

Tales From The Savage Lands 7  
A Work In Progress  
By Raymond Towers

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Introduction

Part 1 - What is going on in my world? Tonight is November 14<sup>th</sup>. Tomorrow, I have the idea to start working on Savage Lands 7, a full novel writing project. The basic premise for this novel is an idea I thought of way, way back in 1990 or so. This novel

scares me. I had it in my head to write this novel when I had no idea of how writing works. I started it, wrote a few pages or many, many pages, all handwritten mind you. I would not like the way it was going, I'd scrap it, and I'd start all over. In my notes, I have two character name pages, a nine page story outline, and three rough draft versions: Tagger Version 1 at 117 pages, the 'patch' Tagger Version 2 at 20 pages, and another 'patch' Valet Version at 20 more pages. The patches were like Band-Aids for parts I didn't like, where I would have to rewrite what came before and after to fit the patch into the main story. I got so frustrated with this project that I have shelved it for 28 years.

I'd better learn how to write before I tackle this idea again. That's what I thought back then. And I waited, and waited, and waited some more. I wrote my early poems and short stories, worked my way up to longer novellas and short serials, a couple of story collections and finally, full-length novels. Let me tell you how scared I am of working on this novel. I have published 56 titles so far, including 35 full novels and 11 collections. My Chaos Rift series was supposed to be a couple of novels leading up this one, but so far I have 11 e-published Chaos Rift novels, and 5 more unpublished. (Those are titled Savage Lands 2 through 6.) After all that... Well, I'm officially starting it tomorrow.

Whew! Can I do it? Is this novel going to rock or suck potatoes? We will see. I've gotten pretty good at having a strong initial concept for a story, and winging it, as in letting my characters and events take the initiative for me and lead me into new sub-plots. I have to get 'into character' before I start, but I haven't decided on what tone to use yet: adventurous, mystical, somber, dark, etc. Anyway, I may post my progress as I write this novel, in PDF format, for anyone out there who is interested. See my writer's blog or my Freebie page on my main website for the announcement, if I decide to do this.

Part 2 - I'm jumping into the pool now. Or is it frying pan? If you're reading this, it will be in PDF form. I have written several stories for people in the past. Most people I write for like to read my stories while I am writing them. They'll ask me for daily updates, even if it's only a rough draft with a lot of imperfections in it. Information in (parenthesis) will include the current date and short notes to keep readers updated. I will not be able to insert active links in this document, but I will put a Table Of Contents so you can see what my latest additions are. Use the Search Function, if you can, to get to the next unread date. Or remember what date or page you left off on! I will try to update this file every 2<sup>nd</sup> day, or every even date. At this point, I am aiming for a medieval fantasy novel with High controversial matter in it.

Send your comments to me at [RaymondTowers777](mailto:RaymondTowers777@yahoo.com) at yahoo dot com.

(November 15, 2018, 6:30 PM - All right. I've decided to make this project open to the reading public, both for the notoriety of it and to encourage potential writers out there on how the process works for me. We will see if I can take this project to its end in a rough draft form, so expect a good amount of errors. I intent to write a full novel, as continuation of what has already gone on in Savage Lands 1 through 6, and also to do justice to my 'Kingdom of Ranth' idea that I first envisioned nearly 30 years ago.

To start with, I will be adding in the preliminaries of title, a Creative Commons License and a collection of all the notes I currently have. First off I'll do the title. I have no subtitle yet, but it will likely end up along the lines of The Kingdom Of Ranth or The Rise Of Ranth. I won't settle on anything firm this early. 6:41 PM - Title is done.

Next comes the CC title. 6:48 PM - CC License is done.

You ever hear that song by, was it Suicidal Tendencies or the Butthole Surfers? Anyway, the line went like this... 'Inch by inch and step by step.' That's the kind of random crap that comes to mind at a time like this. That reminds me. I just turned on my CD player. I've got Blondie's Greatest Hits playing. Sweet!

Next, I need an intro. I wrote something down in Verum Et Inventa, Issue No. 2. I think I'll use that, since I don't feel like making a whole new intro. Give me a sec, will you? 7:02 PM - Intro is done. Table of contents is included.

This next part is going to be tedious. I am about to Copy And Paste my old notes into this document. Some of these notes are so old they have to be reformatted. This will take me a few minutes. 7:36 PM - Reformatting my old notes reduced my page count from 157 to 109. Regardless, I have nearly 60% of my minimum word count for a full novel. This is still going to be a huge, huge hassle to rewrite, but at least I have plenty of notes.

Here are the guidelines for readers. If the date posted is November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018 or later, the writing will be new or reworked. If you go past Old Notes Table Of Contents, those are from my original scribbles that began way back in 1989 or 1990. I am sure to rename some of my old characters, as well as change the original plot around to conform to the six previous books in the series. I will be creating new lists of names and events; that's how I keep track of things. As I go along, I will incorporate old ideas into my new novel, or discard them if I won't be using them. That's about it. I will take 5 to 10 minutes before I get started on writing this novel. I will NOT read my old stuff ahead of time, but I will be referring to it when needed. Let me go make some coffee.

Okay, I'm back. I think I will take chunks of my old writing, Copy And Paste them, and modify them one line at a time. I changed music, too. I am now listening to the King Arthur Soundtrack by Hans Zimmer. Medieval tunes for a medieval novel! My pace is as follows: I will write for 20-25 minutes, then take a 5-10 minute break. Start time: 8:00 PM. I've been at this since 6:30, and after 4 hours, I've had enough for tonight. End time: 10:30 PM.)

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## Old The Kingdom of Ranth Introduction

06.07.2010 - Fantastic reptilian creatures from the medieval age of a parallel universe use sorcery to open an inter-dimensional doorway to our galaxy. These beings, the barbaric Ranthan, draw in humans from a modern day Earth. The prisoners are savagely interrogated, as the Ranthan armies attempt to extricate information on the military capabilities of mankind.

The Ranthan conjurers, High Sorcerer Arak and his apprentice, Faas, resort to desperate measures, but their designs are shattered by an attack from the formidable Altecian armies. In the ensuing battle, the group of humans manages to escape. What follows is an incredible journey through magical and treacherous lands. The band of humans is hunted by the Ranthan, as well as by mercenaries from other kingdoms, as they search for the Land of Lost Men. Can they find the place where humanity was slaughtered by the hordes of evil armies? This mysterious place holds the secret to how

the animals were created, as well as how to stop the Ranthan from taking over the entire planet.

### Old The Conquest of Ranth Introduction

02.10.10 – Several years after the overthrow of the Ranthan Empire, Master Sorcerer and newly crowned monarch Faas returns to Castle Ranth. Aided by sorcery, he rebuilds the ruins of his capital into an impregnable fortress. Reaffirming his control of the Royal Crown, he vows bitter vengeance on all who engaged in the destruction of his once powerful kingdom.

After successfully bringing his planet to its knees, he shifts his considerable energies towards the portal to Earth. The survivors of the first epic are among the few people who fully realized what is occurring, but they are mostly reluctant to take action. As the world crumbles into dust all around them, they find that their indecision may have cost them the fate of the entire human race. (see story; Kingdom of Ranth, for background)

Song lyrics include:

Folsom Prison Blues by Johnny Cash

Hotel California by the Eagles

The Last Of The Famous International Playboys by Morrissey

## Part I The Great Experiment

The dark shadows danced demonically on the cold, stone walls. They were cast from the flickers of the sporadic suspended torches hitting the dozens of reptilian beings that traveled industrially through the dank, semi-lit corridor. From a good distance away, the multitude of greenish creatures with humanoid heads heard the heavy echoes from the thick leather boots the soldiers wore. Most of these civilians scurried across the corridor with a growing sense of urgency, and some even felt alarm.

The squad of soldiers, a full ten reptilian men deep, moved unnervingly fast, too fast for the civilians to scatter. Apprehensively, the commoners drew back, away from the troops and bracing their scaled bodies against the cool and damp wall, leaving as much space for the troops as their short-limbed, thick bodies allowed.

The steady roar of synchronized marching filled the corridor, growing louder with the arrival of the Erranth soldiers. With their gazes transfixed unwaveringly on the path ahead of them, the warriors swiftly marched past the throng of civilians. Their tailored blue and silver tunics revealed them to be Castle Guards, a much more civilized breed than the army rabble that wore only blue uniforms. Despite this clear distinction, the commoners maintained a wary eye on their brisk movements. The soft rattle of the soldiers' swords grazing against their thighs gave the common folk another reason to remain guarded.

A wave of unfeigned shudders coursed over the bodies of many of the reptilian beings, as another of their kind strode closely behind the squad. Unequivocally, the regal, dark purple robe belonged to the Master Sorcerer of Erranth. The hooded grand wizard slid effortlessly across the cobblestone walk, almost as if he could glide on the very air.

With his legs and feet completely concealed by the dark folds of his robe, none present could confirm this. Only a handful of the boldest commoners dared lean forward, staring with morbid curiosity toward the sorcerer's face, attempting to catch even a glimpse of it, but the careful placement of the purple hood allowed only traces of dark green skin.

Beside the Master Sorcerer marched Branek. As of late, Branek was one of the king's favored personal guards. He dressed in red and white, as befit his position. The robust reptilian took wide yet effortless strides to keep pace with the wizard.

As abruptly as it had appeared, the small entourage quickly stepped out of view, heading into a spiraling staircase wide enough for two Erranthan at a time. They were going into the lower levels of the keep, the wary witnesses knew. Several of them released long-held breaths at the passing of the soldiers, going as far as to show anxious grins to their fellows. The nervous beads of sweat on many foreheads added considerably to the moistness already lingering in the air. Even more hurriedly than before, these green-skinned men, and a few women, resumed their walks and went about their business.

The group of soldiers rhythmically trotted down the long flight of steps. Upon reaching its end, they turned to their immediate right and proceeded down another long corridor. These darker passages were less frequented, deeper into the bowels of the keep, where commoners were not allowed. In these restricted confines, less torches were mounted to guide their way. The few others they encountered were also soldiers, or Castle Guards, all of whom promptly stepped aside and nodded at their passing.

Finally, the squad halted before a pair of wide and heavy wooden doors. That section of the keep had four sets of such doors, two on each side of the corridor, but sentries currently guarded only the ones to the northern side. Silently, the sentries acknowledged the presence of the squad with practiced nods, before pulling the doors open. The squad leader up front was indistinguishable from the rest. With a short utterance, he commanded the soldiers inside, with the sorcerer and King's Guard following close behind them.

The door sentries had actually held their breaths, worried they might somehow attract the sorcerer's attention and unleash the great temper that brought that man such an infamy throughout their kingdom. Quietly, the reptilians shut the doors, and as the civilians had done in the upper floor, they felt much of their tension subside.

Master Sorcerer Arak halted just inside the great chamber, as the doors closed up behind him. His escort Branek marched ahead, into the center of the chamber, where Arak's First Apprentice Fass was busy giving final instructions to the newly arrived soldiers. The King's Guardsman paused there briefly, gazing with barely concealed contempt at the diminutive Fass, before he too went to give last-moment details to the armed men who had come in earlier as secondaries.

Arak dismissed Branek's irritating demeanor, instead turning his attention toward the entirety of the chamber. He surveyed all he could with a scrupulous eye, in order to assure himself that everything had been done precisely in the prescribed manner. The chamber was the largest found in or under the keep. As long and wide as four common houses lined up. From the looks of things, final preparations had already commenced. Four sentries were assigned to douse the majority of the wall-mounted torches. Starting at the far end of the chamber and working their way sequentially to the opposite end Arak

had just come in from. At this pace, it would only be a few minutes before the entire chamber became engulfed in darkness.

Anxiously scanning the area once again, the sorcerer counted eight secondary guards already at their spots. Factoring in the squad of ten just arrived, plus the four quenching the torches, gave Arak a total of twenty and two armed warriors. Once these men were in position and correctly spaced out, they would each have a narrow section to cover. With any luck, that spacing and their experience would be enough to prevent matters from getting out of hand. Closely, Arak observed the forms of those in charge of security: his apprentice Fass and Captain of the Castle Guard Gruhg. Those two were diligent men, the sorcerer felt, and loyal.

Nothing could be left up to chance, Arak worried. He scanned the chamber until his eyes fell on the accursed Branek. Taking a breath, the hooded sorcerer bowed his head slightly, concentrating the necessary magical energies with his mind. Without opening his mouth, without opening his lips, he reached out to his apprentice.

“Fass, how go the final preparations?”

A few heartbeats passed, before the apprentice used a similar telepathy to answer. “All is in hand, master. I feared the captain of the guard would not come, and that his second would come in his place. That concern is no longer needed.”

Arak was not particularly enamored with the older Gruhg being there, but he did need good men for his daunting task. “Have you instructed the soldiers precisely as I have asked you to?”

“To the last one.” Fass replied. “Even these men just arrived.”

“It is crucial for my purposes, that they do not over or under react.”

“That point has been duly stressed.”

“We can move forward then.” Arak decided. “The soldiers are nearly finished dousing the torches. Take up a position directly across the chamber from where I am standing now.”

“As you say, master.”

Seconds later, barked orders were heard from Gruhg. The few lights that still glowed were snuffed out, leaving them all in complete darkness. Arak took a few steps toward the chamber’s center, with nothing to guide his bare, scaled feet but his memory. Much deliberation had taken place, he recalled, before he had resolved to undertake his spell-casting in full obscurity. Too many matters, possibly including the Kingdom of Erranth itself, were at risk for Arak not to take every possible precaution.

Hoping to reassure himself further, the mage mentally reached out for the mind of the nearest soldier to him. Unnoticed, and some would say insidiously, Arak poked into the man’s muddled thoughts. Discomfort and dread, both tinged with a sprinkle of fear, were clearly evident in the man’s head. Pushing his sentience past these thoughts, Arak came to the directives issued by his apprentice and the captain. They had both done their duties well, Arak noted. Later, when this unpredictable business was at an end, and if he was successful, he might commend Fass for convincing Gruhg to attend, despite the sorcerer’s misgivings.

Fass continued to surprise him, Arak considered, glad he had chosen that man instead of any other for the post of First Apprentice. What would Fass, in his body shrunk to half its size by magic, do if he were in Arak’s place? The idea that Fass could be Master Sorcerer was not as farfetched as it sounded at first. Arak and Fass were only a

few years apart in age. They had both studied in the Halls Of Mystical Discernment, where they had met a few times but not socialized much. Things had changed after the Upheaval of Kellor. Only by circumstance did Arak end up in combat against that feared mage, while Fass' skills were employed in fending off Kellor's supporters. True, Arak was instrumental in bringing about the downfall of the former Master Sorcerer, but it could just as easily have been Fass who might have set up that final, killing blow. At that time, their skill in magic was nearly identical. In fact, it was more due to Arak's family name than his reputation, that he had been chosen as the one to spearhead the offense against the rebellious Kellor.

But now, it was his spell, Arak's spell, on which the entire fate of the kingdom rested. Future success or immediate failure, those were two ends of the same scale, with the fulcrum being him. The sorcerer finally pulled the hood away from his head, comforted that his face, and the queasiness it held, would not be observed in the penetrating darkness. His normally dignified brow was furrowed with anxiety, and he quietly labored to steady his mind and determination. Bringing his strong and thick arms up before his chest, and forming a circle with his hands, Arak focused on the task, the Great Experiment that he needed to perform.

The Incantation Of The Rift Through Time; that was the title of his spell. He ran the latest version of it through his head, more than once. The great work that the late Kellor had begun, that Arak had taken over and painstakingly studied over the course of nearly the last year, was now ready to be cast. What results would it produce, perhaps the mighty weapons his King craved, or some form of superior knowledge that could be implemented against Erranth's many enemies. Or worse... Potentially, Arak might unleash some powerful, terrible beast that could level the resplendent Castle Erranth to rubble. So many factors were still unknown, and could not be known. For only a few more moments, these factors would be mysteries. Arak was determined to see this through to the end.

As if he needed further prodding, the loathsome Branek had been assigned to watch over the proceedings, to provide the heated poker on Arak's back. Whatever occurred, Branek was there to see it, and to right away take his report to the King.

"The chamber is prepared and ready." Branek muttered impatiently, coming up on Arak's right. As if a mere guard could command a Master Sorcerer, he added, "You may begin with your experiment."

A wave of disgust swept through Arak. Mentally, he rummaged for a few good curses he might set on that stupid, arrogant man, after this was done.

His apprentice was also impatient, but with excitement. Fass' mind-voice reached into the sorcerer's mind. "All is set, master. We are ready."

The words did what they were intended to. They brought Arak's muddled mind back to his carefully designed incantation.

"Gods upon us." Arak's voice rumbled clearly across the chamber, enhanced in its volume by magic. "Here is the beginning of it."

In his mind, the Master Sorcerer spoke the chant of his labored creation. The raising and moving of his arms came next, to draw the magic and pool it together before him. He did this several times, feeling the ebb of energy increasing around his body, becoming more confident, seeing the spell implanted fully in his inner vision. One final time, Arak scanned the chamber, finding it pitch black save for the few dim auras of his apprentice

and the men who had come to assist his efforts. The sorcerer took several steps closer to the center of the chamber, inhaling and exhaling measured breaths, becoming fully aware and absorbed in his task.

Arak raised his arms, his long sleeves falling away from his limbs and to his shoulders. Had their been light, the many soldiers in that chamber would have seen hard, strong muscle, very unusual for a spell-caster. As he had already done with his mind, the sorcerer began to recite the same chant with his mouth, in a low drone, but careful to make the correct intonations and lilts.

Bright streaks of green electricity began to crackle from his fingers, and dark smoke, black and gray, began billowing in front of him.

(November 16, 2018. 7:45 PM - I've been binge-watching a show called Bosch on Amazon Prime. It's a good show, by the way, and a huge contrast compared to Season 1 of 24, another show I watched recently. The starting credits and music are superb, too. Bosch features a homicide detective from L.A.P.D. Get this. In 24, Jack Bauer's wife and daughter are kidnapped, and it takes him damned near the entire season to get them back. In Bosch, when Detective Bosch's ex-wife and daughter are taken, he gets them back in the same episode. Ha! Anyway, the reason I mention this is because I'm studying the show's main character. Bosch can boss around civilians and suspects, but when another cop or supervisor rides his ass, he clams up and takes it. I have a policeman I'll be introducing into this novel later. I'm thinking about modeling him after Bosch.

Here's what I'm doing right now. I am going to make a new file where I can save only the rough draft, without all my notes and whatnot. 7:53 PM - Okay, that's done. The reason I need the copy is to keep an accurate word count. So far, I have 4 pages and just over 2200 words for the official story. The minimum word count I usually aim for is 100,000 words, totaling about 175 DOC pages. If I want to go at a slow pace, I will try to write 1,000 words per day, or per night. At that rate, this novel will be finished in just over 3 months, or 100 days. For all you new writers, 1,000 words is a good goal to start with; it comes out to about 2 DOC pages. Every 1,000 words equals 1 percent of the novel, so at 2200 words, I am slightly over 2 percent done. That's an easy way for me to keep track of longer projects.

What I'm about to do next is to copy and paste another section of my old notes, and rewrite it. That's what I'll be doing for the next couple of hours. Start time: 8:02 PM. Oh, I almost forgot to mention this. I am no longer using the name Ranth for my reptilian kingdom. I changed that to Erranth in Savage Lands 6. For music, I am listening to the Red Sonja soundtrack for the 80s, by Enrique Morricone from the Clint Eastwood / Man With No Name movies! How awesome is that? 9:47 PM - Moved Outline Of Major Events to the end of this document. They were getting in the way as I was moving text around. End time: 10:30 PM.)

Moments later, in another time and place, on the world we know as Earth...

I always get my way, Crystal Harris thought smugly, as she triumphantly left the video rental store behind. Oh, yes, I do. The dark-skinned, hefty woman strode past the side of the building and into the dimly lit parking lot right behind it, where her beat up compact waited for her. Oh, she was so satisfied with herself tonight! Gloating inside, she repeatedly tossed her set of keys into the air. So lost in thought was the woman that she

missed a catch and heard the keys clink as they hit the cement. Her grin fell away. In a flash of fury, she raked her hand over the sidewalk, missing them, then missing a second time. Finally, she caught sight of them from the glint they gave off, thanks to the cheap lighted sign on another business across the street.

Crystal tightened her fingers around her keys, showing an aftershock of the loud eruption she'd displayed inside the video store. Anger clouded her vision, and even her mind, so much that she fumbled for the door button as she neared her dirty brown car.

That little shit had some nerve, she grumbled. That would be the store clerk, who had very erroneously tried to collect on the late charges due for the movies she'd just taken back. They were late all right, but now way was Crystal going to part with five more bucks of her hard earned money! That's why she'd caused a scene in the store. Crystal had started up a shouting match first with the clerk, and later with his manager. She had the audacity to do this right in front of the counter, preventing other customers from doing their business and making sure they heard everything she said. Not only had Crystal avoided paying the late fees, but she made the manager give her certificates, with no expiration date, for two free rentals. Of course, she redeemed the coupons right away.

In the small plastic bag she carried, were the movies *Booty Call* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Crystal smirked. Let that Stella bitch show her face around here, and Crystal would show that bitch how a real woman got her fucking groove back!

She hadn't stopped, thought, even after she got her certificates for the free movies. Oh, no. Crystal was not done dishing out the punishment. She was scolding the clerk while she picked her movies out, and she was rattling off when she stood in line to scan them. In fact, Crystal was airing out her lungs until the moment she stepped out of the store. Oh, she was so proud of herself! Those two store employees were not going to forget who Crystal Harris was anytime soon!

The car door creaked when Crystal yanked it open; it was bent after backed up onto a fire hydrant, when she forgot to close it. And then, the tired seat cushion gasped when she dumped her fat ass on it. Crystal threw the movie bag onto the passenger seat. Her eight year-old son was wanting to watch some stupid kid movie that night, but no, she got what she got, and he got nothing.

As Crystal maneuvered her car out into the street, she saw how dark it was. Damned daylight savings time... When she got home, Jeffrey would ask about the movies, and he'd groan when she'd tell him nothing was coming his way. He'd groan again, yes he would, when he asked what she was going to make for dinner, and she said the same thing, nothing. That damned kid. One of these days, she would have to teach him how to cook for his damn self.

The screeching of a car's brakes startled her. Crystal realized she wasn't paying attention to the road. Her car with its bad alignment had drifted over into the oncoming lane, and got real close to smashing into another car. Crystal yanked at her steering wheel to miss, then stomped down on her brakes right after. She paused, not because she wanted to make sure the other driver was okay, but because she was rolling her window down to give that man the finger!

Her eyes gaped wide, when the man, an older man, stuck his hand out of his own window and returned the gesture.

"Oh no you didn't." Crystal fumed. "Oh, no you didn't!"

An exchange of discourtesy followed. Crystal had some good lungs on her, loud enough that the old sack of bones soon got wind of exactly how outclassed he was in the bellowing department. The old man and his car cowered away, while Crystal sat smug and defiant in hers.

“Ain’t nobody messing with me tonight.” She vowed.

Crystal checked her composure in her lighted vanity mirror. That mirror was one of the only things that still worked on that crusty car of hers. She admired her rich brown eyes and her thick lips that pouted out from her swollen cheeks. Her hair was tied back into a bun, only because she’d left the apartment in a hurry. Otherwise, she considered, she looked *fine*.

The radio was playing on low as she turned on Orange Avenue. That street was residential, much darker than the busier ones she’d just left behind. A couple more blocks and she’d hit Thirty-Seventh, and then she’d have to worry about what she’d give Jeffery for dinner. A couple more blocks and she’d be home.

A perturbed look crossed Crystal’s face, when she noticed a small cloud of smoke ahead of her. It was about halfway down the block, and right in the middle of the street. Maybe some of the neighborhood kids had set something on fire. They did that every so often; set things on fire for the hell of it. The weird thing, Crystal observed, was that she didn’t see any kids running around. That was a giveaway that they were up to their mischief. Even stranger, Crystal saw that as she slowed by the cloud; it was dark and gray like a storm cloud, she couldn’t find any source for the smoke. It was just there, hanging in the air for no good reason other than to get in her way.

“Make me get home even later, why don’t you?” She grumbled.

When her curiosity briefly held her, Crystal allowed her tired compact to idle beside the odd apparition. Transfixed she was not, as she’d taken way too long at the video store, and she was getting hungry just thinking about what she’d make for Jeffery to eat. He tended to get into his own mischief at home, if she left him alone for too long, just like the dumb kids who had started up this crazy smoke that was burning in the air with nothing to cause that burning underneath it.

Crystal drove right on by, after lightly pressing on the gas pedal. That smoke didn’t move like regular smoke, now that she analyzed the damn thing more. No it was more like a solid color, a fog maybe, and not like any smoke she’d ever seen before. Whatever she was looking it wasn’t smoke but something else. Fire smoke that was black or gray, or it would swirl into a mix of those two colors. This smoke was uniform, dark gray all over, so thick she couldn’t see through it. The smoke looked pure, if that was the right word to describe it.

Before her eyes, the smoke or fog or cloud looked to breathe almost. After it took that breath, it had gotten bigger. That prompted Crystal to push the brakes again. Sure enough, after only a few second, the cloud looked to breathe again, and to grow.

“The hell is that?” She asked herself.

Long, thin trails started sprouting from the gray cloud. As they stretched out, they went from straight lines to bent ones, looking more like very long fingers. When they reached for the back of Crystal’s car, she heard soft thuds from the contact they made. That’s when she decided it might be better if she drove off and left that strange cloud behind. She pushed the gas, feeling the car lurch forward, but then it stopped. More bumps were heard, as more fingers touched her car. Glancing into her mirror, Crystal

could see the tendrils, that's what they were, tendrils, stretching out from the cloud, and impossibly holding on to her vehicle.

"I must be seeing things." She decided. "I am getting out of here."

Concerned, she put more pressure on the accelerator. The tires started to move her car, but then they stopped and weren't going anywhere again. Crystal checked her side mirror. Those tendril-things were on her trunk and rear fender. They were still reaching at her car, thumping against the metal like raps or knocks against a door. Her next glance went to the rearview mirror. In growing terror, she saw the long fingers spreading out like dripping paint. They were merging together, become something like a blanket that was covering the trunk, and also the back window. Whatever was happening to her car, it was strong enough to keep it from driving off.

One of those long and skinny nightmares extended to her window. She had that window open by a couple of inches. When she understood that the tendril meant to come inside, she quickly shut it. The long finger struck the glass with a soft tap.

"Oh, no." Crystal worried. "No, no, no!"

More fingers hit the car; sticking like glue to all the windows, and also to the roof and doors. Crystal panted in short bursts, stamping down hard on the gas. The car's engine revved loud, and it jerked to the side a little, but it wasn't moving forward. What was moving was all those fingers. They kept on coming and thudding on her car, before they spread out. Gray syrup began leaking down the windshield, obscuring her view.

The motor strained, but it was a cheap little motor that took her nowhere. Her car lurched to the side, as if something was dragging it. Crystal turned at the waist, trying to see what was going on past the half-covered windows. Something was pulling at her car now, tugging the entire thing despite the protests of the engine. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

In desperation, Crystal stomped on the gas. Cold sweat was running from her forehead as she looked to all sides. She couldn't even open a door and try to run out, because the cloud was all over the car by then. She was trapped, filling up those same lungs that had humbled two unfortunate employees only minutes earlier, but this time those lungs were emanating screams of wild panic.

Standing on his front porch, an older man by name of Norman Bailey watched the entire incident take place. As he took a long drag on his cigarette, he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it. Norman was out there for a good reason, and that was because his wife Jill started nagging at him the second she saw him with the pack. Get your ass outside, she'd menaced, and give your secondhand smoke to somebody else!

So there he was, out on the porch despite that it was chilly for an old guy with bones that didn't like chilly nights. Better that than having to listen to his wife give him the third degree inside. His cigarette wasn't even finished yet, but Norman still removed it from his mouth and held it up to scrutinize the smoke wafting of its glowing end. After what he'd just seen, Norman no longer felt like smoking. He dropped it on the corner of the porch; it was made of cement and already had a hundred ash stains on it, and he went on to stamp this one out the same as all the others.

"This time," Norman said to himself. "I'm really quitting." He leaned over and shouted through the screen door. "Hey, Jill! Why don't you get on out here?"

What Norman had just witnessed was that little brown car, driven by the mother of that little brat that always trudged through his front yard after school. That car, well, he was still questioning what he'd seen; so much that he abandoned his porch and walked out to the middle of the street. Norman ended up right where that smoke had appeared for no reason whatsoever. It was gone now, all of it, and so was the little brown car. He saw the tire marks the car had left behind, and he'd heard the engine growling. The street to the left and right of where he stood was empty.

"Maybe I should call the cops." He mumbled.

Back on the porch, Norman's wife wondered why in the hell her husband had gone and interrupted her from watching her favorite game show.

Crystal Harris paused from screaming, but she only paused long enough to fill her huge lungs up to their full capacity, before her voice exploded into another fit of frenzy. The woman's panic kept her from noticing the changes taking place in the cloud that still shrouded her car. Her tightly closed eyes didn't see the cloud's color lighten, or the blanket of fog thinning out into long fingers again. Had Crystal been paying more attention, she would have noticed how the fingers were gradually releasing her vehicle.

