

**THE FOURTH AGE:
SHADOW WARS
BOOK ONE
ASSASSINS**

BY
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First Printing

All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblances to any persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

Dedication

To my loving wife, Minh Ha, who made this possible, and my brother James, the first to believe.

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PROLOGUE

LAST DAY OF THE THIRD AGE

Bran's diminutive figure lay under a magic cloak given to all the Walkers by Aradia, Elf Queen of Phoenicia. Months of planning, hardship and pain would be rewarded, or he along with his friends would die here in *Plaga Erebus*, the dark kingdom of Magnar. Ash spewed up from the *Brunna Hatan*, the fountain of hate, where Dark Lightning crackled and hummed, at the top of its metallic peak, just a mile from their position. The ash spread outwards from the terrible fountain creating a gloomy pall that covered the sky, blending day into night.

Dark lightning crackled behind them, flickering all along the borders of Magnar's realm of nightmares, forming an impenetrable barrier obviating the need for border guards. Nearly all of the Dark Elves and Men comprising Magnar's army of conquest lay dead upon hate filled battlegrounds across the great lands known as *Nostraterra*. Most of the remnants gathered at the *Sanguine Templar*, the enormous temple complex only miles from the fountain, sacrificing captives from all the races, fueling the Dark Lightning. Others roamed the confines of the land patrolling between the temple and the fountain, guarding against any interference while Magnar brooded and festered in malice, plotting his resurgence.

Aradia, Elf queen of Phoenicia, driven from her realm into exile in the human realm of Eldora used her magic to find a small rent in Magnar's lethal defenses, allowing the Watchers to penetrate step by step avoiding all contact with the guardians of this dark kingdom. Horses could not fit through the small stone archway that was the only ingress to this land and the Elven cavalry waited upon the hills just outside the shimmering fence of death, waiting for their chance to rescue the Walkers upon their success.

Now, with a slight increase in light, day was beginning, they must strike soon, or risk detection this close to the fountain. One of Bran's fellow Walkers, the Dwarven King Gneiss approached leaned down to whisper,

'It's time Bran; stay behind me while I see if I can breach this infernal pipe.'

Gneiss and Bran moved to the edge of a freshly dug hole only three feet down, where the top of a subterranean pipe lay, flowing with the raw magic supplying the Fountain. Bran's three closest friends from their homeland of Platonia were gathered close to Bran, chosen from amongst their fellow Gracies to bear the water of life from their Spring of Hope to this terrible place. The four men from Eldora lurked nearby, their bows at the ready as they covered the rest of the party. The three Dwarven engineers, accompanying Gneiss had located this section of pipe, which was close enough to the surface to be breached, digging the hole. Now, the magic of the Dwarves must sever the hard metal of the pipe for Bran to complete his mission.

Gneiss took an ornate ancient war-hammer from his pack, its' head made of solid *Platina* a priceless metal mined by Dwarves, and Gneiss muttered an ancient Dwarven spell. Withdrawing a gleaming crystal cylinder, capped in Platina which shone with hundreds of changing colors and tiny shapes, Gneiss inserted it into a socket in the top of the hammer.

Muttering for everyone to stay back but his fellow Dwarves, Gneiss struck down through the hole in the ground hitting the pipe with a tremendous metallic crash. Small bits of black metal spewed up into the air from the hole, and Gneiss lurched backwards, pulled by the Dwarves.

'Now Bran!' said Gneiss.

Bran and his three fellow Gracies approached the hole and peering down Bran saw a large rent made in the dark pipe, where a thick dark red liquid swirled its' way to the Fountain, the

smell of rotting flesh emanating from the fissure was nearly overwhelming. '*Death, in liquid form.*' thought Bran, '*so Aradia was right.*' Gracie lore held only Life can defeat Death, and now Bran uncapped the jar of blue liquid—the waters of life carried from Platonía. His fellow three Gracies held him around the waist as he poured in the waters, and for a moment nothing happened; Bran feared that he had failed.

Suddenly the liquid in the pipe turned from red to a purple white, welling up from the pipe into the hole, as the ground beneath their feet shuddered. The Fountain's muttering flicker visible above their heads stuttered and went out, an unearthly quiet descended upon the land. Then, the Tower exploded in flickering sheets of shimmering energy, blue-white bolts discharging up from the ground and into the sky in actinic courses, running along the ashes of the surrounding desert. The deafening roar was pierced again and again by the sharp cracks of fresh bolts emanating all around. Bran, dragged up from the hole was pushed to safety by his Gracie friends, when a great rush of gas and liquid vomited forth from the hole, claiming two of his friends. Their escort of men grabbed Bran and his friend Arwel, propelling the Gracies to run as fast as they could, following the Dwarves towards the borders of the land, hoping for rescue by the Elven cavalry.

Seconds turned to minutes as Bran ran as fast as his short legs could manage, the bolts of Dark Lightning flashing across the ground and the sky. Bran paused at the top of a small rise, gasping for breath turning to watch the Fountain discharge its energy upon the *Sanguine Templar*. The entire temple structure was covered in streams of the dark lightning, when suddenly it exploded upwards and outwards; dark red blocks of stone hurtled hundreds of feet skyward before crashing down again. The magic of the *Sanguine Templar* faded, its dark red glow failing at last. Now, the Fountain spewed its magic outwards, the bolts lashing further and further from its peak.

'Run, Bran, run.' Cried Gneiss and turning to look ahead, Bran saw that the Dwarves were in front, with the men bringing up the rear. The smell of ashes, of ancient dust and decay, filled Bran's nose, as a bitter alkali taste choked his tongue, acrid vapors filling the air, making it difficult to breathe. Wheezing, he ran down the slope of the rise, seeing the dark hills where the cavalry surged down from the hills, the deadly fence vanquished. A leap of hope unlooked for soared in his chest,

'*We did it, we destroyed Magnar and Platonía is safe and soon I will return home.*' He thought but one last bolt of dark lightning caught him, its dark blue threads burning across his face and body. His left ear erupted in a cacophony of great sound and he writhed upon the ground in agony. Arwel had caught most of the blast and was ablaze, the men behind him vanishing forever. As Bran lay upon the sands of *Plaga Erebus* he saw dark ash filling the sky, his feeling of triumph over the destruction of the fountain replaced by hopelessness and despair as he realized price of victory. Bran thought he would die until the strong arms of Gneiss grabbed him and dragged him towards the distant hills, where he saw with his last sight a small column of horsemen racing towards them across the bitter desert.

When Bran woke, he felt the terrible pain shoot through his body, he screamed aloud, arching his back off the ground. He lay on his back, naked inside a silken tent, with a young Elf sitting on a nearby stool.

'My lady, he is awake!' cried the Elf.

'Here, my young Gracie, drink this potion it will help with the pain.' said the Elven healer Drindar.

Supported by Drindar, Bran gratefully gulped down the thick cloying liquid. The pain began to subside almost immediately, but the potion only took the edge away, and it was all that Bran could do to keep from screaming again.

A tall blonde Elf woman entered the tent, her high cheek bones and sapphire blue eyes, gave her face an unearthly beauty. Aradia was clad in light grey robes that clung to her slender figure, but she carried a small bundle with her under one arm. Now, she approached Bran and said,

‘Bran, you are mortally wounded, without Elven magical aid you will die by tomorrow. You have said that your people forbid the use of magic, but if you wish it, I can slow the poison within you.’ said Aradia.

Bran thought for just a moment, unable to speak through his teeth that he clenched against the pain, and then nodded.

‘Drindar, leave us, I will call for you when I am finished.’

The Elven healer left the tent and Aradia opened her bundle, removing a slender crystal rod that appeared to generate a small pink light. Kneeling at Bran’s side, Aradia placed the flute to her lips and she began blowing air through it like a normal flute, but now the pink light strengthened, tendrils moving from the flute towards Bran’s body, in tune with a warm rich melodic tone emanating from the flute. The pink lights expanded and entwined him within a magical net, where the light touched his flesh. He felt the pain subside, and he could finally relax his jaw to try and speak when Aradia shook her head slightly without losing contact with the magic flute.

Several minutes later, Aradia stopped, her serene features now set in lines of fatigue, as she placed the flute back in her bundle. She looked down at Bran and saw that the purple lines of dark lightning that had flickered and gleamed when she entered the tent were now barely visible. The open gaping wound across the Gracie’s chest was beginning to close, but Aradia knew that this was only a temporary respite.

‘Bran, can you hear me now clearly?’

‘Yes my lady,’ said Bran exhausted by his wounds.

‘The healing powers in this Breath Crystal are unique, and while they have stayed your death by reducing the poisons from the Dark Lighting, the crystal is not strong enough to save your life. There is an alternative; you can take ship with me to Elvalon, the immortal homeland of the Greater Elves. There you will be healed by the master healers, but the magic will fade if you try and leave Elvalon to return here to Nostraterra. Your death would come swiftly. However, by living in Elvalon, surrounded by our magic, your life will have no natural end.’

‘But I want to go home, to see that my people are safe; not go into exile even if I live forever!’

‘It will take four weeks at the fastest ride on horseback to get you to Platonía, and that is as long as I can keep you alive. You would have a day, maybe two to see your land before you die an excruciating death. You must choose now which journey you wish to make.

Bitterly, Bran said ‘So my choice is either to die in my home or go over sea forever. Can you guarantee me that I will survive the voyage to Elvalon?’

‘No, all I can do is take you there by the fastest ship remaining in Elven hands and hope that I can get you to the Master Healers before you die on board the ship.’

‘Hope, there is that dreaded word again, all I “hoped” to do was save Platonía from destruction.’

‘You accomplished this Bran; Magnar is no more and while you lay unconscious, word has reached me that Platonía was not attacked and remains inviolate as it always has. Truly your task is done.’

‘I will go with you my lady to your homeland; I can only hope that I find peace there.’

‘Rest then Bran, for we leave for my ruined city of Phoenicia within the hour. I will have Drindar come in to clothe you and prepare you for the journey. We must hurry.

