

Chapter 1: **Antiark**

6617A.O.M.

Approximately 30th day of the New Order incursion.

A circle of ancient trees swayed in The North's ceaseless wind, burdened, yet uncompromising, beneath the undisturbed ice of millennia. Stately firs glowered at the overarching mountains that surrounded the glade of their residence while dominant spruces stretched protective limbs over the shorter rowans and shaded the mingled willows. A wall of stout cypress, eucalyptus and baobabs concealed the trunks of these primordial sentries like a woman's skirt, their grandeur undiminished by their inferior height.

A magnificent sequoia grew from the white lake, reigning proudly as this sanctuary's living heart beneath the Rhawn Mountain's daunting shadow, its graceful limbs also stretched out protectively over its attendants. The implacable northern wind caressed the sequoia's fragile, golden leaves as unblemished snowflakes kissed its alabaster skin.

Older than all other corners of the world, The North disregards the necessity of change. Bleak and overwhelmed by storms capable of shredding men, The North never yields. It stands separate from the Mortal Kingdoms, shielded by the ancient Rhawn.

The North is a land of mysteries and legends, where the laws governing other lands submit more easily than they govern. It is a remnant of the Before Age, and the domain of a creature older than mortal existence: *Winsyria*. In this, the Third Age, his power is diminished, his influence restricted to The North. Nevertheless, here, *Winsyria* remains the caretaker of his people, feared and loathed by the Ascended Gods since a time older than reminiscence; and until all creation fails, he will continue to rule The North.

A howl reached down the sheer pass, forewarning of an unusual arrival. The sanctuary stirred in silent welcome, its drowsy soul waking from a century of isolation. Men do not come here often, for the Rhawn are perilous to ascend, and this sanctuary is secreted deep within their highest peaks. Moments passed, and a White Wolf of *Winsyria* materialized from the lashing winds and eternal blizzard and strolled into the circle of trees. The unearthly canine reached the pond and surveyed the water before settling down to drink, its eyes alive with an unnatural intelligence.

The Wolf remained unperturbed when a second figure materialized from the storm; a man advancing with a hesitant step, his features brooding with the tundra-cold eyes, the pale northern hair, and the imperceptible scars dealt to his skin by his unforgiving homeland.

Mirroring his companion, the deranger scanned the lake, probing through the heavy fog that frolicked across its surface. Although the mist reached out to embrace him, one could still see the bow of rare black rowan hanging across his shoulder beside a quiver of three dozen arrows fletched with the feathers of black swans.

A ripple stroked the abnormally serene water, alerting the deranger that his presence was noted. Chagrined, though no sign of it broke the impassivity of his features, the deranger drew his cowl back, revealing himself to the entity he sought.

He smiled at his foolishness, a rare moment of unveiled humor for him, recollecting that his skill would not conceal him from the man he sought. The deranger, a Ranger-Warden of

Winsyria, thus named by the Northern people due to his habitual insanity of braving The North's harshest maelstroms, walked to the lake's bank and knelt beside the Wolf. Closing hazel eyes, he slipped into a half-trance, allowing his mind to relinquish the constraints of his body while he waited. With the air of beginning a ritual, he unsheathed his glass sword and plunged it into the water, returning the blade to the forge of its birth. The true North welcomed him; mists and half-formed shadows swelled in his mind, granting him wordless visions of beauty and solitude that transcended both distance and time.

To an outsider, The North was a sinister land encircled by baleful mountains; but to those within those mountains, the land was a haven of solitude and peace.

Immersed in the ancient majesty of his homeland, the deranger lost track of time until something powerful stirred, releasing a cascade of turbulence to forewarn its arrival. The mist receded unveiling another man kneeling, immersed to his breast, at the center of the lake's crystalline waters. The deranger opened his eyes, sensing who he sought. Exhaling to release the trance brought by his communion with the land, he unsheathed the glass sword from the water, its spine shimmering with captured light, the impurities cleansed.

The Rhawn Mountains murmured; their voices a resounding echo that descended from the heavens. The deranger glanced up in response, unnerved by their voice. He did not fear the Rhawn or Winsyria's storms; they were facets of a home he cherished. He respected them unto the verge of terror, but never feared them. It was what they portended that he feared.

The half-immersed man stood, tied back the locks of bronze hair, and strode toward the shore, water streaming down his naked torso over an intricate tapestry of almost indigo tattoos. "Hello, Maern." The High-Warden's voice rumbled, filling the air and the world about him with a graceful cadence that, despite his size, lacked volume. The storm slowed around them, calming at his words.

Maern stood, sheathing the glass sword but hesitating to speak, loath to break the silence again. "The New Order has entered The North, slipping past Adriat under cover of night, battle and enchantments. Some four thousand of them slipped into The North." Maern fell into step, and the White Wolf followed.

"Yes, and they bring demons in their company." The High-Warden shortened his stride, allowing for his companion's shorter step.

Maern glanced at the High-Warden. "The war that Lord Dellak predicted has arrived."

The High-Warden shrugged. "None of us ever doubted his words; we've had time to prepare for this."

Maern nodded beginning to struggle through the fresh snow. In contrast, the High-Warden moved easily, leaving no history of his passage as he guided them deeper into the Rhawn Mountains. Unperturbed by the arduous trek, Maern continued, "Lord Antiark solicits your aid."

"I know, but I cannot aid him. This is a war whose entirety we do not yet fully comprehend." His voice was strained, disfigured by the violence of emotions roiling beneath the surface of his implacable eyes, "More evils than one stride this earth, gathering their might and whispering in shadows while fouler things beyond their knowledge stir. Messages of portentous events rise on dark wings, and the **Hounds of Karrassain** walk this land anew. In the West, Cardolyn Tyier broods upon his high throne, eyes turned heavenwards." At the mention of **Karrassain**, a prison for gods and their ilk, Maern's step faltered and the warmth fled his blood. "For the first time in decades, Tiberius Wyite leaves Apelium to converse with the last Avenar Prince while Morrehiegann laughs in his dark tower, gloating over our plight and inner conflicts. Rumors speak in half heard susurrations, echoing a dark resonance; the harbinger of something

terrible that has long slumbered. A Dread Lord once more walks the Mortal Kingdoms, and with this messiah's arrival, the curse inflicted upon the Avenar Princes is reawakened to resume the harrowing of their souls."

The High-Warden reached the door of a small cottage and opened it; beckoning both man and Wolf to enter. Eager for warmth, Maern hurried inward. Bending under the high doorframe, the High-Warden followed. The Wolf entered last, at ease in the deteriorating weather.

Motioning for Maern to sit in a chair before the fire, the High-Warden walked to the corner of the small house, where his mattress lay, and donned a shirt. Meanwhile, the Wolf claimed the hearthstones with a satisfied huff.

As heat soothed his chill, Maern brooded, uneasy with his lack of knowledge. The North always balanced on war's precipice with the Light and Dark Pantheons ruling the exterior world. *Winsyria* loathed the gods just as they abhorred him; where he sought solitude, peace and distance, they hungered for dominion. War was coming to The North at *Malbreyth's* gleeful summons. As Maern's thoughts turned to the God of War, *Malbreyth*, second Lord of the Dark Pantheon, realization struck. "We are at war." He reiterated his words in stunned apprehension, hitherto having failed to realize what forthcoming events dictated. "The gods will fall on us like crows upon the dead."

"Yes, the gods will come: *Telacra* shall ride the backs of her New Order, and *Malbreyth* will invade as the first drop of human blood falls. *Jaidar* will enter through the flames and agony as the slightest threads of chaos sunder our unity; and where *Jaidar* goes, *Enecki* soon follows."

Maern searched the dancing flames for comfort, watching as they adopted a myriad of shapes and guises. First, there was a solitary wolf running in place and then its brethren joined it, their heads lifted in the ancient lament they had sung since the first dawn, regaling the moon with tales of heroes dead or forgotten.

The High-Warden continued, "Still, it is not the gods I fear. There are many creatures of darkness stirring in their ancient prisons or holds. Too many long dormant entities are awakening and too many guardians are hearing the call to rise. I fear what will be demanded of them."

He took the vacant seat, offering Maern dark bread and cold mutton while a tea kettle whistled over the fire. The High-Warden took a pair of clay mugs from pegs driven into the walls and poured tea into each. Maern accepted a mug, beginning to murmur his gratitude but fell silent when he noticed the cold iron of the High-Warden's eyes. "Too many entities are testing their strength beneath this veil of artificial peace while others cower in their burrows praying that this breathless tranquility is nothing more than a lapse and not an inhale of preparation." He sighed, "I know too much for peaceful nights or untroubled days, yet far from enough to safeguard us as I would wish. *Winsyria* recedes; his power is no longer used as it was. Many consider it a weakening, but it is not; a bargain has been struck, and I cannot see its laws." The High-Warden paused, considering his next words. "All paths hence are shadowed; I do not know which road is best." He shrugged, sighing to release more frustration. "I think we are all pawns for now, and until I discover more, we shall remain thus. The question is: Who's controlling us?"

At these last words, a shiver ran through Maern's blood. He leaned back, setting aside his repast and clasping the tea mug for warmth. His mind wandered the roads of queries and doubts, guessing at players he could not conceive.

Hours passed before Maern surfaced from his thoughts. Of the once vibrant fire, only embers glowed in the hearth. Night had fallen outside, calling the Wolf away to its eternal song. The High-Warden stood before the hearth, dressed in flickering light and watching the embers, his bronze eyes veiled with internal shadows.

Maern stood, reaching for his glass sword laid to rest beside his seat. He felt a need within him; a summons from The North, a silent reminder that his labors were incomplete. The derangers patrolled the trackless North, searching for whatever foreign monsters managed to slip past Adriat. They gave little heed to the affairs of kingdoms and empires, of armies or warlords. They guarded the land while lesser men guard their children.

Maern looked to the High-Warden. "You will be needed in Antiark."

"I know I can hear their pleas whispering, the dead accusing and the living bitter; I cannot help either. I have my own task waiting. When it is done, I will lend my strength to Antiark." The High-Warden stirred the fire, giving himself time to reflect. "I fear that the New Order is a diversion. I fear this war shall reach its wretched fingers into our heartland up to the walls of Antiark. I fear those who call The North home shall trade tranquility for power and tainted gold."

"You speak of the Weshac." Maern donned his sword, preparing for the overdue departure.

"Yes. Their latest pretense of a king is dead and, even if he was not, the laws governing their race are fragile. The New Order will find an easy alliance with the outcasts. Those Weshac hunger for power with which to broker their return and fulfill their long desired revenge."

The High-Warden turned from the embers and walked to a shadowed corner. Extending a hand into the veiling shroud, he removed twin swords. Even after three hundred years, no one had seen them unsheathed or knew their potential. The High-Warden mimicked his blades, existing as a mystery of leashed power and unknown origins.

He inspected the weapons, all the more terrible for their beauty. They belonged to him from a time lost to memory, and, throughout that time, they had rarely seen the light. They were Talwars, as long from pommel to tip as the average man stands. Though they were heavier than a normal man could wield, the High-Warden held them with ease. A full two inches in width at the spine and six inches of blade at the base; the weapons curved, expanding to a near foot before tapering to a point. Maern shivered, a sense of foreboding darkening his heart.

"Will you serve, High-Warden?" This question revealed Maern's purpose, a task given to him by Lord Antiark. The query itself was merely decorum, a petition of the High-Warden in days of war: *In the years of peace, none shall have greater power than the High-Warden, though he shall not reign. In times of war, none shall have greater power than the Lord of Antiark, though the Lord of Antiark has no command over the High-Warden unless the High-Warden submits to his commands.* This passage declares the High-Warden subordinate to none, unless he submits to Lord Antiark during times of war.

The High-Warden of Winsyria served a single purpose: a guard against the greatest supernatural forces the Mortal Kingdoms harbored. The Lord of Antiark was the sentinel against the mortal tyrants who rise and fall reaping the profits of war. Lord Antiark and the High-Warden existed as the most powerful forces in The North, barring the *Winter Court*.

"No, Maern, I will not serve." Maern bowed, expecting nothing else after listening to the High-Warden.

"What are the tasks you mentioned?" He queried, intending to convey Lord Antiark's offer of assistance, yet no answer came. The High-Warden, at last, looked up, his eyes cold with fury; a fury that inflamed with every black boot that tread the soil of his home.

"Though already beset, The North is better served by the prevention of any other foe seeking spoils. These are tasks neither the derangers nor Lord Antiark should interfere with. You still have time, though, so rest, and resume your obligations in the morning. Cherish this peace, for it will be hard to find in the days ahead." The High-Warden gestured to a mattress in another corner.

The deranger hesitated before accepting. His fatigue, masked while he conversed with the High-Warden, returned in full, defying his attempts to ignore it. Wrapping himself in the woolen blankets, he watched through heavy lids as the High-Warden brushed one callused hand across an ornate pommel. Maern closed his eyes, accepting this gift of tranquility and trusting the High-Warden of Winsyria to accomplish the necessary tasks.

Returning to the fire and pulling the intricate scabbards encasing the Talwars across his shoulders, the High-Warden released a breath. The Talwars knew the hour of their first song neared, the scent of that forthcoming moment lay draped across the air, teasing him with phantom sounds and laden whispers.

He commenced his last preparations for departure, first adding fuel to the hearth, then laying out the last meat and bread for when Maern awoke. Finally, glancing to ensure nothing was displaced, he exited into the wrathful storm.

He could feel The North's wrath swelling up to embrace him. It desired to unleash itself on the intruders, to ravage them until nothing remained. Interlaced with that rage, however, he felt its elemental, instinctive fear, and almost wept for it. The North knew the gods would come with their fire and their oppression, seeking to crush it, to shackle it to their Pantheon, nothing more than a broken wolfhound kept for amusement and display. It was his task to prevent this, to defy the gods.

Feeling their rage reverberating through the earth, he looked toward the Rhawn Mountains, intimidating with their razor peaks and cruel with their storms of ice and snow. To him, their fury deafened the screaming winds, a rage that went unheard by almost anyone else. The earth trembled and the heavens thundered, threatening to split; and they would split, they would shatter if ever he relinquished The North.

