

Chapter 1

On a plane of existence unattainable by living mortals, sat the High Temple of Casdralla. Within its sacred halls resided the greatest of the Qyaendri who served the goddess. These beings, immortal and powerful, had the ability of traversing between the planes upon which the gods resided and the ones their mortal worshipers inhabited. Having such beings in their service was the only way in which the gods could affect what transpired on the numerous inhabited worlds of the universe.

In a never ceasing stream, the prayers of Casdralla's worshipers were brought to the High Temple. Lesser Qyaendri were always among her people, ever watchful and listening to their needs. When a prayer was given up to the goddess they brought it to the High Temple, and there the decision was made whether or not to grant the follower's prayer.

Prayers ranged widely from the mundane to the grandiose. Those which flowed from great need, or were in line with the philosophy of the goddess, were the ones most likely to be granted. Those of a selfish nature such as wishing ill on another so you could prosper, or for money to buy items of little import, were summarily rejected. Whether large or small, each was brought to the High Temple for consideration.

Many Qyaendri were always in and about the High Temple for there were many worlds upon which Casdralla's influence had spread. Some worlds numbered followers in the millions, while others held but a handful. No matter the size, each was accorded the same amount of diligence by the attending Qyaendri.

This day was no different than any other, though days as mortals thought of them had little meaning in the High Temple. Qyaendri came and went with prayers both large and small. Those which had been

deemed worthy, were assigned lesser Qyaendri that would return to the world from which the prayer originated and do their best to fulfill the worshiper's need.

Needless to say, some prayers needed to be answered by more experienced Qyaendri. Those were the prayers which had a much more encompassing affect, or were directly linked to the worship of her followers; ones such as the choice for the next High Priest, or dealings with neighboring kingdoms, those sorts of things.

Once in a very great while, communication to the High Temple comes not from the worlds of her followers, but from the goddess herself. Only three of Casdralla's Qyaendri ever had direct dealings with Her. Those three had served her the longest and proven their faithfulness and judgment over the millennium. Rarely were they seen within the High Temple. For the most part, they appeared only when they were there to gather high ranking Qyaendri and a cadre of Celestial Warriors for a mission to a world wherein Casdralla held little or no influence. Such missions were how she continued spreading her influence throughout the universe.

Of the three, Xi was senior and had served Casdralla longer than the memory of any other Qyaendri could recollect. Not for a thousand years had he graced the High Temple with his presence. And so, when he appeared within the Rotunda of the High Temple before the goddess' statue, it was greeted with great surprise and anticipation. For surely, his presence foretold an event of possible world shattering import. Word of his presence spread like wildfire through the ranks of the Qyaendri.

Those Qyaendri on their way back to worlds to answer prayers, or simply to watch over the faithful, stopped when they were made aware of his appearance. Prayers were left waiting as each and every Qyaendri converged on the High Temple in the hopes of being one of those chosen to aid Xi in whatever his endeavor may be. While it was true, those of minor standing in the hierarchy of Casdralla's Qyaendri had little chance of being chosen, one never knew. And so, each came and waited as Xi stood there quietly gazing out over the assembled Qyaendri.

Finally, his eyes settled on one of the Qyaendri. "Daeson," his deep, base voice intoned.

A murmur ran through the assembled Qyaendri as the one upon whom Xi's gaze was fixed made his way forward.

Daeson's heart, if Qyaendri were to have such, pounded in his chest with pride and exhilaration for having been picked. As he made his way forward he could feel the eyes of everyone upon him, some joyful for him, others envious.

He wasn't a high ranking member of Casdralla's Qyaendri, but had proven himself throughout the years and was now what in human terms would be considered a sergeant of sorts. Daeson held a modicum of authority and oversaw a cadre of the lesser Qyaendri.

Coming to stand before Xi, he knelt down on one knee, bowed his head and asked, "What does our Lady require of me?"

An expectant hush fell over the gathered Qyaendri as they waited for Xi's reply.

"Have Larus returned to the High Temple," Xi commanded.

Daeson couldn't believe at first what he had heard. Xi wanted him to bring Larus back? His first inclination was to ask why, but he dared not do so. If that was what their Lady wanted, then that is what he would do. Raising his head, he looked at the ancient Qyaendri. "It shall be done," he replied, giving Xi another bow. When he brought his head back up, Xi was gone.

On a world far removed from the High Temple, a boy worked in a field cutting tall grass with a scythe half again too large for him. The youngest of five sons, he was thought to be a little bit addleheaded.

He was often withdrawn and rarely had dealings with others his own age. This gave his mother and father grave concerns for his future. Now eight years old, he should be taking a more active role in life, but instead, seemed to be withdrawing more and more. He tended to work alone and was lost when forced to work with others. That was why he was here, alone in the corner of the field, cutting grass to feed their livestock. Next to him stood a wagon partially filled with grass already cut. Once it was completely filled, Allen could return home.

"I don't care what you think," he said to his friend.

"Yes you do," replied Stymie. Though no one else could see him, Stymie was Allen's best friend. They had been fast friends for two years now, and Stymie was the only one with whom Allen would talk outside his family.

“School is stupid!” Allen said as the scythe cut a small swath of grass.

From where Stymie sat on a nearby stump, he sighed as he watched his friend pick up the cut grass and lay it within the wagon. “School is not stupid,” he argued. “You get to meet people and make friends.”

After tossing the grass into the wagon, Allen turned to his friend. “I don’t like people,” he replied. “No one understands me.”

This has been a common conversation between them for some time. In the fall, Allen would be starting school as do all youths in his community when they reached their eighth year.

“They will,” replied Stymie. “You simply need to give them the chance to get to know you.”

Returning to cut more grass, Allen gripped the scythe and paused before cutting a swath. Without looking at his friend, he whispered, “I’m scared.”

Stymie hopped off the fence and came toward him. “I know you are,” he replied. “But I’ll be there with you.” When Allen turned to look at him, Stymie could see the fear in his eyes. Even a small tear had begun to make its way down his cheek. The dread he felt at being forced into social contact with others had grown steadily as the first day of school began.

“I don’t know what I would do without you Sty,” he said.

Then as Stymie always did when Allen grew melancholy, which he had begun to do less and less since Stymie’s first appearance, he hopped onto his hands and began gyrating around. When a smile broke across Allen’s face, he flipped back onto his feet and launched himself toward the boy. Giggling and laughing, the two rolled about in the tall grass as they wrestled.

When they finally broke apart, the melancholy which had taken hold of Allen was gone. Stymie knew Allen was in for a hard time once he began school. Over the past two years, he has seen Allen emerge from his shell bit by bit. By the time school began, it was Stymie’s hope he would be ready.

“You always know just what to do,” Allen told him. Stalks of straw intermixed with his shoulder length brown hair made him look quite comical.

“That’s what I’m...” began Stymie when his attention was caught by the sight of someone standing across the field looking in their

direction. A sharp intake of breath followed as he saw a faint glow shimmering about the figure.

Larus' time wasn't nearly over yet. When he had come in answer to the prayers of the boy's mother two years ago, he had been charged with helping Allen emerge from within himself and be able to have a more active role with those around him. In Larus' mind, the resolution of Allen's mother's prayer hadn't yet come about. To remove him from Allen before his mission was completed could undermine everything he had worked to achieve with the boy.

Staring across the field to where Daeson waited, he inwardly sighed. Creating a simulacrum of himself to remain with Allen, he hurried toward Daeson.

He came and knelt on one knee before the superior Qyaendri and bowed his head. "What does our Lady require of me?" he asked. Such was the ritual question a subordinate Qyaendri always asked a superior.