The next time Crystal stomped on the accelerator, there was very little holding her car in place. The vehicle leapt forward, with as much velocity as the weak engine could generate. It picked up speed quickly. Crystal clenched the steering wheel when she felt the momentum. Even with her headlights on, she could hardly see anything in front of her. The radio was full of static; jarring her into shutting it off only because she knew where the button was.

Her car was speeding through darkness, but at least she was out of that scary cloud. Crystal had just released the gas pedal, meaning to hit the brake, when her car abruptly came to a violent crash. Her large body hurled forward; her head slamming hard on the windshield, but she was lucky that her seatbelt kept her from tumbling through it.

In the next moments that passed, Crystal tried to gather her wits. Her hands clutched and released the wheel a few times as her mind raced. She'd just crashed into something solid, and it hadn't sounded like another car. It felt like she'd collided with a wall. If it wasn't so dark out, maybe she could see that wall, but the headlights were gone and there was no other lighting around anywhere. Crystal tried to calm her body, so she could think more rationally, but her body wouldn't have it. Pain started creeping into her, from her head, from where her chest had crushed against the wheel, and from her neck that had gotten yanked by the stupid seatbelt.

(November 17, 2018, 8:00 PM. Tonight I am listening to nearly four hours of Epic Fantasy Music compiled by Youtuber Ivan Bogdanovic. This collection includes tracks from a large number of pop movies with medieval themes, such as Gladiator, The Last Shogun and Game Of Thrones. I had an add-on for Firefox that let me download Youtube videos, but Youtube figured out how to disable this, so I can't use it anymore. I also downloaded several medieval movie soundtracks through Torrent sites. I don't consider myself to be a digital pirate, as I do intend to purchase the official CDs for all of these when I can afford them. In the meantime, I love listening to themed music while working on genre writing projects. Star time: 8:00 PM. Here is an oddity. I took a 10 minute break at 10 o'clock. My clock tells me I've been editing this novel for 2 hours, BUT... My

music player shows it's been playing for 1.5 hours. Hmm? Added a few rap lines at the end of this segment that I will be using later. I am changing the rating of this story to High after the following addition. End time: 11:30 PM.)

I have to go, she decided. I have to get out of here before somebody comes along and sees me crashed up against this here wall. Oh, no, she thought, it's too late! In her rearview mirror, she could see the silhouette of a man not too far behind her car. The light this man was holding was unusual in that it didn't look like a regular flashlight, but more like... Was that an old-time lantern?

The man was approaching her cautiously, holding the lantern up high near his head. At the same time, he looked to be stooped forward. He swayed from one side to the other while he walked. That was weird, too.

"I was this close to getting home." Crystal grumbled. "And now this shit had to happen to me! What am I going to say? That stupid smoke got in my way, that's what! That stupid smoke made me swerve my car and I ended up hitting somebody's house!"

The same way she turned on the Rage at the video store, she could turn on the Innocence right now. All she had to do was play it cool. The cops would show up and they could sort the mess out with them, and then she'd be free to go so she could go feed her hungry-ass son.

Crystal felt a trickle of moisture dropping down the side of her head. When she touched it, and traced it back by her forehead, she winced. That's where her head had struck the windshield, hard enough to draw blood. She tried turning on the car's interior light, but that didn't work. Next, she reached over for the glove box, pulling it open and digging around for a pack of paper napkins she usually kept on hand. In no time, she had the napkins out and started wiping her head with them.

Thanks to the lantern's light, Crystal could see that she'd struck a wall built of large stone bricks. Who the hell had a wall like that in her neighborhood? With any luck, the owner of that wall would be out, so he wouldn't start up a big stink about Crystal running her car into it. Maybe she could back up, she plotted. She could back up real quick and avoid that man with his antique lantern, and she could drive around the block and hide her car in the alley behind her apartment.

"I have to do this fast, before he gets my license plate." She decided.

Crystal tried the ignition, but it wouldn't catch.

"Shit! Just what I need!"

A peek into her side mirror revealed the lantern man was back by her trunk now. He had the lantern behind him, as if he were talking to someone else. Crystal could hear voices back there, deep voices, but she couldn't tell what they were saying. She tried turning in her seat to get a better view, but all she saw was darkness past the lantern and the one man's silhouette.

When the lantern swung back around, it illuminated the person holding it. Crystal cringed at the sight. In the lantern's bright glow, she saw a bald man with almost no neck, big shoulders and thick arms. Whoever it was wore a long blue blouse, and damned if that man didn't look like he had green or yellow-green skin.

"Who is that?" Crystal asked.

The strange man peered at her, putting his face closer to the light. In her mirror, Crystal a thick brow over his eyes, and some kind of body ridge running across the top of his head. His face really was green, and he was as ugly as a damned dinosaur!

“People... People be wearing those stupid masks sometimes!” She squealed. “That’s what he’s got, a damned mask like a triceratop!”

She tried the ignition again, but all that did was click at her.

“I need you to cooperate!” She demanded of her car. “I have to go!”

The dinosaur man moved away from the driver’s side of the trunk, to stand behind her car. Crystal looked over her shoulder one way, and then the other to keep him sight.

“I have to go!” She insisted, trying to start her car again.

When the car stayed silent, she slammed her fist on the steering wheel. After this, she gripped the wheel and started shaking it. Crystal became aware of something else, the second she stopped moving. All of her attention was on that ugly man standing behind her car with the lantern. She was only now realizing that another ugly man, who had no lantern, was standing just outside her door.

“No, no, no!” Crystal screamed, shaking the wheel again. “Why won’t you start? Oh, Lord, let this nightmare be over!”

In Crystal’s desperation, she didn’t hear the second man growling at her, his face only inches from her window. She didn’t see his wide mouth open up to show long fangs instead of human teeth. Crystal missed the two thick and scaly arms lunge at her, easily shattering through the glass of the window. Shards flew at her, biting into her face and arms. A short, thick hand with claws grasped her neck, crushing her windpipe to cut off her screams. The second hand clawed at the side of her head, tearing through her soft flesh like paper. The thumb on that second hand snapped her nose, before it pierced into her left eye socket.

Crystal’s lungs clamored for air, but they could no longer find it. Her arms were in a panic to remove the green limbs away, but they were inhumanly strong and wouldn’t budge. Her body convulsed and weakened, as the grip on her throat grew tighter. More soft tissue gave way to those hard claws.

In a few short moments, her body slackened and slumped into the seat.

A vicious hiss sliced through the air, surprising the Erranthan guard so much he released his hold on the human woman. The guard took a nervous step back, scanning the darkness around him for the source of that hiss. That hiss, the guard knew, came from First Apprentice Fass, who was somewhere nearby, in the far end of the chamber. The short mage was difficult to locate in the dim light, and the gray fog that still lingered a few strides behind the strange metal carriage.

“Talek, you are a stupid fool!” The coarse voice snarled, closer this time. “What have you done? Weren’t you just told to keep her alive?”

A powerful wave of air punched at the guard’s middle, knocking him over and winding his breaths. A second wave sent him tumbling away by several strides. As quickly as he could, Talek leapt to his feet, worrying over how much trouble he was in.

“Krayuhl, come here!” Fass ordered. “Heighten the glow on your lantern!”

The guard who was standing behind the metal carriage rounded the vehicle in a hurry. He adjusted the flame to make it brighter, before he held it out near the ruined

window. The short sorcerer actually hovered through the air, peering into the carriage now that he could fully see its interior.

The small mage wasn't sporting a happy countenance, Talek observed. For the most part, the First Apprentice looked like any other person from Erranth. His scaled skin was greenish, not as dark as some or as light as others, but of a middling hue. In general, reptilian skin was thicker on the extremities of head and limbs, and thinner on the chest and abdomen. If a soldier of Erranth wore any armor, it would be placed over those vulnerable spots.

Fass' build was more robust than most, more the build of a working man than a mage who spent his days studying old books. Undoubtedly, some of that brawny form was magically enhanced to give him a bolder appearance. Fass' arms were muscular, and his legs toned as much as a message runner. Unlike most Erranths, Fass had a squared head instead of a rounded one. His eyes were rectangular, large and curious, looking bloodshot as if he'd been to the taverns earlier that day. The bony structure over the small mage's eyes gave him an aggressive, predatory appearance. Fass' nose was short and wide with large flaring nostrils. His broad mouth connected to bony, powerful jaws, making his fangs look that much more dangerous. Erranths did not have true earlobes, only a small cluster of wrinkles around a small orifice.

In this case, the mage had pierced his right earlobe, as was the custom for all magic adepts. The shape of his earring was modeled after the Jaws of Erranth. It was circular with four inwardly curving fangs spaced out evenly. This same symbol was on the Erranthan coat of arms and on military uniforms. Distinguished military personnel were allowed to have the symbol branded onto the first body ridge of their heads.

Fass wore the traditional robe design reserved for First Apprentice. It was colored in dark green and bordered in silver. This placed the short mage several ranks higher than the Minor Sorcerers who wore robes in dark brown, while the Master Sorcerer was a step above in his regal purple and silver. Fass' garment was long and flowing, and the cut stylish in keeping with popular trends. Intricate designs were sewn into the sleeve ends and hem. The robe was drawn at the waist by a leather belt, also trendy.

The mage wore several pieces of jewelry, including a thin, fist-sized emerald held by a silver band around his neck. This was his Soulstone, which allowed him to draw manna faster than through simple magical will. The silver surrounding the emerald was also in the shape of the Jaws of Erranth. Several magical rings adorned his thick fingers. Each had its own unique hue and size, and its own magical purpose. A few leather pouches secured to the mage's belt contained mysterious, but potentially powerful, elements.

The mind of the slow-witted Talek was not the most focused. It began to wander, comparing his average height to that of the diminutive Fass. At the mage's current height of just under three Standard Feet, Talek was nearly twice as tall as Fass. In fact, the guard considered the mage to look more like a young reptilian than a mighty wizard. Talek's random thoughts filled his head. He imagined Fass in a wooden cradle, crying for his mother's teat. That put a smirk in the guard's face. When Talek remembered what Fass was capable of, and what he had done in the past, he pushed those distracting images away.

Perhaps Fass was reading his mind, for the small sorcerer gave him an icy stare. Talek tried to keep his fear from showing, but his body betrayed him. He was shaking.

“You should not have killed the human.” Fass scolded the guard in a hushed tone. “Master Arak will not be pleased with you, and neither am I.” He turned his head aside. “Grugh! If you can hear me, begin lighting all the torches. This experiment is done!”

Halfway across the chamber, the Captain of the Castle Guard barked out the orders. Two sentries exited the chamber, long enough to retrieve torches already lit, before they returned and began their task. The freshly lit torches began devouring away the shadows.

At the sound of approaching voices, Fass craftily turned his attention to the inside of the carriage, and more specifically, to the dead human woman. Under his breath, the mage uttered obscenities at what would undoubtedly be considered a great failure. To Talek, he grumbled, “I should roast you alive for killing her.”

The soldier straightened up anxiously as the others approached. Other soldiers were surrounding the carriage with their swords drawn, now that the experiment was over and the torches were filling the chamber with light. A sub-captain grunted for them to halt at three strides from the carriage. Behind this first group, Grugh was calling out orders to the Castle Guard, who were under his command. All of them, soldiers and guards, had the Jaws of Erranth clearly sewn onto the left side of their tunics, at the level of their chests.

Erranthan military personnel were usually taller than the norm, but the Master Sorcerer towered over them by a head. Arak had increased his height magically, of course. Next to Arak was the King’s Guard Branek, and coming up behind him was Captain Gruhg.

Standing at over six Standard Feet, Arak had to lean over to examine the carriage’s cluttered interior. The dark purple robe he wore swelled with the immensity of his back. His pendant and chain were similar to Fass’s, except his jewel’s color was purple, and the stone was amethyst. Arak’s belt pouches numbered less than those of his apprentice, but these few were reserved for the most potent of elements. Each of the sorcerer’s fingers held an golden rings encrusted with various jewels and script, but these revealed their magic purposes to no one. At the moment, the anger shone heavily in the sorcerer’s face, rivaling the intensity of the brightly lit torches.

Branek impatiently crossed his arms, while Gruhg stepped around the carriage to get a better look at it.

Fass levitated over beside his master, still searching for an excuse to clear that oaf Talek from a decidedly unpleasant fate. The small mage had quick glance at the contents of the carriage, which were disorganized and random, knowing full well that he would have ample time for a thorough inspection later. Fass did note that the woman had dark skin, but not as dark as the elusive Nubians he was somewhat familiar with. The woman missed few meals. Clumsy, stupid Talek had nearly ripped her head off.

Being a carnivore, Fass could not help but salivate at the sight of the raw meat. He reached into the carriage, past the broken window, and grabbed hold of the head and fractured neck. Easily, the mage finished snapping and tearing the head apart. Having already read Arak’s furious expression, Fass slowly drew the head out. He displayed it to all who were present, barely resisting the urge to lick away some of the delicious liquid leaking from the torn neck. Thick drops of blood dripped to the floor below.

“Master Arak’s spell was a success!” Fass announced. “Look! Here is a human brought here from another dimension!” The mage’s triumphant countenance turned to one of concern right after. “Unfortunately, the human made a sudden movement. The

soldier nearest to her mistook this movement for the brandishing of a weapon. The soldier reacted too quickly, killing the human.”

Suspicious, Arak shifted his attention to Talek. The sorcerer attempted to pry into the man’s thoughts, but the combination of Talek’s weak brain and the excited, random thoughts of the others around him resulted in a confused babble. The only other soldier who had been near enough to witness the incident was Krayuhl. Arak read his mind quickly, too quickly even for Fass to notice.

“I see no weapon!” Branek declared, striding closer to gaze into the carriage for himself. “What weapon?”

“There was no weapon.” Fass replied. “But the important matter is that this carriage was summoned from elsewhere, and a human driver came with it! Who has ever heard of a metal carriage? Surely there is the possibility that a weapon may be found following another experiment!”

“There is no weapon.” Branek argued. “That results are not what we were told they would be. That is the report I will give to the king.”

“That is a premature conclusion.” Arak stated. “An extensive examination of this carriage and its contents must be conducted straight away. Any conclusions made this early are premature.”

“Clearly, this carriage is not from our history!” Fass pointed out, also attempting to dissuade the King’s Guard from giving a negative report. “Will you look at the frame? It is constructed entirely of metal! The car propelled itself with no horse attached to the front of it! Who has seen anything like this?”

“It moved quickly.” Gruhg spoke up, as eager as anyone to add something to the conversation.

“A Nubian in a carriage, and you think you have conjured up a great thing?” Branek scowled at Arak. “We have war plans to worry about. The king has no time for magic spells and fruitless exhibitions! I will advise our king to forget about this so-called Great Experiment, and to focus his energies on matters of importance!”

Arak felt his temper rising. “I have had no time to prepare an adequate presentation to our king. There may indeed be a weapon here, although you and your feeble mind are failing to recognize it!”

The Master Sorcerer and the King’s Guard glared at each other. This caused the nearby soldiers to take a wide step back and away from them. There was not telling what sort of violence would erupt if either man’s temper exploded. Fass hovered forward, between the two strong personalities. Attempting to break up the tension, he held out the severed head.

Arak paused to view it, before he returned his angry eyes toward Branek. When he spoke, he was speaking to his apprentice. “She is no use to me unless she is alive. I must cast the spell again, but at a later time. I must modify it’s structure first.”

“What later time?” Branek spat out, before storming away. “There will be no later time! I will personally see to that!”

“Fass, record as much information regarding this carriage as you can, no matter how irrelevant it might seem.” Arak instructed. “It seems I must seek an immediate audience with King Lehnorack, before this pig-headed imbecile ruins my plans!”

“What about the woman?” Fass asked. “What of her?”

“She is nothing but an ordinary human female.” Arak huffed. “Dispose of her.”

(November 18, 2018, 7:50 PM. My novel is at 13 pages and 7700 words. That's not bad for 3 part-time nights. It puts me at 7% complete, instead of the 3% minimum I'm pacing myself at. If any of you are following me so far, how about sending me an e-mail with a comment, criticism or word of encouragement? If you do, I will give you a shout out here on my project notes. For music, I am playing The Game Of Thrones Symphonic Soundtrack, released in 2017. Start time: 7:54 PM. I removed a big chunk of clutter, including details of Fass analyzing a modern car and the fate of Crystal's son Jeffrey, as they weren't really necessary. Actually, I am finding a lot of extra paragraphs that don't really add to the forward movement of the plot. I'm erasing a lot of them. End time: 11:00 PM.)

The sorcerer turned so abruptly his majestic robe whirled around him in trying to catch up. Hardly had he taken a full stride, when he looked over his shoulder. "Captain Gruhg, see to it that Talek is assigned to stable duties. He will remain there until further notice."

"As you say." The Captain replied.

Arak departed the chamber quickly, nearly colliding with a minor sorcerer as he went through the doorway Branek had just opened up. The minor sorcerer shrank out of his path, waiting until Arak had gone down the corridor before he ventured into the chamber. This mage was Bizelle, a close associate of Fass from when they had trained in magic together. He stood there dumbfounded for a moment, not sure if he should enter any further.

"Approach me." Fass called out.

While the short mage waited, he peered into the carriage's broken window. With a bit of morbid humor in mind, he dropped the dead woman's head into her lap. Next, he withdrew and set his resentful eyes on Talek. The soldier avoided his gaze by looking elsewhere.

"Your ink quill and writing scrolls, First Apprentice." Bizelle announced, when he was near to Fass' side. The items, plus an inkpot, were in his hands. "Excuse my tardiness. I did not find them in your chamber."

Fass pointed an accusing finger at his friend. "I did not leave them in my chamber. I said they would be found in my nook in the Discernment Library. If my writing tools were in my chamber, I would have simply whisked them away from there, and directly into my hands. As you well know, magic is prohibited in the library, because any magic sensed there is treated as an attack from the enemies of Erranth. I am sure the last place you looked was the first place I told you to look."

Bizelle's worried look confirmed the suspicions of Fass. The short mage was peeved but not angry. Half of his people were like that. They had to be taught how to think, as they did not think rationally or even intelligently most of the time. Instead, the majority of Erranthan thought in simple, straight lines, with Bizelle assuming that Fass' writing materials would be kept exactly as Bizelle would keep them. It was a both a shortcoming and a disadvantage.

"Cast it off for now." Fass grumbled. "Write notes for me, with a new scroll for each heading. Can you do that much?" When Bizelle agreed, the mage looked to the Captain. "Gruhg, I am certain there are other duties for these men."

“Especially for Talek.” Gruhg sneered, before barking out new orders. “Trayuhl, you will remain behind.”

The soldiers organized themselves into squads and efficiently marched out.

“Trayuhl is one of my best.” Gruhg boasted. “Very intuitive.”

Fass ignored the older man, motioning to Bizelle. “The heading for the first page is Outside Of Carriage. Keep up!” He turned to view the car. “This carriage may be a weapon in itself. It is crafted of metal and can move at great speeds, as fast as a horse perhaps. I wonder if it has a function as a battering ram.”

“Not very effective against walls.” Gruhg commented, examining the damage to the front end. “Would that mean the driver is a woman soldier?”

Fass considered that. “Not likely. She was screaming more than trying to fight against us. She screamed in panic, not anger.”

“A poor woman, then?” Gruhg wondered.

“How so?”

“She drove her own carriage. What human woman drives her own carriage, and especially one as fat as a sow like this one?”

“Poor humans are skinny to the bones.” Fass countered. “Merchants’ daughters, they can grow big and fat.”

“This is true.” Gruhg agreed. “But the daughters of rich humans have their servants drive carriages for them.”

This was going to be harder than he first thought, Fass realized. That’s why it was a good thing to have Grugh around. That man could think!

“Bizelle,” Fass decided. “Write down the suspicions of Grugh as well as mine. Be sure to note his name beside his guesses, in the case he discovers a thing that I miss. I will be sure to credit him in a proper manner.”

The idea of being rewarded brought a grin to the Captain’s face.

That’s how they were kept loyal, Fass knew.

Friday afternoon; the warm breeze was blowing, gently displacing loose leaves and bits of discarded paper, allowing them to ride on its coattails before landing them a short distance away. The wind would die out shortly, to be replaced by cool evening. That’s how it usually went this time of year in Southeast San Diego. It was early spring, when the warm weather was trying to anchor itself, while the cold from the mild winter resisted it until the very last moment.

The intersection at National Avenue and 43<sup>rd</sup> was a busy one. The four-way crossing connected the small neighborhood of Stoner Town to the Interstate 805 going southeast, and to National City going south. Thousands of vehicles stopped at those traffic lights each and every day. Pedestrian traffic was much lighter, with people migrating to the few local grocery stores, fast food diners, and the odd business such as the bail bonds and the beauty salon. On a Friday afternoon, most people were already out of their homes and doing stuff, or getting ready to do stuff once the sun went down. Others who weren’t so lucky didn’t have a choice; because they were stuck.

Rex was one of those unfortunates. That wasn’t his real name, but his tagger tag. Rex was a long and lanky Hispanic teen, with hair down to his shoulders that he usually knotted at the back. The reason he was thinking of 43<sup>rd</sup> and National was because he was hungry for a chunky burrito with diced beef and guacamole, and his favorite taco shop

was on 43<sup>rd</sup>. He wished he was there right now, instead of wasting his life away in the Summit Continuing Education Center on 36<sup>th</sup>.

He was in a small classroom, in a building that only had two stories and eight total classrooms. The chalkboard up front was a small one, but it wasn't small enough that the name of the school for troubled youth wasn't written up top. Rex scanned the teacher behind his desk, and next the chairs around him. Only eight were occupied, with regular school rejects like him.

Even the chair Rex sat on was uncomfortable. It was bright orange, and one size fits all. Those were never accommodating to his tall frame at 5' 10". Rex was tall for being only seventeen, taking after his even taller father. His hair was black, and his face a couple of shades too pale to be considered vibrantly healthy. Rex was trying to grow a mustache so he could look older, but so far it was only peach fuzz. His clothes were the usual: a baggy shirt and even baggier pants, trendy for taggers. His feet were covered by something a bit more lethal; steel-toe work boots. That was a precaution just in case he ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To the right of Rex sat his buddy John, a.k.a. Merlin. John was a fellow tagger, obviously, as he dressed in the same style. He was about average height at 5' 7" with a slim build and a face handsome enough to catch a girl's attention. If John combed his hair and wore glasses, he could look like a straight nerd. That kid hated high school as much as Rex did, but he didn't go through as many pains to show it. He'd only taken the name Merlin a few days before, after the Stoner Town Dukes gang crossed out his old tag of Reck.

David was sitting way across the room, by himself, after getting caught one too many times talking in class. He'd been in there for about three weeks by then. At first, David had been excited about joining up with Rex and Merlin's tagging crew, but he kept making excuses when Rex said they were going out. Screw that kid, Rex thought.

The young man shifted his attention to the front of class. Lupe and Angela sat up there, smiling and acting interested so the teacher wouldn't fail them. Lupe with her wavy brown hair, her piercing black eyes and her big ole butt. One day, Rex mused, she would give in to his advances. They always did.

Angela was the black chick who'd transferred over from Morris High, after beating the crap out of some other girl. She was pretty, and curvy, but so far she'd spurned every attempt Merlin made to seduce her.

The rest of the class wasn't worth mentioning. Okay, they were gang members: two from Stoner Town and one from Langley Heights. Gang members didn't like taggers, but they liked rival gang members even less. As long as Rex and Merlin didn't get into their crosshairs, let the world go 'round.

Rex rested his head on the wood desktop. He hadn't slept much the previous night because his mother had kept the radio on too late. Rex's mother and her boyfriend of the month always drank late, or at least they drank until they couldn't afford more alcohol.

The next time he looked up, it was only to check the time. Half an hour, he noted, half an hour and he'd be out of that classroom and eagerly running to the weekend. That was the good news. The bad news was that this would be the longest half hour of the entire week.

Merlin squeaked at him. That was Merlin's way of getting his attention, by sucking air through his teeth to make that squeaking noise. The first time, Rex didn't care to look

over. The second time, he figured he'd better or else Merlin would keep doing it and irritate him. "What?"

"Take a look." Merlin shoved a notebook at him.

Reluctantly, Rex propped his upper half up on his elbows. He slid the notebook under them, finding nothing on that page but scribbles. "Yeah?"

"Last page, log head."

Rex yawned as he shifted the pages around. Merlin had drawn out their crew name's initials: RTD. That stood for Roll Them Dice, or Rolling The Dice, but it could also stand for a number of other things. Rex liked keeping the initials steady, while changing the words around so he could make the name stand for almost anything.

It was a good piece of graffiti, Rex determined as he appraised the work. Merlin had taken up nearly the entire page, paying close attention to the letter shapes, the shading and how he'd colored it all in. With a single pencil, that gifted kid could create half a dozen different shades.

"That's what you've been working on all day?" He whispered.

Merlin nodded back.

"It's sick." Rex approved, right before he plopped his head down on his arms. The teacher was talking about cutting a stupid pie into pieces, or fractions. He didn't want to think about stupid fractions with less than half an hour to go.

"We going out tonight?" Merlin asked.

"I am." Rex decided. He noticed that Lupe and Angela looked as bored as he was. "You?"

"Yeah." Merlin nodded. "What about David?"

"How we doing on spray paint?"

"Two cans. One black, one blue. The blue one is half gone. I don't have any tips for them."

Tips were getting hard to come by. Most hardware stores that sold spray paint would take the tips off the cans, knowing taggers would come by to steal them.

"Don't worry about tips." Rex said.

"Bombing run?"

Rex thought that over. Most times, they would go to a place they were familiar with and spray it up. They knew the ins and outs of such hangouts, in case the cops or some other threat showed up. A bombing run, on the other hand, meant they were going out of their comfort zone. The tradeoff was that they put up their best tags when they were close to home, and they'd leave behind sloppier tags elsewhere, but they were getting their crew name out there where more people could see it.

"Bombing run." He nodded.

"Mr. Clemente?" The teacher called on him.

Rex frowned.

"Since you feel it's okay to talk in class, you must know everything there is to know about fractions. Would you care to explain how you got the solution to problem five?"

Rex had his math book open. When he scanned down the page, he didn't find any problem five. Damn, he thought. Every pair of eyes was on him, from the two chicks up front to the gangsters sitting in back. He hated being the center of attention like that, when he was on the spot.

Rex decided to undo the knot of hair at the back of his head. His hair fell forward to cover most of his face. The maneuver caused the two girls to start giggling.

“I can explain number five.” Merlin raised his hand.

“Why don’t you show us on the chalkboard?” The teacher asked. “Enrique, you’ll be staying after class today. We need to talk about your lack of attention in class.”

The teacher could have beaten him on the head with a stick, and it wouldn’t have been as bad as Rex having to stay after class. Yeah, he was going to be there for a while, long after everybody else was gone.

First Apprentice Fass very carefully observed the arm movements his master was making. For a lesser mage, this scrutiny was tedious, even boring, but lesser mages did not have the same ambition as Fass. Over the last few hours, Arak had repeated the same actions over and over. By this time, Fass had no doubt that even the two soldiers at the chamber door could have replicated the movements. The Master Sorcerer’s arms were moving slower now, due to fatigue most likely, as drawing and concentrating magic took its toll on one’s muscles. The laggard pace allowed Fass to read his master’s mind more clearly, so he could understand the changes Arak was making to the wording of the chant.

The short apprentice took his eyes away from his writing tablet, for a moment scanning the courtyard around them. Instead of the underground chamber they had used the last time, they were above ground, in a space usually reserved for fighting instruction. This yard measured twenty strides by forty. Ten-foot walls were built on the perimeter, with narrow walkways for overseers to stand and watch their pupils in practice. Earlier that morning, the training equipment had been removed and the space turned over for the sorcerer’s use.

Despite the scorn from King’s Guard Branek, King Lehnorack was impressed with the summoning of the ugly metal carriage, and with the revelation that some unknown, new type of magic propelled it. It was enough that the Great Experiment was allowed to continue. Only six soldiers were granted to the mages this time; all of them were up on the walkways, in the case another carriage appeared and tried to run them over. Only Fass and Arak were on the ground, and only Arak was seen weaving his spell.

This time, the experiment would take place outdoors, and in broad daylight. The element of surprise would be greatly diminished, without any darkness to hide the men. In the case a threatening carriage did come through, two Tyer bulls were waiting behind the doors. Those large, strong animals could pressure through walls, or pull trees out of the ground. The hope was that they could halt a speeding carriage in the same way.

Minor sorcerers Bizelle and Minos were also standing up there, on the walkway. This gave Arak and Fass two additional wizards to counter any hazardous arrivals from beyond the fog.

(November 19, 2018, 8:00 PM. I am reworking some of the back-story to match the Savage Lands novels, regarding the kingdom of Atronia. Tonight, I’m listening to The Lord Of The Rings symphony soundtrack. End time: 11:00 PM.)

In order to maintain the utmost secrecy, Arak had already cast a simple mirror spell over the enclosed courtyard. Any prying eyes flying overhead would see only the blue sky and their reflections. Unfortunately, the spell did nothing to diminish the effects of

the warm sun. It should be noted that the reptilians of Erranth were most comfortable in cooler, damp places.