His skin prickled, aggravated by the energy latent on the air. The North was gathering its strength. Whether he wished it or not, this land would destroy itself before yielding to the Pantheon.

The High-Warden, knowing his every stride took him farther down a road of no return, stepped forward. He knew he would never return to this sanctuary, his home for the three hundred years of his Burdening. Turning south, he began his journey to Antiark.

Throughout the eternal memory of immortals, the Rhawn have stood in The North, an impenetrable barrier guarding the land. As he stepped onto their black roots, snaking along and beneath the snow, the winds died, and the ever-shrouding mist engulfed him. The High-Warden greeted the Rhawn Mountains, laying callused hands on the primordial rock. They slept now, dreamless in their protective vigil and wrathful in their slumber. Still, they answered him, rising from their memories at the touch of an old friend. He soothed their troubled thoughts with a whispered promise, calming their dangerous ire.

He journeyed toward the numberless peaks, a twilight surrounding him and mists filling his every stride. Despite his solitude, he was never alone; the Rhawn Mountains always accompanied him. He heard the wind just beyond his reach; saw the trees thrashing in shared fury while their leaves of gold, burgundy, and emerald fluttered helplessly. He completed the journey of weeks in hours; the Rhawn opening crevices for him, and the mist bending distance to hasten his pace until he reached one of the Rhawn's many summits where The North's tapestry opened before him in all its beauty.

Twelve cities rose across the country of men within The North. They began with Adriat

where it stood in Winter's Gate, reclining on the banks of the *Annuir'Hyme* and guarding the only aperture in the Rhawn's perfect continuity. It was the City of War, and the only entrance into The North men dared take because only fools travel the Northern seas.

The High-Warden looked to the four horizons, soliciting knowledge of current events from The North. The wind answered his summons, carrying images of all that transpired. He saw longships with wolf-prows rising and falling over the waves searching for a river flowing inland. He saw a serpent of iron and men slithering across the earth pursued by another of lighter skin. The High-Warden released the wind; the hour grew late. The New Order had succeeded in circumventing Winter's Gate through deception and a sacrifice of hired soldiers. They raced toward Antiark, pursued by Lord Adriat's legions.

The High-Warden of Winsyria allowed himself one last glance, a final farewell to what he relinquished. Then he turned and descended the mountain toward Antiark and the world of men.

When the first men fled through Winter's Gate into The Northlands from the oppressive gods and Elder Races, *Winsyria* gave them asylum. He called the *Annuir'Hyme* to rise and molded its water into the glass city of Antiark. He parted the clouds from high overhead, allowing starlight to illuminate his refuge. The stars, however, did more than cast light: they danced. Whether they were solitary lights or vast constellations, the stars wove across the heavens, shifting and swirling in an eternal, slow ballet. It was here, in a glass city straddling the *Annuir'Hyme*, that the race of Northern men was born twelve thousand years ago.

Even in The North where hard men tower over their softer cousins in the Summer Lands and know many wonders, the High-Warden elicited stares. He entered through the gates, the glass portcullis chiming in the wind as the thin trickle of people entering and leaving Antiark slowed to watch him. A dozen guards in white reclined around the entrance speaking of inconsequential matters and jesting while their piercing eyes measured all who entered with a cold flash of buried anger. Deceptively indolent wolfhounds lay at their feet chewing bones and lolling contentedly.

The guards noted his approach from the periphery of their vision, hands resting on long hilted swords. He bowed his head to them in passing, making no attempt to introduce himself or conceal the weapons across his shoulders. They did not, could not question him. Something in his mien conferred his power, his Burden and his sacrifice, placing him above inquiry. Thus, though never having seen him before, the guards recognized him and bowed their heads in silent awe.

The High-Warden stepped into the city, hardening his will against the onslaught of humanity and all it entailed. He felt the city stir, recognizing and greeting him with pleasure but also disquiet; Antiark feared for her people.

Slipping from the press of men and women going about their morning activities, he soothed her fears with a murmured word, asking her to trust him as he approached one of the rivers that were the city's main thoroughfares. Small coracles drifted the river, propelled by the currents to ferry passengers across the city without need of guidance. There were four stone roads in Antiark, crisscrossing the city and merging into a ring around the Citadel. This ring was the market where the hunting and fishing clans brought their meat to barter for milk and cheese, or the rare fruit grown in the most secluded forests.

He paused on the riverbank and waited for an empty vessel. A coracle slipped free of the current a moment later, running aground before him despite the absence of a dock. The High-

Warden stepped onto the empty vessel and grasped its stern as the coracle slid from the bank into the gentle currents.

He had visited Antiark twice before, both times to take his measure of the current Lord Antiark and permit the same. Each of the twelve cities is governed by a protector, a Lord who surrenders their birth name and accepts the city's in its stead in a ritual known as the Burdening. These Lords bear a quiet but vast power and prolonged lives. Each must watch their families wither beneath the years until at last, they bury them. The greatest of the twelve are Adriat and Antiark and, in accordance with this, the power, onus and centuries of life inflicted upon them are increased.

The coracle slowed, drawing him from his reverie. It slid ashore rasping across the ice as he stepped from the glass vessel unto the shore of Antiark's final bastion. The Citadel was a dour structure, its towers and walls a stark contrast to the Northland with their black, sharply hewn stone. The great iron portcullis stood shut, its vicious jaws lodged in the hallowed ice as a reminder that The North belonged to a more bestial era when mortal men bowed to wolves. Amalgamated tragedy, joy and anguish hung in the air like curtains for windows that never open; an echo of the Citadel's past Lords. Derangers patrolled its walls and lingered before the solitary gate, their faces unseen within the fabric of their cloaks, watching The North with eyes that saw past Antiark's walls.

The High-Warden approached the gate, his arrival going unnoted until the iron portcullis lifted of its own accord to admit him, drawing the derangers' attentions. One fell into step with a drawn cowl. "May we be of service, High-Warden?"

The High-Warden shook his head. "No, I am afraid you cannot. My words are for Lord Antiark alone." He paused before continuing, reminding himself of courtesies. "I would like to speak with Lord Antiark in as short a time as can be arranged without inconvenience." The deranger nodded as they ascended the wide stairs and entered the main domicile.

Where the outside stonework was sterile and forbidding, the inside was beautiful. Its stonework was perfect, without scars, dents or mortar grooves. Patterns filled the walls, preserving the memories of past lords and safeguarding their rare joys from the currents of time.

The High-Warden crossed the antechamber, his strides hushed on the intricate floor. A thousand strands of glass thread colored silver and cobalt flared with soft light at his steps. They formed a pattern too intricate to map, each strand twining the names of past Lords and High-Wardens. His name also rested somewhere in the pattern, surrounded by the names of other men both greater and lesser than himself. Across from the hall leading into the main complex, a pair of rowan doors opened of their own accord, welcoming him.

The High-Warden paused before those doors and bowed to the deranger. "Please, inform Lord Antiark of my arrival." The deranger accepted the dismissal and turned, donning his cowl to submerge in the shadows. He watched the deranger leave before passing through the open doors. They closed behind him, barring anyone who did not bear the Burden.

He entered a vast room seething with heat, the high walls to either side of him utterly masked by towering mahogany bookshelves and a dozen great furnaces with muzzled flames. The fires diminished with his passage, yielding to the essence of winter slumbering in his heart. He advanced over the carpeted floors, weaving between the empty chairs and tables that occupied most of the available space.

The oldest books waited for him on the far wall, their covers gray, torn, or nonexistent while the scripture on their spines endured. Some held memories of the Before Age; others transmitted visions of *Lord Arthramain Roy'al* and his wars of conquest. The last, those nearest

to the shadow-bound ceiling, were loath to surrender their enigmas and would often obscure them with barren pages and spilled ink. They spoke of forgotten memories and, among other things, the elemental force known as the *Oracle*.

He halted at the far wall, his eyes scaling the shelves until they found the pewter carving of a serpentine dragon twisting along the sixth ledge. The High-Warden extended his right hand and traced the beast's curved tail, rising and falling with the sinuous stone, feeling the ancestral carving of scales and horns. The dragon's crest caught his forefinger, opening a minute gash so a drop of his violet blood could slip down the dragon's face and into its open maw. He withdrew, his offering complete.

The dragon's head turned toward him, its maw closing to taste the blood's purity. A shiver ran the length of its form, changing the dark stone to glass. An echoing tremor cascaded through the books, and with its passage, they grew ethereal becoming translucent without fading. The wooden shelves followed, turning crystalline until all that was once stone, parchment and vellum became a glass mirror. Bowing his head, the High-Warden stepped into the mirror.

He entered a library of azure water that surged up, around, through and over the glass books. Even the floor underfoot was comprised of water that pulsed a subtle emerald with every step he took. The High-Warden inhaled, a gentle ecstasy enfolding him as the quintessence of *Winsyria* awoke. The whole of this land touched him, transmitting the joy of spring's first awakenings scarred by the portent of rising war.

He waited, knowing the time for the books would come later, and soon a glass figure emerged from the coursing walls, light glinting off its countless facets. This fraction of *Winsyria* stepped forward and spoke voicelessly, his arctic words entering the High-Warden's mind, "*Much time has passed since we last spoke.*"

"Yes, by the standards of mortal men. Soon my reckonings will transcend that if they have not already." The High-Warden lowered his head, bowing to his lord. "I do not know if it pains me yet."

"It will not pain you now or for decades to come, but it will as all the choices, losses and broken promises of centuries weigh upon you unrelenting. You shall learn to hate both it and humanity; when the ceaseless passing centuries convert to millennia then eons, and as, piece by piece, you are denied all the gifts of mortality. You are eternal, and in living among mortals, you will truly learn all that it entails."

The High-Warden nodded. "I know. Just as I know my years of solitude have ended; once more I will tread on ground fallow of memories."

"Yes, and it will bring new pain. I wish such torments need not fall upon the shoulders of any, and I wish I could change your fate, High-Warden. But know this; if a burden must fall then let it fall to one who can bear it."

"I accepted the Burdening; I will carry it until another is selected."

"I ask for nothing more and it is still more than I would ask of you."

The High-Warden nodded, his eyes rising as a ripple shook the still water. "I can no longer sense you in the earth, my Lord, no longer hear you in the wind or taste you in the water, and the cold now bites my skin; where have you gone?"

"Nowhere, but I am forbidden from aiding in this war. There was an old debt, and I have been called to answer."

"For how long will this pact hold you?"

"Until this war is done." The crystalline figure looked heavenwards. "*My time is up, High-Warden and we will not speak again until the war reaches its conclusion.*" Like leaves in the

wind, *Winsyria*'s form scattered and merged with the water, restarting the current.

The High-Warden turned away from where the Great Immortal had stood and moved to the river. He reached into the waters, feeling only the pressure of a quiet stream, and extracted a book.

He took the slender book in hand, the glass cover undulating beneath his fingers, shaping itself to his hand. Careful of its fragility, he opened the first page, watching the scripture write itself. The words spoke of the ritual he needed, a means to awaken and summon the eldest Rhawn.

A sound broke across the room, sending contrary ripples eddying along the walls. The High-Warden noted the footfalls of Lord Antiark and the accompanying flash of emerald light but continued to read the progressing script, reassuring himself of the essential knowledge. A boot touched the water, giving less retort than a mouse might have.

"Greetings, Lord Antiark." He shut the book, his words unleashing a ripple through the water and glass.

The quiet footfalls ceased when Lord Antiark reached him. "I hope you are faring well, High-Warden; it seems like you haven't aged a day." Lord Antiark bowed his head, the frosted locks of his pale hair drawn back from a wide, unassuming brow. "I remember you coming to speak with my grandfather all those years ago when he accepted his Burden. I remember being frightened of you because of your tattoos and size." Lord Antiark smiled, brushing off his own words.

The High-Warden nodded, looking back and seeing the child this man had been those decades before. He remembered the boy for his laughter, made all the stronger because of his heritage. The Lord Antiarks were not blessed with joyous lives; they are the caretakers of a land wild in its aggression and must balance all of mortality's pain coupled with the agonies of immortality. His laughter was one of the reasons the High-Warden had not traveled to Antiark on the eve of his Burdening: he already knew the man.

"You have grown." The High-Warden said dryly.

His words brought a surprised smile to Lord Antiark's face. "How can you recognize me?"

The High-Warden ignored the question. "The war brings me to Antiark, though, not to aid in her defense."

The smile fled Lord Antiark's face. "I expected as much, but I had hoped."

The High-Warden nodded, raising a hand to forestall further words. "This invasion opens a breach in the power that has long held this land secluded from the gods and their ilk. This cavity broadens every day the New Order remains in The North. Their gods are waiting for the slightest opportunity. They cannot enter, not yet; the *Barrier* still denies them entrance."

"I know of the *Barrier*, but how can it defy the joint power of four gods with *Winsyria* gone?"

"The *Barrier* is not a solid wall, Lord Antiark; it is a layered defense, each layer bound to a single divinity. If they desire to enter, the gods must fight alone."

Lord Antiark nodded, a slight frowning of his brow the only sign of his rage at the invasion. "What are your intentions?"

The High-Warden glanced at Lord Antiark, responding with dry humor, "Intend? I intend to seal every cavity before the gods use them. If that is unsuccessful, I intend to rip the eyes out of any god who dares enter and hold them until the breach closes. And if all else fails, I intend to bleed as much as The North requires, Lord Antiark." The High-Warden replaced the book, the water swirling about his hand, clinging to his arm. With a gentle motion, he coaxed it back into

the river.

“What do you require of us?” Lord Antiark turned to depart, the High-Warden’s need satisfied.

“Of Antiark itself? Nothing,” The High-Warden followed the man, passing through the glass doorway and into the library’s oppressive warmth.

“If you require nothing of Antiark, then why come at all? The Forefathers tell me you examined everything in the library years ago?” There was a silent inquiry under the surface of his words, a question as to what the High-Warden sought.

