on your journey."

So they all mounted their horses again and rode on. The young man, whose name was Lifandin, rode behind one of the soldiers, and together they made their way towards the sand dunes of the southern-most part of Oronfal. They turned away from the Marith road and went across Elif-Gard instead.

The Warm Plain was flat and dry. Little could grow there because there was no water. Only strange, bulbous plants came from the sandy soil. These were covered in sharp spikes that could pierce a man's skin, and they grew to enormous sizes. But if one was cut open it was filled with moist, green tissue and a good drink could be had from this uninviting vegetation.

It took two more days of swift going before they reached the first of the sandy hills of the Mure. Mithulin had thought that they might meet the Nalesh on the way, but he underestimated the speed with which those creatures could travel. They did not stop at night, nor seem to tire or thirst. If hunger overtook them they would begin to eat each other, but their numbers would never diminish. They seemed to appear from nowhere and sometimes their numbers would swell, and other times they would dwindle a little, but never by any great degree.

After another day of constant searching, Mithulin and his men found the Nalesh warren. They saw them from a distance at first and managed to remain hidden, spying out the land and making a plan of attack.

It seemed that the spriggans actually lived underneath the sand. Mithulin often saw them dig into the ground and disappear below. Then some of the vile creatures would appear as if by magic, but they had only come from holes that had already been dug in the sandy hills.

They also saw Theltiem. The Nalesh were keeping him above ground, and although the spies could see no detail, he seemed to be alive. But he was treated brutally, and Mithulin decided that he should be freed at once.

So the twenty five men, and one wizard, set to work against the thousands of gaolers that held the King.

It was Lifandin who did the most work. He set a spell against the Nalesh, and while the human soldiers had to fight their way through the evil horde, the young magic maker turned them against each other. In the heat of the fight, as the men's swords cut this way and that, the Nalesh began to ignore the true foe and instead went on a frenzy of killing among themselves.

The battle raged on for a long time, but at least Mithulin was able to reach his father and cut the bonds that held him still. But the dreadful journey, and the torturings of his captors had proved too much for the old Emasar. He could not stand, though Mithulin tried to help him to his feet, and he could barely speak to his son.

As he held his father's head in his arms, Mithulin heard the King's last words. "It is a terrible wrong that we have done," the old man whispered as the killing went on around them. "There is but one hope though. You must go to Ilis Clair, and ask her for The Key. She will know what I speak of, and she will help you. But you must hurry, young Mithulin, before it is too late."

And then Theltiem died in the arms of his son, and King Mithulin began his reign over Oronfal.

The two kinsmen stayed together like that for some minutes until eventually Amortin saw what had happened and came to them.

"Your Majesty, we must go from here. We cannot rely on Lifandin's magic for too long."

So the King's men carried his father's body through the turmoil that surrounded them, until eventually they came to a safe place, away from the Nalesh who continued their bloody orgy.

Then they buried the old man beneath the sand, with as much dignity as they could in such an inhospitable scene.

When all was done a shout went up.

"Hail King Mithulin," they all called, and he saluted them in reply.

Only Lifandin was silent.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With Theltiem dead, there was no longer any reason for Mithulin and his followers to remain at the Mure. So they quickly rode off to a safe distance, away from the Nalesh who continued their self destructive riot, even though Lifandin's spell was beginning to wane.

They went north for ten miles until they came out of the sandy hills and back onto the flat plain of Elif-Gard. Here they rested for a while and discussed their next move.

Mithulin recounted his father's last words. His face was haggard and he looked suddenly older.

"He told me to go back to Ilis Clair, to ask her for 'The Key', whatever that might be. He also said that she would help us in our fight, but I do not think he meant against Falforn. I believe it is our struggle with the Nalesh that most troubled him, and the powers that control them. The war with the west is our own affair, and I deem that Ilis Clair will not help us in that action. But any aid that we can get against those awful creatures will be of countless worth."

"But how can we reach Ilis Clair again?" asked Amortin. His mind was a little more practical than his friend's, and he remembered only too well the reception they had received at Oslar. "If your own army is against us now, what hope do we have of ever speaking to the Statue?"

"There is no hope," said Lifandin mockingly. "Hope is the one thing upon which you cannot rely."

Mithulin snapped back at him. "I thought that you were offering aid to our cause. If this is your attitude then I can see no reason for you to remain with us."

"I will give you aid enough," said the wizard, "but you will only succeed through military might, and powerful actions. If you rely on a mere word then we are all doomed to failure. I will help you indeed, but with my magic and my own mind."

"I am sorry, Lifandin. I do appreciate the work that you have done for us, but our position is hopeless." Mithulin realised that the stranger was right. Fate had not been kind to them, and they would have to bring about their own salvation through hard work and clever thinking. There was no use in waiting for easy opportunities or good luck. If there was no hope of success then they would have to continue without it.

Amortin turned his attention to the young wizard. "Then what would you counsel?" "This is my plan," said Lifandin quietly, "and you would do well to follow it."

"We must go to Harvena and seek help from the Amarin. It is clear to me that we cannot turn to your fellow men in this matter. They offer no fealty to their new King, but the Satyrs will give whatever assistance you ask. They are a kindly race and would do anything to help Ilis Clair. They may not fight against the men of Falforn, but the Nalesh and such other devils are their enemies too, and it would be in their interests to help us against those foul beings."

"If we are clever, we may even be able to use the Amarin against the Storm Land without their knowledge. But watch them at all times. They are a devious race and we cannot trust them fully. Be on your guard."

"I also have another plan that will deal with Falforn for good, but now is not the

time to discuss that. Come, we must begin our journey at once."

With that the young man stood up and mounted one of the horses. The others quickly turned to their King, as if waiting for his approval to follow. Mithulin nodded in agreement and soon they were on their way again.

It seemed as if they were doomed to wander through the land, always seeking assistance from unwilling hands. Mithulin was a King who had no subjects, and even the land itself seemed to have turned against him in his battle against evil. The Amarin were almost his last hope, and even that was a very slim one. But he would not give up. Providing he was still alive to fight the cause, he would continue. Only when victory was theirs, or the fight was truly lost, would he finally rest.

The journey to Harvena was long and difficult. The riders made their way north first, to join the Dry Road that went west to Fathrain. They followed this for twenty miles, but before they reached the Golden Hall they turned north again, away from it.

Lifandin advised Mithulin to avoid the places where they might come into contact with more men. He thought word may have spread from Oslar and that the young King might not be welcome at any town or fortress in Oronfal. It seemed wise to follow such advice, so they skirted northwards in a great semi-circle that took them across the Morath road and rejoined the way to Fathan some ten miles to the north east.

One of the soldiers was sent to the Hall itself. He was instructed to purchase a horse for Lifandin to ride, and provisions for them all. The King carried a few gold coins and he gave the man one to buy all that he could carry. But Mithulin also gave the man the authority to use whatever peaceful means were necessary to get what they needed, and to protect himself.

When the soldier returned he had brought enough food to last them a week or so, but no extra horse.

"There is no steed to be bought or stolen in the whole place," he reported. "In fact, most of the menfolk have gone away. Many of them joined the army that we took to Oslar, and some more have gone since, to The Statue knows where. Those that remain seem friendly enough, but they were wary of me, and I thought it wise not to tarry."

"You have done well," said Mithulin. "I shall see you rewarded when all this is over." Then he turned to all the men that gathered round about.

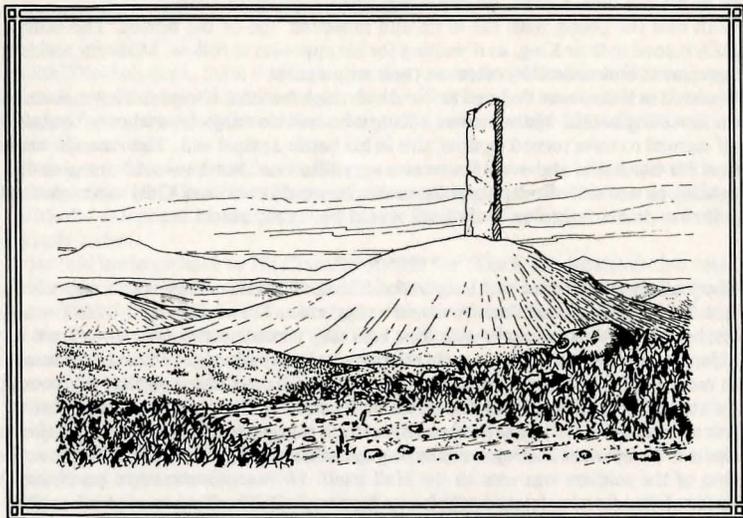
"You are all my faithful servants," he called out loudly, "I will set you in the highest esteem when we return to our old lives. May The Statue see that we do so."

And his men replied in unison, "By The Statue", and saluted their King with upheld arms.

Then they rode off again on their way to the Castle of Joy.

From where they had stopped briefly they went to Fathan, the Gold Hill. This was a magnificent monument set atop the tallest hill for many miles. It was said that once, long ago, the old megalith had been made of solid gold, and was set upon the land as a temptation to the races that lived nearby. But the temptation had not been resisted and over the years the precious metal had been chipped away by pilgrims who came to wonder at the incredible sight.

So, in an effort to restore the obelisk to its previous dignity, its keepers built a



new one from the golden coloured rock that could be found in the mountains of Monar. They took the old gold block away, and replaced it with the slab of worthless stone that remained to this day. But even that had been hundreds of years ago and the new stone was now cracked and weather beaten. What had become of the old one, no-one knew. No doubt the keepers of the hill had become rich with the proceeds of their restoration.

With the gold gone, of course, the hill lost its attraction to the men and other races of the land. So they quickly forsook it, and eventually even the keepers left it as a bare and ancient reminder of past days.

Mithulin and his men rode on past the hill, almost oblivious to the history that passed so close to them.

Here the old road ended too, and they were forced to continue without its guidance, or the ease of a prepared surface underhoof. But they still went with some speed, north-east towards the mountainous circle of Rostar.

This enormous ring of tall peaks almost completely cut Harvena from the rest of Oronfal. Only at its very eastern edge could entry be gained to the place of the Amarin; where the narrow pass of Maylodd weaved between the mountains. There was no other way, unless one was prepared for an almost endless climb into the cold, dizzy heights of the Mountain Ring.

In all it took nearly six whole days for King Mithulin and his faithful band to reach

Harvena. When they did arrive, they were all tired beyond belief. They had travelled practically without rest for all that time, only stopping when the need was very great. Sometimes they would be almost asleep on their mounts, and sometimes it would be so dark that they could not see the ground before them. More than once they became lost on the way, and only in the morning would they find that they had travelled miles in the wrong direction. It seemed foolish to do so, but in the dead of night Mithulin felt compelled to continue and his men were only too eager to follow him, wherever he led.

Harvena was a strange place, built amid the hilly landscape within the boundaries of the encircling mountains. In fact the Satyrs that lived there seemed an odd race to the men who occupied the lands outside their small enclave.

It was called the Castle of Joy because they would welcome anyone who came in need. They were a peace loving race and this was reflected in the land where they lived. Although the great building of their home was called a Castle, it was not the kind of fortress that a man would recognise. There were no battlements, nor fortifications of any kind. But there were tall towers with red tiled roofs and strange shaped domes that glinted in the sunlight. It was a bright and happy place and there seemed to be a warm glow of contentment upon the countryside thereabouts.

When the twenty six travellers saw that place, their hearts were uplifted and they forgot the hardship that had brought them there. It was as if a healing force radiated from the Castle itself, bathing them all in its rejuvenating power.

Only Lifandin looked a little uneasy as they rode nearer to the white plastered towers, but none of the others appeared to notice his concern.

Here life seemed to continue unaffected by the ravages that had caused so much suffering to men, dwarves and the other races of the land. The Amarin continued with their daily lives much the same as they had since they came into the world. They were farmers and shepherds mostly. They ate no meat and fed themselves from the harvest of the land, which was always good in these fertile valleys.

The Satyrs were also strange in appearance, being the most beast like of all the races. Their thin legs were hairy and ended in small hooves, like a goat's. They each had a short, stumpy tail and from their hirsute heads two small horns protruded. These grew with age; youths started with only tiny stumps in their scalps, but the elders of their kind possessed bony spikes the length of a man's finger. It was these horns that the Amarin could use as weapons, if the need ever arose.