With Arak busy contemplating the many potentialities of his spell, including what might result if one word were to be replaced by another, similar word, Fass had little to keep him occupied. The short mage rummaged through the events of the recent past, and how these events had brought him to his present place. Not too long ago, he had been a mere minor sorcerer, albeit an exceptionally skilled one. His accomplishments were all the more noteworthy considering he had been born into a peasant family.

The former Master Sorcerer of Erranth, Kellorr, had always been a recluse. The old reptilian's favorite hobby was the study of old folklore and its origins. Every so often, Kellorr would be seen in the Alchemist's Wing of the Halls of Mystical Discernment, digging out some obscure, ancient manuscript for study. One of these tomes went back many centuries, and perhaps as far back as over a thousand years ago. It was written in an early version of the Common Tongue, claiming to be from before the Dawn Of Creatures. The land of Atronia, the volume stated, was a land of little magic, where humans from various races put together the knowledge of their entire world. Their world had an archaic name to it, even back then. The original name was lost, but in the Common Tongue it was called Grond, and later became Grond. A grand complex was built for the gods, with great temples and civic buildings. Within this complex was found that library, with all that was known in that long gone era.

The gods of that world, of Early Grond, decided to increase the amount of magic available to humans. Then the gods became jealous of one another, and so did the humans who worshiped them, so that in the end great wars were fought and the world was turned upside down. The greatest blasphemy against the gods occurred when humans caused the natural creatures of the world to be reformed into the shapes of men. The idea was so absurd that no sane Erranthan would believe it.

Master Sorcerer Kellorr was no sane man. He financed and organized an expedition that traveled north for four months, out of the Erranthan tropical zone and to temperate climates. There were many dangers, from creatures unimaginable, that reduced the mage's traveling party to one-fourth its original number. But Kellorr claimed he had found ruins, ruins that must be those of Atronia, that long forgotten place. He found no library, and no tomes of knowledge, but he did find mysterious clues. Here, he said, is where the gods incarnated as humans and walked the earth. Here, their lavish temples once stood, now only broken fragments of cement and marble.

When Kellorr returned, he brought with him rusted weapons of iron, bits of stone with faded inscriptions, and a few items of magic that had been hidden away in a pocket of magic. The items were fascinating to ponder over. A leather glove fit for human hands, that could crush anything. A bowl of copper covered on the outside with strange writing that had still not been deciphered. Strange, small metal balls were found, the size of a round egg, but no one could guess what metal they were made from, or what they were once used for.

Painstakingly, Kellorr worked to decipher his clues. The ancients had found a way to open dimensions, he believed, to open rifts to other worlds that were set in layers over, under and parallel to Grond. Kellorr hid himself away, conducting secret experiments, without the knowledge or permission of the royal seat.

King Lehnorack had an assortment of supernatural, magical venues at his disposal. As Kellorr's behavior became more erratic, and his absences more frequent, the king employed his mystical tools to spy on the sorcerer. Before long, the tools revealed that Kellorr would draw vast amounts of mana to his lair, potent enough to burn cities or cause mountains to crumble into dust. Lehnorack had Kellorr brought before him, and he demanded to know what the sorcerer was setting in motion.

"I am near to opening a door to another world!" Kellorr raved.

"For what purpose?" The king ordered.

"Why, to see what there is to see! To spy upon the gods, even as they spy upon us! To find out the secrets of the gods, and to use those secrets against them! We will have the gods dancing to our tune, the way they have us dancing for them, ever since the beginning of Creation!"

In his quest to find forbidden knowledge, Kellorr had driven himself insane. King Lehnorack, however, saw other possibilities.

"You will continue your research, but with another purpose." The king commanded. "You will reach into these hidden worlds, and you will take from them! Bring me their weapons, Kellorr! Bring me their knowledge of war! I will use it to bring the enemies of Erranth to their knees!"

Kellorr refused. He claimed that taking objects from other worlds would upset a cosmic balance of some sort. His intentions were to open a window to see through, while the king wanted a door for his soldiers to run into. Another world might suddenly flood into Grond, the sorcerer warned, or Grond might flood away and into another place. Great cataclysms might start up; the world might end, if they tampered with reality without taking the greatest precautions.

"You will continue!" Lehnorack ordered. "Or I will have you executed!"

Kellorr vanished from the king's presence. He used magic to whisk his body into his chambers, where he gathered as much as he could of the ancient knowledge. Before he fled the castle grounds, he cast a trap spell around his created portal, his rift. Any person who tampered with his portal would receive a fatal shock of lightning. As Kellorr went to gather mages loyal to him, to return to Atronia, King Lehnorack gathered other mages to go against him.

Nearly a third of the mages of Erranth sided with Kellorr. They were the old guard, the traditionalists who taught the novices and refined their craft. The remainder, those who were loyal to Erranth and the royal seat, were mainly the younger students, many of who were ready to set aside the old ways, ready to explore new and innovative methods, rather than repeating what was already known and established. Before, there was constant friction between the old guard and the new breed, but at the king's decree, that friction had turned into open war. Battles of magic erupted both within the castle's walls, and in the area surrounding them. Soon, the conflict spread to the outlying territories, bringing even more sorcerers into the fray.

Then came the Upheaval Of Kellorr, when the Master Sorcerer, hampered in his efforts to leave the kingdom, turned his full anger toward Castle Erranth and its powerful king. Lehnorack refused to abandon his throne to these rebels, and he endured the losses of many of his officers and wizards of the highest ranks. The castle was nearly shaken to the earth, when the call went out ordering all minor sorcerers to defend it. Arak was sent to the front lines, where he would face Kellorr and most powerful magicians. Fass, by

contrast, was assigned to the outlying territories, to prevent other mages from joining the rebel faction, and to keep their communications and forces split apart. Fass had seen a good amount of magical fighting out there, but nothing like what had occurred closer to Castle Erranth.

The First Apprentice had not been present when Kellorr released the Four Demons upon the castle, but he had seen their destructive wake soon after. The Ice Demon, Efrezio, had walked the streets to the north of the battlements, using his power over cold and ice to freeze and destroy reptilians and their structures. The minor sorcerers standing against that demon had no defense against a creature made entirely of magic. They could do nothing to stop the demon, only to batter it in their feeble efforts to keep it from entering the castle grounds.

Inside the castle, other mages mounted a defense against Kellorr and his small army, a clash that ultimately decimated both sides. The Master Sorcerer tried to teleport into the castle, to assassinate the king, but Arak had set a magical trap for him. When Kellorr materialized in the king's hall, a strong magic repelled him, hurtling the sorcerer into the floors below the castle and also robbing him of mana. Arak and two other mages went to finish Kellorr, but he was not without his tricks. Kellorr summoned Yamas, the Fire Demon, to destroy his pursuers. Those fighting at the side of Arak perished. Somehow, incredibly, Arak convinced the demon to turn against its master. With Kellorr dead, the resistance against the king rapidly diminished and was destroyed.

As the last few pockets of the rebellion were quenched, Fass had desperately tried to make a strong impression on his superiors. Alas, his endeavors had come too late. When the dust cleared, it was Arak who had been honored as a hero, and promoted by the king to become the new Master Sorcerer. Fass suspected that Arak's quick rise had more to do with the king wanting his weapons from other worlds, and to exploit their knowledge, than it did with Arak's up until then largely unremarkable achievements.

The real surprise came later, when Arak publicly named Fass as First Apprentice. Due to their contrasting economic backgrounds. Arak and Fass had never been more than classmates at the school of magic. For Fass to be named to the second highest post for sorcerers was completely unexpected. The established order had balked at his nomination at first, but Arak had only to point at how meager the ranks were to quiet them. He needed an apprentice, Arak argued, and he had chosen one.

Fass liked to think that he was selected solely for his adeptness in magic, but he wasn't naive. There was no doubt that he was the best qualified from among the minor sorcerers of humble backgrounds, but there were a few other sons of nobles who could have easily been selected instead of him, and with much less criticism. The real reason he was First Apprentice, he figured, was because very few minor sorcerers from noble lineages still remained. Had Arak chosen a well to do sort, resentment would have surfaced among the rest, causing a new friction between the wealthy and the poor mages. It was simple numbers; more poor mages were still around. If they wanted to force the issue through war, it was likely their side would have won over the sons of the nobles, and Fass would have been in a good spot to become their leader. Arak chose him because Arak was not a fool.

The short mage's attention came back to the Master Sorcerer. Fass caught another change in the wording of the scroll, through the telepathic link he shared with Arak. He jotted the adjustment down on his scroll. Arak had made over a dozen alterations in just

this last hour. They weren't drastic changes, by any means, only minor details such as replacing the word 'war' with the word 'battle' or 'armed conflict.'

A short while later, Arak lowered his arms to his sides. He was obviously frustrated with his disappointing results. The weary sorcerer lowered his chin and began a slow walk toward where his apprentice and the castle guard captain were standing.

"Page, bring water, quickly!" Gruhg shouted, sending a subordinate off at a run.

The errand runner was the newly promoted Vouhl. The reptilian youth, whom Gruhg had apparently taken a liking to, hurried over to fetch a bucket. The water was tepid, but it had been kept in the shade. Arak drank from a deep-bowled spoon, twice, before he signaled to the soldiers that he was done with his spell-casting.

"Master Arak," Gruhg started. "Do you wish for the soldiers to rest for a time, or should I return them to their duties?"

"A short rest." Arak replied. "Give them water. I haven't decided if I will continue or end it for the day."

Gruhg barked his orders, before sending Vouhl off with the water bucket.

"I cannot understand it." Arak confided to his apprentice. "The spell is not in any way consistent. When an object comes through, it is only rubbish. How many times have I cast it today?"

"Dozens, master." Fass answered. "If you ask, I will count the times I've noted on my scrolls."

Arak scoffed. "Better that I not know. If I had guessed that I would be casting this same accursed spell a thousand times today, I would not have been carrying rocks and logs all day yesterday. Tell me of the items that were produced so far."

"Nine items, master." The short mage informed. "A plant in a pot that is not natural, but it has the appearance of being natural. A large, rounded container of metal with a lid that contained several old scraps of food, thin paper and other objects we could not identify. A bottle of glass, a piece of fluffy material that is not a sponge, and the only living creature so far, a black cat with a white underbelly..."

"What is their connection to the spell?" Arak cut him off.

"I can only guess." Fass admitted. "When the cat appeared, you used the phrase 'stealthy predator.' The bottle of glass that reeked of alcohol, the phrase for that was 'powerful potion.' And for the metal container you said 'protective barrier.' Should I go on, master?"

"That is enough." Arak replied. "I cannot help but suspect that the Common Tongue will not work outside of our world. In this world, the words I use and their meanings are clear. Outside of Grond, perhaps they mean something else. Do you have any other suggestions I might implement into the spell?"

"None that I haven't mentioned already." Fass said. "Could the experiment have been compromised somehow? Perhaps there is a mechanism present, that is twisting the meaning of your words into focusing on harmless objects?"

Since Gruhg was usually included in their conversations, he patiently waited until Arak dismissed his apprentice's idea. "I have a theory. Do you recall the metal carriage that was summoned two nights ago? A human drove it. These items you've been getting today, in my opinion they are for human use. Perhaps, in this new dimension, as was suggested by Kellorr's interpretation, the dominant species from this new world is indeed the human."

“There must be another dominant species in the new world, beside the human.” Arak presumed. “The last thing I wish to present to King Lehnorack is a circus of humans!”

“The bottle of alcohol has a human figure on its label.” Grugh reminded him. “And the papers in that metal container have images of humans. Ask Fass if this isn’t so.”

“All I can say with certainty is that I can sense no magic on any of the items that have been retrieved so far.” Fass related. “Not even the faintest trace!”

“It’s true.” Arak made a frown. “For most of today, I have been seeking items with some amount of magical resonance.”

“If my logic holds true, there is no magic in your new world.” Grugh reasoned. “Your spell has nothing it can attach itself to!”

“A world with no magic?” Fass asked. “Absurd! What would be keeping that world intact, if not magic? I say there is plenty of magic, but we don’t know what language it speaks yet.”

“Don’t reject the theory too quickly.” Arak cautioned. “Perhaps Grugh is correct. If we assume that only humans populate the new world, I must adjust my spell. Instead of seeking out a magical weapon of destruction, I should alter the wording to human weapon of destruction. Even a simple change as that could make a difference. I will try again.”

Before returning to the center of the courtyard, Arak scanned the grounds. Grugh ordered the soldiers to return to their posts, before he, Fass and the young page returned to their place by the courtyard entrance. In short order, all was ready.

(November 20, 2018, 7:40 PM. First off, I am going to delete all the italicized stuff in my old notes. I’ve already included the most relevant portions into the rough draft, so I don’t need that anymore. 7:46 PM - Finished. My page count dropped from 137 to 114 as a result. Now, I am opening up my story document. I’m at 22 pages and 13,000 words. That means this novel is already 13% complete. I’m listening to The Lords Of The Rings 1 soundtrack, which is different from the symphony version I had on previously. I am about ready to start writing now. Start time: 7:49 PM. End time: 11:25 PM.)

The sorcerer ignored the heat of the midday sun, as his mirror spell did nothing at all to deflect it. He lifted his weary arms, stretching his fingers out, clamping them together into a fist, and spreading them once more. Instead of imagining the words in his mind, and in the mystery language spoken by the Erranthan mages, he mouthed the words out loud in the Common Tongue. Humans originally created this language as a means to facilitate commerce.

“For the glory and power of Erranth. Hear my petition, o ancient gods of Creation. As I reach into the deepest and darkest corners of this rift between worlds, I cloak myself with manna, to shield my self from the sight of other mystics and any attacks of magic. If by chance I fall into a mystical snare, let the manna go before me to take the brunt of it, that I might pull away without danger or injury. With my physical hands, I reach, and at the same time I reach with magical hands. Past the boundaries of this world, of this dimension, my magical hands will travel.

“The place I seek is called Kellorr’s Finding. This place once allowed Kellorr to peer into other worlds, but now I am expanding that place to allow what I seek to come through to where I stand. There is a land to the other side, a land with little magic in it.

From this land with little magic, I am seeking an object, a physical, solid object that is used in human conflict. I command that the object appear before me now. Once it has materialized fully, I also command my mystical hold on Kellorr's Finding to release itself, in such a way that my manna will become dispersed and no other mage might follow my tracks back to where I stand."

Several strides behind the sorcerer, an eager Captain Grugh leaned over to speak to the First Apprentice. "Is the spell working this time?"

Only Fass with his mental link to Arak could hear the actual words. "Very soon, we will find that out."

As the Master Sorcerer recited the spell, the great cloud of gray fog had formed before him. It pulsed as if it were a living thing. The soldiers watching from the upper walkways readied for action, as this was the largest they'd seen of that cloud all day. Even Arak drew back from the cloud, worrying that it might reach out for him, and suck him into that hole between worlds he'd just opened up. The thick gray glob hovered a few feet from the warm grass below it. Abruptly, it darkened and started to sag lower, as would a cloud pregnant with rain. Like a bursting womb, cargo from another world began to belch out of it...

It was late evening in Southeast San Diego. In one corner of the neighborhood, a young man who tagged under the name Rex was trying to round up his crew to head out on a bombing run. At the same time, only a couple of miles away on Ocean View Blvd., other events that in the category of human conflict were taking place. In fact, things were about to take a turn for the worse.

The predatory night had just devoured away the last of the sun's brilliance, and as was the custom, the nightwalkers were beginning to crawl out of their holes. They were the drunks, the drug dealers and drug users, the unruly pimps and the scabby whores of Stoner Town. Bums pushing rattling shopping carts were seen more often than cops in their warm cruisers. Nowhere was this wretchedness more evident than along the stretch of Ocean View between 36<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> Streets.

The two liquor stores in that three-block span thrived on Friday nights. Oh, sure, people complained over how the managers jacked up the prices, but that didn't stop them from dipping into the alcohol coolers by the dozens. Johnny's Liquor was a tiny store with two merchandise-crowded aisles about thirty feet long, and a high counter that prevented clerks from seeing what went on in the aisle furthest away, even with their security camera looming overhead. Johnny's was a good place for people with sticky hands, and worse.

At that moment, loitering near the bus stop across the street were two black men with guns in their pockets. The older man, in his early thirties, was keeping his eye on the liquor store's entrance. The young man was looking down the street at a police car that was out doing the rounds.

"I think they're leaving." The younger man said.

"Of course they're leaving." The older man, named Bryan, tried to calm him down. "They've got no reason to be hanging around here, unless we give them one. Just do like I told you. Pretend we're waiting for the bus, and tell me when they're out of sight."

As casual as could be, Bryan was leaning back on a neighbor's wall with his arms crossed. He had on a grungy black cap, a brown overcoat and jeans. To give off the ruse that they were part of the rabble, he carried a paper bag with a bottle of beer in it.

His partner's name was Moses, and he'd never hit a store before. He was barely twenty, and unlike Bryan who'd been locked up twice for burglary, Moses had never seen the inside of a police car yet. Moses looked more like a student from the local junior college than an armed robber, with his striped shirt, nice jeans and white sneakers.

"They're almost gone." Moses said. "Straight down Ocean View."

"Like I told you." Bryan reiterated. "If they take the bridge, they'll be in Langley Heights in a couple of minutes. We'll have enough time to ghost out of here before they can turn around and come back. You want a drink?"

Moses glanced at the offered bottle. "Naw, that's all right."

Bryan was the shorter of the two, but he had a good build on him thanks to his jail time. Moses, on the other hand, was long and lanky. His nose was a trifle too big for him to be seen as handsome, and his ears were even worse.

"Tell me the plan again." Moses requested.

"Again? It's not that fucking hard, man. We put our masks on and go into the store. I'll grab the cash from the till, and you stay by the door and keep people out. You want to write that down or what?"

"What if something goes wrong? Is there a back door?"

"The fuck are you smoking? You've been in there before, stupid-ass. That liquor store is about as big as a fucking closet! It's too small for anything to go wrong, as long as you do like I told you!"

"And you're sure they have mad cash?"

"For that last hour, people have been going in and out like a revolving door. You think those poor mother-fuckers are paying with credit cards?"

"No." Moses answered.

"Just shut your fucking face. You don't know nothing."

The truth was that Moses hardly even knew Bryan. The older man had just gotten out the joint, and one of the first things he did was to approach the younger men at the park, looking for a way to get a fast payday so he could score some drugs. About the only thing Moses was sure of was that Bryan was a fellow Blood 'banger from Stoner Town.

"You'd better not wimp out on me." Bryan growled. "You'd better be ready to pull the trigger if shit goes down."

"I'm not backing out of anything!"

"All right." Bryan nodded back. "That cop car is gone, and there's only two people in the store right now, besides the two punks behind the counter. Let's go handle this."

Moses took in a deep breath.

"Man, let's go before you piss your pants." Bryan huffed. He set his beer bottle down next to the wall. "I'll get this later."

They hadn't done anything, and Bryan was already acting like he was bragging.

With Bryan a few feet ahead, the two men trotted across the street. Moses lagged just long enough that a car had to slow down for him.

"Come on!" Bryan hurried him.

Everything sped up in Moses' mind. He pulled his ski mask over his head. Next, Moses saw the sidewalk and the front of the store, and then he was heading inside, when Bryan shoved him back.

"Stay here!" Bryan shouted at him, before he went around the single aisle and pointed his gun at the two clerks. "Y'all know why I'm here, so give it up and I won't have to blast nobody!"

Two Mexicans were standing at the far end of the aisle. One of them was holding a box of beer in his hands, when they both turned and saw Bryan masked and holding a gun. Both men looked straight for the door, spotting the accomplice standing in the way. For a moment, Moses fumbled to get his gun out. When he pointed it, the Mexicans knew enough to get down on the floor. He didn't have to say anything.

Bryan was still threatening the clerks. "You got something behind the counter? You got a gun back there? Go ahead and pull it out! Let's see who can pull the trigger faster! I ain't fucking around here!"

"Here, here, take it!" The more frightened of the clerks opened up the cash register. He backed up against the liquor shelves behind him and kept his hands up.

"Put that shit in a bag!" Bryan ordered.

The second clerk wasn't as rattled. He pointed at the masked Bryan. "I know you! You came in here an hour ago to buy smokes!"

The first thing that came to Moses' mind was the surveillance camera. Bryan and that clerk must have been thinking about the same thing.

Moses shook when he heard the first shot. Real time was moving as fast speed already, but now reality became a blur. Bryan was shooting and clawing money out of the cash register. The timid clerk was screaming in panic, and then he was screaming because he'd been shot. Moses kept his gun pointed at the cowering Mexicans, until Bryan came charging around the corner and crashed into him.

"Let's go!" Bryan shouted.

Moses visualized blood and gore, and also death with black wings. What had started off as a simple robbery had rotted into something much worse. He was pushing away from the cooler with his hand, the cooler with all the milk and juices stacked back in neat little rows. Fingerprints, he realized, he was leaving them on the glass door, but by then his legs were propelling him out of the store, and Bryan was way ahead of him.

"We just killed somebody!" Moses cried out, not at Bryan or the clerks, or even the Mexicans he'd been menacing. "We weren't supposed to kill anybody!"

Where was Bryan, Moses wondered. He was gone, that's what! He was gone down the street and Moses was lagging behind and would probably get caught by the cops! He had to run and hide, before the cops came, before the witnesses could tell the cops what he was wearing and what he looked like.

The blur before his eyes was still there, but it had turned gray. It looked like fog was trying to sneak into the store. Maybe the cops were there already, and had fired some kind of smoke or tear gas to flush him out, so they could arrest him and take him away. The only chance Moses had was to keep running, and maybe in that gray fog he could lose them and leave them back. With his gun still in hand, Moses ran right into it.

In general, Rex didn't have a whole lot of patience. He was pacing back and forth in a dark alley, when he could have been tagging up some choice spots already. Knowing

that he was waiting for his best friend Merlin didn't ease his irritation; it compounded it. Why couldn't Merlin just toss on a shirt and pants like everybody else?

"Get the hell out of your house, fool!" Rex growled into his friend's backyard. "Before I throw a fucking rock through your window!"

Rex wore dark clothing, and he hoped Merlin would too, or else he was making his friend go back inside to change. He would have started tagging already, but all he had was three good tips. Merlin was the one holding the spray cans.

"R.T.D.!" A new voice called out.

Rex spotted somebody else from the crew. This was Acer, who had the common sense to show up on time, unlike Merlin. "What time you go?"

"Almost eight-thirty."

Acer was a year younger than Rex and Merlin at sixteen. He didn't look like much with his long face and sleepy eyes, but he could spray up some crazy cartoon people and letters.

"Why don't you buy a watch, dick?" Acer teased.

"You're mom is getting me one for my birthday." Rex countered. "Talk some more shit, and I will squash you like a bug!"

"Where's Merlin?"

"In his house jacking off. I heard his right hand was twice as big as his left. Wait, maybe I heard that about you. Let me see your hands real quick."

"You got comedy tonight?" Acer asked. "How about this? If Merlin is in his house doing the backstroke, he's probably looking at a picture of you in a pink tutu."

"I used to have a sea monkey that looked like you." Rex nodded. "I had to kill it 'cause it kept scaring my dad."

"Here comes your girl." Acer motioned toward the back of house.

Merlin had figured out how to open the security bars on his window. Carefully, quietly, he climbed his way out, before he set the bars back in place and scurried into the alley. "I got two spray cans. You got the tips?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Rex reminded him.

"Hey, dick." Acer called out.

"What?" Merlin asked.

Acer started laughing.

"What?" Merlin repeated.

"You answer to your real name, that's what."

"I don't get it." Merlin shook his head.

"Don't listen to him." Rex got between them. "We all know Acer was dropped on his head when he was a baby. It's a miracle he can even get dressed."

"Can we get moving?" Acer inquired.

"Yeah, let's go." Rex said. "Merlin, you keep the cans on you. Don't take them out until we're ready to use them."

The three teens started off down the alley.

"What colors you got?" Acer wondered.

"Red like your nuts." Merlin joked.

"You don't get it, do you?" Acer asked. "You just don't get it."

"What don't I get?"

“If you say my nuts are red, that means you’ve seen my nuts before. Is that what you really want to tell us?”

“No!”

“Both of you need to zip the lips.” Rex spoke up. “What color do you have besides red?”

“Blue.”

“I thought you had black?”

“You thought wrong. I have red and blue, and that’s it.”

“Where’d you get the cans?” Acer inquired.

“From my uncle. He had them in his garage, and I snaked them.”

At the end of the alley, Rex saw a freshly painted beige brick wall. “Let me get a can.”

“Which one?”

“Doesn’t matter, as long as it has paint in it.”

In less than thirty seconds, Rex sprayed out RTD.

“Yeah, we’re still on my block.” Merlin scolded.

“So? Maybe your neighbor is an asshole and deserves to have his wall tagged.”

“Let’s go over to your block, and I’ll tag up your neighbor’s house.”

“Fine with me. I already know my neighbor is an asshole. I’ll point out his house for you.”

“I know what you can do.” Acer nodded. “You can spray paint Rex’s mom.”

Merlin started laughing.

“Where should we go for the bombing run?” Rex asked.

“How about the fire station over on 35<sup>th</sup>?” Merlin suggested.

“Langley Heights already got that.” Acer informed him.

“How about the big retention wall across the street?”

“They got that, too. Those guys can’t tag for shit.”

“Let’s not tag anywhere near gang graffiti.” Rex decided. “The Dukes are already after us for tagging near one of their hangouts.”

“You shouldn’t have tagged there, dick.” Acer said.

“It wasn’t me; it was this asshole!” Rex pointed at Merlin.

“I don’t know where all the Dukes live!” Merlin snapped.

“What about behind the big grocery store on 43<sup>rd</sup>?” Acer proposed.

“By the Jack In The Box?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Acer confirmed. “The Rite-Aid has a big, blank wall facing a busy street. And then you’ve got a couple of trailers sitting right behind the store. I know they’ll paint over the Rite-Aid right away, but not those trailers. They might have our tags on them for a week.”

“Trailers are the new subway trains.” Rex said. “All right, we’ll tag up the shopping center and we’ll make our way back through Southcrest Park.”

“As long as we don’t run into any Dukes.” Merlin worried.

“We won’t.” Rex predicted.

(November 21, 2018, 7:30 PM. I think I’ll delete my italicized portions every other day. A lot of that early writing doesn’t flow as smoothly as my writing style at present. Also, I will update the Official Word Count every second day as well. Before I get to the

project, I'm adding a few notes that I plan on integrating later, as the story progresses. These notes have to do with birds and terrain. They are minor notes, but I will probably end up writing an article on catching and small birds soon. The notes are placed right before the Old Notes section starts up. I am listening to The Best Of Celtic by Medwyn Goodall. Start time: 7:40 PM.)

Moses felt as if he'd run face first into a mattress. Once he tried pulling away from the gray cloud, he found that strange substance unwilling to let him go. Strong tendrils reached out from it, lashing themselves around his arms and legs, yanking him off his feet and dragging him away. The struggling young man tried to aim his handgun, but all he was really moving was his wrist, as the rest of his limb was bound. Gritting his teeth and growling, Moses tried to pull his head and neck free, only to feel the cloud wrapping even tighter.

Smaller extensions, as thick as fingers, reached out for his face, probing at his eyes, nose and mouth. Now Moses was shaking his head to keep from having his facial orifices penetrated. The cloud held him around the middle, tight enough that he could barely expand his lungs to breathe. He was caught like a mouse in a glue trap.

He deserved it, Moses decided. Whatever was happening to him, he felt he had fully earned it after the mess in the liquor store. Those two clerks were probably dead now, or at least badly wounded, and if Moses' life was forfeit, then fine, that would be his way to atone for the tragedy.

Something like a vision pushed into his mind. Moses saw himself naked in a dark limbo, falling or swimming through a viscous fluid. As he struggled to right his body, he felt a hand clasp onto his ankle. When Moses turned to look that way, he saw Bryan holding him with both hands. Bryan was naked, his face desperate and his body covered over in blood. Moses also had blood, all over his long legs and belly, all over his arms. Bryan's weight was dragging him down, deeper into those black depths, and to whatever hell lay down below.

Suddenly, Moses felt his physical body drop by several feet. He landed painfully on his tailbone. The young man yelped as he fell over on his side. If he was in hell now, he expected for its demons to come out and greet him. Right away, Moses began feeling pinpricks on the exposed skin of his face and arms, hot like flea bites or poison ivy. It took him several moments to understand this was grass, not soft like lawn grass, but thick and rough and prickly.

"They have grass in hell?" He asked in disbelief.

Moses could breathe much better now that the cloud was receding. He thought he'd gulp down a lung full of sulfur, but no, the air felt and tasted normal. Loud coughing and swearing startled him.

"Bryan!" Moses called out. "Can you hear me?"

The coughing continued. Moses started crawling along the grass, unable to see very far because the cloud was still thick in places.

"Bryan!"

"Over here. I can't see a damned thing through this smoke!"

"Is this like tear gas or something?"

"More like a smoke grenade. The cops must have heard the shots!"

"You tried to leave me behind, didn't you?"

“Naw, naw!” Bryan answered. “I was just making sure the street was clear!”

“You were going to run off with the money, and leave me behind so I would get caught!”

“You’re thinking too much!” Bryan shouted. “Just stand up and tell them where you are, before they blast us.”

Sure, Moses thought. He’d stand up, while Bryan tried to crawl his way through the fog and not get caught.