“Immortality dominates my blood in many ways, but three centuries is long enough for any man to forget, and I cannot afford to err. Furthermore, my memory is overburdened.”

Lord Antiark nodded, accepting the High-Warden’s evasion. “What do you require?”

“I require nothing of you, but much from those who shelter within Antiark. I need a wizard.”

Lord Antiark paused. “Are we so weak that we need to plead for aid from outsiders?”

“The North is not lacking, Lord Antiark, I am. What I am in body, if not in soul, is averse to an essential rite. I need to enact a summons, Lord Antiark, and wizards are my sole recourse.”

“Are you certain, High-Warden? Your past with them is fractious. Moreover, Falain Durensev has grown influential in the council’s deliberations.”

The High-Warden answered with a measured voice, “We cannot waste energy fighting neutral forces, Lord Antiark. I understand your caution concerning Falain Durensev, but I cannot risk The North on that fear. I need the aid of a wizard, not Falain Durensev; I have to trust that one will remember they live in The North.” The High-Warden faced Lord Antiark. “They are outsiders only because neither of us has tried bringing them into the fold. Yes, most come from outside Winter’s Gate, but many have lived here for decades. They could belong to The North if we welcomed them.”

Lord Antiark hesitated then nodded. “I can try, High-Warden, with those unburdened by anger or hate, but I can promise nothing. The North has survived for millennia by standing on its own, without the aid of outsiders. There are exceptions but only at *Winsyria*’s intervention. Our past teaches lessons of mistrust; the only good thing that came out of the Summer Lands was the Avenar Princes, and they came in answer to the Andaar Kings.” Lord Antiark gave a wry smile. “The North does not forgive or trust willingly.”

The High-Warden bowed. “I ask for nothing more.” Straightening he searched Lord Antiark’s eyes, considering, “You are like your ancestors in many ways but different also.”

Lord Antiark held his gaze, neither challenging nor accepting. “How so?” Stepping away with a gesture of farewell, the High-Warden gave Lord Antiark the hint of a smile. “There is more hope and laughter. Two qualities your grandfather lacked, for all his strength of character.” The High-Warden gave him one last bow and departed.

Chapter 2: **Slade Lammerock**

6616 A.O.M.

Slade Lammerock sauntered through Tellor's congested streets with an ease that belied his surroundings, smiling at people he enjoyed a passing acquaintance with and greeting vendors from afar. The latter group ignored his salutations, too busy hawking their wares.

Dissatisfied by this diversion, Slade blew kisses at strange women without regard for either age or beauty, sharing his flirtations uniformly. Once he fluttered his eyelashes and smiled coquettishly at a handsome man he "accidentally" collided with. The poor victim froze mid-step, watching his tormentor first vanish into the crowds and then reappear several moments later to blow a final kiss.

Apart from these antics, Slade basked in the sunlight and all encompassing festivities, enjoying the gay colors that danced around him with steps guided by the prevailing music and laughter.

Glancing skyward, Slade espied a circling hawk that drew closer, its slow, steady progress suggesting a purpose. When directly overhead, the bird folded its wings and dove from the sky, landing at his feet with uncanny grace.

With its feathers rasping closed and its talons clicking on the cobbles, the stone bird shuffled in place, patiently waiting for Slade to either acknowledge or dismiss it. Slade, of course, elected the former option, crouching down and extending a hand to the marble hawk which accepted his invitation. The bird called twice, foregoing a hunter's shriek, and any sound its species might achieve, to employ the musical notes of a songbird.

"You may repeat the message here." The bird shuffled in place and frowned as much as possible for a stone creation. "Don't worry, I'll listen closely." The marble avian shrugged and spoke with the voice of a middle-aged man, one whose misspent youth infected his speech with a harsh, rasping cough.

"Our uninvited guest just arrived at the Trader's Gate; it is the Fifth-Apex." For lack of a better recipient, Slade shared his delighted grin with the bird. "At the rate admissions are progressing, she will enter the city within Half-the-Apex. Do you want us to shadow her?" Finished, the hawk gave its singsong cry again, the distinct feel of a question inflecting the notes.

"There will be no return message, you may return to your station." Slade hurled his hand into the air and, voicing a final screech, the hawk departed, ascending with ease despite its marble skin.

He glanced to the street's entrance where Trader's Gate, adorned by several additional messenger statues, scowled inward. At the base of its northern keystone, a gray-haired man coughed into his sleeve, holding what looked like a half-finished carving. Beginning to whistle, Slade turned his step toward the gate.

As he neared his destination, Slade perceived a solitary woman standing underneath the archway, tapping her foot as the guards checked her papers¹. Weight shifting forward and her shoulders broadening, she made an inquiry; whereupon, the guard's figure adopted its own combative tone.

¹ Imperial law dictates that all citizens must carry papers detailing the relevant parts of their history, from employment to crimes. Any who lack these documents are refused admittance.

A lonely, articulate eyebrow lifted as Slade reached into his satchel, producing a thin reed flute. With a light skip and the beginnings of a dance, he raised the instrument to his lips and started to play. What the performance lacked in technical skill, it supplied with charisma and soon enough a crowd gathered.

The gate guard looked up from the woman's papers, his eyes searching the crowd until they alighted upon Slade. Still performing, the young man twisted in place and beckoned him closer. The guard shrugged, resuming his job by waving the woman through, all difficulties apparently resolved.

Eyes narrowing, she snatched her papers and marched into the city with a confident, arrogant stride, walking past Slade without a single glance. He grinned, finishing his tune before he let the crowd drag him along behind her.

Over time her confidence faded, ground to dust by an hour spent wandering through unfamiliar streets. With each intersection, she dawdled longer, pausing to glance down the available streets or look back down the way she had come.

Any native could discern the problem at a glance. Slade strolled to the nearest shop, a little tent ruled by an obscenely fat man who still grew a beard despite the disastrous results.

Leaning upon the counter, Slade raised his eyebrows at the shop's overlord, prodding the man to broach a conversation. Finally, the man acceded. "What can I do for you, good sir?"

"That lady looks lost; perhaps you might assist her?" Slade made casual wave toward the uncertain woman.

The man scowled at him. "You seem perfectly capable."

"Since I've never visited this side of town before, we share the same affliction." He smiled, waved good-bye and merged with the crowd, leaving the vendor to decide. A moment later, grumbling too low for Slade to hear, the vendor forsook his stall, moving to engage the woman. Taking advantage of the stall's defenseless state, Slade sidled up and selected a package of candied apple slices.

Whistling a sunny tune, he walked past the woman as she gave the vendor a grateful nod and began searching her pockets for spare coins, unwittingly buying Slade's pilfered snack. Then, their positions now reversed, she resumed her journey.

Matters continued like this until lunch hour arrived, marked by the sun forsaking his earlier position and marching to his next guard-post, there to wait for another hour.

Slade, meanwhile, ignored the suddenly creeping shadows, glancing around as he examined the abundant food stalls. Most sold common lunch fare, meat pies, fresh fruit and the like. An audacious few, however, braved disapproval by providing the public with exotic delicacies.

His oblivious stalker also glanced skyward, marking the [Apex's](#) shift before shrugging and approaching the nearest stall; an establishment which supplied tediously flavored lunches for a nominal expense.

Slade adopted the opposite course, approaching a stand whose green and gold banners proclaimed that it served eastern cuisine. In a location dominated by robust waiting lines, their ranks filled by proper Descendant citizens, the eastern shop's total lack thereof provided a welcome alternative.

It's lack of patrons notwithstanding, the stall enjoyed a large property, allowing its owner to erect a casual dining area that came replete with a large emerald awning, a long curved bar and half a dozen graceful high-chairs. Whatever its current ostracizing, later, when the divine smells emanating from the kitchen soothed the people's patriotism, the stall's profits would soar,

surpassing any competitors by early dusk.

Slade reached for a bronze bell, its glistening metal etched with strange runes. Heartbeats before his fingers brushed against its chill surface, a tall, skeletal woman reached over the counter separating them and slapped his hand with a spatula, splattering grease across his shirt cuff. Slade snatched his hand away, concealing the wounded appendage behind his back.

Most store owners provided bells so customers could announce their arrival, this one, however, used the bell to ward off malignant spirits. Several metal bottles decorated with matching runes swung from the awning, threatening imprisonment to any spirits that wandered past. All cultures outside the East considered these methods pure superstition, deriding the believers whenever the chance arose. Nonetheless, all agreed that to touch another's charm against spirits brought only misfortune on the offender. Slade, enjoying adventure, had spent the last three months attempting to ring the bell.

"Master Lammerock, shall I prepare the usual?" Despite her assault, the woman's eyes remained fixed on the eight skillets sizzling before her, each adorned by three to four cakes depending on the skillets, which varied in both size and color. The woman's hands blurred as she swapped between skillets, sliding a spatula under each light brown patty and flipping them skyward before focusing on the next skillet, allowing the airborne cakes to land wherever they wanted. Somehow, each cake landed on the appropriate skillet, their upturned faces an appetizing golden brown. That task finished, she reached past the griddles and moved the bell further down the bar, outside of Slade's reach.

"How can you expect any different from me? Have we not constructed a habit together?" He grinned, placing his customary bet atop the counter.

With scarce a hiccup, the vendor switched tasks, reaching into a drawer, producing a sheaf of thick wrapping paper and placing it atop the counter. Carefully unfolding a sheet she chose a finished cake, set it in the paper's center and began wrapping it with the efficiency born of long practice. After preparing a second cake, she disappeared behind the counter, bending to investigate an oven's contents. She reappeared a second later, holding two pies with mysterious contents. Sprinkling them with an unknown spice, she wrapped the pies and, setting them atop the cakes, relinquished the mysterious collection into Slade's custody.

"Terribly grateful." He grinned and reentered the crowd, waving farewell as he departed. If she failed to surprise his taste buds, their permanent wager ensured she bought his next meal.

Slade checked his quarry's position, discovering that, due to a truculent customer's efforts, she stood near the line's tail end, eyeing the adjacent stalls speculatively. Exploiting this delay, he crossed the street to procure a pair of skins filled with mulberry juice. The skins in hand Slade returned to the skeletal woman's stall, claimed a seat by the bar and set aside one of the skins. The owner spared him a single glance, acknowledging his presence, and then returned to her griddles. Slade, for his part, flashed the woman a grin and picked up a small packet conveniently laid to his right. Thus armed, he mixed its contents with the second skin of juice. Whoever imbibed the drugged liquid would feel a slight euphoria while their natural suspicion suffered an extreme case of pacification.

Once he was finished, Slade rewrapped the packet and stored it in his satchel, using the opportunity to produce several tightly wrapped packets, six in total, which he laid on the bar. Without glancing away from her various griddles, the woman took the packages and concealed them behind the counter.

His chores finished, Slade collected the uncontaminated juice and departed for the inner city, leaving the drugged beverage lying atop the bar. His crew knew the plan; they simply

needed to ensure their uninvited guest received his contribution.

Projecting a long shadow, Tellor's second wall nearly doubled its younger sibling's height. In a similar fashion, the third and eldest wall doubled the second's height. Of all three, Slade sought the second because it overlooked those sectors allocated to unofficial performances.

Upon arriving, he scoured the wall's base for an appropriate berth, ducking beneath the occasional banner commemorating the Imperial Emperor's birth and dodging through those who sought respite from the sun's glare. In time he discovered a mass of spectators coalesced around something. A cacophony of cheers arose, preceding the exchange of coins as participants won or lost wagers. A second roar burgeoned and again money changed hands, only to switch ownership a third time when another roar sounded. A quick glance told Slade that, to his disappointment, the betting taking place was legal and thus merely frowned upon.

Slade grinned, spun on his heel, and raced up the nearest set of steps leading to the wall. Upon reaching the summit, he returned along the wall, mirroring his earlier steps until he stood above the congregation. From there he surveyed the proceedings, his view unimpeded by the heads of fellow spectators. Additionally, Slade could watch for his quarry without fearing conspicuity, and correct her mistake should she leave the route he'd arranged for her.

He shifted his attention between the performance and relocating his uninvited guest. If all transpired according to plan, the performance would interest her enough that she stopped to watch, allowing Slade to complete his repast at leisure.

Seven people, four men three women, stood within a cleared area, listening to the crowd's adulation interspersed with the occasional obscenity, bowing before one and cheerfully ignoring the other. The entertainers posed in a line, feet spread so their heels touched, and arms thrown over their companion's shoulders. Each smiled, grinning with the crowd as they absorbed the excited energy swirling all around, taking pure enjoyment from being the center of attention.

The audience's merriment receded to a constrained din, an expectant hush falling as the world took a breath, some innate sense warning the show started soon. The performance began with deliberate abruptness, eliciting many a gasp from the audience.

In unison, the women tumbled from the scene, bestowing the figurative stage onto the shoulders of their compatriots. The men juggled glinting swords, flaming torches and twisted hatchets. They performed blade dances, balanced knives in doubtful places and executed similar feats. On one occasion, they abandoned the script to belch fire at another performer, setting the poor man aflame and causing untold merriment before they doused him. In closing, the men completed various magic tricks, strapped a spectator to a spinning table, blindfolded themselves and hurled knives at him.

Mid-performance, Slade's uninvited guest approached with lunch in hand, her eyes growing delightfully wide at the displayed antics.

Noticing her arrival, Slade began whistling a haphazard tune. By all rights, the spectators should have drowned his muddled song, but a male performer glanced up at the sound. He listened a moment, eyes closing and head bobbing along as he deciphered the melody. Opening his eyes, the man turned a measured circle, searching the crowd until he spotted the woman as well. He glanced back to Slade, giving a single affirmative nod before mounting the stage to accomplish his final display of skill: a quiet performance wherein he stood on one hand and juggled three colored balls.

The women entered as he departed, stepping onto the stage with calm dignity as showers of coins greeted their arrival. Ignoring the coins, they began an elaborate series of vaults, cartwheels and handstands designed to tease the audience with a hint of what awaited them.