As Aradia left the tent, Bran wept bitterly for his friends and his impending exile, before sliding into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER ONE: ARRIVAL

Aradia awoke to the smell of rain blending with the hiss of fragrant seas coming through a small open window in her cabin. The fact that the window was open for the first time in four days told her as much as the absence of both the howling shriek of wind and the chaotic lurching motion of the ship *Silver Foam*: the great tempest was over. She was safe from shipwreck.

The rhythmic rocking of her bed should have soothed her back to sleep, but instead she fretted over her dying friend Bran lying in a neighboring cabin. Bran was a Gracie, people who had once been Men, but they had been changed long ago by a mysterious plague. Persecuted for their diminutive stature—they were shorter than Men, though taller than Dwarves—they had found refuge in Platonía, an island surrounded by a fierce river whose powerful spirits had bestowed their protection upon the refugees. There they had lived in peace and harmony for time out of mind . . . until the shadow of Magnar had fallen upon them. Though Gracies were slender as reeds, their appearance belied a physical and mental fortitude not present in other races, as Magnar had learned to his sorrow. But even so, Bran had been taxed beyond these limits and Aradia had pushed the ship and its crew into the heart of the storm, racing against time to save Bran.

Now, dressing quickly, she drank a small cup of water when there was a knock on her door.

‘Enter,’ she said.

Jerus, the Elven healer, opened the door and stood before his queen; his portly build and short stature at odds with the tall slender build of other Greater Elves. The usual warm smile and caring eyes beneath light brown brows that usually filled Jerus’ face was missing replaced with an ashen color, and faint sweat on his forehead.

‘My lady, may I speak with you?’ asked Jerus with a slight bow. Aradia nodded her six foot frame towered over Jerus, long blond tresses flowing down to her waist her sapphire blue eyes fixed him with a penetrating stare. ‘Bran is dying, isn’t he, Jerus?’

‘Yes, my lady. His wounds are beyond my ability to heal. I fear that he will not survive until we reach Elvalon.’

The queen’s exquisite features, sculpted cheekbones above a perfectly symmetrical mouth, tensed into a grim mask as she turned to Jerus, ‘Let us go find Ragnall.’

Climbing up a light ladder, Aradia rapidly walked to the stern of the ship, while around were the sounds of Elves repairing the ship from the rigors of the storm. A cool cloudy day, filled with mist and the faint crying of a seagull, was a welcome change from the days of unrequited tempest, but Aradia knew that if the wind was too calm for too long, Bran would die. Aradia now saw Ragnall, the only Air Spirit known to have assumed corporeal form. He had ventured to Nostraterra in defiance of his own kind, who, for reasons of their own, had prohibited all direct contact between Air Spirits and mortals. Ragnall bore the form of a Greater Elf. He stood nearly seven feet tall, with bright silver hair. Only the faint shimmer that occasionally blurred his outline marked him as other than what he appeared to be.

‘Ragnall, you told me the Air Spirits would allow me to take Bran to Elvalon, where he could be healed if I consented to their demands.’

‘My lady, the Air Spirits consented to Bran’s arrival in Elvalon, but they never guaranteed that he would arrive alive.’

Her pale cheeks flushed red with anger. 'I will go to him now and see how he is. Jerus in half an hour have Bran's bandages changed, along with his clothes and bed linen, remain here until then.'

Aradia strode across the deck, furious that the Air Spirits had taken advantage of her situation and her motherly love for Bran. She had been forced to surrender her freedom and nearly all of her magical powers in an effort to save Bran. She'd initially believed that the Air Spirits would honor both the intent and the letter of their agreement; that Bran would live until their arrival in Elvalon and then be treated by the most senior Elven healers. But now Aradia realized that the preeminent powers of the Greater Elves had their own plans, and that she had made a bargain with entities far beyond her control or understanding, subject only to their own whims. *'Well, if they want to argue the terms of our agreement, then so can I,'* she thought with great determination.

She climbed down the ladder and knocked on Bran's door. Hearing no answer, she entered and saw Bran more unconscious than asleep. The Gracie tossed and turned, moaning faintly. The stench of his wounds permeated the air; green pus oozed from the top layer of his bandages, while stronger threads of purple light crawled over his face. Aradia reached within her robes and brought out her healing pipe again, knowing that each time she used the flute, its powers were less effective. The poison from the Dark Lightning contained magic that seemed to adapt to Aradia's magic, countering the effects of the healing notes, bringing death closer and sooner to Bran than Aradia had once thought.

The Breath Flutes were conceived by Aradia and produced by her husband Justinus soon after their arrival in Nostraterra. Their collaboration had borne fruit once before, when they had designed new Air Crystals, unknown to Aradia's grandfather Phaidan, patriarch of the Greater Elves. Phaidan, jealous of her skill and innovations demanded she and Justinus reveal the techniques that they had invented, so that he might have mastery of all Greater Elven magic. Refusing to submit, Aradia and Justinus instead lead a rebellion of other young Elves, determined to create a new kingdom in Nostraterra, free from interference.

Placing the flute against her lips, Aradia smiled darkly as she thought of Phaidan's face going purple with rage if he ever discovered that she and Justinus had transcended the very nature of the Air Crystals. Air Crystals were meant to move through the air, allowing the magic of the Air Spirits to flow through them, creating the magic of the Greater Elves. Instead, the Breath Flutes received their air from Aradia, allowing her to imbue her exhaled air with her own magical powers, creating a magic uniquely hers. If Phaidan ever learned of this new form of magic, he would place her in prison until she surrendered all of the secrets of its use and making. Phaidan would brook no rivals to his magical supremacy or his role as king of the Greater Elves.

Aradia placed her lips against one end of the flute, and a melodious sound filled the cabin, and the strands of pink light did their work again, but this time, the effect was not as great as before. The poisoned threads lost much of their vibrancy and many of them faded away, but they would return stronger than before, winning the war over Bran's body. The terrible odor retreated, however, and Bran lay easier in his bed, enjoying a restorative sleep.

Aradia placed the flute back into her robes and thought of the other, similar flutes that lay hidden aboard ship. If they were discovered when she arrived in Elvalon, there would be little mercy for her. While all on the boat were loyal, she suspected that her baggage would be carefully searched upon her return, but with the aid of the *Silver Foam's* captain, one of her most loyal followers, she hoped to be able to hide the flutes until she dared to use them again. Spent

and hungry, she left Bran's cabin as Jerus and another Elf entered Bran's cabin to clean his body and change his bandages. Aradia returned to her own cabin and bathing and dressing, she climbed on deck in time for lunch with the ship's captain Sarton, joined by Ragnall and Jerus. As she ate, she asked Sarton 'How is the ship, when can we get underway again?'

'My lady we have hove too for the past 6 hours, and we should be underway safely in three days, I dare not risk the safety of the ship.' replied Sarton.

'How long until we reach Elvalon?'

'My experience tells me that we should have a steady north wind for the next week, so with a little luck we shall arrive in six days.'

Turning to speak with Jerus, she asked, 'Does Bran have six days?'

'No my lady, I am amazed he has lived this long, at most he will die within four days.'

'Sarton, when is the earliest that we can get moving again?'

'The main mast is sprung, and our bowsprit broken off; six hours would see us able to make way again, but even without another storm, strong waves or wind could spring another leak. Without finishing the repairs, the ship stands little chance of making Elvalon.'

'As soon as you are able to make sail again, do so.'

Sarton opened his mouth to object, when Aradia cut him off 'We and every other person in Nostraterra owe their lives to Bran, the least we can do is risk ours to save his.'

Nodding his acceptance and acknowledging the debt to Bran, Sarton turned and bellowed orders to the Elven crew 'Finish the repairs to the mast, reinforce the plug in the starboard leak, jury rig a bowsprit, I want to make sail by sunset.'

Aradia retired below for a brief nap, knowing that she would have to risk using her forbidden magic again to circumvent the machinations of the Air Spirits to try and preserve Bran's life until they reached Elvalon. But now time was her enemy and once again she would wrestle with fortune, but this time not to help herself but her friend.

#

Three days later, Bran was carried aloft to the port rail, close to death yet again, his wounds fomenting disease and oozing, barely able to see through the haze of pain, when he felt his chest contract, the breath leaving his frail body. Black spots swarmed before his eyes, a chill grayness covered his eyes, as if he were enveloped in rain clouds on a hillside.

Suddenly Bran felt a cool, invigorating draught placed within his lips, he swallowed reflexively, and the fog fled. Life, along with cool air, flowed back into his battered frame. Never had he known such joy in the simple act of breathing. Bran tasted sunshine and the fruits of the garden, smelled the sweet clover moving beneath the buzzing sound of bees laden with pollen. As suddenly as the flavors had appeared within his mouth, they were gone, replaced with a newfound strength that coursed through his limbs. Today he had tasted death for the second time, and this time it had seemed so empty, so empty. He hoped he would be spared its cold embrace in Elvalon, but even more he longed to be free of the pain of his body.

Coming fully back to himself, Bran realized that someone had called his name. He blinked away the last of the mist obscuring his vision and turned his head to the left, where he saw his friend Ragnall.

'Are you all right Bran?' As Ragnall spoke, Bran saw a flash of gold in his hand. It came from a small crystal phial that shone as if a newly risen sun was trapped within it. Ragnall spilled the phial into a pocket in his robes, as Bran responded.

'Is that...' he began.

‘The Cordial of Phoenicia, so powerful that only today, could you take another drop without the liquor burning your body away. The effects will last only until sunset; pray that we get you to Elvalon in time. Look now while you still have the strength to see.’

Bran turned away from Ragnall and looked over the port rail of the ship. Cerulean waves hissed as they caressed the hull, welcoming it onward into strange seas the timbers had never known. Dawn was breaking, and to the east a golden glow filled the sky. Shafts of rose and pink, saffron and salmon streaked across the sea, blending with darkened waters. Silver-white foam climbed upward from the crests of waves, blown westward to fall like heavy raindrops upon the sea.

