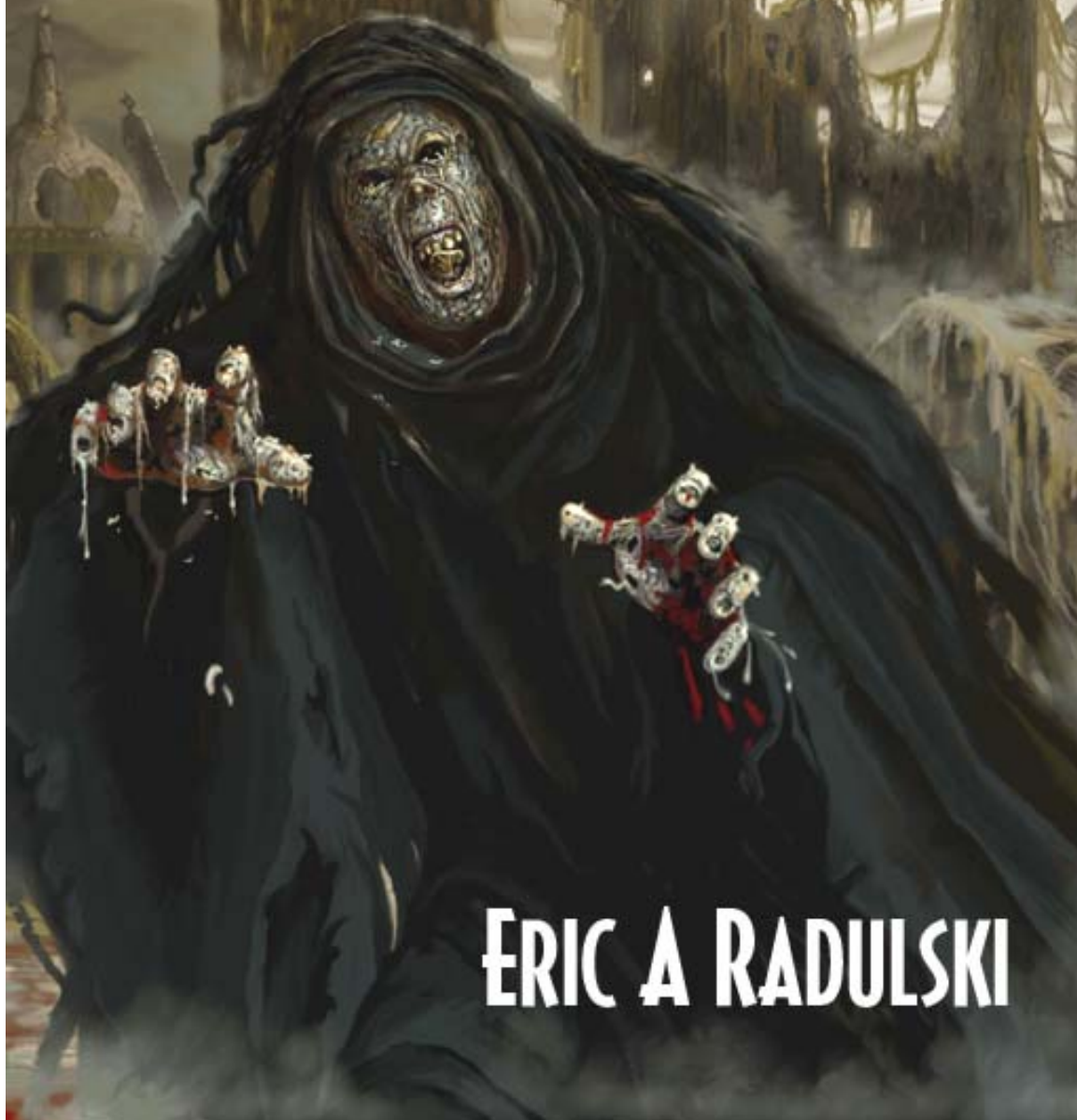


THE HANDS OF ALDULAN

BOOK ONE: KINGDOM OF THE NECROMANCER



ERIC A RADULSKI

The Hands of Aldulan

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The Hands of Aldulan

Book One

Kingdom of the Necromancer

By

Eric A Radulski

I have seen this world's beginning, and I have seen its end. I watched it rise from the ashes only to fall into darkness and flame. I want nothing more at this moment than to see nothing more of this predictable chaos, yet here I am - an ageless relic of countless forgotten tomorrows. And who am I to deny this perverse privilege? Who am I to deny the gods that made me, or the beasts who made and continue to control them, even as they slaughter one another again and again?

- The Wizard Aldulan, from his personal journals.

Prologue

Aldulan was both wise and ancient. He had known the world when it was peaceful and had wandered the world of Arioc for many long years before the night held any danger in its darkness.

Not one crevice was unknown to him, and not one coast was left unexplored. He had been everywhere, and his wanderings had lasted the span of many mortal lifetimes, all of which were spent alone and at peace.

Out of these peaceful moments, Aldulan gathered his vast wisdom.

By the time the mortal races came to know him, Aldulan, still ever curious but not quite as young, wore a long white beard that reached down to his toes. Thick gray hair fell in a flood of tight braids down his back, and he wore white and blue cloaks that glimmered like night reflected off of newly fallen snow.

Despite his impressive height, his hearty laugh, and his boundless wealth of knowledge, his eyes were his most impressive attribute. "You look into those eyes," some said, "and it's like gazing up into the heavens."

"Aye," said others. "It's like looking into the eyes of an ancient child. He has seen so much, but he still looks at all of the wonders of the world like he's never seen them before. It's an innocent wisdom that he has. It isn't jaded. It's pure, bright, and it shines like a blanket of icy stars in his eyes."

Aldulan had built himself a workshop by then. The long years of his life had fostered in him an interest in the creation of various devices, both great and small. In the beginning, long before the mortals came, he looked to his own sustenance, creating tools for farming and agriculture. As he grew into his young adulthood, still many years before the mortals arrived, he looked to the creation of his own home and hearth. As the years ticked on, however, he found that what he enjoyed creating most were clocks. The wizard found time fascinating, especially after the birth of the mortal races with their relatively short life spans. This fascination led him to create timepieces of all kinds, sizes, and shapes, and in the making of them and through the studying of their workings, it could be said

that Aldulan became the very first horologist, although the inhabitants of the world of Arioc did not call him that.

“He’s a sorcerer,” some said, “and a powerful one at that! He’s unparalleled in his craft, and his imagination is boundless. His eyes are as keen as his thoughts are deep, and his hands are the tools of the gods on this earth.”

“An artisan,” others called him, “as good in humor as he is brilliant in his work. This world is blessed to have him in it.”

And that it was.

