

Dreams of Azenaria

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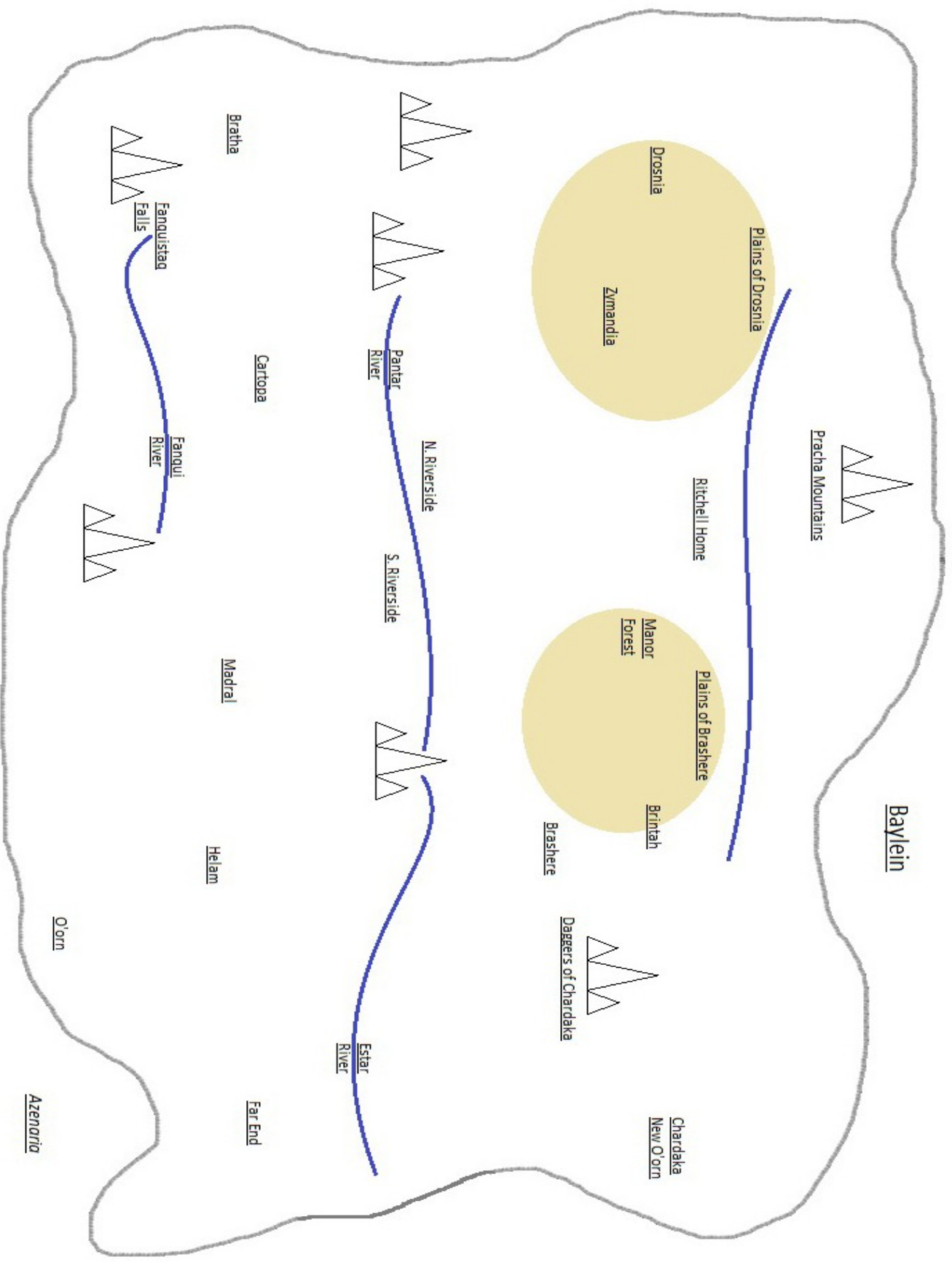
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DREAMS OF AZENARIA



Book I of the Epic Fantasy AZENARIA

Conrad Acosta III



Azenaria.

Once a wonder of the world, the great city stands blackened and dead. The streets, once paved with gold, are now filled with the wreckage of crumbling buildings and the invading armies of nature.

The sun slowly drops behind the eastern hills, and a cloaked figure steps out of the shadows into the dark street and begins walking west, deeper into the city, and deeper into the darkness. Moments later, a second cloaked figure steps out and follows.

A storm has gathered in the western sky, and is steadily moving towards them. They must find shelter before the storm hits the city. If they are caught outside, in these streets, the storm will kill them. There will be no stars tonight, and the moon is low and shines a cold, harsh light that only amplifies the darkness and shadows. The crumbling buildings and twisted causeways look like the skeleton of a giant, black creature has fallen from the sky and landed on the side of the mountain.

It has been three years since they left this city in a flight for their lives. They knew they would be back. They knew she would be waiting - had been waiting for these three years. They know where she is, buried deep beneath the heart of black Azenaria, but they are not alone in this terrible place. Their enemies are everywhere, and are prepared to meet them.

After walking through quiet and shadow for nearly an hour, the two men stand in front of a large, ruined building, not unlike most of the other buildings on this torn street. The storm has hit the western edge of the city in full force and the snow is falling. Their way is lit by the light of a blood red moon - a light that will soon be eaten up by the encroaching black clouds.

The first man quietly slips into the building and disappears. Moments later, the second man steps into the darkness and follows.

The Edge of the World

Brevlin - Ghosts

“My name is...” “My name...” “What the hell is my name?”

The air hung thick and hot around him like a fog. Brevlin sat alone at his usual table in the back corner of the tavern. The darkness suited him well. The darkness was his friend. He had no other friends, no family, no home, and no soul. He was a dead man - a ghost.

He always came back here, to this tavern, to this table, when he finished a job. He sat here, in the darkness, staring into his mug, until he remembered his name. No one in his life called him by his name - no one reminded him he was human. It had been getting harder and harder, lately, for him to remember.

"Brevlin." The sudden knowledge of his name filled him with relief. He knew he would really forget his name someday. When that day came, he feared he would no longer exist.

He had been alone for four years now. When Jenna died, he swore he would never fall in love again. It had worked so far. He had his work, and he had his thoughts, both dark and terrible. He allowed no woman to come near him, or to touch him. The last woman who had looked him in the eyes had turned and walked away weeping.

He had just finished a job for a rich merchant in Madral. It seemed the rich merchant had a richer rival who was stealing his business. Brevlin didn't care. His customers always tried to explain their problems to him, but he didn't care.

It was more expensive when Brevlin used a dagger, but the merchant was willing to pay. Using a dagger meant that he had to get close - close enough to smell his victim's breakfast. A dagger was quick and silent, and it sent a very personal message. The rich merchant's business suddenly began to boom, until another rich merchant accused him of stealing business. There was always work for a man like Brevlin.

He always came back to this tavern when he finished a job. He sat at the same table, had the same drink, and thought the same dark and terrible thoughts. It had become a ritual, and that didn't bother him. He didn't have any other rituals in his life, and he thought he needed at least one. He knew he wasn't sane, but he thought that having just one ritual might keep him from going completely crazy.

He wondered how long it would be before his latest victim haunted him. It always happened. At first, he was terrified. After the first ten, twelve, thirty - he couldn't remember how many times it had happened before he became numb. Every one of them had visited him. They always appeared within a day or two of the job. They were never angry or accusing, they were simply there - part of his shadow. It was as if they wanted him to see what he had done. He had never taken on a new job before the haunting had stopped. He didn't want to find out what would happen if he had two ghostly visitors at the same time. So, he always waited. He waited now, and he never knew exactly how long the wait would be.

He had almost nodded off right there at the table. He caught himself just as his nose dipped into the foam in his mug. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and noticed that someone had

joined him. It took him several seconds to realize that it wasn't a living person. It was the man he had been waiting for, but something was different this time. Brevlin noticed the ghost's eyes. They were not empty and hollow like all the others. This ghost's eyes were alive and they looked straight at him - they penetrated his soul. He felt like he was in the presence of someone, or something, who could read his thoughts and see his greatest fears. Brevlin knew at that moment that this ghost was going to break the rules. It wanted something from him, and Brevlin knew, with a sense of dread, that he would give it what it asked for.

The fear slowly filled his body, and he knew that his life, as he knew it at that moment, was over.

They stared at each other for several moments, and then, just when Brevlin didn't think he could be any more shocked than he was, the ghost did something unthinkable - it spoke to him. It was the voice of a man, but it seemed as if the voice was inside his head. The ghost's lips moved as he spoke, but Brevlin knew no sound came from them. No one else in the tavern would overhear. It was a very soothing voice, and Brevlin realized, too late, that he was being entranced. His entire body had become very calm and still. All of his muscles had gone completely numb. His body and his mind were no longer his to control. For the first time in his adult life, he had absolutely no power to determine his own fate.