One woman slid into a graceful split, extending her hands upward, palms facing the sun, creating a podium for the second performer who ran forward and flipped onto this platform. Perfect balance eluded them for a second, neither the platform nor its tenant conserving poise long enough to breathe, each heartbeat threatening to topple the pair. With each dangerous tilt, the audience groaned; with each last moment correction saving the display, the audience lost its ability to exhale. Slowly, however, the two women worked their way to absolute equilibrium. No sooner had this state been reached than a third woman scaled the tower to erect her own handstand, balancing on the feet of her predecessor. This time, neither a twitch nor a tremor shook the display. Long, breathless seconds ticked by as the audience waited for the first quiver, the first hint that signaled imminent collapse. This intimation was never given. The uppermost woman vaulted off, landing in a crouch and quickly rising to catch the second performer when she dismounted in turn, forming another tower. Hands locked, the women allowed their display to fall backward, collapsing into a half-circle that the third woman hurdled with a double flip. It was a single performance among several and each successive routine strained belief once again. Their more implausible feats included dancing across wires, contorting themselves into astonishing postures, and escaping impossible situations.

The performance as a whole matched the skill of any acrobatic exhibition and surpassed most. Nevertheless, Slade knew this demonstration by heart from three years of watching; thus, he felt only a moderate surprise at the stunts accomplished by the performers. Still, the exhibition proved entertaining, so Slade applauded and cheered with the audience, his attention unwavering from where his quarry stood entranced.

At the show's conclusion, the spectators dispersed to various errands, some wondering lost, most sojourning to discover amusement elsewhere. The woman dawdled for a short time, pausing to ask for directions before joining the former group. Slade elected to finish his meal before continuing his own journey, watching as three performers donned various disguises and set off in pursuit.

Slade glanced upward, marking the Apex as the Sixth, or high noon; if he hurried, he could arrive fashionably late. "But what's the rush," he muttered to himself with a crooked grin and hopped off the parapets onto the wall, tossing his meal's greasy wrapper into a fire specially prepared for that purpose.

Turning, he found himself standing opposite a wall guard. The guard inclined his head briefly, discarding the obeisance as soon as propriety had been satisfied. "My Lord, do you have a license?" Despite being strangers, pins hooked into their respective collars revealed their stations in life, their family, and any award either might have won. A single, gold pin adorned Slade's collar, its surface bearing his father's crest. The soldier, conversely, possessed two silver pins, one denoting his middle-class rank and a second revealing both his military service and rank.

Slade began patting his various pockets. "Oh my, I seem to have misplaced it."

"Then I must request that you accompany me." The guard bowed his head again.

"If you insist," Slade heaved an elaborate sigh. To which his detainer responded with the typical efficient silence one comes to expect from paladin soldiers, at least while on duty. Making a sharp turn, the guard led Slade to the nearest stair where he politely but inflexibly assisted Slade on his way.

Slade merged with the crowd, letting its whims direct his steps. He needed to make a random appearance and that was impossible unless he himself didn't know the destination. The crowd, a great mindless beast, filled this need. On this occasion, his travels deposited him

alongside an alleyway so murky it shamed the other members of its species.

Entering this murkiness, Slade started tiptoeing around its numerous puddles and slipping in-between the countless strings that bisected its length, sometimes at strange angles. Curiously, several tiny bells hung from each multi-colored cord. For most people, in particular armored soldiers, traversing the alley's length without causing a disturbance was impossible. In Slade's case, he practiced touching the bells without them noticing.

The alley ended at a large, iron-grate that led to the sewers where, if somebody knew the correct path, an illicit gambling den hid.

Grabbing the slimy, green bars, Slade lifted the grate, stepped onto the ladder and slid down, his boots landing with a quiet splash at the center of a dim light. Streaming from overhead, the sunbeam provided the only visible illumination.

Pausing to listen for unexpected guests, Slade nodded once before disappearing down the right-hand path, one hand forever trailing along the damp wall. His current schedule forbade disoriented wanderings, and his clothing decried the thought of falling into the scummy river moping along beside him.

Slade soon heard the sounds of life, beginning with a quiet, many-throated groan of despair and a muted cry of triumph. Upon drawing closer, he distinguished the occasional word or a familiar voice. Songs followed, their topics wandering across any subject polite society found distasteful. Each ballad was sung with complete disregard for both skill and beauty. Arriving at the threshold of his destination, Slade, at last, heard the prayers: a combination of muttered entreaties, damnations and bargains all offered to the same god. *Kis'Maat*, God of Luck and Fate: Patron of the Streets.

He found the secret latch easily, long familiarity guiding his hand. Air whistled as the stone wall drew inward, pulling back several inches before sliding sideways and allowing light to illuminate the darkness.

He grinned at the startled faces of those concealed within, twenty-five assorted men with a scattering of women. Slade swept a bow, gesturing toward the numerous dice tables sprinkled across the room. "Don't let me disturb you, pray continue." Hesitantly at first, then with greater confidence, the rattling continued as players returned to their games, many ordering ale, or whiskey to supplement their courage after this unexpected disturbance. Next time it might be the military that barged in through the door, bearing hefty fines for all caught within, and for the ringleaders, a couple years in prison.

Slade beckoned the gamekeeper over, turning his back so their conversation would enjoy a modicum of privacy. The man followed suit, leaning in close so Slade could whisper in his ear.

"Listen closely, My Friend, I know you've been cheating me." Slade leaned closer still, slinging an arm around the trembling man's shoulders. "But that's alright, I'll deduct an estimated figure from your wages. This time, I feel generous; don't do it again." The man gave a stiff nod and Slade grinned. "I'm glad we understand one another, now for the interesting bit." He reached into a pocket, producing three sets of identical dice. "These are loaded dice, be careful not to raise suspicions when you use them. I want you to lose for the next month, allow rumors of our... misfortune to spread, let these tales draw a larger crowd and then lose big. At that point you can start making money again; do it subtly, though, I don't want to scare off potential customers."

The gamekeeper bowed once then departed, leaving a grinning Slade behind him. If all transpired according to plan, this gambling den and several others would lose a colossal amount of money this month.

Half an hour later Slade, once again walking the city's over streets, passed under an elaborate archway all dressed up in banners of silver and blue, and entered the Great-Market concealed beyond.

A cacophony of scents, colors, sounds and humans dominated the giant scene, whispering possibilities into his ears and teasing him with the possibilities contained therein; all it needed was a single step. A throng like this ensnared people like the winds of a hurricane plucked leaves from trees.

Last year on this day, the city lost and recovered twelve children, endured hundreds of robberies, drunken brawls and even the occasional explosion. On this singular day when the Empire embraced excess, the chaos and merrymaking superseded day, extending far into the night and only stopped when the final reveler fell comatose. So far, an Apex past noon, festivities proposed to shatter the previous year's records.

Located at Tellor's heart, the Great-Market overflowed its designated boundaries and claimed everything within a massive radius, crushing against the third wall and extending beyond the first; some things defied control.

The shade offered by the colossal archway grew increasingly scarce as more and more people sought respite from the oppressive sun. Looking around at his shrinking domain, Slade decided to vacate his current berth, the heat bothered him less than most, and his agenda discouraged loitering.

If nothing captured his fickle gaze, Slade only needed Half-an-Apex to cross the intervening distance and reach his destination on time, or rather, fashionably late. Arriving late was the procedure for Slade, a simple practice that served multiple purposes, foremost of which was ensuring his minions appeared on time even when he himself did not. A result of Slade's delayed attendance was that his crew aspired to the opposite; arriving prematurely in case he decided to break the habit and arrive on time or before the appointed hour. Good policy dictated that Slade materialize at uncertain hours to remove complacency from the minds of his subordinates. In general, he manipulated arrivals so once everyone had arrived, both the late and the premature, the meeting took place at the correct time if not necessarily the appointed one.

Slade rallied his determination and strode from the archway, everything from his walk to his posture detailing the colossal willpower necessary for crossing the Great-Market without interruption. Some might have dawdled on the market's edge, pondering the monumental task arrayed against them, but not Slade. He dove headfirst into the writhing torrent of jostling shoulders, dishonest hands and ubiquitous confusion.

It is common knowledge that desires have little trouble seducing even the staunchest wills. Therefore Slade avoided desire, focusing all his attention on the cobblestones underfoot. All except for a small portion which he saved for the sharks that infested this particular sea, namely pickpockets.

At first his scheme lauded its own virtues, then reality spoke and silenced the opposition through calm, assured arguments. Because Slade focused on the cobblestones, less benign objects escaped his notice. Pickpockets attacked his purse three times. Twice the prospective criminal was an orphan searching for their next meal. In both cases Slade patted the ruffians' heads and directed them to easier, more lucrative targets. The final pickpocket was a handsome youth dressed in nobles' attire, an excellent suitor for the most fastidious wallet. Slade, the eternal gentleman, decided to help this dashing example of noble virtues by relieving him of all excess valuables, thus enabling him to better pursue the object of his affection.

Despite these travails, Slade almost succeeded in crossing the Great-Market, however,

“almost” is the same as utter failure. As he neared the Great-Market’s edge, his absentminded gaze wandered across a quaint shop tucked into a far corner. There an old man flitted about, his capable hands straightening and polishing resplendent merchandise.

Slade fell and was forever lost. His attention listened to the murmuring of hats, the seductive whispers of scarves, and the expectant silence that belonged to sashes alone; unlike hats, dresses or other articles of clothing, sashes rarely spoke since they refused to be worn daringly or radically.

Amongst this multitude of apparel, one specific item fascinated his gaze. The hat forced his slow, deliberate tread out of its predetermined path.

This mutiny notwithstanding, Slade sauntered to the old man’s stall with all manner of disinterest. Opposite him the proprietor lounged on a stool set before his shop, its legs creaking as he leaned back against his counter. Slade stopped before the stall, allowing his gaze to wander over the shop’s wares. Both men knew the other playacted.

Affecting a fascination with his hands, the old vendor watched Slade from under lowered brows. “Does anything strike your fancy, My Lord?” Slade wore simple clothing, discarding anything that hinted at his noble heritage. He had even concealed his solitary pin before entering the Great-Market. Therefore the old man sought to charm Slade’s money from his purse with exorbitant flattery. A crude strategy, except he also employed a clever ruse by demonstrating his supposed incompetence to inspire compassion. Inwardly, Slade grinned.

“I am simply inspecting your...wares.” He incorporated a slight pause, suggesting he mistrusted the quality of said wares. “I doubt you provide the singular product I seek.” This rejoinder challenged his opponent, offering the old man an opportunity to prove Slade wrong. “I’d hoped to find something appropriate for a masquerade, but I doubt I’ll find anything useful.” Slade shrugged, preparing his departure.

“Please, My Lord, rest for a spell.” The vendor abandoned his chair, hurrying forward and gesturing toward the vacated seat. “Allow me to present a few choice products, I’m sure they will both satisfy your impeccable taste and fulfill any requirements.” His words though rushed, never trod across one another’s heels.

Slade heaved a sigh, letting the action convey a sense of exasperation directed more at himself and his overly generous nature than the old man who accosted him. After a moment spent schooling his countenance to one of careful disinterest, Slade spun on his heel, returning to the stall where he claimed the offered seat and prepared himself for the approaching contest.

“My wares are the best quality, I assure you.” The old man followed Slade, carefully remaining a step behind lest he stumble across his patron’s heels, then rushing forward to lean across the counter and lift a hat from its hook. “Take this specimen for instance, My Lord.” The proffered hat was a firm, wide brimmed example burnished to a glistening black. Whether from luck or acute observation, the vendor had chosen the hat which held Slade’s attention captive.

“This article, My Lord, was crafted with the finest materials; resources so rare that master craftsmen strain to procure them. The results, however, are incontestable, leaving this specimen unmatched in comfort or durability. I assure you, my lord, that this purchase will satisfy your every need.” He surprised Slade by presenting the hat for inspection, validating his claims.

Accepting the hat, Slade began his inspection, running fingers across the brim as he searched for minute bumps, examining the silk interior for tears and testing its resilience by contorting the article in various directions. “I assume the article is waterproof?” Slade asked with an offhand manner, pretending to don the hat but already suspecting its perfect fit. The vendor nodded, affirming Slade’s guess. “Very well, I shall offer you two bronze-crowns.”

“For the young lord, my first customer of the day,” the vendor pretended to consider, “I can part with it for three silver-sails.”

Slade gave a low whistle and returned the hat, drumming his fingers as the vendor perspired behind his well-concealed anxiety. “One silver-sail,” Slade countered.

“Two silver-sails, and three bronze-crowns,” a sour note invaded the old man’s voice. Seeming petulance aside, the price remained unchanged because the wily old fox he had simply altered the denominations. He measured Slade’s knowledge of Imperial currency; foreigners often fall prey to such tactics.

Many years earlier, the Paladin Empire had adopted the common tongue, allowing its natural language to fall into disuse. It quickly became impossible to know a Descendant from an Avaran simply by listening to their speech.

“Three bronze-crowns,” Slade replied, returning the favor and proving his knowledge.

“Oh, how you attempt to ruin me.” The vendor brought a hand to his chest, swaying backward slightly. Notwithstanding his bantering tone, the man’s jaw had adopted a stubborn edge. “This fine article cost four bronze-crowns to make; why I could sell it for two silver-sails if I were allotted a more hospitable market space.” A hopeful light entered the vendor’s eyes, his hand falling to the counter where it nudged the hat a few inches closer to Slade.

A large reduction in price; either the man was desperate, or he tired of the game. After a moment’s consideration, Slade shook his head.

“Unfortunately, two is my final price.” With a sigh, the vendor returned the hat to its hook, expecting the refusal.

Slade captured the man’s wrist. “I may have an ulterior proposition, one I think you will enjoy.” The vendor stilled, his ear-pricking up at the suggestion that all was not lost, that depression may yet be escaped. “You, good sir, will give me this hat, that peacock feather and the crimson band hanging from that nail.” Slade indicated the items by turn, marking the hat before pointing to an outrageously sized peacock feather and then tagging a deep crimson band.