When the Satyrs saw Mithulin and his men they ran to meet them. These creatures always reminded the young King of human children. They were nearer that size and they always seemed to have immature personalities, whatever their own age. In fact an Amarin could outlive even the oldest man, but they never lost the boyish way with which they treated life.

Mithulin addressed the crowd sternly as they gathered around him.

"I have grave news for you all, but you must first take me to your elders. I have much to discuss with them."

So the soldiers all dismounted and Mithulin, Amartin and Lifandin were all led deep into the Castle.

"You must wait here," said one of the Satyrs, in his high, squeaky voice.

The three men sat on the small wicker chairs that were dotted about the chamber.

The ceilings in the Castle were low, because that was the Amarin's style, but inside the building was exquisitely decorated. Tapestries were hung from the walls, brightly coloured and depicting scenes from all around Oronfal. The floors were carpeted in a similar way, and the furniture was all made from growing things; wood and finely woven basketry for the most part. The walls and ceilings were in soothing greens and blues, and the whole place had a mysterious atmosphere.

Mithulin had never been to Harvena before, but he now regretted that fact. It was a place of beauty and calm and he immediately fell in love with it, and with the people that lived there. They were charming and kind, but perhaps with a hint of mischief in their eyes that made them interesting to watch and be with. He could see now why it was called the Castle of Joy.

The visitors sat in silence, looking about them, but they did not have to wait for long. Within a few minutes an older Satyr, with longer horns than most, came through a door and spoke to them.

"You may come with me. The Elders are waiting for you." Then he saw the swords hanging at the two men's sides. "But first, I must ask you to leave your weapons in this room. We will not touch them, and you may collect them when you leave."

"Very well," said Mithulin, undoing his sword belt and indicating that Amortin should do the same.

Mithulin's friend lay his sword and dagger on a chair at his side, then he and his King stepped forward to follow the Amarin guide. Lifandin carried no sword, but the Satyr was suspicious of the odd package that he carried.

"What is that?" said the horned creature, grasping the untidy bundle that the young wizard always carried in the crook of his arm.

Lifandin quickly tried to pull it back, saying in his most commanding voice, "It is nothing that will concern you."

But it was too late. In the struggle over the small parcel, its wrappings loosened and something dropped onto the floor. It was a small book which fell open at some blank pages.

Mithulin bent forward and handed it back to Lifandin.

"I do not think you need trouble yourself with my colleague," said the King quietly, "he carries no weapon. I will vouch for him."

The Satyr replied sharply, "But I have only your word on that. I do not even know who you are."

"Then I will tell you that I am your King," said Mithulin with as much conviction as he could muster, though he doubted that the Satyr would believe him. "King Theltiem Emasar is dead, and I am his son, Mithulin."

The Amarin stopped suddenly in his tracks, almost stunned by the words. Then he bowed low and said in his squeaky voice, "Your Majesty, I welcome you to Harvena. I apologise for my harsh words and the insult that I have done you and your friends. If there is any way in which I can repay my insolence, you have only to say and I will do whatever I can. It brings me such joy to meet you like this, though the meeting is far from expected. I am so sorry to hear that your father is no longer with us. May I repeat, how sorry I am for doubting your word and ..."

Mithulin was forced to interrupt the grovelling speech that looked set to continue for some time. "You may repay me by taking us to your Elders, with haste." And

he clapped his hands as if to urge the Amarin forward. They quickly moved on again.

The Council of Elders sat in a half circle around a similarly shaped table. All the Amarin here had fully grown horns, and they looked at the three travellers with wise eyes that were a little out of place in their still youthful faces.

One of them spoke before Mithulin, or the Satyr that had brought him here, had a chance to say anything.

"You are not the first emissary to come from the King. I will give you the same answer that we gave your forerunner."

Mithulin interrupted quickly, before the Elders went too far with their mistaken belief.

"I am not a messenger from the King," he said. "Theltiem is dead. He was killed by a horde of evil creatures that are overrunning our lands. I am his son. I am King Mithulin and I come to seek your aid for myself."

A murmur of voices ran around the gathering until the first speaker stood, raising his hands to silence them. Then he spoke to the King, but this time with a little more reverence.

"If that is so," he said, with an element of doubt showing in his voice, "then I bid you welcome, Your Majesty. But I must still give that same answer. The Amarin people will not help you in your wars against the other good races of this land. We have seen the folly of men too often to take any part in them now. Though you believe that you are right, your foe will also say the same, and we cannot fight for one against the other.

"We are a peaceful nation, and we will not have that peace disturbed by the likes of you. King you may be, but our allegiance is to our own race first and foremost, and then to Ilis Clair, and the goodness that she brings us all. You must remember that, and act accordingly."

The words that the Satyr spoke came as no surprise to Mithulin, or his friends. He had long suspected that the Amarin cared little for the monarchy of men, and he could not blame them for such feelings. He wondered how the humans of Oronfal would take to a ruler who was not of their own flesh and blood. He had decided long before this that under his reign the Amarin would be able to decide their own destiny, without interference from outside.

But that was not the issue now. He needed help, and badly. It would fare him well to make friends with these people rather than enflame old passions and rekindle forgotten arguments.

"I do not come now to seek your aid in such matters," he said. "What has happened on Oslar is between us men, and we do not expect your race to help us solve the problems that our own foolishness has created. But I must warn you that those battles are like small skirmishes when compared to the real war that is about to unfold before us all.

"I have told you already that my father was killed by vile creatures that were unknown to me until a few days ago. The Nalesh they are called, and there are others like them that wait to take all our lives if the opportunity should present itself. Even the Amarin are not immune to the ravages of such beasts, and the powers that drive them on.

"There is great evil afoot throughout the land, and you would be foolish to ignore it. You must help me rid the land of these things so that you may continue your peaceful existence. If you do not, then even I may not remain your King for long. There would be a new era of anarchy and destruction and I cannot say who would end as the victor.

Certainly not the men of this world, and probably none of the old races that came here with us."

The Amarin Elders turned to look at each other, their glances going from face to face as if they spoke without uttering audible words.

"Then what would you have us do, King Mithulin?" asked their spokesperson.

"I would ask for two things from you. First, you must form an army amongst yourselves. This would be for your own protection, not to fight at my command. You will need it before long, I think. The Nalesh hordes are everywhere and it will not be long before they come this far east. When they do arrive here, you must be prepared for them.

"Secondly, I have great need to visit Ilis Clair and seek her guidance. There is a human army of occupation on Oslar and they will not give me their allegiance. I know that you all have powers beyond the imagination of men. If you will use those powers to help me, then I will be forever grateful. Remember that I am King of all Oronfal, and whatever you may wish for, it is within my power to provide."

The Amarin looked about them again, but for a longer time than before. Eventually the same one spoke in reply to Mithulin's plea.

"Do not trouble yourself with our safety. We have the power to protect ourselves as need be. But your journey to Oslar is a problem for us. I have already said that we cannot assist you in your war against Falforn, and to journey there with an Amarin army would only provoke more killing. If you and your men will rest here for a day and a night, then we will consider the matter further, and give you our reply on the morrow.

"Now go, and cleanse yourselves, and take food and rest."

Mithulin thanked the Elders for their consideration of his request. Then he and his followers were taken to chambers where they washed, ate a hearty meal, and slept for almost a whole day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After their encounter with Fethrol, Avarath and Holdin lay unconscious for a long time. They were two sleeping figures at the side of the road, but no-one saw them there. Nobody passed by in all those hours and they remained unseen and uncared for.

Eventually it was Belanshar who awoke first. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief, until at last he remembered what had happened. His head ached as if a hammer pounded in rythm with his heart beat, but there were no bruises or cuts to show where the blow had fallen. Yet his brain throbbed in agony and he could hardly think or see through the veil of pain.

He looked over to where Avarath lay on the cold ground. The old wizard may have been dead for all that Holdin could tell. He did not move, nor did he seem to breathe. Sudden panic gripped the man, but he was powerless to give any help until his own pain subsided and he could clear his mind.

He drank a little from the water bottle at his side. Its contents tasted awful, stagnant and old, but at least it wet his parched throat. When he closed his eyes the world seemed to spin around him, so he quickly opened them again.

After a few minutes of sitting still, the pain gradually began to diminish and Holdin was able to stand. His muscles ached and his legs wobbled, but they bore him well enough for a short while and he walked over to where Avarath had fallen. He was some distance away, even though they had been sitting together before Fethrol dealt her shattering blow.

The old man's face was deathly white, and his eyes were wide open. Holdin quickly reached within the wizard's cloak, searching for a heartbeat, or any sign of life. There didn't seem to be one. His skin was cold and his chest was still. No air flowed into his lungs and the heart that should have been pumping his life blood, like any other creature's, had ceased its work.

For a long time Holdin Belanshar stood over his old friend. He thought of all the miles that they had walked together, of the adventures that had befallen them. And of the quest that they pursued. It was their aim to rid the world of the evil spirits that haunted it, but now that goal seemed impossible to reach. With Avarath dead there was nothing that a mere man could do to further that cause.

With a heavy heart, and a head that still throbbed, Holdin turned away from his old companion. He did not know what to do now. His own people had imprisoned him, he had no friends left living, and his land was overrun with malevolent forces that he was powerless to resist. He looked around him for some large stones with which to cover the old man's body.

He had gone about twenty paces when a familiar, gruff voice called out behind him.

"Where are you going, young man? Will you leave your friend in his greatest hour of need, or do you plan to bury me alive?"

Holdin turned back. The sight that met his eyes brought such joy that he could hardly contain himself. He ran to where the old man sat on the short grass.

"Avarath," he cried, embracing the Zim Farinid with his strong arms. "I took you for dead. I didn't know what to do when I saw you there. How are you? How do you feel?"

The old man looked up with tired eyes. He still looked pale and drawn, and his voice was quiet.

"I am well enough, considering the circumstances. It was a cruel blow that she struck against us both. If it had touched you first, then you would not have lived to tell the tale. As for me..." he thought for a moment. "Well, I think that even I was lucky to escape."

"But who was she?" asked Holdin, still not really believing what had happened. The young maiden had changed before his own eyes, and he could not understand who, or what, she might be. He also found it hard to believe that his friend had seemed so dead, but was now alive and well.

"Give me time to rest," said the old man, his voice quavering as if he too was experiencing great pain. "I will tell you what I know, or have guessed, when we are both feeling a little better. Give me your water bottle, my mouth is as dry as the Kora."

Avarath drank long and deep from the old skin vessel. When he had had enough he handed it back to the soldier. Holdin also drank some more. Miraculously the water was no longer stale tasting. It was fresh and sweet, and every drop of it seemed to soothe the pain and awaken the sleeping corners of his mind.

Holdin thought to himself, "Then Avarath has not lost his magical powers." And he drank some more of the refreshing liquid.

The two men sat in silence until, after what seemed like an age, Avarath began to speak. He went slowly at first, but quickly gained in confidence. After a few sentences the old man seemed like he had always been; brusque and sarcastic. But that was only his manner of speaking, and Holdin knew that it hid the true character of the wizard.

"I think the woman that called herself Fethrol was one of my own kind," he began. "If she is the one that I believe, then you would call her Kielmath. But I cannot understand what has happened to her. She has always been good and kindly, as would befit one of the Zim Farinid. But something has changed her beyond recognition. Her looks have altered too. She was not an old hag before, but beautiful in her own way. Still, I did recognise her, despite the wrinkles and lines. Yes, it was Kielmath that we met.

"Since she stole my staff, I can only assume that she has lost her own, but I cannot say how, or why. It would take one of great power to wrest it from her. You saw how she took mine." He chuckled a little. "A mortal like yourself would never be able to carry such an instrument, let alone use it for its true purpose."

Holdin interrupted with a question. "Then the staff is the root of your power?"

"It is not!", Avarath replied indignantly. "It is difficult for me to explain to someone as simple as you, Belanshar. Imagine yourself holding a pen. The pen does not help you to create the words that come from your own mind, it simply enables you to transcribe them into a form that can be understood by others. My staff is much like that, but infinitely more powerful. But that is by the by. It is gone now, and there is little that can be done to get it back. At least for the moment.