"I am not here to blame or to curse. I care not for your past sins. I am here to bring you a message."

Brevlin stared dumbly at the apparition sitting across from him.

The ghost continued. "You must travel to the ruins of Azenaria. There you will enter a marble palace that does not exist in this world. Inside this marble palace, you will find the trapped soul of your brother Danshaw. If you are unable to save his soul, and deliver it back into this world, you will both be lost and your destinies will be to ride the rapids of Fanqui into hell." The ghost then reached across the table, brushed two of his fingers across Brevlin's cheek, and was gone.

He came to with a splash of cold water in his face. He was lying in the street. A young man stood over him, holding an empty bucket. The young man looked at Brevlin in disgust, and walked away.

It took him several moments to remember what had happened in the tavern. He never got stupidly drunk. He did not like being out of control, and last night he had not had more than a swallow of ale. He then remembered his visitor, and he shivered as the memory of the ghost's words came back to him.

He sat cross-legged in the dirt and wept. For the first time in twenty years, he wept. He wept until he had no tears left, and then he sat there in the dirt, stunned, staring off into the distance. Danshaw. His beloved little brother and best friend. The sweet little boy who had been lost over twenty years ago. He had disappeared without a trace and their father had blamed himself.

Brevlin slowly made his way back to his room in the boarding house. He had no idea how to get to Azenaria. He knew the city once existed, but over the past several hundred years, it had become more of a legend than a real place. He had no idea where to start. He only knew one thing - he would die before he would give up on the chance of rescuing his long lost little brother.

He knew that his life, as he knew it at that moment, was over. Though he did not deserve it, his life of despair and death had been filled with a little bit of light.

The Top of the World

Danshaw - The Storm

Darkness covered the small bedroom, protecting the sleeping boy from the storm that raged outside. A blinding flash of light filled the room. The sleeper stirred, rolled over so his back was to the window, and continued dreaming. Several seconds later, the windows shook with the vibration of thunder rolling across the sky. There was another flash of white light even brighter than the last.

Danshaw woke to a crash of thunder. He threw his arms in front of his face to protect himself from the huge sword that sped towards his head. Several seconds later he realized the sword had not split open his skull, and he still lived. He slowly peered through the opening between his arms and saw nothing but his bedroom wall. He sweated so heavily that his clothes stuck to his body. He got out of bed, tore off his soaking shirt, and splashed some cold water onto his face. Refreshed, with the effects of the nightmare slowly leaving him, he got dressed and started walking downstairs.

The storm that had come up during the night was demanding entrance into every window of the house. Danshaw hoped the shutters would hold. This house had stood for four centuries, and he was not going to let a little storm make him nervous. He kept trying to convince himself that this was just a little storm.

Memories of his dream slowly came back to him in fragments. There was a white temple in the midst of a wide open plain. Then the temple became a huge mountain. Then the mountain turned into a volcano and was swallowed up in a river of living, breathing rock. He saw the face of a beautiful princess twist into that of a hideous monster dressed in a robe of human flesh. The monster snarled at him and he froze with fear. Then the monster had a sword raised above its head. Danshaw gazed into the monster's eyes and was sick with dread when he saw nothing there but his own death. That must have been when he woke up. He had heard stories that if you die in a dream, you die in real life. He was suddenly very grateful for the storm.

His father and brother had been gone for three days now. Danshaw was too proud to admit he was lonely, but he missed them. No one could tell a funnier story than Brevlin. He was not sure if the stories were really that funny, or if it was just the way Brevlin told them. Danshaw was sure that Brevlin could turn the tale of the battle of Azenaria into a hilarious story of blood and death. His father was almost as talented, but there had always been a small, sad side to his father's mood ever since his wife died.

Danshaw still had a few, scattered memories of his mother. She had been tall, to a four year old, and had flowing, golden hair that looked like it was always on fire. He would always remember how much his parents loved each other. They were each others best friend, and when she was killed, both he and Brevlin had feared for their father's mind. There was a period of time when the boys thought their dad would rather join her in death than remain with them. Their father had always been a very strong man, however, and soon he was their father again.

Brevlin and Landar were traveling to Zymandia to sell the year's crop of tobacco at the annual festival. Landar's tobacco was one of the most popular fares at the festival. Everyone in the entire region of Baylein, who smoked, had smoked his tobacco at least once, and it had become one of the most rare and demanded items at the festival. It was common for Landar's tobacco to be sold several more times after Landar sold it. The first buyers at Landar's table could be sure of making a killing on the re-sale. Because of this, Landar usually sold out his stock in the first day or two and headed home. The three men were a very close family and none of them liked to be separated for long.

The sun glided up over the western mountains when Danshaw got downstairs. He opened the door to the main hall and looked outside. The rain subsided and the clouds broke up. It might be a nice day after all. He put on his heavy cloak and boots, went outside, and

closed the door behind him. He looked to the west, the direction his father and brother had taken. The storm was worse there. He hoped they were not being slowed down. The sooner they got to Zymandia, the sooner they would be back home.

He turned the corner and slowly walked toward the river. He didn't like going near the river. The terrible memories were often too much for him to bear. This morning, however, his loneliness caused him to push those memories aside.

His mother died ten years ago. She had been washing clothes in the river that morning, like she did every morning, when she was attacked by a large red wyvern. She did not see it coming and Danshaw prayed that she did not feel any pain. Danshaw found her lying upside down on the giant boulder next to the river. She was covered in blood and her hair had turned cold and dark. He was crying so loud that Landar had heard him from inside the house. Landar ran to Brienna's side and buried his face in her hair. He cried like Danshaw had never heard him cry. It was an anguished, soul-filled despair, which filled Danshaw with a sense of dread. When Landar looked up at Danshaw, his face was covered in Brienna's blood. Danshaw wasn't sure if his dad even recognized him. Danshaw saw, at that moment, what the face of an insane man might look like. He thought to himself that he had lost both of his parents that day. It was months before Landar recovered.

Danshaw turned away from the river. The boulder was still stained with blood. They had all tried to clean it, but nothing worked. They even tried to roll it over, but it was too big and most of it was still buried in the ground. All they could do was stay away and try to forget. With tears still in his eyes, he went back into the house. He needed to lie down for a few minutes. He slowly climbed the stairs to his room, undressed, and climbed into his small bed. He was only going to take a short nap before breakfast. The dream had filled him with adrenaline, but now he was coming down from his natural high, and realized it was still an hour before his normal waking time.

He ran through the woods. He did not know where he was, and he did not care. He only knew one thing - if he stopped running, he would die.

Branches slapped him in the face, and blood ran into his eyes, but he did not notice. He was running blind, but as long as he ran, he knew he would live. He did not know what chased him. He could not turn around to look. If he turned to look, he would slow down. If he slowed down, he would die.

When his lungs were on fire, and it seemed like he could run no further, he came to the

edge of a cliff. He had a split second to decide between jumping and facing his pursuer. His fear told him to jump, and he listened.

He fell through the air, and he wondered if this had been the best choice. He had been so frightened and so tired, that anything seemed better than stopping. He could not see the ground rushing to meet him, but he knew it was there, coming fast. He knew he could not fly, but in desperation, he actually tried to flap his arms, and he let out a small, frantic laugh as nothing happened.

He felt like he was slowing down. The air was not rushing by him as fast as it had been. Suddenly, he stopped falling, and for a moment he hung in mid air. He noticed how hot and muggy the night was. Then he began to rise. Slowly at first and speeding up every second, he was being pulled back towards the cliff he had jumped from.

The fear started first in the pit of his stomach and quickly spread through his entire body. He refused to believe that the creature that had been pursuing him had the power to break the laws of gravity to catch its escaping prey. In the back of his terrified mind, he knew that was exactly what was happening.

His ascent slowed. He knew he was close to the cliff and his pursuer. He stopped rising and floated horizontally toward the cliff edge. When he was over land, he suddenly dropped to the ground. Even though the breath was knocked out of him, he quickly jumped up to face his attacker.

He stood there, ready to fight to the death, when his pursuer approached. It was almost half again taller than he. Cold, red eyes looked down at him through a black hood. Just when he was sure the thing was going to attack him, it reached out with both of its hands, knelt down to the ground, and laid at his feet a huge sword. Stunned, out of breath, and prepared for death, he could not react for several moments. His first thought was that this creature wanted to fight him. He looked down at the sword. It was almost as long as he was. He looked up to question the creature and noticed that he was alone. The creature was gone. With shock and confusion battling in his mind, he reached down and picked up the sword.

