

The sun's rays flickered through the highest reaches of the leafy boughs, then died. Dusk descended over the glade where Kaer rested. Only his eyes showed movement. Motionless, he remained, cooled by the scented air drawn in from the surrounding woodland. Matters of great importance occupied his mind. He had recovered the Shintae, the long-lost Stone of Power. His long years of search and hardship had been worth the sacrifice; the end of his mission was within his grasp.

His mind wandered as he fingered the short sword at his side. Memories of deeds done and enemies slain, far away in the west among the mountains of Cantae, were vivid in his thoughts. On the ground beside him lay his trusty bow, an old and valued friend. It had saved him on many occasions beyond the edges of civilisation. The young man stooped to gather the weapon from the still warm ground. Close by, a solitary timber-framed cabin stood. He turned towards it, content that, if only for a single night, he would sleep in his own home.

Although darkness had fallen, Kaer could picture the building, built with his own sweat and toil – its heavy planked walls and angular straw-thatched roof, supported by wooden cross-members. Shutters covered the narrow openings cut into the walls. An arched doorway led into the first of three large rooms, with several smaller chambers at the rear. Highly intricate carvings and multi-coloured tapestries decorated the internal walls. A variety of woven and deep-furred rugs lay scattered over the wooden floors. Most of all, he recalled the stone fireplace in the main living area; and how, on winter days, a

roaring blaze spread warmth to everyone inside. Even on a warm summer's evening, it felt good to remember such days.

With this thought in mind, Kaer moved round the cabin towards its doorway. To his surprise, it stood open. He ran his fingers around the opening, where he found the door frame's shattered remains. Alert, for a moment or two, he listened to the sounds of the night, but could detect nothing untoward. Satisfied he was alone, he removed a tallow-lamp from his pack. Using his tinderbox, he succeeded in lighting the wick. With eyes shielded from the glare, he stepped over the remains of the door. Earlier thoughts of triumph faded as he gazed at the scene of destruction that greeted him. Weary, he wandered from room to room. It was evident that, during his lengthy absence, someone had ransacked the entire building.

A native of the forestlands of Marae, at a fraction under six feet in height, Kaer stood tall for his race. Long brown hair flowed down to touch the top of his broad shoulders. Weather-beaten cheeks faded into a wide hairless chin. Piercing blue eyes gazed out from beneath broad eyebrows that angled down towards a finely chiselled nose. Because of constant travel, his well-worn clothes were faded and stained. A creased brown tunic, hanging limply from a slightly hunched back, covered the upper part of his torso. The garment blended into the surrounding woodland, as did his deerskin trousers. A pair of stretched-hide moccasins covered his feet. His grass-coloured cloak lay beside the pack he had rested on the floor beside him.

He leant against a wall, his senses dulled by fatigue. Had this been otherwise, Kaer would have moved on. In doing so, his story might have had a much different ending. Too tired to think with any clarity, he slid to the floor. His head nodded once, twice, thrice. Moments later his eyes closed. He fell into a deep but troubled sleep.

Some time later, in the small hours, those who had wreaked the damage to his home returned. This band of savage mountain men, warriors from Cantae, was skilled in the art of the hunt. They moved

silently. Taller than the average forest dweller, their black hair, long and dirty after months of travel, hung down their backs. Their black rooted unkempt beards, dyed ginger as their customs dictated, had grown to reach their chests. Over muscular frames, they wore tunics of dark grey. These garments, woven from rough and crudely spun yarn, blended more readily into the rocky mountainsides than the forests below. Their thick-hide trousers were heavy and cumbersome in the heat of summer on the lower ground.

The antithesis of the forest dwellers who, overall, lived peaceable lives, these inhabitants of the mountains had evil embedded in both heart and mind. A single glance into their dark eyes revealed the hatred that smouldered deep within their souls. An all-consuming loathing for most living things filled their daily lives, whether creatures of the wild or strangers from another land. Arguments and feuds were a part of daily life in Cantae. Those who perished during combat could be counted the lucky ones. Prisoners, whether from elsewhere or their own kind, came to a hideous end - something that, in particular, applied to those from the forests.

The origins of this hatred of the woodland folk lay in the distant past. Centuries ago, in self-defence, the people of Marae took up arms against the invading mountain hordes. With the enemy driven back to the foot of the Cantaen mountains, the Maraens engaged them in battle below the cliffs of Sorealai. Here, the lowlanders inflicted a crushing defeat on the forces of evil. Few Cantaens escaped the ensuing carnage, but those who did took with them the embryo of the Hatred. This had become instinctive now, the young were born with it; the elders added to it by their teachings.