"You must return to the High Temple at once," Daeson replied.

"But," argued Larus as he came back to his feet, "my work here is not finished."

"I realize that." He paused a moment as he glanced back to where Larus' simulacrum sat near Allen. "Xi has requested you to return."

"Xi?" he asked, shocked beyond measure that a lowly Qyaendri like himself would even be known by one such as Xi. "What...what does he want of me?"

"He would hardly explain himself to me," explained Daeson. "All I know is that you are to return to the High Temple immediately."

It was with no small amount of trepidation that he heard those words. Once before he had been summoned back to the High Temple and it hadn't been for congratulations on a job well done. Rather, it had been due to the disruption he had caused on a mission where they had striven to bring Casdralla's enlightenment to one of the many worlds filling the universe. He could see that Daeson remembered as well. Daeson had been one of the leaders of their group and had lost much standing within the Qyaendri hierarchy because of him.

"But, what of Allen?" he asked.

"Allen will be assigned another Qyaendri," Daeson told him. Directing Larus' gaze back to the boy, he showed him where another Qyaendri had already taken his place. In every aspect, the new

Qyaendri looked just like the ‘Stymie’ Larus had portrayed. It didn’t appear Allen even noticed the difference.

Larus looked on with mixed feelings, not the least was sadness at being parted from Allen. Many of the Qyaendri disliked being the ones who fulfilled the lesser prayers and would have jumped at the chance to put behind them such an ignoble job as being the playmate of a small boy. Larus on the other hand enjoyed these types of jobs. True, he had originally been part of Casdralla’s Celestial Warriors, and had shown great promise before the incident which had preceded his earlier summons back to the High Temple. But where he was happiest was out in the field helping to make the lives of his Lady’s followers better. He held great empathy for them.

Turning back to Daeson, Larus sighed and nodded. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Before we return,” said Daeson, “let me just tell you that I don’t know why Xi would request you. There are many others who are wiser...” he paused and stared at Larus as if daring him to argue, “and more dedicated.”

Larus knew that Daeson didn’t like him, and he felt guilty for having been responsible for all the troubles Daeson had gone through because of him. Frankly, he too was rather astounded that Xi had asked for him.

“Whatever he may have in mind for you to do,” continued Daeson, “give it your utmost attention and stay focused on the job at hand. I don’t want you to mess it up like you did before.”

“I won’t,” replied Larus. “I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll stay focused on whatever my task is to be.”

Daeson continued glaring at Larus for a moment before nodding. “See that you do.” Then with that, he and Larus left Allen’s world and returned to the High Temple.

Upon their return, they found the High Temple even more crowded than it had been when Daeson departed. Word must have spread throughout the ranks of Qyaendri that Xi had appeared and something momentous was in the offing.

None spoke to the pair as they made their way toward the rotunda where Xi had so recently appeared. The Rotunda was the general meeting area within the High Temple. Seven statues of the goddess were evenly spaced in a circular formation around the outer fringe. An eighth statue, dwarfing the others, stood majestically in the center. It

was toward the central statue that Daeson and Larus proceeded. As they drew close, Xi appeared.

Larus and Daeson dropped to one knee and respectfully bowed to Xi in silence. They remained that way until Xi spoke.

“Larus,” resonated Xi’s deep voice.

Larus raised his head and gazed at the most ancient of all Casdralla’s Qyaendri.

“Our Lady’s people are faced with great difficulties in the times ahead,” he said. “Her presence on their world may come to an end.”

“No!” several of the Qyaendri among those watching exclaimed.

“What does our Lady want of me?” Larus asked.

“To save her people,” he replied.

“How?” asked Larus. *The fate of her people on an entire world was going to rest in his hands?* Where most would feel only the greatest sense of pride in being selected for such a job, he instead felt grossly inadequate with just a touch of fear.

Reaching out his hand to Larus, Xi replied, “Take my hand.”

Larus reached out and laid his hand upon Xi’s palm. As soon as contact was made, they disappeared.

When they were again corporeal, Larus discovered that he was in a very strange place. The air was the same as what he had experienced on most of the other worlds to which he had traveled in Casdralla’s service. It was an arid place with sand and round shaped weeds which tumbled as the wind blew. Larus gazed to the horizon and found a range of mountains rising to the sky. Between where they stood and the mountains were more sand and dirt, a few small trees, and the odd bird.

What made it so strange was the uniform, black road that lay on the ground before them, and the building situated on the other side. The black road was unlike any he had seen before, with a strange yellow stripe running down the middle and a single white line adorning either edge.

The building across the road was rather squat, looked dirty, and in disrepair. A tall pole in front had a large squarish sign that bore the inscription: ***Good Food---Gas.***

“Where are we?” Larus asked. Other than the strange road and the building, there were no indications that people inhabited this place. “Is this where our Lady’s people live?”

“No,” Xi replied. “On this world, there are none who worship our Lady.”

Larus glanced at the other in surprise. “Why am I here then?” he asked.

“There is one here who can help our people,” explained Xi. Glancing to Larus, Xi continued. “You have a single year of this world to locate the one and prepare him for what he must do.”

“Him?” asked Larus. “So am I to understand that I am to find a man?”

Xi didn’t reply. “We have made arrangements for one person to be selected and removed from this world,” he further explained. He glanced to Larus and said, “Only one.”

Larus nodded gravely. He understood that whoever was selected would be the only chance they had. “Part of our agreement is that you in no way attempt to bring our Lady’s influence to this world. You will not interfere with its people. Confine your actions with locating, and training the one who must save our Lady’s people.”

“I understand,” he replied. Then he felt energy flowing from Xi to him and what needed to be done, as well as the information to impart to the one chosen, was made known to him.

“You have one year,” Xi said then vanished.

As he stood there in the aftermath of what he had learned, he thought of the great responsibility entrusted to him by the mighty Xi. The fear he had earlier felt at being summoned by Xi faded away only to be replaced with pride and a sense of purpose. *Yes, he said to himself. I can do this!*

Glancing around at his surroundings, the first question that came to mind was, *‘What manner of people lived here?’* He bent down to touch the black road running along the ground in front of him and was surprised to find it hard, yet slightly malleable.

“Interesting,” he said to himself.

Then his attention turned toward the squat building. Stepping toward it, he walked across the black road to investigate. Often times, an examination of the native architecture would reveal insights into the inhabitants of a world.

Out front were two small obelisk looking structures about five feet high. They had tubes of a firm substance that was attached to them at one end. Passing the obelisks, he made his way to the building.

It had several windows whose glass had long since been broken, all but one were boarded up. The front door was a latticework of metal which he found to be unusual. Looking inside, he saw barren stands and tables. Small animals the size of his hand with a long tail, rats he thought they were, could be seen making their way across the floor. Whatever this place's original function had been, it was deserted now. Realizing he wasn't going to learn anything further there, he returned to the road.

Glancing down either direction failed to give him any indication as to which way he needed to go in order to reach the nearest town. Determining that the path to the right traveled slightly downhill, he decided to try that way. Stepping upon the black road, he set out in search for the one who would save Casdralla's people.

Larus had been walking for a little over two hours, all the while contemplating the information Xi gave him to impart to the chosen one. First and foremost was the language of the world in question. Whoever the chosen one turned out to be, it was a given that his native tongue would not be that of the world to which he would be taken. Also, there was a general knowledge of the world which would prove invaluable, as well as basic skills he may need along the way.

Then a sound began to develop behind him, bringing him out of his reverie. It was growing louder by the second. Glancing back the way he had come, he saw what looked to be a fast moving carriage hurtling toward him. *What propelled it?* he thought. There were no horses drawing it and the carriage rode low to the ground. It was black and shiny. Along the side were what looked to be red flames, but were in actuality simply an adornment.