Bran's heart gave a great leap as he saw a range of white-tipped towers impossibly high against the still midnight-blue sky of the south. In their lee lay green isles, their living presence felt like a mother's kiss on a child's scraped knee. Peace and hope radiated from them. Bran saw small ships put out from their shores, tacking into the northerly breeze, eager to greet their brethren from the distant shores of Nostraterra. The crew responded redoubling their efforts to keep the ship afloat long enough to reach land. Above all were the towers of Myrddin, the city of the Immortal Lands. The towers rose from white castles and battlements, their tops covered in crystals that sang with the morning breezes.

‘You are the first mortal to hear the music of immortality,’ said Ragnall.

Bran was astounded at their song, a music that came to him in the flutes of birds, the pipes of musicians, and the voices of otherworldly spirits mixed in with the noises of wind and weather. The sounds culminated into a great symphony of life and hope portending tremendous magic and power flowing through this land.

As the day wore on, the ship drew nearer to the isle, and the Elves in the first welcoming boat swarmed up the sides of the ship like squirrels up an oak tree. Many presents they brought, and their clear voices bid all welcome to the undying lands, but Aradia cut short their welcome bidding them to return to Elvalon and summon the master healer to meet them at the dock as soon as possible. Several Elven mariners remained on board the *Silver Foam* aiding in the repairs as their small sleek craft turned back to Elvalon its silver lateen sail billowing out from the mast, racing before the wind to summon help for Bran.

Ragnall and Aradia remained on deck as they helped Bran into a hammock. Jerus examined Bran briefly, turning to Aradia, and said in the Elven tongue,

‘Three hours after sunset my lady, that is all the time he has left. Would that he could have gone in the small boat, but the rougher voyage would have finished the work of Magnar’s poison.’

‘Then let us sail as fast as we can.’

Sarton stood nearby and gave the order to get every trace of speed out of the beleaguered ship, heavy weights and extra supplies were thrown overboard, their fresh drinking water pumped over the side. Fresh groans and snaps were heard by Aradia coming from the wounded main mast. Glancing at Sarton with an unspoken question, Sarton replied

‘My lady this ship must reach harbor by nightfall, or we will founder.’ Mentally urging the ship on, Aradia watched the island steadily grow larger. Hearing Bran’s breath coming in shorter rasps, Aradia wondered if any of them would be alive tomorrow.

#

An hour before sunset, the ship reached the quays of Solana, the great harbor on the north shore of Elvalon. There a great throng of Elves had gathered to greet them, as Sarton drove the sinking ship alongside the pier knowing he had to beach the ship on the soft sand close to shore

as they would never remain afloat at the dock. Aradia heard the ship shudder and groan, the mainmast slowly toppling forward until it crashed upon the deck, the Elven sailors jumping free from the tangled rigging. The ship scraped to a halt and listed towards the pier on its right side by ten degrees. Elves had run alongside them, and ropes were tossed to the ship and a boarding ramp was hastily brought up and lowered to the deck of the *Silver Foam*. Bran was bundled ashore and taken into a tent bearing the flag of the Master Healer that had been hastily set up on the pier, and was lost to Aradia's sight.

Aradia now saw her grandfather, Phaidan, High King of the Greater Elves emerge from the crowd. He towered a foot over Aradia, his raven black hair starkly set against his extraordinarily pale face. His deep, rich, melodious voice spoke with disdain and contempt.

'So granddaughter, you have returned to the land of your birth after leading a rebellion against my authority, do you have anything to say for yourself?'

Gritting her teeth and suppressing the rage that she felt towards the man who had always held her back from her true potential, she said 'Grandfather, accept my apology for my transgressions, I ask nothing for myself only that Bran be treated for his wounds and allowed to live here in Elvalon.'

'I can see the fire in your eyes, and I don't believe that you have repented in the slightest from your arrogant folly. Still, the first reports reached me yesterday about the tiny mortal in your charge. He accomplished what you could not, destroying Magnar and the evil magic in his realm. He will be treated by our healers and if he survives he will live in Elvalon for eternity. You will pay the agreed price for his care. Go now to my kitchens, you are the lowest scullery maid there, with no rights of the royal family. After one hundred years, your behavior will be reassessed and if you have not re-offended, you will be freed from the kitchens and placed on probation for another century as a lady in waiting. Make any presumption to resume your rebellious nonsense and you will spend eternity scrubbing dishes, and your mortal friend will age and die in a matter of days. Now go from my sight.'

Aradia could do nothing but bow her head in acceptance, hoping that someone would tell her tomorrow whether Bran had survived his healing treatments. She found herself wondering if she had made the right choice in coming here, wondering if the sacrifice of her rank and magical powers would be worth the cost. Still, morally she had no choice but to be Phaidan's loyal servant, as Bran's future held her hostage to the King's will.

CHAPTER TWO: IN PARADISIUM

Fourth Age: Year 100--Spring

One hundred years after returning to Elvalon, Aradia stood on the pier in the bay of Solana, conflicting emotions clouding her thoughts. Dawn was breaking over the eastern edge of the harbor, illuminating the homes and businesses clustered on the small hills that ringed the harbor in a half moon. The sounds of the harbor coming to life were all around her. The slap of oars from a small boat ferrying crew and cargo to an outbound fishing boat came over the water along with the strong smell of fish from nets drying along the shore.

Here, she thought. Right here on this pier is where it all began. I stood on this very spot and vowed never to return . . . and yet here I am.

Early in her youth, Aradia had led a rebellion of talented young Greater Elves who chafed against the conservative restrictions of the Elven Council denying them permission to experiment with Elven magic. Phaidan was the first and only Greater Elf given the secrets of both making the Crystals and how to use them by the Air Spirits. As his family grew, Phaidan made certain that the crystal-making skills were confined to Greater Elves not of his line, who possessed no magical abilities to use the crystals. Phaidan did not want anyone to threaten his complete monopoly over the use or creation of Elven magic. Aradia from an early age showed tremendous magical talent, but Phaidan, brooking no rivals, would not teach her all that he knew, so to expand her skills and learn, she began experimenting with different movements of existing crystals, usually with disastrous results. Specific crystals were designed for individual tasks, and Aradia was terribly frustrated until she met Justinus, best and brightest of the apprentice crystal makers. Justinus possessed a similar curiosity, but he too had been forbidden by the Master Crystal maker to deviate from traditions handed down over millennia.

Aradia and Justinus then made a fateful choice: Justinus would make new crystal designs, and Aradia would experiment with them in secret. Swiftly, their efforts bore unexpected fruit as they fell in love with one another, but Phaidan discovered their activities and demanded the surrender of the crystals: worse, he forbade Aradia from seeing Justinus again, as Justinus was not a member of Elven royalty. Refusing to bow to her grandfather's demands, Aradia gathered other young Elves who yearned for independence and set sail for Nostraterra, where they would be free to be themselves.

Departing from this pier in open defiance of the Council, Aradia and the other rebels had been convinced of the superiority of Greater Elven knowledge and culture. Aradia had wanted to civilize what she considered to be the primitive, barbaric, races of Nostraterra; to build a kingdom of her own far from the oversight of the paternalistic males, led by her grandfather, who formed the Council. She, along with her followers, would lead all the races of Nostraterra into a new enlightened age from a city she would found and rule as its queen. Aradia, Justinus, and the other Greater Elven rebels created the city of Phoenicia on the southern coast of Nostraterra, the most beautiful advanced city in the mortal lands, startling the other races of Nostraterra with their tremendous magic. Aradia and the other Greater Elves were forbidden to interfere in the affairs of the other races by the terms of the Spiritual Peace commanded by the Elementals who created the world.

According to Phaidan, when Nostraterra was newly formed from the void, the Elemental spirits had warred with one another, each vying for supremacy, creating individual portions of the world, yet seeing them destroyed by other Elementals. The futility of their actions eventually persuaded them to cease the pointless war, and each agreed to influence part of Nostraterra, with

lesser Elemental spirits building specific areas under individual Elemental control. Earth chose to forego putting her power into many lesser elemental spirits, creating only a few lesser elementals, while instead creating a race of mortal creatures, Men that would breed quickly and use the secrets of the elements of the earth to eventually dominate Nostraterra. Fire chose to have many lesser elementals, but he kept the peace with the other Elementals by having only distant, mysterious contact between his Lesser Elementals and his mortal creatures. These mortals of the fire Elemental, known as Dwarves, would initially be few in number, live much longer than the creatures of earth, and slowly build their realms, hoping to outlast the brief lives of Earth's creatures. Water, gentlest of the Elementals, wanted no domination of Nostraterra, only the right to create life wherever and whenever she chose to do so. She spread her power far and wide, with only one lesser Elemental to abide in Nostraterra, creating immortal beings, the Lesser Elves, who would care for the forests and beasts. Air, strongest of the Elementals, had a large group of lesser Elementals at his command, but his very strength was his undoing, as the other Elementals allied against him most frequently. He chose to create the strongest beings to people Nostraterra, immortals superior in magic and skill above the other beings. To retain the uneasy peace amongst the Elementals, he was forced to agree that his creatures would never intervene directly in the affairs of other beings and that his lesser Elementals would communicate rarely with his creatures, the Greater Elves.

The Elementals created their creatures and set their individual plans for eventual supremacy in motion, content to wait eons if need be for their beings to defeat the others. Only if the peace was broken, directly or indirectly, could they act personally or send their subordinate spirits to act in their stead. Constant maneuvering and jostling for power kept the Elementals on edge, suspicious of one another's actions. This mistrust manifested itself within their creatures, and each race of beings looked to the others with suspicion. But the world was young, and Nostraterra was vast: the great conflicts between the races were yet far in the future when the first mortal creatures awoke and began to fulfill the plans of their creators.