Kaer's awakening was both sudden and violent. As he rolled around the floor, an excruciating pain radiated from his side. Through pain-filled eyes, he gazed on a pair of dirty boots. In that instant, he recognised the style and origins of the footwear. That Cantaens had created the havoc within his home was never in doubt, but for them to remain nearby surpassed Kaer's understanding.

Few things came close to their loathing of the forest dwellers, other than their fear of them. Few Cantaens ventured into the forests. Of those who did, none dared stay long in any locality. Damage to the cabin was old; layers of dust had settled over Kaer's scattered possessions. He had believed the despoilers long since departed, but current circumstances were extraordinary. *He* had reclaimed the Shintae and, for that, the Cantaens would make him pay a high price.

Exhaustion had made Kaer careless, which, in turn, and led to this disastrous ending to his mission. There could be no triumphal return to Myssous, the Maraen capital. There the High Council had charged him with the task of recovering the Shintae. He had failed them, himself and his country. The Stone might have the power to create, build and heal in the hands of the just, but, in those of the degenerate, its potential for evil had no equal. This ancient relic had been the deciding factor at the Battle of Sorealai, where wise men had transmitted its energy to the warriors in the field.

During the final moments of the conflict, a lone Cantaen warrior had infiltrated the Maraen lines and surprised the wise men. In a frenzied attack, he had slaughtered those who had surrounded the Shintae. As he made his escape he seized the Stone, then took it with him. In the confusion he fled into the mountains, pursued by a company of Maraens. Despite their desperate search to relieve him of his prize, he evaded them. Along with the Shintae, the warrior disappeared without trace among the peaks.

Although many searched for the Stone, it had vanished. In time, both sides accepted its loss. Now, five hundred years had gone by since the last expedition sought its whereabouts. The story passed into legend. There it seemed destined to remain until, three years ago, runners arrived in Myssous from the border. As they related their disturbing news, senior members of the High Council of Maraen recalled the fables they had learned in childhood.

Despatched from their villages in the foothills, deep in the shadow of the mountains, the messengers had warned of strange happenings

taking place, over the border, in Cantae. At diverse hours of the day and night, villagers had witnessed bolts of lightning play around distant peaks. Accompanied by the faint sound of thunder, this phenomenon occurred with or without visible signs of a storm.

Those High Council members with greater knowledge suspected what the cause might be, though none dared voice their thoughts aloud outside their chambers. Border-scouts received instructions to reconnoitre the enemy lands, to gather what information they could. On their return, they brought news of large bands of armed Cantuens flocking towards the central mountains.

Troubled by this latest information, the Maraen leaders dispatched others, in an attempt to locate the exact source of the lightning. These forays proved costly. None of the scouts involved returned. Six months after the first troubling signs, again, messengers bearing ill-tidings hurried towards the coast. Now, columns of smoke billowed from the tips of the highest peaks, while huge flashes of fire replaced much of the lightning.

The coming of winter curtailed any further exploration. The following spring, as the snow thawed, another scout volunteered to go into the mountains. The leaders, desperate for knowledge, accepted his offer. Months passed without word or sighting of him. Long before the scout crawled back over the border, delirious and with severe wounds, even the most optimistic member of the High Council believed him lost. Unable to talk, he lapsed into a coma. Some time went by before his broken body healed and he regained consciousness. As his mind cleared, he was able to decipher his jumbled thoughts and the details of his mission unfolded.

For many weeks, he had hidden by day and travelled by night. By this method, he had worked his way towards the centre of enemy activity. After he had followed a supply column for several days, the scout had come across a large concentration of enemy troops, camped in the Subrat valley beneath the towering peak of Mount Subae.

On a hillside overlooking the area, the scout took cover. He settled down to watch. In an open area near the centre of the encampment, guarded by a large contingent of warriors, he located a group of wise men. For several days the scout observed the Cantaen sages as, day and night, they worked in relays over what appeared to be a small stone. This article, no larger than the palm of his hand, was set on a pedestal in their midst. Backwards and forwards, the wise men paced, while the object of their attention pulsed. At night, when the camp became still, the sound of the sages, muttering in ancient tongues, carried to the scout's hiding place.