"As I was saying, before you interrupted me young man, Kielmath is, or was, my friend. She is one of the Assembly of the Three and she is a powerful figure in this land. If her mind has been warped by the same dark forces that we strive to destroy, then our task will be all the more difficult. And we have only just begun.

"We have not even scratched the skin of this evil menace. Every move we have made thus far has been to no avail. We are approaching our last chance, and if we

should fail in that then we may have failed altogether. Come, we must begin, there is no more time to be lost."

Once more the old man began to walk, almost leaving his companion behind. He went due south, away from the North Road that carried on east to Holath and the River Milfair.

"Where are we going?" Holdin called out as they went.

"To Glowist, we must return to where we started. If any have survived from Ormead they would have journeyed there to meet me. From there we can co-ordinate our efforts and plan the next phase of our attack."

"Very well," said Holdin dismally. They had gone full circle about the Storm Land and accomplished nothing. He was beginning to doubt that they would ever make their mark against the Nalesh and whatever evil force drove them on. But he was wrong. Their time was about to begin.

The two travellers walked southwards for many days. The going was fairly easy and they came across no living things that would harm them. To the west they could see the peaks of the Brondith reaching high into the sky, but their journey was over the reasonably flat ground that lay in the centremost region of Falforn. The Forn-Gard, or Storm Plain, this area was called. It was from the violent weather of this place that the whole kingdom had received its name.

At first the weather was kind to them, but food was more difficult to come by than previously. Avarath seemed unable to provide all that they needed. Holdin was forced to hunt for rabbits, as he had on his own in the wild, and Avarath seemed to know instinctively where they would find edible roots or berries. His magic helped a little, but there were no ready cooked meals or filling snacks to be had.

When they had been going for nearly two days, great black clouds began to gather above them. A strong wind blew in from the north and it became colder with every passing hour.

And then the rain began. It was only a light drizzle at first, but soon it became a torrent that fell from the sky like a waterfall. And it looked set to continue for days. Great rolls of thunder bellowed across the plain, and echoed from the mountains in a chorus of booming voices, but it was the lightning that made the travellers cower. It came down from high above in long blue streaks that seemed to tear the sky open in great rifts. The brilliant flashes illuminated the land for the briefest of moments, more brightly than the sunniest day, and made the nearby mountains appear to glow with an electric luminance.

Sometimes the lightning would strike the ground close by. Each time it sent a great shock wave through the earth and they could almost feel the tension in the atmosphere. But they escaped unharmed, though they saw many burnt areas where the unimaginable energy had run to ground.

Avarath and Holdin were soaked through to the skin by the downpour, but they had to continue. There was no shelter and even the wizard could not change the weather. So on they marched for another day and a night. There was no point in stopping to sleep. They could never get comfortable on the wet ground and they were forever cold and miserable. During the day it hardly became light, and at night the pitch blackness

was broken only by the flashes from the lightning bolts.

In the end, when they could endure it no longer, Avarath turned to Holdin, and shouting above the sound of the thunder, said, "We must shelter ourselves from this storm. We cannot go on like this or we will drown like rats in a barrel of wine."

So they turned east from their course, towards Hansan, the home of the Topil.

It did not take long before they found the first of that race. Night was beginning to fall, and the skilled Topil hunters and huntresses were already abroad, despite the inclement weather.

The Topil were human-like in overall appearance, but pale skinned and pink eyed. They awoke mostly at night, being wary of the sunlight and a little afraid of the other sentient creatures that ruled the day-time lands. They were timid and shy, but clever and skilled in the ways that were of benefit to their kind. They lived underground for the most part, building great burrows beneath the soil which were linked by intricate tunnels. They would dig to great depths, even exceeding the reach of the dwarves' mines many miles to the south. But unlike the dwarves, they did not dig for mineral wealth, only to build safe homes away from prying eyes.

The men of Falforn knew little about the Topil, but Avarath had often walked among them and they knew and trusted him.

The first Topil huntress to find the two bedraggled travellers knew Avarath well and recognised him at once. But she was wary of Holdin, and watched his every move carefully.

The female Topil called out in her high voice, "Hail, Esilith. What brings you to Hansan on this awful night?"

Avarath answered haltingly, straining his eyes to see who it was in the dim light. "We are so pleased to see you, Guinol. We have come a long way and are in need of shelter from the rain. Perhaps you could give us a warm bed and some food."

But Holdin turned to him with a puzzled expression and said, "Why does she call you Esilith?"

The old man whispered in reply. "I have told you that Avarath is what men call me, but not all the races of the land use that name."

So Guinol led them back to the green hill that formed the entrance to her home. At first she would not take Holdin. Only when Avarath assured her that the man was harmless, and a true friend, did she relent. As they went she spoke to them, though they sometimes found it hard to hear her quiet voice above the loud cracks of thunder that still roared overhead.

"I think that we might be more glad to see you, Esilith, than you are to find us. Terrible things have been happening to our people of late." Her voice saddened suddenly and Holdin could sense the emotion that welled within her.

She seemed kind and gentle, despite the long spear that she carried, but her appearance was repulsive to the human. She looked too ghostly for his liking. Her white skin and large, staring eyes were similar to the pictures that his mother had conjured when she threatened him with midnight visits by haunting demons. He realised now that these ideas were probably fuelled by the Topil themselves, a race seldom seen by men, and probably feared because of their aloofness. Since they preferred the dark of night, brief glimpses of these creatures might have given rise to tales of ghosts and ghouls in the distant past.



But Holdin knew that the Topil existed, though he had never seen one before this night, nor had he really wished to. But they seemed harmless, though his fears remained just a little in his mind.

Guinol went on. "Something has come into our lives that may see the end of all the Topil in this land. A terrible plague is sweeping through the burrows here, and elsewhere as far as we can gather. It has spread like ripples in a pool, and it leaves only death wherever it goes. Everyone that it touches has no hope for the future. Even if it does not strike immediately, it will wait only a short while before taking the life of its victim."

She stopped, then turned thoughtfully to Avarath. "Perhaps you should come no further. If this disease can take the lives of my kind so quickly, then even the Zim Farinid may suffer from its awful effects."

"Do not fear for us," said Avarath. "We will come to no harm. Take me to those who suffer now from this plague, and I will see what I can do."

But Holdin thought to himself, "What if she is right. Avarath may be spared from this, but I am a normal man."

He decided to say nothing. He trusted his leader too well to worry overmuch about such things. Besides, he was intrigued by the Topil, despite his initial misgivings, and he wanted to learn more about them, and to see their strange dwellings.

So Guinol took Avarath and Holdin down into the burrow that formed her home.

Its entrance was cut into the side of the hill, but cleverly concealed so that no passing stranger would find it. The passages that wound steeply downwards from that door were narrow and dark.

"Where is the light that you carry in your staff?" asked the guide.

"I wish that I could answer your question," he replied wistfully. "It is gone to The Statue knows where, so I will have to rely on your guidance in the dark."

Where the passageway went down through the soil, it was supported all around by wooden beams and planks. But quickly they came into the bedrock of the land, and here the floor, walls and ceiling were smooth and well cut. They needed no further support, such was the skill of their makers. It was a miracle of engineering that any human builder would have envied, but few men's eyes had ever been inside those underground ways.

They went on for several minutes through the twisting corridors, sometimes turning away from the main path, and sometimes taking long, winding stairs that carried them still further into the depths of the earth. In these rocky parts it was not totally dark, and the two travellers could see a little in the dim glow that filled the caves with an eerie bluish light.

Seeing the look of wonder on his companion's face, Avarath turned to Holdin and said, "The light comes from the rock itself, there is no magic to it. There is a strange mineral in these stones that glows with this dim illumination. It does not seem bright to us, but for the Topil it is like daylight. Their eyes are far better than yours, or mine for that matter, but sensitive to the light. That is why you will not see one above ground when the sun is up, unless he wears a thick veil across his face. Their day is the reverse of ours and it suits them well."

"I see," was all that Holdin could answer. He was too awe stricken with everything that he had seen to make any more of a conversation.

In some places the glowing rock was delicately inlaid into the dark stone of the burrow walls. The blue filigree was formed into weird, ghoulish pictures, and strange writing which Holdin could not read. But it was beautiful to see.

Every so often they passed an open doorway that lead from the passage where they walked. Holdin would see tantalising glimpses of large chambers, dimly lit by the same glow. Sometimes a smokeless fire also burned, adding flickering red shadows against the smooth, blue tinted walls.

In these larger rooms, whole Topil families gathered for their first meal of the night, the equivalent of a human breakfast. Fathers, mothers and children of this nocturnal race would sit on the mat covered floors, eating the dried meats and vegetables that they had stored from previous forays into the outside world. Yet that world was now high above them. It seemed incredible to Holdin when he thought of the storm that raged so far away, while they were here, dry and warm below the ground.

As they went further down, they passed different kinds of chambers. In one place there seemed to be a school. There were no children there, nor books or pens, but Holdin could tell that it was a place of learning.

In another part there were store rooms. Each section of the great warehouse was filled to overflowing with different supplies. There was food in plenty, and clothing of all sorts. Then weapons, and hunting traps, great jars of water and wine. It was a hoard the like of which the soldier had never seen in all his years. It made him wonder

how many of the Topil there were living in this place to warrant such vast quantities of all these things.

At last they came to what seemed to be a hospital. It was a large chamber that stretched almost as far as the eye could see in the dim light. Its ceiling was high and domed and Holdin guessed that its top was at least ten times his own height. But the floor was covered with Topil. Each one was wrapped in a thick, colourful blanket, and all looked miserable and sick. They lay in long rows of suffering, their faces swollen with the illness. Some had great sores on their hands and feet and they all looked skeletal through the inability to eat.

When Avarath saw them he quickly went from one to the other, examining each one closely to see what was wrong. He offered words of kindness to some, whilst he lay his hands upon others and their tortured faces wore expressions of relief for a brief moment.

After a while he came back to where Guinol and Holdin stood. He hung his head in sorrow and spoke in a whisper.

"I cannot say what ails them, and I am powerless to help. All I can do is ease the suffering for a while, but I have no cure." Then he added, as if speaking to himself, "If only I had my staff."

"Is there nothing you can do?" asked Guinol. A tear came to her eye and she was almost pleading with the old man.

"Yes, there is something. You must bring me these herbs, and I will make a potion." Then he gave the Topil huntress a long list of herbs and roots, most of which Holdin had never heard of. He wanted huge quantities, but they seemed to present no problem to her and she quickly went off to find them, calling other Topil as she went. Then Avarath asked for the largest cooking pot that could be found, and that it should be filled with water and brought to the boil.

Holdin guessed that all the ingredients Avarath sought were already in store not far away. Guinol returned quite soon with great armfuls of strange leaves and small jars of many coloured powders. Three others of her race brought a huge black cauldron and placed it in the passageway just outside the infirmary. They built a fire beneath it which they lit with strange glowing sticks. The flames burned without smoke and quickly heated the cold fluid inside the pot.

"Good, good," said the Zim Farinid as he set to work. He then spent an age cutting leaves and mixing the herbs to exact proportions. Sometimes he crushed the ingredients with his hands, whilst others needed to be ground to a fine dust with a pestle.

When the dry mixing was done he poured the whole concoction into the huge jar of boiling water, then stirred it round and round with a huge wooden spoon until he seemed to be satisfied. Only then did he taste a little himself before administering the hot medicine to his patients. A strong aroma filled the air of the chamber and they could smell the almost intoxicating goodness of the potion. It was sweet and earthy, a little like the smell of new mown grass.

Holdin marvelled at the care which Avarath showed for the sick Topil. He stopped at the side of each one and gave a cupfull of the strange liquid, not moving on until the whole measure was taken. It seemed to take an age before they visited all of those who lay in that great chamber, but Holdin and Guinol did not complain. They knew that it was Avarath who did the hardest work and they were in awe of the way in

which he carried out his arduous task.

Only when that job was all done did Holdin and his friend get to eat and sleep. As the two companions lay in a blue lit chamber, Avarath turned to Holdin and said in a tired voice, "They will not die so quickly now, I have seen to that, but I cannot cure what ails them without my staff. We must find it, and soon. Only then can we get the Scroll of Healing. That will be their only chance."

Then he seemed to sleep, but Belanshar noticed that the old man did not close his eyes even then. They were always open, aware of their surroundings and alert to all that went on around, even when their master had closed his mind to all waking thought.