“The smoke is clearing.” Bryan told him.

Moses should have been lying on cement, on the sidewalk in front of Johnny’s liquor store. Instead, he was on fresh grass, and as the cloud drifted by, he saw the night lighten up until it was daytime again. How was that possible?

A breeze pushed at the cloud, moving it past Moses. He watched the cloud or smoke condense smaller, into a ball, like a hole taking water out of a sink. Moses actually heard the sound it was making as it was sucked in. In seconds, the smoke was gone.

The scared young man finally got a good look at his surroundings. What he saw made his stomach turn. He was in a small field with a tall wall of stone around it. To make things worse, incredibly worse, he saw men with grotesque faces and green skin. They were everywhere: four of them standing together, wearing long shirts or robes, and several more spaced out along a wooden walkway that went all the way around the field. These men with their monstrous faces wore clothing, and the ones up on the walkway had swords in their hands. As Moses focused on the men, he thought their faces looked like lizard faces, or dragon faces.

Two of them used stairs to descend from the walkway to the field, before they both came directly at Moses and his partner.

“Fucking cops!” Bryan yelled. “They put some shit into that smoke they threw at us! That’s why we’re seeing all this crazy stuff!”

“Are you seeing cops with lizard faces?”

“Only the first two are real!” Bryan assumed. “The rest are fake! It only looks like a lot of them!”

“I don’t know.” Moses replied.

The hideous men barked at the would-be robbers, but Moses couldn’t understand a word they said. Maybe they were illusions, like Bryan said, but he didn’t want to chance it, not with those swords they were holding out.

“Why don’t we lower our guns?” Moses asked.

“Naw!” Bryan refused. “Fuck that!”

The lizard-cops were closing in, only ten feet from Bryan. That’s when Bryan raised his gun and started popping off rounds. One cop fell over. Before Bryan could aim at the second, a strong gust of wind shoved him off his feet and sent him tumbling. Before the man could regain his bearings, the second cop ran over and kicked at his middle. Bryan grunted, unable to point his weapon. As Moses watched, the cop thrust his sword into Bryan’s stomach, pulled it out, and thrust it a second time.

More barking was heard. Two more cops were running toward Moses, scaring him. The young man had never gotten to his feet; he was still propped up on one knee. When he saw the lizard-cops and their swords directed at him, he tossed his gun away and spread out on the grass.

“I give up!” Moses cried out. “Don’t shoot! I give up!”

Bryan was screaming, up until the lizard-cop hacked his head off. Cops weren't supposed to do that! Cops were supposed to put people in cuff and read them their rights. Cops had to take people to their precinct, where they would question them and where people had a chance to call their lawyers. It was so crazy!

"Is this even real?" The bewildered Moses asked. "What the hell is going on?"

They were watching him, those two lizard-cops with their swords, making sure Moses didn't move.

"I said I give up!" He pleaded with them.

One of the lizard-cops put the tip of his sword on Moses' back. The young man gulped, figuring he was as good as dead. He shut his eyes tightly.

After a minute of waiting, Moses opened his eyes. Now he had three lizard-cops around him, all poised to strike. The small group had come in closer, eyeing both he and Bryan's corpse. A little one wearing what looked like a dark green dress was leaned over and having a look at the gun Moses had tossed away. Since when did San Diego cops hire midgets, anyway?

The little one trudged over, looking Moses in the eyes and speaking in coughs and hisses. Moses thought he looked like a monster. Apparently, Moses was expected to make a reply, but he had no idea what he was being asked. The little one barked at him again, and for good measure, the sword at his back dug into his flesh.

"Ow, ow!" Moses cried out. "Don't kill me, man! Just take me to jail, but don't kill me! My head's fucked up right now, I can't tell what you're asking, okay?"

The little one stepped to Moses, leaning over so close that Moses thought he might try to bite his face. Again, he spoke in a way that didn't make sense.

"Listen, listen," Moses urged. "I have no idea what you're saying!"

The monster stared at Moses, showing fangs through a wide mouth. Finally, he moved back, motioning at another of his kind. This one had a blue blouse that went down to his thighs, so Moses assumed it was another cop. The lizard-man barked at the rest.

Two of them pulled Moses up by his arms, revealing how strong they were by how easily they did it.

"I'm not resisting." Moses told them. "I'm complying, right?"

He had no idea if they understood him or not, as they led him away, toward where he supposed their cop car was waiting.

Briefly, the First Apprentice watched the soldiers take the prisoner away, before he returned to the center of attention. Arak and several others were crowding around the soldier who'd been felled by the thunderclap sound. Fass levitated so as to have his head at the same height as theirs, before he pushed his way past the onlookers. He descended only when he stood next to Arak.

Down on one knee, Captain Gruhg examined the two gaping holes in the dead soldier's chest. "Incredible that a loud sound caused this much damage. Is it a new form of magic, Arak?"

"It must be." The Master Sorcerer replied. "Fass, bring to me the weapons that spoke with thunder."

"As you say." The short mage bowed his head, before he floated his way past the ring of onlookers.

One soldier stood by the decapitated human, guarding the dead man in case he might come back to life. Fass saw that the human still held his weapon, and with a careful hand, he pried it away. An end of it was still hot, he felt. After turning it over and studying its opposite end, and after feeling its weight, Fass decided the best way to handle the weapon was to float it through the air. It had weight to it, Fass calculated, as he added manna until the weapon lifted up. This done, he went to the second weapon and did the same, taking them both back to the circle of spectators. When the soldiers saw his approach, they moved out of his way.

Gruhg was tearing away the dead soldier's uniform and flesh, before he poked his claws into one wound and brought something out. He held it up for all to see. "It is a slug of metal! The thunderclap's magic has propelled this slug from out of the weapon, making it a tiny missile!"

"A tiny missile that can cause such a grievous wound?" A subordinate asked.

"Enhanced by magic, surely." Gruhg decided. "What else could have done that?"

"The weapons, Fass." Arak requested.

Fass floated them up in the air, high enough for all to see them.

"Metal weapons that shoot metal slugs." Gruhg discerned.

"Made for human hands." Fass added. "Much too small for our wider hands."

"Were the humans sorcerers, then?" A soldier asked.

Gruhg looked to the Master Sorcerer, along with several others.

"We cannot answer that with certainty." Arak decided. "What we can say is this. A Nubian woman has come through the rift in a carriage that was propelled by no horses. And now, we have two Nubian men that have come through, both armed with weapons that make thunderclaps and shoot metal slugs."

"The carriage was metallic, and the weapons are metal." Gruhg said. "If we assume the carriage was propelled by magic, then perhaps it is the same magic that activates the weapons. This new world must be populated by Nubians as well."

"Without further experimentation, we cannot be certain of anything." Arak warned. Because he understood he could make a strong impression in the soldiers' minds, he added, "Devastating weapons, that can pierce through tough Erranthan skin. You that stand here saw with your eyes how quickly your fellow was slain. Imagine, if you can, that we might procure such weapons and modify them for the use of our army. Captain, I have kept your men from their duties long enough. Ask them if they wish to continue standing by while I continue the Great Experiment. Fass, carry the weapons along, while we wait for their answer."

Fass knew what his master was doing. He followed Arak several strides away, with the humans' weapons gliding through the air before him. When they were reasonably far away, both master and apprentice used their psychic powers to listen to the conversation the soldiers were having.

"It felled one of us so quickly!"

"He was dead afore he hit the ground, I tell you!"

"A magic weapon!"

"Small enough to fit in a human's hand!"

"Consider the distance it was fired from." Gruhg said. "Ten feet away, and that weapon struck one of us, afore he could get in proper range to use his sword."

"We could use those weapons against the pigs!"

“Aye, fell the pigs from a distance!”

“Even more than that.” Gruhg extrapolated. “We can use those weapons against the pig sorcerers!”

“That is all we need to listen to.” Arak told his apprentice. “These soldiers were tired of standing here, but now they have become excited. They will be eager to stay longer, if only to boast of what they witnessed later, to their fellows.”

“A good thing.” Fass agreed. “Their talk will spread far and wide among the army.”

Just as the mages basked in their sudden fortune, the courtyard gates swung open. Two King’s Guards strode in, including the man whose report could damage them the most. That would be Arak’s rival Branek.

“Not him!” Fass whined.

“Transport the weapons into my chamber, quickly before Branek sees them.” Arak directed.

Branek and his companion joined the group of soldiers.

“What occurred here?” Branek demanded. “Why is one of our soldiers dead?”

The witnesses started up a torrent of voices over what they’d seen.

“Why was I not informed the experiment would continue?” Branek snarled, starting toward Arak.

“Are we obligated now, to tell you all of our comings and goings?” Arak asked.

“Show me these magic weapons!”

“Once they have been properly studied, we will.” The sorcerer decided. “Until then, we cannot assure they are not in some way volatile and a danger to us.”

“I know you, Arak.” Branek pointed. “I think you deliberately planted those weapons to make up for the great amount of nothing you’ve produced so far!”

“Think what you will. I am not here to amuse you.”

“Oh, but you are here to pull the wool over my eyes, aren’t you? And over the eyes of the king as well?”

The King’s Guard went to bump his chest against the sorcerer’s. They were about the same height, and with similar muscular builds. Every person in attendance turned to see the confrontation, including Fass. There were bets pending on the outcome, if those two ever fought it out.

“You and your magic.” Branek growled. “I say that all sorcerers are cowards! They stand behind their magic spells while real men tear into their enemies with swords!”

“I have grown tired of your insolence.” Arak said. “If you are so sure that I am a coward, challenge me officially and let us quarrel.”

“Oh, you’ll give up your magical enhancements to fight me?” Branek laughed. “We all know your big shoulders are only there because you’ve used a spell to increase their size! Without magic, I’d say you are as strong as a human!”

“If you are so sure, challenge me.”

“So I can embarrass you when you refuse?” Branek huffed. “I think I will challenge you, if only to put you into your place, magician. But first, I will go and tell the king how you have tricked these simpletons into believing you actually summoned a weapon from another world!”

“But he did.” Gruhg insisted. “Two weapons! We all saw them!”

“You were all fooled! Why has Arak hidden the weapons away? I tell you it is because they are objects he has created in his chambers. Arak has no weapons, he has only trickery!”

Fass hated the guard’s arrogance as much as Arak did. The only reason Arak hadn’t killed him yet was because Branek had the king’s favor.

“I think I will tell our king, straight away!” Branek threatened. In a moment, he was stalking back toward the courtyard gate.

“Imbecile.” Arak rumbled, as he made to follow. “Fass, dismiss the soldiers. Send them back to their duties while I deal with this thorn of my arse!”

The second King’s Guard followed behind the two rivals, keeping his distance from both of them.

“Always strife between those two.” Gruhg frowned. “Especially at a time like this when our enemies may be on the march against us.”

“Are they on the march?” Fass wondered.

“That is the latest rumor from the runners. We don’t know when they will arrive, or how many troops come with them, but we do know they are coming. Ah, but I would enjoy seeing those two squabble. Arak may not fare so well if he is forced to give up his magical enhancements.”

“I would bet for Arak.” Fass said.

“Would you now?” Gruhg asked. “And I would wonder why. About the experiment?”

“Let me try it a few times.” Fass was suddenly eager. “Arak has just changed the spell, and on his first try he has produced results. I know the words, Gruhg!”

“Are you certain you should even try?”

“Yes, yes.” Fass insisted. “Get the dead men out, and put the soldiers back on their posts. I can cast the spell as well as Arak can!”

“As long as it falls on your head if you summon a catastrophe.”

“Have a little faith, man. I am not First Apprentice by chance!”

The Captain gave in, for he was soon barking orders to his subordinates. Once the soldiers were out of hearing range, he turned back toward. “All right, Fass. Now you can tell me why you would bet on Arak instead of Branek, if they fought with no magic allowed.”

(November 22, 2018, 6:45 PM. No comment regarding Thanksgiving. I am a recluse, after all, but Thanksgiving to all of you out there. Okay, first off, I’m deleting my previous italicized old notes. Next, my word count is just over 19,000 words, so this novel is 19% complete. I will be very happy if I get near one-third finished by the time I’m done with the old draft. 7:42 PM - I switched Old Chapter 8 with Old Chapter 9. This keeps the story alternating between Earth and Grond, the way it has been going all along. 11:20 PM - I had to get rid of a couple of large story chunks from my old notes. They just weren’t good enough! Okay, I’m about to call it quits for the night. Let me update my Story document first. Not too bad; my Official Word Count is now up to 40 pages and 23% complete! End time: 11:25 PM.)

Fass simply gazed back at the Captain.

“You know something, don’t you?” Gruhg chuckled. “You have me intrigued. Tell me what you’re hiding.”

“Why do you think King Lehnorack always manage to place Arak and Branek close together?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Gruhg replied. “Any good Erranathan keeps the gators snapping at each other, instead of against him. I’m sure the king tells Arak his magic is invaluable, while at the same time he tells Branek that he does not fully trust his Master Sorcerer. It follows back to Kellorr. That traitor had no one to watch over him, and look how that ended up. A third of the kingdom obliterated, left so weak that our enemies from across the ocean have come to clash swords against us.”

Patiently, the Captain waited for the short mage to comment.

“I’d say the odds are about even, between Arak and Branek.” Fass related. “Branek may have the king’s ear, and while he is among the best fighters we have here at the castle, there are some matters most of our brethren do not know about. These matters are what, in my opinion, make Arak the better fighter.”

“Do tell.” Gruhg nodded.

“We know Branek is an excellent wrestler. Arak is not without certain skill in that category.”

“Arak is, or was, very good. One of Branek’s criticisms is that Arak has not wrestled since before he entered the magic school.”

“Not a word of this to anyone.” Fass cautioned. “We have spies in the army camps, who tell us how good Branek is, and what his weaknesses are.”

“And I’m sure Branek has spies among the minor sorcerers as well.”

“You would be correct in thinking that. What you don’t know is that Arak and I will sometimes go to the outlying camps where Branek’s lazy spies will not. We teleport there through magic, so the spies couldn’t follow us if they wanted to. Arak first started doing this to ensure we could reach the outlying territories in a hurry, in case of sudden attack. Arak will dress as a runner passing messages along, so that no man knows who he truly is. Arak well knows that one day he will be put against Branek in a duel to the death. When he is out there in the faraway camps and villages, he wrestles with the wild men out there. If he cannot find wild men, he wrestles gators!”

“Gators?” Gruhg exclaimed. “Our very ancestors?”

“I tell you no lie.” Fass confirmed. “Arak goes into the swamps and pulls the gators out by their tails. He battles against them until one side tires out. Oh, they are so angry they will gnash their teeth and hurl their necks in trying to rip him apart! They sink their teeth into their arms and legs and throttle him about like an old rag!”

“Fass, I don’t believe you!”

“Before Arak fights the gators, he sets a mending spell about his body.” Fass revealed. “Of course, he still suffers and becomes wounded, but the mending spell makes it easier to heal him. I know this because I am the one that does the healing. What sort of wrestling does Branek know?”

“The classical style, naturally.”

“And the fighters he wrestles against, what style to they use?”

“The same.”

“When does Branek wrestle in the wild man style? When does he wrestle against our ancestors?”

“Never, I suppose.”

“You said so yourself. Arak is a good wrestler while Branek is excellent, when it comes to using the classic style. When it comes to unorthodox styles, Branek has not a single moment of experience. I tell you, Arak can beat three of every four wild men, and the ones he cannot beat with their fighting ways, he can beat with the classic style. Would you change your bet in Arak’s favor, knowing what I have just revealed to you?”

Gruhg noted the way the short mage was looking at him. “You know something else, don’t you?”

Fass showed a grin full of fangs. “It will cost you a Dove to find that out.”

The Captain stared at the sorcerer for a long moment, before he caved in. “All right! I’ll pay you a Dove! What is the secret?”

“When Arak first became Master Sorcerer, he already had an athletic build on him. King Lehnorack wanted his best mage to look formidable, and so he allowed Arak to use magic to enhance his musculature.”

“Yes, yes.” Gruhg laughed. “Arak will be in a tight spot when those enhancements are taken away! When he fights Branek, he will have to do so in his natural form!”

“What makes you think he is not in his natural form now?”

“Really? No, I don’t believe you!”

“How strong are the wild men, compared to the soldiers here in the castle? I told you that Arak wrestles wild men, and that he can beat most of them already. The ones he cannot defeat might have something to do with their greater strength, yes? Ask yourself this question: If Arak is using magic to enhance his strength, then why are his arms so tired from casting the same simple spell all day?”

“Oh.” Gruhg realized the truth of the matter. “The possibility never even crossed my mind.”

“Not to worry. You think like a fighting man, and not a sorcerer, the same way Branek does. You stand to make a good bit of money on your bet, when Arak and Branek request a duel to the death. If I were you, I would say publicly that Branek is sure to win, but when you place the bet privately, you know who will remain standing. Not a word of this to anybody, Gruhg, or I will eat your children!”

“Not a word.” The Captain agreed. “On my children’s heads!”

“Do you want to see what I can summon up, if I cast the spell?” Fass asked, vibrating with excitement.

“A swarm of hornets, most likely!” Gruhg laughed. He scanned the entirety of the courtyard. “All is in place. Cast away, Fass!”

The worried taggers crouched down behind the thick row of hedges, keeping their breaths as slow and steady as possible. Merlin in particular stayed frozen, as it was his spray can that had just been hissing while he was putting up a tag. The police cruiser was slowly rolling down the block, but as far as the vandals could tell, the single cop inside was looking in the wrong direction.

“Don’t be scared, dick.” Acer joked.

“Shut up!” Merlin snapped, using the loudest whisper he could manage.

“You both need to be quiet.” Rex, the calmest of the three, said.

They hadn’t even seen the police car, while they’d been tagging on the south end of the small shopping center. Rex and Acer had warned Merlin not to spray too close to

where the shopping carts were lined up, but he'd gone and done it anyway. That was a stupid thing to do, Rex understood, since the grocery store was still open and shoppers were going back and forth into the large parking lot up front. Somebody must have seen Merlin tagging, and in some unknown way that had gotten back to the cops. They were lucky because the cop assumed they'd gone off the premises right away, and to the next street over. Instead, the taggers had hidden behind the shopping carts, and behind the bushes next to the shopping center's wall.

"If the cop had chased us, we would have run that way," Rex figured. "And he would have seen us. The good thing is that we saw his car before he saw us. We had the chance to hide before we were spotted."

The words were mostly for Merlin's benefit, as Acer was considerably more seasoned in hiding from the law.

"Merlin wants to go home now." Acer ribbed.

"Yeah, no shit." Merlin nodded. "I was still spraying when he turned his spotlight on!"

"He turned it on the other way." Rex reaffirmed. "Maybe he heard the spray and maybe not. Be happy that people are making a lot of noise in the parking lot."

"I'm so happy I'm farting out happiness." Merlin replied.

Acer was heard chuckling.

"Don't sweat it." Rex said. "The cop is almost gone. As soon as he's out of sight, we'll walk back behind the store and tag up the trailers, like we said we would."

"You still want to keep tagging?" Merlin worried. "After we almost got caught?"

"Go home, man." Acer said.

"Are you guys staying out here?"

"We're staying because we're not finished yet." Rex determined. "We already hit the most dangerous spots along 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. That's where we had the worst chances for getting caught. Now we're going behind the store where nobody is walking around or parking their cars or nothing."

"Grow some balls." Acer said. "If you can't hang, go home and go to sleep."

Merlin took a long minute to answer. "I'm going with you guys."

"We're clear." Rex said, standing up. "Let's go, and don't rattle so much."

The teens made their way between the store wall, the hedges and the fence of iron bars a few feet to the side.

"If the cop comes back, just drop on your stomach and hold still." Rex kept talking. "If the cop starts getting out of his car, we run through the back of the store and into the park. We'll have to split up, but we can lose him in the brush."

"You have to get to the water canal." Acer told Merlin. "Jump into the canal and walk a couple of blocks in either direction. Climb back out and walk home like nothing is going on."

"The water canal?" Merlin asked.

"There is no water in it." Rex explained. "Just a lot of bushes and a lot of bums."

"A lot of bums?"

"You can walk right by them." Acer said. "They won't bother you."

"Great." Merlin complained.

At the end of the wall, Acer sprayed up a quick RTD.

"Don't put it there." Rex frowned. "Nobody's going to see that."

Acer pointed out past the iron bars. "Somebody walking by on that sidewalk will."

"Give me that fucking can." Rex held his hand out. Once he had it, he walked over to the first trailer, tagging Rex in big letters. He put RTD on the trailer's back door.

Acer pointed at a row of small businesses, just past the store's back parking lot.

"Let's go tag those big windows. You can see those from the sidewalk."

He and Merlin walked off, while Rex kept tagging the trailers. After marking up a second trailer, he sauntered over to join his friends, who were debating by then.

"If you're getting chased, and you can jump a wall, you should just jump the wall and get it over with." Acer was saying.

"How about if there's a dog on the other side of that wall?" Merlin shot back.

"If the dog heard you coming, it would be barking at you already. That's how you know not to jump that exact wall."

"Not all dogs bark."

"Man!" Acer blurted out. "Rex, will you tell him something? This dummy wants to stand in the middle of the street like a dumb ass!"

"I didn't say I was going to stand in the middle of the street." Merlin countered.

"What are you going to do then, climb up on somebody's roof?"

"All I know, is that while you two are standing still and arguing about it," Rex cut in. "I'll be running and not getting caught."

"Whatever." Merlin said. "Where are we going next?"

"Let's stay off of 43<sup>rd</sup> Street." Acer suggested. "Anybody paying attention to that street is going to notice the bunch of new tags we just put up."

"We'll cut through the park and head back home." Rex decided.

"Are you sure we won't run into any Dukes?" Merlin worried.

"We're not going to hang out at the park." Rex told him. "All we're doing is passing through. Besides, the Dukes are probably out crashing somebody's party or something."

"You down?" Acer asked.

"Yeah, I'm down." Merlin nodded.

"I'm not scared of the Dukes." Rex said. "Fuck the Dukes."

Acer laughed. "Say it to their faces, dick."

Every couple of months, somebody got killed in Southcrest Park. It wasn't a nice place to visit after dark, when all of the druggies came out to quarrel with their own, or with unlucky pedestrians passing through while trying to mind their own business. Even in the daytime, the usually placid park could often be the scene of horrendous violence. People with grudges shot each other, robbers would stab their victims, druggies would overdose in the bushes, and even the Hispanics who played soccer there would at times start up fistfights over what country they hailed from. Huge lights were installed along the major pathways, to light the park up at night, but that didn't matter. There were still plenty of places left for the criminal elements to hide in.

Across the street from the shopping center, the three teens came to the park's southern entrance. A winding cement path took them down the side of a hill to the flat section, where the closed recreation center and combination baseball and soccer fields were located. Rex paused at the top of the hill, taking in the big lights and tall, dark trees within view.

"You hear anything?" Merlin asked.

“No.” Rex said. “Let’s go through.”

“If we get killed here, I’m going to haunt your ass, Rex.” Acer vowed.

“You’re going to haunt my ass?” Rex wondered. “What did my ass ever do to you? I think anybody who wants to haunt somebody else’s ass has issues to take care of. I mean it, Acer. You need help.”

At the bottom of the hill, the tall stadium lights brightened almost two thirds of the park’s flat portion. The cautious teens walked between the baseball fields and the recreation center.

“This park gives me the creeps.” Merlin said. “Look at how dark the hill is from here.”

Acer turned back. Sure enough, the trees and bushes made the park look haunted.

“Don’t worry about it. Who is going to try anything with all these lights on?”

“Rex?” Merlin called out, when he saw his friend stopping to stare at the rec. center. “What are you doing, man?”

“That’s a sweet wall.” Rex nodded. “If the park people don’t work weekends, I could have a tag up there until Monday.”

“Don’t even think about it.” Acer said. “This is Dukes’ territory.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rex grunted. He caught up with the others. “Fucking Dukes. I can’t believe they crossed us out last time. We’re not even gang members; we’re taggers!”

“Like they give a shit.” Acer reminded him.

They were almost to the end of the park, when Rex stopped again.

“You know what?” Rex asked out loud. “Fuck it! I’m going to put my tag on that wall. If the Dukes can cross us out on our streets, then I’m tagging up their park! One of you give me a can.”

“Are you sure about this?” Merlin feared.

“You guys go on ahead.” Rex answered, once he had Acer’s spray can. “I’ll catch up.”

Merlin and Acer watched him go.

“Fucking Rex.” Acer shook his head. “This is a bad idea.”

“I smell weed.” Merlin said. “Somebody is smoking weed around here.”

“I smell it, too.” Acer suspired. “You know, if shit happens, shit happens. I can’t leave Rex behind. You coming?”

“Uh, yeah.” Merlin nodded. “Let me take a leak first.”

“Fucking Rex.” Acer said distastefully, before he trotted away.

Merlin felt like taking a leak all the way back to his house. He looked around for the nearest bush to rain on. By the time he reached the bush, he’d unzipped his pants and pulled his pisser out. Even after some urging, nothing came out.

“I should just go home.” Merlin said to himself. “We shouldn’t be here, and we sure as hell shouldn’t be tagging here.”

Merlin glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he would be the chicken that ran away, or the bulldog that stayed behind.

“You smell that weed?” Acer asked.

Rex was busy spraying letters as tall as he was, going over every edge twice to give them a bolder look. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just the bums that hang out here.”

“We should get going.”

“I’m almost done. You could be putting up a big-ass cartoon right now.”

“Yeah, except Merlin has the second spray can.”

“So get it from him.” Rex said. “We’ve got time. Nobody’s coming after us.”

The sound of the spray can hissed into the night. Just as Rex finished and backed up to scrutinize his artwork, Merlin came in at a run.

“They’re here!” He cried out. “They’re right behind me!”

“Who’s right behind you?” Acer asked.

“The Dukes!”

“We’ll run up the hill and get back to the shopping center.” Rex decided.

As the taggers turned around, they realized they were already surrounded. Several thugs were up ahead of them, clearly seen in the glow from the lights. The worst part about it was that they were stuck in a tight corridor, with the recreation center to one side, the high fence from the baseball field opposite that, and gang members to the north and south.

Rex could have broken away from his friends and made a run for it. He was fast enough to get away. Acer probably could, too. The reason Rex didn’t flee was because he was worried about Merlin. That kid would probably get his head stomped if they left him behind. He hoped he could reason with the gang members who were standing out there.

“We’re not gang members!” Rex called out. “We’re taggers!”

“Can you run?” Acer asked Merlin in a low voice.

“I think so.” Merlin nodded.

Rex heard the exchange, and he also saw the way Acer looked at him. Acer also figured they could avoid a sure beating, if they left Merlin behind. He still felt the best plan was to talk things out, as he faced the thugs again. “All we’re doing is tagging. That’s it!”

“What are you tagging?” One of the gang members asked.

“RTD. It stands for Rolling The Dice. We’re not a gang, I swear!”

“You know where you’re standing, right? The thug asked him. “You know who controls this park?”

“Everybody knows.” Rex answered. “The Dukes control this park. We don’t want any trouble with you guys. How about this? We’ll give you our spray cans, and then you can let us go? How about it?” He looked at Merlin. “Give me your spray can.”

“Four of them are coming up behind us.” Acer said in a low voice. “If we can get to the baseball field, we can shut the gate behind us.”

As Rex took the spray can, he looked at the field. He saw the chain link fence, and the gate Acer was talking about. Ahead of them, three gang members were waiting, making a total of seven against their three. If they got to that gate, and shut it, maybe they could keep from getting pounded into hamburger.

“We’re going to run for the gate in a second.” Rex whispered, as he turned and held the two spray cans up in the air. “You can have these, okay? Nobody wants to get jumped tonight. Just take these, and we’ll get out of your way.”

One after the other, Rex threw the spray cans at the thugs. He broke into a run, not stopping until he got to the gate. He barreled through it with Acer right behind him.

When Rex turned back to look for Merlin, he saw his friend being knocked over, bouncing on cement first and rolling into the grass at the field’s edge. The first four gang

members were going to give him the beating of his life, while the other three ran at the gate Rex was standing next to.

Suddenly, Rex and Acer were using their bodies to keep the gate shut, while three thugs pushed and kicked to get it open. In the meantime, Merlin was already getting pummeled. About the only thing Merlin did right was to roll over next to a section of metal bleachers, where he crawled between the posts and made it harder for his attackers to reach him.

Two thugs kicked at the gate, nearly knocking Rex and Acer over on the other end. Barely, they managed to keep the gate shut.

“Let’s go!” Acer screamed.

“What about Merlin?” Rex shot back.

“We can’t help him!”

Rex had enough awareness to know that if anything happened to Merlin, it would be his fault. The three friends had nearly crossed the park, but it was Rex who had talked them into heading back to the rec. center.

“I’m not leaving him!” Rex shouted.

Acer ran out of sight. With only one person left holding the gate, the three thugs were able to shove it open and flood through. Rex couldn’t hope to win against all three of them, but he brought his fists up anyway. Whatever happened to Merlin was going to happen to him too, because he refused to leave his friend behind.

Rex traded blows with one thug. Another thug smacked him on the head, and then punched him in the stomach hard enough to wind him. He got shoved hard enough to land on his side, on the hard dirt instead of the softer grass. Rex got kicked in the arms and legs, and in the ribs. He tried to cover his head, only to have a hard foot stomp on his hands. In the distance, he could hear Merlin crying out. Gang members were yelling at him, telling him that nobody trespassed into Duke ground and got away with it.