Now, returned to Elvalon, Aradia reflected on how arrogance and pride had been her downfall. Too late she'd discovered that even immense talent and undying personal strength could not lead a world if its inhabitants did not wish to be led. Prohibited from direct intervention in the affairs of mortals by the Elven Council and the Air Spirits, Aradia was forced to work indirectly, confounded and stymied by the ignorance and fear, greed and selfishness inherent in the peoples of Nostraterra. Only when the Great War enveloped Nostraterra did the other kingdoms call for her help, and then it was too late.

Justinus, searching for new materials to make stronger crystals at edge of the Plaga Erebus, was ambushed in the first skirmish between Magnar's forces and the Greater Elves. Justinus and his entire mining party vanished, presumed dead.

Fifty years to the day that Aradia received this terrible news, Magnar launched his attack. The outer portion of the kingdom of Phoencia was sacked and looted, leaving only the eponymous capital city on the southern shores of Nostraterra intact. Aradia wept for her husband, but took solace that her city, and her people, most of all her son, Marcellus, remained safe. Aradia bitterly remembered the choice forced upon her by the Elven Council: flee with the few ships she had, abandoning most of the Elves of Phoencia, or intervene in the war and lose her powers. Unable to betray her subjects or even the ungrateful peoples of Nostraterra, she had stayed to fight for her people and her kingdom. She felt so certain that her choice to stay and fight had been the correct one. But her certainty and inner peace were breached as quickly as the city's defenses as the hordes of Magnar sacked and looted the city while Aradia found her magic

inexplicably useless against Magnar's sorcery. Fleeing with the tattered remnants of her people, Marcellus leading the van and Emedius, weapons master of the Greater Elves, guarding the rear, she found temporary refuge in the Great Forest of the Lesser Elves.

There she was met by an Air Spirit sent by her grandfather. Stripping her of all her traditional magic, the spirit offered her a final choice: return to Elvalon, beg forgiveness from the Council, and spend a year in humble compliance to her Grandfather's will, or remain a powerless Elf woman, queen of a ruined city and a ravaged people. Raging in defiance, she refused to return to Elvalon, determined to regain her powers through methods known only to her. And such had been her intent . . . until Bran was brought to her, dying from terrible wounds. After all the pain and loss Aradia had suffered, this was a tragedy she could not endure. Secretly she used a flute created by Justinus for healing and played the small crystal instrument, staving off Bran's death. The Breath Crystals, as Aradia and Justinus called them, were few in number, but Aradia had not been given the powers to use them by the Air Spirits, instead learning them on her own.

Remorse for leading her people from the safety of Elvalon to disaster, and grief at the loss of her husband and her kingdom, overcame her desire to remain free. Guilt coursed through her mind as Aradia realized the tremendous suffering she had inadvertently caused by her arrogant presumption that she could change Nostraterra for the better. Distraught and hopeless, magically destitute of her traditional powers, Aradia had been determined to save at least one innocent life, and thus she had asked Ragnhall to petition the Air Spirits to aid Bran. The Air Spirits had agreed, but their conditions, backed by the Elven Council, had been dire. Aradia was forced to accept even more humiliating terms than she had been offered before. Now Aradia would become a submissive lady in waiting, losing her royal privileges and titles for one hundred years, but Bran would be allowed access to Elvalon, to heal and become whole again.

Now, today, her sentence had been removed at last, and she had been restored the use of her traditional powers . . . though forbidden to experiment with new forms of Elven magic. She had come here, to where her long downfall and suffering had begun, to watch the sun rise on what she believed would be a new life, one in which she had learned from the errors of the past. One in which she could be happy again. Complete.

No one troubled her solitude, and she basked there in the morning light, feeling as if the dawn were breaking inside her as well as without. But she did not linger overlong, for had agreed to meet Bran at his house close to the harbor. It was late morning when she arrived at Bran's simple home, located in a quiet courtyard adjacent to a small market where the hum of Elves going about their business was faintly heard. She knocked and was told to enter.

Ducking her head, Aradia avoided the low ceiling of a dwelling fit for a Gracie. Clean white-plastered walls in a rustic style with wooden beams greeted her eye. A simple couch stood against one wall. This sitting room was also Bran's dining area, and Aradia smelled the simple fish stew that Bran made for his lunch, the aroma drifting from a pot that hung above the glowing coals of the fireplace along the wall near his kitchen. Daylight streamed in through open windows.

Bran offered her refreshment, which she declined. Crossing a small rug woven of clean rags sold cheaply in the markets, she sat on the low, cloth-covered couch, her knees nearly level with her chin, and looked at Bran in the sunlight. How young he looked! Far from the prematurely aged and wounded Gracie who had disembarked the ship one hundred years ago. The Air Spirits had actually kept their word. 'Well, how are you, then Bran?' she asked.

'Fine, my lady, I am as healed as my wounds will allow. But my dreams remain dark and foreboding.'

Knowing that Bran would likely never recover completely from the terrors of his adventures, the pain of his physical wounds, and the loss of his dearest friends, Aradia counseled him as she always did to focus on the present and the future. 'The past, dear Bran, is eternally written. No magic can change it.'

'I know this objectively, my lady, but it still haunts me. However, that is not what I wanted to discuss with you today. For the past two weeks or so, I have had a recurring dream of Gracies in thrall and Platonian overrun by outcasts and vagabonds. I am afraid now that my sacrifice was in vain and that my home is in great danger.'

'Why do you believe your dreams are anything more than that?' asked Aradia.

'I have never had a dream that repeats itself night after night. I believe in my heart that what I see is true. We Gracies have always relied on our rivers to protect us from the outside world. Even before I departed, there was some concern amongst us that an attack by the Alchemists of Men could overpower the River Spirits who guard us from outsiders. If Men successfully overcome our River Spirits, then we will be forced to rely on the goodness of Men to honor their treaty giving us Platonian in perpetuity for our part in destroying Magnar. Who will look after the Gracies if Men fail in their promise and allow others to take Platonian for themselves?'

Aradia replied, 'When we left, one hundred years ago, nearly all of the Alchemists had been slain in their efforts to defeat Magnar. Many of their secrets were lost, according to the Men of Eldora. Even the two Earth Spirits who, according to legend, taught the Alchemists of Men their knowledge had fled Eldora to parts unknown long before Magnar attacked the world. Only the Earth Spirit who values life and the growth of animals and plants remains among Men, and even he has gone missing. What makes you think that Men could now attack your River Spirits and force your land into submission?'

'My dream is persistent, my lady. I do not know what else to say other than that.'

'Why would Men covet your small lands? Nostraterra is vast, and even now I am certain that Men have not filled all the corners. Besides, the Men of Eldora and Kozak are for the most part honorable and true. They will protect your land against intruders in thanks for the great part that you played in freeing all of Nostraterra from the terror of Magnar.'

'If there is one thing I learned during my journey to the dark land, it is that most people, when given half a chance, will take from others simply to have something that someone else does not—Magnar being the greatest example of such selfish desire. Please, my lady, will you take me to the place of your visions so that I may see for myself that Platonian is safe?'

Aradia frowned. 'Though I mentioned this place to you, Bran, I also told you that I am under complete restriction to use any magic by the Council, including using the Acies,' she said, referencing the massive crystal set in the Tower of Sight to which Bran had referred.

'I may be much older than I look,' Bran said, 'but I have not yet lost my wits. Rumors of your pardon swirled through the market when I went shopping this morning. It is common knowledge that your sentence is over. The restriction has been lifted, your powers and authority reinstated. You can help me, if you wish it.'

Sighing, Aradia said, 'Yes, my restrictions are lifted, it's true. But if I wish to keep my new status, I must abide by the law. No one but a member of the royal family is allowed to use the Acies, and it is strictly forbidden for all but Greater Elves to communicate through them.'

'I do not want to talk to anyone, my lady, just look through it a single time. You can direct it to allow me to see Platonian. I lack the knowledge, desire, and skill to communicate with anyone. I just want to see. My access would be only with and through you, so what harm could

it possibly cause? I have not asked for any favors from you Elves in the two hundred years I have been here. Surely, after so long, I might be permitted a brief glimpse of home.'

Confounded by this clear logic, Aradia was uncertain what to do. Part of her thought of sending for permission from the Elven Council, but as this was a minor matter; it might take weeks or months to receive a response. After all, her appeal for clemency had been pending before the Council for three years before she had finally received the news this morning. The Elven Council derived its power from the Air Spirits who communicated through Seven Sacred Crystals of Air. The Spirits' voices were notes of music, various tones that were open for interpretation by the Seers of the Elven Council. Aradia knew that the only method of communication was to make similar sounding tones through a sending crystal played by the only Crystal Master, one of the oldest Elves in Elvalon, with air supplied from bellows by his two apprentices. At least two millennia of training were necessary before an apprentice had sufficient skill and knowledge to become a Master, forming random notes and tones into messages complex enough to pique the Air Spirits' interest. The Air Spirits were notorious for ignoring most requests from the Elves, and when they responded, a simple answer was highly unusual, and only when their preeminent law of non-interference was at risk. Thus the three Seers of the Council interpreted the messages from the Air Spirits and frequently disagreed with each other. The only fact that had remained constant for the past millennia was a strict policy of isolation, in which the Air Spirits refused to aid any Elves that left Elvalon for Nostraterra.

Besides, Bran was correct: she would not be violating Elven law in any significant way that she could see. So what if he looked upon the forbidden crystals? And who, if not Bran, deserved a bit of mercy, a glimpse of home? Still, if she did this thing for her old friend, she must be careful and consult with some authority in Elvalon to make certain that she was not punished again.

Saying nothing, Bran looked haunted by his dreams, and she was moved again by great pity for him.

'Very well. Tomorrow, I will meet you here just before dawn. But we will meet with Ragnall on our way to the tower and abide by his opinion in this matter. If he says that you may not see through the Acies, then we must petition the Elven Council and await their reply, no matter how long it will take.'

Bran nodded his assent, as this was the best outcome that he could reasonably expect.

The next morning, in darkness, Aradia and Bran passed swiftly across the city of Myrddin to the hill on which stood the Vistus Castellum, the Tower of Sight. Waiting for them at the foot of the hill was Ragnall, his lined face grave but not foreboding.