As he turned toward the fast moving carriage, he could see two people riding inside. "Well, this was easy," he said to himself as he waved to them in greeting. It was nice of Xi to have placed him where he was sure to encounter the chosen one so readily.

He stood upon the road waving but the carriage failed to slow down. Almost as if those within didn't see him, it approached and then with a gust of wind, roared past. Larus was startled when just as the carriage was passing by, it let out with a very loud, very unnerving sound that lasted but a second.

As the carriage sped down the road away from him, he ceased waving. Standing perplexed for a moment, he tried to figure out what happened. Then from behind him, another roaring sound began to be heard. Looking back, he saw another carriage heading quickly toward him.

This carriage was unlike the other one. Where the first one had been black and shiny, this one was kind of a brownish color. Only one person was within it, and behind the area where the person sat, was a long open area that resembled a box without a lid.

Larus stood there as the carriage roared toward him. Always the friendly sort, he again waved. To his astonishment, the carriage let out with an unpleasant squealing sound as it began to slow. At its current rate of deceleration, he realized the carriage was going to stop next to where he stood.

As the carriage let out a final ear piercing squeal as it came to a stop, Larus looked through the carriage window and saw an older man inside. The glass of the window suddenly began moving down and smoke belched forth. "Are you lost?" the old man asked.

Larus wasn't sure how to respond so remained silent. *Could this be the chosen one?*

"Do you need a ride?" the old man asked.

"Yes," replied Larus. "I would find that most welcomed."

The old man waited while Larus simply stood there for a moment then said, "Well, don't just stand there." Motioning to the other side of the carriage, he added, "Get in."

"Oh, right," replied Larus. He quickly moved around to the other side and opened the door. The opening apparatus was unlike any other he had ever seen, but readily deduced its function. Climbing inside, he sat next to the old man then closed the door. As soon as the door shut, the carriage roared back to life and they began moving down the black road.

"What's your name?" the old man asked.

"Larus," he replied.

The old man grinned. "You can call me Pete," he said. Reaching up to the panel before him, he pressed a button and music filled the inside of the carriage. It was loud and its sudden appearance startled Larus.

As the old man pulled forth a small thin circular tube, Larus reached up out of curiosity for the button which seemed to have produced the music. Pressing it, the music abruptly stopped.

The old man applied a flame to the tube and smoke began to issue from it. He glanced to Larus and asked, "What, you don't like county?"

Country? Thinking fast, Larus replied, "I like your country very much."

"Then why did you turn it off?" the old man asked.

"Off?" asked a confused Larus.

"Yes," replied Pete. Reaching up, he pressed the button and the music reappeared. Pressing it again, the music vanished.

"Oh!" said Larus as he realized what the man was talking about. "You mean the music."

"Yes," said Pete, giving Larus a sidelong look.

Larus gave him a grin and pressed the button which caused the music to once more fill the carriage. The novelty of creating music by pressing a button intrigued him.

"Are you okay?" Pete asked.

"I am fine, thank you," Larus assured him.

Pete held forth his hand which held a small package with more of the round tubes and offered him one. "Want a smoke?" he asked.

Larus shook his head. "I must decline," he answered. He had encountered various means in which people inhaled smoke given off by burning vegetation, but never once had he enjoyed it.

Pete shrugged and said, "Suit yourself."

They rode down the road in silence for a bit, Larus completely enthralled by the novelty of riding in a horseless carriage. Turning back from watching the landscape zipping by, he caught Pete casting glances toward him. "Is there something I can help you with?" he asked.

Shaking his head, Pete said, "No." Then a moment later, "You're not sweating."

"That is true," replied Larus.

"But, it's a hundred and fifteen outside," the old man stated. "And you were walking beneath the sun."

"I don't perspire," he explained.

"Some kind of medical condition?" Pete asked.

"I suppose you could call it that," he replied.

While Pete had been checking him out, Larus had been weighing the chances of Pete being the chosen one. It didn't take him long to rule him out as a candidate. Using the senses all Qyaendri possess, he could tell the man had extensive problems with his lungs. In fact, Larus would be surprised if he lived through the week. He wanted to help the man for it was within his power to do so, but Xi's warning about not interfering with the people of this world prevented him.

Larus sat back and again looked out the window at the world passing by. Arid, barren, lifeless, he felt the chances of finding anyone suitable in such a land extremely remote. He knew his Lady's people were counting on him to find the one to save them. But where could that person be?

As they continued down the black road, they began encountering other carriages coming from the other direction. Not one of them looked the same. He was fascinated by the apparent need for variety these people exhibited. For the most part, places he had been sent to help Casdralla's faithful tended to be all the same; the people, sights, and sounds. But here, things were different.

"How far are you going?" Pete finally asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," he replied.

"A free spirit huh?" the old man guessed.

Larus shook his head. "No, that I am not."

The response wasn't what Pete was expecting. Shrugging it off, he said, "Well, I'm only going another couple miles. My son and I have a booth at the fair where we sell produce."

"Fair?" asked Larus.

"That's right," he replied.

"Will there be many people there?" he asked.

"A *fair* amount," he said, then laughed at the play on words.

"Excellent," Larus commented. "That would be an ideal place in which to start." He began thinking about how he was going to go about winnowing the people he was to meet down to the few who may fulfill the criteria for the chosen one. Before he had it figured out, his attention was drawn to a town appearing out of the horizon further down the road. As they drew closer, a sight appeared some ways from the town off the right side of the road that he had never seen before.

There was a large wheel going round and round yet not going anywhere. As they drew closer still, he saw people riding upon seats

attached to the inner surface of the wheel. Then other sights, equally strange and wonderful caught his eye. "What is that?" he asked.

"That's the fair," explained the old man. "What, ain't you never seen one before?"

Larus shook his head. "Not like that," he replied.

"Shoot, that's a small one," he said with a chuckle. "Out here in the middle of nowhere, you can't wrangle the big amusement companies to come. But this one suits our needs and provided a place for the young'ens to have fun."

Not really paying much attention to what Pete was saying, Larus was taking in the wonders coming at him through the window; the lights and the people. And the **energy!** He could feel it radiating out from the fair. Only extreme emotions could generate such an outpouring of energy from mortals. Fear and love would do it, but he didn't feel any of that coming from there. Something else was causing it.

As Pete pulled from the road they had been traveling upon onto another smaller one, they covered the last of the distance to the fair.

Larus' eyes were trying to take in everything the fair had to offer. He then caught a whiff of an odor coming from outside the carriage. It took him a moment of searching before he found the correct mechanism and rolled his window down to better experience it. Baked bread, only sweeter with a hint of something else. As the window came down, so too did the noise enter. Larus was beside himself with the sights, sounds, and smells of the fair.

Pete followed the smaller road to one of the entryways where he came to a stop. A lady stood near the gate and approached Pete's window. "More produce Pete?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "My boy called and said they were running low."

The lady looked over to Larus. "Who's your friend?"

"Found him wandering along the side of the road. His name's Larus," Pete explained.

"Walking out in this heat?" she asked.

Pete nodded. "Yep." Revving the engine, he said, "Talk to you later."

"You take care," she replied warmly.

Making their way slowly through the fairgrounds, Larus was overwhelmed by the sights and sounds. Never in all his experiences had he encountered anything like this on a mortal world. When Pete brought the carriage to a stop, Larus opened the door and left the cab. In the back of his mind he heard Pete calling his name but he was too enthralled by the energy bombarding him from every side to pay any attention.