Unexpectedly, the gang members started fighting with someone else, leaving Rex gasping for breath, but not getting stomped on. He looked, seeing that Acer had come back, and was trying to keep the three gang members from knocking him down. Ignoring the pain at his side, Rex tried to get up, but he lost his balance and fell, this time partially on grass.

As Rex tried to push his body up, gray fog looked to sweep in through the chain link fence, as if coming from a large air blower. The fog swirled as it moved, flowing around him, past him, but also clinging to his arms and head. He could feel that it had some kind of electrical charge on it.

The thugs were yelling now, saying the fog was grabbing at them and not letting go. Rex felt the fog actually tighten around him. It scared him so much he tried to crawl away from it, only to have it press on him like a giant gray hand. Up ahead, and thanks to the bright park lights, Acer and his attackers tried to run off. The fog went after them as if it had its own mind. It caught all four, knocking them on their stomachs and grabbing at their legs and middles. In one of the most horrifying sights Rex had ever seen, the fog started pulling at all of them, dragging them across the field. Rex’s legs lurched, as the fog began taking him, too.

(November 23, 2018, 8:00 PM. Some minor moving around of text chunks, before I get started. Official Word Count is at 23%. Okay, ready to write now. Start time: 8:05 PM. End time: 11:00 PM.)

After leaving the courtyard, it took no time at all for the Master Sorcerer to catch up to the King's Guard. Arak was furious, as imbecile Branek was deliberately going to badmouth him, also the magical, metallic weapon that had been conjured up, without giving the mage time to properly examine it. Perhaps it was a good thing that Arak did not know how it functioned; if he had, his demeanor was so disturbed he might have tested it out on this fool that had been his nemesis far too long.

Branek's pace was hurried. Surely, the King's Guard expected for Arak to teleport directly to the king's hall, and at the outset, Arak had in fact thought to do that. The reason he had not done so was because it would have made him look weak, and scared, if he used magic to leap ahead of Branek and his malicious report. When they approached the king together, the ruler would have to balance their words out in the moment, where Branek could not use Arak's haste against him. The time would come, the sorcerer knew, when he would have his long anticipated revenge.

Mere moments later, Arak came up with a suitable way to both reach the king's hall quickly, and to bring out his rival's anger. He could be just as malicious, when he chose to be. Already, he had matched Branek's quick pace. Arak took one stride, then another, coming closer to the guard, before he reached out to grasp his arm. In that instant, Arak teleported, and he took Branek with him.

Magic was a dimension that existed alongside that of the the physical world, apart from it, but also helping to maintain its structure. It was possible to create conduits within magic, to move objects from one place to the next, or troops, or even larger things if enough mages pooled their energies together. Magical energy was colored gray. It was thick, but also fluid, powerless to the uninitiated, yet very powerful to an adept. Under normal conditions, when Arak teleported he remained in the dimension of magic for a very short duration, less than the time it took for his heart to beat once.

On this occasion, and to impress upon Branek how powerful he was, Arak decided to prolong the stay. No air existed in the magical state. The sorcerer had filled up his lungs before entering, while the guard, taken unawares, had not. A good way to kill Branek, but alas it was not the right time.

They appeared in the king's hall, in a private, painted corner reserved for arriving mages. The corner was set aside for this specific purpose. It had to be vacated right away or else a rather nasty problem would occur if too many mages tried to arrive at once. Arak had his air while Branek did not. The sorcerer arrived smugly, while the guard was suffocating. Since protocol dictated they move immediately, it was with no small amount of satisfaction that Arak shoved his rival out of the painted corner. Arak left Branek behind, as he strode toward the table reserved for King Lehnorack and his top advisors.

To his credit, Branek recovered quickly, too quickly for Arak in his smugness to react. The guard snarled and leapt toward the sorcerer, slamming into him and tumbling both to the polished tile floor. Branek slapped at Arak's head, smashing it against the floor, but only once before Arak was able to start his defense. Using his legs, Arak slid his body to the side, away from Branek. Both men bolted upright, taking the classic wrestler's crouch with their head and shoulders down, and their hands extended. Their

eyes narrowed, and at the same time they bared their fangs and snarled guttural threats to one another.

Hungry for blood, and meat, the two began slapping at each other. Their hands were heavy enough for their blows to hurt, but they also used their claws to tear at each other's scales. This was the usual way of reptilian fighting, with their longer arms and shorter legs, until one side sank their claws to firmly hold their opponent. The next moves would be to take bites at any vulnerable areas.

A rough voice ordered them to stop, but so engrossed were the two that they did not hear it. The fighters continued to slap and tear at each other, and to snarl loudly, until a long metal rod began striking at their shoulders. Each time the rod struck, the sharp crackle of electricity ripped through a fighter's body. The power surge was strong enough to jolt them and make them jump away from the fierce weapon. Within moments, both were left weakened and shaking, relinquishing their anger as they moved apart.

King Lehnorack towered over them at a height of eight feet. He had chosen to have his stature magically enhanced for the purposes of majesty and intimidation. The king wore a tunic in royal blue, that was embellished only slightly more than his personal guards. He preferred to seem more as part of a specialized crowd than to be set away from his subordinates entirely. His height set him apart from the rest already, and also the silver band that served as his crown, his silver necklace that held a large, disc-shaped sapphire, with a pendant showing the Jaws of Erranth around it, and of course his metal rod that harnessed the power of lightning.

"A trivial matter for the jolt to be increased to a fatal level." Lehnorack menaced. "Had I two worthy replacements for your useless carcasses, rest assured I would have done it and gotten rid of you both."

"Forgive me, sire." Branek faced the king, bowing his head. "It was Arak that..."

"Silence that speech." The king cut him off with his deep, raspy voice.

"Forgive me also, sire." Arak bowed.

Lehnorack had other powerful magics, besides his rod. On the fingers of his right hand, he wore four rings, each in a color of the four elements: air, earth, fire and water. These rings contained the Four Demons, Rakan of the Storms, Terremo of the Quakes, Yamas of the Flames and Efrezio of the Icy Depths. Former Master Sorcerer Kellorr designed the rod. It was made of polished steel with a reservoir of magic in its hollow innards, and in the middle, a non-conductive, hardened sap, covered over with a leather grip, allowed the king to wield it. The rod could be charged up by any of the Four Demons, as they passed their specific powers into the weapon.

"It is in your best interests not to test my patience further." Lehnorack said, before turning and striding toward his command table.

The table could seat twenty, Arak knew. At the moment, he observed that about a quarter of the chairs were taken, by highly ranked military men.

Another King's Guard, the older veteran Aydirk, stood frowning at Arak and Branek. "What a fine pair of idiots you two are. Just look at you, bleeding all over the place while we have the king and his generals at the table. Stay where you are while I call for a healer to mend you."

Aydirk motioned to a page standing by to serve chilled water. The page nodded right away and left the hall through a servant's entryway.

“A truce, Arak, until later.” Branek said, waiting for the sorcerer’s nod before he spoke to Aydirk. “Why have the generals come here?”

“Why do you think?” The older reptilian asked. “They’ve come to plan out a war, that’s what. We have word that the pigs are on the march against us, coming from the far east, from across the Gaudrian Ocean. We may very well hear a declaration of war before this meeting is over.”

Two minor sorcerers, specialists in healing, were soon seen entering the hall. They right off strode over to Aydirk, who had signaled for them. The sorcerers took stock of what needed to be mended. They could do their work while Arak and Branek listened in on the meeting, if the king would allow it.

“Request an audience for us.” Arak told Aydirk.

“For you both?”

“Yes. We were attending to other matters, but since we have come here, we should ask if we can stay. Undoubtedly, whatever is discussed will affect us.”

“He’s right.” Branek agreed. “Better to hear it firsthand than to have an edited report reach us later. Ask for us both to stay.”

“I will do so.” Aydirk replied. “In the meantime, you healers can start your healing.”

As the older guard strode away, Branek faced his adversary. “If we had walked here, the king would have shut the hall doors and we would not have been allowed to enter. It may have been a good maneuver to whisk us here directly, even if it was inadvertent.”

“We will see what the king decides.” Arak replied.

The table of advisors was termed the Table of Reckoning. It was large and rectangular, with ten seats to either side, and the head of the table reserved for the king. The table was varnished and polished, while the chairs were plush and upholstered in regal blue on the backrests and seats. To the right of the king sat Chief Royal Advisor Zowns. Next to him were Generals Hennen and Mo-Dahk, who both gazed upon the battered Arak and Branek with open contempt. To the king’s left, Aydirk took the first open chair, while the sorcerer and guard sat next to each other, and their healers stood close behind them. A page came by to present clay cups of chilled water to the pair of newcomers.

“As we were discussing.” Lehnorack spoke first, as was his right. “Zowns is in the action of collecting weapons from the smith guild. Those weapons will be delivered here to a courtyard, and stockpiled until they are needed.”

“To be transported by the sorcerers?” Hennen inquired.

“Correct.” The king confirmed. “The weapons cannot be taken directly to the front of any battles, else they and the sorcerers moving them might be compromised. Squads of soldiers can retrieve them from a distance away from the fighting.”

Zowns was busy writing down notes, giving Arak the impulse to summon his own writing tools. The trendier Zowns used a fancy stylus, while Arak, who was prone to losing his tools on occasion, wrote with a much cheaper quill.

The king and his two generals had been through several campaigns together, Arak knew. They put down rebellions within Erranth, and also uprisings in the outlying lands. Most recently, these same generals had quelled the followers of Kellorr, while the mages loyal to the royal seat fought his magicians. Arak felt a twinge of jealousy, as military types like these were looked at with great admiration and respect by the king, while

sorcerers like him were always viewed through a filter of doubt, and even suspicion. Some of that mistrust was warranted, as Kellorr certainly was not the first mage to rise against a monarch, but regardless, Arak felt he had been loyal enough to be above scrutiny, much less to have a watchdog like Branek keeping eyes on him.

Henchen was given authority over several important ports to the northeast, while Mo-Dahk had charge over the troublesome Bear Lands to the west, near to where Kellorr had gone to search for the ruins of that fabled, long lost kingdom of Atronia.

(November 24, 2018, EARLY, 8:45 AM. Good news! I have Morrissey playing in the background this morning. Okay, that's not the real good news. I have finished up my morning projects, so for the rest of November I will have more time to dedicate to this project. Unless something else comes along, that is. Take December as an example. I have four novels to revise, two starting on the first, and two more on the fifteenth. And then I have an e-zine to put together around the middle of the month as well, and maybe I'll have the itch to write a short story or two. You get the picture. Usually, I keep very busy with my hands full of writing projects.

When I'm ready to go, I will first backtrack by one page, to get myself in the mood. So let me take care of that. 9:00 AM - Done with that, and with breakfast of hot cereal. Morrissey is singing, last night, on Maudlin Street... All right, I have most of the next 3 hours to work on this. Start time: 9:01 AM. Progress on this novel has slowed down considerably. This is because I am trying to keep continuity with the first six novels in the series. Also, I am trying to stay within the guidelines I established for my Chaos Rift series, which add a whole other 11-plus novels. If I do this project right, it will explain how everything started up way, way back at the beginning, in Dobrynia's Path 1, and to a lesser extent, in Snatched Up, a novella found in Variant Worlds 1. End Time: 12:00 PM.)

"How are matters at your end of the empire?" Arak asked the burlier of the two commanders.

"I must complain of it." Henchen answered. "Running ports day to day, as I am, does take its toll on my head. That is a post, I should think, more agreeable to a younger, more enterprising individual than I. Give me a sword and shield over a stylus and scroll, any day."

Most of those present chuckled at the remark, being military men.

"In truth, matters are rolling along smoothly." Henchen continued. "Mostly thanks to the young men I enlisted, who have a good head for numbers. Caneh-Vatra and Triest-Vatra thrive as fishing ports, as they always have and always will. Caneh-Vatra in particular is the best candidate for a transition from producing textiles and tools, to creating military uniforms and weapons in the case of war. Kuy-Kuh-Thilia may not be as productive as one imagined. The supply of ores has become exhausted, it seems."

According to Kellorr's findings, Arak knew, the name of Vatra was once an ancient human land called Ovatra, full of fair-skinned humans. Kuy-Kuh was originally Cuycuhl, whose inhabitants were bronze-skinned and more warlike than their western neighbors.

"Thilia is not feasible for a strong defense." Mo-Dahk ventured. "The land is full of hills and jungles. Those bastard pigs will have an easier time of traveling through that hot mess than will ours."

“Do you want us to abandon it then?” Henchen balked.

“We might have to do that.” Mo-Dahk nodded. “Thilia is inland, you stubborn rock. Caneh and Triest both have forts and they lie along the coast, while Thilia is an open camp full of soldiers and tunnel miners. Need I remind you of how quickly the pigs will move through that terrain?”

Henchen snorted. “They’ll move quickly into the ends of our swords!”

“Be reasonable.” Lehnorack quietly commanded. “I hold as much disdain for the pig hordes as you. If we keep the camp manned, the pigs with their greater speed will move to surround it. Our troops there will be cut off and killed.”

“We can’t simply pick up our tools and walk off with them!” Henchen argued. “Put together, the soldiers and miners number at over four thousand souls!”

“How certain are we of the pig approach?” Zowns asked.

“General Essenek has gotten the warning from the tribe of humans to the far east. The humans are already moving south to avoid the pigs, into the ruins of their old cities.”

Not simply old, Arak mentally corrected. Those cities of Cuycuhl were perhaps two thousand years old, according to Kellorr’s notes.

“What if we were given a false alarm?” Zowns wondered.

“Then what is the appropriate response?” Mo-Dahk asked. “Do we sit pat and do nothing, and risk the loss of four thousand of our people?”

“We will not sit pat.” The king determined. “I would rather lose the uncollected ore than sacrifice the lives of our people. I will send word to Essenek to leave the camp with everything those men can carry on their backs.”

“Through a messenger sent by magic?” Zowns asked.

“Yes.”

“I will prepare the message.” The advisor volunteered. “The miners will not be happy about it, as their earnings will drastically diminish.”

“Leave that to Essenek and I.” Henchen said. “We’ll arm those men at the ports. We’ll tell them the only way they will get back to work is if we eradicate those filthy pigs first. There are three thousand miners and one thousand soldiers out there, roughly. What say I split the miners, with half going to Caneh and the other half sent to Triest?”

“We don’t want to lose too many of them.” Zowns calculated. “Who will do the mining for us? The ores in Kuy-Kuh are buried only a short distance under the ground, easy to dig up once the miners know where they are.”

“A thousand miners to each port.” The king decided. “And the last thousand are to be the most able of them. They will come here to Erranth until the fighting is done.”

“A delicate task, to choose who will stay and who will go.” Zowns said.

Lehnorack looked to his left. “I will send Aydirk. He can speak to Essenek directly and in confidence. Henchen, can you use a thousand more men at each port?”

“Of course, but it will be hell to feed them and to provide latrines for the lot.” The general nodded. “Once the fighting commences, I will have them form a flank to the south of the port, in the jungle where they won’t disrupt my soldiers.”

Zowns looked across the table at the Master Sorcerer. “We will need a number of your mages to move men and equipment. How many can you spare, and who will you put in charge of them, your accursed midget?”

“All of the minor sorcerers will be at your disposal.” Arak replied.

“All of them?” Zowns asked, not sure he’d heard correctly. “Won’t that leave the castle vulnerable?”

“Not if we move quickly. Unless our king sees it another way, I would first move the contingent from Thilia to Triest. Once they are in Triest, less mages will be required. If need be, the miners can carry their equipment on a march, or on fishing vessels. Fass will not oversee the sorcerers. I will appoint another man to that task and keep Fass with me.”

“So you can continue on with your blasted failed experiment?” Branek rumbled. “How many times have you cast that same stupid spell today, Arak? A hundred? Two hundred? And what do you have to show for it? Nothing!”

“Perhaps after this briefing is done, our king would care to discuss the progress of my Grand Experiment.” Arak replied, diplomatically.

“Branek,” Lehnorack growled. “Keep your trap shut until I ask you to open it.”

Irritated, the guard said nothing, but he did slap away the glowing hand of the healer mending his wounds. Expecting his task was done, the healer bowed his head and walked off, leaving only Arak’s healer still active. That caused the sorcerer to wonder if he would look weak to the others, by keeping the healer with him. He was glad when the king diverted the matter a moment later.

“All minor sorcerers will expedite the evacuation of the Thilia camp.” Lehnorack told his advisor. “Confer with Arak once this briefing is over. Once you know who is to oversee the magic end, come up with a schedule to begin the process. I want that schedule ready before nightfall.”

Zowns confirmed the order. “You will have it, sire.”

Next, the king looked to the nearest general. “Assuming a minor defense at Triest and a major defense at Caneh, tell me what your troop numbers are now, and what their number would be under optimum conditions.”

“The numbers are similar for both ports.” Henchen replied. “One thousand soldiers are posted there, and their families. Triest has two thousand civilians: fishermen, laborers and the like, and their families. Caneh has nearly twice that many. If Triest is to be a minor defense, the men coming from the camp will round that out. Caneh, on the other hand, we will need as many soldiers as you can spare.”

“Will the pigs sail past Kuy-Kuh and attack the ports directly?” Mo-Dahk asked.

“Doubtful.” Henchen replied. “Enough mages gathered together will sink their ships. We’ve had incursions before from these bastards. Their first priority is to get their hooves on land, and their second is to acquire an abundant supply of food. Unlike our kind, the pigs do not enjoy being in the water.”

“Not to mention the Four Demons.” Zowns interjected.

“Yes, the demons.” Henchen confirmed. “The demons are fast as lightning. They can be anywhere at a moment’s notice, thanks to the teleportation of the sorcerers, and as far as we know, they cannot be killed.”

“They are also unpredictable.” Mo-Dahk added. “They are as like to decimate our troops as they are those of the enemy.”

“The pigs must have some sort of attack against the demons,” Lehnorack reasoned. “If they are intent on attacking us on our lands.”

“If they do, we have no hint as to what that attack is.” Henchen replied. “They will not attack Erranth or the ports because they fear the demons. They will come as a horde,

all of them at once, the moment they have enough numbers on their side. Knowing their fear of water as I do, I expect it will take years for them to amass an army on this side of the ocean, unless they have developed some new magic that will give them more power somehow.”

“So much uncertainty.” Lehnorack frowned. “How go matters in the Bear Lands?”

“Not as well as with Henchen, I’m afraid.” Mo-Dahk shrugged. “You know how the bears can be, sire. You turn your back on them for one breath, and they’re starting up a new rebellion. They have this idea that a Bear Messiah will come and bring them out of their servitude to us. Thanks to that notion, I’ve had to quell four uprisings in the last half-year. The losses are always heavy on both sides, and as result our wood and stone production has fallen. Executing their leaders hasn’t helped, rationing their food hoard hasn’t helped, and the moment we reorganize their labor groups, they always begin to plot against us. I’ve tried all that I can think of. Any suggestions? As for manpower, sire, if you remove any large number of soldiers at all from the Bear Lands, the remainder will be under threat of getting wiped away in the next rebellion.”

“How many soldiers are under your arm?” Zowns asked.

“Twelve hundred.” Mo-Dahk said. “Eight hundred of them are due to rotate out in a couple of weeks. Under good circumstances, I would say take them and put them along the battle lines as the king sees fit. If these eight hundred are kept, I’m afraid we may have to scale our production back even more. We can hardly watch them as it is.”

“We will need the material to build stronger defenses.” Lehnorack said.

“You think I don’t know that?”

“If I could.” Arak cut in. “What has caused the bears to think that a Messiah might be soon coming to them?”

“Oh, that is bunkum and balderdash.” Mo-Dahk dismissed the query. “They’ve been clamoring about a Messiah ever since we subdued their kind, and when has their blasted prophecy ever born fruit?”

“You’ve said the rebellions are worse now?” Arak asked.

“Oh, they are bad!” Mo-Dahk huffed. “The worst they’ve ever been!”

Military men were always so pragmatic, thought the sorcerer. Arak found it strange that the bears were rebelling at the same time the pigs were on the march. He couldn’t even mention this oddity to the king, as Lehnorack could not fathom a link between the two distinct forms of men, just as the generals couldn’t.

“We are in a predicament, sire.” Zowns lamented. “If we reassign soldiers from the Bear Lands, timber and stone production will continue to fall. If we keep the soldiers in place, we may wish we had moved them ahead of time, to bring them here to Erranth or to defensive line at Caneh.”

”But we will have wood and stone.” Lehnorack considered.

“The rebellions will continue.” Mo-Dahk nodded. “I am sure of it.”

“Kill more bears.” Henchen resolved the matter. “Kill their leaders, and the families of their leaders. Skin their hides off and hang them from the trees. That will put the rest of them back in line.”

“The tactic will not work.” Mo-Dahk refuted. “They don’t have families in the way humans have them. The male bears care little for the female mothers. They come along in their season and mate, and then they wander off and let the females worry about their offspring.”

“They are like us?” Zowns questioned.

“No, not like us.” Mo-Dahk corrected. “If a male reptilian sees that a female’s eggs are in danger, the male will defend the eggs, even if that female has not mated with him. A male bear will not defend mothering females or young bears. The male bear will eat their remains, but he will not lift a finger to help them.”

“Defending our eggs is what has allowed us to increase our numbers so rapidly.” Henchen remarked.

“Our first kings instituted that practice.” Lehnorack nodded.

“The pigs watch their litters closely, and they give birth twice a year.” Henchen detailed. “Reptilian females lay more eggs, but their season comes by only once a year.”

(November 24, 2018, LATE, 7:40 PM. I’m doing some routine maintenance before I get going tonight. First, I’m erasing my old italics stuff... 7:43 PM - Done. That erased 19 pages from this rough draft. Next, I’m going to redo the synopsis at the start of the Old Notes section. 7:54 PM - I could not bring myself to erase the old intros, so I moved them to the front of this document, and right after my official introduction. These old intros will change before publication time, but I wanted to keep them for sentimental value. Also, I finished moving all the characters from the Old list to the new one. I’m wondering if I should get rid of the few Old headings I’ve moved into the official section. Back when I first began this project, I tried to write chapters of 10 or so pages. I don’t really need to follow that format any more. More likely, I will split this book into two or three parts, such as Arrival, Escape and... Oh, no! I’m not telling you that yet, because it will be a spoiler! Start time: 8:00 PM. I am feeling a little burn-out tonight, or maybe I’m just more tired than usual. I’m calling it an early night. End time: 10:02 PM.)

“Regardless, we cannot return production to previous levels.” Mo-Dahk settled the matter.

“If the soldiers from the camp are split up among the ports,” Zowns considered. “Won’t that leave Essenek without an army?”

“It will not.” Henchen answered. “Essenek can helm the troops at Triest, and take over the bureaucratic end as well. The entire boodle! He won’t like it, but it will free me up to build better defenses at Caneh.”

“Is that acceptable, sire?” Zowns asked.

“It will have to be.” Lehnorack replied. “Essenek enjoys running the mines because it is a simple operation, and because it is making him a rich man. What do you say to this, Henchen? If Triest falls, I will bring Essenek here to run the defenses of Erranth. Captain Gruhg will supervise inside the castle, and Essenek without.”

“What about Sendoah?” Zowns inquired.

The mention of that outlying town put the king into a thoughtful state. Sendoah was the place Erranthan criminals were sent to. The bears took their timber and stone there. The outcasts sorted through it, loaded it onto wagons, and drove it out to where the materials were needed. For the most part, the criminals governed themselves. More production meant reduced sentences, and many of the outcasts were eager to work their sentences or fines off so they could return to normal society.

“Do you feel you have a good handle on Sendoah?” The king asked Mo-Dahk.

“As good as any headman there.” The general replied. “My troops are out on patrol most days and nights, because if they stay in Sendoah too long, they will tussle with the criminal gangs. At the same time, the gangs will expect us to defend them in the case of bear rebellions. I say this, but without a complete certainty. If we begin to war with the pigs, the criminals will do what they can to defend Sendoah, but they may not be as willing to defend Erranth.”

“Will they for a reduced sentence?” Lehnorack wondered.

“A good carrot for the mule, sire.” Zowns nodded.

“If you want those men to be ready for combat,” Mo-Dahk reasoned. “Then I should return to the Bear Lands right away to start training them. The vast lot of them are tavern brawlers who know nothing of field maneuvers.”

“And you want to put weapons into their hands?” Henchen scoffed. “The first thing they’ll do is attack our troops!”

“No, no, think of the carrot!” Zowns detailed. “We will train them to fight, and we will give them a choice. Their sentences will be reduced small if they fight for Sendoah, but reduced large if they fight in Vatra. Tell them that when the fight is done, they can rule Sendoah as official governors and free men. Sendoah can be their city when the war is done with!”

“Good ideas, sire.” Mo-Dahk agreed. “If there is war, and the bears find out about it, surely they will refuse to provide us with any material at all. The rabble in Sendoah will do nothing but fight among their selves with no work to keep them busy.”

“If they are citizens in an official town, they will pay taxes.” Zowns finished off.

“Essenek has no great battle experience.” Henchen commented. “All he’s done in Thilia is swat a few flies in the swamps.”

“That will change soon enough,” The king replied. “If he is our first line of defense.”

“Throw him to the wolves!” Zowns laughed. “We shall see what he is made of!”

“So far, I have heard good suggestions.” Lehnorack commented. “Mo-Dahk, you will return to the Bear Lands in haste. Give the criminals in Sendoah their options, and begin training them at once.”

“Give them their own banner and units.” Zowns added.

“Yes, do that.” The king seconded. “I suspect you may not have too much time to train them. Do what you can. Send those who will fight for Erranth to me right away.”

“How many are there?” Zowns sat ready to jot the numbers down.

“Three hundred foot soldiers.” Mo-Dahk said. “Between seven and eight hundred sentenced men. No women, no children.”

“Sire, you are neglecting one possibility.” Arak spoke up. “What if the pigs and the bears attack us at the same time?”

“Why would they?” Mo-Dahk scoffed.

“Rumblings of war from the east and west, at the same time, and no one questions that?”

“The pigs come from across the Gaudrian, Arak.” Henchen reminded him. “They have never even met the bears!”

“That only proves my point.” The sorcerer persisted. “When is the last time both sides threatened us together, as they are now?”

“They are not together.” Henchen protested. “Those people are worlds apart!”

“Arak, you are a paranoid fool.” Branek growled.

“The bear rebellions are periodic, and so are the raids from the pigs.” Mo-Dahk surmised. “They were bound to come against us at the same time, sooner or later.”

“Don’t let them come at night,” Branek joked. “Or else the night will become our enemy as well!”

The generals laughed, but the king only started at Arak with a disappointed look on his face.

“Our line of communications will be solely through the sorcerers?” Zowns asked.

“Teleportation through magic is the fastest way.” Arak replied.

“It should not be the only way.” Branek argued.

“Why?”

Mo-Dahk answered first. “Because there may not be enough sorcerers when the war begins. There are two sorcerers in Sendoah, in all of the Bear Lands. If we lose them, we will have no fast way to send news to the king. What we need as a secondary measure is a network of running messengers.”

“Easily done.” Lehnorack conceded. “We have plenty of pages here for the task. Zowns, write that down. Later, you will prepare a route for them, for Erranth out to Vatra and to the Bear Lands.”

“As you say.”

“Arak, what is the number of minor sorcerers in Erranth?”

“Seventeen, sire, including four instructors, myself and my apprentice.”

“Only eleven all together?” Mo-Dahk looked surprised. “I didn’t know. I thought we had at least twice that many!”

“After the Uprising Of Kellorr, many Erranthans have discouraged their sons from attending the Halls of Discernment.” The king revealed.

“But that may change soon, yes?” Zowns grew intrigued. “Have we any good results from Arak’s Great Experiment yet?”

“Bah!” Branek brayed. “Arak has nothing but fantasies!”

“Is this true?” Lehnorack turned his large eyes toward the sorcerer.

“We have recovered a few promising artifacts.” Arak replied tactfully. “But we must have more time to study their properties.”

“What did I say?” Branek huffed. “He has nothing but empty wishes!”

“I am confident that the experiment will yield excellent results.” Arak said, ignoring the brute sitting next to him.

“Some Great Experiment.” Branek mocked. “More like a Great Failure.”

The sorcerer’s irritation with the guard was reaching the point of boiling. He could have brought up how a soldier had been struck and killed by a human weapon earlier, but then the king would demand to see it. Since Arak had no idea of how to work the device, he thought it best to avoid mentioning it until he had examined it further.

“Arak summoned two humans today.” Branek opened up the bag the sorcerer hoped to keep shut. “After a full day of trying, two humans is all he could manage. As happened the last time, the soldiers killed one. Arak, for all of his big talk, cannot even question this human, as the human speaks in a foreign tongue. I tell you, sire, the best thing you can do is to pull Arak away from his little boys’ game, and put him where he can use his weak magic to bolster our defenses.”

“One good success will change everything.” Arak said.

“First, Arak has us clear out the storage chamber beneath the castle, a chamber we use for storing dry food mind you, and he achieved nothing.” Branek kept pestering the sorcerer. “Today, Arak has pushed our warriors out of their training courtyard, and again, what was gained except a waste of time?”