Ragnall was the only Air Spirit who had taken corporeal form in the history of Elvalon. He had done so in an effort to aid Aradia and her rebel group millennia ago. In punishment for defying the ban on Air Spirits aiding material beings directly, Ragnall was forced to remain in this form indefinitely, allowed access to some of his former powers, seemingly at random, but not allowed to transform back into spiritual form. Ragnall had told Aradia long ago that he believed the Greater Elves would someday play a decisive role in defeating evil in Nostraterra and that he was willing to make this great sacrifice in aiding her and the Greater Elves in the creation of their city of Phoenicia.

Now Aradia spoke with him and asked his thoughts on taking Bran to the Acies. Ragnall was long in thought, and his eyes lost focus as he appeared to commune with a higher power. Aradia saw Bran shuffle uncomfortably as the seconds became minutes and the minutes nearly an hour before Ragnall's gaze returned to Aradia and Bran.

'I consulted the Air Spirits, and while theirs was not a unanimous decision, the consensus is that you are correct, Aradia. Bran's aid in defeating Magnar is renowned even in the spirit world, and allowing him to see his homeland is part recompense for his great sacrifice. Such is the view of the majority of the Air Spirits. However'— and Ragnall's features took on a stern aspect—'if Bran communicates with anyone or anything in Nostraterra in any fashion, you and he will be severely punished. Is this clear, Bran? There will be no mercy if you break this command.'

'Perfectly clear, Ragnall,' replied Bran, whose ruddy, cheerful face now drained of color.

'Then you both may proceed with me. I will inform the guards at the base of the tower that you are both allowed to enter the room of the Acies.'

A great beacon had been placed atop the tower to hold the light of the sun and moon at all times. It lit the sea for dozens of leagues at night, so that any ships tarrying in the darkness need not fear losing their way. Bran marveled at the immense crystal tower two hundred feet tall, built of white, hard stone whose pipes and flutes powered the beacon. The crystal tubes, imbued with the magic of the Elves, took energy from the very air and changed it through sound into a great heat and light. The beacon waxed and waned as the wind coursed through the beautiful tubes. A deep, powerful song was sung by these tubes, often plunging in tone to beneath hearing, resonating in the body with powerful waves. Indeed, even the Elves could not long withstand the power of the song of this mightiest of crystal towers. Guards were exchanged several times per day, yet still the tower took its toll, and the Thunder Elves, as the guards and beacon tenders were known, came to look old in a land of perpetual youth.

With Bran and Ragnall beside her—the Gracie appeared lost in marveling—Aradia climbed the steps to the tower entrance. There Ragnall stopped and addressed the guards, informing them that Aradia and Bran had the permission of the Air Spirits to enter into the Chamber of the Acies.

The guard captain was relatively young, perhaps a millennia in age, and he was rather short, with weak, watery features under his dark hair. His thin voice matched his stature. 'My lord Ragnall, while I take your word that the Air Spirits have given permission, I must have permission from the Elven Council for this mortal to proceed with lady Aradia.'

Ragnall shot him a glance of cold condescension. 'Young one, the Elven Council draws its authority directly from us Air Spirits. Lady Aradia and her guest have neither the time nor the inclination to wait on a slip of parchment from the Elven Council. We Air Spirits have allowed this visit. Now stand aside.'

Looking uncomfortable but acknowledging the authority of Ragnall, the guard captain bowed and stood aside, 'My lady, you and your companion may proceed. Here is a pass to present to the guards on duty outside the Acies Chamber.'

'I shall wait here,' said Ragnall.

Aradia nodded. 'We will not be long.'

In silence Aradia and Bran climbed the circular stairs that led up the tower. Six Elven guards greeted them at the entrance to the chamber and, after briefly examining Aradia's pass, bowed and opened the doors.

Aradia knew the history of Elven magic better than any Elf but her grandfather and her brother. Great was the skill of the Greater Elves in the Ancient Days, when magic was fresh and ran freely in the world. It was then that they had built the great city of Myrddin in Elvalon. Her grandfather had drawn forth the magic from the air necessary to create the Acies, and the finest Elven crystal wrights had built the magic devices when they were still young in their craft,

before their final masterworks, the Crystal Towers of Air, were born of their hands and hearts, forming the heart of the defenses of Elvalon.

Beyond the door lay the master crystal pipes of the Acies. There were other lesser and Greater Acies within Elvalon, one Greater Acies in Phoenicia, and four lesser Acies scattered throughout Nostraterra, originally given by Aradia to the men of Eldora.

Lesser Acies, while transmitting images to the user, only allowed communication when another person was using an Acies. More powerful Acies would allow the user to send messages to others, though the recipient of the message could not respond directly to the sender. Only the master Acies here in the tower allowed the user to directly communicate with another if they were not using an Acies in return. Moreover, all of the Acies would present images of past and present and future, though only a highly skilled user could distinguish between certain of these images. The Elves who were allowed to possess them used the Acies as messenger devices. The Greater Acies could be directed by the user to an extent, depending upon the mental strength of the viewer, and could communicate with both other Greater Acies to a limited degree and with nearby lesser Acies with only minor difficulty.

Aradia was going to use the Master Acies herself to see, if she could, what was occurring in Nostraterra, and then focus its powers on Platonia. As she and Bran entered the room, she knew in her heart there would come a time again when the purposes of the Council and her own purposes were in direct conflict. She hoped only to have enough to time to be beyond the reach of the Council before she returned to Nostraterra to resume her desire to bring order to that chaos.

Enormous open windows filled the outer walls of the room, giving Aradia a view of the endless ocean to the north, and the lands of Elvalon to the east and west. The breeze was much stronger up here, blowing almost constantly from one direction or another. The sweet smells of the flowers of Elvalon wafted into the room with the ever-present salt tang of the ocean. This high above the surface, on an isolated hilltop, the only sound was that of the wind; sometimes cheerful, occasionally mournful, the sound came with each gust as it danced and swirled around the room.

The room itself was simply furnished. Chairs were set along one wall, and there was a small step ladder and one gold circle inlaid in the floor about two feet in diameter where one stood to use the Acies. The large crystal pipes of the Acies hung down from the ceiling in an ornate, chaotic mass, glinting in many different colors as the sunlight that streamed in from the eastern window was refracted and reflected in an endless light that constantly changed.

Bran stood a few feet back from the center of the room as Aradia moved around the collection of pipes, which was over ten feet in circumference, hanging down from the simple ceiling above it. Many valves were within her reach, but others required the use of the ladder, and Bran was soon moving the light wooden ladder on wheels as Aradia commanded. Bran looked on in confused wonder at the Acies: some of the crystal cylinders resembled flutes, with a myriad of small holes where air would flow and resonate, while others were larger, nearly ten inches across and ten feet long, responsible for the deepest sounds of the set. Still others were tiny, smaller than even Bran's fingers, and made no noise that Bran could hear.

'My lady, how does it work?'

'By opening and closing the valves and stoppers, I can generate an infinite variety of tones, but most of these are useless except to create a sense of mood or create an enticing fragrance in a home. There are small crystal sets, sold by my family, that require no magic; just place them in an open window, and they will generate one affect, perhaps the smell of new-made bread. Please

move the ladder two feet to the left, Bran, thank you. But the great, complex sets, such as this Acies or the Beacon crystals, can do much more. As you saw as we arrived, the massive towers strung along the coast project enchantments of the Elves across the water so that none but the Greater Elves can come here. Now please let me concentrate: the exact combination of tones is quite complex; I will need all of my thoughts focused on the task to allow you to see Platonía. Just move the ladder when and where I tell you.'

'Yes, my lady.'

Aradia focused on the final subtle combination of tones needed to produce distant visions in the Acies—a combination known to only a few Elves of the royal house of Phaida. Though it had been more than two centuries since Aradia had stood here, in the Chamber of the Acies, she had not forgotten the knowledge that was her birthright.

With only final small adjustments necessary within her reach on the ground, Aradia had Bran sit in one of the chairs in the room as she twisted knobs to create the silvery-sounding tones that indicated the crystals could and would produce their visions. Suddenly a sphere of light burst forth from the Crystals, forming a globe many feet in diameter, and Aradia heard Bran gasp in wonder. Most of the pertinent information was only visible within the golden circle, and Aradia knew that Bran could only see the odd vision from his vantage point a few feet from her side. The magic had a will of its own, and while it could be directed to a degree by someone as powerful as Aradia, the images it chose to reveal were not always of the present, but instead could be of the past or the future.

'My lady, may I look now?' asked Bran, screwing up his courage.

'Please do not interrupt, Bran,' Aradia replied without glancing up. 'I must now engage my will with the crystal set. Otherwise it will generate random images from all over Elvalon, Nostraterra, and even the ocean. Once I have adjusted the Acies, I will first have a look around Nostraterra to satisfy my own curiosity. Then, when I am finished, I will focus the Acies on Platonía and sit in the chair next to you. Then you can step into the circle and see your homeland. But for now, please be still.'

Aradia stood in the golden circle looking into the light sphere immediately beneath the crystal set. At first she saw little, only the sea and views from the other Acies located in Elvalon. Slowly, she became able to direct her gaze, and ever northward did she press, until she cast her glance toward Phoenicia, where her cousin Celefin, Lord of Phoenicia, dwelt with Emedius, weapons master of the Greater Elves. Seeing him, she was able to use her many gifts to read some of his thoughts and learned much concerning the Greater Elves who yet remained in Nostraterra.

Then the sphere took her farther afield from Phoenicia. She saw swirling smoke, trees that were in motion, Gracies on short horses, some with weapons, and bedraggled Men standing in weak sunlight. These images were confusing and disturbing, as the Acies was unclear as to the sequence of the events and their specific location. Still, the images seemed to validate some of Bran's concerns.