So Holdin fell asleep as well, though his mind was spinning with unanswered questions. He did not wake until the next morning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Mithulin and his followers awoke the next morning at Harvena, they all felt rested and refreshed. They ate a large breakfast of hot oats mixed with milk, and then the King went to the Amarin Elders once more.

The dozen or so elder Satyrs sat around their table as if they had not moved all night. When Mithulin entered they greeted him with reverence and their spokesman began almost at once.

"We have given much thought to your request, Your Majesty, and are all agreed that we must help in your journey to Oslar. To this end, we will send one of our own kind to travel with you. He will go as our representative, and you may travel with our blessing."

Mithulin was almost speechless. What help was just one Amarin against the hordes of evil creatures that lay in wait outside the Mountain Ring?

"This is absurd," he replied, not hiding his anger at their decision. "I will thank you not to mock my intentions. If that is all the assistance you can offer, then I will be on my way, without your blessing."

"Wait, Your Majesty, I have not yet finished." The speaker held up his hands, as if to appease the King. "You should know that the powers of the Amarin race are far reaching. Though just one of us will travel with you in body, the spirits of us all will go with you. We can offer more aid from Harvena than as an army travelling at your side."

Mithulin felt a little ashamed for his outburst. He said diplomatically, "Then I am sorry for my hasty judgement. I will gladly take a new companion to Oslar, and we will all travel with lighter hearts with the thought of your magic following us."

Inwardly he doubted that the Amarin could offer any real assistance with their powers, whatever they might be. It seemed inconceivable to him that any good could be done by these creatures when they would remain so far from his destination. But he would have to trust in their faith. There was clearly nothing else that could be done.

When the King and his companions set off from Harvena, an extra rider travelled with them. He was named Ulin-Gail and he went as representative from the people of the Castle of Joy. He was a middle aged Satyr, not young enough to be considered a youth, but not yet of the age to become an elder. But it was difficult to tell his age from either appearance or personality. Only his horns revealed that he was in his middle years, probably about fifty or so.

There was an extra horse too, for Lifandin, though that, and the one that Ulin-Gail rode, were more like farmers' work horses. They were not like the others' sleek, swift animals, but it was still better than walking. The Amarin found it a little awkward at first, since his kind were not used to riding on the backs of other beasts. His tail got in the way and the horse would not respond to the commands of his small hooves. But he soon found his feet and kept up with the rest well enough.

They rode east for the first day, away from Harvena and towards the pass at Maylodd. The going was quite difficult and they went slowly. Lifandin and Ulin-Gail tended to lag behind, and the others had to travel at less of a pace than they otherwise might have. By nightfall they had only just passed through the Ring of Mountains, a mere

thirty miles or so from their point of departure.

They camped for the night and rested in the entrance to the green valley, where the land of the Amarin ended and that of men began.

The next day they turned north. It was decided that they would fare better by taking the northern route around Rostar. In doing so they would generally avoid the habitation of men and might pass mostly unseen and unmolested. Mithulin guessed that the Nalesh were largely to be found in the south of the country. With luck the vile creatures might not have ventured so far to the north-east and their journey might be safe from that terror at least.

After another day and a half of travelling they came to the Derris. This narrow stream was fresh and new so close to the mountains. Its origin was only a few miles away, high in the peaks of the Rostar. All the men eagerly filled their water bottles with the rich, cool liquid that flowed quickly past them. It was here, so legend said, that the Spirit of Water had made her home, in the days when Ilis Clair was still young.

Then the riders forded the stream, allowing their horses to drink as they went, before trotting on westwards towards Oronoman and Oslar.

It was well over a hundred miles from the Derris to their destination, and Mithulin and his friends reckoned to take three days to travel that distance. They did not push ahead with great speed, but plodded steadily onwards, leaving five miles or so behind them with every passing hour. Some of the urgency had gone from the King's mind now that they were actually travelling in the direction he wished to take. He did not say anything to the others, but he let them go more at their own pace instead of willing them forwards with all haste, as he had done previously.

Amortin suspected that his friend was a little afraid of what might happen when they reached Oslar. It was one thing for the King's heir to be refused entry by his own army, but for the King himself to be so humiliated was unthinkable. Yet that was what they were now risking. They were still only a small band of riders, although a Zim Farinid and a Satyr now swelled their ranks. He could only assume that it was with these two that their hopes now lay. He did not know much about the powers of either, so he trusted Mithulin as best he could. If the King was happy to follow their advice, then he would do likewise.

Mithulin did not speak much while they journeyed, not to Amortin, nor to any of the others. However, Ulin-Gail more than made up for the lack of conversation from the King. He was a chatter-box and, if allowed, would have gone on and on without halting even for breath. The men put up with his constant talking for the first day or so, but after that they became a little tired of it, and he could rarely find anyone to listen to his tales. Still, this hardly made any difference to him, and he would talk to the world in general if there was no particular audience at that moment in time.

Despite their misgivings though, Ulin-Gail was quite well liked by the men. He was cheerful and happy, and he would take to singing when his spoken words fell upon inattentive ears. His voice was high and sweet and it seemed to rouse them all from morbid thoughts and heavy hearts. One of his songs went thus;

"In days gone by, when life was new,
A shepherd with his flock was out,
And when the north wind hard did blow,

He thought to keep them round about.

With a hey-ho, round we go,
Gathering the stock.
With a hey-ha, tra-la-la,
Shepherding his flock."

The verses were many, and the men did not know the words, but the chorus was easy and after a while they all sang it together. Even Mithulin joined the rough choir of voices and he felt a little happier for it. Only Lifandin did not take part, but none there expected a man so awesome in his power to enjoy such a frivolous activity.

When Ulin-Gail was not talking, or singing, he played his pipes. The men had never heard the like of the sweet music that the Amarin could conjure from his simple wooden instrument. Sometimes the melodies were almost hypnotic and would carry them onwards, letting them forget the soreness of the journey, and the rumblings of their stomachs.

About half way between the Derris and the Milfair, they came to the northern tip of the mountains of Sanberian. These mounts were not as tall as the mightier ranges of the Rostar or Monar, and their slopes were covered in a green growth of forest and grassland, from which they received their name. The trees here kept their long, needle like leaves all through the year, so that even in the depths of winter the range stood out from the land like a green oasis in a cold desert. When the King and his men rode past, the trees were bright with new spring growth even though they went by the shadowed side of the mountains.

As they came level with the first of the gentle slopes, they saw something strange ahead. It looked like a town of sorts, but odd in construction and sinister in appearance. Besides, there had never been any town or village in this part. It had sprung up since Mithulin left Oronoman all those days ago, to take his army on its crusade against Queen Rolquin.

It was a low, village-like hamlet, with small huts dotted about here and there, and one slightly taller building in its centre. All around it was a fence, built high and strong, as if to keep out wild animals, or to keep something within its bounds.

Amortin turned to his friend, the King. "What can that be? It looks like a fortress of some kind. I wonder whether its inhabitants are friendly, or if we should avoid them if we can."

"I don't like the look of it," replied Mithulin, straining his eyes into the distance to see if he could spy out any clue to its purpose. He could see vague figures moving around within its bounds, but no more than that. "I think that we should stay here a while, and watch and wait. If we try to skirt around it, we may find ourselves in deeper trouble. Yet we cannot knock at their door. For all we know the Nalesh themselves might be hiding behind those walls."

"Or perhaps it is to keep the Nalesh out," said Amortin.

Lifandin then offered his opinion. "I would suggest that we ignore this thing. We do not know what it is, and nor do we care. We are wasting precious time. If it is full of evil creatures then we would be powerless against them. I think that we should press on with our original quest and not trouble ourselves with such minor concerns."

"No," piped up Ulin-Gail, determined not to be quiet for too long. "I would like to know what goes on inside that camp. I find it intriguing. If there are folk in there

who need our aid, then we would be foolish to pass by. I think we should investigate."

"Very well," said Mithulin, nodding his head in agreement, "we will observe from here for a while, and then, if whoever lives there seems friendly, we shall go to them. For all we know, they may even help us."

"I very much doubt it," said Lifandin with a disapproving tone.

Even as he spoke they saw a band of figures appear from the north, heading straight for the encirclement of wood and wire that kept the strange village cut off from the outside world.

Mithulin and his men hid themselves among a small clump of trees a mile or so from the new camp. The passing figures did not see them, and they watched from the safety of the wood until the dozen or so strangers passed through the fence by way of a gate.

"They were mostly men," said Ulin-Gail excitedly, "but there were some of the Sandinid with them too." His eyes were better than most of the men's and he had seen more detail than the others. Then he added, "The men seemed to lead the others as if they were prisoners."

Lifandin interjected, his voice almost threatening. "We must go from here. They are clearly not friendly. If they have taken those kindly people as their prisoners, then we would surely follow suit. Come, we must be gone from here before we are found."

Mithulin thought for a while, and then he said, "Very well, we will go from here, but I must know more of what goes on inside that place. Remember that I am King, and I will not tolerate any foul deed within my lands, whoever the perpetrator might be."

Then he began to explain a plan for their reconnaissance, but Ulin-Gail interrupted before he had said more than a few words.

"I will go," said the Amarin. "You clumsy men would give yourselves away in a trice. If I go on foot they will not hear me coming and I could spy out that place without them knowing I was there."

"It is too dangerous," replied Mithulin. "I cannot let you go alone." Then he thought for a moment to consider the possibilities. Finally he added, "Amortin will go with you, to see that you come to no harm."

The King's friend nodded, to show his approval of the plan.

Ulin-Gail was indignant. "But he will spoil everything. I can go with far greater stealth on my own."

Mithulin insisted though. "That is my command. There will be no arguments."

With that the soldiers and their leaders rode off to the south-west, taking two empty horses with them. Ulin-Gail and Amortin waited until the others were out of sight before they began their careful journey to the strange camp.

It took them only a few moments to reach the high encircling fence that surrounded the tiny group of huts. They went almost within touching distance of the barbed wire that reached up more than three times Amortin's height, and was topped with cruel looking spikes and blades.

As they went past they saw at last what was happening within the compound. There were large gatherings of the Sandinid, all standing grim and motionless. They looked ill-fed and badly treated, as if they had been herded together and kept here for a long time without food and attention. Ulin-Gail glimpsed some humans as he crept past. They were beating a few of the Sandinid and their captives were unable to prevent

it. Their hands and feet were tied and they looked pathetic and helpless against the cruel hands of their gaolers.

But there was nothing that could be done to help. At the gates were more men. One of them caught sight of Amortin, who was not very skilled at keeping himself hidden. When they realised that they were no longer safe, the two spies ran off as quickly as they could. The men within the camp did not take up the chase, but they called out after them, shouting for them to stop, and swearing and cursing when they took no heed.

A mile or so further on the two parties met again and Ulin-Gail described to the others what he had seen.

When Mithulin heard what was happening there, he spoke quietly. "It is an awful place," he said, with his head hung low in shame for the deeds that were done there. "When I have regained control of my army we will come here and free the Sandinid that are suffering at the hands of those men. I wish there was something that we could do now, but there are too many of them and we could not hope to win a battle against them. I fear that the Green Men would not be able to help themselves now, and we would have to fight alone."

"There is one more thing that I noticed," said Amortin quietly as he remounted his steed.

"Yes, what was it?" asked the King when his friend went silent.

The young man hesitated before replying. "The men wore the badges of your own army, Mithulin. I think that your father may have caused that place to be built."

At first the King said nothing, then his face began to redden with rage. "My father. My father." He shouted at the top of his voice. "My father was a good man, and you should watch your tongue Amortin, or else you may lose it." Then he swung his fist against the young man's chin and knocked him bodily from his horse.

Amortin landed with a crash on the hard ground, and he lay there for several minutes. The others sat upon the backs of their mounts and said nothing. Even Mithulin was silent until his friend stood at last, rubbing his head and wiping the streak of blood that oozed from his cut lip.

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," Amortin said quickly, trying to hide the anger that was within him.

But Mithulin had calmed by now, and he turned to his friend, offering his hand to help him up. "No, Amortin, it is I who should apologise. I was too swift to judge your words and I did not think before I dealt the punishment. If what you say is true, though I doubt that it can be, then I owe an apology to the Sandinid of far greater measure. Come, my friend, mount your horse and we will be away."