“Enough, Branek, you have made your point.” Lehnorack said. “Arak, you have done what you could. Remove yourself from the courtyard and give it back to the soldiers who need it more than you. Your time will be better spent in preparing your magic against whatever energies the pigs will employ against our kingdom...”

(November 25, 2018, EARLY, 6:55 AM. I’m at 28% completion as I get started this morning. I was a little fed up last night, or maybe extra tired, enough that I stopped early. If that keeps happening, I may stick to working on this project only at night. Maybe it had something to do with a few tricky parts I had to rework to keep the continuity going with the previous novels in the series. Start time: 7:05 AM. I will be adding estimated population numbers in the notes section.)

...I want a schedule from you by the end of this day. In it, you will detail a strategy for defending the ports with magic, and a separate strategy for defending this castle. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sire.” Arak replied evenly, hoping no man present would sense his anger, or his contempt toward Branek.

“The king will likely be the main target,” Henchen expected. “If the pigs make it this far inland.”

“Will you travel abroad or stay here?” Zowns asked. “Will that blasted midget be in your place if you are gone, or one of the others?”

“If our sorcerers number so low, won’t most of them be assigned to healing the wounded?” Mo-Dahk figured. “We will have no defense at all against magical attacks!”

“I have much on my plate.” Arak muttered. “The schedule will be ready by night.”

“I hate to even bring this up.” Zowns fidgeted. “But, sire, have you a hierarchy in place, in the case you might fall?”

“Pray it doesn’t happen.” Mo-Dahk suspired. “We must make certain it doesn’t happen.”

“A contingency plan is still necessary.” The king admitted. “Make a separate note of this, Zowns. If I am killed or wounded beyond proper stability, Captain Gruhg will remain in charge of the castle’s defenses. General Essenek will take control over Vatra, while General Henchen will return to Erranth and temporarily take my throne.”

“I would do better to stay at the frontlines, sire.” Henchen replied.

“And what, have Essenek as king of the castle?” Mo-Dahk protested. “That greedy snake will sit here hoping the two of us are killed, if only he could keep himself in power!”

“Essenek has no battle experience.” Henchen reminded his counterpart. “What if he is too inept to hold the front, and the pigs barrel their way through until they are storming at our gates?”

“It would be a bad situation of Essenek were left in charge of the castle.” Zowns said. “What if Henchen and Essenek stay in their places, and Mo-Dahk temporarily takes the throne?”

Mo-Dahk looked skeptical. "Pulling me away from the Bear Lands will greatly reduce our patrols there, or even end them entirely. If I am not patrolling, the bears will run rampant, and if the bears run rampant, we will lose the already tenuous hold we have in that territory."

"You would rather patrol in the wilderness than defend the castle?" Zowns looked shocked.

"First, we must judge which is the larger threat." The king said. "If the pigs get past Triest, that would mean that Essenek has been defeated. If I am killed, Henchen may have his arms full already. I will suggest a compromise. Henchen will evacuate Vatra and camp his forces to the east of Erranth. Mo-Dahk, the bears may be aggressive towards your patrols, but they are not planning to invade us as the pigs are. You will bring your forces, and also all residents of Sendoah, and set up camp to the west of Erranth. My first choice to run the castle is Henchen, but if he is in the fight, and the fight is fierce, then Mo-Dahk can watch over Erranth and its castle as Henchen's subordinate."

"Temporary subordinate." Mo-Dahk grunted.

"Until the war against the pigs is over." Lehnorack nodded. "Once that is done, choose a new king in any way you wish. Our main goal should not be the mines in Kuy-Kuh or the timber in the Bear Lands, but the preservation of our people."

"You make it sound as if the war is already lost." Mo-Dahk worried.

"Nothing is lost yet." The king replied. "I simply do not wish to encounter any sudden surprises as I did during Kellorr's Uprising."

"I am hoping to receive scout reports soon." Henchen lamented. "So that we might have a better idea of how many will come against us. Essenek's human spies are not so dependable in their timeliness."

"And our sorcerers are still having trouble with their magical sight?" Zowns asked.

Every head turned toward Arak, except for Branek's, who sat there with his arms crossed and an irritated look in his square face.

"The pigs are using magic to cloak their advance." Arak divulged. "The psychic visions will not come in their usual manner."

"That was Kellorr's specialty, wasn't it?" Branek recalled. "To see into the future? A pity Arak hasn't half the ability Kellorr had."

"A premature judgment!" Zowns pointed at him. "Arak has been our Master Sorcerer for less than a year! Give him time to fill the role, man!"

"Kellorr would not only have known how many troops march against us," Branek kept up the banter. "But he would already have a plan in place, to keep those troops from reaching our valuable mines in Kuy-Kuh!"

The royal advisor was not to be shaken. "You seem to forget that Arak defeated Kellorr, despite his youth and inexperience."

"We sit here and bicker, while the enemy keeps marching." Lehnorack halted the spat. "You have your assignments. Those of you who will prepare schedules had best get started on them."

"Let any pig snort near one of our ports," Henchen menaced. "And he will find the cold steel of my sword looking for his neck!"

"We will skewer their fat bellies with our spears!" Mo-Dahk grew excited. "And right after, into the roasting pits with their bodies!"

“Old generals with weary bones in their backs.” Lehnorack teased. “Have you the strength for one more war?”

“We can still lift our swords, can’t we?” Mo-Dahk chuckled.

“As in the old times.” Henchen nodded. “I will fight to the east, while Mo-Dahk protects the west, and Lehnorack anchors down at the center. The mighty fist of Erranth will pound upon the heads of our enemies! Pig blood will flow all the way across the Gaudrian Ocean, back to where it came from!”

The excitable Zowns nearly fell out of his chair as he rose to his feet. “For the power and glory of Erranth!”

“Aye!” Henchen joined him. “For the power and glory of Erranth!”

In short time, every man was on the table repeating the motto.

Lehnorack looked ready to lead a charge, as he allowed the energy of the men fill up that side of the hall. Only when the fervor began to subside, did he utter words. “Branek, Arak, you have your duties. Aydirk, inform the royal kitchen that we will have a great feast tonight. The biggest boar we have will be its main dish! Prepare a list of guests. Only our most valued nobles will attend. Henchen, Mo-Dahk, join me in a tour of the castle grounds. Let us talk more of the old times!”

“The old times!” Henchen chuckled, patting the king’s shoulder. “How good they were to us!”

As the three military men walked away from the Table of Reckoning, Branek gave Arak an icy stare.

“Get on with it.” Aydirk told him, before he shuffled off toward the servant’s entrance. “The king will not hold back a second time, after the way you two louts burst in here earlier.”

Branek pointed at the sorcerer. “It is not done between you and I. I expect we will have our own reckoning, once this pig business is quelled.”

The guard turned on his heels, heading out at a brisk pace.

“I expect you’ll soon produce a schedule for me.” The king’s chief advisor said.

“Minos and Bizelle will head the minor sorcerers.” Arak said.

“You’re not sending that stunted little bastard?” Zowns looked irritated.

“What is this animosity between you and Fass?”

Zowns gave the sorcerer a hard look. “Minos and Bizelle; I will write that down. I expect a full schedule from you soon, as you have already chosen its leaders. No later than one or two hours.”

“As you say.” Arak bowed his head slightly in subservience.

When the advisor went to his scroll, the sorcerer turned and started away. Arak could have gone directly to the reserved area and teleported back to the courtyard. He felt like having a walk, to clear his mind of the bad success he had with the spell earlier, and also to absorb the news of pending war. Most of all, however, Arak wanted to know what the strife was between his First Apprentice and the Chief Advisor.

The thick gray cloud released Rex only a little at a time. After the beating he’d just gotten, and the adrenaline rush of whatever other weird shit was going on, the tagger’s body was sapped of energy. Rex dropped on warm grass, grass that had been heated up by sun, despite the late hour. Trying to gather his wits, Rex sat up. His arms, legs and

back, and even his head, were sore all over from the lopsided fight. Gradually, the gray wall around him lightened, but it was still too dense to see through.

“Warm grass.” Rex felt the soft blades under his palms. “How the heck is the grass warm when it has to be like nine or ten at night?”

He went as far as ripping out a handful, feeling it warm on top, but cooler below. Several coughs and grunts reminded the tagger that he was not alone. He couldn’t see the thugs that had jumped him, but they were close by.

“What is this shit?” A rough voice called out. “Fucking fire or what?”

“It doesn’t smell like smoke.” Another gang member answered. “This shit smells like... I don’t know, like a hospital or something.”

Quietly, Rex had a sniff at the air. The smell was ozone, like after a thunderstorm.

“This shit grabbed my arms and legs!” A third thug growled. “And now it’s letting me go! What is it?”

“It couldn’t have been this smoke. Maybe one of those punks grabbed you, but not the smoke. Smoke can’t grab anything.”

“I’m telling you, it was the smoke!”

“It was the smoke, fool. I felt it, too.”

“You two numbskulls don’t know shit. Smoke can’t grab anything!”

Not a good idea to hang out there, Rex figured. He should grab Acer and Merlin and get the hell out! The fog had cleared to where he could see a couple of feet around him. The youth stood up, keeping his noise down, and tried to calculate where he’d last seen Acer. He took about three steps, when he nearly bumped into a thug standing before him.

The gang member was stocky, slightly shorter than Rex. He wore the same dark clothes his buddies had on.

“Is this tear gas?” A hidden form called out.

“No, it isn’t fucking tear gas.” The thug in front of Rex answered. “Do you have tears in your eyes, asshole? This is something else.” To the tagger, he said, “Did you do this? Like a smoke grenade or something?”

“You mean the fog?” Rex shook his head. “No, I didn’t do it.”

“Well, if it wasn’t you punks, it was somebody else.” The thug decided. “Anybody see any cops coming into the park?”

Two voices, then three, called out that they hadn’t.

The thug looked back at Rex. “You sure you don’t know what happened?”

“No, I was busy getting my ass kicked!” Rex snarled back.

“That’s what you get for spraying in our park. Nobody gave you permission to do that.”

“We’re just taggers, man!” Rex shouted.

“Sucks to be you.” The thug laughed.

Rex curled his fingers into fists, ready to brawl again, when a second gang member stepped over to stand next to the first one. Knowing he and his buddies were severely outnumbered, he changed his strategy. “All right, so you kicked our butts and you took our spray cans. How about you let us walk?”

A breeze started up around them. At first, it lightly brushed against their clothes, but it picked up strength until Rex squinted.

“I think it’s daytime.” The second thug commented, as he looked around at the brightening cloud.

“How the fuck can it be daytime?” The first thug questioned.

The fog swept by them. It reduced in size, as if an invisible vacuum cleaner were sucking it all up. In mere seconds, the fog swirled around in a spiral, like a flushing toilet, until it vanished completely.

“No shit.” The first thug looked up at the sky. “It is daytime.”

When Rex spotted Acer, he hurried around the gang members. “You all right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Acer nodded. He was standing up, with a third thug nearby, gawking off in the distance. “Look at those monsters, Rex.”

The youth was so engrossed with the fog and warm day, that he still hadn’t figured out they were no longer in Southcrest Park. Barely, he began to fathom the enclosed space with walls made of large stone bricks, and the men standing on the walkway up top, who looked like medieval soldiers. After a second glance, he saw they weren’t men, but men with ugly green faces.

“Acer, what am I looking at?” Rex asked.

“Lizards that look like people.” His companion answered. “Or maybe dinosaurs with arms and legs like us.”

“Fuck.” Rex gasped in awe. He scanned the area where he stood. He and Acer were standing next to each other, while the three thugs were a few yards away. Further to one side were four other gang members, and his other friend lying on the grass.

“Merlin!” Rex called out, starting toward his friend.

Acer kept up.

“Merlin!” Rex repeated, the moment he reached the tagger. Merlin had his hands on his ribs, wincing from obvious pain. “Are you okay?”

Merlin shook his head. “It fucking hurts!”

“We’ll get you to a hospital!”

“What fucking hospital, Rex?” Acer asked. “Damn, Merlin! Did you cover your face even once?”

Rex dropped to his knees, tugging at his friend’s arm. “Come on. We’ll get to a phone and call an ambulance. They’ll take care of you.”

“Ow, ow, it hurts!” Merlin squealed.

“Rex, those dinosaurs are coming!” Acer warned.

The tagger looked away, watching as the medieval monstrosities trotted down wooden steps to reach the grass. One of them barked, and the bark was repeated. At nearly the same time, the weird men drew their swords and began to creep toward the small mob of youths. As Rex scanned the space they were in, he counted six or eight of those men, all of them armed and poised to strike.

Two of the gang members that had been beating on Merlin ran off, toward the widest gap between the dinosaur men. Unexpectedly, a new creature, half the size of the others, appeared before them. The creature wore a green dress, Rex saw. It lifted its arm, causing an invisible force to knock the thugs onto their backs.

“Hey, hey!” The stouter gang member called out to them. “Don’t run! Come back over here with the rest of us!”

The thugs didn’t listen. They ran in another direction, away from the small one that floated in the air. This put the youths closer to the armed men. Before they could run past, the dinosaurs sliced out with their swords. The weapons were aimed at the thighs, Rex witnessed. Both thugs fell over, clutching at their legs. The dinosaur men loomed over

them, as they tried to crawl away. Rex and the rest watched as the dinosaurs plunged their swords into the middles of the young men.

“Oh, shit!” A thug cried out.

“Rex, did you see that?” Acer asked.

“What?” Merlin asked. “What’s going on?”

No words came to Rex, to describe the savage murders he’d just seen.

“The dinosaurs just killed two Dukes.” Acer said.

“Why?” Merlin cried out. “Are they going to kill us too?”

“I don’t know, man.” Acer shook his head.

This time, Rex saw the green man grunting out the orders. The six armed men kept their attention on the youths, as they closed in.

“Dukes, come in closer!” The stout thug shouted. “Hurry up! Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head, just like we do when the cops come around!”

As Rex and Acer watched, the Dukes followed the command. After losing two thugs, five of them were left.

“Should we do the same thing?” Acer asked.

Rex considered the approaching swords. “Yeah, I guess.”

The thugs were in a state of emotional disarray. A couple of them looked ready to take to their feet and run off, except they’d seen what happened to their homeboys. The rest looked to their sides nervously, as the dinosaur men kept moving closer and closer. Of the five Dukes, the thickest of the bunch looked to be the most composed.

“Acer, you see that Duke?” Rex said. “The one who is all calm and collected. Imitate that guy. Don’t look scared like the rest of them. Don’t look like you’re about to run.”

“I’m not running!” Acer denied. “I don’t want to get stabbed to death!”

“This can’t be real!” Merlin whimpered. “No way this is real!”

“Merlin, I know you’re hurting, but you have to stay quiet.” Rex warned.

“All right, all right, I’ll be quiet. But my stomach hurts, a lot!”

Rex was about to mention the hospital again, except Acer was right. They weren’t at the park anymore but somewhere else, a place where it was normal to have guys that looked like dinosaurs walking around, holding swords. He caught a few words from the thugs. One of them was convinced the dinosaurs were really men wearing monster suits, and the swords were fake. The stout thug pointed out how two Dukes had already been killed, but the other teen refused to accept that.

“Don’t run!” The gang member snapped. “If you do, they’ll probably kill all of us! Just stare down at the grass and pretend you’re having a nightmare! Pretend you’ll wake up in a couple of hours!”

“They’ll probably kill us anyway.” Another thug said.

“You got any better ideas? If no, then shut up and do what I told you!”

The dinosaurs didn’t look as tense now, Rex observed. Their approach was still guarded, but at least they weren’t showing teeth like before.

(November 25, 2018, LATE, 8:50 PM. Started off a little late tonight. I’m going to be writing a few articles on controversial subjects in the mornings, I think, that I’ll be posting on my Truth site and my e-zine Verum Et Inventa. Earlier, I was busy sorting out videos I’ll be including as sources for the articles. So, I’ll reread the last page to get

myself back into the groove, then I'll take a 5 minute break or so before I start writing. Official Word Count is at 31%. For music, I'm playing The Lord Of The Rings 3 soundtrack. Start time: 9:07 PM. End time: 10:59 PM.)

"Yeah, let's just do what the Dukes are doing." Rex nervously told the taggers.

They couldn't help but shudder when the green men loomed close enough to stab them. One of the dinosaur-men looked more aged and scarred than the rest. He barked out like a dog with a hoarse throat, prompting the others to reorganize themselves. The others went to split up, with one standing beside or behind either a tagger or a Duke. With the swords ready to strike, each dinosaur grabbed a young man's arm and yanked him up to his feet. The only one spared was Merlin, as he was still lying on his back.

"Wait!" Rex cried out. "My friend his hurt! We need to take him to a hospital! He's hurt really bad!"

The green man holding him barked and coughed in a language Rex couldn't even begin to understand. Rex tried pulling away to protect Merlin, until the tip of the green man's sword came in close to his neck.

"He's my friend!" Rex pleaded. "He's already hurt! You'll make it even worse if you start jerking him around!"

The small one in the green robe floated over, a full three feet off the ground. He gazed at Rex for a moment, before he scrutinized the fallen Merlin and his pained face. The small one pointed at Rex and made several grunts.

"I don't know what you're saying." Rex shook his head. "All I know is my friend is hurt! I have to help him!"

The small one barked at the old one, who in turn barked at the rest. They were soldiers, Rex decided, as they lined up into a single column, with their hands still gripped on their human captives. That's what they were now, Rex realized. They were captives because they'd just been captured. The small one gestured at the old one. This time, when the old one passed the orders along, the others began a march, with the old one taking up a pace beside the procession.

"Where are they taking Acer?" Merlin groaned. "Are they going to kill us?"

"I hope not." Rex said, looking over at the soldier still holding his arm.

When the small one barked at Rex's captor, the green man yanked on his arm hard enough to make him fall to the ground. Rex looked up at the soldier, worried that a sword was headed his way, but no, the soldier simply stood there glaring at him.

"Okay, so you want me to sit down." Rex nodded. "I'll stay right here. Don't worry about me running away, because I'm not going to."

"Where the hell are we?" Merlin asked.

"No idea." Rex frowned.

Both Rex and Merlin cringed when the small one came to hover near the fallen youth. The small one descended until his feet were on the grass, before he motioned to the single soldier that remained. The soldier turned aside and barked. At the end of the small field, another green man stood. He went to pick up a bucket and quickly made his way over. Rex thought this new green man looked different than the rest. It took him a couple of minutes to figure out he was either a rookie or young. The green man took a large wooden spoon out of the bucket and set it close to Merlin's lips.

"Should I drink it?" Merlin asked.

“I don’t know.” Rex said. “I guess.”

Merlin took a few sips. “It’s cold. I mean really cold, like it just came out of the freezer.”

The little one sounded off another collection of grunts, his eyes set on Merlin.

“I don’t know what he wants.” Merlin looked to his friend.

“I don’t either.” Rex shook his head.

Merlin was full of bruises. The little one reached out, touching one bruise at a time, starting with Merlin’s arms before moving over to his face and head. Merlin tried to avoid the thick hand with its scales and big fingernails, but the small one kept probing around. Finally, the robed creatures started touching Merlin’s chest and stomach. When he pressed on Merlin’s ribcage, the youth cried out in pain.

“You’re hurting him!” Rex shouted.

The small one looked at Rex with his strange eyes, making the teen nervous. He decided he’d better shut up, or else something bad might happen to him. The small one then spoke to the soldier holding Rex. The result was that Rex got yanked up to his feet again, as if he were about to be led out.

“No, wait!” He protested. “I want to stay with my friend!”

Before his eyes, the small one reached out to grasp Merlin’s forearm. A blink of an eye later, and they both vanished. It happened so fast all he could do was flinch.

Rex looked at the green man who’d brought water, but that creature was staring at Rex as if the tagger was the weird one. A moment later, the soldier was pulling Rex along, leading him out of the enclosed field.

“This place is fucking crazy.” He mumbled.

Rex was taken through a gate. Just outside, he witnessed the biggest bull he’d ever seen. The animal had massive horns, as long as his arms, and its front legs and chest were full of muscle. In movies, Rex had seen bulls or oxen pulling carts, but this creature was so big it could have pulled a dump truck. The bull was placid as could be, as it merely stood there and watched the soldier dragging Rex along with eyes the size of his fists.

He’d just gotten over the giant bull, when he started to notice all sorts of other things. The reptile people were everywhere. He counted a dozen or more milling about, wearing human-style clothing that he guessed were from the Middle Ages. The males wore tunics in brown or green, and pants in darker shades. The females, and he guessed they were females, wore dresses and aprons in lighter colors, such as sky blue or bright yellow. If it were not for the colors, he wouldn’t have been able to tell the men from the women, as to him, they looked exactly the same. He even saw little reptilian children, but their sexes were tougher to distinguish than the adults. The little ones only wore tunics in forest colors, hand me downs or patched up, as if their parents didn’t buy them any new clothing. Many of the adults wore silver jewelry: necklaces with gemstone pendants and rings, mostly, but some had earrings and bracelets as well.

Rex had never seen a castle in real life before, but here he had one looming right over his head. It had a huge wall, maybe fifty feet tall, with crenellations at the highest edge. The wall had very few windows. They were very small and started only at about the third floor. As he was led along, he saw several purple banners with a strange O symbol on them.

Two reptilians dressed like monks, in brown robes, paused to ask the soldier a question. They barked at each other, before the soldier gave one final grunt and got

moving again. They entered the castle through a small archway with its large wooden door pulled wide open. Reptilian people were coming and going, as if this were a busy street. Inside the archway, a dark corridor started up.

As Rex's eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting, it came from flaming torches mounted on the walls, he discerned a bit more about the reptilian crowd. Their heads and faces had no hair. The males and females, again, to his eyes looked identical. He saw a wider range of clothing on both. The men in the castle sometimes wore capes, cloaks and vests. The women had on shawls or dresses with very droopy sleeves. Rex stared at two women a few moments too long, looking for womanly curves, but they had none. Those women stared at him the same way, as if he was also a curiosity. Rex wondered if they thought he was as repulsive as they looked to his eyes. The soldiers dressed in royal blue, he noticed, and when they passed each other, they would grunt or tap their chests with their big, scaled fists. They were the only people he saw with swords.

Rex was just coming to the conclusion that the reptilians had social classes, when the soldier pulled him into a spiraling staircase. The stairs were so narrow only half of his feet fit on them, and the walls were so close they almost rubbed his arms on both sides. He had to walk ahead of the soldier, on his tiptoes almost. They went up one long flight, and then another. If he could assume the castle had four floors to it, they ended up on the third. When they reached the landing, Rex stepped out, expecting the soldier to grasp his arm again. Instead, as if the reptilian had no fear of him trying to escape, the soldier went ahead. Because he felt he had no choice, Rex followed. It wasn't like he could hide among the crowd, anyway.

"Rich people and poor people walk around inside the castle, but only poor people walk outside." Rex surmised. "I haven't seen any kids in the castle, either."

The soldier paused to knock on a wide wooden door with black iron hinges. He didn't wait for a reply before opening it. A quick glance informed Rex he'd better follow. When he stepped inside, he observed a wide chamber of some twenty feet by forty feet. The last ten feet were cut off from the rest by black iron bars stretching out from the floor to the ceiling. Acer was in there, standing to one side, while the five Dukes were taking up most of the rest of the cell. Rex's escort waved him toward the cell door, which stood wide open. Again, the youth didn't think he had much choice, so he voluntarily walked inside.

"Where's Merlin?" Acer asked.

"I don't know." Rex shrugged. "The little guy took him somewhere."

"They didn't kill Merlin?"

"No."

"They didn't eat him?"

"No."

"I thought for sure they were going to do something to him." Acer suspired. "This is a dream, right? A bad dream that we're going to wake out of in a little while?"

Rex frowned. "I don't know what the hell this is."

"You scared?"

Rex nodded. He glanced at the gang members, but they all looked to be sulking in their own thoughts. Next, Rex looked out of their cell. The chamber had several bookshelves lined up against the widest wall, each one a good eight feet high and full of old books. The center of the chamber had several benches that Rex thought looked like

church pews. Four soldiers and one man in a brown robe were seated there, speaking to each other. At the far end of the chamber, Rex saw two wide tables made of wood. He shuddered to think that they might be dissection tables, and that he and his fellows were going to be cut apart in a little while.

“This is like a classroom, right?” Acer wondered.

Rex didn’t reveal his suspicions that it might be for a biology class. He glanced at the Dukes, seeing that the stocky one was watching he and Acer.

“This ain’t a dream.” The thug said.

“How do you know?” Acer asked. “Maybe that gray fog put us to sleep somehow.”

“We can’t all be having the same dream. That’s impossible.”

“What about a mass hallucination.” Acer considered. “Those are possible, right, Rex?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Rex nodded.

“I just watched two of my homies die.” The thug said. “They died for real.”

“You didn’t have to beat the shit out of us!” Acer scolded.

“You came into our park at night, and you sprayed up our rec. center. Maybe you don’t know how things work in Stoner Town.”

Acer looked ready to start up another fight, so Rex cut him off. “Just chill out for now, until we figure out what is going on.” To the thug, he asked, “Do you think they’re going to eat us?”

“If they were, we should be in the kitchen right now, getting our necks snapped like a chicken. I think they want to keep us alive for something else.”

(November 26, 2018, 8:35 PM. I deleted the italicized section and read through the last page. This project is 33% complete, which is awesome pace, by the way. Okay, I’m ready to write now. Start time: 8:40 PM. Oh, and tonight’s audio is 2 Hours Of Celtic Music by Adrian Von Ziegler. End time: 11:00 PM.)

Rex wondered if he should keep talking to the gang member or not. He grew a little worried when the four soldiers and one monk-guy strode over to their cell. Since he was the closest to the door, a soldier stepped inside and began grunting at him.

“I don’t know what you want.” Rex cringed.

The soldiers grunted at each other for a few seconds, before the one inside the cell grasped him by the arm and pulled him out.

“Don’t eat me!” Rex worried.

While one soldier held the handle of his sword, another started pulling on his shirt. It didn’t take long for Rex to understand they wanted him to take it off. When he pulled it off, the soldier started tugging at his pants.

“Shit.” Rex grumbled. “Are you serious?”

When the soldiers started growling at him, he gave up. That wasn’t enough, apparently, as they kept tugging at everything else he had on until he was buck-naked. All of his clothes were piled onto one of the pews. Next, the monk with the brown robe came in closer to inspect Rex’s nude frame. The monk looked especially interested in the young man’s bruises. He poked at them with his fat finger and long claw, causing Rex to wince every time.

“It hurts, you know.” Rex managed.

The monk started grunting at him, but all Rex did was shrug back.

“I still don’t know what you’re saying.”

The monk grabbed at Rex’s arm, right where he had a red mark from some Duke stomp. The moment the tagger felt his arm getting hot, he jerked it free. The monk barked at him, before he motioned for a soldier to grab Rex and hold him in place. It was already embarrassing enough to stand there naked, and now he had this big, green man grabbing him on top. The soldier holding him must have been five times stronger than Rex, as the teenager could barely budge. The heat on his bruise started up again, making his body hot, and as it continued his head felt sweaty and feverish.

“They’re going to fucking eat me!” Rex feared. “They’re going to cook me first, and then they’re going to eat me!”

The monk held his arm for a couple of minutes, before he released it and put his scaly hand on another of Rex’s many discolorations. The same process followed, with a great heat ebbing from the youth’s body for about two minutes, before the monk moved on to another bruise.

“Does it hurt?” Acer asked.

“No, not really.” Rex shook his head. “It just gets really hot. I need some water.”

One of his bruises started itching. When Rex moved to scratch it, the monk barked at him until he took his hand away.

“I can’t even touch my own body now?” He asked.

In response, the soldier pushed him back into the cell.

“Excuse me, but can I have my clothes back?”

The soldier ignored him, reaching out to grab Acer’s arm next. For a short second, Rex could have grabbed the soldier’s sword. Since he wouldn’t know what to do with it if he did, he let the chance pass him by. Acer was taken out of the cell, where the soldiers started making him undress too.

Rex grimaced at the Dukes. “I guess they’re doing that to all of us.”

“They’re not taking my clothes!” One of the thugs snapped. “Fuck that!”

The thick-bodied gang member, the calmest of the bunch, went to stand by the door, keeping a close eye on Acer as he stripped.

“Stop looking at me, dick.” Acer grumbled.

Undeterred, the gang member kept watching until Acer got down to his briefs. At that point, he strolled back to confer with the other Dukes. “Listen up. I’m thinking these lizard guys are going to get all of us naked. How about we take our clothes off now, so when they get to us we won’t have worry about it?”

“I’m not doing it.” A thug refused.

“You’ve got a head, right?” The stouter gang member asked. “How about you use it for once? I’ve got a blade on me. If I leave it in my clothes, they’re going to take it away and then I won’t have shit. I know you guys have something on you. If we strip our clothes ahead of time, we can hide our stuff by sitting on it. They’re taking us out of the cell one by one, right, so that means somebody can sit on our stuff the whole time.”

“I’ve got a blade, too.” One of the other Dukes said.

“What about the rest of you?”

None of the others were armed. All they had on them were a couple of lighters, two joints and half a pack of cigarettes.