Bored of sitting, Bran rose from his chair and slowly walked around the sphere, watching idly as occasional images flashed into focus and then disappeared. The only image that made sense to him was one where Gracies appeared engaged in combat. The rest showed places unknown to him and faces of people that he did not know. Impatiently, he waited for Aradia to finish with her search, reminding himself that he would soon partake of a magic that was not even rumored amongst Gracies, much less accessible to them.

Aradia concentrated harder on bending the magic of the Acies to her will, and the sphere took her northeastward to the Ice Mountains, where she could see into many of the Dwarven mines, but not into the minds of the Dwarves. She saw enough clear visions of Nerea, the great Dwarf Mine, to concern her gravely. Looking north to the Dwarves of the Bastion and those of the Sandy Hills, she caught her breath in fear as an ancient dark magic took new form, fluttering wingtips crackling with lightning as it embarked on a new reign of terror and destruction, the ancient enemy of the Dwarves stalking them again with terrible new weapons.

'No, it cannot happen again, not after all these years!' she muttered to herself.

Looking away from the sphere, she paused and, seeing Bran's hopeful gaze, shook her head, then returned her gaze to its depths. This time she was able to focus her thoughts more clearly and looked into Eldora, the realm of the Westmen. Many images of Men flickered and died, each more foul than the last. Corruption vied with debauchery and treachery as Men took what they wanted from themselves and from others.

'So, this is the legacy of the Westmen,' she thought with disgust. 'This is what we all fought and died and sacrificed for: the rule of Men at the last.' Though sickened by what she saw, she was surprised by it. The scenes only reinforced her fears that Men would lead Nostraterra into decay and destruction, even those of the north. 'Why?' she asked herself silently. 'Why are they acting like this now?' her mind drawn to a hidden source of great power far to the east in Nostraterra.

Suddenly, she heard Ragnall's voice in her mind even though he remained outside the tower, ***'Cease looking eastward Aradia, turn now to answering Bran's questions.'***

Ignoring his command, she bid the crystals to help answer her question, and they into the Eastern Waste of far Azhar. Here she saw hundreds of people, Elven in origin, but dressed in skins and rude clothes, the Dark Elves, chaotic allies of Magnar banished after the end of the war. Gathered together, they praised a giant humanoid figure garbed in blue robes. Its features were hidden by a large hooded cowl. She could guess nothing of its race and origins. Shimmers of light and darkness came from its outstretched hands, glowing and fading, serpentine bands of radiance and emptiness vying with one another in their quest for supremacy. The blue hands, with clawlike fingers covered in scales, were like nothing she had ever seen or heard of before. They manipulated the intertwining bands, holding them together somehow, despite their apparent opposition in kind, even as they twisted and turned their way outward from the figure.

'Perhaps there is a similarity in function,' Aradia thought. 'The mirrored reflection of the same will or purpose that takes different hues and forms, facets of an unknown power of thought and focus.'

Many of the Dark Elves were touched by these emanations, and some writhed in pain as they died. Still others began to change into forms that had no clear shape or purpose. One thing was certain: none of those who came into contact with the billowing strands of nightmare were able to survive without catastrophic change to their corporeal forms.

Feeling the evil presence of this figure, but seeing nothing clearly of it besides its clawed blue hands; she pulled her gaze away, directing it to a second nearby figure. This one was also garbed in coarse robes of a dark, nearly midnight blue. Its hands were also blue, though of a darker hue, and its face and form were likewise concealed beneath robe and cowl. But Aradia felt on some unknown level that this being was mightier than the first blue shape she had seen.

This second figure unlike the first stood utterly still, without any overt display of magical energy. Yet it exuded a sense of power that made Aradia shiver. Little could she see of its interactions with its subjects or slaves, but the bodies of the Dark Elves, moving in a rhythmic,

sequential dance, testified to its influence over them. Aradia felt sure that those bowing before this second figure were wholly its creatures, devoid of individual will or thought.

Swaying as though in an ecstatic trance; the worshippers turned their faces to the sun and silently screamed. Raw rage was written there. It seemed to Aradia that their hatred was so great that it must extinguish the sun itself. For it was plain that they needed only one sun: the blue-garbed figure around which they orbited.

Pulling terrified animals, birds, and wild dogs toward a crude altar, the Dark Elves slew them all, slashing their throats and anointing themselves with the warm blood of their victims, offering the hearts to the darker figure before them. The creature gestured slightly, and those closest to it fell screaming, their bodies melting and blazing in the darkening sky.

Now more Dark Elves dragged a young female, a child of Man, to the altar. She seemed drugged, or at any rate did not struggle or cry out as her heart was torn from her body by the fingers of the supplicants and held up, still beating, to the blue-garbed figure. This time the creature did not slay its worshipers but instead imbued the closest with an unearthly black-purple hue. As dark light flickered across their limbs and upturned faces, they grew in stature, their faces gleaming with an almost sexual rapture even as their eyes became blackened slits and their fingers elongated and twisted, turning into claws. All the while, they sang silently to the maker of their madness.

All at once the cloaked head rose; its face still concealed; yet Aradia felt the hidden gaze reach out to her across the vast distance that separated them. The creature removed what appeared to be a large black gem, nearly the size of Aradia's hand, from its cloak and held it in front of its shadowed face as it stared in Aradia's direction. A chilling stab of malice thrust at her mind as the figure tried not merely to contact her through the Acies but to overwhelm her defenses. It knew she was watching, of that she had no doubt. And it meant her no good. The strength of its dark mind, unknown and unheralded, was astonishing. She felt a shadow, an echo, of the madness and hatred that dwelt there, and a dark hunger that yearned to feed on her soul. The creature would possess her if it could.

But Aradia was not so easily defeated, though it had been long indeed since she had battled mind to mind in this way. Fortifying her thoughts from all of the long, hard years of struggle in Nostraterra, she used her renewed powers to snap the outstretched tendrils of hateful cunning that searched for her without eyes. As soon as the pressure lifted, and before the attack could be renewed, she pulled back, retreating from the most powerful evil mind she had felt since the days of Magnar.

Wrenching herself from the sphere of light, Aradia withdrew her gaze and collapsed, exhausted, onto a chair.

Bran rushed over. 'My lady, are you all right? Should I summon the guards?'

Powerless for several moments, she could say nothing, but waived her hand toward Bran and the sphere, which Bran took as a signal that she was merely tired, that he should enter the circle. He took this opportunity to gaze into the sphere itself, believing that Aradia had left it focused on Platonica for his use.

Dragging the small ladder into the golden circle, he climbed to its top rung. There, balanced precariously, he gazed into the sphere. But instead of the pastoral fields of Platonica, he beheld a terrible blue-cloaked figure holding a black gemstone in front of its hidden face. Dark blue rays of energy shot from the gem and through the sphere, striking Bran in the face and running up and down his body. Never had he known such pain. He screamed as the crackling

sounds of lightning filled his ears and a horrible smell of burning meat rose to his nostrils. Only briefly did Bran realize that his body was the source of these sounds and smells.

The guards outside the room heard Bran's terrible screams and rushed into the room. One went to Bran's aid as the other, seeing the terrible purple rays of energy slash into the Gracie again, moved to close the valves on the crystal set. As he pulled the last valve shut, a final blast of energy emerged, slaying him where he stood. Still, his falling body completed its action, shutting down the Acies. The other guard, meanwhile, ordered his fellows to carry Bran from the chamber. The Gracie's unconscious body twitched as streamers of dark energy faded, sinking into his flesh.

Aradia rose from her chair and took a step toward Bran then, intending to aid her friend, but her reserves of strength were gone. Black spots swam before her eyes, merging, spreading over everything, and she knew nothing more.

#

Later that day, Aradia lay upon a couch in her chambers. The curtains were drawn to protect her eyes, which were unusually sensitive to light in the aftermath of the attack. She still could scarcely believe what had happened. The blue-clad creature had sent its magic through the Acies. That should not have been possible for anyone. What was the creature, and why had it attacked her? The strength of it, the sheer violent hatred she had sensed, caused her to shake, assailed by fear such as she had never known, not even when she had faced Magnar.

Just then, a knock came at the door. She heard it open, then sensed more than saw Ragnall and her brother, Dorphin, enter.

'How do you fare, my sister?' asked Dorphin in a voice at once gentle and sorrowful.

'Bran,' she croaked, with no thought for herself. 'How is he?'

'In great pain,' responded Ragnall coldly. 'The dark magic that attacked him lives in his flesh still. He will last only a matter of hours maybe a day or so. He is paying for your incredible arrogance in ignoring my command, with his very life. I hope that you are satisfied with yourself.'

Weeping bitter tears, Aradia begged Ragnall to aid Bran, asking him to use the power of the Air Spirits.

'Do you not think I haven't tried?' Ragnall replied angrily. 'Unfortunately for Bran, the magic that invests his body will not respond to any magic available to the Elves, and the Air Spirits have denied my request for aid and temporarily have taken away my powers for my role in allowing this catastrophe to happen. I cannot save him. No one can. Bran will die, as the world intended before we ever brought him here.'

'I must see him,' she said. 'I must try to—'

'You have done enough,' Ragnall broke in. 'Bran is beyond your help now. You should be more concerned about the Council.'

Aradia felt a thrill of fear at that. 'What do you mean?'

'They have decreed that you are to be placed under close watch for a year and a day. During this time, you will not have access to the Acies. Nor shall you be permitted to use any of your Elven magical skills.'

'I broke no Elven law!' croaked Aradia angrily. 'How dare they punish me? Shall I be relegated to cleaning kitchens again, or do I have some dignity and respect left from my family and the Council?'

'Silence!' thundered Ragnall, and Aradia heard in his voice that she had gone too far. 'Even now, you repent nothing. You have learned nothing. I told you that while you were

allowed to use the Acies yourself and allow Bran to see his homeland, you were not to allow Bran to communicate with anyone in Nostraterra. Once we Air Spirits felt the tremendous dark powers close to where you were looking, I commanded you to stop, but you refused and look what happened? You broke the law of the Air Spirits, and my plea on your behalf condemns me as well. Any hope that I might receive more if not all of my powers back has been summarily rejected. Selfish, sentimental woman, you have allowed an unknown creature with terrible powers access to Elvalon. Who knows what this creature might be capable of now? All Elves are forbidden the Acies until we Air Spirits can create safeguards against this most terrible magic.'