During that time now long forgotten, many curious travelers found their way down the twisting brick path that led to Aldulan’s ornate front gate. Once inside of his enormous home, which was crafted from the finest marble, silver, and gold, they found that Aldulan was a gracious host filled with cheer and tales. He was an excellent and respectable wizard, and the table he set was as exotic as it was delectable.

Upon returning from their visit to the wizard’s mansion, travelers would regale eager listeners with tales from their trip. “His mansion shines,” they’d say. “I’ve never seen its like, nor will I again. His walls shimmer with gold and silver, and his floors are made of fine draidin marble. But beyond that – beyond all of the actual material goods that make up the place – the most amazing thing that the wizard has done is to let nature inside. It’s almost like he’s flung open the gates of his home to let the light and the green of the world indoors. Everywhere you look, there is a sprig, a root, a flower, or a stone as wild and at peace inside of his mansion as it would be anywhere else in the world. It ebbs with the friendliness of Arioc, and its beauty is sublime.”

As the years passed, however, the world grew less friendly around its edges, and these changes found themselves reflected in Aldulan’s mansion, much to the wizard’s chagrin. Birds no longer sang from his rafters, and the trees of his magnificent indoor orchards no longer bore fruit. Instead of light, a growing darkness – an inky shadow – fell over all that the wizard had made.

He noticed that even some of his mystical timepieces had started to show signs of the growing unrest in the world abroad. Some of his clock faces cracked

and would not allow themselves to be repaired. No matter how many times he replaced their glass faces, he would find them broken again the very next morning, smiling their crooked, humorless smiles.

Some of his clocks stopped altogether and could not be coaxed back to life. Aldulan wound the clocks, replaced their inner workings, or, in the case of some of his most magical timepieces, he manufactured new hearts for them out of enchanted gemstones from scratch. Still, they remained lifeless.

And then there were the worst of his clocks. Those clocks, to Aldulan's dismay, started to run backwards, silently mocking the wizard in his own home. They seemed to have lives and thoughts of their own and, as far as Aldulan could tell, no longer wanted anything to do with him. "Darkness is coming," they seemed to say. "The time of peace is over, Aldulan. The time of fear is at hand."

Noticing these changes with a growing dread, Aldulan banished his rogue clocks to a musty basement and then retreated to the sanctuary of his workshop to work on what would eventually become his greatest, most mysterious invention. The invention would later be called the Clock of Aldulan by the few that knew of its existence, but it was no ordinary timepiece. Into it, the wizard poured all of his magical power, all of his knowledge, and all of his hope for mortal-kind which, of course, was ironic, for it had been mortal kind that had ushered the shadow into Aldulan's house in the first place.

The brave men of the plains, the sturdy draidins of the mountain passes, the graceful elsynians of the forest realms, and the fierce ganglins of the hills, had all begun to forget the simpler wonders of magic and nature. They had discovered the persuasive draw of gold and blood and power, and those discoveries made them sick with want.

The shadow of greed swept across the land, blotting out the light with a shroud of oily smoke. War erupted between the races as they fought each other for control of the world and all of its intoxicating power. Blood flowed more than wine, sorrow filled hearts more than joy, and death and fear reigned supreme over life and peace.

Aldulan was forgotten to mortal-kind during this dark time, but the wizard

had not forgotten the world. Through the turmoil he was relentless, toiling in the dim torchlight of his shop.

The bloodshed lasted years, and as the years went on the atrocities of the war grew in scope. Cities fell into ruin, and ancient peoples were left decimated. Pillars of smoke billowed up into the air, leaving the lands of Arioc blind with fluttering ash.

As the world of Arioc cried beneath a never-ending dusk, and night threatened to enfold the world forever, Aldulan finished his masterpiece at last.

Emerging from his workshop, the ancient wizard beheld the scope of mortal-kind's destructiveness firsthand. He saw the crumbled cities. He saw the charred bodies. He saw the endless seas of floating waste.

He saw all of these things and became sickened by what mortal-kind had become.

In his sorrow, Aldulan wondered if he should use his invention at all. "Perhaps it would be better if I just stood aside and let the mortal races finish what they've begun," he thought. "It will only take a little longer. They're butchering themselves out of existence. Who am I to stop them?"

After several days of uncertainty, Aldulan decided that mortal-kind did deserve another chance. It was his hope that the mortal races might develop differently if they were given back their naivety. Perhaps if they were coaxed into forgetting that they had discovered greed, power, and wealth, their early fascinations with beauty, magic, and art would continue, unsullied by the taint of their ambitions.

"After all," he thought, "a seed can grow in many different ways."

It was with this hope in his heart that the wizard turned back the hands of his simple-looking clock. Immediately, a sound like a chorus of angels filled the heavens as cleansing fires dashed across the lands of the world. Earthquakes shook mountains to their heights, and the seas rose up in great, bounding tidal waves to wash away the world of Arioc's savage battle wounds.

Men retreated to their homes, and angry beasts curled up in their burrows before falling into a deep, immediate sleep.

When they awoke from their long slumber, the mortal races had forgotten the brutal war of the years before. Their homes had been rebuilt to look like they had been before the war, and although some friends and familiar faces never made the journey home, there always seemed to be a reasonable explanation for their absence.

During the years of 'the Sleep', as Aldulan called it, the wizard finished training his pupils, Aldfrost and Gastion. Aldfrost became the protector of the lore and history of the clock, while Gastion was charged with the dismantling of the clock and with taking its pieces to the far corners of the realm to ensure that it would never be used again, except in a time of greatest necessity.

The keepers of the clock's relics were known as the Holders, and the great, forgotten war was to be remembered as 'The Undoing' to Aldulan's progeny. Written as such in the pages of their secret histories, the knowledge of the clock was protected through the ages, although the clock had never been used since. The pieces of the clock rested safely in the hands of the Holders, although most of the Holders knew nothing of what they possessed – as the knowledge of what it was that they had had been forgotten with the passing of time.

In the years following the Undoing, the balance between good and evil, greed and wonder, once again became more and more tenuous. The mortal races of the world had begun to forsake art and nature for war and industry once again.

All the while, a great darkness had been gaining power in the northeast, in the dark land of Malifess, and its goal was not dominion.

It was destruction.

Nearly 1000 years after the Undoing, all was nearly lost again...

Sorrow's Keep was a small, snow-strangled village on the southwestern edge of the Fangrun Peaks. It was a depressed little place, so choked by the never-ending winter nights of the region, and so frightened by its proximity to the dreaded peaks, that it was a wonder that anyone lived there at all.

The citizens of Sorrow's Keep were stubborn, though. Trudging down the slushy streets that ran between the droopy buildings of their sad little village day after day, most of the citizens felt a strange sort of pride for being able to live under such wretched circumstances. Tempered by the burning winter winds, they were hardened like stone and immovable like the mountains of the Fangrun Peaks.