The gleeful cries of children, the amazing odors emanating from dozens of sources, all added to the sensory overload he was experiencing. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced on a mortal world. Moving deeper into the fair, all he could think of was Pete's comment that this was small. He couldn't help but wonder what a large one would be like.

Chapter 2

A lone traveler was riding along the road that wended its way eastward through rolling hills. This part of Casdra was sparsely populated with only the occasional farmsteads dotting the land. Further east rose the mountains through which the road would ultimately go. A cool breeze blew down from the peaks, easing the heat of the summer day.

Father Thomas was on his way back to the village of Billin where he was proud to be the spiritual leader. Every three years, Casdralla's priests were required to spend time at the High Temple for a period of fasting and purification. Then once completed, they would return to their home temples, recharged in spirit and ready to continue the work of the Lady.

Riding his mule across the hills of the lower region of Casdra, the land in which their holy Lady held sway, he passed the time by recalling many of the theological discussions in which he partook. Such learned exchanges of ideas were a rare thing in his home temple and that was part of the reason he so enjoyed his time at the High Temple. The priests with whom he served on a day to day basis in Billin were not necessarily the brightest of those called to the Lady's service. Billin being a small town with a small temple, it didn't draw many of what many would consider deep thinkers. The only one with whom he could

discuss the more abstract theoretical ideals was Brother Frey. But he tended to be rather peripatetic and spent most of his time traveling between temples, being a more hands on priest than most.

All in all, Father Thomas was quite satisfied with his life. The birds were singing and the light breeze aided in keeping the summer heat tolerable.

Sometime tomorrow he would be back in Billin. Nestled in a high valley along the shore of the prettiest lake one could ever hope to see, Billin inhabited the most tranquil, and beautiful area Father Thomas had ever encountered. That was why when he had heard of the passing of the Father in charge of the Billin temple, he quickly volunteered for the position. He loved being in the mountains and away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Dabbing away the sweat beading his forehead, he would also be glad to be away from the heat of the lowlands.

It was still early in the day when the road began to rise on its way toward the upper elevations. Casdra on a whole was a land of rugged terrain and deep forests. Almost completely encircled by tall mountain ranges, the greater part of Casdralla's domain was accessible only through a single mountain pass. Father Thomas had made his way through that pass four days ago and then spent the better part of a day visiting a friend who was a priest at the temple in the walled city of Xith.

Xith was by far Casdra's largest city. Situated as it was on the southern border, the soldiers garrisoned behind its fortifications had protected the pass leading into the heart of Casdra for centuries. With its massive wall protecting it, they could sally forth and attack any army which dared try to invade into the heart of Casdra. The last such assault was three centuries ago and the invading army had been decimated so severely, they had eventually given up and returned home in disgrace after losing more than half its men.

Their country was strong, its people prosperous, the world was as it should be.

As he continued along, the road gradually grew steeper as it made its way to the summit. At times it would switchback on itself and grow quite steep. Every time he passed through this section of the road, he would offer a prayer up to the Lady for those traders hearty enough to dare this route of steep incline and narrow switchbacks. For without them, his village would experience grave hardship.

Hours went by as he worked his way to the summit. A hunter's cabin stood not far from the road just over the summit on the eastern side. In the winter, hunters from Billin would come and use it as a base. During other seasons of the year, it was a way-stop for travelers, a place where they could escape the cold of the mountains and take their ease during the night.

Father Thomas always made it a point to stop there whenever he traveled to the High Temple or visited his friend in Xith. Rarely did he encounter another person sharing the cabin during those times. It afforded him a final period in which to commune with the Lady before returning to his duties. And as he crested the summit and the cabin came into view not far down the road, he saw that this time was to be no exception. It was shut tight against the elements and had the look of being deserted.

Behind the cabin was a small stable where he housed his mule. He offered a prayer of thanksgiving to Casdralla when he discovered oats for his mule. They must have been left by the last traveler.

But such was the custom in Casdra. It being for the most part a mountainous and rugged country, way-stops such as this one were not uncommon. Whenever a traveler stayed at one, custom dictated for them to leave what they could for the next traveler. Because who knew when someone's need would be great? The Lady favored those who helped others.

Aside from the oats, Father Thomas discovered plenty of chopped wood stacked inside near the fireplace, another benevolent act by the previous occupant. He stacked several of the smaller logs within the fireplace and soon had a warm fire burning, its warmth quickly banishing the cool of the upper elevations from the cabin.

Once the fire was able to continue burning on its own, he took his pot and went outside to where a small creek made its way past the cabin. There he filled it a quarter of the way with water.

The sun by this time had fallen behind the western peaks and the day was once more giving way to night. Father Thomas took his time on returning to the cabin. The peace of the moment filled him and it was in times like these that he felt closest to the Lady.

When at last he returned inside the cabin, he went about making a stew from the last of his supplies. As he waited for it to become ready,

he gazed from the window, enjoying the tranquil view of the trees and mountains.

Tomorrow he would be home.

In the morning before he left, he offered a blessing for the next traveler. Since priests normally weren't expected to chop wood, this was their way of contributing to the way-stops. Anyone who encountered a way-stop that was ill prepared for them knew that a priest had recently spent the night and that they would be blessed. True, there were some who took advantage of the custom and took without giving, but they faced a reckoning for their actions when they departed this world.

Once the blessing had been said and he was again atop his mule, Father Thomas resumed his progress toward Billin. His spirits were high as he worked his way down from the summit, fully enjoying another of the remarkably beautiful days that were so common to this region at this time of year.

He rode for several hours before encountering another traveler. The man was on foot further down the road and making his way toward him. Walking with head down and steps coming in broken rhythm, there was something about the man that made Father Thomas uneasy. Nudging his mule to a quicker pace, he hurried forward. He had covered most of the distance and was about to shout a salutation when the man took a misstep and fell to the road.

Father Thomas immediately slipped from the back of his mule and rushed forward, his concern growing into something more. Even before he reached the man's side, he could see that his clothes were torn and stained red with blood.

His first thought was that the man may have run afoul of bandits. Though not very common along this stretch of road, it did happen. "My son!" he cried as he reached the man's side.

Raising his head, the man looked up. "Father," he said.

Father Thomas gasped in recognition when he recognized the face staring up at him. "Jesop?" he asked in worry. Dropping to his knees, he reached out for his long time friend. "What happened?" he asked. "Who did this to you?" Dried blood matted Jesop's clothes in several places. There was a wound on his head, a bump that appeared to have been caused by contact with a blunt object.

Jesop grabbed the front of Father Thomas' robe. "They're gone!" he cried. "Everyone is gone!"

Fear from deep within the priest began welling to the surface as Jesop spoke. "Gone?" he asked. "Who?"

"I tried..." he began then stopped as the light in his eyes began to fade.

"Jesop!" yelled Father Thomas. Bowing his head, he closed his eyes and prayed. "Lady, who watches over her people as does a loving mother, let not this good man leave us!" When he opened his eyes, he saw Jesop looking back. "Tell me what happened," he said softly.

"They came in the night," Jesop explained. "With clubs and swords they came and took everyone they could find." He started to fade again but strength returned to him and was able to continue. "I tried to save them!" he shouted. "But there were too many." Tears appeared in his eyes as he said quietly, "They took my Valia, ripped her out of my arms as I tried to shield her. She was but a girl!"

"Who did this?" Father Thomas asked.

Jesop didn't reply. He turned his head toward him and sobbed.