At that, Dorphin spoke up. 'You will always have my love, sister, but your action was incredibly foolish and, yes, selfish. Now there is fear in the Council that, as Ragnall says, thanks to you, whatever you saw has learned a way to breach the magical barriers that protect Elvalon. Now this creature may attack other Elves who live here, as it did you and Bran, or, worse, may suborn them into doing its bidding. That is why your punishment is so harsh. Don't you see? They are afraid you might be under the influence of Dark Magic.'

'The only influence I am under at the moment is anger,' she said. 'And that mostly at me for allowing Bran access to the Acies. It is my fault that he is dying. Take me to him in the morning if you will, Dorphin. I should be strong enough to see him then.'

#

By the next morning, Aradia's eyes were able to tolerate dim light. Wearing a hood, she was escorted by Ragnall to Bran's chamber, where the Gracie lay in his bed. As soon as she entered, she saw the horrible pulsing of purple energy below his skin, like a crawling bruise. The sheets of his bed were filled with putrescent ooze whose foul odor assailed her with almost physical force.

Ignoring it, she pulled free of Ragnall's supporting arm and knelt at the bedside, taking Bran's hand in her own. 'I am so sorry, Bran, that you were attacked,' she said softly. 'If I had thought you would be in any danger, I would have kept you from the chamber and looked at Platonica for you.'

'It is not your fault, my lady,' hissed Bran through clenched teeth. 'I begged you for this chance, and I took it. But unlike the other times I escaped death, this time I fear there is no other path.'

'Think of it as a gift,' said Ragnall. 'You will soon be beyond the point of pain and heartbreak. You will be at peace.'

'A gift,' Bran repeated, and laughed weakly. 'A gift would have been to remain here in Elvalon forever, my pain slowly fading through time, or until I was weary of life. Instead, I have had but a taste of immortality, a taste that is now unjustly taken from me for no greater crime than concern for my people.'

Ragnall seemed intrigued by these words. 'All of your people eventually die, Bran. They can accept it. Why can't you?'

With a weak yet vehement voice, Bran said, 'You may be wise, Ragnall, wise beyond the vision of Men and Elves alike, but you are blind when it comes to the hearts of mortal beings. Can you not guess what I have always wanted?'

Ragnall thought a moment, then said, 'No, I cannot.'

'Family,' cried Bran. 'A sense of belonging somewhere; belonging to someone, of believing in something that mattered; a sense of purpose. I was orphaned at an early age. My parents died of an evil plague that came from a Gracie who traded in the far east of Nostraterra.'

I was raised by distant wealthy cousins. I lacked for nothing, but I did not have any family. I was always alone. I had a few friends, and they provided great comfort at the time, and I didn't understand until much later all that I was missing. I became an acolyte of the Gardens to give myself some purpose, and then undertook my dark journey in the hope of preserving Platonía from harm.

'Magnar represented a danger to Platonía, and as long as he lived, my people were in danger. While they were not my immediate family, they were the only family that I knew. I took the Waters of Life to the Plaga Erebus and poured them into the breach hewn into the conduits of Dark Lightning, destroying the power of Magnar: hoping that with his destruction I could return to a home unscathed by war and anguish, that the tramp of boots from evil creatures would not be heard in the quiet fields or family taverns of Platonía. Yet it was not to be. I came here to preserve my life, in hope of peace and healing. Yet that hope, too, has been dashed. I am dying. I am so afraid that my sacrifice and those of the other Gracies will be in vain! Platonía is still in danger—worse danger than ever. I know it! And there is nothing I can do to help.'

'Your sacrifice was not in vain,' replied Ragnall. 'All that you desired to preserve was preserved. Your cousins and Platonía were saved along with the rest of Nostraterra. Take solace in that.'

'Thoughts of what is past cannot assuage my fears of what the future may hold,' Bran said. 'That is what torments me now. What happens after we die, Ragnall? Where will I go? What will I become?'

Ragnall answered softly. 'Your questions have been asked by many mortals. And many are the answers they have given themselves. All the Spirits that oversee Nostraterra demand faith, but they will not give certainty in exchange; unfair perhaps, but then you mortals are myriad mayflies in a perpetual morning that they—'

'I do not mean to be rude,' said Bran, interrupting, 'but my questions have only one answer. I do not belong anywhere. I have been bereft of kin since I was born. Alas, that is my doom. I only wish that somehow it could have been different. The least of all Gracies has a home to call his own: a family and a place in Platonía. He is secure in the knowledge that, at least within his family, he will go on. Here I am only a name in a song, a heroic figure in a larger tale, a small thread in the greater tapestry. Please forgive me for my outburst,' he went on, seeing the effect of his words on Ragnall and Aradia. 'None of this is your fault. You have heard the maunderings of a dying Gracie who only wanted a simple life that was denied him. I fear now more than ever after my encounter yesterday that Platonía is still in danger. Keep my people and my land safe once I am gone, I beg you both.'

Aradia spoke, still kneeling beside him, clasping his hand in hers, tears streaming down her proud face. 'Bran, I do not have the answers to your questions. The Acies showed me only confused images of Platonía. Your people might be in danger now or perhaps in the future. Nothing is certain. But there is a new ship arrived this morning from Nostraterra. We can ask the crew if they have heard any tales. Hold on while we send a messenger.'

'My lady, I am trying to,' said Bran, 'but I feel my life departing quickly now.' With those words, a deep shudder wracked his body. 'I am so cold, my lady. I am so frightened. I can't see anymore.'

His breathing grew thin and rapid, his chest heaving under the blankets, gasping for air. One final word, 'Platonía,' sighing his last breath in Elvalon.

Aradia wept openly for Bran.

After several minutes, Ragnall said, 'Go in peace, my friends, for the spirit of our beloved friend is now departed. Let us honor him with our memories. There shall be a feast in his honor within Boreas, the holy grove of air, in seven days' time, his body interred in fragrant earth as is the custom of his people, but his coffin will be interred in marble at the foot of the sacred mountains.'

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Later that day, Aradia found Ragnall standing on one of the small hills contained within the city, looking out over the waters of the harbor. Ragnall turned toward her as she approached, nodding in acknowledgment of her presence.

'Did you ask the Elves who came from over sea if there was anything to substantiate Bran's fear?' asked Aradia.

'Not yet,' he replied. 'I was waiting for them to sleep and wash away the burdens of the mortal lands.' After pausing for a moment, Ragnall asked, 'Why was Bran so afraid his sacrifices had been in vain? Despite the attack of the dark creature, it is located far away from the civilized regions of Nostraterra and no threat to Platonía. Besides, Magnar is no more. The Hraban, his terrible Black Cavalry, perished before the walls of Titania. The great Southern army that was once united in purpose and destruction fled in dissaray, pursued by the armies of Men. All of the Elemental Spirits and wizards that aided Magnar have been defeated, their avatars and bodies destroyed. The Dark Elves, who survived the war, were sent fleeing into the utter east. Even if they are allies of this blue creature, there is no indication that they will attack Platonía. None of great evils that once sought to dominate Nostraterra survived the fall of Magnar. Bran succeeded beyond his knowledge. Not only did he help destroy the Fountain, but he saved his own land from destruction. He asked us to protect Platonía after his passing, and I intend to do so, but until this attack I did not fear that any Dark Magic was left in Nostraterra. Men are the most powerful race there now. They, too, lost much in the war. I believe that they will do well by the rest of Nostraterra.'

'How can you believe that the powers of Men are preeminent and all other ancient powers removed after the attack upon Bran and me?' Aradia asked in turn. 'Clearly even an Air Spirit can be mistaken, or perhaps deluded. As the attack showed, there are still beings greater in power than Elves alive and well in Nostraterra. While the beings may now be in the far-east, how long will they remain there? Even if those terrible blue creatures stay put, there are mortals in Nostraterra who covet what the Gracies have and will stop at nothing to possess it.'

'Most Men are honorable and trustworthy,' Ragnall said. 'Are you saying that the rule of Men, even those such as the Westmen, is flawed? That they are incapable of governing themselves?'

'No,' answered Aradia. 'I am saying that while Men are capable of governing themselves—although that, too, is open for debate—there is no guarantee that Men will govern the other creatures of Nostraterra with wisdom. Not only the other mortals, but all the Elves in Nostraterra will fall under their sway. What of them? Even Celefin, Elf Lord of Phoenicia, and my son, Marcellus, must bow to the weight of Men. Men alone of all the races of Nostraterra survived the Great War essentially intact, their cities still standing, their people alive and well. All other races will have to determine how they will live under the dominion of Men. Men, given half a chance, have always fallen into darkness. How can I expect them to succeed this time? Will they become benevolent leaders or despicable tyrants? Regardless, they will have power above all others in Nostraterra, and where will that power lead them? These are the

questions I will be asking the Elves who have returned,' said Aradia. 'Will you join me in asking them?'

'I will do so within the boundaries of my authority,' said Ragnall. 'You would be wise to exercise great caution in this matter. While I will not betray your confidence to my Air Spirit brethren, you walk a fine line between independence and exile. You have seen that you're impulsive, though well-meaning instincts led you astray. You would be wise not to defy the will of the Council in this regard.'

Aradia laughed. 'I cannot tell you the extent and nature of my defiance of the powers throughout the ages. They neither frighten nor disturb me. I will deal with them when the time comes.'

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The next day, she met Ragnall at the end of the pier in the harbor of Solana. Aradia rose from a white stone bench where she had been gazing out to sea in hopes that her visions and Bran's fears would not be verified by tales from the most recent arrivals from Nostraterra. Ragnall nodded to her and gestured for her to resume her seat, then sat beside her.