On occasion, one of the wise men would utter what must have been a special incantation. Whenever he did, he raised an arm, whereupon forks of lightning flashed from the strange fragment of rock. The bolts spiralled towards the sage, to encircle his outstretched arm. To wherever he pointed, a place on the valley side or a distant mountain peak, the bolts streaked towards his target. There, sheets of flame would erupt, scorching vast areas of land around it. The heavy crash of thunder reverberated, as clouds of thick, acrid smoke billowed high into the atmosphere.

Several days later, a thunderbolt landed near to where the scout lay hidden. Compelled by the flames that leapt up around him to break cover, he stumbled into the path of a passing patrol. Although badly wounded in the encounter, he made his escape. More by instinct than any conscious effort, he wove his way through the mountains back to his homeland.

The High Council had to admit their darkest fears had come true. Legend had become reality. The Shintae existed - its future use dependent on the whims of a sadistic leader and his bloodthirsty nation. Unpalatable as these facts might be, matters could be worse. No matter how spectacular lightning bolts and sheets of fire might appear, they displayed only minor examples of the Stone's power. Given sufficient time, the Cantaen wise men would learn how to make greater use of its considerable latent energy. Faced with such

a certainty, the country's leaders had to act. Somehow, they must retrieve the Shintae. Once back with them, they knew how to exploit its potential to protect Marae. The High Council had records of such things the enemy lacked. With action a matter of great urgency, the Maraen leaders sent word that Kaer should attend them with all haste.

Whereas no others looked for the Stone now, Kaer was the exception. Close to thirty years of age, he had devoted much of his adult life to this quest and to the study of the Shintae's history. He had slipped away from home on his fifteenth birthday to commence his mission. The years that had elapsed since then had been far from easy. Tales of his exploits had spread throughout both Marae and Cantae. His talents were unique.

Until now, the elders had left him in ignorance of the events taking place in the west. The country's leaders had feared to risk him too soon, but, since this latest news, it was time to call on his talents. They knew of no-one else capable of the task in hand.

Far to the south, where the mountains met the sea, messengers found Kaer camping high in a rocky pass. From there, he had journeyed up the coast to Myssous, where the High Council had apprised him of the facts. Within the day, the young man set-off towards the border. The year that followed had been one of travel and dangerous adventure, during which he had been successful in recovering the Shintae. In time, he had made good his escape from Cantae, but, in doing so, in secret, had to slip across the frontier.

To avoid the many Cantaen patrols that sought him, Kaer had entered Marae far from any border settlements. Unable to call on an escort of border-scouts, chance alone had dictated his route. Some strange quirk of fate had directed his footsteps towards his own home and into his current predicament.

Through a pain-filled haze, Kaer's roving gaze steadied for a moment on the eyes of the Cantaen warrior who towered above. Deep pools of hatred stared back. Sartae, head of the Cantaen Guard,

struck out at him with fist and boot. The blows become more severe as the beating intensified. Kaer lapsed into unconsciousness. His attacker, robbed of the pleasure of watching him suffer, aimed one final blow at the head of his helpless victim.

Many hours passed before the prisoner regained his senses. The sun approached its zenith. Beyond the cabin walls, the forest resonated with the sounds of the creatures of the day. Kaer's face had swollen beyond recognition, eyes mere slits amid the bruising. A ringing noise filled his ears. His whole body ached, except for his arms and legs, where the tightness of the ropes that bound them had strangled all feeling. Despite his injuries, Kaer's initial thoughts centred on the Shintae. Had he been able, there would be no need to feel for the pouch around his neck to know it had gone. In his misery, he attempted to roll over. The pain this manoeuvre created caused him to groan.

"Sartae! Sartae!" shouted a voice from nearby. "Come quick! He's awake."

The guard's cry brought home the gravity of the situation to Kaer. Until that moment, his main concern had been for the Shintae, his own safety of secondary importance. Unbidden memories of the treatment he had seen inflicted on prisoners by the enemy raced through his mind; the twisted, broken bodies he had stumbled across during his years of wandering.

Nevertheless, the fate of prisoners taken by the Cantaen Guard occupied his thoughts the most. Much more skilled in the art of making death more painful and protracted than the average Cantaen, to fall into their hands was unfortunate. To find oneself at the mercy of their chief, Sartae, turned the unthinkable into a nightmare. In a land where cruelty had become a normal part of everyday life, his inhuman deeds had become legendary.

Once Kaer had forced a gap between his blood-encrusted eyelids, in search of a means of escape, he stared round the room. Had his limbs been free, he might have tackled the pair of guards at the door

and the others by the window. Unarmed as he was, it would be better to die fighting than by torture. In desperation, he ignored the pain as he struggled with his bindings.