The entire cell was wide open, Rex noted, as the thugs looked for a good place to stash their contraband. When they started undressing, the hefty one turned toward Rex.

"These lizards might pull us out at random." He said. "But they already checked you. Why don't you come sit on our stuff?"

"No thanks." Rex said.

"All right, how about this? If you don't do it, the second they close this cell back up, we're going to dog-pile on your ass."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'll fight you one on one, if you have the balls."

"You're looking at them, aren't you?"

Repulsed, Rex turned around, only to see Acer standing there in his birthday suit. He mumbled, "Great."

"You got a plan to get out of there?" The gang member asked.

"No!" Rex snapped back.

"Well, I do, and it starts with these two knives we got. If you don't help us, we'll get out and we'll leave you and that other asshole in here. You saw what happened to my two homies. These lizards want something from us, or else they would have hurt us already. When they get what they want, guess what? They won't need us anymore."

Rex didn't like that he was standing naked in a cell with five other naked men. He liked it even less that the thug might be right. "Fine, I'll do it."

"So come sit over here and pretend you're my girlfriend."

A couple of Dukes laughed when they heard that. Rex glowered.

"You've got long hair, don't you?" The thug goaded. "Just let your hair down, and you can be my little bitch."

This time, they all laughed.

The soldiers were grunting at Acer, Rex noticed.

"Hey, I'm not fucking around anymore." The thug changed his tone. "Come and sit over here before they bring that asshole back."

In resignation, Rex walked over. He'd just taken a seat on the contraband when Acer was led back in.

"Asshole number two, go sit down next to asshole number one." The thug ordered.

When the soldiers went to grab the next man, he saw all five Dukes standing up with their clothes in their arms. Rex assumed the soldier would take the nearest thug, who was the bigmouth, but the tagger was wrong. The soldier took a good look at all five youths, before he chose one from the middle and led him out.

"The rest of you keep standing." The stout thug said. "We can only sit down after we've been checked. Nobody talks back and nobody gets froggy. Just do like they tell us. We'll figure out a plan later."

The rest of the Dukes were meandering through the cell or looking out at their homie, while hoping things didn't get any worse.

"Are you fucking listening to me?" The thug lashed out.

This time, the rest nodded or said something.

The thug watched the soldiers for a couple of minutes. They were doing the same thing to the Duke as they had to the pair of taggers; checking his body for injuries, or just looking him over. The soldiers were paying close attention to the Duke's tats. After this, when the monk took over, the thug looked at the taggers.

"Let's start over from the beginning." He said. "We'll call it a truce, all right?"

“We don’t want a truce with you.” Acer made a face.

“Sure you do.” The thug nodded. “You remember a couple of years back, when the Do It Yourself Warehouse disappeared? What if these are the guys that took it?”

“You don’t know that.” Rex said.

“I don’t.” The thug agreed. “But what a coincidence, right? A couple of years ago, what was it, four or five places disappeared and they never came back. And just last week some lady in East Side disappeared while she was driving her car. One of her neighbors saw it.”

“When did that happen?” Rex inquired. “I didn’t hear about it!”

“Just a couple days ago.” The thug replied. “Don’t you watch the fucking news? This lady got into this big fight at a video store, and then she got in her car and right before she got home, this big, gray fog took her and her car. They showed the surveillance cam from the store and everything.”

“Like the fog that got us?” Acer asked. “I swear, that fog was pulling me!”

“Those people that were taken never came back.” The thug emphasized. “There is a good chance we won’t be able to go back either. So, truce or no truce?”

Uncertain, Acer looked to Rex.

“Okay, we’ll have a truce.” Rex relented. “All I remember was the warehouse going missing. You’re saying there were more places than that?”

“Yeah. You remember the Do It Yourself place because that happened in our neighborhood. A liquor store disappeared too, and a couple houses, but those places went missing from somewhere else.”

“Damn!” Acer griped. “We could be gone from home... like forever?”

“That’s my guess.” The thug replied. “Maybe those people that disappeared, maybe they got eaten like you guys said. I don’t know. All I know is that I’m not sitting in any fucking cell waiting for them to stuff me and toss me into an oven. If I have a chance to break out of here, I’m going to take it.”

“Rex, do you think we were taken, like those other people were?” Acer worried.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Damn!”

The soldiers brought the Duke back into the cell. This time, the hefty thug picked up his clothes and went to stand right by the door. A soldier stared at him, not liking how willing the thug was, and he walked around to choose somebody else.

“That’s twice that I was standing closest to the door, and they passed me over both times.” The thug realized. He told the gang member who’d just come in to go sit with the taggers, before he spoke to them directly. “You said RTD, right? What does that stand for again?”

“Roll Them Dice.” Rex mumbled.

“And what do they call you?”

“Rex, and this is Acer.”

“We live in Stoner Town.” Acer added. “We didn’t deserve to get jumped like that!”

“Yeah, well next time ask permission before you go tagging in our park.” The thug growled back. “Anyway, I’m Bulldog. That punk sitting next to you is Vamps. Waiting their turn are Manny and Slam.” He motioned outside the cell. “That other punk out there, that’s Wolfie.”

“Stoner Town Dukes Gang, and fuck the rest.” Manny said.

“What about the other two Dukes?” Rex wondered. “The two that got taken down. What were their names?”

Bulldog’s expression became somber. He opened his mouth to answer, but then he thought twice about it and went back to looking out the cell. “Don’t worry about it.”

Hopefully, Rex considered, they wouldn’t get beat up by the Dukes again. Beside him, Acer introduced himself to Vamps, before the two shook hands.

It was a slow process, Rex noted, until the examinations were done and they were all back in the cell again.

(November 27, 2018, EARLY, 6:31 AM. Made some minor changes to the characters page. Let me take a break, so I can figure out how I want to structure the next few pages. This is going to be tedious. Start time: 6:55 AM. At 10:25, I deleted the Wront Place, Wrong Time heading. The only heading I am leaving is The Great Experiment at the start. This novel will probably only have to major parts, the experiment and the war with the pigs.)

At least an hour passed, maybe more, before the soldiers returned to rouse them up again. It was the same as before: four soldiers and one monk in a brown robe. They drew the humans out of the cell one at a time and lined them up in a column. Bulldog made sure Rex and Acer were the first two in the procession. Whatever was going to happen, he hoped to have time to react to it.

With one soldier up front, a second behind, and the last two on either side, the group was marched out of the chamber and into the shadowy corridor. The monk roamed back and forth, keeping a close watch on all of the humans.

They didn’t go very far; only about thirty feet, when the soldiers stopped and prodded the humans to stand next to the wall. Rex shivered as his bare shoulders and back touched it, discovering it was cool and almost cold. Torches that had a strong, ugly smell to them, like a room full of cooking meat, lit up the large stone blocks that made up the wall.

The soldier up front barked at Rex and motioned for him to move forward. Rex saw a narrow doorway with the door propped open; it swung inward, before the soldier put his hand on Rex’s shoulder and prodded him in. The young man stepped into a tight and stinky little room, hardly bigger than his closet back home. The room was dark, with its only light coming from the torches out in the corridor. There were no decorations at all inside of it, only a stone bench with a thick wooden lid, and on that lid, two large circles had been cut out.

Acer was pushed in right after. “What is this place?”

“I think it’s the toilet.” Rex answered.

Acer gazed down at the circular cutouts, grimacing when he saw a cobweb in the nearby corner. “This place really stinks, but, man, I’ve been holding it ever since we got here. I don’t see any toilet paper.”

Rex had a look around. He found a wooden bucket half full of water, with a long-handled brush coming out of it. With his leg, he slid the bucket away from the wall, only to start when he saw a large cockroach scurrying away from behind it. “Maybe they don’t use toilet paper here.”

“You serious? What a bunch of dicks! I have to go, Rex. I’ve been holding it for too long.” He looked at the hole again. “I hope no fucking spider comes out to bite me.”

Acer sat down and started doing his business. He complained about his stomach hurting and how he had diarrhea. When the smell reached his nostrils, Rex felt like walking out. He wanted to be stubborn and hold his bowels, but they didn’t have anything like a toilet back in the cell. For that reason, he sat down and did what he had to do. Rex pulled the brush out of the water bucket, seeing that it had wet rags tied around its end. That thing looked pretty bad from previous usage, but since he’d rather use it now than after Acer, he wiped his butt with it. His body was already cool thanks to the dank atmosphere, and now his ass was freezing!

“I’ll see you outside.” Rex said.

The soldier motioned him to walk across the corridor, a distance of only about ten feet. Another soldier told Rex where to stand. He was starting a new column, apparently. Bulldog was next in line. He went into the toilet room, spent only a couple of minutes in there, and strode out. Bulldog was put in line next to Rex.

“Damn.” He said. “Good think I only had to take a leak. When we get back into our cell, we have to hurry over and sit on our stuff. I don’t want these lizards to take it.”

“You think they’ll take us back there?” Rex wondered.

“Where else? It’s either that or the kitchen, right?”

“Man, I hope it’s not the kitchen.”

“If it is, you’d better be ready to fight.” Bulldog told him. “These lizards are way stronger than us. You grab whatever you can and you hit them as hard as you can.”

Rex nodded back, but inside, he wasn’t sure if he could do it. He didn’t want to be hacked up by swords, like those two Dukes had.

The lizards kept the formation tight, as they didn’t allow Acer to take his former place. About half of their group had their chance to use the toilet, when another squad of soldiers came by. Two soldiers had a nude black man between them. The man was nervous, holding his clothing in his arms, and looked even more nervous when he saw Rex and the others. Another lizard carried Merlin over his shoulder, as if the teen was unconscious, or dead, Rex gulped. Soldiers from both squads barked and grunted at each other, with the monk listening intently to what was said. The black man was taken to the end of the toilet line, while Merlin was carried into the chamber they’d just left.

“I guess we’re going back in there.” Bulldog assumed.

“How long do you think they’ll keep us?” Rex wondered.

“Shit, I don’t know.”

Rex noticed the thug was staring at him. “What?”

“Look at your bruises. They’re going away.”

Rex scrutinized his red welts, discovering it was true. His bruises were already turning brown. He looked over at Acer, seeing that the same thing was happening to him. “Hey, Acer. Check your bruises, man. They’re healing already!”

“Not by themselves.” Bulldog cut in. “It was that lizard in the brown dress. I think he healed your guys. Maybe he healed all of us.”

“I thought it was a dress at first.” Rex admitted. “But it isn’t. It’s like a robe, like something a monk would wear.”

“A healing monk? Like in a video game?”

“I guess.” Rex shrugged.

Bulldog was curious enough to pass the word down the line. The Dukes hadn't gotten any bruises, except maybe on their knuckles. Their old scars were still there. When two soldiers came by to listen to them, the humans clammed up.

They were taken back into the chamber, and into the cell.

Rex stood near the door, watching as the limp Merlin was stretched out on one of the two wooden tables. His stomach knotted up, as he wondered if the lizards were about to dissect his friend. Thankfully, they didn't start cutting him open, or anything like that.

Strangely enough, the soldiers started playing a game with some kind of wooden, multi-sided dice. They each took turns throwing the dice onto the second table. By that time, both squads of lizards were in the chamber, a total of seven guards for the seven prisoners, not including the monk who stood nearby watching. The three lizards that won the dice game left, while the four that lost groaned and took their seats. From the looks of it, they'd just decided who was going to keep watching over the humans.

"They play dice." Bulldog commented.

"So?" Rex asked.

"So maybe we can use that later, to help us get out of here." The gang member said, making an impatient face at the tagger. Next, he turned to the young black man, who was sitting in a corner and eying everyone with an anxious look. "Hey, what's your story? How did you get here?"

The black man gaped back at him.

"Can you speak English?" Bulldog pressed. "What's your name?"

The man grew even more reluctant, as now everyone in the cell was looking at him. "Mu-Moses."

"That's a start. Keep it going. What happened that made you end up here?"

"Are you guys real?" Moses asked.

Bulldog looked back at his homies, and then at Rex, before he addressed the black man again. "Are you drugged out?"

Moses shook his head. "No. The cops used this crazy gas on us. It made us see things different. The cops didn't look normal. They were green and looked like dragons or some shit."

"You got here with somebody else?"

"Yeah, this guy Bryan." Moses nodded. "He didn't make it. The cops... I guess they shot him. Bryan fucked up because he shot one of them. I just dropped my gun because I got scared. Everything looks so crazy here! We're in jail, right? We got picked up in a cop car and taken to jail, and now we're in the tank?"

"You've got to tell us where you were and how it happened." Bulldog tried again.

Moses face grew suspicious. "Are you a cop? Are you an informant?"

Bulldog laughed. "Hell no, I'm not a cop! Wolfie, tell this fool who we are."

"Stoner Town Dukes!" The young ruffian claimed. "Southeast controllin,' five-oh keep on rolling!"

"Dukes?" Moses replied. "Yeah, we've got a peace treaty with the Dukes. I'm with the Tray-Eight Street Bloods."

"We know all kinds of Bloods." Bulldog revealed. "John-John, Sohog... We were smoking blunts earlier that we got from Red. You know Red, right?"

"Yeah, yeah." Moses nodded. "Everybody knows Red."

“How about I go first?” Bulldog decided. “Most of these guys are Dukes. We were smoking out at Southcrest, right, when these taggers came along and sprayed up the fucking rec. center. These dumb ass taggers should know better, but they went ahead and did it anyway...”

“You didn’t have to jump us!” Acer snapped.

Rex reached out to grasp his friend’s arm. “Just let him talk. We’re trying to figure shit out, okay?”

When Bulldog saw he wouldn’t be interrupted again, he continued. “We jumped the taggers for being stupid. And then this gray shit came down on all of us. When it cleared out, we were here and it wasn’t nighttime anymore. Two Dukes got taken out, not by guns, but by fucking swords. I don’t think that gray shit made us hallucinate. I think it took us out of Stoner Town and brought us somewhere else.”

“As far as I can tell, all of that sounds right.” Rex added. “My boys and I did go to the park, and we did tag up the rec. center. Just like he said, we got jumped by the Dukes and then the gray cloud came and took us, and brought us here. That guy on the table over there,” Rex motioned across the chamber. “He was with us.”

“The lizard-men were healing them.” Moses said. “Did you see the little one that floats in the air? He put his hands on that kid, and it was like the kid’s entire body started glowing. The kid was groaning and squirming around. I guess it was too much and he passed out.”

“We saw the little one.” Rex nodded. He pointed again, this time at the monk in the brown robe. “That guy healed us. I had all these marks on me, from when the Dukes jumped us, but they’re going away already. They don’t even hurt right now. They’re just itchy.”

“You remember when the home improvement store disappeared?” Bulldog asked.

“Yeah.” Moses nodded.

“We think that’s what happened to us. We think we were taken away like that. It might help if we knew what happened to you, and how you got here.”

“This is like a nightmare.” Moses griped. “I just wish it was over. I have never seen the shit that I’m seeing now!” The black man saw that everyone was still waiting for his answer. “All right. My man Bryan and I hit a liquor store. Bryan was supposed to grab the money while I watched the door. I don’t know what set Bryan off, but started popping bullets at the clerks. When we ran out of the store, we went right into the gray fog.”

“What liquor store?” Bulldog asked.

“Johnny’s, off of Ocean View.”

“That’s like two blocks away from my house!” Acer exclaimed.

“What time was it?” Bulldog urged.

“Uh, after eight, I think. Before nine.”

“And we got to the park at close to ten.” Rex remembered.

“Robbing a liquor store on Ocean View, and an hour, hour and a half later, at Southcrest Park.” Bulldog considered. “What happened next?”

“When the fog cleared, Bryan and I were in a courtyard. He was still itchy to shoot at somebody, so he shot at what I thought was a cop. I don’t know where it came from, but this crazy wind knocked Bryan on his back. That’s when the other cops, or dragon-men or whatever, came over and killed him with swords.”

“Let’s just call them lizards.” Bulldog suggested.

“After Bryan was dead, they walked me out of the courtyard and into this castle. They took me to this room. It’s the same layout like this one, but it has two jail cells instead of one. They put me in one...” He paused, looking from Bulldog’s face to Rex’s. “You’re not going to believe me.”

“What?” Rex asked. “What did you see?”

“In the other cell, I saw a tiger.” Moses said, pausing to gauge his audience’s reaction. “It was huge, bigger than me. It was walking around in the cell, but when I got put into the next cell over, it came over and sniffed at me. That was bad enough, right? Having a big-ass tiger sniffing at you like it’s wondering what you might taste like. And then... I swear this is what I saw. The tiger stood up and walked to the bars. It started pounding on the bars with its hand. It was mad and everything! It was talking shit!”

“What did it say?” Rex implored.

“Man, I don’t talk tiger!” Moses scoffed. “I can tell you that the lizards were shitting bricks, like they thought that tiger could break out of the cell and kick their butts! The little one floated over. He wasn’t scared of it. He put his hands up like this, and he started waving them around...”

A soldier had peered in on the humans. When he saw the way Moses was moving his hands, he started snarling so viciously the prisoners all trembled. Immediately, Moses put his hands down at his sides.

“My aunt had an alligator purse.” Bulldog said, out of the blue. The stocky gangster walked over to Moses. “It must have cost her five hundred bucks. Hey, asshole, put your hands out.”

“What for?” Moses asked, only to have Bulldog slap one. “What?”

“Put your hands out.”

“So you can hit me again?”

“That’s right.” The thug nodded. “Either you let me smack you, or that guard might come in here and bite your head off.”

Fearfully, Moses looked to the cell bars, where the soldier was still glaring at him. Thinking a slap or two were favorable to a sword in the belly, he lifted his arms. Bulldog slapped his forearms a couple of times, before he slapped at Moses’ head and shoulder. After this, the stocky thug turned to face the soldier. Their captor issued a handful of rough grunts, before he turned and strode off to join the others. They’d started up another dice game, apparently.

“All of you, listen up.” Bulldog announced to the entire cell. “I don’t know what it means when somebody waves their arms around, but the lizards don’t like it. Do not wave your arms around. All right, Moses. Go on with what you were saying.”

“There wasn’t much else.” The black man admitted. “The little one waved his arms and the tiger-man backed up. He dropped back on his hands and legs again, and he started pacing like before. It was a little while later when that other kid got brought in. They put him on the table. The little monk and another monk started working on him. That’s everything that happened until they took us out of the cell.”

“Lizard people and tiger people.” Acer remarked. “That’s crazy!”

“Hey, Dog, why don’t you sit down?” Wolfie called out. “I’m tired of staring at your ass all day.”

“Well, stop staring, asshole!”

Acer laughed, along with several others. Rex lowered his head and chuckled. Even Moses, who looked the most rattled of the bunch, was grinning.

“You had guns, right?” Bulldog asked. “What happened to them?”

“The lizards took them.” Moses shrugged.

“Where did they put them?”

“They’re still in the other chamber.”

“How many bullets?”

“Bryan and I both had clips. I didn’t even count how many bullets were in mine, because I didn’t think we were going to use them. I didn’t plan on shooting anybody!”

“Don’t worry about it.” Bulldog replied. “That happened on Ocean View, right, and we aren’t there anymore. This is somewhere else.” He looked at the other Dukes. “If we had those guns, it would help us get the hell out of here.”

Others started coming into the conversation, but it was all a rehash of what Rex had already heard. He moved closer to the cell bars, only a couple of feet from the open door. Rex didn’t like the way the hard, cold floor felt on his butt, but there wasn’t anything he could do about that. He was pretty tired. It must have been past midnight by then, back on Earth. Who the hell knew what time it was in this place?

Rex looked to the single, tall and narrow window set near where the tables lay. That was the only bit of sunlight that entered the chamber, keeping the rest of it dark and cool. It was a little too cool for comfort, Rex figured, as he felt his body starting to doze off.

When Rex opened his eyes next, the chamber was fully dark, with three torches mounted on the window wall giving the only light. Somehow, he’d fallen asleep against cold bars and hard floor, and now his body was complaining about it. He saw Acer standing next to the cell door, bouncing up and down on his feet, looking like he had to go to the toilet.

“Just go out there, man.” Moses told him. “You don’t want to shit all over the floor, do you?”

“What if those dicks decide to use me for a pin cushion? Fuck!”

“I have to take a leak.” One of the Dukes said. It took Rex a moment to remember his nickname was Slam. “I’ll go with you. Hey, lizards, we have to go to the toilet!”

Rex stood up. He observed only two soldiers sitting on the table. They weren’t playing dice anymore, but sitting down across from each other looking bored. They had wooden bowls in front of them. This reminded Rex of how empty his stomach felt.

“We’re going, okay?” Slam called out. After waiting a moment, he nodded to Acer and they both started out of the cell.

The soldiers were watching them, but they didn’t look ready to get up. One of them grunted a couple of times.

“I think that was permission.” Acer assumed. “Is that what it sounded like to you?” Slam shrugged.

The two humans took a few steps into the larger part of the chamber. When the soldiers still didn’t react, they were emboldened enough to walk to the door and make their way out.

“They don’t treat prisoners like they do where we come from.” Manny noted.

“No shit.” Bulldog replied. “Maybe because we’re somewhere else? They probably don’t even have cops here. Shut up, yeah? Let me go back to sleep.”

(November 27, 2018, LATE, 9:02 PM. Starting off a little late tonight. I did pretty good this morning, so that's okay. I'll get going right away. Uh, for music... How about the Conan The Barbarian soundtrack, from the 80s flick with Ahnold. That's got some nice, bold beats to it. I recommend checking on Youtube. Maybe somebody uploaded a copy you can listen to. Start time: 9:05 PM.)

It was still dark the next time Rex opened his eyes. He was shivering. Somebody in the cell was sneezing. Acer was lying next to him, curled up and snoring lightly. Rex stood up, hugging his middle for warmth, seeing that the torches were still flickering away in the dark. The two soldiers were sprawled out on the pews.

"Who's awake?" A Duke asked.

"I am." Bulldog answered. "Anybody else?"

"This is Moses. I'm up. I can't sleep."

"I'm awake too." Rex added.

"Yeah, no shit." Bulldog grunted. "I can see your long neck even in the shadows. Hey, Wolfie, did you sleep at all?"

"Yeah, I slept." The Duke replied. "I slept all right."

"Anybody else up?" Bulldog called out. When no more voices were heard, he said, "I guess it's just us four. Let's stand next to the bars, where Rex is."

The three young men joined the tagger.

"You want to try breaking out?" Wolfie asked.

"There's nothing to break out of." Bulldog answered. "I can't believe we're stuck in this fucking cell, and the fucking door is wide open. It's like the lizards have no fear of us taking off on them."

"Maybe they don't have humans here, wherever we are." Rex figured.

"Nah, they've seen humans before." Bulldog reasoned. "They looked us over, yeah, but that was only to see if we were hurt. I think they need to keep us alive."

"For what?" Wolfie questioned.

"If we could speak their language, maybe we could ask them."

"Moses?" Rex asked.

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm freezing my butt off, but I'm here."

"Have you figured anything out yet?"

"No. I'm still trying to figure out if this is a hallucination or not."

"When I hallucinate," Wolfie piped up. "I hallucinate naked women!"

"We must be in Rex's hallucination then." Bulldog presumed.

"Why do you say that?" The tagger wondered.

"Because you were staring at my balls earlier. You're the only one in here who wants to hallucinate naked men."

Rex grumbled inside, as Wolfie started laughing.

"Keep it down!" Bulldog said.

"Are you guys going to try and escape?" Moses asked.

"Yeah." Wolfie answered first. "We could do it right now. The lizards have their swords next to them. All we have to do is stick those fuckers and run out the door."

"Hold on." Bulldog said. "We may not even have to stick them, if they're sleeping heavy enough. What happens after we make it out the door?"

“We run, that’s what.” Wolfie said.

“Yeah, but where do we run to?”

“It won’t be that hard to get out of the castle.” Rex calculated. “I think I can find my way down the stairs.”

“And then what?”

“We could go back to the courtyard.” Moses spoke up next. “Oh... It wouldn’t do any good, would it? Even if we got there, we don’t know how to make that gray cloud come back so we can go home.”

“You don’t think we can get back home?” Wolfie worried.

“We saw the courtyard first, and the castle second.” Bulldog remembered. “Did anybody see anything past that?”

None of them had, apparently.

Bulldog kept going. “So we don’t know if we’re in a forest or on top of a mountain, do we? We could be right next to an ocean, or a desert, and we would never know it.”

“Too bad we can’t just catch a bus home.” Moses regretted.

“Not only that, chump.” Bulldog reminded them. “All those people that disappeared from San Diego, they never came back home. What makes you think we can go back?”

“You mean we might be stuck here for good?” Wolfie asked.

Bulldog didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

“They didn’t bring us here by accident, did they?” Moses questioned. “It’s like you said, they brought us here for a reason.”

Rex couldn’t fathom that. “What reason?”

“How should I know?”

“Okay, let’s talk this out.” Rex decided. “You were robbing a store right before you came here. We were out tagging when the Dukes started fighting with us. What do both things have in common?”

“Violence.” Moses said.

“It happened in the same neighborhood.” Wolfie added.

“Wait.” Bulldog stopped them. “The lady that disappeared in her car, that happened way over in East San Diego.”

“Didn’t you say she was in a fight?” Rex recalled.

“Not a fight. An argument with a video store clerk.”

“Except for the different neighborhood, the common factor is still violence.” Moses determined.

“What about the Do It Yourself Warehouse?” Bulldog brought the incident up.

“That was nearby, but the liquor store and the other places that were taken, they were in other parts of the city. And there was no violence going on, as far as I know.”

“Those other places happened a while back, right?” Moses asked. “What if they’re not related?”

“They might not be.” Bulldog shrugged. “But what if they are? What if last time, they were looking for tools or booze, and this time, they’re looking for... What?”

“Violent people maybe?” Came from Wolfie.

“That’s the best theory we have.” Bulldog concluded.

“Let’s stick with what we know for sure.” Rex decided. “We know we were brought here, because lizard people with swords were waiting for us when the gray cloud went away. What else do we know?”

“They have castles and swords and shit.” Wolfie ventured.

“That makes this like the Middle Ages.” Moses said.

“Except we haven’t seen any humans.” Rex kept it going. “They know what humans are, but maybe humans don’t live around here.”

“Maybe they have humans as slaves?” Wolfie guessed.

“They do kind of treat us like slaves, don’t they?” Moses thought it over. “They bark at us and push us around like we’re nothing to them.”

“Not to mention making us strip down to our sacks.” Rex murmured.

“The lizards are just a little shorter than we are.” Bulldog went on. “But they are a hell of a lot stronger. I tried to pull away from one when they were looking me over. I mean I was straining, and I couldn’t do it.”

“And their legs are short.” Moses said.

“Serious?” Rex asked. “I didn’t even see that.”

“It’s hard to tell with those clothes they wear.” Moses nodded. “They have long arms and short legs. And they have small necks.”

“Did anyone see the lizard women?” Rex inquired.

“Aw, they were fucking ugly!” Wolfie grimaced.

“Yeah, plus they didn’t have women shapes.” Moses recalled. “They looked just like the men, and they didn’t have any, you know, boobs and stuff.”

“I don’t think any of that can help us escape.” Bulldog commented.

“It might.” Moses countered. “You never know. Those short legs might mean they can’t run very fast.”

“We didn’t see them run, did we?” Bulldog thought back. “All they did was walk up to us real slow, holding their swords out. That’s a start! That’s the kind of stuff we need to figure out if we’re going to escape!”

“What about that little one?” Rex asked. “He was waving his hands around, wasn’t he? He did something with his hands, and then those other Dukes fell over on their backs, and the lizards ran right up to them.”

“That happened to me to.” Moses seconded. “That’s how they got Bryan. The little waved his hands and Bryan fell on his ass, for no reason.”

“So?” Bulldog wondered.

“The monk healed me with his hands.” Rex said. “I think they use magic.”

“Magic?” Bulldog scoffed. “No way!”

“They brought us here with magic.” Moses put the pieces together. “They used magic to throw us off balance, and they used it again to heal us. The little one dressed in green, and the others ones in brown; I think they’re all wizards!”

It was so much colder when dawn arrived. Everybody in the cell was awake by then and huddled close together. Despite their proximity, most had their teeth chattering.

“It’s so cold,” Vamps shivered. “I can’t even see my balls anymore!”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” Bulldog scolded.

Rex didn’t know which remark was funnier. He stopped laughing when he heard grunting coming from the far end of the chamber. Along with several others, he stood up to have a look. The small wizard was out there, standing next to another one wearing a brown robe. The small one barked out orders, sending the soldiers out right away and the wizard in the brown robe toward the cell.

The humans moved aside when the wizard stepped in. He started waving his hands in the air. Before long, an orange circle appeared, the size of a softball and radiating a healthy warmth. The moment the wizard left the cell, the humans went to stand around the glowing circle.

“You were right.” Bulldog told Rex. “They are using magic.”

The wizards convened next to the table Merlin was lying on. Rex feared his friend might be dead, as Merlin hadn’t moved or said a thing all night. As the wizards set their hands on the immobile youth, Merlin was heard groaning.

Rex checked for bruises on his arms, finding they were all gone. “I’m all healed up, and so is Acer. Maybe Merlin’s been out of it because he was hurt a lot worse than we were.”

“Go check on him.” Bulldog suggested.

“Huh?”

“You know. Walk over there and see what they’re doing. If they don’t want to kill us, the worst thing they can do is make you come back.”