Bull-headed and obdurate, they had no need for complaints or time enough to spare to hear them. "Save it for the Maker," some would say. "If you're complaining, you must not be dead. So why bother?"

Constantly occupied with the business of survival, the citizens of Sorrow's Keep were kept busy enough.

The homes and businesses of Sorrow's Keep were never without a standing white mantle of crusty snow, and the streets were never very full, nor were they ever fully plowed, but they had character – grim and resolute.

"Let the demons slither out of their mountains," some would say as they basked in the safety of a well-lit tavern or in the bright sunlight of midday. "At least then my sword arm would be warm!"

Sorrow's Keep was very quiet at night, though, despite these brash daytime declarations. It was dead quiet, in fact, and locked up like a tomb. No one dared to leave a door unbarred or a window cracked open. No one talked above a whisper, and no one dared to leave a light untended in the dark.

Everyone knew that all manner of foul beasts wandered and crawled and stalked the passes and caverns of the Fangrun Peaks at night, and they knew well enough not to turn their backs on the dreaded land known as Malifess.

Yes. Malifess. That hive of wretchedness, that roosting place of demons,

was well known to the people of Sorrow's Keep. It was best not to think of its grim stone towers or of its oily red fires. It was best not to ponder the enormity of the evil that slept there, or to think about the history of that place of dripping fangs and black wings.

The residents of Sorrow's Keep tried to live normal lives under the eye of the foulest evil the world had ever known.

Most of the time, they succeeded.

The creature hovered just inches above the sharp crust of snow. Its cloaks were long and tattered, and its dreadful face was buried somewhere in the deep, dark shadows of its hood. Its breath was a rumbling rasp, fetid-smelling, like the creature had gorged itself on the fruits of some old, rotten grave.

Against the distant glimmering of icy stars and the intimidating rise of the craggy mountains, the creature looked small enough. Inside its mind, though, inside the most rotten recesses of the creature's thoughts and musings, hell sat in all of its malevolent vastness.

Moving with grim purpose, the creature had been sent from the tower of Kai-Ogar. It was there that the highest of Malifess' dark throng of demons, the dreaded Suggradath, made his home. It had been there, in the deepest hallways of that sweltering tower, that Suggradath had given the beast its orders.

Now it disturbed nothing in its silent drift across the barren landscape.

It was not long before the dark shape caught sight of a well-kept farmhouse shrouded in murky moonlight. Reaching out one of its sinewy hands, the hooded werelock hissed an incantation into the cold, watching as its hot breath billowed out of its toothless mouth in a plume of curling silver smoke.

The incantation sharpened the shape-shifting creature's senses. In a sudden rush, the beast felt the presence of not only a little boy inside the house but also the treasure for which it had traveled so far.

Inside the house, Jonathan sat beside the dying embers of an old fire, hugging his knees to his chest. Frightened and miserable, the blond-haired youth sat on the cold wooden floor with his cheeks rosy from the chill in the air and his hands quivering.

It was the coldest night that he could remember. It was also his first night alone since his parents' grim passing.

The village elders had told him that his parents had died in a carriage accident before sunrise that morning. They had said that his parents' horses must have been spooked by something and that the frightened steeds had run

their carriage right off of the Drimsley Bridge, down into the raging, unforgiving waters of the River Putris.

The eldest of the village elders had handed Jonathan a small trinket in a worn leather coin purse. “This was in your father’s hands,” he had mumbled. “It must have been dear to him somehow. Take it and keep it, Jonathan. At the very least, it offers you something to remember him by.”

Jonathan had seen the slightest trace of fear in the eldest of the elder’s bloodshot old eyes, but everyone in Sorrow’s Keep had been more edgy of late. The recent weeks had brought with them talk of a mysterious stranger in the area, and mysterious strangers wandering around the outskirts of Sorrow’s Keep were generally taken for foul omens.

Unlike most omens that came to Sorrow’s Keep, which were there one day and gone the next, this omen – this stranger – had lingered for some time. He had been seen by many. Some called the stranger the Night Watchman – for he only seemed to be spotted at night. Others called him the Dark Wanderer – after the billowing black cloaks he was said to wear. Still others called him the Devil Incarnate and demanded that he wasn’t talked about at all.

All that Jonathan knew for sure was that the little trinket he had found in the coin purse – a piece of some ancient family heirloom, he supposed – glowed with a dim white light that gave off no heat. It did not have arms to hold him. It did not have lips to kiss him good night. It did not have sweet voices filled with soft, parental sentiments.

He realized in that moment that his parents were gone, that he was alone in the house, and that something didn’t feel quite right.

It was quiet at first, unnoticeable above the crackle of the fire, but it was there, like a soft voice whispering from a great distance. Jonathan paid it no mind, though, despite a growing feeling that something was amiss. It could be anything, after all. He hadn’t eaten much. He was exhausted. He’d been through so much over the past handful of hours.

Then something stirred at the edges of his memory that filled his heart with dread. For some reason, he had remembered a song that he and the other

children of Sorrow's Keep had used to sing when they were younger. He would have sworn that he'd forgotten the words to the song if he'd been asked a week earlier. But now the lines of that rather grim tune came unbidden into his thoughts, as if coaxed by an unseen specter.

*Eyes in the darkness
Watch me while I'm sleeping,
Come with no warning,
Hold me while I'm screaming.*

*Black are his footsteps,
Hidden by the twilight,
Hungry for mourning,
While the world is snoring.*

*Shapeshifter, changeling,
Touches me with laughter,
Comes like a whisper
Dead forever after.*

Gooseflesh prickled up his arms, up his back, and even up onto his cheeks. He tried without success to think of something comforting – something safe – but his mind had gone blank.

Then he heard it again. The voice. It wasn't the wind. It wasn't the house creaking. It was a *voice*, and not a familiar one, either. It sounded guttural and inhuman and somehow... hungry.

Yes. If hunger could be a sound, it was there in that whisper. That whisper – that voice – held a complete and enveloping hunger that was painful in its ferocity.

"What was that?" the lad stammered. He swallowed hard as he drew himself up to his feet on the creaky floor.

"Who's there?" he stuttered.

His father used to play games like this. He'd rattle and moan on the stoop and peer in through the ice-clouded windows. He'd keep it up until Jonathan's mother chased him out into the yard with a broom.

"Was my little man afraid?" his father would ask later as the dark drew in around the farmhouse's shoulders.

And of course he had been. Every time. Any reasonable person living in Sorrow's Keep would have been.

The werelock – called a shapeshifter by some, or changeling by others – had drifted up on to the doorstep like a cold black patch of smoke. The dimness of its deep hood dispersed as its eyes ignited like two flickering tongues of cold blue hellfire. Its sinewy gray mouth spoke foreign words in its low, guttural voice as its flaming eyes focused on the locked door that stood between it and its prey and prize.