Then he laughed. "You may have the opportunity to return the blow one day, if I deserve it."

"I might do that," retorted Amortin, still tending his injured face, "I just might do that."

Ulin-Gail thought to calm the situation by playing a little music. He reached into his tunic to find his pipes, but they were not there.

"My pipes," he cried out, "my pipes are gone. They must have fallen from my pocket when we fled from those men. We have to go back. We have to find them."

Mithulin said to him, "We cannot go back. Now that those men have wind of us,

we must get away from here as quickly as we can." Then he smiled to Ulin-Gail. "When all this is over I will give you golden pipes that will make even sweeter music."

Ulin-Gail looked to the King with tearful eyes. "It is not for the music that I carry them," he replied, looking wistfully over his shoulder.

But there was nothing that could be done, though Ulin-Gail was not as happy as he had been, and they all missed his tuneful playing.

When they rode off again, Lifandin came alongside Mithulin and beckoned for him to pull away slightly, so that they might speak without being overheard. They turned to one side, away from the others, and the King signalled to Amortin that he would not be gone long.

When they were alone Lifandin looked about him suspiciously and then turned to Mithulin, speaking quietly in his most toadying voice.

"Your Majesty, I have been giving great thought to how we might overthrow both the army that is now in occupation of Oslar, and that of Queen Rolquin, who still threatens that land, and this."

"And how do you propose that we rid ourselves of those nuisances?" Mithulin asked sarcastically.

"You must not forget the powers of the Zim Farinid," reminded the young wizard. "We can do mighty acts that your own mind could not even imagine. Indeed, I have one such deed in my own mind at the present time. We could use it to conquer both your foes in one action, to kill two men with one arrow, so to speak."

Each time Lifandin stopped talking, Mithulin was forced to prompt him to say more.

"And how might we, or you, do that?"

"I have a spell," he said, even more quietly and slyly than before, "that would rock the very land itself. Such power has not been seen in this country since Ilis Clair formed the mountains many thousands of years ago. Not even the great earthquake that destroyed Glowist would rival the tremendous powers that I could unleash upon Falforn."

"And you could do this without harming either Oslar or Oronfal?"

Lifandin almost whispered into the King's ear. "Not a blade of grass would shake on this side of the River. It would be like any other day in your land, my Lord, but in Falforn it would be the end of all things."

Then he added in a hissing voice, "But there would, of course, be a price to be paid."

"And what might that be?" asked Mithulin.

"When the time is right," came the reply, "I will present my bill. But do not worry, Your Majesty, it will be a mere trifle compared to the wealth that you will gain on that day."

So Mithulin reluctantly agreed to the wizard's proposal and they returned to the others. Lifandin smiled with a broad grin, like a child rewarded with a special treat. But the King looked a little dubious and wore no happy expression.

When they had gone a little way further, Lifandin called that they should look across to the tree covered mountain slope not far to their left.

"King Mithulin," he shouted. "If you seek proof of my power, then look there." And he pointed at the peak not ten miles to their south.

Suddenly a great cloud of dust and smoke rose from the green ridge. As the twenty

six men and one Satyr watched in open mouthed amazement, the whole mountain side began to slide downwards at an alarming speed. Within a few moments the sound of the explosive force reached their ears in a deafening crescendo. They saw the tall, straight trees disappear by the thousand as the crumbling rock gave way beneath their roots. Boulders and debris flew in all directions and hundreds of birds, disturbed from their roosts in the leafy branches, began to wheel round and round in the darkening sky.

Then the great landslide slowed and stopped and the dust began to settle under its own weight, though it had risen high into the air. On the mountain side an enormous rift had appeared that was to scar its fertile side for years to come, but otherwise the land was unchanged and the ground beneath the travellers feet was as steady as it had ever been.

When at last all was still and the air was silent, Mithulin turned to Lifandin and said quietly, "I believe that you have the power to do as you say. But this is a weapon of ultimate destruction and it would be madness to use it against our fellow men, whatever their mistaken beliefs. We must use it to threaten them only, or else the guilt of our actions would hang forever around our necks."

"That is true," agreed Lifandin, staring into the King's eyes. "Yet it would be all the worse if that power was used against your own land."

Then they rode on in silence. Even Ulin-Gail did not speak for a long time after that.

The next day the riders came to Oronoman. They stopped here to survey the changes since they last visited that sorry place. They were relieved to find it a little better than they left it. The bodies that remained had been buried in a mass grave outside the palace grounds and a small stone had been set for each one, though none bore the names of those who lay there.

As the new King entered the Royal Palace he called the people that remained into the courtyard. When they had all gathered and were silent he spoke to them.

"I come now as your King," he said, trying to hide the emotion that grew within him. This was his first visit to his home since Theltiem's death. "My father is dead. He met his fate at the hands of the same evil beings that brought such death and destruction to this place. Yet there are even more difficult times ahead of us all. We now have two, perhaps even three enemies against which we must fight with whatever means are left to us. Queen Rolquin, I imagine, still waits to retake Oslar if the opportunity should occur. Our own army has turned against us and will not offer fealty to the throne. And the Nalesh, those vile creations that came here that terrible day, are still at large throughout the land.

"It is against those perils that we must now turn our attentions and see that we come to victory. I have with me friends that will help us in these tasks, and I ask that you treat them with the distinction that they deserve."

Then he left his people and went inside.

The palace itself had been repaired somewhat and Mithulin took up residence in what had been his father's chambers. His stomach trembled and tears welled in his eyes as he entered the bed chamber from where his father had been taken almost two weeks before. But he checked himself. These were his quarters now, and this was

his home. There was a job to be done, and quickly too.

So he sent a messenger to Oslar. The swiftest rider of his faithful men. He was to carry an open letter from the King of Oronfal, to his own men on Oslar, and to Queen Rolquin and her forces, which he presumed were still on the west bank of the Milfair.

The letter read, "To all my subjects who no longer remain loyal, and to Queen Rolquin of the Storm Land and the peoples of her realm.

"It is with deep regret that I find myself facing such opposition, at the outset of my reign in the land of Oronfal. With my own forces I have no argument, and cannot understand why there is such misunderstanding between us. To Queen Rolquin, I say only this. Though you may believe that your cause is just and right, Oslar is not your land alone and can never be taken by one side, away from the other. I cannot allow your army to march unopposed into the home of Ilis Clair and I believe it to be my duty to protect Her from the ruthless attacks of such evil forces.

"There shall be no more fighting between us, and to that end I give this ultimatum. Firstly, that all occupying forces must withdraw from Oslar and the lands immediately surrounding that island. Secondly, that all such armies should be disbanded within seven days from this date. Thirdly, that Ilis Clair should remain free of interference from any source, from all of the races of this land.

"If you do not comply with these terms I will have no alternative but to employ a weapon more terrible than any yet seen in this land. I cannot divulge what form this will take, but be warned that I have allies with the power to destroy the whole of Falforn with one blow. It would be folly to ignore this warning if you value your lives and your country."

The letter was signed, "Mithulin, King of Oronfal," and its carrier went with all haste to the westward lands.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After the battle on Oslar between the forces of Falforn and Oronfal, Queen Rolquin and her captains fell back to the west to consider their next move. The armies of men and dwarves pitched camp at the northern edge of the forest of Tar Gelfay and tended their wounded. The fight had not gone well for them and their ranks were reduced by half in the bloody exchanges.

When they had all rested a while, Rolquin called a meeting of her war council. Lairmath, Sharmek and Kirkmere came to her tent late in the evening and carefully went over their views of the battle.

Lairmath began first. "My cavalry performed to the best of their ability," he said proudly. "If you seek the cause of our defeat, Your Majesty, then you need look no further than our short friend here."

Sharmek almost exploded with anger. He jumped to his feet and looked as if he might strike Lairmath with his axe.

"This man seeks to shift the blame from his own head," shouted the dwarf. "Had it not been for his interference, my army would be standing on that bridge even now."

But Rolquin was displeased with both of them.

"Your armies were a shambles," she began, looking at each grim face in turn. "You allowed the men of Oronfal to walk calmly onto Oslar, with barely a challenge from our side. Lairmath, I will not forget that you were the captain in charge of this campaign. If you think I am foolish enough to trust you in future, then you will have to change your thoughts. And you, Sharmek. Your dwarves are more like children. I have seen young babes braver than the so-called warriors that you have brought north."

Sharmek stood as if to say something in reply, but thought better of it and quickly sat down again.

Rolquin continued with no less anger in her voice.

"From this moment on I will take personal charge of all our strategies. Your mistakes have cost us dearly, and we cannot afford to suffer in this way again. We must continue our fight against Theltiem and his evil ways, but now we will have to be more cunning. This is not the time for military might; we must use our brains in our defence and plan every move with stealth and precision.

"It is my intention to fight Theltiem from within his own ranks. If we can do that, then the war will be won for us, without Falforn losing another man."

The Queen sat again, waiting for the reaction from her captains. Lairmath spoke first in response to her oration. His voice was low and sounded shameful.

"Your Majesty, I agree that this day has not gone well for any of us, but how do you propose that we make our mark against Theltiem's army? If we do not have the power to mount a counter attack, then what can we do?"

Rolquin replied in a sly, almost witch-like tone. "We will send spies and subversives to twist the minds of those who control the land that is rightfully mine. The common soldiers will turn against their leaders, and the captains of the army will be driven away. It is the powers of persuasion and deceit that will be our allies in the next battle."

"What then of my dwarf folk?" asked Sharmek despondently. "I can see no part

in this for them.”

“Their time will come again,” said the Queen. “You must be patient until then.”

Then the four leaders made plans for the conquering of the Oronfal army. Though they were to make no use of sword or axe, they had weapons enough that could be used against the minds of their enemies.

In the days that followed, many men were chosen and trained as agents whose sole task was to gain the confidence of the enemy and divert their purpose from its true path. The spies were chosen for the quickness of their minds, and the eloquence of their tongues. There were some under Rolquin’s command who could use the power of their own minds to overcome others with weaker souls. These men were able to pass their secrets on to those who trained with them.

And when the training was done they set forth slowly, in ones and twos, for the island that lay so tantalisingly close, yet so difficult to reach. More than half of those who tried perished in the attempt. Some were drowned when their tiny boats sank in the raging river. Others were caught by the occupying forces and tortured before being put to death by slow, agonising methods. But none of them revealed his secret mission, or the ways in which he had been taught.

For the spies who did succeed in their clandestine journeys the task was easier than expected. They found that Mithulin had already left Oslar, and that the man he had left in charge was already dead. He had been killed by his own soldiers who were egged on by a stranger. Who that man was, nobody knew. He came and went in less than a day, but left death behind him, and a sense of rebellion in all of the men’s hearts.

Before very long the army on Oslar, which had once owed such allegiance to Mithulin and had fought so bravely against Queen Rolquin, was nothing but a shadow of its former self. The men and women who had given so much to save Illis Clair from what they saw as evil, now forgot their gallant aims and slowly began to drift away. They left in small groups to return to their homes. As far as they were concerned the fight was over, they had done their duty and were now free to resume their normal lives. None of them could tell that such freedom was an illusion and that they were still being controlled, but by more subtle means than the passions that had once raged within their own minds.

The combination of Rolquin’s subversion and the effects of the evil forces that still roamed unchecked was too much for any man to resist. Though the evil ways had at one moment revealed themselves as violence and anger, they temporarily gave way to the less obvious emotions of jealousy and fear. It was on such feelings that the spies of Falforn worked their trade, to bring the whole army to a slow and inevitable submission.

And so it was that on a dark, rain swept afternoon a messenger came to Rolquin. He was one of the spies who had done his job so well, and now he came to report that the mission was accomplished and that what remained of Mithulin’s army was disheartened and disorganised.

The man also carried a letter. It was tattered and dirty, but Rolquin could read it well enough. She studied it carefully for a few moments and then looked up at the messenger.

“Where is the man who brought this note?”

“He is dead, your Majesty.” He spoke apologetically, but a grin appeared on his cruel face. “He met with an accident as he crossed the bridge from Oronfal.”

Rolquin began to laugh in a hissing cackle that reddened her face like a Soylok berry. Then she stopped suddenly and said in a serious voice, “Mithulin makes idle threats while his army is in ruins. But this is a very poor joke.”