“Sartae!” the guard called again “He’s awake and moving.” With sword drawn, he advanced on Kaer.

“Stop!” Sartae’s word of command rang out from the doorway. “You treacherous dog! No-one touches him, apart from me. Out of the way, fool,” he bellowed, thrusting the guard to one side.

He strode over to a now indifferent Kaer. An evil grin spread across Sartae’s face as he stared down at his victim. His laughter broke the silence, an unpleasant sound, the product of a warped and twisted mind. Soon, the room filled with a dozen others, all who chortled in a similar manner, as if at some demented joke.

Kaer, resigned to his fate, closed his mind to the sound. He had done the best he could, but that had not been enough. Now, he had to suffer the consequences. With the back of a dirty hand, the Cantaen leader wiped the tears of laughter from his face. Sartae glowered at his victim. With every passing moment, malevolence intensified in his eyes. Towering over the still form, Sartae presented a terrifying sight. His long, ginger-beard brushed against the huge green-leaf of authority woven into his brown tunic. His thick hair reached the middle of his shoulders. A band of black leather encircled his head. At the band’s centre, it held the large jewel of seniority firmly against his forehead. The splendour of the gemstone dazzled Kaer. When he began to speak, it compelled him to cast his eyes elsewhere.

“So be it,” he said, his voice devoid of fear. “You’ve won, for now, but I won’t give you any pleasure in your games to come.”

Kaer had suffered their ‘entertainment’ before. He knew that, although his body could be broken, his spirit had greater resilience.

“Savour your victory Sartae. Make the most of it, because it can be nothing more than temporary,” his voice strengthened, “others of my people will come. Where I’ve failed, they will succeed. May your remaining days be cursed.”

Kaer's words echoed round the room. He smiled. No matter how hard they tried, these despicable creatures could never subjugate the soul of his people. His smile turned to laughter. The act releasing some of the tension that had been building within him over the months.

Such open defiance enraged Sartae. His face turned red, veins on his forehead protruded. Never had he faced a situation such as this. When brought in front of him, no matter how brave a prisoner might be against his men, he or she cowered in fright - yet this insignificant wretch laughed in his face. Sartae's anger overflowed. In blind fury, he grasped his sword. He raised the blade, ready to strike. At the last moment, he stopped himself from delivering the killing blow. Only a supreme effort of willpower enabled him to control his rising temper. Naked hatred shone in his eyes as he slammed the sword back into its sheath.

"Light the fires and bring me the irons when they're hot," he said to the guards, his voice choked with fury. "As for you," he addressed himself to Kaer, "your ploy didn't work did it? You thought you could make me so angry, I'd kill you without thinking, eh? By nightfall, we'll see who's laughing."

Sartae stormed out of the room, almost trampling underfoot the guard who was standing by the doorway. No sooner had he left the room when, from outside, came the sound of running feet. One of his outer sentries raced towards the cabin.

"Sar-tae!" came the breathless cry. "We must hurry...a large party...of Maraens is coming this way."

"How much time do we have?" Sartae snapped, as he stepped outside, back in full control of himself. "Come on, speak up!"

"They're a quarter of a league away," the sentry replied, "but they don't suspect anything, their weapons are sheathed."

"Quick, everybody, prepare to leave. I'll deal with the prisoner," Sartae commanded his followers.

At speed, he moved back inside towards his helpless captive.

“As you doubtless heard,” he said, glaring down at Kaer, “some of your countrymen will be here soon. They’ll be too late, because you’ll be dead before they arrive. It’s a pity I’m unable take you with me, otherwise we could have continued with our meeting later, but you’d only slow me down.”

“I’m so sorry they’ve ruined your fun,” Kaer lisped through swollen lips, his voice laden with sarcasm, able to savour in his final moments the disappointment of his enemy.

“Ha! But no! I’ve a much better idea. I’m going to spare your life. Well, with some luck, you might survive for a day or two. To kill you outright would spur on your compatriots, rather than slow them down; but if they find you injured, they’ll have to split their forces. They’re certain to leave a number to nurse and protect you. With fewer in pursuit, we stand a far greater chance of escape.”

Kaer strained at his bounds. It would be better for him to die, than the world face the consequences of Sartae’s escape with the Shintae. Pain shot through Kaer's side and chest. Sartae stood back, blood dripping from his sword. For the second time that day, Kaer left the world behind. Deep he sank, into a dark, unyielding nightmare from which there seemed no hope of return.