Jonathan heard the voice on the step very clearly now. He heard the words as they were spoken, but he could not understand them.

The beast left the doorway for but a moment, continuing to speak its grim incantation even as it peered into the farmhouse through a nearby window.

"I taste fear," the creature shivered. "Delicious fear."

Jonathan needed only to see the creature's face looming behind the frost-encrusted window to urge him – relentlessly clasping the glowing trinket he'd found in his father's coin purse – up the steps that led to the second floor of the farmhouse, where his parents' vacant bedroom waited.

Just as Jonathan reached the landing, the werelock shouted at the locked door that barred its way, finishing its spell. The force of the werelock's voice blew the door off of its hinges and burst it into thousands upon thousands of splinters that fanned into the small living room that lay beyond.

The fireplace exploded into a full roar. Swirling smoke billowed out of it, filling the living room with a choking, stinging darkness.

Wreathed in acrid smoke, the werelock floated through what remained of the doorframe. Once it was inside of the living room, the creature stood silently, seeking out its prize with its two smoldering eyes.

It didn't take long. The werelock's sight was keen and the farmhouse was small. The creature swept up the steps that led to the second floor like smoke up a chimney and there it found Jonathan.

The werelock wet its lips. "You're a sweet one, aren't you, *Jonathan*? So sweet and young."

Jonathan backed away. His parents' bedroom had never seemed so small.

"How do you know my name?" the child stammered. "Get out! Get out now!"

"No, no," the werelock snickered. "Not yet. You have something that I need... something of your father's."

"What?" Jonathan asked. "What do you want?"

"Its creator would have called the piece that I seek an escapement shaft," the beast growled. "But you have little use for such names, boy, and there will be no escape for you. All you need to know," it said, "is that it is in your little hand."

"No! I don't have anything!"

A peep of light from the escapement shaft squeezed between Jonathan's clenched fingers, betraying him.

The beast's eyes widened. "You dare to lie to me?" it asked.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said, still backing up. "But it was my dad's," he said, his voice heavy with sorrow. "It's all I've got left."

"No, boy," the werelock said. "You've got so much more than that little bauble to offer," it smiled. "In fact, you not only have something that I need, but you have something that I want, too."

"I do?" the boy asked.

"Oh yes," the werelock said. "And I want it very much."

"What is it?" Jonathan asked.

"Life," the werelock's eyes burned brighter, ringing its skeletal face in light, "fear and blood!"

"No!" Jonathan screamed, tripping back over his own two feet to land, sprawled out, with his back against the cold wooden floor.

The werelock laughed mirthlessly at the boy. "Give me what I've come for, child," the beast insisted. Its eyes pulsed with power, humming as they burned. "This doesn't have to hurt. Just give me the relic." It closed in on its prey. "And I'll make sure that you don't feel a thing," the beast lied. The corners of its mouth dripped with gray slime.

Jonathan crawled backwards on the palms of his hands, shaking his head. "No!" he cried. "Leave me alone!" His heart was fluttering butterfly wings inside of his chest.

"Oh no," the werelock shook its head. "That I cannot do. My master, Suggradath, demands my success," it said. "My failure would mean my death."

The beast reared up and floated like a dark cloud, looming over the child that cowered before it. Its black hole of a smile grew larger as its gums sprouted monstrous, twisting fangs. The fangs looked more like sharp, elongated toenails than teeth, all curled, coiled and yellow. Gray spittle splattered down onto the wooden floor from the corners of its mouth as its teeth knifed up from its black gums. The stench of the beast's foul-smelling saliva reeked of sulfur and brimstone.

"Do you miss your parents, Jonathan?" The creature smiled with its dripping new teeth. "Do you miss your family?"

Terrified, Jonathan nodded. Hot tears cascaded down his flushed cheeks.

The werelock bent down to the boy. "Good," it said. "I'll show you where they are. Just stay still. Can you do that, Jonathan?"

"I think so. Just don't hurt me."

Jonathan felt the sickening wetness of the werelock's clammy touch and smelled the fetid stench of the creature's hot, death-scented breath. He saw the monster's burning eyes as they bore down upon him, and he saw the creature's wicked fangs as they closed in around his neck, but his terror kept him petrified.

"I won't hurt you," the beast said. "Quietly, now."

The boy felt an engulfing, embracing pain. It was unlike anything he had ever known as the werelock's twisted fangs raked open his throat with a splash of eager red blood.

The boy gurgled, trying to scream, but the beast shushed him. Its toenail teeth dripped ruby red blood. Drawing its drenched lips close to the boy's little twist of an ear, it said, "No, no... Don't do that. Screaming makes it hurt more. It might make Mommy and Daddy run away. Is that what you want, Jonathan?"

Jonathan shook his head even as he began choking on his own coppery blood. His legs kicked sluggishly, but he stopped making any noise aside from the bubbling sound of his blood-choked breaths.

"No," the beast smiled. "Don't move. Not even a little. Be still and quiet like a good little boy at church. Your parents *did* take you to church, didn't they, Jonathan?"

The boy's eyes were beginning to cloud over. His pupils had started to dilate. Still, he acknowledged the beast's question.

"Good," the werelock replied. "Of course they did."

"Yes. They did," the child mouthed.

"Good. So, do you know what I'm going to do now?" it asked.

The boy was so weak, but still he shook his head as tears rolled down his cheeks in silence.

"Pray," the werelock hissed. "Go ahead and pray inside of that little head of yours. I don't mind. I don't mind at all."

The werelock's skin was shivering. It could feel every inch of the child's life slipping away.

As the little boy bled, he prayed in silence.

"Yes, Jonathan," the beast said as the boy's pulse slowed to a quiver. "That's it. Mommy and Daddy are just ahead. You can fly to them, Jonathan. Fly away..."

Soon, the werelock had what it had come for. With the tiny escapement shaft in its grasp, a small trinket that looked like little more than an insignificant length of thin metal rod, the creature would soon be back inside of Malifess' horrible walls of screaming obsidian stone.

Inside the farmhouse, blood had started seeping through the floor to pool in the middle of the living room's soot-blackened ceiling. Jonathan lay on the

blood-smeared floor of his parents' bedroom with his little hands open. Lifelessly, his fingers sought for something that that they would never touch again.

The fire was growing in the fireplace. Soon, it would consume the house. Hungrily, the flames would eat away at the wood and the cloth and the painful memories.

After the fire's feast, all that would remain of the house would be the old stone bones of its frame and some sad, windswept ashes.

"I can't believe it," a voice grunted in the dark.

The air around the warriors smelled of damp earth and weeds.

Gadras Woundwing smiled, whispering, "What? That we've been in these pits for three days, or that the Ganglins of Midra-Gorak still use their war drums?"

The pulse and throb of the drums drew nearer. Gadras swore that he could hear some harsh sounding words being exchanged in the spat, violent language of the ganglins.