The messenger was silent for a moment, but then he said, “With respect, your Majesty, I do not think that Mithulin jokes at all. Before he died, the bearer of that letter spoke to me. He said that one of the Zim Farinid has allied himself to that upstart king, and it is he who poses this threat to you and your land.”

“Indeed,” remarked the Queen, speaking quietly to herself. “This is an interesting turn of events.” Then she turned to the messenger. “Be gone,” she said loudly, “I have need of peace and quiet.”

It had been Queen Rolquin’s intention to march on Oslar once more, as soon as she felt it was safe to do so. But the letter from King Mithulin had changed her plans. She thought that there was too much risk involved in such hasty action. If the threats that had been made were true then she would be very foolish indeed to take up arms again, even against what remained of the Oronfal army on the small island.

The ultimatum gave seven days in which to decide a response. There seemed to be only two alternatives open to the Queen. She could either comply with the demands, disband her army and give up all hope of retaking Oslar and defeating Mithulin. Or she could ignore the threat and continue with her original plan, though the consequences of such action might be dire.

For a long time Rolquin said nothing to her aides, but she remained quiet and thoughtful. It was a difficult choice for her to make. She had to decide whether it was all an elaborate bluff on her enemy’s part, or whether it might be true. If it were all true then her position was hopeless and she would be forced to surrender to Mithulin. Yet if he lied, and she fell for his deception, then she would lose not only the war, but also the faith of her subjects.

It seemed that whatever course she chose, there could be no sure victory for the west. For the moment the balance of power had been tipped in Mithulin’s favour, but Rolquin hoped that it would not be so for long.

Then suddenly there was a stroke of luck, if it truly was luck.

Two days after the messenger had come with the letter from King Mithulin, an old woman was found wandering close to the camp. She had seemed confused at first and the dwarves who found her tried to send her away, but she would not go. In the end they threatened her with their axes. But she was no mortal woman. The staff that she carried brought with it great power and she used that magic against her antagonists. With bolts of lightning she burned two of the soldiers to cinders, and then demanded to be taken to Queen Rolquin.

The Queen was alone in her tent when the guards brought the old hag into her presence. “Who is this vile creature?” asked Rolquin as the old woman stepped before her.

The soldiers did not answer. Instead the woman looked at their Queen with cold eyes and said, “My name is Kielmath, Keeper of the Book, and I have come to give

assistance to your cause.”

Immediately Rolquin seemed to understand what was happening. She signalled for the soldiers to leave and then beckoned Kielmath to sit with her.

The old woman’s face was wrinkled and grey and she wore a long, dark cloak. The staff that she carried was old and heavy, as though it belonged to someone of greater stature, but she carried it easily enough and had used its hidden power with authority against the dwarves just minutes before.

“Why have you come here, and now, when my need is so great?” asked the Queen. She knew who this old woman really was, and she was more than a little surprised to see her here, at just the time when she needed one of such mighty power to help in the war against the east.

“The Zim Farinid see many things,” the old woman replied. “We see far and near, into the future and into the past. When we perceive that the balance of power is changing, we must act to set things right. I am on the side of good, and I can see that you are too. Together we may conquer all the evils of this world, and reap the benefits for ourselves, before the men have time to realise what is happening to them.” She gave a knowing look to the Queen who sat beside her, and then Rolquin knew that her war was not yet lost.

The monarch took out Mithulin’s letter and handed it to Kielmath. The old woman read it quickly and then looked across at the Queen.

“Do you wish to have the same powers at your disposal?” she asked. “If we could threaten Oronfal with the same destruction that they promise for us, then we might overthrow them for good. They would not dare to carry out such a threat if it surely meant the end of their own land too.”

“Would you give me that power?” asked Rolquin, her voice trembling with the excitement that grew within her. To command such might was beyond even this Queen’s wildest dreams. It sent her blood racing to imagine the hold that she might have over her enemies, perhaps over all the people of the land.

The wizard-woman replied with an air of authority. “Have I not said that I am of the Zim Farinid? I hold more power than you can imagine, and I will use that power if you wish it.”

“Then I do wish it!” came the reply. “Together we can rule this whole world, and every creature in it would pay homage to us. What use is Ilis Clair when we can command such wonders ourselves.”

So Rolquin immediately sent a message to Mithulin, in reply to his earlier threats. In that letter she rejected fully his ultimatum and instead made her own counter-demands. These were that he should firstly relinquish all claim to Oslar, and secondly repay the wrongs that he had done to the Storm Land. She proposed that an area of his own land be annexed to Falforn as reparation for the death and injury caused by his illegal occupation of the island.

To support her demands Rolquin gave the same warnings that Mithulin had given. She said that she also held the power to destroy all of Oronfal and that she would not hesitate to use it if the need arose, or if provoked.

But there was a difference between the monarchs of the two countries, even though they were now locked in an unsteady equilibrium of impending total destruction. Mithulin had made his threats without the intention of ever using the awesome power that



Lifandin had put at his disposal. But Rolquin, with her heart more twisted by the evil powers, had every intention of taking up Kielmath’s offer, if the opportunity ever arose.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After sleeping the night through, and a good deal into the morning, Avarath and Holdin awoke to find Guinol, the Topil huntress, standing beside where they lay. She had brought them food and drink, which they both gladly took, and then she spoke to them as they ate.

"I think I know what truly brings you to these parts, Esilith. We too have heard tell of the battles and killing that rages amongst the men. It has been said that some madness grips the land, and all the creatures that live in it. Perhaps it is that evil which has taken so many of my kind too."

"That may be so," replied the old wizard, trying to sound cheerful between chewing mouthfuls of dry bread. "It is no common ailment that affects your fellows. It looks to me like a plague brought here by a stranger to the land. Has there been anyone else here of late, a man perhaps, or a creature that you have not seen before?"

Guinol thought for a moment, then she said slowly, "Yes, there was one. A young man. He came upon us by chance, or so he said, but he did not stay long. We did not bring him into the burrow, but we gave him a little food and set him on the right path."

"And what was his name, do you remember?" asked Avarath.

"If he had a name, I did not hear it," the young Topil replied, still searching the recesses of her mind for any clue that might help her guest. Then she added, "But he did say that he was a farmer from Morath, in Oronfal. I remember we were all puzzled as to why he should be so far from home."

"Indeed," said Avarath, thinking deeply, "it is a mystery, and no mistake."

Then Holdin asked the Topil a question.

"You spoke of battles between men, Guinol. Do you know any more about that?"

"Only a little," she replied. "We keep away from the workings of your race. They have done us no good in the past and I doubt that they will in the future."

Holdin would have hung his head in shame for the ignorance of his people and the injustices that they had done, but he was anxious for news.

Guinol continued. "There was a great battle on Oslar, fought, it is said, for the ownership of Ilis Clair."

Avarath interrupted with a tone of anger in his voice.

"No-one can own Ilis Clair," he said quickly, almost shouting. "She has her own masters and no mortal creature can hope to replace them."

Both Holdin and Guinol looked at the Zim Farinid with puzzled expressions. This was the first time that anyone had mentioned Ilis Clair as being the tool of some other superior race. It seemed that Avarath had let slip a secret that he should have kept, even during these dark times.

He pretended that he had said nothing, and motioned for Guinol to continue.

She told them all that she knew of the war that had raged above them, but that was very little.

"There is an alliance between the men and dwarves, and they have been fighting under the banner of Queen Rolquin against King Theltiem of Oronfal. There have been many skirmishes in the past weeks, and just a few days ago a great battle took place near Ilis Clair's own home. The island was taken by Theltiem's men and it is

they who hold it even now, though to what purpose I cannot say. But we have heard only rumour, and what I tell you might not be the whole truth. That you will have to discover for yourselves."

Avarath was silent in thought for a while when Guinol stopped speaking. Holdin looked to his friend for guidance and waited for his command.

At last the old man came to his decision. "Holdin, you and I must go at once to Glowist. I have urgent business that can be best conducted from that place. There we will be safe and comfortable, at least for a time, and we may begin our true fight against the evil forces that are loose in this world."

Then he gathered his cloak about him and prepared to leave, but Guinol took his arm.

"Wait," she said, "you cannot go yet. The rains have not stopped, and the Hunters will want to see you before you go."

"Then you must apologise to them for me. I have need of great haste, and to tarry here would be foolish. As for the rain. Well, I was wet before, so it will not hurt me now. I cannot take heed of my own comforts when the future of all this land may be at stake."

"Then may I come with you," the Topil woman pleaded. She seemed to have an urge to help Avarath with his tasks. A feeling of adventure and excitement overwhelmed her and she felt the desire to do something constructive, to help her own people and the other races of her land.

"No," replied Avarath forcefully, "you must stay here and help to guard your own home. Beware of any stranger, and protect yourselves against the evil creatures that will come here by both day and night. There will be no rest for you and your kind until this foul time is over. You must spread the word among your own people, that is the task I set you."

With that he sped away, upwards through the tunnels and caves of the Topil burrow. Holdin followed as quickly as he could, but Guinol was left behind, disappointed at the small part she was left to play in the overall scheme of things. But she did not realise that she too had an important role in the fight against evil, though it had not yet begun.

Avarath and Holdin Belanshar quickly walked the dozen or so miles to Glowist. The rain eased a little and eventually stopped, but the sky was still filled with black clouds which looked down at them ominously. However, they soon came to the foothills that surrounded the mountain of Molaktar and before nightfall they reached the ruins of the old house.

They passed through the unseen defences that the wizard had left in his stead. Any other man would have been repelled by the invisible barrier, but Holdin went through without a thought for the spell that his companion had cast behind him as they left for Ormead many days before.

The sun had just set to the left of the mountain peak when they entered the den that Avarath had made for himself amongst the ruins and rubble. It looked unchanged in all the time that they had gone. The old chest still stood in its corner, and the table and two chairs were exactly as they had left them.

They rested for a short time and Avarath produced some food which they eagerly ate together. Holdin hoped to sleep for a while, but his expectations were broken by what the wizard had to say to him.

"I must leave you for a while now," said the old man, "but in mind only. My body will remain here while I am gone. I may seem as if dead to you, as I did on the road from Clarooth, but I will not be so. My mind will be far away, with Ilis Clair on her island in the river, but I cannot take these flesh and bones with me." He looked down at himself and shrugged his arms with a show of disappointment.

"So you must guard them, with your life if necessary. If anything should happen while I am gone, then perhaps it would be the end for us all. And with my staff gone, I cannot protect either of us with magic. We must both trust to your sword alone, and luck, if we may have any."

Holdin was a little dumbfounded by his master's words, but he promised to do his best.

"I will guard you as well as I can. You will be safe as long as I live."

Then the soldier unsheathed his sword to prove his loyalty. Avarath lay down on the floor and seemed to fall into a deep sleep. But he said nothing, and made no sound. His eyes did not close and his breathing stopped.

Holdin waited for a moment, looking all around him for anything that might be unusual or amiss. Then he looked closely at Avarath. For a moment a panic of terror gripped him. He wanted to run, to get away from the strange happenings and the magic, and the evil. But the feeling soon passed and he settled with his back to his friend, but constantly turning his head this way and that to survey what he could see of the surrounding area. They were quite well enclosed within the ruins, but he could see for some distance through the gaps in the piled rubble that formed walls around them.

He lit a small fire and it burned with a crackling flame and a billowing column of smoke that climbed high into the darkening sky above him. Then he thought of the attraction that this would be to passing strangers, whether friend or foe. So he quickly extinguished it and sat instead in the pitch darkness of the open night.

All appeared peaceful and calm at first, and Holdin had great difficulty in keeping awake. He tried singing to himself, but his voice was croaky and he could not remember enough words to keep his own interest. Then he spoke aloud for a while. There was a poem that came into his mind, though he could not say why, so he recited it to the quiet emptiness that surrounded him.

"South of Rostar, North of Monar,
Deep and hollow, hot and dry.
Lies the power of the morning,
And the fire of the night.
"Close to Fathan, near Harvena,
In the eastern lands of old,
Stands an icon of past ages
In the moonlight, dark and cold."

For some reason the two simple verses stuck in his mind for all the hours of the night. The words rang round and round inside his head, confusing him with their unknown meaning. He did not know where he had heard them before, nor why they should come to him now, but they helped to keep him awake through the darkest part of the night.