Danshaw woke to a loud booming coming from downstairs. It took him a few moments to collect his wits, before he realized someone was knocking on the door. Dazed and shaken, he jumped up, splashed water on his face, and headed for the stairs. He quickly got to the door, just as another booming knock sounded on the other side. He was disoriented and still half asleep. He reached toward the door latch and was embarrassed to notice that his hands were

trembling. He mentally reprimanded himself, remembering that he was master of this house, and opened the door. There was no one there. He looked into the darkness for several moments and saw nothing. He stepped out into the night and peered all around. He was alone. Embarrassed or not, he quickly jumped back through the door and slammed it shut behind him. He was flustered and confused. This was too much to deal with after the dream he had just awakened from.

He stood at the door and pondered the recent events of his life. He felt alone and suddenly started thinking of his mother. He was a child when she died. He was soon to be a man. He wondered if it was a sign of weakness that he missed her. He was not sure. He knew if she were here, he would not be alone or frightened. If she were here, he would be cozy and warm.

He shivered. Another storm was on the way. It was not raining yet, but the wind was picking up. He couldn't believe it was dark out. He had only intended to take a short nap before he began his day. Now it was almost bedtime and he was exhausted. These dreams had stolen all of his sleep. He walked toward the stairs and his bedroom, anxious to get some undisturbed slumber before morning. As he reached the top of the stairs, a loud crack of thunder shot across the sky. He walked into his bedroom, sat down on his bed, and glanced to the corner of his room. That part of the room was a little darker than the rest, but his eyes were drawn to it like a bee to honey. Leaning against the wall in that dark corner was a huge sword.

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Landar poked his head out of the tent and glanced up at the sky. When he pulled his sopping wet body back into the tent, and Brevlin saw the scowl on his face, Brevlin's hopes of getting to Zymandia by day's end were dashed. Landar sat down hard on his bed-sheet, wiped his hair and face with a towel, and told Brevlin to get comfortable. They were staying here for another day.

The Ritchell family had been without a wife or mother for ten years. This had been hard on Danshaw and Brevlin, but Landar had suffered very deeply and the two brothers knew he still suffered. If it weren't for the two boys and the annual festival, Landar would have had no reason to go on. The festival was the biggest event of the year for the three men. Danshaw and Brevlin took turns going with their father to Zymandia. It was like another world. They saw people of every color, size, and shape from all over the world. They ate food and saw art and animals from every region of the known land. Brevlin was glad he was going this year. He felt

sorry for Danshaw, but at the same time he was glad not to be in Danshaw's place. This storm, however, worried him.

Storms were not unusual in this area. In fact, the entire region of Baylein was looked at jealously by some of the other regions that were plagued with heat and drought. This storm was unusual, however, for two reasons. It had come from the west. This had rarely happened in Brevlin's lifetime. Normally, storms came down from the north after being blown by the fierce, icy winds of the Pracha Mountains. The storms were always very cold and usually gave way to snow. This storm was very warm and muggy, having come from the west, from the Plains of Drosnia.

What worried him even more was the fact that there was no game anywhere to be found. In past years, the trip to Zymandia was just as much a hunting trip, as it was a journey to do business. The game was always plentiful and Landar had instilled a deep and sacred respect for nature into his two boys. They had not seen a single animal in two days.

Landar had a sudden, desperate reluctance to go any farther. He felt compelled to return home. When he looked to the west, the direction he and Brevlin had to travel for another day, all he could see was darkness and all he could feel was fear. Zymandia was on the eastern edge of Drosnia, which meant another day or more traveling through the open plains. For the first time in his life, Landar felt afraid to go on. He looked at his oldest son, asleep now and probably dreaming of the fascinating days ahead at the festival. How would he explain his fear to Brevlin? His boys looked up to him with reverence and respect. How was he supposed to tell his son that he was scared of a storm?

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He walked through an open field of wheat. The deep blue sky was a sharp contrast to the golden plain laid out before him. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, and the air was still and warm. The sun was a perfect orange ball directly above his head. Far ahead, almost to the horizon, stood a single rocky mountain. It looked alien to him. Standing by itself in this ocean of wheat, it was out of place - it didn't belong here. He started walking toward it.

The air grew cool, and a light breeze had come up from the direction of the mountain. He walked, slowly getting closer to his destination.

A sudden, loud shriek, cried out directly above him. He jumped, and his heart did the same. A large black raven was flying away from the mountain and seemed to be warning him to go no further. He stopped walking and lay down, stretching his arms out behind him, hoping to calm his pounding heart. It was working. His breathing came easier and his

heartbeat slowed. He looked up at the sun, blazing down from directly above him, and realized it had not moved since he began walking hours ago.

He sat up, his head barely coming out above the wheat, and looked again at the mountain. He stood up and decided he would not stop again until he reached it.

The air was cooler and the wind was picking up. He was beginning to get cold. He wasn't sure if the mountain was really getting closer or his eyes were playing tricks on him? The wheat was beginning to thin out and the ground was getting rocky.

The mountain loomed up in front of him now, but it still seemed miles away. He glanced up at the sun, and saw that it was still directly over his head. He knew he had been walking for hours, and the sun hadn't moved. He knew there was something wrong with that, but now he could only concentrate on reaching the mountain.

He walked on and wondered what he was going to do once he got there. He realized he didn't care. Reaching the mountain was all he cared about now. He was freezing. The sky was still clear and the sun still beat down, but the temperature had plummeted and the wind blew. He didn't remember how he got here or where he came from, but he was not prepared for winter weather. Still, he kept walking.

He stood in the middle of a huge shadow. Something had blocked out the sun, and he felt as if he was being watched from high above. The cold was unbearable now, with the sun gone, and he shivered uncontrollably.

With an inhuman cry, the thing in the sky began to dive. He knew it had a body, a head, and wings, but he didn't know what it was. He knew now that he would never reach the mountain. He should have heeded the raven's advice and turned back long ago. The thing was closing in, and he saw the eyes - two glowing pieces of coal in the center of a black monster's head. The thing was almost on top of him and he put his arms in front of his head just as he felt its warm breath on his face.

#

"Brevlin, are you OK? Wake up, son."

Brevlin opened his eyes and stared up into the worried face of his father. He was sweating and shivering, and for a minute he couldn't speak.

"You must have been having a nightmare. You were shaking and talking to yourself." Landar seemed overly worried about a simple nightmare.

"I..., I'm fine," Brevlin stuttered through chattering teeth. He must have had a nightmare, but he couldn't remember any of it. The storm had picked up during the night, if that was

possible, and pounded hard against the outside of the tent. "Is it morning, yet?"

"It's morning," Landar said, "but you couldn't tell it from looking outside. This storm is like nothing I've ever seen." Landar suddenly grew silent as if he were thinking. His eyes appeared glazed-over in the dim lamplight and he stared off into nothing. "If I ever lost you or Danshaw, I don't know what I would do. I love you boys, and I will do anything to protect you." Brevlin was really worried, now. "We are going home. I feel as if something very bad is happening, and I want the three of us to be together when it comes."

Brevlin was now beyond worried. He was scared. His father had never talked like this. Even in the months after their mothers death, he had never sounded like this.

"Pack up everything. We will move out in thirty minutes."

Landar and Brevlin struggled against the wind to get the horses loaded up with the few things they had decided to take with them. They would leave most of their belongings here. With a little luck, they would come back in a few days and everything would be intact. Almost an hour later, they had mounted their horses and they were on their way back home.

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Danshaw grabbed a hammer and a handful of nails from the tool shed and decided the shutters would not wake him again. As he walked toward the house, intent on permanently protecting all the windows, and his sleep, he glanced to the east. It was clear and calm. He was confident that he would have a full day to get some work done. He then looked to the west. He didn't notice the nails falling to the ground, but he did notice when the hammer landed on his foot. He glanced down at the hammer lying next to his boot, saw the nails spread out in the grass, and then looked back to the west. All he could do for several minutes was stare. The sky was black. It was darker than black, if that was possible. The clouds boiled and flowed towards him like a huge, dirty river. He thought about running, but where would he go? The storm was approaching too fast. He decided to run into the house. If he was going to die, he wanted to be home when it happened.

He didn't really know what he could do. He closed all the windows and bolted all the shutters, knowing it would do no good. The storm would hit the house any minute. All he could do was stand at the foot of the stairs, and watch the door. He almost laughed at himself. Did he expect the storm to ask for permission to enter? The wind pounded against the outside of the house. Several of the shutters had already come loose and banged against the windows they were supposed to be protecting.

Danshaw could see outside a few of the windows and it was total blackness. The wind

was gaining strength and parts of the house began to creak - a sound Danshaw had never heard before. He always knew that this house could withstand anything that nature could throw at it. If there was ever a threat, all he had to do was seek refuge inside and he would be safe. Now, the house told him it was not strong enough to withstand this torture for much longer.

A window on the other side of the room shattered. The howling wind now had a passageway into the house and it took full advantage. It was so loud that Danshaw covered his ears. Another window shattered, and another. Danshaw ran upstairs to his room, trying to be a man and hold in the panic. He closed his door behind him and bolted it, shutting out some of the howling. For a second, he thought the wind laughed at him, mocking him, asking him where he thought he was going to hide.