'I have spoken with the crew of the ship,' he said. 'It seems you and Bran had reason to worry. Nostraterra is in danger again. When the great evil of Magnar was vanquished, you and I, along with others of the Greater Elves, thought that evil was gone forever from that long-suffering land. One thing we overlooked, however, according to your visions through the Acies and my interviews, is the unifying effect of Evil.'

'What do you mean?' asked Aradia.

'When Magnar was a power in Nostraterra,' said Ragnall, 'Men, Dwarves, and Elves put aside most of their differences and allied in a common goal to defeat him and his army. Now, without such a pervading evil, all sentient beings have been free to revive old differences and create new strife from them. Each race has its divisions, and now, without an external enemy, they may descend into chaos and war. Strong-willed leaders, wishing to enhance their own glory, will emerge here and there, carving out petty realms and tearing asunder the stable fabric of Nostraterra. In the end, our mysterious enemies, whom you glimpsed from afar, may succeed with new dark armies, creating a realm worse than that of Magnar.'

Sinking onto her knees from the bench, Aradia looked up at Ragnall. 'What can we do? I am not yet fully healed, and my magic is forbidden me again for a year, presuming that it will be reinstated even after that time.' Aradia conveniently did not mention her new magic that depended upon the Breath Flutes, but she would have to be even more careful now in practicing than she had been before.

'There is time, Aradia, for us to think of a course of action that will free Nostraterra from the darkness without and within,' Ragnall said. 'We must remember that the Acies, while powerful, will show things that have not yet come to pass and may not ever come to pass.'

'Yes, but the Blue Shape attacked through the Acies. That was no glimpse of a possible future. That was here and now. That was real.'

'True enough. The danger is real. But the future is not set in stone. Still, we cannot tarry. We must speak with your brother, Dorphin, who is sympathetic to you, and take his counsel in great secrecy, lest all our past efforts and sacrifices be rendered useless.'

INTERLUDE

Fourth Age: Year 147—Mid-summer

Creon, King of Eldora and of all the Westmen, gazed implacably down at the man responsible for the breach of peace in Occupied Shardan. Gronthin, a rebellious upstart from the far Shardan province of Parnin, lay as he had for hours now, spread-eagled over an enormous ant hill in the Shardan wastes, his naked brown body coated with honey and sugar. The man writhed uselessly against the ropes that held him in place as the fierce stinging ants of the desert introduced him to agonies that Creon wished only to prolong. The Eldoran king did not bother to disguise his smirk of triumph at the spectacle of this treacherous, callow man who had dared oppose him.

A thin, dry wind was blowing on the high plateau. Scrub pines and sand dunes sprawled haphazardly under a brilliant, cloudless sky of dark blue. The only sounds were the shrieks and groans and maddened mutterings of the condemned man, and the busy scratching of the pens of the royal scribes as they recorded every detail for subsequent review. The sour and stale odor of sweat from men and horses hung heavy in the air, unmoved by the wind. Only the faint hint of resinous oils from the pines alleviated the stench of overheated bodies, honey, and death.

Gronthin was not the first to taste justice here. The bones of other Shardan rebels and criminals gleamed dully amid the heaped sand of other insect mounds. Skulls scoured free of flesh gazed up at the sky with empty eye sockets.

Creon spat. No matter how much water he drank, he couldn't clear the grit from his mouth. Though he wore the lightest of silks, still he was sweating like a peasant. This was a foul land. No wonder it bred traitors and assassins.

Discontent and evil always sprang from the South, whether it was the terrifying might of Plaga Erebus or the incessant rebellion that lurked within the heart of every man not historically allied to Eldora. Time and again, Creon had crushed the uprisings in Shardan and Hagar, only to see them sprout again, vile weeds in his otherwise tidy garden. The original wars of pacification had gone well, but with heavy cost. Shardan had fought stubbornly and tenaciously. Only after fifty-nine years of struggle had the great Treaty of Jelani been signed; by the Northmen from Kozak, the Westmen from Eldora, and the lords of Shardan. The Great Peace of the South, as it was colloquially known, had lasted for decades, until this one rebel leader had threatened to bring it all crashing down by assassinating the King of Shardan and the Eldoran ambassador. Gronthin had been captured immediately after the murders, but the damage had already been done, the example set. He'd claimed to have no memory of the attack, and he had stuck to that absurd story throughout his interrogation, revealing nothing of value. It was that intransigence, as much as his crimes, that was to blame for the grisly manner of his execution.

Now, as the day began to wear to a close, the stream of words from the prostrate, writhing figure became more disjointed and unintelligible. Gronthin suddenly paused and drew in a rattling breath. Creon leaned closer to hear his dying words. Wrinkling his nose at the stench and ignoring the fierce heat beating up from the sands despite the shades held over his back by sweating servants, Creon waited with grim elation for the foul creature's final croak. The creak of leather saddles and the sounds of boots moving as the guards tried to shift their cramping muscles without leaving their assigned positions seemed impossibly loud to Creon, and he began call out irritably for silence. But then Gronthin began speaking again. His voice was cracked but strong, and his words were in the native Shardan tongue, unknown to Creon.

'What is he saying now?' demanded Creon of his interpreter.

'He is not making any sense, my King,' the man said, looking up at Creon, who, at well over six feet, towered over every man present. 'He is saying, "The dark one is coming, the dark blue one whose powers can move heaven and earth. Atanar save me from the pain, save me from the white men." He continues to repeat this over and over again.'

'Atanar? Who is that—another rebel?'

'I have never heard the name before,' the interpreter replied.

'Bah. He is raving.' Creon looked at Gronthin's brown skin, blistered and red from the ferocious sun despite Gronthin's origin in the deep desert. Gronthin had spent the first hours pleading for mercy and water, than begged for a quick death, before finally lapsing into raspy, intermittently coherent mutterings. Creon noticed that his shadow had fallen over Gronthin's body, and it occurred to him that he might inadvertently be comforting the condemned man. The notion filled him with fresh rage, and he stepped forward, drawing back his boot to deliver a vicious kick to the cowardly assassin who had, however briefly, fanned the flames of rebellion again.

But before he could deliver this final insult, Creon suddenly felt a wave of tremendous fear rise up in him. As the veteran of a hundred battles, he was no stranger to fear, but always he had been its master. Not now. The icy cold terror that raced along his spine was like nothing he had ever felt before.

Without thinking, he turned and ran away from the staked-out man, leaving his aides, guards, scribes, and interpreter behind as he stumbled across sand and broken stone, breath rasping from sun-dried lips. Only after a few hundred yards was he able to master himself sufficiently to stop. Looking back, he saw nothing that had not been there before the blind terror had overwhelmed him. Angry at himself and feeling conscious of having humiliated himself before his inferiors, he began striding back.

He had not taken more than a dozen steps when he felt the hairs on the back of his arms and his head stand straight up. An incredibly loud, high-pitched sound, such as tens of thousands of mosquitoes might make, pressed upon his skull from all directions. He halted as though he'd run into a wall. But in the next instant the sound was gone, vanished as suddenly as it had arisen. Creon shook his head. The fear threatened to return, but he fought it off. Some of his guards, he saw, had started toward him. He motioned them back irritably even as he advanced again in their direction.

Then, out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning split the dry desert air just beyond the figure of Gronthin. It hit the sand with a deafening crack, throwing up a cloud of sand and smoke that completely obscured the rebel. The dark cloud did not disperse. It hung in mid-air, a foggy void from which, like some demonic exhalation, a rush of unnaturally frigid air. Despite his distance, Creon shivered at the icy blast. His men, closer, reacted with panic, as did the horses, straining against their tethers and whinnying loudly. One animal broke free and came straight at Creon, fleeing blindly in its terror, just as he had done a moment earlier. Creon had to throw himself aside to avoid being trampled.

He hit the sand, rolled, and regained his feet to a chorus of screams. He turned toward them . . . and staggered. Not from fear but from sheer disbelief. A vast blue figure, man-shaped yet over ten feet tall; emerged from the fog. A great cloak draped its body; its face was hidden by a large cowl. It hovered above the sands of the desert, and tendrils of lightning emanated from its form, slaying all who were near.

Even as Creon watched, muttering a prayer to the Earth Spirits, a bolt flashed toward him. It fell just short, though the tremendous thunderclap nearly bowled him over. He felt the heat of

lightning on his face and braced himself against a tremendous icy wind that began once again to blow from the void. A great black cloud billowed from the shape, concealing all but the figure itself as several men, trying to flee, were slowly and inexorably dragged into the maelstrom. Arrows snapped and hissed toward the Blue Apparition but were reflected back toward the men who had sent them on their way. They screamed as their own arrows cut them down. Creon watched the bodies of the slain float above the sands, seeming to respond to subtle arm gestures of the shape, moving in a macabre dance as it drew them into its blue cloud. Gronthin's tortured form was ripped from the sands, his hoarse voice lost in the tumult as he disappeared within the black cloud.

Then Creon felt the strength of the shape's mind pushing and pulsating against his spirit, hungering for his very soul even as it devoured the souls of the men who were closer at hand. Few men were left alive when Creon, awakening as if from a dream, and angrier than he had ever been in his life, so that what fear he might have felt was utterly annihilated in the fires of his rage, strode forward. His guards pulled at his robes, begging him to remain where he was. But Creon ignored them, his gaze fixed upon the midnight blue form. He could hear it calling to him voicelessly, wordlessly, mocking him and offering to contest the mastery of Nostraterra with him, if only he had enough courage.

For answer, Creon drew his ancient sword, Caelestus, forged by the Dwarves of Nerea and given to one of his ancestors long ago. Another bolt of lightning flashed toward him, but Creon parried it with the sword, feeling only a vague tingle as the eldritch energies were dissipated by the timeless edge of his blade. Again ignoring the pleas of his guards, he strode toward the maelstrom, determined to settle the mastery of Nostraterra once and for all. Greater and greater bolts of lightning flickered around the King, and his guards were horrified to see his form disappear into the blue-black cloud of cold and mist.