“What do I receive in return for my generosity?” The old man freed his arm, disdaining force in favor of constant pressure to achieve this end.

“Aha!” Slade reached down into his satchel, producing a gold embellished envelope with a flourish. “I offer you this most magnanimous gift.” Slade allowed himself a grin as he proffered the card, winking to suggest a conspiracy between himself and the old man.

The vendor unfolded the envelope and read its contents, his wide-eyed gaze lifting from golden words to stare at Slade. “This is a letter bearing the governor’s personal signature allowing me to sell my wares wherever I wish.” His awestruck gaze left Slade’s face, returning to the prize he held, the document wrinkling under his forceful grip.

The vendor’s eyes flicked across the document’s surface, rereading its contents to ensure the message remained unchanged during his brief inattention. “I could sell my wares at the very center of the Great-Market.”

A colossal statue dominated the Great-Market, its shadow providing a makeshift sundial while the structure itself depicted the Imperial Emperor in his divine glory. One hand clasped a sword wreathed with actual fire, the sibling held a titanic war hammer whose rune encrusted head sat by Cardolyn Tyier’s boots.

“What a marvelous idea, setting up shop in the center of the marketplace. I wish I’d thought of that myself. Do we have a bargain?”

The man, entranced by the Governor’s Writ and oblivious to his surroundings, nodded.

Slade grinned, hopped from the stool and leaned over the counter, collecting his various

purchases before disappearing into the crowds.

It consumed a moment's labor to construct his masterpiece, a simple matter of wrapping the crimson band around the hat and then slipping the tip of the scandalous peacock feather in-between the two. Once done, Slade resumed his journey, whistling a cheerful melody to celebrate his latest acquisition, one he at least considered marvelous.

After escaping the Great-Market, Slade took a side street and followed its lead until he stood amidst the convoluted backstreets that always inhabited cities, a place where compasses and maps lost their way. At the center of this warren, beyond the twisting corridors, past the innumerable dead-ends, through the countless stalkers, footpads and other individuals of similar occupation, a meeting waited in desperate need of his attendance. He couldn't attend to it just yet; one last task remained. Slade needed to hire some muscle for a job down on the wharf. He had a smuggler friend slated to make an appearance tonight, a friend with a cargo.

Three disreputable men stepped from the shadows, one approaching in front while his companions snuck up behind. Slade grinned. "Hello, gentlemen. I have a proposition for you."

After the Great-Market Slade doubted he could still arrive fashionably late; no matter, he could arrive exceptionally late and be extremely fashionable.

Slade entered through the back door, but only after his long delicate fingers danced across multiple locks, each subsequent contraption surpassing its predecessor's difficulty. His casual disdain for the traditional door lacked any serious motivation. On the whole, his aversion amounted to front doors being clichéd, and entering through windows was undignified. It was only subsequent to his entering the building that Slade realized slipping in through the back was similarly cliché, doubly so considering his chosen profession.

He closed the door with supreme care, attempting to secure the gap without betraying his arrival. Darkness swallowed the room, but neither the furniture gratuitously scattered across the room, nor the prevailing shadow hindered Slade. Last night he had meticulously arranged the furnishings to cause the greatest possible inconvenience for unexpected guests and, through the course of his exertions, memorized every detail. With a relaxed posture that belied the numerous traps crowding his path, Slade crossed the shadows to where a great oaken door stood with quiet forbiddance.

Here he paused, tapping his foot, more to pass the time than from any actual impatience, while waiting to discover if somebody detected his approach. Long, tedious seconds elapsed without someone emerging to confront Slade. A grin split his face, and his eyebrows tipped inward. He reached up and tapped the door, selecting a simple drumbeat that one hand completed without difficulty. Next he performed a complicated stanza, its composition requiring the entirety of his one-handed abilities. Finally, he presented the crowning achievement of his little concert, laying both hands against this rough, sliver prone instrument. What followed was inspiration derived from a moment's consideration, its tempo fast enough to outclass a three handed man while its complication delighted in befuddling musical prodigies.

The faint chatter hitherto seeping through the door fell silent. The silence stretched on until the sound of hurried footsteps echoed and detailed their owner's journey to the door's opposite threshold. The door cracked open, allowing a shred of light to penetrate the darkened exterior and revealing a single blue eye through the crack. "Who's there?"

"Ah, my dear, sweet, foolish subjects, I dread to consider what sorry tales your lives would have told without my patronage. I tremble to think what horrors you would have endured sans

my guidance. I almost gibber from the thought of what terrors you might experience if someone kidnapped my patient, nurturing self.” Bowed by unspeakable despair, Slade’s head shook from side to side.

Following these sermons, most recipients scrabbled for a response that both matched his eloquence and returned the insult. Normal circumstances, however, invariably found themselves waylaid by Slade’s total dedication to originality and his utter disdain for the humdrum.

“It’s Slade alright,” the man grumbled as he opened the door, stepping to one side and letting firelight illuminate Slade’s features.

“You forgot to ask me what the password is.”

The man frowned. “We have a password?”

“Of course we do, all shady dealings require a password, and I just made ours up.”

“Alright...so what’s the password then?”

“Utterly useless minions.” Slade smiled at the door guard, his face impersonating innocence.

“Um, that’s correct you can come in now.”

Slade threw his hands into the air. “No, it’s not, that was a decoy password; the true password is psychopathic paraphernalia. If you can’t remember it what’s the point in having a password.”

The man’s lips worked in silence for a few moments, desperate to find a suitable defense, before he admitted defeat with a shrug.

Slade sashayed past the guard, reaching up to lay a hand on the man’s shoulder as he stepped past. Once inside he grinned, waving at those present.

“The next time, one of you can answer the *Jaidar* blessed door.” The door-guard glared at his fellow occupants, reaching a hand backward to grab the door’s edge and slam it shut before stalking across to the room to reclaim his seat. For such an intimidating man, he pouted with the skilled grace of a child.

“Have you, my servants, slaves and devoted sycophants enjoyed my absence?” Assuming his customary position at center stage, Slade spun a slow circle and examined his crew with a grin that warned of imminent danger.

A quick tally accounted for all twelve members, including the acrobats from earlier. Among the numerous, allegedly solitary crews Slade managed, Tellor’s leading crime syndicate was his most skilled and profitable; logical considering they were his oldest asset. Neither their ability nor their history earned his secrets, however, subjecting them to the same blissful ignorance that surrounded their fellow crews.

If the separate groups discovered one another’s existence, Slade suspected jealous rivalries would spark as each crew vied for his favor. Unfortunate, considering the conflicts would half his profits.

“*Jinsorren* grant me patience, Slade for once start a conversation as etiquette demands with the proper use of our names and a culturally accepted greeting.” A dark-haired woman, lying curled in her lover’s arms, directed a scathing glance towards Slade though she was less irritated than her words professed.

The couple inhabited one of the many seats scattered throughout the room, each cushioned chair or sofa looking unnaturally clean when compared to everything else. Ash stains covered the stone walls, the polished floor and the solitary window sulking in a back corner. The air itself carried distant memories of last year’s fire.

After the flames had been extinguished, the building’s former inhabitants had carried their

few possessions to the nearest pawnshop, leaving the worthless remains for looters. These, in turn, left behind a single rug, abused beyond redemption, for the fleas to infest. This, of course, forsook the building to inhospitability and so, to indulge his personal comfort, Slade provided the room's current adornments. His crew promptly claimed the chairs as their own, heartlessly disregarding his threats of unending torture.

"Why ever should I concern myself with something as defunct as etiquette?" Slade raised a questioning eyebrow as his arms extended in either direction inviting his whole audience to answer. "Especially since you ladies don the most delightful pouts when I disregard it? We cannot ignore our male companions either; they offer boundless merriment as their besotted minds untangle the twisted web my tongue weaves, a web that grows denser with each silver-tongued sentence I spew."

The men sitting around Slade retreated with the usual expressions of simmering discontent or stoic suffering. Their counterparts, conversely, seemed pleased, smiling among themselves while their youngest members, twin girls who just escaped childhood, giggled and exchanged various pouts.

"Well, alright." Noticing the discontent creeping through his male followers, Slade threw his hands into the air. "Your pouts can be adorable too; for all I know it might be true. The mere act of pouting would demean your manhood beyond recovery because pouting is the sole province of women."

"All well and good, Slade, but the time for jest has passed." Harram, predictably, rose from his chair with hands raised to soothe the rising storm, sealing any breaches before they developed. "The time has come to pool our collected knowledge, hopefully developing a suitable response to this incursion."

Slade huffed, blowing a solitary strand of hair from his eyes. "If you insist; pray continue. Report our discoveries without delay; time is neither so cheap nor so copious that we can waste it without fruit."

Harram inclined his head, accepting the task and, with that slight maneuver, gathering the room's attention to himself. "As you may have guessed, the Thieves Guild has crossed into our territory, breaking the unspoken truce. From their past encroachments, we know that they come with some purpose, whether for war or peace I cannot say, but it is certainly no whimsical lark." Slade smirked to himself; he knew but wasn't going to spoil the surprise. "The Guild's chosen representative is a woman in her middling twenties; she has dark auburn hair, almost red, and blue eyes." Harram leveled a stern expression on his companions, pinning each to their seats. "She is armed, be careful when approaching or following her."

Slade inspected his nails.

"The woman has callused hands but no obvious scars despite walking like a soldier; it seems the Guild sent a Rat."

The Guild's agents fall into two categories: Rats and Mice. The former steals gold, fine carpets and occasionally people whereas the latter appropriates information, mainly through spying.

Slade waited until Harram reclaimed his seat before clapping, the sharp report snatching the room's attention for himself. "It seems that you, my loyal slaves and hopelessly devout worshipers, have this affair well in hand. All that remains is for me to speculate on what impression we should cultivate for our opponent." Slade twisted, turning so his side faced the majority of his audience, and lifted his right hand toward the ceiling, clenching the appendage into a fist. Its brother, Slade concealed behind his back, accentuating his already twisted body.

As a final touch, he expanded his chest and lengthened his waist, spine arching ever so slightly to convey a sense of dignity. “Shall we go for impressive and influential, or perhaps the lucky fool?” His posture shifted becoming the type of stance one expects from a man who hasn’t suffered a rainy day in his entire life and is foolish enough to believe this good fortune arises from his own skill rather than the universe’s design. “On the other hand, we might do a bit of both, an influential upstart perhaps.” Again his posture changed, becoming the epitome of a young, conceited man who rose above his station. “Better yet, we could nurture an idea so profound, so far beyond her understanding, it boggles her mind.” Slade brought his arms close, rubbing his hands together and cackled with the malignity of a truly evil mastermind.

“I’m not sure it matters; she is clearly an experienced combatant, but I think she lacks the same skill in subterfuge.” This whispered phrase came from a young woman who kneeled to Slade’s right. She bent over a small coffee table, inspecting a gigantic map that exceeded the edges of its host and draped onto the floor.

She was his tactical commander for any operations Slade found impossible to supervise in person. Most people thought this assignment mocked her deep, timid brown eyes, her slight figure, and especially her shy demeanor. Few guessed she possessed a shrewd, analytical mind that calculated most scenarios down to their brutal conclusion.

Slade swiveled in place, facing the young woman with a grin that welcomed uncertain guests and invited easy conversation. “Why do you say that, Little One?” His voice dropped, becoming a low, soothing instrument destined to lull the wary into comfort.

Nevertheless, her countenance flooded with color, her nose quickly falling to bury itself in the map spread out on the coffee table. From that position of refuge, she managed to mumble a reluctant explanation. Her words, despite their inconvenient obstacles, conveyed themselves with fair clarity. “Our quarry walks without subterfuge, neither glancing over her shoulder to search for possible tails nor weaving her way amongst the crowds; she walks as if shot from a bow.”

Slade allowed himself a small, inner sigh. If Emily glanced up once throughout the entire meeting, *Kis’Maat* smiled on him today. Perhaps he should purchase a new map for her; her current specimen resembled a fisherman’s net more than a map.

“An adequate deduction. Well done, Little One.” This, of course, caused her face to reignite, but it arose more from pleasure than embarrassment or discomfort. A little encouragement never hurt and Slade intended to employ every possible weapon in his war against shyness, and its intolerable grip on women.

Slade refocused on his crew, inspecting the gathered criminals for any who wished to offer an opinion. None, however, presented either hand or thought, electing to sit in patient silence, watching him with shameless expectancy.

Slade grinned, clapping his hands together with the loud, unmistakable sound of a cymbal. This retort startled his crew, causing even the staunchest crew members, except for Harram, to jump slightly. “You realize that I adore you all? With this business of allowing me to make the final decisions in all of our operations, I get the distinct impression of being in charge. Why, it’s almost as if I actually lead this crew of rogues and scoundrels, like I am the true mastermind behind our exploits.” For effect, Slade danced a little jig and hummed a brief snatch of tune, laughing silently as they stared at him with the usual blend of expressions: horror, amusement, shock and long-suffering patience.

“Slade, you command with an iron grip and abuse us mercilessly whenever the opportunity arises; of course you’re in charge.” A woman yawned and stretched back with luxurious pleasure. “Now concerning your accusation that we leave all the decisions in your lap; in our

defense, something must alleviate the colossal pressure resting on our young shoulders. Furthermore, it's always amusing to grant you free reign and enjoy the ensuing chaos."

"Besides, it's obvious that you wish to parade your latest acquisition." The dark haired Samara gave the apparel an admiring glance. "Such a marvelous beast deserves a proper maiden voyage."

"I am sooo glad you noticed." Slade grinned, adding a wink and a tip of the hat, both ostentatious beyond the point of insanity. "With how you study me, notice my feelings and my clothes, one might suspect you for a spy."

Of course she was a spy. Oblivious to all of the rotten information he fed her, the woman stayed sweeter than sugar. It was a state ensured by her assignation to a post of grave importance, the kind that if mismanaged often spelled doom for the crew in question.

"Such is our job," the woman retorted, her expression revealing slight irritation. "Color me surprised if you appeared more than once or twice a week to complete your job, and on the days we don't distribute the winnings." Samara sat, her back ramrod straight, tapping her foot on the floor as she favored Slade with a glare. The theater had lost a marvelous actress when Slade adopted her.