Just before dawn, when his strength was at its lowest ebb, and his mind was befuddled with tiredness, he thought that he heard strange noises. But he could not be sure.

It sounded a little like animals moving around close by, but he could see nothing in the pitch blackness that surrounded him. But it reminded him of his first encounter with the Nalesh and he was afraid of what might be stirring in the dark, where he could not see.

He could not even see his own hands in front of him, or the sword that he gripped with dread and fear. He suddenly became more alert, straining his eyes and listening carefully. It became quiet again. He reached behind to reassure himself of Avarath's safety. The old man was cold to the touch. Holdin pulled the grey cloak closer about his prostrate body, so that it should keep him a little warmer.

Belanshar thought that the night would never end. He began to ache with stiffness, and his eye lids were so heavy that he could barely keep them apart. He had not expected Avarath to be gone for so long, and he did not know what was happening to the old man. For all he knew the wizard could be dead already, and he might be guarding his body for no reason. He began to wonder how long he should wait before leaving the old man.

But Avarath had said he might appear to be dead. There was no use in doubting his words. Holdin would simply have to trust him, and do the work that he was bade, whatever price there might be to pay.

When the sun began to rise that morning it brought an awful sight to Holdin's eyes. Just a short distance away a horde of Nalesh had gathered in the darkness. They sat unmoving in the dim half-light, staring with wild eyes across the short divide between them and the man that guarded his companion so closely. They looked hideous in the grey dimness, and their short figures cast long shadows across the old stones of the ancient building.

Holdin froze with horror. He thought of those vile creatures sitting in that place all through the night, and a cold shiver ran along the length of his spine.

But he did not have long to consider his situation. As the sun slowly rose, increasing its illumination of the scene with every passing moment, the band of evil beings began to move closer. They came slowly at first, creeping forward on hands and feet. It seemed that they did not realise Holdin could actually see them. Perhaps they had been waiting for first light to make their attack, and they did not know that a man's eyes were as good as their own. But if that was the case, how could they have come so quietly in the blackness of night?

Immediately Holdin stood up, raising his sword in anger towards them. The tiredness that he had felt only moments before was gone now. His blood raced through his body, and every sense was suddenly alert to the impending attack.

Then the Nalesh rushed towards him. They had to pick their way between the piled boulders and rubble that surrounded Avarath's small den, and they reached Holdin almost singly. At first his task seemed comparatively easy. He was able to cut them down with his sword as quickly as they reached him. Their vile bodies fell this way and that and their stinking blood flowed down the crumbling paths that lay beneath their feet.

Holdin quickly became tired though, and the Nalesh did not ease their attack for a long time. Their small swords and knives darted this way and that as Holdin fought bravely to beat them back, but he gave no thought for his own safety. All the while the protection of Avarath was his only concern and he used his sword, hands and

feet to beat the overrunning hordes away. His sharp blade made quick work of their soft flesh, and he pushed the dead and dying to one side as still more came for him from all directions.

Eventually the attack slowed and stopped. Either there were no Nalesh left, which Holdin doubted, or they considered themselves beaten for the time being.

The respite gave Holdin time to rest and drink a little from his water bottle. Then he cleared the spriggans' bodies from around Avarath and looked about him to see the lie of the land. From the top of a broken column he could see for some distance around their camp. There was no sign of any more of the Nalesh and all was quiet as far as he could tell.

Avarath lay in his trance for several more hours after that. Holdin stayed at his side for all this time, never easing his vigil and constantly on the look-out for more attacks. But there were none, and the morning passed peacefully.

At around noon, Avarath suddenly sat up, rubbed his eyes a little and then spoke to Holdin as though he had never left his side.

"I see that you have done a good job in my absence," he said, looking at the Nalesh bodies nearby.

Belanshar jumped with fright on hearing the familiar, gruff voice behind him. When his heart stopped pounding he said, "Yes, they came during the night, but I managed to keep them at bay for a while. Still, they might be back at any time."

"No, they will not come back here," the wizard shook his head. "I have seen to it that our camp is safe again. But you have done well. I shall reward you now by telling you a story."

"A story sounds like small reward for such a task," replied the soldier, though he said it with a smile.

The old wizard said cunningly, "But this is no ordinary story, for you will be the only man in all this land to know the Truth."

So the Zim Farinid began his tale and Holdin Belanshar listened intently without a word of interruption.

"Long, long ago," the old man began, as if it was a story for children, "there was a race with a far greater power and intellect than any of us could imagine. They surpassed even the Zim Farinid in their wisdom and skill. You would call them gods, but they did not see themselves in that way. Instead, they called themselves inventors and experimentors. Together they worked to produce what we would consider to be miracles. Their powers knew no bounds and they were constantly searching for the truths that were hidden in their own world, as we are searching now to save ourselves from evil.

"They were a kindly race, and good for the most part, but the more that they developed their own magical skills, the further they seemed to wander from the path of nature and truth. With every step they found themselves deeper into such mysteries that they could not fathom, and every answer would bring a thousand new questions to torment their minds.

"So they tried to break away from their past history, to create a new world, peopled with new races that would grow and develop into a paradise of salvation for themselves. They found a place for these new creations and they sent an emissary from their world into it. She was fashioned in their own likeness, and took a name from their language.

I cannot pronounce that word in a form that you would understand, but you know her by the name that men gave her. Ilis Clair she is called now, and she was the first seed of the new world that grew around her.

"Soon after Ilis Clair came to your world, the Zim Farinid followed. We were formed in the image of the races that were yet to come, and our task was to prepare the land to receive the children of Ilis Clair. We were given many tools and weapons with which to work, but the magical powers that the great ones bestowed upon us were the most useful.

"Between us all we refashioned the land to a form that would be hospitable to the delicate creatures that followed. We made the mountains and the river, planted the forests and the grasses and provided food enough for all the animals that were yet to come. But there were already many different kinds of creatures living in the land. These were vile, uncouth forms that had wandered wild and aimless for uncountable years. These we banished to another place; our orders were that no creature should die in the creation of the new world. And so we brought peace and order to a place that had been untamed since the beginning of time.

"When all that was done, Ilis Clair brought forth the Men, Dwarves, Amarin and the rest of the thinking beasts. Some of those races have perished since. They were unsuitable for the lives that had been set for them, and they passed away naturally, as the great ones had intended all things should be. Others of the races thrived and multiplied, the men being the most successful. They formed themselves into alliances, and their societies developed into the advanced civilizations that we know today.

"I have already mentioned Kielmath. Indeed, you have seen her once, though not as I remember her. She was one of the leading Zim Farinid. It was her task to collate all the details of how each task was done, to record the magic and the forces that had been used in the creation of the land and its people. So she locked herself away in her home beneath Artoros and wrote a book. Then she sealed it away in a place where no mortal could reach, and there it has lain ever since.

"Within Kielmath's book lie all the secrets of this land, and if it were ever taken into the wrong hands then we would all be doomed. If someone of great wisdom and evil intent should read those pages, then all the good works could be undone in a single day. Once the spell is made, then it can be unmade in the same way. That would be a dark day indeed for us all, and I am none too sure that it has not already passed."

Then Avarath fell silent, leaving Holdin stunned and enthralled, shocked and awestricken, all at the same time. He felt honoured that the wizard should confide such secrets in him, yet he did not fully understand his reasons for doing so. But the truth was astounding and from that day he could never be the same again. For him to be the only man to know such things would change his life forever, and he realised that he had an important part to play in the conquest of the evil that was now rife in the land of Avarath's tale.

Eventually Holdin asked a question. "Then what is our part in all this?"

"Well Holdin," Avarath said, "we have a difficult, perhaps impossible task ahead of us. To complete it we will have to recruit aid from others throughout the land. The kings and captains of every nation must come to our assistance, or else they,

and us, will perish in the catastrophe that may follow. We must enlist the help of the Four Elements. We must find three of them, and then take them to the fourth. There I can enter the other world and call the evil to me.

"In the distant past, before the coming of men, the Zim Farinid banished all the wild things that were in this land, as I have already said. Guin-Math was the third member of the Assembly of Three. It was he who went into the other world to call the evil ones to him. But for him it was the ultimate sacrifice. From that moment on he was doomed to an eternity of captivity. There could be no escape for Guin-Math without releasing all the forces that he had striven to contain for these thousands of years. Yet this might be what has happened. His mind may have been twisted by the unimaginable torture of that imprisonment, perhaps until he could bear it no more. I think he is releasing the evil gradually into our world in an effort to free himself from that awful place.

"But it was not just the creatures that we banished. With them we also sent the evil forces and emotions that would have plagued us all throughout the years that followed. Anger, Greed, Hatred, Jealousy and Pride were all removed from this world and taken to another place from which we thought they could not escape. Of course, a little of each evil was left behind. A man cannot function if he does not know the meaning of both good and evil. But the tiny forces that were left were nothing compared to the vast powers that we captured.

"Well now they have been released from that place and we are suffering the consequences. I must go to that half world, to take Guin-Math's place, and call the evil to me from within its bounds. We must find the entrance to that hell and I shall enter it, and finish the job that was started so long ago. But first we must find my staff and rescue Kielmath from the terrible power that has overwhelmed her great mind."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After Rolquin sent her letter of challenge to Mithulin, she told her followers of her plans. She guessed that the King of Oronfal would not dare to use the powers that he had obtained through his Zim Farinid friend, whoever it might be. She knew Mithulin, though not as well as his father, and she suspected that his mild nature would prevent him from using further force. So she decided to wait a short time, to allow her message to reach its destination, and then she would act.

In the meantime she told Lairmath and Sharmek to prepare their armies to move.

"We shall march unopposed to Oslar," she said to her captains, "but we will not stop there this time. We will go on eastward, to Oronoman itself, to the very home of Mithulin and his line. There will be no resistance to us, and I deem that his threats are just the empty rantings of one who is doomed to failure.

"Tomorrow we will set forth for Oslar, and the glory of victory will be ours once more. But this time it will be the final victory. There will be no enemy when we have finished our next battle."

So Lairmath and Sharmek departed to prepare for the march, and any battle that they might join along the way. They had not forgotten their old differences, but now they were working together in the knowledge that there would be no more defeat for either of their races. Dwarves and Men would rule the world together from now on. This was to be their finest hour.

When night came, great black clouds rolled in from the west, and the sky grew darker and darker. By midnight the whole air was filled with a darkness that seemed to hide everything. Not even the camp fires that burned brightly could penetrate into the black mist that enveloped the two armies. It was icy cold, and quiet. Not even the slightest breeze blew and all sound was muffled by the damp, heavy air.

When dawn finally came, late and dim, Lairmath, Sharmek and Rolquin left their tents to prepare for the days events. But each was greeted by a sight that defied belief.

The three leaders stood together by the forest at the river's edge. But their armies were gone. Not a single soldier, man or dwarf, was left where once there had been thousands. Their tents remained, and some of their weapons. The camp fires still smoked where they had been left to burn out, and the cavalry horses were tied in their quarters, abandoned by their riders in the night. Yet not a soul stood where there should have been a great mass of fighting warriors.

Kielmath had gone too. She was not in her tent and there was no sign of her. Everyone had vanished without trace.

The Queen and her captains looked about them in disbelief and dismay. Then they looked into each others eyes and they realised that they had been wrong. They knew that Ilis Clair had taken the armies from them and that every move they had made until now was as a result of the evil influences that had taken control of them.

Lairmath hung his head in shame at the thought of the destruction and the killing that had been committed in the name of right and good.

Sharmek remembered what his dwarves had done. They had massacred innocent people and started a war that had killed many more.

He turned to Rolquin and said in a quiet, unsure voice, "I do not understand. What

has brought us all to this? Why have we strayed so far from the teachings of Ilis Clair and the peace that there was in this land?"

But the Queen had no answers for him. A tear rolled slowly down her face, and all that she could say was, "We must repay our people for the wrongs that we have done. We must repay them."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mithulin was sat upon his throne in Oronoman, with Amortin and Lifandin to his left and right, when two messengers came. One was from the King's own army, but the other was one of Rolquin's men. He had been brought under guard with a sealed letter from his Queen which, he said, could only be opened by Mithulin's hands.