Father Thomas held him as he cried. Inwardly, he feared for his people, for Jesop had been one of those who lived within Billin. He was amazed that given his injuries, Jesop had made it so far. Giving silent prayers to the Lady for the safety of his people and for her to protect them, he held the man until his cries stopped. When he loosened the embrace, he found that Jesop had died.

He said another prayer for Casdralla to ease Jesop's passage to the next world, then set about burying him. Father Thomas desperately needed to return to Billin and find out what had happened, but first he would give Jesop the proper burial he deserved.

It took him almost half an hour before Jesop was properly in the ground. Standing by the grave, he offered another prayer then returned to his mule and continued the last stretch home as fast as possible.

An hour later he saw the smoke. Two more hours found him upon the crest of the ridge overlooking Billin and saw what remained of his once peaceful, beautiful village. Not one building remained intact. Whoever had done this had set fire to everything. He sought where his temple had once stood and found only a charred remnant.

A glimmer of hope sprung within him when he saw people moving amongst the smoldering remains of their homes. Nudging his mule into motion, he hurried down to the town.

Daeson was aiding in processing prayers of the faithful as most Qyaendri do from time to time when another of the Qyaendri appeared before him. "Daeson!" the Qyaendri exclaimed. "Xi has returned!"

"Xi?" he asked.

Nodding, the Qyaendri said, "He wants you to come."

Without saying anything further, Daeson vanished and immediately appeared within the High Temple where he made his way to the Rotunda. The temple was crowded to the point of bursting with curious Qyaendri. As he came forward, their ranks parted to allow him a path to the center by the statue of their goddess where Xi waited.

Xi said not a word as Daeson approached. As he came before the most ancient one, Daeson dropped to one knee and bowed "What does my Lady want of me?" he asked.

There was a moment of quiet expectation as everyone within the Rotunda held still to hear Xi's reply. "It is time," his deep voice announced.

Daeson raised his head and saw Xi holding his hand out toward him.

"Take my hand," he said.

Coming to his feet, Daeson reached out and took hold of Xi's hand. In that instant, they were gone.

In a world very much different to that in which Father Thomas hurried to help his people, Larus laughed. He had done much laughing during the past year spent on this world. The people inhabiting this particular world were basically much the same as those he had encountered on every other world to which he had been sent during his time in Casdralla's service. It was what they had done with the world that so amazed him.

He had learned much of this world and its people since his first arrival: radio, television, candy bars, the list was endless. These people had a way of living which transfixed him as none other. From the simple country fair, he had made his way to a more populated area where he planned to search for the one to save his Lady's people.

But soon after arriving, he discovered a place that made the fair seem boring in comparison. It was something the locals called an ‘Amusement Park’. In it were things the locals called ‘roller-coasters’ and other ‘thrill rides’ which soon had him procrastinating in his mission to find the chosen one. After all, he did have a whole year didn’t he?

One of the attributes of the Qyaendri was that when they were around mortals, they were prone to pick up the habits and attitudes of those mortals. Most Qyaendri were able to use this ability to better deal with the mortals they were trying to help. Knowing how mortals thought and felt gave them an edge when attempting to answer their prayers.

However, some like Larus, tended to be more influenced in their own actions by the habits and attitudes of the mortals around them. His susceptibility to being thus affected had played no small part in why he had been sent to help the boy Allen. The little boy lived in a sparsely populated rural community and Larus would have minimal contact with humans. Now though, with thousands of people surrounding him and being constantly bombarded by their thoughts, emotions, and the basic drives of all humans, he was ill equipped to deal with it.

And that is why, a year later, Larus had done very little in the way of finding the chosen one. In fact, for the last three months, he hadn’t even thought about his mission at all. Going from one experience to another, he became an addict of this world. Not from drugs or anything like that, but rather from a deluge of experiences so overwhelming, that they were all he could think about.

A year to the day of his arrival on this world, Larus was seated in an old, rundown movie theater watching a Three Stooges’ marathon. Aside from himself, there were only fourteen others in the theater. On his lap was a monster bucket of popcorn from which a steady stream of the crunchy goodness found its way into his mouth. Resting on the seat next to him was a half eaten box of bonbons, a pop that was all but gone, and the nachos he planned to eat a little bit later.

There was something about the men on the screen that was hard to resist. Their antics brought forth laughter from him the likes of which he had never experienced. Currently, he was watching them trying to get a block of ice up a tall flight of steps. Every time the block of ice reached the top, it had melted to a fraction of its original size. And

every time, he would laugh. Then, they positioned themselves to relay the block of ice to the top. Each moving quickly, they were finally able to get the block of ice to the top intact. When Curly held it up to show the other two they had succeeded, it slipped out of the tongs and shattered on the ground.

Larus broke into laughing so hard, he could barely breathe. When he was finally able to control the laughter and returned his gaze to the screen, he found the picture to be frozen.

“Hey!” he hollered up to the projection room. Glancing to the square through which the picture emerged, he tried to see what, if anything, was going on in there.

About to get out of his seat and head out to the lobby to tell someone, he noticed everyone in the theater wasn’t moving either. That was when he saw someone standing nearby in the aisle looking straight at him. A soft nimbus of light radiated from the man. It took only a moment for him to recognize Daeson.

At seeing the Qyaendri, the enormity of what he had done, or rather not done, struck him like a load of bricks. The presence of another Qyaendri did much to negate the accumulated affects of the mortals on this world. He realized the time was up and that he had done nothing in finding the chosen one.

“I’ve come to bring the one to save our Lady’s people,” Daeson told him.

Fear coursed through Larus. He had failed! There was no chosen one!

“Where is he?” asked Daeson.

Panic filled him. He could be banished from his Lady’s presence for this! And what of Xi? What would that mighty one do to him for having failed? Visions of consequences too terrible to mention ran through his mind.

“Well?” asked Daeson. “Don’t tell me you failed again.” His expression darkened.

“No,” lied Larus. It just came out. He had never lied before, ever. Yet there he was, lying! Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “The chosen one is ready.”

Surprise appeared on Daeson’s face. “Truly?” When Larus nodded, he asked, “Then where is he? Time is short for our Lady’s people.”

His mind froze. What could he say? What could he do? Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man frozen in the doorway leading from the theater. The man was returning from the lobby with a bucket of popcorn in one hand and a drink in the other. Pointing toward him, Larus said, "That's him."

Daeson turned to look at the man and said, "Good." Moving toward him, Daeson reached out and touched the man on the arm.

As Daeson and the man disappeared, Larus moaned, "What have I done?"

Father Thomas was numb. Only a few of his people had survived the attack. Those who had been lucky enough to find refuge in the surrounding forest told tales of men appearing in the dead of night. Wielding clubs, they felled everyone they encountered.

Here and there as he passed through the pitiful remnants of his once beautiful village, laid men who had fought to save family and friends. Their bodies hacked and stabbed, some beyond recognition. Whoever had done this had shown no mercy.

They had come for his people, taken them toward a fate Father Thomas wouldn't allow himself to contemplate. A steady stream of prayers issued forth from the priest as he moved from body to body. Not only were they of the men who fought in defense of their village, but also of the old and infirm.

"Why?" a woman cried out to him. "Why would they do this to us?"

He looked her way and saw a woman cradling the head of a man in her lap. As he gazed into her tear streaked face, he recognized her as Clarissa. She and the man whose head she cradled had exchanged vows but a month ago. Theirs had been a life of promise. Now she was a widow.

Shaking his head, he said, "I do not know."

"It was them damn Ullentites," stated a crusty old codger. Ogger was one of the oldest living residents in Billin and had been the boil on many backsides during his protracted years. "Always knew they were no good."