"Well you indolent worms, there's work that needs doing." Slade directed a subtle wink toward Samara, hinting that his recent absences were all a part of the greater plan. "Let us yank wool over the eyes of an inexperienced damsel in distress; today will be her first experience in such an intriguing position. Now the true magic will happen when she believes the wool is actually a strip of light, shimmering gauze." This time Slade's grin answered Slade's own, all except for one man who looked confused.

"So which charade will you employ?" But Slade's only answer was to grin and tap the side of his nose.

One by one or in pairs, Slade's crew abandoned the house and ran to their assigned positions. The younger members fiddled with pieces of clothing. Their counterparts, the older and wiser criminals, retreated deep within themselves to prepare. A bare few, Slade's most promising acolytes, grinned.

Before long Slade stood alone in the empty building, giving his people the time they needed to position themselves. And soon after that, the hour came for Slade to make his grand entrance. A little deliberation never hurt anybody, however, particularly when the deliberation created drama and Slade loved drama.

Chapter 3: **The Tragnashi**

6617 A.O.M.

Dunes of burnished sand rolled over the trackless desert, each higher than the waves of a tempest and hiding a thousand secrets lost from human memory. A vindictive sun scorches the earth, long ago having incinerated all but the hardiest life to dust.

A Raven, small for its kind, soared over the land in defiance of the sun. Its emerald eyes surveyed the world below in search of a city. The land knew the Raven was amiss and retaliated against its intrusion with a whirlwind of lashing sand. The Raven cawed once, evading the sand's grasping fingers, and ascended beyond the volatile land's reach.

The last towering dune subsided, giving way to parched, sundered rock. Here the desert and the land's spirit yield begrudgingly to the dominion of man, abandoning them to their own devices. In the near distance, immense towers rose like a forest of pines from where the stretch of barren earth dropped suddenly into a chasm. In width, this rupture extends southward beyond the sight of any human eye; in length it stretches further than a pilgrim's road at the turning of the year.

The towers of the Avaran Hold rose from this chasm, ravaged by time and sun until even the ancient, proud stone bowed from exhaustion and misery. The Raven banked, descending until the immense towers and countless bridges eclipsed the sun overhead, many casting a shadow over three hundred men long. Diving beneath a filthy clothesline fermenting in the stench of sewage, the Raven circled a ponderous tower. It dove again, searching the moldy structures and arching bridges until it reached the chasm's walls.

The Raven glided down the burnt red precipice, passing over the centuries of rock as they mellowed to white and then darkened to gray with age, hued by memories and sorrows. At its foundation, the rock became black and tormented: a testament of lingering misery. The Raven pulled up just shy of where smooth stone gave way to the jagged, tusk-like rocks, tenacious vines and withered bracken that provided a frail shelter to the few species hardy enough to survive.

At this ancient foundation ran the chasm's architect. Here, where water is the greatest luxury, the *Annuir'Hyme* rules with a tyrannical dominion greater than any man, god, or sun. The Raven skimmed over the river's feral currents, spray bathing its wings until they glistened.

The Raven ascended through the bridges anew, searching for the city's heart. It found the Coliseum near the chasm's middle within reach of the sun, yet not so close as to endanger lives. Rising past the walls of the Avaran Hold's stone heart, the Raven gazed down at the Coliseum.

The Coliseum is no single arena, but rather a compound of a dozen arenas interconnected through bridges, interred passageways and walls. Each stadium hosts a different environment, from swamps and infernos to small jungles. What they shared were the pillars: towering structures laden with dozens of ornate carpeted balconies for the Kalvonders to enjoy their spectacles of blood. Stands were built into the octagonal arenas for lesser men to enjoy the exhibition.

The Coliseum is the largest of the arena complexes scattered across Sahdaen and the nearest to the Old Palace. It is these arenas that the Kalvonders pour their most extravagant displays of power and fear for their Avaran subjects. All Kalvonder's are Avaran, but a Kalvonder is a man born to rule while the Avarans are born to shackles.

These arenas host a series of gladiatorial entertainments at the end of every four Turnings,

or forty-eight days, called the Angorat'Wass. Within their confines, men are set upon one another and the monsters that inhabit the arena like fighting dogs.

Weapons are cast into the arena at the day's commence and remain there through every conflict. The Tragnashi are the condemned who wield these weapons and slaughter one another for survival. They are, literally, soul-less, their entire existence owned by a Kalvonder. They bleed and die for their masters; if victorious they live, and their Kalvonder receives half of the aggregate wealth wagered on them. The gamblers are allowed to keep what remains.

There is only one survivor for every bout.

The Raven descended, continuing to circle the Coliseum as it sought a particular man. It found him on a pillar overlooking the swampland arena, alone but for his attendant and ordered rows of vacant seats. It dove, circled once and alighted on the balcony's railing.

Valerius Kalvonder glanced over from his seat, eyes settling upon the Raven. The balcony's other occupant was a slave woman, her waist length hair braided into a dozen interlocking chains and adorned with the bone jewelry of her station. She looked up at the Raven's descent, revealing the severe lacerations that marred her features and the rough black hue of her skin. She was one of the itinerant Aparthii who lived outside of the Avaran Holds.

The slave woman averted her eyes before Valerius Kalvonder noticed her lifted brow. He glanced at her, breaking his scrutiny of the Raven to issue a silent command. The slave woman hastened to remove the preserving lid from a glass tureen and lift it for her master. Within the bowl nestled various cubes of frozen blood. Valerius selected a piece and slipped it into his mouth while analyzing the arena with a bored demeanor. His eyes were blank, uninterested, scything through the ranks of expectant and screaming Avarans. Despite the dozen seats about him, Valerius Kalvonder sat alone, an event that was, to a small extent, at his contrivance.

Valerius was neither tall nor short; he was not handsome or ugly and neither muscular nor overweight. His unbound hair was medium length and his stance ambivalent. He walked with a quiescent stroll and spoke with banal lethargy. In summary, he was a man many overlooked.

Behind Valerius, the balcony's iron door swung open without a whisper, admitting a quartet of his guards. Their faces were concealed behind nondescript veils, marking them as eunuchs. The veils were a façade, serving instead to conceal the pale skin and large eyes of eastern sell-swords. Avarans abhorred foreigners, but eastern sell-swords far surpassed any warrior he could find in the Avarus Desert, so Valerius made an exception. Avarans were too addicted to the plethora of drugs the Kalvonders supplied to become adept warriors. It was a disgruntling result, but sufferable when compared to the control and wealth they amassed through preserving the Avarans' addictions.

The sell-swords advanced to encircle him, cautiously maintaining the appropriate partition. Their commander knelt before Valerius, laying his brow on the floor and assuming the posture of due reverence. When the man looked up, Valerius nodded once, suffering the sell-sword to straighten. "Valerius Kalvonder, Krell Kalvonder desires an audience." His message completed, the sell-sword resumed his abasement.

Valerius deliberated. Krell Kalvonder desired either to offer an alliance, at least the discussion thereof or to exact tribute. Either way, his response was the same; a waved hand to the sell-sword at his side, motioning for him to admit Krell Kalvonder. His guest, however, did not wait for the summons. She stormed into view with all the grace of a schismatic boulder and collapsed into a seat, exuding just enough arrogance to compound her dominance but not enough to merit retaliation.

Raising an eyebrow, he watched the corpulent women collapse into the vacant chair with

an anguished sigh of relief. Kalvonder Krell immediately began patting her multiple chins and forehead with a silk handkerchief before moving to adjust her apparel with bulbous hands. Her retinue trailed in behind her, the half dozen guards first, followed by her numerous slaves and contracted attendants: specialists courted through offers of wealth and power. The first of the three was a guardian of the Mercenary's Guild, armored in leather with an iron shield slung across his back and shoulder length hair pulled tight across his skull by ivory pins. The next was her gamekeeper, dressed in white over-tunic with the minor embellishments of his class. The gamekeeper wore his hair just above the shoulders, betraying his lack of proficiency, and woven into three separate tails. The final man was her assassin. He dressed in black, his lowered face concealed behind a conforming mask, and his hair styled into an elaborate knot of braids. The man displayed a single skulled-dagger on his hip, marking him as a minor assassin at best.

To skilled Kalvonders, attendants provide another form of manipulation and deceit. Their number, specializations, attire and wealth all collaborate to fashion a mirage of the Kalvonder's wealth, inclinations and power. In general, the game's true intricacies reserved themselves for the greater Kalvonders who had the wealth and time to squander.

Krell Kalvonder's game-keeper conferred that she enjoyed the many violent southern sports, but his lack of gaudy embellishments signified she lacked the wealth to hire a true master of the art. The guardian and assassin in her retinue suggested ties to the Guilds. The evidence of their true allegiance indicated she was deeply indebted to their masters.

Valerius had no attendants, blatantly declaring his lack of wealth and prestige. Their absence was a careful ploy. When another Kalvonder saw him surrounded only by slaves and guards, they would view him as weak, inexperienced and easily controlled. The contempt they derived from these emotions would blind them, hampering their already fumbling intellects.

Valerius waited as the obese woman shifted in her seat, searching for comfort despite how she inundated its constraints, the heavy flesh of her body sagging like warm gelatin. Upon realizing the futility of her endeavor, she slumped forward with a snap of her fingers. One of her servants, a male child slave who bore more scars than he did locks of his waist length hair, scurried forward bearing a flask of cold wine. She snatched the wine and raised it to her lips for a long gulp. The slave ran back to hide in the mass of her retainers.

Krell Kalvonder lowered the wineskin with a belch, plastered a counterfeit smile across her swollen, over painted features and spoke, "It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Valerius!" She made a lilting gesture to exemplify the intensity of her emotions and gulped more wine.

Valerius tapped the balcony's floor with his cane, a beautiful artifact with an amethyst core wrapped in carved vines of ebony and rowan. Those vines guarded the innate brilliance that shimmered within the amethyst's core, a heart of slowly pulsing light. "The pleasure is mutual."

The inebriated woman tittered and gulped her wine. When she lowered the wineskin, she replaced it with a larger no less sickening smile. "I have been watching you for some time now, Valerius," He nodded in acknowledgment.

Throughout the last Turning, Valerius had been steadily feeding Krell a feast of rumors and lies regarding information he possessed that, if brought to light, could destroy her. She had devoured his banquet of lies like a prize-winning pig, until, through gradual submersion, she now drowned in it.

Trailing another gulp, Krell Kalvonder resumed her discourse, "What with Greole Kalvonder's death, wisdom dictates that we ally ourselves." Greole Kalvonder had been her sole ally; thus, Valerius ordained his destruction. Fraydan Kalvonder, Greole's pawn, also perished in

the massacre. The death of her ally left Krell Kalvonder as the sole distributor of a rare, hyper-addictive toxin. This solitude made her vulnerable while the resource made her a target: she needed an ally. Krell Kalvonder, however, was an unimportant member of the Kalvonder hierarchy; necessity demanded she find an inferior ally or, at least, an equal she did not fear. Of the Kalvonders in Sahdaen, only Valerius matched these requirements. With little more than a score of warriors and a small fortune, Valerius lacked the military threat Krell Kalvonder brought to their conference, her meager intelligence, however, more than settled this imbalance.

Every law of politics and self-preservation dictated Valerius should leap at the opportunity to make an alliance with Krell Kalvonder. Her military power was insignificant compared to most Kalvonders, but it still far surpassed his own and would fortify his position substantially. Appearances are deceptive, however; both Kalvonders knew she could not survive without an ally. Her vulnerability was a beacon, and Sahdaen never lacked for vultures.

"We both know why you seek an alliance with me, Krell Kalvonder." He waved a hand delicately toward her as if conceding something. "You need time, time that only I can provide with any modicum of fidelity." While he spoke, Krell Kalvonder gulped the red wine and exchanged the empty flask with her slave. The liquor, though, did little to obscure the pale fright dominating her features. "So, let us dispense with these time consuming political games." Valerius reclined, nodding for Krell Kalvonder to present her offer.

She blinked, mouth hanging agog as her befuddled mind tried to rouse itself from intoxication. Finally, she smiled in a confused manner, nodded and began speaking, "Very well then, how..." she struggled for words complementing on the surface but insulting at the core, "concise." Almost gasping from the effort, she celebrated with more wine. "Let's see, huh?" Her brows crinkled and she shook her head. "Ahh, yes, yes... it should begin with a promise of both offensive and defensive military support, yes? A large portion of the Anatay drug also, not equal but certainly profitable." Krell collapsed back into her seat and drank the rest of her new wine flask before reaching for another.

"I will match your brevity." Valerius leaned forward, grinding his cane into the floor. "I desire all you offer, but you will also nominate me as the sole heir to your estates in the event of your death." Valerius bowed his head, ceding her the opportunity to ponder his convoluted overture. In the higher echelons of Kalvonder hierarchy, Valerius's offered alliance was a statement of superiority and a gamble on who could murder their ally first. Another possibility was a simple desire for increased wealth.

Krell Kalvonder examined his features with a calculating light in her beady, drunken eyes. Valerius met her gaze calmly, evincing an absolute lack of guile. Ultimately she looked away, and Valerius resumed surveying the arena.

Krell Kalvonder coughed, her decision reached, "The Inheritance Article would be mutual." She glared, challenging him to refute her.

Valerius gave the woman a smile of affirmation, both reassuring and warily good-natured. "Of course."

She maintained her glower for a long pause. Then she nodded, her manner becoming subdued, and reached into the voluminous folds of her dress to withdraw a svelte quill. It was an object of wrought gold and vibrant mahogany, marked at its base with the single rune unique to its species. Valerius extended his left hand. Krell Kalvonder hesitated before surrendering the precious object.

Closing his eyes, Valerius explored the quill, his deft fingers stroking its length without missing a single detail. He shivered, already immersed in the vast age of this artifact. It was a

Blood-Quill, doubtlessly inherited through countless generations of her family for a single, primordial function.