"Both." Faern Goldbuck smiled, or at least that was how Gadras pictured him in his mind's eye. It was pitch black in the covered trenches, although it was nearing midday in the plains above.

Gadras took a moment to string his bow, check the long sword that hung at his waist, and secure the short sword strapped to his back. Then, he knocked an arrow.

"They'll hit the pit traps soon," he said, "and we'll make our move soon after. Make sure that each of you keeps your wits about you. We can't afford to lose any of you to our own defenses."

Thirty men agreed in the dim, quiet trench.

"If you get lost or aren't sure which direction you're headed, I've assigned each of you a partner for a reason. Move together and one of you is bound to know where the next trap is set."

"Yes sir," whispered the team of warriors.

"Now, it's going to be bright out there. Damn bright. And the sun is going to be blinding to all of us." Gadras paused, listening to the thrum of the nearing ganglin war drums. "Just remember," he added, "that it's temporary."

"Your eyes will adjust soon enough," Faern said, echoing Gadras's sentiment. "Don't struggle, and don't give in to fear. ganglin blades are quick to find the exposed back of a fleeing coward."

Gadras nodded. "If you each do what I've asked, we'll all be at Merrick's celebrating our victory by nightfall." The ranger grinned. "These bastards don't

expect us on foot.”

The Ganglins of Midra-Gorak had traveled nearly one hundred and eighty miles. Hailing from the city of Azrith, the ganglins had set out twelve days before to once again challenge the border that the kaltaken had maintained for decades.

The fall chill had been to their advantage. It had kept the troops spry and eager to move without pounding them into submission with the cold. They had made good time and were now nearly within sight of their ultimate goal.

Two hundred strong was their number on the day of their departure from Azrith. One hundred and eighty-nine remained of their original company, but that was acceptable. Self-inflicted casualties were expected, even encouraged, by the quick tempered ganglin hierarchy.

“The lands lying west of the River Running are not to stay in the filthy hands of the kaltaken forever!” King Gagnor had proclaimed from atop his bloodstained white marble throne. It had been less than a month since his brutal ascension to kingship, but his violent temper was already the stuff of legend. After all, he had gutted his brother for the crown, in the throne room, while his brother’s wife and twelve young sons watched on. “By my decree,” he snarled, “I order the fall of the city of Alhailan by the spring solstice!”

The city of Alhailan sat just over the River Running. It was there that the High Council of the Kaltaken met, and it was there that the majority of trading was done for the whole of the northwestern corner of Termeydiun. Ultimately, it was the heart of kaltaken society. Although well-fortified, it seemed as good a starting place to the ganglin king for his assault as one could ask.

“Send a force of two hundred troops,” Gagnor had demanded. “To test our enemy’s resolve.”

“Two hundred, my liege? Against the walled city?”

“They aren’t being sent to win,” the king had replied. “They’re being sent to die. Still, their deaths will show us two things.”

“Yes, my king?”

“First, it will show us our enemy’s strength,” Gragnor replied.

“And secondly, my king?”

“It will show the measure of my army’s loyalty.” The ganglin king sat back in his throne. “Chose two hundred foot soldiers. Send with them one commander.”

“Do we send siege engines with them, King Gragnor, to use against the battlements of Alhailan?”

“No. Siege engines are much too cumbersome. They would slow the army to a standstill, and the kaltaken riders are both cunning and swift,” the king replied. “Our men would be cut to ribbons before we’d learn anything of their power, their number, and their spirit.” His piercing yellow eyes narrowed to slits. “No. Better to send a sorcerer than a catapult.”

“You mean to surprise them, then?”

“Yes,” Gragnor agreed. “With speed and savage courage. But this is just the first strike – tentative, but necessary. We’ll hope that a few ganglin survivors return from the skirmish with information, and that their strike will serve to tenderize our prey a bit.”

The commander of the ganglin army had marched his troops vigorously, flying the colors of their people high and proud from the moment of their departure. Unfortunately for the Ganglins of Midra-Gorak, displaying these colors as openly as they did afforded the kaltaken just enough time to prepare for their onslaught.

It was common for kaltaken scouts to venture across the River Running and pass into the borders of Midra-Gorak on their patrols. In the end, it had been Gadras Woundwing, riding out on one of these very patrols, that had discovered the ganglin army's march, and he had ended up riding back to his stepfather in a fury of wild, long black hair and pounding horse's hooves.

"They're coming!" he said breathlessly, rushing into his stepfather's fire-lit study. Gadras had not slept in days, and he looked worn and frazzled. "They're marching, father!"

Gadras's stepfather, Brusk Weatherdown, had smiled at his handsome stepson, admiring his untamed spirit and unfaltering strength. He had chuckled behind his braided white beard, his eyes glowing with pride. "Again?" he said, half in jest. His voice was thick and rich and pleasant, although it carried the hint of a lisp. He put the book he was reading aside and sat up, setting aside his tea. "I suppose it's time to gather the horses and take the fight down to the river, then," he said. "The ganglins are marching without rafts, I assume, and I daresay we won't be extending them the courtesy of our ferry. We should have plenty of time to thin out their herd as they try to cross the river."

Brusk had already retrieved his long sword from where it hung above his fireplace before his stepson interrupted. "No, father," the tanned ranger said, throwing back his brown hood to allow his tangled mass of black hair to tumble down his shoulders. "Not yet. I have another idea."

"Really? And that is?" his gray haired stepfather asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"Trenches," Gadras Woundwing whispered. "This had better work."

"What?" Faern asked.

"Nothing. Nothing," Gadras assured him.

His troops were getting restless. So was he. In his mind he could already see the ganglins with their long, keen ears and midnight blue skin. He could picture their patchy, bald scalps and crude scimitars of dimpled, uneven steel.

Still, something about the way that they were coming troubled Gadras. "Why so few of them?" he thought. "And traveling so light?"

Although the number of ganglin foot soldiers had allowed Gadras the freedom to persuade his stepfather into trying some rather unconventional tactics, it was unnerving.

"I think I hear something," Faern said from somewhere in the dark beside him. "Listen! Quiet! All of you!"

Gadras nodded after a moment. "Yes. There it is."

The Ganglins of Midra-Gorak had hit the first snare. A handful of their number had tumbled into its murky depths. Those that fell would either be skewered to death on the spikes that lay in wait beneath or crawl out only to be foiled by the quick acting cloven wheel poison that coated the nettles that they had just fallen through.

"Let's move," Faern insisted, anxious for the battle to begin. He climbed, reaching to pull back the cover of reeds that camouflaged the warriors' hiding place.

"No," Gadras urged, pulling Faern back down beside him. "They're going to be a little more careful right now, Faern," he reasoned. "More wary. But if I know ganglins like I think I do, their patience won't last long. If we hold off for just a little longer..."