Ullen was the nation to the south. Ruled by a king, they and Casdra had enjoyed many years of peace and prosperity. During his recent time in the High Temple, Father Thomas had heard unsettling rumors

surrounding a recent shift in the power structure of Ullen. He had paid little heed, now much to his regret.

“Carey!” “Mort!” A woman cried out in anguish as she moved through the charred remains of Billin in search of her children.

Father Thomas continued to sink lower into sadness, his world crumbling around him. All he could think of was that he had not been here when his people had needed him the most. Self deprecating guilt and mind numbing emotional pain sought to take his will from him. Then, almost as if a hand reached inside him and brought him back to his reason, he knew what he had to do.

Moving with renewed determination, he made his way toward what was left of his beautiful temple. Offering prayers and words of encouragement to all he passed along the way. The temple door was gone, as were the walls and ceiling. Fire had taken everything but the stone fireplace and the adjoining wall.

Passing resolutely into the still smoking remains, he made his way toward where the wooden altar had once stood. The silver chalice, the golden statue of the goddess, none of the precious, sacred objects had been spared by the invaders. They had stolen them all. His heart broke at the desecration to his temple, but he persevered until he reached the area just before where the altar had sat.

Charred sections of the crossbeams and ceiling were lying crisscrossed upon the floor. Taking hold of the uppermost beam, he began clearing them to the side. For hidden beneath the floor was the most sacred of all the artifacts which his temple had held.

“Father Thomas?” a man asked.

Pausing in his work, he turned to see Ogger standing at the edge of the ruined temple. The old man was looking at him.

“Could you use some help?” he asked.

Father Thomas was taken aback by the offer. In the fifteen years he had served in Billin, this was the first time Ogger had ever offered to help anyone. “Yes,” he replied. “I could and thank you my son.”

Ogger made his way to the Father’s side, and with his help, the floor was soon cleared of debris.

It didn’t look as if the secret compartment had been discovered. The fire which had destroyed his temple had scorched the wood of the floor and warped it slightly but appeared still intact. Kneeling down, Father Thomas pressed in the two places necessary to open it. When it popped

open, it only opened half an inch. Then Ogger was there with a knife and wedged its blade into the side of the secret compartment's lid. When he pried the lid open, Father Thomas saw the purple velvet pouch and breathed a sigh of relief.

"What is that?" asked Ogger.

"This, my son," Father Thomas replied as he took the pouch and stood up, "is a piece of the very first temple ever built on this world to Casdralla." Opening the pouch, he pulled forth a piece of wood three inches long and one wide. To Ogger it looked like nothing more than part of a wooden plank that had been chipped away from a larger piece.

Father Thomas let the pouch fall away as he held the sacred artifact. "I am going to beseech our Lady to help our people," he explained.

Ogger nodded. "Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked.

"No," replied Father Thomas. Holding the artifact reverently in his hands, he fell to his knees and prayed. "Great Mother Casdralla, your people need your help this day..." As he prayed, he could feel the holiness of the piece of wood he held seem to magnify and envelope him like a warm, comforting blanket.

Pouring his heart and soul into the prayer, he beseeched her to watch over his people, that they may be safe and quickly returned to their loved ones. "...let them know you walk with them great Lady. Help them, I beseech you." With the utterance of the last word, he grew silent as tears streamed down his face. Finally giving into the emotions which have plagued him since first learning of the attack, he clutched the piece of wood and sobbed.

His sobbing continued for only a short time before a warm sense of calm settled over him, a feeling of safety akin to that of a fearful child being comforted by a loving parent. "Father!" he heard Ogger suddenly cry out. There was something strange in his voice, something he had never heard in it before. Opening his eyes, he was startled to see two men enveloped by a radiant glow standing before him.

"A Qyaendri!" he exclaimed. For the man on the right could be none other. Though they looked as any man one would expect to encounter on the street, a Qyaendri had a certain aura about them that any priest could immediately recognize.

Father Thomas was awed beyond words. Never in his time as a priest had he come face to face with one. While it was true he had been taught that they were the intermediaries between Casdralla and the

mortal world, he had always harbored doubts as to their existence. At the High Temple where he had just recently come from, there were many murals and statues depicting Qyaendri. He had always hoped they were real. And, now standing before him, was one. Fear intermingled with awe at being in its presence.

The man standing next to the Qyaendri was an odd sort. His dress was unlike anything Father Thomas had ever seen before. In one hand the man held a bucket containing an unknown substance, while in the other was gripped what looked to be a container.

Remaining on his knees, Father Thomas bowed his head. "Mighty one," he said with as much reverence and respect he could muster. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ogger and several others down on one knee.

"There is a task which this man must complete," said the Qyaendri. "You, Father Thomas, must aid him in whatever way you are able."

"But what of my people?" began Father Thomas when suddenly, the Qyaendri disappeared. The glow encompassing the man faded with the Qyaendri's disappearance.

The man stood there with eyes wide for a moment as he looked first to Father Thomas then to the burned out husk of the temple. Then a small noise escaped him as his eyes rolled up into his head and fainted dead away.

Chapter 3

As the man hit the soot covered floor of the temple, Father Thomas rushed forward. Upon reaching his side, he saw that the man still breathed. He had merely fainted and remained uninjured. Turning to where Ogger still knelt he said "Help me carry him somewhere more comfortable."

"Kyn's place out in the woods was untouched," offered one of the bystanders.

"Good, we shall take him there." With Ogger's help, Father Thomas lifted the unconscious man and carried him from the temple's remains.

Revitalized with hope, Father Thomas had thrown off the cloak of despair which had settled upon him. Obviously, the appearance of this man was the answer to his prayer. This man of unknown origin would somehow be instrumental in the return of his people.

"What was that?" Ogger asked once they emerged from the temple.

"I believe it was a Qyaendri," replied Father Thomas. "A servant of our Lady."

A hushed murmur passed through those accompanying them. Throughout their lives they had heard tales of the wondrous creatures, but never in all their days had they expected one to materialize in their midst.

"Have everyone gather at Kyn's," he told them. "When the stranger awakens, we'll discover how we shall bring about the return of our people." Moving quickly, he and Ogger brought the man to Kyn's home and laid him on the bed. Kyn had been one of the men who fell during the initial moments of the attack.

A water filled bowl and towel were brought to clean the soot from the stranger and his clothes. And such strange clothes they were too. The shirt was made of a material softer than wool. Brown in color, it

bore a bear's face with indecipherable symbols stitched in an arc over its head.

His pants were dark blue and made of a sturdy material. Perhaps the greatest oddity about the man's apparel was his shoes. Never before had any seen their like. They only came to the man's ankles and were tied with a long cord looped through circular, reinforced holes. Altogether it made for a very odd and strange appearance.

While one of the village women cleaned the man, another came in carrying the items the man had been holding when he appeared. "Father," the woman said as she came forward with them.

"Give them here my child," he said. Reaching out for them, he took the bucket and container from the woman. A strange aroma was being emitted by the contents of the bucket which he found to be not entirely unpleasant. Inside were a multitude of small yellowish-white objects. Setting the bucket on the bedside table, he turned his attention to the container. The outside was blue and white with strange, unfamiliar diagrams inscribed upon its surface. Moving the container, he could feel liquid sloshing about within. Setting the liquid filled container next to the bucket, he turned to those assembled in the room.

"These must be the man's food and drink," he said. "Perhaps given to him by the Lady." That elicited a murmur from the onlookers.

"It might be wise to let him rest," Ogger said.

Father Thomas nodded. "I shall remain here with him," he told them. "The rest of you continue in your search for any others who may have survived." As the villagers started to leave, he said, "Ogger."