Valerius returned the Blood-Quill. She raised it to her lips with a quick nod and kissed the rune at its base. Withdrawing the Quill, she lifted her right hand and pricked her thumb on the tip. A grimace flashed across her features as she reversed the Blood-Quill and pressed her thumb into the rune at its base, bathing the delicate sigil in unyielding blood. Scowling at her injury, Krell gestured for another slave to bring a page of vellum. Placing it across her knees, she set the Quill to the vellum and wrote the laws of their alliance in her blood.

When she finished, Krell offered Valerius the Blood-Quill, her features paler now despite the drunken blush. Accepting it, he did as she had done; first slicing his palm then writing the oath and his name in blood.

With their alliance forged and bound in blood, Valerius reclined into his seat, waiting for his vow to take hold. The Blood-Oath's ethereal constraints enveloped him, fettering his actions, forcing him, despite his formidable will, to abide by the oath he swore. Valerius ignored the sensation and watched the vellum's lettering change, gracefully warping from recognizable script to archaic words of power. The letters, a thousand fold older than any script in all the Avarus Desert, eclipsed his knowledge to decipher. They were the *Arthramainian* script, the words of kings.

Rising to his feet with smooth grace, Valerius gestured for Krell to accompany him and for their guards to stay back. Wrapping Krell's arm in his own, Valerius advanced to the balustrade, allowing his attention to wander the arena. At his side, Krell Kalvonder settled her bulbous form upon the railing with a repulsive sigh. Meanwhile, their movement surreptitious, Valerius's sell-swords moved to stand behind Krell's guards.

Valerius turned his gaze away from the arena and onto her. It did not matter if she caught him because a woman like her would see only a man intoxicated by her beauty, much as the wine intoxicated her. Valerius, however, did not find her beautiful. He sought a reaction rather than beauty; specifically, her reaction to the sudden gurgles of her dying guards as Valerius's sell-swords struck. Her attendants shrieked, their theatrically distraught wails of fear and pain mingling while her slaves stood in a shocked silence.

Valerius watched the horror dawn across Krell's features, watched as terror consumed her visage, and watched as her jaw worked in a desperate, futile attempt at speech. Valerius thrust her over the edge, sending her plummeting into the morass below with a splash. She struggled to resurface, flailing in the quagmire. Taking a seat on the balustrade that hung just out of her reach, Valerius continued to watch her pitiful struggles.

She managed to rise above the black water and, gasping for air, waded toward the shore, oblivious to the leeches on her hands and face until their numbing poison wore off. Throwing back her head, she screamed, her hands scraping at her arms and face in wild desperation, opening lacerations with her stone-tipped fingernails. Near insane with agony, the massive woman floundered nearer to the shore and stumbled into the leeches' nest. Krell resurfaced after a moment, her bloated skin almost invisible beneath a curtain of leeches. Valerius watched from his balcony, taking care to show no excitement, pleasure, or disgust as the leeches devoured her.

The leeches would inject their embryo into her bloodstream, using the walls of her flesh to protect their young until they matured. At that point, the colony dispersed to seek new hunting grounds in which to fester. Nothing would disrupt this lifecycle because everything else feared the leech colonies.

Valerius continued to observe the struggles of Krell Kalvonder. At first, her flailing grew

stronger, provoked by the agony of being consumed, then, as the leeches continued to devour the massive woman, her movements attenuated, becoming little more than uncommon spasms.

With nothing left to witness, Valerius returned to his seat, beckoning for Krell's scarred slave to hasten forward and hurl himself into a posture of abject submission. "You are to go to the palace of the late Krell Kalvonder and present this document to her entire household." Leaning forward, he laid the vellum representing their alliance before the prostrate slave. "After they accept its authenticity, you will inform them of their mistress's demise and that they are now my property." The slave dared to look up and Valerius, noting his bloodshot eyes, ground the slave's head back into the floor with a boot. "Furthermore, all household members will cease the consumption of intoxicating drugs. Let those who cannot survive the deprivation, die; I will not suffer addicts, understood?" The slave cowered.

Valerius paused, allowing his new slave time to memorize the commands. "You will transfer my new holdings discretely through the sewers. Make certain there are no witnesses. When you've collected everything of value burn her estates." Valerius paused, a thought occurring to him. Two other Kalvonders had their palaces abutting Krell's residence. Neither possessed much wealth or power, but if handled correctly, Valerius could acquire a profit from them. "Ensure the fire expands to the palaces of Trayvo and Haven Kalvonder." Valerius dismissed the slave and addressed the sell-swords. "Send a message to the others. Tell them to infiltrate Trayvo and Haven's palaces while they remain occupied with the Angorat'Wass. They are to pillage everything within easy reach and ensure the palaces burn." His sell-swords bowed in the manner of the Autumn-Lands and departed.

There are hundreds of Kalvonders in Sahdaen, but only a few are noteworthy, and it was these that Valerius now sought. Xexeross and Trerrock Kalvonder stood together at the edge of their balcony with their heads tilted toward one another as they discoursed. Trerrock, a masked brooding figure, vied with Xexeross's towering, passionate aura. Together they formed two-thirds of Sahdaen's ruling Triad; and though neither was the crowning jewel, they were both powerful enough to threaten their rivals.

Almost every Kalvonder across the Avarus Desert built their power on a mixture of lies, coercion and alliances. The lower they ranked in the pyramid, the more they relied on these assets to survive. Trerrock, Xexeross, and Ureign, the ruling Triad, alone were exempt from that need. Their individual wealth, power, and military strength were the equivalent of a small kingdom.

Trerrock, an immortal by all reports, had been visiting galas and Angorat'Wasses for over a century, appearing at each one masked in iron and bearing a naked crimson blade at his side. He built his fortune and amassed his power over the generations, quietly ascending to his current prominence.

Xexeross had been a warlord before declaring himself a Kalvonder, and prestige did nothing to temper his predilections. Even now, after a decade on the Triad, Xexeross still sought conquest, relentlessly consuming the lesser Kalvonders and oppressing the greater.

The final member of the Triad was a mystery to all; Ureign had appeared one night in the doorway of a lavish gala, thunder heralding his arrival and lightning marking his entrance. They had challenged his presence, declaring him unfit to join their company, and in rejoinder, he butchered them all. Then, awash in the blood of his rivals, Ureign declared himself lord of the Triad and set about constructing an unassailable bastion of fear, opulence, and prestige. Now, three decades later, rumors would have all believe that Ureign's army numbered upward of a thousand soldiers when Valerius knew it approximated thrice that, plus assorted specialists.

Still, if Terrock and Xexeross deliberated an alliance, it boded ill for Ureign. Even if their combined military strength could not match his, a war would decimate his power, leaving him vulnerable to formerly insignificant rivals.

The thunderous beating of a drum attracted Valerius's attention to the arena where four sobbing children huddled together on a dais. Over the centuries, the Kalvonders had found that simply sending Tragnashi to brawl with one another grew tedious. Thus, they inserted beasts into the arena, and, later on, objectives. These children were one such objective. If the victorious contender managed to collect the heads from one or more of these children, he would receive a prize, which could be almost anything he desired and even, for exceptional performances, exclusion from the subsequent Angorat'Wass.

Valerius reclined, waiting for the drum roll to cease and the Angorat'Wass to begin. Across the arena, the spectators began to cheer.

Dieharamon waited in silence trying to suppress his fear, his hate, and all the silent screams demanding that he rebel, commanding that he oppose this evil, pleading that he defy this madness he was on the brink of re-entering. His emotions were frighteningly easy to silence now after sixteen years of fighting, bleeding and killing in the Angorat'Wass. The individual memories had faded, amalgamating into a river of past misery that would inevitably spit out a nightmare whenever he thought better of himself.

Now he waited again, standing just outside the sunlight reaching in from the arena, peering outward. Even though he looked, Dieharamon did not truly see the arena. Its high curving walls were branded in his memory, a permanent scar that would forever haunt his fractured sleep. Closing his eyes, he could see the forest of pillars rising from the noxious swamps, entrenched on their thin embankments. Something always lurked in those waters, stalking its prey with a swish of black scales. It was the same for every arena; he needed only to close his eyes to remember them.

Snapping back into focus, Dieharamon looked at his new leather gloves. They were already ruined; their once black leather scuffed and faded, their seams stretched and their half dozen buckles rusted. He clenched his hands against a spike of fear; these were his second pair this month alone. Valerius would not be pleased.

Dieharamon always wore gloves, both the obligation and the articles imposed upon him by Valerius Kalvonder. In recent years, the gloves had begun deteriorating without any visible explanation but never at this rate. He groaned, knowing it was futile to conceal the ruined gloves. Valerius would replace them, but he would also exact payment.

He retreated deeper into the tunnel, distancing himself from the cheering crowd outside, and leaned against the wall, pulling the single, waist-length braid over his shoulder. They forbade him from unraveling it and water was too precious for washing, so the years of dirt and blood simply thickened.

He stared at the braid, his eyes running over the countless bone shards and intricately woven knots. His braid marked him as a Tragnashi, and the shards signified a gladiator. As for the length, a gladiator's hair was never cut because they never survived long enough for length to cause difficulty.

Hearing a roar, he looked up and, sheltered in a fortress of apathy, assessed the arena beyond with a callus eye, scanning the four sobbing children crouched at its epicenter. They huddled together, seeking comfort and protection where such things could never be found. A

hundred gladiators stalked around the children, awaiting only the last thunderous drumbeat to commence their small war.

The gladiators, all of them Tragnashi, ranged from mere children to young men who would have already fathered a litter of children. Looking at the circle, Dieharamon noted an irregularity: a woman. His control wavered, forcing him to retreat and repress his emotions anew, locking them in their prison. He dared not allow them to surface, not if he was to survive again.

Female Tragnashi were no less common than male; their suffering just differed. The Kalvonders used female Tragnashi to breed because any child born of a Tragnashi is a Tragnashi. Thus, they increased their fortune until the woman could bear no more children, and then sent her to the Coliseum. Few women ever survived their fertile years, killed by disease or the labor of unremitting childbirth.

The drum's thunder ceased, and the Angorat'Wass began. The youngest gladiators, little more than children, were drugged to corrupt their minds, twisting their delicate sensibilities into a combination of feral instinct and raw bloodlust. The older gladiators would be drowning in enhancing drugs and anesthetics. Dieharamon had taken his share of those drugs when they first consigned him to the arena. As he matured, however, Valerius had reduced his dosages until, having removed them entirely, he declared to all of Sahdaen that his gladiator fought without augmentations.

The arena exploded with a deafening roar as the gladiators charged, taking their first steps toward commercialized war. Unsurprised, Dieharamon watched the woman slit her throat, knowing she acted out of fear for what awaited her in the arena. Dieharamon had seen it before: near the battle's end, a couple of gladiators would rape the woman before killing her and one another.

The younger gladiators lasted only minutes despite their chemical savagery. Their reach was too short and their strength too insignificant to compete with their larger, more experienced foes. Some called these opening minutes a baptizing, an act of consecration to prepare the field for the Angorat'Wass. The actual conflict would begin after this initial massacre, with the surviving participants forming alliances to hunt down and destroy the truly dangerous among them: the survivors of past conflicts. These alliances never lasted, though; the moment a back was turned in arrogance or idiocy, betrayal took another life.

Initially the conflict centered around the four prize children with the embattled gladiators struggling for dominance, and the opportunity to safely claim one of the prizes. As the conflict progressed, the circle of gladiators broke, scattering across the arena to continue and conclude their volatile existence. It was then, with everything truly beginning, that the Kalmarads unleashed their hoarded monstrosities. The swamp erupted, heralding the arena's newest arrivals, as its native monsters burst from their prisons to assail the gladiators. Meanwhile, caught in the center of this horror, the four children huddled together on their raised dais, safe from the beasts.

His self-control restored, Dieharamon surveyed the performance. The last two gladiators were a youth of thirteen summers and a man of sixteen. The first carried a net and trident, while the other held a shield and a broken sickle blade.

The younger gladiator charged, hurling his net only to have the elder gladiator raise his shield and bat it aside with derisive ease. However, in doing so, he blinded himself, allowing the younger gladiator to thrust the trident into his groin. The elder gladiator screamed, lurching back and clutching the trident's haft. The younger gladiator drove his opponent back, forcing him toward a small cavity in the island upon which they fought. This cavity lurked in noxious stillness while the rest of the swamp broiled in conflict.

Screaming his triumph, the younger gladiator gave one final shove and flung his opponent into the cavity. The elder gladiator had managed a single terrified cry before he submerged into the already thrashing water. Heedless of his abandoned trident, the younger gladiator fled toward the dais, all his remaining strength focused on escaping whatever horror brooded in that cavity.

Meanwhile, one of the drugged children from the dais leapt onto the back of a feasting crustacean.

The beast spun in a blur of orange claws, snapping at the child straddling its ridged shell.

Just barely evading the abominations claws, the child retaliated with a jagged rock, smashing the stone repeatedly into the crustaceans head.

Dieharamon could see what the child fought to obtain: a simple bone knife clutched in the half-devoured gladiator's fist.

A terrified scream pierced the throng's clamor, drawing Dieharamon's attention back to the elder gladiator. A fascinated horror welled within him as Dieharamon saw what the Kalmarads buried in that small cavity: a Vultaki.

The Vultaki was comparable to a centipede, with a shell of thick, overlapping plates and a hundred twisted, gray limbs. Two antennae sprouted from its head, which, when the Vultaki rested, was covered by a helmet-like carapace. This Vultaki, however, had its carapace withdrawn, revealing the wide circular maw.

It was small for its species, barely four feet long when they are known to grow upwards of a dozen. It enveloped the elder gladiator's torso, its legs driven into the man's flesh, pumping him full of venom and eggs. With a last spasm, the Vultaki fell away, her body inert and drained of color as it slid back into the cavity.

The elder gladiator soon followed it in an agony-induced madness, his body contorting as the Vultaki Queen's eggs hatched. With the last gurgling struggle for life departing him, the gladiator slumped into the dark cavity with a splash.