"Trust me," he added with a smirk. "They want to charge Alhailan."

The ganglin snorted, unsheathing his rough-looking scimitar with a ringing

sound that filled the air. Baring his crooked, yellowed teeth, he peered down into the pit that had just opened up in front of him. It had swallowed several of his comrades.

With a sweep of his naked blade, the ganglin brought the army of Midra-Gorak to a halt behind him. The plain fell into a dead quiet, save for the wind that rustled through its short grasses.

The ganglin foot soldier grunted, edging his way around the treacherous pit. Standing there, absolutely still as he breathed over his tusks, he listened to the distant sound of his fallen comrades' moaning.

"What's down there?" the ganglin growled at last.

Gadras's warriors, still waiting in their trench, laughed darkly. Their ears were sharp, and they could hear every word spoken by the ganglin soldier.

"Spikes," a weak voice replied. "Rows of sharpened stakes. Poisoned, too, I think."

The voice tapered off and died.

"You think?" Faern chuckled beside Gadras.

The commander of the ganglins shoved his way to the front line. Dressed in heavy chain mail and dented metal plates, he stood grunting with displeasure, his long, protruding tusks gleaming with foul-smelling gray spittle.

"What is this? A spiked pit," he spat, looking down into the yawning dirt mouth that had swallowed a handful of his troops. "Why are you stopping? Walk around!"

He looked back at his men. "March, damn you!" he demanded, his bulbous yellow eyes bulging. "March!"

Gadras nodded in the dark. So far, his plan had worked. The ganglins were proceeding exactly as he had hoped that they would.

"See?" he whispered. "They want to charge."

With a swing of his flowing green cape, the ganglin commander turned his back on his apprehensive troops. He marched toward Alhailan, unfastening the savage war axe that hung at his side. Holding the gigantic double-bladed axe aloft, he gestured toward the walled city that lay just beyond their sight.

“To victory, ganglins! For Midra-Gorak!” he barked.

“To victory,” his followers called, unsheathing their weapons and raising them high in the bright sunlight.

Tentative at first, the ganglins began marching behind their leader. Then they began to match his speed.

The ganglin commander marched, each step growing less and less cautious. Then he began to run, howling with each quickened step. “Bring me the scalps of the kaltaken, and bring me the manes of their fallen, bloodied horses!” he shrieked. “Tonight, we’ll feast on the seared flesh of our enemies and drape ourselves in the dripping skins of their foul-smelling, pathetic little steeds!”

Sprinting behind their fearless leader, the army of ganglins shouted their thunderous reply. Before the echo of their response had drifted off into the distance, the ganglin commander discovered the second of the pit traps. He fell screaming into its opening maw.

Plummeting into the twisting pit, the ganglin commander landed face first on a sharpened pike. With a sickening sound, his face was punched out through the back of his skull, the tip of the spike plunging through his head like a dripping fang.

The momentum of his sprinting troopers continued the slaughter as twenty of the ganglin warriors fell into the spiked pit or were pushed in by the soldiers running behind.

“Now, Gadras?” Faern asked, hearing the din of screaming and confusion.

“Now, my friends,” Gadras Woundwing ordered. “Now!”

The warriors of the plains pushed back the heavy brush that had concealed them, erupting from the trench with a savage chorus of war cries. As their eyes adjusted to the light, Gadras saw that close to one hundred and sixty of the vile creatures remained but that they had been stricken dumb, faltering as they stood before the second of the immense, jagged pits.

“Ready!” Gadras yelled as he bent to one knee on the cool grass, pulling the knocked arrow he had held back to his ear. “Aim!” he shouted, his men

dropping into position in perfect time. “Fire!”

A flurry of arrows leapt from the thrumming bowstrings of the kaltaken and took wing toward the immobile, dumbfounded ganglin ranks. The wooden shafts flew true, catching the stunned, wide-eyed ganglins in their necks and chests, and in their gaping mouths and swollen stomachs.

“Back up!” a ganglin screamed from the front lines, watching the soldiers around him fall as they were skewered with arrows. “It’s an ambush!”

The second volley of arrows felled ten more of the foul, screeching creatures. A sizable pile of the dead and wounded had already begun to form.

The golden-haired Faern knocked a third arrow and let it fly with a smirk. His marksmanship was faultless, his third successive shot swooping in to catch a ganglin foot soldier’s exposed throat.

“Mind your quivers, men,” Gadras warned. “Take the surest shots only! Prepare to move in! Spread out! Mind your positions!”

The warriors of the plains stood, firing arrows as they began to march forward like a grim wall of advancing death. Thirty across they stood, their arrows flying like sheets of rain, arcing in perfect concert toward their bloodied, screaming enemy.

“Run!” one of the ganglins shrieked. His cry sent the army of Midra-Gorak scurrying in almost every direction, although none dared to venture west. Nothing could have convinced them to head that way. The kaltaken archers were there, and they were creeping forward like an advancing storm cloud upon the scattering ganglin ranks.

Some of the ganglins discovered more pits awaiting them as they ran, meeting death within their yawning maws of sharp, poisoned teeth. Others ran straight into sheets of whistling, bloodthirsty arrows.

“Mage! Call the mage!” one of the ganglins cried with an arrow sticking out of his bleeding side. His blood looked black as it drooled out of his midnight blue skin.

“Mage?” Gadras asked the air around him. A fist of cold terror seized his heart. He had not noticed any siege engines in the ganglins’ ranks. There had

not been one catapult. One battering ram. One trebuchet. Nothing.

“A summoning,” he realized.

From the rear of the ganglin line rang a deafening explosion. All of the plainsmen ceased their relentless rain of arrows as they tried to catch a glimpse of what was going on within the enemy’s scattered ranks.

“Rise!” a red-robed ganglin cried in a deep, rumbling voice that shook the grassy earth. “Rise! Rise and conquer our enemy! Your master commands it!”

“Gordrake!” Faern yelled in horror.

Rolling smoke peeled back from the immense figure of a hideous monster. It stood more than twenty-five feet high on its hind legs, dragging its muscular reptilian tail behind it. The creature’s face was like that of a gigantic lizard, although its head was massive - bulbous and bony, perfect for smashing through city walls and turning thick stone into tumbling rubble. Its hands were small, almost puny when compared to the creature’s girth, but its cry was loud and terrifying.

Gadras did not wait for this new horror to steal his courage. Rather, he grabbed at his quiver, only to find it empty.

“Damn,” he cursed. “Out of arrows! Faern!”

The golden-haired fighter swiveled around and awaited his orders. There was a wild desperation in his eyes, but he had faith in Gadras.

“Kill the mage,” Gadras Woundwing commanded. “Now!”