He wished his bedroom door were stronger than it was. He had never needed protection inside his bedroom before, and this thin door had always been good enough to keep out the draft. He knew it wouldn't be long before the storm was inside his room, so he gathered up some traveling clothes and supplies, not knowing what condition the house would be in after this nightmare passed.

The door blew open, splinters of wood flying from the latch, and Danshaw was blown back against his bed. The darkness appeared to have form and substance. In his terrified mind, he saw black eyes gazing at him through the doorway, and a dagger filled mouth screaming for his blood. He suddenly shouted. He didn't know why, but he didn't want to stand there silent any longer. He shouted at the storm to get out of his house and leave him alone.

At that moment, he saw a distinct form standing in the doorway. It was completely black, and it was silhouetted against the blackness of the storm still raging in the hallway, but he clearly saw it standing there as if it waited for something. It didn't have a face. Danshaw couldn't even tell if it was human. The thing stood in the doorway for a few seconds, when its head turned as if it had caught sight of something in the corner of his room. Danshaw followed its gaze, and he saw the giant sword standing by itself in the corner, resting against the wall. Danshaw knew that if this creature got hold of the sword, it would kill him with it, but the creature seemed unable to come any further into the room. He didn't understand why. The storm had blasted into his house as if it were made of straw. The wind and rain howled around him, but the creature could not or did not want to enter his room.

Danshaw slowly crept toward the sword, without taking his eyes off the monster. He

approached it, and the wind picked up to an impossible frenzy, and Danshaw was thrown back against the wall. He jumped up, expecting to see the black thing hovering over him, ready to finish him, but the thing remained in the doorway. Still on his knees, he leaned against the wall, stretched his arm to its full length, and grabbed hold of the sword's blade. There was a flash of light, like lightning, and Danshaw waited for the thunder. It never came. He glanced at the doorway, at the creature standing there. It seemed to be staring directly at him, its eyes so full of hatred that it made him shudder. There was another flash of light, and the creature was gone.

The wind and rain slowly calmed. He watched in wonder as the storm slowly crept back down the stairway, the blackness following like a shadow, and then it was gone. The quiet was deafening and Danshaw was afraid to move. He still knelt, leaning against the wall, and stretched out with a death grip on the blade of the sword. He was sure if he let go, the storm and the black creature would return. Several minutes later he stood, his knees creaking and sore, and removed his hand from the blade. He had gripped the blade so tightly that he now had two bloody gashes across the palm of his hand. He wrapped his hand in a clean, wet cloth and sat down on his soaking wet bed. He stared at the sword, and he suddenly remembered how he had obtained it. Thoughts of his mother came back to him, and he wondered if all that had happened in the past two days had brought on the sudden memories of her, or if it was the other way around.

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Landar and Brevlin fought their way through the worst storm either of them had ever seen. The horses were terrified, and so was Landar. He felt a reluctance to let his son see his fear. Brevlin was doing well, considering what they were up against, and Landar didn't want to worry him more than he already had. Even worse than Landar's fear of the storm, was his unexplained worry for Danshaw. The storm headed due east, toward their home. Landar wasn't worried about the house, the farm, or the tobacco they had left behind - he only worried about his son.

Landar was angry. He had been caught completely off guard by this storm. He had been forced to abandon his trip to the festival, effectively ruining a season's crop and a season's income. He was showing fear to his oldest son. Landar wasn't a proud man, and he was not embarrassed to show emotion to either of his sons, when it was justified. In this case, however, his fear and panic were inexplicable. Brevlin also felt it, and when he looked to his father to explain it for him, his father was unable to. This filled Brevlin with much more doubt

and apprehension than the storm itself. Landar was also angry because he had a very strong feeling that Danshaw was in danger. They were at least another full day away from home, and his youngest son was alone. Deep down, he knew Danshaw could take care of himself. This did not prevent the terrible feeling of helplessness that grew inside him.

It seemed that time had stopped as they traveled. There was no change in the fury of the storm. They had no idea where the sun currently rested in the sky. They were weary and soaked through to the bone. They had ceased feeling cold. They were physically numb and mentally exhausted. They did not speak. Their only goal was to keep the horses under control and continue moving forward.

#

Danshaw still sat on the sopping wet bed, his hand wrapped in a bloody cloth that was beginning to dry and harden, when he heard the front door open. The house had been so quiet for minutes, or hours, Danshaw wasn't sure. The quiet had become a living thing that surrounded him and played games with his senses. At first he thought he had imagined the sound of the door. He wasn't even sure if he had imagined the storm. He looked up from his silent reverie, and quickly became aware of the intense pain in his hand. He had allowed his wounds to dry while being wrapped in a cloth. Now the impromptu bandage had become stuck to his wounds. He was more concerned, however, with the possibility of an unexpected visitor. His hand would have to wait.

He stood up, and his entire lower body almost failed him. He gripped the heavy bedpost and stood there for several seconds, while red-hot fire ran through the veins of his legs. As the pain subsided, and warm blood returned to his feet and legs, he walked toward his bedroom door. He had not heard any more noises since the first one, but he needed to begin surveying the damage to the house. He did not know if there would be any more storms, but he wanted to have the house in a basic state of repair just in case.

He reached the top of the stairs and looked down into the main hallway of the house. He was shocked, but not completely surprised. There was broken glass all over the floor. Every piece of furniture within view had been knocked over. He walked down toward the main entryway, and the front door. His first order of business would be shuttering all the windows with whatever material he could find.

He walked out the front door, and was slammed backwards by the brightness of the sun. The sky was a clear, clean blue and the air was sweeter than he had ever known. He stood with his eyes closed and spent several minutes breathing deep. He forgot the pain in his

hand. He forgot the damage to his house. He forgot about his father and brother. He simply stood there and breathed as if he had been living in a dank cave his whole life.

He finally opened his eyes and looked around. He was more content at that moment than he had ever been. He felt invincible. He walked towards the north end of the house, taking in everything that needed to be done, and making a mental list of the supplies he would need. He was confident that he could rebuild the entire house if needed. He turned the corner and faced the river.

Standing between the house and the blood-stained boulder, with her back to him, was a woman. She had beautiful, golden hair and she wore a flowing, white laced dress. He stopped and stared at her back. He could not admit to himself that he knew who this woman was, but deep inside he knew. He stood there, staring at her and she spoke one word - "Danshaw". What she said brought tears to his eyes, and he fell to his knees and wept. She turned around, looked down at him, and took his head in her arms. She ran her fingers through his hair, just like she had done when he was a small boy. He sobbed uncontrollably now, as she pulled his head to her and held him tight.

#

The two men and the two horses made terrible progress. If they had waited at their camp for several more hours, the storm would have passed them by, and they would have had easy travel to the festival. They were traveling with the storm, not moving away from it. This knowledge would not have affected Landar's decision to return home. He was worried about his youngest son. The festival and the crop were inconsequential compared to the security of his family.

Strong feelings of anxiety had grown inside of Landar over the past few hours. Something was wrong and he didn't know what. He thought of his wife. He still missed her dearly. He loved his boys more than his own life, but it wasn't easy being without Brienna. A home needed a mother. There was no question about that. When she had been taken from them, the Ritchell family had almost been lost. Only the individual strength of the three men had allowed it to survive that dark time. Now, Landar remembered happier times.

About one hundred yards ahead, off to the side of the road, was an old barn. It had no windows, and it would be a much needed respite from the storm. Landar was exhausted. It only took one glance at Brevlin to tell he was practically asleep in his saddle. They approached the run-down barn cautiously, knowing that anyone or anything might have taken refuge inside. It was empty and they gladly dismounted and led the horses inside. The floor

was hard and wet, but the wind was almost calm. There was nowhere inside where one could be totally free from the rain, but it was about as welcome as a feather bed would have been under these circumstances. Both men took care of the horses and then collapsed into immediate unconsciousness. Normally, in this type of situation as strangers in a strange place, on someone's property, Landar would have been much more concerned with keeping watch. As it was, he and Brevlin were oblivious to anyone who may have watched them enter the barn.

#

Morgan watched the two men and the two horses enter the barn, and he couldn't believe his luck. He thought he had lost them in the storm. They were both obviously exhausted and they went inside without even looking back. For a second, he was angry that he would not be able to take refuge in the barn, but he counted his blessings. The two men would be like children now. He crept toward the barn, and the two sleeping men inside.

#

Danshaw knelt there by the river's edge, and he tried to convince himself this could not be his mother, but he knew that it was. He was just beginning a train of thought that would have eventually driven him crazy, when she spoke. Her voice, like her hair, her dress and her smell, was exactly as he remembered it.

"I have been watching you, Danshaw. You have made me so proud. You don't realize what is happening yet, but you are acting exactly as I would have expected."

He briefly pulled away from her and looked up into her eyes. They were as blue as the sky on a cloudless day, exactly as he remembered. He had no idea what she was talking about.