The larvae within him would spend months devouring him from the inside, using his body as protection until they grew large enough to survive on their own. When insufficient meat remained to feed them, they would turn cannibal, devouring one another until only one remained. The surviving Vultaki, always a queen, would emerge several years later already impregnated with a brood of larvae.

The Vultaki eats only two things throughout its lifetime; first is the host, and second are its eggs. They are ambush predators and will wait motionless for decades in dark waters sustained by their eggs. The Vultaki Queen uses the nutrients of its eggs to produce more eggs and grow larger in a self-sustaining cycle. Once she reaches a dozen feet long, a Vultaki Queen can endure the insemination of its young and will then survive indefinitely.

The younger gladiator reached the safety of the massive drum where, his victory assured, he lifted his voice in a wordless cry of triumph. At his pronouncement, the countless spectators roared back in salute. They loved champions as they loved bloodshed. Dieharamon ignored the victorious champion, focusing on the small child and the crustacean instead.

Armed with only a jagged stone, the child continued pounding the engorged monstrosity until it finally died. Hurling his makeshift weapon aside, the child dove into the fetid water, scrambling to claim the bone knife. Upon the dais, the younger gladiator still screamed his victory, ignoring the absence of a horn validating his triumph; he did not fear a quartet of unarmed children.

Wrenching the bone knife from the dead gladiator's hand, the child turned back to the object of his fear. The gladiator remained oblivious to his peril up to the moment the child

stabbed him just under his left shoulder blade, rupturing his spleen.

The horns and drums sounded, declaring the murderous child the victor. A thunderous voice bellowed over the crowd, suppressing their jubilation with its power, "Victor, against all the odds, unarmed and unprepared, you have managed to achieve dominance. Now, all you must do is take the blood of your fellows and receive your reward!" The child stepped back, casting aside the dagger as he closed his eyes and covered his ears. One of the four did not hesitate, though. He rushed forward to grasp the discarded knife and drove it into the victor's throat with a cry. The massacre was brief and accompanied by riotous laughter from the spectators; they loathed a weak victor.

Dieharamon rolled his shoulders and stretched in preparation for his fight. He no longer saw the dying children or listened to the screamed adulations. Instead, he sought the weapons scattered across the arena, knowing he would need as many as possible to survive. His attention was drawn back when the voice boomed, "We have our true victor!" The spectators rose, applauding the child with ruckus cries and stomping feet. When they subsided, the speaker resumed, "Your prize waits at the entrance to the Coliseum, victor." The child looked up, a spark of hope rising on his soiled features only to die with the Speaker's parting words, "We are eager to watch you compete in the next Angorat'Wass." The spectators exploded into a roar, and the youth collapsed to his knees beside those he had murdered. He begged with words lost in the crowd for them not to be dead, for his crimes to be erased. It took a ruddy-faced guard to remove the child, clearing the road for more bloodshed.

The arena's ancient summons called Dieharamon forward, renewing the unending war of his existence. Taking a last calming breath, Dieharamon hurled his massive frame into the scathing sun.

He lunged to the right, his eyes locking upon a youth scrambling to extract a javelin embedded in the body of a gladiator. Dieharamon reached him in two strides, and all the youth's veteran scars did not matter. He died like anyone else when Dieharamon snapped his neck.

Dieharamon tossed the cadaver aside before crouching down and collecting the javelin. He scanned the arena for approaching foes. Alliances were common in the Angorat'Wass; strong alliances were not. Thus, Dieharamon immediately noticed the dozen or so gladiators warily approaching him, each one armed with a weapon procured from the dead.

The cadavers, like the weapons, were left to rot until one of the resident monsters devoured them, which meant that any arena could house up to three or four Turnings' worth of dead men along with any number of additional horrors.

Dieharamon analyzed his foes, searching for their leader. The man was easy to discern; even lingering behind the formation, he towered over his fellows. The man staggered as Dieharamon's javelin took him through the solar plexus. Clutching at the bone javelin, he stumbled back and fell only to have his descent stop when the javelin drove into the sand, leaving him in a grotesque parody of stance. With the leader dead, the alliance collapsed as the survivors strove to assert their dominance. Dieharamon scanned for another weapon.

He found his next weapon, or rather weapons, quickly. They were a pair of twin pewter hatchets in the process of dismembering a screaming foe while their obese master cackled. Dieharamon glanced to the arena's center, where most of the gladiators had coalesced about the new selection of prize children. The swampland surrounding the drum was already crimson with blood while the black water strangling the scattered islands broiled with dying men and feasting monstrosities. Satisfied that he was in no immediate peril, Dieharamon assessed his intended quarry as the laughing man finally shoved his victim into the water.

Dieharamon hurtled forward, his long legs propelling him over the grisly sand in great strides and over the waterways in bounds. The obese gladiator heard his approach and spun around, moving with incongruous dexterity to he brace himself against the approaching collision, and slashed one hatchet with a bloody leer spreading across his ruptured face. Like so many before him, the obese gladiator saw only Dieharamon's size and failed to compensate for his mobility.

He discovered this error a moment later when his hatchet met air, throwing him off balance. Slipping in after the hatchet, Dieharamon hammered the gladiator's midsection, doubling his foe over. He twisted out from under the obese gladiator's collapsing weight, lifted his hands and brought them crashing down onto his opponents exposed neck, snapping the vertebrae.

Dieharamon saw the last contenders striving against one another in his peripheral vision. The conflict neared its climax with the surviving prize child fleeing through the last embattled gladiators. At some point, the battle had shifted from focusing on the children to the more dangerous gladiators as lesser men unified against the greater. Knowing his time was running short Dieharamon bent low and ripped the pewter hatchets from his opponent.

Except, a shadow fell over him as he began to rise, forcing him into a desperate lunge that ended in the swamp. It was a gamble that he would fare better against whatever the morass concealed. He heard a furious cry from his assailant as the black water devoured him. The cold gnawed at his skin as tendrils of unseen plants grasped at his arms and jagged stone scraped at his side. He dragged himself further in, feeling the swamp hiss as his assailant hacked at the water.

Something ominous gave way beneath his hand, a sinuous body pulling in on itself. He recoiled as a scaled body encircled his chest and tightened, forcing the air from his lungs in a surge of bubbles. He set his feet and lunged for the surface, clawing at the throttling coils. The dark water parted lethargically, loath to release its captive any more than the serpent wanted to release its prey.

He broke the surface with a strangled gasp, the water swirling about his waist as he struggled to escape the serpent's coils. He pressed outward, but the serpent tightened its grip and bit his shoulder. He arched back with a scream and the serpent's weight dragged him back underwater.

He roiled across the swamp floor, fighting to free himself from the serpent's grip and struggling to resist its sedative. He twisted, spinning until he felt swamp bottom beneath his knees, and set his stance. He thrashed, liberating his right arm from the serpent's grasp and almost shirking its embrace entirely. But the coils slithered about him before he could escape, readjusting to the absence of his arm and adding even more pressure to his collapsing chest. During the half-second it took the serpent to retighten its grip he dragged his other arm free, reached up, caught the serpent's head and crushed it.

The serpent's coils slipped away, swishing as they sank into the morass. Dieharamon pushed for the surface, exploding out onto the beach with a coarse gasp. No longer concerned with which bank he climbed, Dieharamon clambered to his knees and retched. He knew he should be looking at his surroundings, but the serpent's toxin made his reactions sluggish, allowing a spear tip to lay a kiss on his chest before he recognized the presence of someone else.

He lifted his searing eyes, the putrid water streaming from his sodden clothes, ruddy with his blood. The gladiator grinned and stepped forward, thrusting his spear to drive Dieharamon back into the water. He felt the water lapping eagerly at his heels and glanced back, searching for

the nearest landmass. All he saw was the serpent's death throws and an ominous ripple arching through the water toward him. The gladiator's triumphant sneer evolved into full laughter, "Let's see you survive that!" Dieharamon spun, grasping the spear beneath its blade. His opponent tried to thrust the spear forward, but Dieharamon shifted aside, grasping the spear with his other hand and propelling the gladiator into the water.

Squealing, the gladiator recoiled, desperate to escape the water. Dieharamon struck in that moment of vulnerability and crushed his opponent's throat. The man had gurgled for a moment before he collapsed into the water as Dieharamon slogged ashore.

Dieharamon trudged across the beach to where the two hatchets impaled the ground and bent to collect them. After that, he stole a moment to observe his surroundings. The conflict approached its conclusion with less than a dozen exhausted gladiators vying against one another in scattered duels. None of them seemed to have noticed him; so he lingered, waiting for his strength to return.

A strange tranquility enveloped the arena as he crouched there assessing the battle. Curious, Dieharamon glanced up toward the stands where the four thousand awed spectators watched him. The silence broke with a roar after a long hesitation of disbelief. Dripping with mud-laden swamp water, it took a moment for Dieharamon to realize why they screamed. No one survived the beasts of the arena; and yet, he was alive. Dieharamon glanced to Valerius Kalvonder.

As always, the man sat alone at the base of a pillar lost in callous vigil. Something dark and brooding always hung about Valerius, haunting Dieharamon whenever they spoke and festering in the recesses of his mind whenever they were separated.

He inspected Dieharamon with a tilted head, his ever present cane lazily held in one hand while his other rested atop the balustrade's beryl curtains. Valerius nodded once, as vast a compliment as a Kalvonder ever bestowed upon their Tragnashi. In return, Dieharamon bowed, touching a fist to his forehead, acknowledging once more that Valerius owned his soul and that nothing he accomplished would liberate him.

Dieharamon turned back to the conflict and the half a dozen survivors now approaching him. These survivors had also noted the silence, and in that silence, they had discovered him. Desperation drove them into one last alliance. He retreated before their advance, recognizing the impossible odds arrayed against him.

In a voice too soft for any man to hear, Dieharamon whispered, "[*Arawn*](#), take mercy on my soul." Though he hated the gods and feared magic, death was something he understood so intimately he could no longer fear it. He hurled himself forward in numb silence. His prayer echoed back to him, thin and inaudible beneath his pounding blood as if something had heard it. Thus, heedless of the perils his words would bring, Dieharamon screamed out, "*Fore-Gods* burn you *Ashshand!*" In unison with his furious cry, a primordial cold filled Dieharamon, and he cringed. Though his words went unheard by men, *Ashshand* stirred at his curse.

The first gladiator surged to the fore of his fellows, slashing wildly. Dieharamon ducked beneath the swipe, a burning sensation welling up within his breast. The heat expanded throughout him, setting his blood alight, broadening his vision to see with crystal clarity.

The first gladiator, wielding a shield and spear, ignored his companions' warnings and engaged Dieharamon without a thought for the gravity of his error. He dove forward but struck air as Dieharamon pivoted around the spear, caught his shield and dragged it down with one hatchet while the other smashed into his skull.

Separating from the corpse and spinning right, Dieharamon swept his right hatchet low to

parry a thrusting spiked mace. The attacking gladiator stumbled forward, pulled by the momentum of his assault. Dieharamon severed the man's spine with a blow and continued past.

He spun, the right hatchet digging into the throat of a third foe encroaching on his left side. Continuing his revolution, Dieharamon threw the left hatchet end over end into the forehead of a fourth gladiator lingering at the back. A fragile clay dagger bit into his already injured shoulder and shattered. Grimacing, he twisted, grabbed the proprietor's arm, braced it against his ax haft and broke it.

The gladiator careened back into his last ally, clutching his arm as blood welled up between fingers. Dieharamon advanced, smashing his last hatchet into the injured man's chest and pursued the final gladiator. His quarry turned on a heel and fled, hopelessly seeking to escape but tripped with a wailing cry. The gladiator managed a single whimper before Dieharamon crushed his throat with a boot.

The audience waited in a menacing, disbelieving hush, most struggling to accept what they just witnessed. When at last they understood, a thunderous roar broke the silence. Avarans loved victors and victories, the bloodier the victory, the better; they did not need to understand how. Heedless of their cries, Dieharamon stood with his eyes closed in an expanding puddle of his blood, trying to dampen the furnace burning within. The heat gradually died, and the pain assumed its rightful place.

Dieharamon opened his eyes and bowed in slow succession to the arena's four corners. His measured reverences caused the spectators to scream all the louder. In his gesture, they saw the arrogance of an unequaled champion, a declaration of invincibility and the mien of a powerful man: and they loved powerful men.

When Dieharamon rose from his last obeisance, he stood facing the south where the chief Kalmarads stood on the brink of their column. The Triad reclined behind them, surveying Dieharamon from the center-most pillar.

With a wide smile upon his features, the Kalmarad opened his arms, paying the Kalvonders at his back no more heed than he would a common Avaran. Dieharamon snorted, wondering if the fool would survive the night. To insult any Kalvonder was an egregious error in judgment. To insult a member of the Triad was suicide. Dieharamon doubted he would survive the hour.

The Kalmarad lifted his arms, palms facing heavenwards, calling for silence. "Once more, brave gladiator, you are our champion! Another chapter is added to your heroic saga!" A roar from the crowd echoed his words but fell silent at his raised hand. "And so you, our greatest gladiator and champion; you, a legend and inspiration, shall be the first gladiator to hear of the ultimate Angorat'Wass!" The audience waited, breathless, for the grand revelation. "On the first day of this subsequent Turning, when the sun first breaks through the heavens, a new Angorat'Wass will be held. Every gladiator in Sahdaen will compete with their brother and sister gladiators as allies!"

Dieharamon flinched, the image of what the next Angorat'Wass would hold rising in his mind. The image depicted hundreds of gladiators striving against one another. Valerius possessed other Tragnashi trained to fight, but none the Kalmarads knew of. To all of Sahdaen, Dieharamon was Valerius's sole gladiator. This was no spectacle: it was a death sentence.

Dieharamon glanced at Valerius where he stood at ease, his left hand resting upon the rail separating him from the arena. In his right, he held the small black cane that always attended his person, and on his shoulder perched a Raven. Looking at his impassive features, Dieharamon wondered why Valerius would orchestrate the massacre of every living gladiator in Sahdaen.