The warrior nodded, turned, and in one smooth motion brought his last arrow up, knocked it, pulled back the string, and released it. The shaft streaked through the air, straight and true, piercing the mage through the back of its crimson robes.

The mage fell in a twisted, unmoving heap, its spine splintered and useless.

“Men!” Gadras commanded, discarding his useless bow and quiver. “Move in! Attack!”

The warriors of the planes dashed forward in twos, discarding their arrowless quivers while unsheathing their long swords. Minding their locations,

they scurried this way and that, engaging the ganglins in melee combat as Gadras watched with pride.

“At least that part of the plan worked,” he thought. In another moment, he would have other matters to attend to.

Drawing his long sword, Gadras alone stood before the gordrake as it advanced toward Alhailan. As the battle raged between his brave companions and their age-old ganglin enemies, he alone stood between the horrible gordrake and his fair and vulnerable city.

Alhailan’s walls, in all of their glory, would offer little protection from the crushing power of the reptile’s skull. Gadras knew it. The ganglins knew it. In the depths of its puny mind, maybe even the gordrake knew it.

“Creature!” Gadras roared as he shined the sun’s light into the beast’s eyes with the glimmering steel of his drawn blade.

Distracted by the ranger’s sword, the creature squinted against the light. Alhailan’s walls could wait.

“Yes!” Gadras thundered. “Come to me!”

Gadras edged back toward the trench that had concealed him from his enemies only moments before as the creature lumbered forward. The beast picked up speed, bellowing as it drew closer. Its horrible, battering ram-like head bobbed from side to side with each of its footsteps, its fangs dripping with wet, stringy saliva.

Under the gaze of his enemy’s terrifying black eyes, Gadras did not falter. Instead, he held his long sword aloft - both a salute and a challenge.

“Blood and glory,” he whispered, taking a deep breath.

The creature lowered its reptilian head and spread its abysmal jaws. As it did, Gadras lunged out of the way, dropping into the trench. The gordrake, driven by its own bulk and speed, tried to stop as it overshot its mark, dirt flying in all directions.

“And now I come to you!” Gadras screamed.

As soon as the reptile passed above him, the plainsman leapt out of the pit and jumped into the air, poising himself to land on the gordrake’s muscular

leg. Holding his long sword high above his head, Gadras brought its keen blade down hard into the scales of the gordrake's massive hamstring. Gadras's blade pierced the creature's leg, slicing through scales and driving hard through rippling red muscle before burying its point into the whitish-pink of the gordrake's bones.

The warrior hefted himself up by the hilt of his buried weapon and swung himself onto the creature's swinging tail in one smooth motion. Rising to his feet with astounding agility, the warrior dashed up over the scales of the gordrake's tail and on to its armored back. The ranger soon balanced himself upon the creature's thick neck.

The gordrake pitched back and forth, trying to hurl the ranger from his perch, but Gadras had already lowered himself to the creature's neck and now hung there by his legs.

Reaching over his shoulder, the ranger unsheathed his short sword to hack at the foul creature's skull. The beast's bones were thick, though. To Gadras's dismay, every one of his blows rang and bounded back off of the reptile's bulbous, armor-plated head, leaving little more than scratches behind.

"That's not going to work," Gadras growled.

The warrior gripped his short sword in his right hand while keeping the creature's jagged scales in his left. Then he released his legs and dropped down to the creature's mountainous back. Holding himself there with his left hand, his legs dangling, Gadras edged the point of his short sword between two of the creature's larger scales and pushed up with all of his might.

Gadras's blade bit deep, but not quite deep enough.

"I need to tear one of these scales off," Gadras thought as he pulled back on the hilt of his buried short sword with all of his strength, using it as a wedge to yank up one of the protective plates on the beast's back. After a handful of anxious moments, the scale yielded, tearing away like a bloody scab to reveal a patch of soft, meaty flesh beneath.

"There it is," Gadras said, cocking his elbow back to drive the point of his weapon home.

The beast shrieked as the blade ripped deeper and deeper into its flesh

until the creature flailed with such strength that Gadras was thrown from its back. He flew from his perch on the reptile's body to land just over twenty feet away, slamming down onto the unforgiving turf.

When Gadras's eyes cleared, he realized that he was still holding the hilt of his short sword. "Where's the blade?" he asked himself, looking at the jagged, shattered edge of his weapon.

The gordrake whipped around with hate swelling in its horrible black eyes.

Gadras threw the useless hilt of his short sword away while backing up on the palms of his hands. Weaponless, he stared up at the gordrake, praying that his death would be just as quick and painless as the creature's dagger-like teeth would allow.

"Blood and glory," Gadras hissed, clenching his teeth as his nemesis lumbered forward, baying like a rabid animal.

Anger seethed in the gordrake's pitiless gaze. Its glare was steeled hatred, horrible and unstoppable as death. It opened its jaws to swallow the ranger whole. It would eat every bit of him – skin, bones, armor. It did not care. It just wanted to feel its foe's body breaking between its teeth.

"It's like staring into a blind rage," Gadras thought, readying himself for the end.

Then, a look of surprise passed across the gordrake's hideous reptilian face. Its anger faltered. Its hate withered and disappeared in the blink of an eye. The beast staggered. Suddenly, it was falling.

Gadras rolled and rolled and rolled, frantically trying to get out from beneath the shadow of the falling creature. When the gordrake landed beside him instead of on top of him, he almost laughed.

The beast's last breath was a foul-smelling gale that drenched Gadras in moisture, but he was no longer afraid.

The gordrake – the great beast – was dead.

"Its heart. I pierced its heart," Gadras thought.

The ranger jumped to his feet and tore his gore-drenched long sword from the beast's sundered hamstring. Then he turned to join his brave companions in

their battle with the ganglins.

But the battle was over. His men had held the ganglins at bay. Once the blue-skinned creatures had seen their gordrake fall, leaving their hopes of infiltrating the walled city of Alhailan dashed, they had turned and fled.

A great cheer rose up from the ranks of the plainsmen as they saw Gadras standing beside his fallen enemy, weary yet triumphant. The gordrake was dead, and the ganglin threat had been extinguished once again.

That night, the victory celebration spilled into the streets of Alhailan, bringing a flood of bright music and happy faces. Confetti filled the air, drink flowed like water, and there was enough food to sate even the richest of appetites.

Lampposts strung with colorful creepers of garland flanked the cobblestone walkways, and the streets beneath them were filled with bright, ecstatic laughter. Shops, inns, and residences all had flung open their heavy wooden doors to let the light of their hearths spill out into the streets.

There was much singing and dancing in those streets, and everything in Alhailan – from the lowest of cellars to the highest of stone monuments – was brazenly lit and adorned for the festivities, leaving no corner or alleyway dark or gloomy.

In the heart of the city, the celebration rose to its height. The Grand Plaza teemed with enthusiastic partygoers, drinking their fill and joyfully raising their voices under an open, cloudless sky.