The old man stopped and turned back toward him.

"Thank you for your help," he said.

Ogger nodded then continued out from the room.

Once the door was closed and he and the man were alone in the room, Father Thomas watched the rise and fall of the man's chest. In his mind, he contemplated the events culminating with the man's appearance. Praying for strength to do what must be done, he pulled a chair next to the bed, sat down, and waited.

Man, what a dream that was, Hunter thought. Rolling over, he tried to settle into a more comfortable position but failed. For some reason, his bed wasn't very comfortable.

His room was dark and he glanced around for the clock but failed to find it. He then looked over to where the red standby light on his monitor should be glowing in the dark and couldn't find it either. "Great," he moaned to himself. "Power's out."

It was still dark so there had to be another hour or two before he would be forced to get up for work, not that he wanted to. In the back of his mind he knew that with the power out, his alarm wouldn't sound and he would probably oversleep. *So?* he thought. Perfect excuse to sleep in.

Rolling over yet again, he tried to find a comfortable position. That's when he became aware of what sounded like breathing coming from within the room. Instantly he snapped fully awake and held still while trying to ascertain whether or not his imagination was playing tricks on him. After a few moments, he heard it again. Then he heard other noises coming from outside which gave him the impression of several others.

The first thing that came to mind was looters taking advantage of the blackout. ***He was being robbed!*** Not if he had any say in it. Whoever was in the room didn't appear to be moving. In fact, the breathing noise seemed to be coming from the same place. Whoever it was, was remaining in the same spot. *Why?* Hunter couldn't figure that out, but he wasn't going to waste time thinking while his few meager possessions walked out the door.

Between his mattress and box spring nestled a 9mm handgun. His father had given it to him shortly after he left for college. He was pretty good with it, having spent time out on the firing range every once in a while with his friend Mitch.

Moving his hand slowly, he slipped it over the edge of the bed and inched his way toward the space in which his gun was hidden. To his chagrin, his hand encountered the bed frame before the crease between his mattress and box spring. Raising his hand back up, he sought the crease but for some reason, couldn't locate it.

Cursing silently, he figured he was going to have to do this the old fashioned way. Hoping the intruders didn't have guns of their own, he slowly sat up on the edge of the bed. As he came to his feet, he continued to concentrate on the sound of the other's breathing. It remained unchanged. *Curious.*

From outside he heard muffled voices speaking to one another but wasn't able to make them out. *One thing at a time*, he thought. He had to take out the one in the room first. It still didn't sound as if the one in the room was moving about. Unwilling to take the time to ponder such an anomaly as an immobile intruder, he readied himself to pounce.

Turning toward the sound of breathing coming from the one in the room he sprang into action. He no sooner took a step than his bare foot forcefully struck a hard object. Aside from the massive amount of pain such a blow elicited from his toes, the unexpectedness of the encounter knocked him off balance. Crashing into a nearby table, he smashed it to pieces on his way to the floor. As the still intact section of the table fell upon him, he resisted the urge to cry out in pain due to the throbbing of his recently stubbed toes.

The sound of the crash startled Father Thomas awake. The candle which had been burning on the table had gone out and the room was pitch black. "Ogger!" he cried as he scrambled to his feet.

His first thought was that someone had made an attack on the stranger. But when Ogger and several others burst into the room with a lit torch, they quickly realized what had happened. The stranger had left the bed and took a misstep in the dark.

Father Thomas pulled the table off the stranger only to have the stranger strike him in the stomach. Doubling over from the blow, he stumbled backward.

The stranger grabbed a section of the broken table and wielded in like a club as he limped backward to place his back against the wall. Moving the club back and forth, the stranger looked as if he expected Father Thomas and the others to attack him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ogger move forward toward the stranger. "Stay back!" he ordered the old man.

Ogger stopped and glanced his way. Upon seeing the priest motioning him to back off, he fell back several feet.

Father Thomas turned his attention to the stranger. He felt no anger for being struck, for he too would be unnerved to suddenly find himself inexplicably in foreign surroundings. Raising his hands with palms facing the stranger in a disarming gesture, he said, "We are not going to hurt you."

The stranger looked to him, his eyes slightly wild. Then the stranger looked to Ogger and the others before continuing to pan around the room. As his gaze moved, his expression turned from determination, to puzzlement, and then finally to one bordering on fear.

“Are you okay?” Father Thomas asked in a gentle, reassuring voice. Again, the stranger’s gaze turned to him but made no other reply.

“I think he’s not all there,” observed Ogger.

“Quiet!” exclaimed Father Thomas quietly, all the while keeping his gaze fixed on the stranger.

“What is your name?” he asked. When again the stranger made no reply, Father Thomas moved one of his hands to his chest. Pointing to himself, he said, “Father Thomas.” Again, no response.

Glancing over his shoulder, he realized most of the survivors of the earlier attack were crowding the area just within the room behind him. Turning to Ogger, he said, “It might be best if I dealt with him alone.”

Ogger nodded. “You may be right father.” Turning to the others he said, “Alright, you heard him. Everyone out.” Moving forward he began ushering them toward, then through, the door.

“Do you want me to stay?” Ogger asked.

Father Thomas shook his head. “No,” he replied. “But leave the torch.”

“As you wish.” As he came to the door and gently persuaded the last of the villagers to leave, he wedged the end of the torch into a crack in the wall, then walked out.

Once the door closed and he was alone with the stranger, Father Thomas could see the stranger begin to relax.

What is going on? Hunter tried to make sense of what he was seeing. He was not in his room. Rather, it looked like he was in some sort of cabin. The walls were made of logs and the furniture crude. *How did he get here?*

He held onto the piece of wood he was brandishing as a weapon while his mind worked to come to grips with the situation. There were at least ten people here other than himself. The one before him seemed to be the leader. From the way he was dressed in a robe and had short hair, he looked like one of those cultist leaders. Could that be what happened? Are they going to brainwash him and make him sell flowers

at the airport? Hunter figured they were going to have to kill him before he would ever allow that to become a reality.

The leader spoke to him in some foreign language, but he couldn't make any sense of it. It sure wasn't Spanish or any of the others he had encountered over the years. He did relax some when everyone but the robed leader left the room. Hunter figured he could take the leader if he had to, but then what?

Not far from where he stood was a window. He began edging his way toward it to see if could figure out where he was. The leader stood still and quiet as he crossed over and looked out. He couldn't see much more than that they were surrounded by trees. Those who had been in the room earlier were congregating together nearby, a few cast glances his way.

Many looked to be in mourning. Men as well as women were crying, some spoke in anger, all in all the mood outside was not good. A second glance revealed that more than one bore fresh bandages that were stained with blood. Turning his gaze back to the leader, his confusion only grew.

As soon as his eyes met the other man's, the leader again pointed to himself and very slowly said, "Fa-ther Tho-mas."

"Father Thomas?" queried Hunter. His question elicited a smile and a nod.

The leader again pointed to himself and said, "Father Thomas." Then the leader pointed toward Hunter and looked at him questioningly.

"Hunter," he explained. "My name is Hunter."

"Hun...ter?" the leader asked.

Hunter nodded. "Yes," he replied. "Hunter."

The leader smiled and said, "Hunter."

"Okay," Hunter said, "now you know my name." The leader nodded when he paused. "What am I doing here?" The leader looked blank at the question. Then, he pointed over to a table near the bedside. When Hunter glanced over, he saw his drink and popcorn from the theater.

That sparked a memory. He had just arrived for the last half of the Three Stooges' marathon, bought his popcorn and drink, then had gone to sit down. After that his memory grew fuzzy. He faintly remembered walking through the door and into the theater. Then nothing until he

woke up here in the dark. It didn't make any sense. If they kidnapped him, why bother to bring his popcorn and drink?