The young King took the paper and broke the red wax seal that held it closed. He read the words slowly and carefully, but his face did not betray any feelings as he did so. Then he handed the letter to Lifandin.

"This does not surprise me," he said in a low whisper. Then he turned to the man from Falforn and said loudly, "You may go now. Tell your Queen that I have received her message and she shall have my reply 'ere long."

With that the soldier from the west turned away and left the room.

The man from Mithulin's own army remained, however, and he waited until the other was gone before speaking to his ruler.

"Sire, there is more news. The army that was yours, that we left on Oslar, is all but gone now. Since the battle they have slowly withdrawn. They have mostly gone back to their homes, deserting their posts when there were no true leaders left to command them. The way would be clear for you to go to Ilis Clair, if you so desire. Rolquin's army is still in her land, but it may not remain there for long. I would advise you make all haste if you wish to speak with the Statue again."

The King smiled at the news, though he realised that it was not all good. He motioned for the soldier to take his leave, and then he turned to Amortin. There was a sense of impatience in his voice and his friend knew what to expect.

"We must leave at once. Find Ulin-Gail and tell him to meet us at the stables, I want to get to Ilis Clair before Rolquin realises there is no more resistance to her."

Lifandin looked up from the letter that he had been studying for some time. He turned to Mithulin and, with a menacing tone in his voice, said, "Do you want me to destroy her army before she has the chance to act?"

"No," snapped the King in quick reply. "There has been enough killing for now. If we can reach Ilis Clair without incident then we may see an end to this foolish war without the need for more bloodshed."

"Very well," was all that Lifandin replied, though he spoke with a disappointed tone. Then he walked slowly from the room, like a child who has been chastised for what he believes to be no good reason.

Amortin turned to his friend and whispered, "I feel there is something evil about Lifandin. I have not fully trusted him from the start and he does not seem like a true Zim Farinid. He is too war-like, and he seems to delight in the suffering of others. I thought the old wizards were men of peace, or so they were in the old stories."

"Yes, I agree," said Mithulin, "but he has served me well for all that, and I owe him a debt for his aid."

The two men spoke no more about their misgivings. Amortin went to find Ulin-Gail and Mithulin set off for the stables.

By the time all four travellers met again, their horses were saddled and ready, and they immediately set off on the road to Oslar. They carried with them a small tent

and supplies enough for several days in the field.

Mithulin hoped to spy out the lie of the land when they reached their goal, and even perhaps to parley with the enemy if the opportunity arose. It seemed that there was no hope left in military power, and careful negotiation might be the only escape from the deadlock in which both sides now found themselves. But he took no army with him, partly because there was none left to speak of, and partly because he wished to go quietly and without any show of force.

So they rode quickly westwards towards the great river. They had not gone far when dusk began to fall and huge, dark clouds appeared from the west. The sky became as black as pitch and a heavy mist rolled in. Soon they could see very little ahead of them.

Mithulin decided that they should stop and make camp for the night, though he had intended to continue riding for as long as they could. They erected the tent and Mithulin, Amortin and Ulin-Gail took turns at keeping watch during the night.

At first all was quiet and Mithulin took the first turn as watch-man. Soon after midnight Amortin took his place, and when he had been sitting awake by the glowing camp fire for an hour or so, an eerie cry rang out across the plain. It sounded like a great bird calling for its mate, or perhaps the hunting cry of a wild dog.

Mithulin, Ulin-Gail, and Lifandin all awoke with a start as the strange noise repeated over and over again in the blackness of the night.

"What demon was it that made that sound," whispered Mithulin to Amortin as he emerged from the thin canvas.

"I do not know," replied his friend, gripping the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheath it at a moment's notice. "I could see nothing in the darkness, but there is some beast out there, and not far away either."

The call came again a few more times, and then went silent. The four companions breathed a short sigh of relief. For some reason they felt that the danger had receded, but they were very wrong.

Suddenly, from the blackness that surrounded them, a creature came running. It was dark and hairy, like a great bear, but with shining white fangs and long, razor-like claws. It did not seem intent on attacking them. It acted as if it was scared for its own life, perhaps fleeing from something even more awful that pursued it across the flat land.

The monster paid no heed to the men that stood in its way. With a great hand the size of a man's chest, it pushed Mithulin from its path as if he were a toy. Then it leapt over the camp fire that burned with small, dim flames, and fell with a crash on top of Amortin. The creature went quickly past Ulin-Gail and Lifandin and then disappeared into the dark night as quickly as it had come.

When the others had recovered from the surprise and gathered their wits about them, they turned quickly to where Amortin lay on the cold ground. The young man did not move and there was blood flowing from his head and his body. His limbs were twisted and broken and he seemed more dead than alive.

"Quickly," said Ulin-Gail with an uncharacteristic tone of authority, "carry him into the tent where I can see his wounds more clearly."

So Mithulin and Lifandin picked up their companion and took him into the dimly lit tent. They lay him on a mat and the Satyr began to attend to him. Mithulin crouched beside them with tears welling in his eyes.

"He must not die. He must not die," he kept repeating. Even when his father had died he had not felt the pain that he felt now within his heart. In those few moments he remembered all the time he had spent with his friend. The games they played when they were children, the arguments they had had as young men, and even the time just a few days before when Mithulin had struck Amortin for no good reason. His mind became clouded with fear and anguish and he could hardly see or hear what was going on around him.

Ulin-Gail began whispering quietly. "If only I had my pipes. If only I had my pipes," he repeated over and over again.

Lifandin stood above them and said, "If you do not want him to die then let me tend him. I can use my magic to save his life, Mithulin, but first there is a bargain that we must strike."

Then the young wizard stepped outside and the King followed him.

Mithulin spoke with a wavering voice, "You must do whatever you can, Lifandin."

"Very well," came the unfeeling reply, "but now is the time for you to repay that debt you owe me. Then we shall all be even."

"I will give you anything," said the king, trying to hurry him on.

Lifandin produced a small document from his pocket. "Then sign this paper," he said, "and I will save your friend."

Mithulin took the parchment from the other man's hand and read it quickly. When he had finished he said, "But this is madness, Lifandin. I cannot promise Harvena to you. That land belongs to the Amarin and it is not mine to give. This is blackmail."

"Then your friend will die."

Lifandin fixed his stare on the King and some of his magical power was radiated against the young man.

Mithulin signed the paper and put his seal at its base. Then he sat upon the ground and hung his head in shame for what he had done.

Lifandin went into the tent and ordered Ulin-Gail outside. The Amarin joined the other man by the camp fire, saying "I could have helped Amortin. My pipes have powers of healing, I could have helped him."

But Mithulin's reply puzzled the Satyr.

"Forgive me," was all that the King said. Tears rolled down his face in anguish for his friend and the wrong that he had done to all of them.

They waited in silence for a long time as the night grew even darker and time wore slowly on. When at last the first light of dawn began to glow on the horizon, Mithulin turned to his companion with a look of anger.

"What is keeping Lifandin so long," he said bitterly.

Then he stood up and went into the tent to see what was happening.

Amortin's body lay on the ground, cold and grey as if he had been dead for some hours. In his chest there lay a long, silver knife which had pierced his heart and taken the last drops of life-blood from his ruined body.

Mithulin said nothing, but he fell at his friend's side crying and shouting curses after Lifandin, who was nowhere to be seen.

"You will pay for this," he called. "You will pay with your life, Lifandin, whether you be a Zim Farinid or not."

Then Ulin-Gail said quietly, "There is a note here, addressed to you Mithulin."



“Read it,” snapped the King.

“Very well.” He took up the paper and read it aloud, slowly. “To the foolish King of Oronfal. Do not follow me. To do so would bring you a fate equal to that of your simple friend. I have taken your seal, so remember that while I have it, I also have a power over you, Mithulin. You will never be able to harm me for I am Lifandin, the new King over all the land.”

But Mithulin did not seem to listen, for he grieved over his comrade and he did not move or speak for a long time.

When at last Mithulin regained his senses, he and Ulin-Gail covered Amortin’s body with stones. It was a simple grave at the roadside. The Satyr sang a song of mourning for the brave soldier, and then the two companions set off once again for their destination.

They had to walk since the horses had gone in the night. Whether Lifandin had taken them, or the beast had frightened them away, they did not know. It made the going slower, but Mithulin was determined to go on, and Ulin-Gail followed him wherever he led.

Mithulin had expected there to be at least a little resistance to them when they reached Oslar, but the whole place was deserted. Only Ilis Clair stood at the island’s centre, but there was not another living soul. There were plenty of signs of life. Half eaten food littered the ground, and some fires still glowed, but no people met the King

as he walked onto the land amidst the fast flowing river.

To the west they could still see the camp of Rolquin’s army. It had changed very little since Mithulin left all those days ago. Perhaps it had grown slightly, but it had not moved and there seemed to be no movement within it either.

They were both very puzzled, but the King did not concern himself too much with such minor points. Instead he went straight to the great Statue and greeted her as he had done before, except that now he was King of Oronfal.

“Ilis Clair, it is I, Mithulin, son of Theltiem. I have come to seek more knowledge and to find answers to questions that have been set before me since we last spoke.”

The Statue looked down on him and said in her soft voice, “I am sorry about your father.”

Mithulin thought for a moment about all the deaths there had been of late. That of his father seemed insignificant compared to the others he had caused through his own stupidity or ignorance.

He continued to speak. “I must thank you Ilis Clair, for the news that brought me to my father’s side before he died. But as he passed away, he told me to come back to you, and to ask you about The Key. He said that it was of great importance, and would help us in our fight against evil.”

“Yes,” replied Ilis Clair, “I have been waiting for you to come. Listen, and I will tell you of your part in these things.

“Long ago there was a book, written to hold all the secrets of this land, and the spells that were used in its creation. The book was made by the Zim Farinid and locked with a key so that the knowledge that remained within it would be safe for all time. Then the book was hidden in the pyramid of Amarnil, and the key was set into my own base. Look there now and you will find it.”

Mithulin looked at the white stone of Ilis Clair’s plinth. As he watched, a secret door opened and revealed a small compartment which had stayed hidden from sight for thousands of years. The King looked inside. It seemed empty. He put his hand into it and felt all around the cold stone with his fingers.

Then he looked up at the Statue with dismay and said, “It is empty, Ilis Clair. There is nothing there, not a key, nor even a speck of dust”

Ilis Clair was silent for a moment, then she said, “Are you sure, Mithulin?”

He looked again, even more carefully than before.

“I am sure,” he said.

Again the Statue was quiet for a moment, then she said, “In that case, Mithulin, I set you this task. You must find the one who has that key and bring it back safely to me. You must not rest until your quest is completed, for if it is not done then the consequences will be dire for all the races in this land.”

Mithulin thought for a moment and then said, “And what if the same person who has the key also has the book of which you spoke.”

As Ilis Clair considered this point the ground almost shook beneath her. Even she dreaded to hear such news.

“Then you will need all the help you can find,” she said, ‘including that of the Zim Farinid.’”

“Then that will be my task,” said Mithulin. Then he turned to Ulin-Gail and said, “Will you come with me?”

"Yes, I will come," replied the Satyr, and they began to walk away, though neither knew how they would complete their quest, or where they should even begin. But at least it was a start in the right direction, and they felt happier to be working for good at last, instead of evil.

When they had gone a few paces Ilis Clair called after them.

"You must go to Glowist," she said, "you will find friends there."

Mithulin looked at Ulin-Gail.

"Do you know the way?" he asked.

"I do," came the reply. Then Ulin-Gail began to sing, and they both stepped forward with lighter hearts than either had had for many a day. The quest had begun.

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'In this book I have put the things,
That man and beast would most demand,
To keep them from the prying eye,
And wrest them from the grasping hand.
But in this book there lies a trap...

'The Silver Key turned quietly between the young girl's fingers and the book fell open at its first page.'

So it was that the age long captivity of evil ended at the hands of an innocent young girl. In the weeks that followed, two Kingdoms found themselves thrown into chaos, their Monarchs overcome by the all pervading forces that had been banished from the land long ago. Even the most benevolent of races could not withstand the onslaught of death and destruction. The Wizards who had shaped the land were almost powerless now, and their own god had become the centre of a bloody struggle for power that threatened the very existence of the land itself. Who can conquer the evil that lurks in the Shadow of the Unicorn?

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