The tall oak trees that decorated the Grand Plaza were lit with small lanterns that hung on all of their branches. The leaves in the oaks had already turned with autumn, and the lantern light made their colors look even more brilliant in the deepening night.

As the night matured, starlight shined down from a blanket of midnight blue. Rising from the darkened horizon was the pale moon, and its kind face watched over the celebration thriving under its dazzling gaze.

Of all the celebrating in Alhailan, the most jovial partying was happening inside of Merrik's Mead Hall. The mead hall was a long, one-story building with tall walls and boundless stores of libations. Its walls were cream colored and ran with a dark wooden trim that made the cloudy windows look warm and pleasant even from the outside. It was a well-worn and wonderful place, with a bar that was long, wide, wooden and very smooth - like a stone from a running river.

That night, Merrick's Mead Hall smelled of roast mutton, honeyed boar,

and chilled frothy brew. Holding court at its largest table, with its surface covered by silver plates that spilled over with food, was Brusk Weatherdown, Gadras Woundwing's beaming stepfather. Beside the stout plainsman sat Gadras himself, and next to him sat Faern.

Faern was laughing between long gulps of honey mead. "So Gadras looks up and sees the gordrake! I nearly lost my skull when I saw it, I swear it," he said. "But not Gadras. Gadras stood right under the beast's nose and unsheathed his sword like he was as tall as a thunder giant, and twice as strong as a titan!

"So when it came upon him, he dove on top of it, right on top of it, and I swear, every ganglin and every plainsman stopped fighting then and there – mid-swing, some of us – for there was Gadras Woundwing, riding a bucking gordrake and hitting it in its bony head with a puny short sword!"

Some of the older warriors shook their heads in doubt. Others burst out into brazen laughter.

"A short sword," one red-faced veteran chuckled. "A damned short sword! That's like saying that he fought a dragon with a bloody toothpick!"

The red-faced veteran snatched up a toothpick, offering it to Gadras with a drunken flourish. "Care to fight a dragon, next, Woundwing?"

"The only dragon you've ever seen is your wife, Barlinon!" somebody shouted, much to the glee of everyone sitting nearby.

"And he's welcome to fight her, too!" the veteran named Barlinon cackled, swigging his brew. His unruly beard dripped with ale. He smacked his lips as he belched.

"It's true, though. All of it," Faern continued over the din. "Right down to the end when Gadras stabbed the beast through the back! His blade passed right through its spine and deep into its black heart!"

Gadras nodded. "And in the end it threw me off onto the ground, only to die at my feet. We all know, Faern," he said. "We've all heard this story already."

Brusk Weatherdown set his tankard aside and stood up, gesturing to his

son with one of his large, calloused hands. "Gadras," he said in his low, warm voice, "you'd better get used to hearing the story. It is a tale straight out of legend! Not since the days of our grandfathers has one man stood alone against the likes of a gordrake. One man," he shouted as the mead hall fell into a reverent silence, "with his best blade gone, riding a gordrake down to the ground."

Gadras flushed. It was one thing to hear Faern inflate the tale with his head clouded by mead. It was quite another to hear his father doing the same.

"Yes," Brusk said, wiping the gray hair from his eyes. His voice oozed with pride. "Behold my son, a far cry from Wounded Wing now!"

The hall erupted in wave upon wave of generous applause.

"As I'm sure you all know, when I found him," Brusk smiled with a reminiscent gleam in his eye, continuing once the thunderous applause had quieted, "he was lost and hurt. Abandoned by his nomadic parents by tragedy or by terror, I found him with his leg broken, his little body battered and bruised."

Gadras swore under his breath, burying his face in his hands.

"What's this?" I asked the Maker, in his High Throne above. It seemed so unfair for a boy to be so young and so alone. But the Maker is never wrong," Brusk nodded as though to himself.

"It was a testament, to be sure, to the unyielding strength of Gadras that he survived such an early brush with abandonment and death. It shows the fabric from which he is cut and I am proud to call him my son and have him sitting at my table."

There was resounding applause from all in attendance while Brusk retrieved his tankard from the table and hoisted it aloft. "To Gadras!" he shouted. "To blood and to glory!"

"Blood and glory!" the hall roared as people raised and drained their tankards. The crowd smiled and cheered, laughed and nodded.

"He *has* grown," some of them said.

"At last, he has become a man," said others.

"Now," Brusk commanded after a time, "more music! More drinking! And,

by the Maker, more celebrating! The Ganglins of Midra-Gorak have been defeated once again!"

Gadras, however, was in no mood for a celebration. He was tired and sore from combat, red-faced with embarrassment, and troubled by thoughts of a confusing, uncertain sort.

He stepped outside, exiting the rear of the mead hall once it became apparent that he could slip away unnoticed. He emerged from the smoky noise of the party and was happy for the clear chill of the autumn evening, happy to be alone at last.

He breathed deeply, stretching and yawning as he considered the colorful trees that grew in the park that sat behind the hall. Some of the tension he'd felt knotting up the muscles in his back started to unwind, but he wouldn't be alone for long.

"Impressive, Gadras," an unfamiliar voice said from the deep shadows to the plainsman's right.

Gadras reached for his short sword, only to remember that it was broken and gone. He had left his long sword at the table.

"Who's there?" the ranger demanded.

"Sorry to startle you, ranger," the voice answered, "but I'm shocked. Do the kaltaken, long considered by some to be the most hospitable and true peoples in all of Arioc, forget their friends so quickly?"

"Step into the light," Gadras insisted. "Show yourself, friend! Then we'll see if I remember you."

"You have grown broader, Gadras." The elsynian that stepped into the light smiled. He was pale, like white marble, and thin. His long white hair was tied back in a single, thick ponytail, and his face was beautiful, angular, and perfectly symmetrical. He wore forest green and brown leather and had an ornate longbow slung across his back. "Wiser, too, if the stories are true. Cunning even, but that I'd like to see for myself."

Gadras squinted in the dark. His eyes were not as keen as the elsynian's.

"Adlain? Is that you?"

The elsynian nodded. "It is good to see you again, my friend."

"It has been ten years," Gadras exclaimed, shocked by just how long it had been.

The two friends embraced. "It has been too long," Adlain said at last.

Gadras agreed. "But what brings you to Alhailan?"

"I've traveled from the Oakwhisper Wood to speak with you, and with your stepfather, on a matter of the gravest importance."

"Really?" Gadras asked.

Adlain Geldwatch's green eyes looked to the left, then to the right, scrutinizing the shadows.

"Yes. But here is not the place, I fear. Someplace inside would be best. Someplace private and out of the way."

Gadras nodded. He recognized the seriousness of the elsynian's tone, despite knowing nothing of what it hid.

"Follow me then. This way," he said, gesturing.