The leader spoke again and again gestured toward the popcorn and drink.

Hunter shook his head. "I don't want any, thanks," he said. "What I do want is to get out of here." The leader looked blankly at him for a second then nodded as he spoke several words.

"Do you understand what I am saying?" Hunter asked. The leader again paused a moment before nodding. Hunter remained quiet as the leader spoke, then nodded. "I don't know how I got here, but I want to leave." As it didn't appear that his life was in peril at the moment, he lowered the piece of wood.

As the leader spoke, Hunter nodded every once in a while in an attempt to placate him. He didn't know what was going on, but he hoped that by keeping this guy happy it might afford him a chance to escape. Thoughts went through his mind about cultists and how one documentary had detailed how a man managed to escape their clutches by pretending to go along until an opportunity presented itself for escape. So nodding and giving a small smile, he listened to words he did not understand.

"Hunter," Father Thomas said, "my people are in great peril. The Lady has brought you in answer to my prayers." Pausing, he waited until he saw Hunter nod before continuing. "We must hurry if we are to rescue my people." Again, Hunter nodded during a pause.

"Are you a wizard of great power?" Father Thomas asked. Relief washed over him as Hunter nodded. "Praise the Lady," he said.

Pointing again over to the man's food, he said, "We brought this for you should you require sustenance. Or can you eat our food?" A nod. "You can? Excellent." He gave Hunter a smile which was returned. *This is going better than I had imagined*, thought Father Thomas.

"We should hurry," he said, "before those who took our people have a chance to get too far away. They already have half a day's head start on us." When Hunter nodded, he turned his head toward the door and hollered, "Ogger!"

The door immediately opened and Ogger entered. Fear sprang anew in Hunter's eyes which Father Thomas was quick to alleviate. "It's okay," he said in a mollifying tone. "He's a friend."

“Everything alright Father?” asked Ogger. He glanced from the priest to the man against the wall.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I’ve explained the situation. He’s willing to help.” Turning back to Hunter he asked, “Aren’t you?”

The appearance of the second man worried Hunter at first. But when the leader, who’s name he believed to be Father Thomas, turned back to him and spoke reassuringly, he relaxed and nodded again. The old guy seemed harmless, at least for the moment. Hunter felt the need to placate his captors until he could make a break for it. Until that time he would go along with anything as long as he didn’t get hurt or was forced to do something immoral. At that time he would turn from a willing, passive captive to one bent on immediate escape by any means necessary.

After several exchanges of words, the old man passed back through the doorway. At that time, Father Thomas turned back toward him and began motioning for him to follow. Backing through the door, it was obvious he wanted Hunter to follow him from the room. Having little other recourse, Hunter moved away from the wall and cautiously followed him through the doorway, the piece of wood still firmly clutched in his right hand.

There he found another room which looked to be the cabin’s living room with a small, crude kitchen off to the side. The lack of refrigerator and other modern amenities led him to believe this cult must not believe in modernization. There wasn’t even so much as a television, radio, or lights. He looked to the walls but failed to locate any switches or power outlets.

When he reached the doorway leading to the outside, he paused. Almost twenty people were present outside, standing still and watching him. “Okay,” he asked, “now what?”

Father Thomas spoke to him in his indecipherable language, again motioning for Hunter to follow. Geared to flee at a moment’s notice, he stepped from the cabin. After three steps, he saw a woman approach him and came to a stop.

The first thing he noticed about her were her red eyes and the tracks tears had made in the areas of soot covering her face. She came toward him with what looked to be an old fashioned satchel. Stopping an arm’s length away, she held it out for him.

Hunter glanced over to Father Thomas and saw him nod for him to take it. Reaching out, he took the satchel from the woman. She began speaking to him as tears welled anew. Then, panic seized him when she rushed forward. But it quickly dissipated when she wrapped her arms around him and began sobbing almost uncontrollably. Two of the other women quickly came and pulled her away. Something was greatly troubling these people, though for the life of him he couldn't figure it out.

Three other women came forward. One gave a satchel to Father Thomas, another to the old man, and the third to a younger man. When he saw the three of them sling their satchels across their backs, he did the same.

"Are we going somewhere?" he asked.

The crowd of people grew silent as every eye turned back toward him. Father Thomas came forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. He spoke for a few seconds and afterward waited with an expectant look. Not knowing what else to do, Hunter nodded. Immediately, the crowd collectively sighed in relief, many directing smiles his way.

From out of the trees came a man with a bow slung across his shoulders. The people grew silent once more as the man came and spoke with Father Thomas. Pointing back the way he had come he spoke quickly and urgently.

The effect of his words was immediately apparent to those assembled. The momentary happiness they had exhibited deteriorated quickly back into sadness, some even breaking down into sobs once more. When the man finished speaking, Father Thomas laid a hand on his shoulder and nodded. After speaking a few more words which sounded encouragingly to the crowd, he turned back to Hunter.

By this time, Hunter was thoroughly confused. What he was sure had been a cult didn't really act like one. On the contrary, they seemed to be in a great deal of distress. Either way, when Father Thomas spoke to him again and indicated they should follow the man with the bow, he didn't know what else to do but acquiesce. Until he figured out what was going on, he better play along. But the first chance that presented itself, he would make a break for it. Somewhere out there had to be a phone where he could call for help.

Father Thomas fell in behind Lurri, with Hunter close by. Ogger and Kyle, the younger man who was to accompany them, brought up the rear.

“They’ve made camp in the foothills,” explained Lurri. A local woodsman, he had returned from a hunting trip not too long after the marauders had finished their business in Billin and headed south. He had immediately followed in the hopes of affecting their peoples’ rescue, but the force had proven too strong. Once the enemy had made camp, he hurried back to inform the others and perhaps organize a more able rescue party. Imagine his surprise when he was told of the stranger and the way in which he had arrived.

Moving quickly, they soon returned to the charred remnants of their village. The sight of which caused the stranger to stop in his tracks. One building still burned while the others were either still smoldering or had been reduced to a pile of ash.

Father Thomas came and put a hand on the stranger’s shoulder. “This was our village,” he explained. “Most of our people have been captured by those who did this.” The stranger glanced at him with an odd look in his eye. Then he silently nodded.

“Come,” Lurri said. “We haven’t much time. If we don’t hurry dawn will come before we can reach them.”

“And if that happens,” added Kyle, “our chances of doing anything effective will be gone.”

“You are correct my son,” Father Thomas agreed. Turning to the stranger he said, “We must hurry.” With a gentle tug on his arm to get him going, Father Thomas had the stranger moving once again.

As they left what had been his home for many years, Father Thomas offered another silent prayer beseeching help up to the Lady.

“Looks like Larus came through this time,” said Ftheril, one the Qyaendri Daeson had authority over.

Standing unseen by the mortals making their way from the ruined village, Daeson nodded. “Perhaps.” He and Ftheril watched as the mortals left the vicinity of Billin and began making their way down the river toward those who held their Lady’s people. “Watch them,” he told the Qyaendri. “Let me know if anything should develop.”

Ftheril nodded as one of the lesser Qyaendri left to take the priest’s latest prayer to the High Temple where it would be considered. No

sooner had the one left than another appeared. Priests always had at least one Qyaendri in attendance at all times. In certain times of crisis or turmoil, there could be more. “As you wish,” Ftheril replied.

Daeson cast one final glance to the mortals before they disappeared into the trees. Then he left this world, for there were many Qyaendri attending numerous errands that required his attention.