He stared into her eyes. "I don't understand. How can you be here? I saw you die."

"I can't explain everything to you now. Please trust me." She choked on her tears. She knew he was still confused, but she also knew he would trust her.

"Why are you here?" He was now completely lost.

"There is only a little I can tell you now. Please listen carefully because there is not much time." She saw that he was about to interrupt, but he caught himself. "The storm that hit your house was not a natural storm. It was the wake of a much bigger event - similar to the wake that a large ship leaves behind it in the water. That wake has the potential to destroy the world. The event that caused the wake has the potential to destroy the universe."

"What was that thing?" he asked. "That thing that destroyed our house?"

“There are many dark powers working together towards an end that even I cannot fully comprehend. You must discover the power that lies behind this storm and stop it before it grows too mighty. If that happens we are all lost.”

“What must I do?” He was surprised that he felt resolute. He was ready to start moving.

“I cannot tell you much, only that you must discover what is behind this storm. Discover it and destroy it.” She took a step closer and smiled. “I will try to watch over you. I will give you any help that I can. Now go.”

He looked into her face for another moment, then turned and walked back toward the house, holding back his tears.

The Bottom of the World

Landar & Morgan - The Eagle

Landar stood alone on the hilltop, counting the seconds as the horizon slowly changed from black, to dark purple, to blue. He had been standing there since early morning, waiting for the world to turn. This was the day that the calling would be made. He had received the summons four mornings ago, and was on the road not two hours later. He had walked away from his parents, from his job, from his life, when he received notice that The Eagle would be selecting men for his newest campaign this morning. Landar had taken only what he could carry on his back, and left his old life for good. He could never go back, even if he was not chosen to be part of The Eagle's next campaign, and his entire life was hanging from his shoulders.

#

About two miles away, in the town of Bratha, another young man waited quietly for the dawn. Morgan sat alone in the back corner of the inn's common room, nursing a mug of ale that he had been working on since late last night. His thoughts were full. He had given up everything when he received the summons that the calling was going to be made today. Had someone asked him a week ago, he would have thought it crazy to give up his comfortable life for something as unsure and dangerous as this. Then the summons arrived and something inside him snapped. This was now the only thing in his life that mattered. He knew The Eagle would choose him. He was a very intelligent, confident, young man, and he succeeded at whatever he decided was important to him. Joining The Eagle's campaign was

very important to him, and yet he couldn't tell you exactly why.

#

The Eagle was an enigma. Most everyone in the region had heard of him, but no one had ever seen him. It was rumored that he really was a true eagle that had the power to take the shape of a man - or maybe he was a man who had the power to take the shape of an eagle. Either way, he commanded one of the strongest and most loyal mercenary forces on the continent. For this reason, many young, idealistic men were drawn to him. For this reason, Landar and Morgan were drawn to him.

Landar and Morgan met for the first time in a small, secluded valley, west of Bratha. About two dozen other men were there - some young and inexperienced, dreaming of the excitement of battle. Others were older - veterans of past wars. They all had one thing in common - a strange but powerful desire to give up everything to serve the legendary Eagle.

No one in that valley knew what to expect. No one who had ever been chosen by The Eagle had ever talked about the experience. Whether young or old, these men were all children, waiting and wondering what would happen next.

The sun went out and darkness covered the valley. Landar and Morgan had been standing next to each other when they were blinded. Both men instinctively drew their swords and stood back to back, covering each other, waiting for some unseen threat. They stood this way for what seemed like many minutes. There was no sound other than the hushed warnings of the other men in the valley. Landar realized too late what was happening. His breathing quickened. It was difficult to draw in enough air to fill his burning lungs. The valley was still pitch black, but he knew his vision was fading. He felt Morgan slump down behind him, and he joined Morgan in unconsciousness a few seconds later.

#

Landar opened his eyes. He sat on top of a large hill looking out over a huge, blackened city. He looked around the hilltop but saw no one else. He had been taken from that valley, alone, and brought here. He did not know why. He stood and looked at the dark city that seemed to stretch to the horizon. It took several moments but he finally recognized it as the legendary city of Azenaria. There were no existing pictures of the city, but every child was taught about the fantastic land in their history classes and bedtime stories. Before it had been destroyed, Azenaria was like no other land that had ever been. The image that now filled Landar's vision terrified him. He saw the city after it had been destroyed, but he understood how it would have looked to a weary traveler coming over this pass a thousand years ago. It

would have been magnificent.

He looked behind him and saw that dark clouds were beginning to amass on the eastern horizon. They would be here within hours and it looked like a nasty storm. He began the journey into the ruins of the city. At the very least, he could find shelter from the storm in a ruined building.

He climbed down the steep, rocky slope, keeping his eyes directly in front of his feet. The hike was difficult and he lost his footing several times. He slid down a large pile of loose rock for the final twenty feet of the descent, and rolled into the valley. His pants were ripped in several places and he had bloody scratches covering his arms and legs. He turned and looked back up the hill the direction he had come from and was amazed he had made it down alive. There were sheer drops, razor sharp rocks and thick brush blocking most of the small mountain. It was a miracle that he had chosen the path he had. He turned and began walking toward the great city, and wondered if any of the stories were true..

#

Morgan opened his eyes. He stood on the middle of a bridge above a roaring river. He looked down into the water, and saw shapeless forms slithering through the rapids. At first he thought they were large trout, or possibly razorfish, but after several minutes of watching them, he realized they were not fish. They were too large, too bloated, and too shadowy. He realized in horror they must be wraiths - the insubstantial shadows of human souls. His only thought was that he now stood over the legendary river of the dead - The Fanqui - and only a short distance downstream would be the great Fanquistaq Falls.

Morgan remembered back to his childhood when his grandfather would tell him stories of the river of the dead and the great falls. Every man, woman and child who died would ride the rapids to the falls. It was there, at the falls, where the judgment would take place. These souls would either rise up and journey into the sky, or they would plunge down the falls and ride the black rapids into the underworld. He thought back but could not remember anything in those old stories about a bridge.

He looked back down into the raging water and thought he saw the wraiths staring up at him, calling out to him as they flowed beneath the bridge, asking him for help. He thought they were reaching out to him through the foam roiling on top of the water. He had become mesmerized by their silent cries and the desperation he thought he heard there. He wanted to reach down and grab hold of them, as if pulling them out of the dead river would somehow allow them to avoid their fates. He suddenly knew this was what he was meant to do. It was

why he had been brought here – to save them. He bent down over the cold, wet railing and reached down into the freezing water. Just as his fingertips touched the roiling foam, the piercing cry of a black raven pulled him out of his reverie. He pulled himself back up onto the bridge, wondering what had just happened. He looked up at the large black bird and watched it as it turned into a dot on the horizon. He then looked back down into the water and saw the faint black forms swirling through the rapids, and he thought to himself that he must be standing over the legendary river of the dead - The Fanqui - and only a short distance downstream would be the great Fanquistaq Falls. He then wondered why that thought seemed so familiar, and why his head seemed so foggy.

He didn't know where he was, or which direction he should start traveling. He looked to the sky and saw the sun shining down directly overhead. He could not determine his position or direction, so he randomly chose a path and, with the fog slowly clearing from his mind, he walked off the bridge and into the forest.

#

The rain began to fall just as Landar approached the outskirts of the city. He thought he had a few minutes at best before the storm struck full force. He quickened his pace and entered the city. As he walked through the front gate, the temperature plummeted. The heat outside the city was sweltering. He was sweating heavily by the time he reached the gates. After he passed through, he was hit with a blast of cold air. More of his childhood stories of this dead city returned to his mind. Terrifying stories of ghosts, ghouls, and demons that caused the air to turn deathly cold. Travelers who froze or burned to death depending on what monster decided to attack. They no longer seemed like innocent, childhood stories.

He looked up and saw the sun was now covered by the storm clouds. He knew it was about to get much colder, and the demons would soon be out in full force. His immediate priority was finding shelter from the storm.

The winds had picked up and the rain was beating down. He entered the first door he came to. It opened easily, and he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He immediately knew that something wasn't right. He had expected to hear the storm beating down outside, but he heard nothing. It was completely silent. He reached around to open the door, and stopped just as his hand touched the door knob. Someone was crying upstairs. The sound was barely audible, and he would not have heard it over the sound of the storm. He let go of the door knob and turned, peering deeper into the building. As his eyes adjusted to the dim, hazy room, he noticed a staircase leading up into the darkness. After a brief moment of

contemplation, he walked toward the stairs.

The Edge of the World

Brevlin - Ghosts

Azenaria. A marble palace that does not exist in this world. It was all crazy. Brevlin thought he had dreamed the whole thing while in a drunken stupor. But, he knew that this time, he had not drunk more than a sip of ale. He was very familiar with the misery of the morning after a night of heavy drinking. He was not miserable now. His mind was clear. Deep inside he knew it was true. He had to find Azenaria. He had to find the marble palace, or he would die trying. He would rescue his little brother. He would finally make up for giving up on Danshaw so many years ago.

His father had told tales of Azenaria to them when they were children. Tales of what the city was like when it was alive. It was a wonder of the world - a magnificent city of eternal light. When Azenaria went dark, the world changed. No longer was there a land where all the races of the world would gather to share their culture and to trade their goods. When Azenaria went dark, the world became a much smaller place.

Brevlin's only knowledge of Azenaria came from listening to the stories and the legends of many of the older men around town. There were no solid facts. No one he knew had ever been to the dead city. Before today, he had not believed it even existed. But he knew it must exist. Deep inside, he knew, and he knew he would find it. He suddenly wished his father were here. He had been alone for so long, an orphan, that he had become numb to the loneliness. Now that he knew Danshaw was alive, he desperately wished his father were here for him, for them both.

The only chance he had of finding the city was to visit an old friend. It had been many years since he had seen or even thought of Tarn, his old mentor. The first time he met Tarn, Brevlin was a man who wanted to die. He had given up on life, and Tarn had told him that would make him an excellent assassin.

Tarn had mentored Brevlin for several years. Together they studied many types of weapons, starting with the long range crossbow, sling, and poison darts. Then they moved up to the closer range weapons. Finally, Brevlin mastered the dagger. Brevlin knew Tarn was pleased and impressed with him. He also knew he would not fade away into old age. When

Brevlin left Tarn, he knew he would never see him again. That was the rule. They must part ways forever.

Brevlin knew where Tarn was, but he was reluctant to visit him. He knew if he showed his face there, his life would be forfeit. Even though he and Tarn would each consider the other a friend, it was an unwritten rule in their line of work that the student, once he becomes independent, can never again see the master. After careful thought, he knew it was his only choice. There was no one else who had the information he needed. He packed up what he could carry, knowing he would never return to this room or this town, and headed out into the night.

He traveled, and he continued going over what he would say to Tarn if he managed to get to him. Tarn had treated him like a son during their time together, but that time was long past. He thought of a hundred different lies to tell his old friend. He finally decided that he would tell Tarn the truth. Maybe Tarn would think he was crazy and take pity on him. Maybe Tarn would be right.

He came to the border of Madral and Cartopa on the third day of his journey. He would be able to cross into Cartopa with no problems, but he knew if he did, he would never be allowed to cross back into Madral. He would say goodbye to this land forever. After a moment of thought, he walked across the invisible line. The guards eyed him warily, but they did not care about anyone leaving their country.

He set off from the border into Cartopa, and he felt a weight lift from him. He had never realized it before, but living and working in Madral had pressed down on him for so many years, he had become a worn down husk of a man. As thoughts and memories of Danshaw came back into his head, he began walking with a purpose.

He entered Cartopa's largest city, Braden, and he began to be more wary of those around him. He knew there were people here who would recognize him - some friend and some foe. Either way, he did not want the attention. He would have to be on his guard. He pulled his cloak up tight around his shoulders, stayed in the shadows, and walked toward the center of town.

Tarn lived and worked in a modest house on the eastern side of Braden. Brevlin approached the house, and he knew it was being watched. Tarn was a very powerful man and was very well protected, but no matter how powerful he was, he was bound by certain rules. One of those rules forbade him from seeing his old student. He was still a few blocks away from the house when he stepped into an inn. He ordered a drink and a table and planned

what his next step would be.

He took a table in the corner away from the door and ordered a mug of ale. He should be starving, but he couldn't think about eating. He had to force down the first few sips of ale. He thought back to the last time he had a drink in a tavern. It had looked and smelled just like this one, and the memories came. He even caught himself looking around the room for the familiar ghost. He saw no one but strangers, so he went back to nursing his ale.

Brevlin looked up as two men entered the room. He did not recognize the first man. He was middle aged with a full beard and a scar across his left cheek. He wore a scowl on his face that Brevlin knew was permanent. He could tell this man was not to be harassed. When he looked into the face of the other man, he stared dumbly for a few seconds then quickly turned away. It was Tarn. He casually glanced around the room to make sure no one had seen him staring. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Tarn and his angry companion walk to a table and sit down. At that moment, Brevlin realized that fate had given him this chance, and he would not let it pass. He knew that Tarn was always intimately aware of his surroundings. Within seconds, Tarn would know the face of every man in this room. Brevlin sat up and took another swig of his ale. Tarn's eyes met his a few moments later, lingered for the time it took him to blink once, and then were gone.

Brevlin's heart pounded. He knew he may have just signed his death warrant, but he also knew he had no other choice. Tarn and his companion talked for several more minutes, and then his companion rose, the scowl still on his face, and walked out of the room. Tarn sat in silence for a moment longer, then rose and walked toward the staircase that led up to the rented rooms. Brevlin waited long enough to finish his ale, gather up enough courage to face his death, and slowly walked toward the stairs.

He reached the second level, and was greeted with an empty hallway full of closed doors. He had not yet rented a room, and did not have a key. Confused, he walked down the hall, looking at each door and listening intently as he went. When he reached the third door on the right, he noticed something odd. There was a tiny scratch in the door frame next to the knob. It caught his attention for two reasons. It was obviously fresh, having been carved within the past few hours, and more importantly, it was the image of a dagger. Brevlin took a deep breath, reached for the door knob, and turned. The door opened quietly, he slipped inside the room and closed the door behind him.

He stood in the darkness for a few moments, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He knew he would die here if Tarn so chose. He had accepted that fact long ago. So, he simply waited in

the darkness until Tarn had decided his fate.

His eyes eventually opened and he was able to distinguish a shadow of a man sitting in a chair in front of a window. Brevlin recognized Tarn's silhouette, and slowly approached him. When Brevlin was still a few steps away, Tarn raised his hand, signaling Brevlin to stop. Brevlin stopped and waited. The room suddenly lit up as Tarn turned up a lamp on the table next to him. The two men looked at each other for what could have been a moment, or an hour. Brevlin wasn't sure.

"Sit down," Tarn said, pointing to another chair several feet away from his. Brevlin sat down quietly and waited for Tarn to continue speaking.

"I must admit, when I saw you downstairs, I thought I had gone mad. I told myself there is no way you would have come back here, and so brazenly. You are either very lucky or very stupid - perhaps both." Tarn's emotionless face had not changed. His eyes penetrated Brevlin's. Brevlin knew he couldn't lie to this man. Tarn would know if he was lying, and he would never receive the information he needed if he wasn't completely truthful with Tarn. He finally replied.

"I know the implications of my coming here. I know the risk I take, and I accepted that long ago. I need information and you are the only one I know who has it." He started off nervously, but had calmed down as he continued to speak.

"Once I have the information I need, I guarantee you will never see me or hear from me again. Chances are, I will not be alive for much longer, anyway." He spoke, and he noticed Tarn's eyes flicker for just an instant. Something that Brevlin had said, or how he said it, had caught Tarn's attention.

Tarn replied, "Brevlin, if I allow you to live, and anyone finds out, my life will also be forfeit. There are those in this organization who feel I am too old and too weak to continue in my position of authority. They would take my leniency toward you as an unforgivable weakness. I will give you an hour to explain to me why I should take that risk."

Brevlin heaved a silent sigh of relief. That was all he could have asked for. He spoke to Tarn as a frightened son speaks to his father. He told him everything. He explained what had happened to their family twenty years ago. He explained what had happened with the ghost four days ago. He let it all out in a rush, and then he was silent.

Tarn looked at him for an eternity. Brevlin knew that the sun had risen and fallen a thousand times as Tarn dug deeper into his soul. Brevlin expected Tarn to begin laughing, or looking at him with sympathy, the way a sane man looks at a mad man. When Tarn finally

spoke, Brevlin silently wept.

“Azenaria. A name I thought I would never hear again outside of legends and child’s tales.” He went silent for a few seconds, and then began again. “Yes, I know where Azenaria is, or I should say, I know how one might get there. No one truly knows where it is, and no one can ever return.” That last part confused Brevlin. How does someone know how to get to a place, but not know where that place is, or how to get back? So many new questions already filled his mind.

Tarn continued. “Having said that, I do not believe you have the courage, or the will required to make the journey. No one can reach Azenaria unless they have given up everything they have ever cared about, even their life. I don’t believe you can do that.”

Brevlin felt helpless. He knew Tarn was testing him, but he also knew that Tarn might be right. Did he have the will to do what must be done? “I will do anything to save my brother, or I will die trying. You must tell me what to do,” Brevlin said softly.

When Brevlin walked out of the room and back into the empty hallway, he was an empty man. Tarn had told him exactly what must be done to reach Azenaria and save his brother. Tarn had pushed him to the edge of sanity with his doubt and disbelief of Brevlin’s true character. In the end, Brevlin finally understood what it would take to discover whether or not he had the composition to succeed in this horrendous task. He would be filled with fear and doubt until he discovered this himself.

Brevlin walked down the hall toward the stairs, and his mind swam. In the past hour he had been told more impossibilities than he dreamed could exist in the world. Either Tarn believed he was crazy, and was intentionally trying to drive him over the edge of madness, or Tarn had believed his story and had given him the true knowledge he needed to reach Danshaw. He realized it didn’t really matter. He would follow the course that Tarn had set him on, whether it was true or not, and he would either die, or he would find his brother and his salvation.

He walked down the stairs, across the common room, and out the door. He stopped in the middle of the street and looked up to the windows on the second floor of the inn. They were all dark. For a moment, he wondered if his conversation with Tarn had really happened. Maybe he had gotten drunk, passed out, and imagined the whole thing. He glanced up at the windows again and for a split second, he thought he saw a pair of glowing, red eyes looking down on him. He shivered and walked away, down the dark street.

He walked for a few minutes, and the air had grown cooler. He was beginning to feel a

little refreshed. He thought back to his conversation with Tarn. It had not really been a conversation. It was mostly Tarn speaking and Brevlin listening to the impossible words as if he were in a drunken stupor. Tarn had been reluctant to tell him anything because he didn't believe Brevlin had the will or determination to do what needed to be done. Brevlin must have convinced him otherwise because he had told Brevlin what he needed to do. But, it was impossible. What Tarn had told him was impossible. No living man could accomplish it, and he was no good to Danshaw if he were dead.

He repeated Tarn's words more carefully, thinking there must have been a secret meaning or some kind of symbolism hidden between the lines. He knew Tarn, and he knew the man would occasionally speak in code if there were eavesdroppers nearby. But, he and Tarn had been alone. Tarn had no reason to speak to him in code. He couldn't get his head around it. The first thing Tarn had told him to do was possible. He had to get to the top of the Pracha mountains. He didn't understand why, but he knew that was something he could do, and he would do it. He could only hope that when the time came, he would somehow understand the rest of Tarn's impossible instructions.

The journey to the Pracha would be long and arduous under the best of circumstances. Physically, it would be a grueling journey just to get to the base of the mountain. It would be far beyond grueling to get to the peak. Emotionally, this journey would be much harder. If he were to travel directly to the Pracha, he would be forced to travel through his childhood home. He had not been north of the Pantar River in almost twenty years. Now he would have to cross the river, and travel north through the valley that lay between Zymandia and the Manor Forest, the valley where he was born and raised, and where he last saw Danshaw so many years ago. He suddenly began to choke up. Memories of his childhood came flooding back - memories of Danshaw. He remembered how happy he had been that it was his turn to go with dad to the festival, and how exciting it would be to visit the great city of Zymandia.

He knew that he could not allow this to keep happening to him. If he were to make this journey, he had to be strong and not allow his emotions to overtake him. He had to put Danshaw out of his mind, at least for a while.

And that is what he did. He thought of this as just another job. The most important thing was to make his plans and preparations as if this were another contract. He never thought of his victims as human beings. He never thought of them as fathers, or sons, or providers. It was just a job. No emotion - no guilt. Once he thought this way, it became easier to deal with. The Pracha was his destination. Danshaw was just another mark - his last and most important

mark.

He would get a room at the inn, and he would start his long journey in the morning. He closed and locked his door, sat on the side of his bed, and waited. He didn't have to wait long. She appeared, like she always did, wearing her long red dress. It was the dress he had given her on their fifth anniversary. It was the dress she had died in.

"I need you, baby," he would say. It always started the same way.

"No you don't," she would always reply.

"My brother is alive," he said. "And you know what I need to do, don't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Do you know what you need to do?"

"I don't understand it, any of it. It can't be real. I've finally snapped. I'll be joining you soon - for real this time."

She smiled, like she always does. "You won't be joining me." She was sad now, like she always was.

"Because you're not in hell," he said flatly.

"If I was with you, you would not be able to do what must be done." She had become more serious now. "The only reason I believe you can accomplish this task, is because you have nothing and no one to live for. Nothing and no one except your brother."

"I still need you."

"No, you don't."

The Top of the World

Danshaw - The Storm

Danshaw didn't know what he was supposed to do, but he knew he couldn't stay at home. He would be gone before Brevlin and dad returned. He would leave them a message, and he hoped they would understand, but he knew this was something he had to do. His mind raced. He tried to calm down and go over his priorities. He needed to pack up some supplies, enough to be gone for a few weeks. Beyond that - he couldn't think that far ahead. He knew he would go crazy unless he got busy preparing.

He surveyed the damage to the house, and he felt torn. He knew he should get some basic repairs done on the windows and shutters, in case another storm came. As it was right now, another bad storm would flood the house and cause even more severe damage. As he

thought about what repairs were needed, the words of his mother came back to him. He knew he couldn't stay. He needed to gather some supplies and get going before nightfall. With the decision made, he made his preparations. He knew the storm had continued moving to the east, so he would start off in that direction.

The three Ritchell men were experienced hunters and were very capable of surviving for extended periods in the wilderness. In less than an hour, Danshaw had plenty of dried food, extra clothes, water skins, his hunting knife, bow and quiver of arrows. He surveyed himself and decided he was ready to go. Just as he was about to set out, he remembered one thing he had almost forgotten. He went back into the house, the broken glass crunching beneath his feet, and climbed the stairs. When he reached the threshold of his room, he hesitated a moment. He remembered the storm that had hit his house last night. He remembered the darkness, and most importantly, he remembered the sword. He knew the sword was an important key to all this, but he didn't know why. He grabbed it, quickly created a makeshift sling, and was on his way with the giant sword safely strapped to his back. He took one last look back at his home, the only home he had ever known, and wondered if he would ever see it, or Brevlin and dad, again.

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Morgan silently approached the barn door that Brevlin and Landar had used. His stealth was purely a habit. He could have made as much noise as he wanted, and the exhausted men inside never would have heard it over the storm. He stood there, just outside the door, and his mind drifted back to when he first met Landar. Neither of them knew it at the time, but their first, brief encounter in a far away valley over twenty years ago, had put them on a terrible path which now brought them both to this barn. They had both served The Eagle for so long, there was no other life available to them. That is why it was so difficult when Landar decided to leave The Eagle, and Morgan, to settle down and start a family.

The storm was as loud and powerful as ever. He hoped the men inside were sleeping soundly by now. He knew he would not be able to enter the barn silently. When he opened the door, he would be allowing the storm into the barn. He readied himself, gripped the handle on the door, and quickly slid into the barn closing the door behind him. It was not a large barn. There were several closed sections for housing horses or cows, and there was a loft that covered about a quarter of the upper area. He slowly crept away from the door and scanned the area. He covered the entire lower area in several minutes, but there was no sign of anyone. That meant they were in the loft. He found the ladder, and climbed. He reached the

top of the loft in seconds, and immediately noticed the two men, sleeping like babes, several yards away.

For the first time since he had decided to pursue Landar, Morgan was confused. He had never truly understood why he wanted to track Landar down. He had never known what he would do if he found him. When Landar left The Eagle, Morgan felt betrayed. Morgan had fallen in love, two years earlier, and he had considered leaving The Eagle for his love, but Landar had talked him out of it. Morgan had eventually come to trust Landar's advice, and left his love during the night. Morgan had finally found Landar, weak and unarmed. He could kill him, try to convince him to come back to The Eagle, or forgive him and move on with his life. Suddenly a tear came to his eye.

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Landar stood next to the river watching his five year old son, Brevlin, try to catch his first fish. Brienna sat on a blanket on the grass, reading from a book to two year old Danshaw. She read Danshaw's favorite poem about the dog named Tiny who saved the life of the famous sword-fighter Bruto. Danshaw knew the story by heart, but he would never read it himself. It didn't mean the same unless Brienna read it to him. At that moment, with his family gathered around him, Landar was truly happy.

Landar found a perfect stick for Brevlin. He attached some thread to the end and a bent nail to use as a hook. He and Brevlin had spent hours digging for worms. They now had several fat ones in a jar of dirt. Brevlin was excited to hook his first worm, but when the time came, he couldn't do it. The only word from him was, "Gross!" Landar only laughed and secured the worm to the hook without killing it. He showed Brevlin how to get the bait out into the river without throwing it off the hook. Brevlin stood as close to the water as he could get, holding his new fishing pole as far out above the water as he could. The smile on his face and the joy there, almost made Landar cry.

Landar saw the string tighten before Brevlin did, but when the end of the pole took a healthy drop, almost touching the water, Brevlin screamed. He pulled the pole out of the water so hard, he almost fell backwards. The fish, still attached to the string, went flying over his head. Brevlin, still screaming with excitement, turned around and grabbed the fish like it was going to run away. He held it in his hands and turned to show Landar. This was the most pride Landar had ever seen in his son and Landar reflected it right back. The fish was not large, but it was big enough to keep. Landar asked Brevlin if he wanted to clean it and eat it. Fishing, like hunting, is a sacred duty. You only harm the animals you intend to eat or make

other use of. Brevlin said he wanted to clean it and have it for dinner that night.

Landar opened his eyes and listened for a moment. He couldn't believe it, but the storm had stopped. He looked across the barn at a crack in the wall, and noticed sunlight shining through. He glanced over at Brevlin, who was still asleep. He sat up slowly, amazed at how stiff he was, and looked around the barn. Everything appeared normal. The door was closed. The horses were still there, and it was daylight outside. He lay back down and stared up at the ceiling thinking about the past day. He was still in shock over that storm. He had never seen anything like it and he had traveled the world for most of his life. He finally decided to climb down, stretch his legs, and take a look outside.

Landar opened the door and was blinded by the sunlight. Even though the barn was surrounded by trees, the little light that managed to penetrate the thick branches was more than he could bear. It took him several minutes to get his vision back. He looked around and could not believe what he saw. There was very little damage from the storm. There were no fallen trees, no large branches torn from the trunks, no large pools of standing water. It looked like a little rain had blown through and was quickly gone. He couldn't understand. There should have been massive damage.

"You and your son slept for almost two days," came a voice from behind him. "I waited outside this barn for almost two days before I decided to go in and kill you in your sleep."

Landar slowly turned to face his friend. He wasn't angry or frightened. He just wanted to make Morgan understand why he had left.

"Hello, old friend", Landar said. "It's been a long time."

"It hasn't been as long as you think," Morgan answered. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

Landar thought for a moment. He looked into his old friend's eyes, and what he saw there almost caused him to weep. Suddenly, he knew. He knew that Morgan had wanted to kill him, had tried to kill him, but in the end couldn't do it. He understood that now Morgan believed himself too weak - too weak to return to The Eagle.

Landar replied, "Why don't you tell me why you shouldn't kill me? If you did finish me, I'm sure The Eagle would reward you well."

Morgan appeared to contemplate this. He replied, "I'm sure he would. I can no longer return to The Eagle any more than you can. My loyalty has been tested and I failed. Because of you, because of my weakness, I am no longer worthy to serve him."

Landar was speechless. He looked at his old friend for several moments. "I am sorry for

leaving you. I was never able to explain my true reasons, and I still can't. I have two sons now - sons without a mother. They need me. After that storm," He broke off, his thoughts going to Danshaw.

"I don't care about your sons. I should have killed you. I should kill you." Morgan turned away from Landar. Landar knew that anger, resentment and regret were building up inside him.

Landar realized the true meaning of Morgan's conflicting emotions. It wasn't his weakness at being unable to kill Landar. It was that intense anger, resentment and regret for what he had lost. Regret that he had so quickly turned away the possibility of love, and Landar had not. Landar ached for his friend, but knew there was nothing he could do for him. All Landar could say was, "I'm sorry."

Morgan smiled, but it was not a smile of joy. It was a bitter smile. All he could say to Landar was, "Goodbye", then he turned, and disappeared into the forest.

The Bottom of the World

Landar & Morgan - The Eagle

Landar looked at the stairs for several more moments. The crying had stopped a few times, but it always started again after a minute. The stairs led up into blackness, and he wondered if he had the courage to climb them. He slowly moved across the entryway towards the stairs.

He looked around as he walked. He appeared to be in a lobby. This might have been a boarding house or hotel of some kind. The upstairs floors were probably individual living areas. From what he could see of the lobby, it had once been magnificent. The remains of a huge chandelier hung from the ceiling. Large chairs and couches were rotting and crumbling to dust. The faint images of huge paintings were still barely visible on the walls. The crier upstairs must be someone who had also taken refuge from the storm. He reached the first step and began to climb.

He expected the stairs to creak under his weight, and he winced slightly when he stepped onto the first one. He was grateful to realize the steps were made of marble. Another indication of how rich this building once was. He climbed in silence. The crying had stopped again.

The second floor opened into a huge landing area. There were more large couches, tables, and paintings crumbling to dust. He stopped for several moments. The crying had not returned for several minutes, and he worried that he would have to search every room of the entire building. He stood and stared down the long hallway until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could make out a window at the far end of the hall. The storm still raged outside, but enough light shone in through the window to allow him to slowly walk down the long hallway.

Landar reached the first door, and he realized it would probably be locked. They would all be locked. This building was crumbling to dust around him, but it had been built to last a very long time. He was not prepared to kick down every door. He reached for the door knob of the first door he came to. He grabbed it and began to turn when he heard the crying return. It was clearly coming from a higher floor. He headed back to the stairs and continued to climb.

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Morgan had walked through the forest for about two hours since leaving the bridge. The brush was thick and he recognized most of the plant life. He would have believed he was in any forest near his home, if not for the fact that he had just crossed the eternal Fanqui. This was all legend - it shouldn't exist. No geography existed in this legend. He had no idea where he was or even which direction he was heading. All he could do was continue moving forward.

He came to a clearing a few minutes later. At first glance it appeared to be just a small open area with no landmarks. The forest continued about twenty paces further on. He decided to stop and rest, and explore the area. He immediately knew this was not a natural clearing. It appeared as if the tress had been felled and the brush had been cleared away. The ground was completely smooth. Not even a blade of grass grew. A few stones were scattered, but they appeared to have been placed randomly. This clearing gave him an uneasy feeling, so he decided he would take a short break just inside the tree line, and look more closely at this strange clearing when his head was clear.

When he woke, the sun had not moved across the sky. He guessed he had slept for about two hours, but he couldn't be sure. He felt much better. He got up, and prepared to cross the clearing, when he noticed movement in the trees on the other side. He crouched, his heart pounding, and watched as two creatures entered the clearing.

Morgan's father had always taught him to pay attention to his senses. "When you get a feeling in your gut, trust it", he would say. "Sometimes it may be a false alarm, but most of the time it will be dead on. It will save your life." Morgan thanked his gut now. He crouched lower

in the brush and watched.

The two creatures entered the clearing together. They were essentially humanoid in appearance, but they were like nothing he had ever seen. They were wearing brown cloaks and they moved as if they were floating on air. He could see their faces through the cowl of their cloaks. Their heads were bald and their skin was very pale. After they had gone a few paces into the clearing, they stopped. Their heads tilted upward as if they sniffed the air. They continued in this fashion for a minute, and then they stopped and looked directly toward Morgan in his hiding place in the brush. His heart stopped, and he prepared to run, knowing it would do no good. A moment later, the two creatures walked back toward the other side of the clearing, and came to a halt in the center.

They stood facing each other. Morgan noticed a very high pitched whine, almost inaudible, and not unpleasant. There was a flash of blinding white light a moment later as a sphere descended out of the sky and slowly floated down into the center of the clearing. The sphere appeared to be about three feet across and was filled with an almost pure white glow. It gently floated down as if it were filled with air. It came to a rest between the two creatures about three feet off the ground. Morgan looked at the sand below the sphere and noticed it had turned to a flat, smooth surface, almost like glass. He could feel the heat from the sphere. He couldn't believe these creatures were able to bear it.

The sphere came to a rest, and Morgan noticed the high pitched whine had stopped. The creatures both put their hands on the sphere, when suddenly, six more creatures, identical to the first two, came out of the forest. They all closed in on the sphere, each one on one of the eight compass points, and placed their hands on the sphere. The high pitched whine returned, and it was unpleasant this time. It continued to grow louder and it felt to Morgan like his ears would bleed. As the whine grew louder, the light inside the sphere grew brighter. Together they were blinding and deafening him. A moment later his world went dark.

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Landar reached the landing of the third floor and noticed it was almost identical to the floor below, but a little darker. He let his eyes adjust to the dark for several minutes, and he could see the window at the end of the hall. He knew that the crying came from one of the rooms on this floor. He could barely distinguish faint footprints in the dust. He walked, hoping the footprints would lead him to his quarry.

The dust had cleared before he got to the first room, but he soon realized it didn't matter. The third door on the right was open just a crack, and the crying had started again. He had

been so caught up in discovering the source of the weeping, that he never even considered the possibility that this was a trap, but now he did. He stopped and wondered why this thought suddenly came into his head. No one knew he was here. No one knew he would be here. It was illogical that someone had arrived here before him with the intention of leading him into a trap. Now he felt, with absolute certainty, that it was a trap. He knew he had been poisoned when he felt the sting on the back of his neck. He had just a moment to turn and see his attacker - a vaguely humanoid creature with pale skin, wearing a brown cloak. A moment later his world went dark.



Conrad Acosta was born and raised in Jacksonville, FL. He began reading fantasy at an early age and never stopped. His favorite authors include Weis & Hickman, Terry Brooks, David Eddings, Robert Jordan, JRR Tolkien, Patricia McKillip, Louise Cooper, Stephen King, Tad Williams, Fred Saberhagen, Raymond Feist, and many others.

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