Rex looked squeamish. “You want me to go up there and stand next to them, and what, just watch?”

Bulldog nodded that it was exactly what he wanted. “Just you. If anybody goes with you, the wizards might get jumpy.”

“Crap.” Rex mumbled, right before he set off.

(November 28, 2018, 7: 23 PM. I forgot to prepare a PDF to release today, so no update was available on the website. The next update will be twice as long, so that will make up for it. Music for tonight is Derek And Brandon Fietcher’s 2 hour of Elf Music. They’re on Youtube, so give them a listen! Start time: 7:28 PM. Okay, I’m fed up. End time: 10:25 PM.)

It wasn’t that Rex was particularly brave; that wasn’t the reason he was walking out of the cell and into a potentially dangerous situation. He was worried about Merlin, for one, and for two, he was tired of sitting around in a small space full of naked guys.

The tagger tried hiding his nervousness by employing a casual stride. When the two wizards turned their heads in his direction, he halted. When they didn’t say anything to him, but simply went back to their business, Rex took a deep breath and got as close as he dared to the table Merlin was lying on.

The lizard in the brown robe grunted something at him, something like a question.

“I can’t understand you.” Rex shook his head.

The same lizard waved his hand. Unexpectedly, a wooden bucket appeared before his eyes. The lizard motioned for Rex to retrieve it.

“That’s not why I’m standing here, but okay.” Rex said. “I’ll take it.”

The teenager grasped the bucket’s wire handle and carried it back to the first of the pews. Once he set it down, he used the deep-bowled spoon in the bucket to take a drink. It was water, but it was really cold. If he drank too much of it, he’d probably start shivering again.

“Acer, come grab this bucket!” Rex called out.

His buddy approached even slower than Rex had. “I hope you know what you’re doing. The Dukes all think the lizards are going to eat you.”

“It makes me feel really good to hear that.” Rex grumbled. “Just take the water back. Maybe the lizards will get comfortable seeing us walking around.”

“Be careful, dick.”

Rex watched his friend retreat, before he sucked up his confidence and returned to the ‘dissection’ table. Merlin looked like he was breathing okay, but his eyes were still shut and it didn’t look like he’d moved ever since he’d been brought in.

“Is my friend asleep?” Rex asked the brown-robed lizard.

The lizard only glanced at him, before starting up a conversation with the short one wearing green. After about a minute, the lizard in green motioned the one in brown to do something to Rex. The teen took a step back, hoping his luck hadn’t just run out. Brown robe gestured for Rex to pick up Merlin’s feet.

“What, you want me to carry him into the cell?” Rex asked, “I’m not that strong. Let me get one of the other guys to help me.” He turned aside. “Acer, come help me!”

Instead of his fellow tagger, Bulldog walked over.

“They want us to take Merlin into the cell.” Rex said.

“Fine. I can carry him by myself, if you put him on my shoulder.”

“You sure?”

“You want to carry him all dumb, with his arms and legs hanging on the ground?”

“No.”

“Then help me get him over my shoulder. You think I’m weak like you are?”

Rex felt like arguing, except maybe Bulldog would punch him in the stomach if he did that. With the thug crouching down a little, they were able to get Merlin situated, before Bulldog walked him back.

A short while later, the small lizard in the green robe left. The one in brown was their only guardian for about half an hour, when two soldiers came in with a couple of wooden bowls and a large, black iron pot. The soldiers took the humans out of the cell, all except for the sleeping Merlin, and organized them on the pews. As the captives looked on, the soldiers used the bowls to scoop some kind of porridge out of the pot. They handed the filled bowls to the first humans in the row. Only two humans could eat at a time, and when they finished, they were sent back into the cells.

It was a good thing the humans could head out to the toilet whenever they felt like it, since half of them had the runs from whatever it was they ate.

The Master Sorcerer felt like an invalid. He had laboriously developed a magic spell with unlimited potential, and he was prohibited from casting it. At the moment, he was standing on the patio atop Castle Erranth, looking out at the horizon while trying to sense any perturbation in the magic strands he’d set out. If the strands were tampered with, it meant someone was using magic and approaching. It was a menial task, usually given to a minor sorcerer, but since all of his underlings were out moving troops and armaments between Vatra and Kuy-Kuh, there was no one left to do this. At least he had a splendid view of the countryside in all directions, as the castle was the highest structure in the entire kingdom.

Being up there also gave him time to think. The influential people of Erranth were always fickle, if not downright dubious, when it came to magic. Public perception had become even worse with the threat of pending war looming over the kingdom. Arak had

cast his spell enough times, critics felt. If he had produced a worthy new technology or weapon for the king, he would be a hero now. Since he had not, he was a failure in their eyes. As much as Arak loathed getting caught up in political scheming and game-playing, he knew that was the way things had always been done in the past, and would continue to be done in the present and future.

One way or another, Arak had to give a good showing against whatever sorcery the pig mages would be throwing at him. Any failures in war would be catastrophic to his title as Master Sorcerer, much greater than his failure in the Great Experiment. He very much doubted that Fass would be selected to succeed him, because of that reptilian's common upbringing. Most likely, Bizelle or Minos would get the promotion. They were good mages. Arak could admit as much. They were good, but they were not great, as he had the chance to become. If Arak were stripped of his title, it was customary that he would be forbidden to practice sorcery for the remainder of his life.

"I have equaled and bettered what Kellorr had done." Arak growled. "And that sorcerer was respected by all of Erranth. Why am I still in that man's shadow, when he should be in mine?"

To make things worse, he was in his mid-twenties, less than half of Kellorr's age when he'd rebelled against the king. Perhaps the old sorcerer had opened up a portal where he could spy on other worlds, but it was Arak who had reached into those worlds to bring out people and things. It was only a matter of time before he found the sort of military enhancement the king demanded him to find! What he had accomplished so far was not a trifle!

"Master." The First Apprentice spoke out.

Arak turned to face his second in command.

"Forgive me, master." Fass bowed his head. "I was prying into your thoughts."

"Were you?" Arak asked. "Your skill in mental eavesdropping could surpass even mine. I never noticed your awareness peering into mine."

"You were preoccupied, master." Fass downplayed the trespass. "Besides, you were busy scanning for foreign magic, and you had... other, troubling thoughts. May I make a mention of something?"

"Speak your mind, Fass."

"If you are removed from your post, I know I will never be selected to replace you. It is, as you considered, a post for one of noble birthright."

Arak scoffed. "And what are the nobles, except merchants who have grown rich and fat, and who refuse to relinquish their hold on power?"

"I am satisfied to be your First Apprentice."

Arak chuckled. "Would you sink your fangs into my back, if you had the chance to? If doing so could achieve your betterment?"

"No, I would not."

"Yes, you would." Arak refused to believe him. "If the king said tonight, go and kill Arak in his sleep, you would do it."

"Think as you will." Fass replied. "I thought you would become cruel to me, when you selected me as your First Apprentice. To this day there are many people who do not understand why you did it. I know part of it was because there were few mages of noble rank left after Kellorr's Uprising, and because there were so many common mages. All the same, you chose me out of all who were available. You have never spoken down to

me, or mistreated me, master. If the king asked me to kill you tonight, I would go to you and tell you, so that you might have the chance to flee. I'm not stupid. If you stay to fight, I will fight you. If you choose to run, I will chase after you. What I will not do is kill you while you sleep, or attack you when you are unguarded. That is a coward's way, and I will not see myself as a coward."

"I should return you to your normal height." Arak said. "You have served your time of punishment, for that minor infraction you committed."

"Rules are important, as you always tell me, and I did break one." Fass conceded. "No, do not return me to my normal size, not yet. I have grown a certain infamy thanks to my small stature. It is... Interesting, I think, that people should view me in a brighter light when I am small, than when I am of average height. Let me stay this way, at least until the war against the pigs is done with. After that, if I feel I have earned that reward, I will bring it to your attention."

"You like being little?"

"I do, master. I might not like it as much if I was told I would stay this way forever. Since I know that, sooner or later, my true height will be restored, I am not hindered by it. There is a matter you wish to ask me about."

"Yes. You know what it is already, if you've read my thoughts long enough."

"You wish to know why advisor Zowns has such contempt for me. I will tell you. Zowns humiliated me before a group of nobles, back when I was first punished to have this shorter form. It happened during a supper in the king's hall. It wasn't much of an insult, really. Zowns simply said I would make a better stepstool than a mage. What angered me the most is that the nobles did not laugh at me lightly. They laughed at me as if I were a stupid human hunchback who had fallen on the floor. They laughed at me in a way that showed me they were laughing because I had humble parents. Zowns is not a bad man, I would say, but he laughed right along with the rest, and I have hated him ever since."

"And so you did some mischief against him?"

"Zowns has his same breeding partner; the same woman for many years now. She is a jealous woman. He also has a habit of visiting the younger women when they are in season. I made a simple switch, in that I took the old woman and put her in the breeding temple, and I took the younger woman and put her into Zown's fancy residence. I told both women to stay there until Zown's arrived, and they did. The younger woman was happy being in a rich man's house, but the old woman, she had such a rage a healer was needed to put her back to right."

Arak laughed. "It is no wonder he always shows his teeth when he speaks of you! Best keep your distance from him, Fass, else you'll risk angering the king."

"Oh, I won't hurt him, master." Fass replied. "The one I truly dislike is that Branek with his bloated head. If you give me permission, I will see to it that he never shows his face in Erranth again."

"And what has Branek done to you?"

"He looks down on me, and I don't mean that as a joke, since I am short and all. I mean he despises me for being of low birth, and also for being a mage. I especially don't like how he speaks to you, master. We are sorcerers, you and I, and the minor sorcerers below our rank. We have committed a great portion of our lives to studying magic. To have that demeaned by a brute whose greatest skill is swinging a sword is too great an

insult for me to bear. Let me kill him, master, and I will make sure he dies a most hideous death.”

“Leave Branek to me.” Arak growled. “After this coming war is done, I will petition the king for a duel against him.”

“And you will win.” Fass acknowledged.

“Speak of other matters. Have you studied the carriage further, or the weapons we took from the humans?”

“Regretfully, I have learned nothing new about any of that.”

“The captive humans, how goes it with them?”

“We are doing our utmost to keep them from being afraid of us. They are passive in their captivity, unlike the tiger-man we keep in the primary chamber. Despite this, we are getting to no good place in communicating with the humans. Even my mental probes cannot decipher their thinking patterns.”

“The same happened when I tried it.” Arak acknowledged. “Their world has so little magic in it, that our magic has nothing to attune itself to. We have two of their weapons, but we do not know what sort of magic causes them to work. It is important that we find a way to speak with these humans.” He took a thoughtful pause. “You know where to find Kellorr’s writings. When he peered into other dimensions, he found that many of their inhabitants spoke languages that could not be manipulated by our magic. Kellorr was forced to create a new magic spell for nearly every new world he looked into. Go through his material. Work up a new spell that will allow the humans to speak and be heard in the Common Tongue.”

“And what will you be doing, master?”

“Organizing a new schedule for when our minor mages return.” The sorcerer replied. “With so very few mages, I will have to be very careful in their placement. Perhaps half will be out in the field, while the other half stays here in the castle.”

“Keep me by your side, master.”

“Are you certain? It might be better if you lead one half, while I lead the other. It would do Erranth no good if we both are ended in the same battle.”

“I insist.” Fass said. “You know how I think, and I know how you think. We will complement each other much better in battle than we would in if we were relying on a minor sorcerer to watch our flanks.”

“Especially with our mind link.” Arak agreed. “I won’t stay in the castle. The king has the Four Demons to command. They will give trouble to anything the pigs are going to throw at us. I will go to the front line and deal with the pig mages directly.”

“Take me.” Fass urged. “I proved myself during the Uprising, did I not? All of Erranth remembers what you did, but nobody remembers my battles in the outlying lands. If I battle with you, and we earn our victory, people will not be able to ignore me!”

“Do not allow your thirst for glory to control you.” Arak warned. “You did well to summon the last group of humans, but you also put yourself at risk. King Lehnorack has only given permission for one sorcerer to carry out the Great Experiment, and that is myself. If the king begins to worry that we are conducting experiments without his consent, it may very well cause tensions between he and the magic-casters. We don’t want or need such strife during a time of war. I have been prohibited from casting my new spell.”

“You have, but I have not.” Fass pointed out.

“Be very careful, Fass. You are dancing on the edge of the frying pan, about to fall in. One mishap, one bad report from Branek to the king, and you will lose your license to practice magic. As I said, you did well, but it was not nearly enough for what our king expected from us. From me.”

“A minor delay, nothing more. You have already done the bulk of the work. All that remains is a bit of refining, and then we will achieve what we want.”

“The Great Experiment is done with, at least until this conflict with the pigs is done.”

“We may not need to cast the spell again. Perhaps these new humans will give up a secret that the king will drool over.”

“All the more reason to get them to speak in the Common Tongue.”

(November 29, 2018 EARLY, 6:48 AM. This project is 43% complete. It is only a couple of days before the first of December, when I start editing a couple of projects in the morning. That will leave me only nights to work on this one. This will probably be the last morning I have open for the next couple of weeks. Anyway, here I am, ready to go. First, I’ll backtrack by one page to get the mood of the story. I can see how my old rough draft had a clunky feel to it, and unrealistic dialog where I tried to convey too much at a time. That’s why I’ve slowed down a lot of conversations, omitted some things, and tried to, as many writing instructors will say, show, don’t tell.

I ran into a roadblock at a little past eight. Most of my old notes center on what Arak and Fass are doing. The material I have for Rex and crew were based on an original idea that I would have more humans crowding up the cell. Here is what I want to do. I am at 43% completion right now. I want to stretch that out to 50% before I get into the war drama. That means that I have around 14 pages to go. I don’t want most of that to be only from the reptilian point of view. This is the last chance for my human characters to show who they were on Earth, before they have to force-transition into their new environment. I have to end things for now, so I can go download some song lyrics that I’ll be putting into place tonight. End time: 8:18 AM.)

The sorcerers gaze at one another: one standing tall, the shorter one floating quietly before him.

“I may ask the king for permission to take a demon into battle.” Arak admitted, finally.

“Are you sure?” Fass sounded shocked. “Those demons are so unpredictable, they might very well turn on you if you release them from their binds! You have just told me to be careful. Let me return that warning to you, increased by a hundred times! When? When will you make the attempt to speak with them?”

“Only one, Fass. I am not naive enough to think I can control more than that.”

“At the very least, let me come with you! Post me outside of any chamber you use to summon those terrible creatures!”

During the Uprising Of Kellorr, Fass knew, the rebelling sorcerer had released the demons upon Erranth, in his attempt to kill King Lehnorack. That was the reason so much of Erranth and its castle were destroyed. Arak had been instrumental in coercing the demons to return to their binding rings, but no person besides he knew how it had been done. The short mage tried reading his master’s thoughts.

“You’ve shut your mind from me.” Fass noticed.

“Yes, I have.” Arak confirmed.

“I won’t lie to you, master. I am very curious as to how you subdued such powerful forces of nature. All of us that practice magic have been wondering about it. But I won’t pry about it. If you are to tell me, you will tell me in your own good time. I know you must keep some secrets, even from me, if you are to prevent others from undermining your post.”

“Enough.” Arak said.

Fass caught a bit from his master’s mind, that time. Arak was building up defenses, not for the upcoming battle, but in the case that King Lehnorack turned against him. The Four Demons were the most potent weapons in the entire kingdom.

“The king might refuse my request.” Arak added. “He has never fully trusted me.”

“I know. He trusts none of us, save that thick-headed Branek. If you won’t allow me to be present when you summon those demons, then what should be my next task? The spell to convert human speech into the Common Tongue?”

“Your next task is to learn how to use those human weapons.”

“As you say, master.” Fass bowed his head slightly. “I will get started on that directly.”

With a worried countenance, the short mage turned and hovered away, toward the floor hatch and stairs leading into the castle’s highest level. Since he was small, he easily floated down the stairwell and into measured darkness. The fourth level was reserved for the king and his royal family. It had eight large bedchambers, of which only five were in present use. There was good reason for that. The king could have filled all of the rooms up with members of his extended family, but quite a few of them had sided with Kellorr during the infamous Uprising. A handful of his relatives, Lehnorack had executed, and their immediate kin were prohibited from entering the castle, let alone sleeping in it.

In the third floor were located Arak’s personal chamber, and also two larger chambers for his studies. For a time, most of the third floor was used for storage of food or wealth, or for the sort of novelties royalty enjoyed collecting. It had been adorned with artwork before Kellorr’s rebellion: busts, paintings, statues and other expensive trinkets the public enjoyed gawking at and pondering over. After Kellorr, Lehnorack had taken all of that out. To keep a close eye on his magicians, he had given half of the floor over to Arak. The other half, the nicer half, was reserved for visiting guests of high importance. These guests were not necessarily the wealthy, as the generals were housed there during their recent visit.

The second floor of the castle included the great hall, the Table Of Reckoning, and a chamber containing wealth and the few extravagant items Lehnorack deemed were worth keeping. The first floor was set aside as the garrison for the King’s Guard and the Castle Guard, and the vast chambers of the donjon were used for storage of food and supplies.

As Fass entered the passageway that ran across the third floor, he caught himself. His first instinct was to return to the main chamber, where Arak and he did their minor conjuring and worked on spells or concoctions. And there was that pesky tiger-man also, who would undoubtedly start howling the moment Fass showed his face. The short mage diverted his direction, toward the second chamber where the recently captured humans would be found. No, no, Fass caught himself. He had to go to the main chamber first, to research the translations spells Kellorr had left in his journals and notes.

“My mind is wandering.” Fass decided. “I cannot let my thoughts roam about with no good direction. I must focus them. There is work to be done.”

The short mage knew what worried him the most. If Arak released the Four Demons, there was a very good chance they might become belligerent enough to kill him.

(November 29, 2018 LATE, 7:45 PM. What does a reptilian serve, when he’s trying to gain the confidence of his prisoners? We will soon find out. Anyway, this project is 44% complete. Let me go back and reread the last page, before I get started. Start time: 7:52 PM. I’ve got a power outage at 10:55 PM, so that will be my End Time for tonight.)

Although Rex would never admit it, he was getting used to seeing all sorts of nude young men walking around. They sat in the cell all day and shot the shit naked, they ate naked, and they walked over to they walked over to the toilet room naked.

“You looking at my balls again?” Bulldog asked, one time when Rex was deep in thought and wondering if they’d ever get back home.

“Man, fuck you!” Rex snapped back. He’d said it so quickly that it took him half a second to realize he’d insulted a gang member.

Bulldog glared at him for a moment, before he added, “It’s okay if you’re staring. Lots of people stare at my balls. They’re pretty nice, right?”

Every Duke in the cell started bellowing in laughter. Suffice to say, Bulldog had caught Rex with that same line half a dozen times already. Knowing the thug kept a bunch of comebacks in reserve, Rex decided not to provoke him any further.

“Seriously, what kind of dick are you?” Acer asked. “Like half the day that guy has caught you staring at him.”

“He’s making it up, you asshole!” Rex grumbled. “I’m not looking at his balls, okay?”

Sitting beside him, even Merlin was snickering. The teenager had woken up a short while ago. He was still woozy, but at least he wasn’t complaining about his ribs anymore.

“I wasn’t looking.” Rex reiterated.

Two lizards had been doing a really bad job of watching them for the better part of that day. The guards looked as if they were more interested in their card game than in anything else.

The disinterest had worked in favor of the captives. Rex and Bulldog had come up with a few ways to gain more information. Rex had gone over to the guards, pretending he was interested in watching them play. Afterward, he strolled by one of the two very narrow windows in the chamber and peered outside. He was hoping he could get an idea of how far they might have to run if they escaped. Unfortunately. He observed the castle, and then wide spaces with small buildings, and after that, a wall of stone that was around thirty feet high. Past the wall, Rex saw rows and rows of wooden houses, most of them two levels high, with thatched roofs on them. If they managed to make it that far, they could hide in the sea of tall, leafy trees that lay beyond the city.

Bulldog tried next. He walked out with another Duke, heading for the toilet. The other Duke returned, starting a steady procession of human walking out, while Bulldog had a look around. He looked in two rooms, he said, and they both had beds, light furniture, and the same sort of narrow windows. When he peered into a third room, the short lizard caught him. A second lizard was in the same room, wearing a brown robe.

The short one told the other to escort him back into their cell. Apparently, the lizards thought the thug had gotten lost.

Wolfie took a piss in the corner of the cell. When the guards smelled it, they became angry. One guard left for about ten minutes. Upon returning, the guard gave a bucket of water and a mop to Wolfie, and motioned for him to clean up his mess. It was a good move, Rex figured. If they were ready to escape, it would be easy to get one guard out of the chamber, leaving only one to worry about.

Manny was the latest to go out and explore. He had new information to tell when he came back. "I went down the stairs by one level. All I saw was an empty corridor with a huge hall and a big table in it. The place was empty, so I went down the stairs to the next floor. I saw a room with all sorts of uniforms and weapons in it, and a bunch of soldiers wearing blue... Whatever you want to call them; blouses, I guess. They didn't see me, so I went the other way. I guess this was the ground floor, because I found a really long corridor that went clear across to the far end of the castle. A whole bunch of lizards were walking through. They saw me and I saw them, but nobody stopped and nobody said anything to me. It got kind of freaky when two soldiers stopped and looked at me. I got scared and I hauled ass back up here."

"Did they try to hurt you?" Bulldog asked.

"No, but I didn't stay too long to find out. I thought they might chase me, but they never went up the stairs."

"You said you saw a lot of lizards down there?" Rex inquired.

"A whole bunch. That is the corridor they brought us in through, so it has to be our way out."

"Right through the middle of them?" Acer asked.

"We need to make a map of this place, without getting caught." Bulldog said. "All right. Who wants to go next?"

"I will." Moses volunteered. "I'm tired of sitting here."

The moment the young man stood up, several lizards entered the chamber.

"I guess not." He murmured. "We've got company."

Several captives stood up to watch. First in was the short lizard, floating along as usual. Following him by a few strides was a second lizard in a brown robe, and two guards carrying baskets of fruit.

"Good." Bulldog said. "I was getting hungry."

The soldiers strode over by the cell. One barked out, before they began pulling the captives out. This time, they weren't exiting one by one. Instead, the guards were motioning for them to sit together on the pews. Four humans ended up on each of the last two pews. The guards held the baskets out to each of them, waiting only long enough for a single fruit to be chosen, before they offered the basket to the next human. They had their choice of apples, grapes, oranges or...

"What is this?" Rex asked Merlin, who was sitting beside him.

"A fig."

"Is that what they look like? I know what fig stuffing looks like, but this?"

"It's a fucking fig!"

"I'm taking an orange."

When each of the eight humans had chosen a fruit or a bunch of grapes, the new soldiers handed the baskets to their guards, and the guards walked out.

“I guess that’s a shift change.” Bulldog noticed.

“Let me get half your grapes.” Rex told Magic. “I’ll give you half my orange.”

“Anybody want half my apple?” Bulldog asked.

Rex watched the two green wizards each put apples into their mouths, and crunch them up as if they were a potato chip.

“You guys see that?” Bulldog asked. “One fucking mouthful; core and seeds and everything.”

“You think they can crunch bone like that?” Wolfie asked. “Those teeth look wicked.”

“Don’t get your fingers anywhere near their mouths.”

“This orange is cool,” Vamps commented. “Like it just came out of the fridge.”

“This fig is cool, too.” Acer said.

“How does it taste?” Rex wondered.

“It’s good. Better than an apple. You want a bite?”

Rex was about to say yes, when he noticed the wizards were watching them, as if the humans were lab rats. “Nah, that’s okay.”

“Half my apple for half your fig?” Bulldog bartered.

“Yeah, all right.” Acer nodded.

When the fruits were finished off, the wizards started waving their hands in the air. The taller one in the brown robe caused a large pot to appear on the first of the dissection tables, and right after, a small stack of bowls. The smaller one produced a ceramic pitcher and several ceramic drinking cups with strange shapes, like upside down funnels with small round finger handles.

“Four bowls and four cup-things.” Rex counted. “I guess we’re all sharing. Come on, Merlin. Let’s go first.”

The pot was full of some kind of thick broth with diced meat and vegetables. The previous times they’d been fed, they had no eating utensils. Since this was the case once again, Rex simply scooped up a bowl full of broth, while Merlin poured the dark drink into a drinking vessel. Just before they started back toward their pew, the brown-robe caused a metal platter to appear, heaped high with round, dark brown bread. At the wizard’s grunted urging, Rex and Merlin both took one.

Keeping things orderly, Acer and Moses waited until the first pair sat down, before they went for their servings. And so on it went until they were all eating.

“We should invent spoons.” Rex griped, as he tipped the bowl over and let the broth slide into his mouth. “How is that drink?”

“It tastes like beer.” Merlin replied.

“Yeah, it does.” Bulldog said, from the bench behind them.

“Let me taste it.” Rex said.

Hardly had he tasted it, and liked it, when Slam said, “This bread taste like I’m eating my fucking shoe.”

Rex decided to try his roll next. It was dry and rough, even after he moistened it with the broth. He studied its innards. “That’s because it has acorns, and beans and seeds and shit in it.”

“The bread is nasty.” Bulldog complained.

“The soup is good.” Merlin said.

“It’s not soup, it’s broth.” Acer corrected.

“Hey, I found a fucking eyeball in it.” Manny mentioned.

Along with several others, Rex looked over.

“Stop fucking around.” Bulldog told him.

“You think I’m fucking around about that?” Manny asked, holding his bowl out.  
“Take a look.”

Bulldog peered into the bowl, before sinking back in his seat.

“Tell me he’s kidding.” Merlin looked queasy.

Rex glanced at Acer. They both stood up and leaned over. Like Bulldog, they sank into their seats, without saying a word.

“Whatever you saw, don’t say it.” Moses grimaced. “Shit! What kind of eye is it?”

Acer’s face was turning green. “A goat eye, maybe?”

“No, because goat eyes look a lot different than people eyes.” Bulldog commented.

“Is it a people eye?” Moses asked.

“I hope not.” Manny answered.

While the wizards watched, all four bowls were set aside and ignored.

“Seriously, did anybody find anything weird in the bread?” Bulldog asked. “I’m hungry, but I am not eating that fucking broth anymore!”

“Me either.” Wolfie seconded.

“There is nothing meaty in my bread.” Rex looked again.

“I think the bread is okay.” Vamps agreed. “At least mine is.”

“I’m going to the toilet.” Acer said, standing up and making his way out.

The wizards were still watching over them.

“I feel like a lab experiment.” Rex remarked.

“Yeah, as long as we don’t end up on your dissection tables.” Bulldog replied. “I feel like they’re stuffing us now, so they can cook us later.”

“Don’t say stuff like that.” Moses grimaced again.

“That was a fucking human eye.” Manny divulged.

“Shut up!” Moses started gagging. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

He left the chamber, too.

The wizards were watching, watching.

“Did they do that on purpose?” Merlin wondered. “Are they messing with us?”

“I don’t know.” Rex answered.

“I wish they weren’t staring at us like that!” Bulldog growled.

“Don’t start anything with them.” Rex cautioned. “They might take it out on all of us, and we don’t want that to happen.”

“All right. I’ll play it cool, but I haven’t forgotten what they did to my homies. Wolfie, give me that beer. It will help get this bad taste out my mouth.”

That was a good idea, Rex decided. He gulped down the rest of his weird cup, before he got up and went for a refill. Manny was right behind him.

Everybody drank. Whenever the ceramic pitcher ran out, the brown-robed lizard would vanish with it. When the lizard returned, he always brought back a full pitcher. Rex drank, and he drank some more, and then his senses were dull and he didn’t recall seeing that repulsive eyeball anymore. They all got drunk, even Merlin. They got so drunk they were on a continual cycle of drinking, stumbling their way out of the chamber to relieve themselves in the toilet, and when they returned, they kept right on drinking.

Rex remembered a vague conversation; something about them getting so drunk the lizards would have no trouble killing them. Somebody, and maybe this was Bulldog, said he didn't care if they killed him or not.

They were so drunk that a few of them started singing. The lizards, the wizard lizards, ha, actually encouraged this. They were waving their arms and humming along with whatever song they were singing. They wanted the humans to keep on singing.

"Wizard lizards, wizard lizards." Rex sang out.

"Wait, hold up." Somebody told him. "You can go next. Let this fool finish first."

With a heavy head, Rex nodded that it was fine with him. He tried to listen to the words, while his thoughts swam in circles.

"When I was just a baby, my mama told me, son, always be a good boy, don't ever play with guns... But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die... When I hear that whistle blowing, I hang my head and cry..."

"Hey, hey. <burp!> I kicked a dog in an alley once, just to watch it diiiieee."

Everybody started laughing. Who was it that said that? Was it Acer?

"I got one." Bulldog cut into his thoughts. "You all know this one, or you'd all better know this one... You can all sing the chorus at least." He cleared his throat. "On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair. Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air. Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light. My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim. I had to stop for the night..."

They sang like cats in an alley, but Rex didn't care. He tried to keep up with the words. When he couldn't, he settled for the chorus. "Plenty of room at the Hotel California... Any time of year... You can find it here..."

Rex slipped into a deep melancholy as the song went on. When Bulldog finished singing, several Dukes wanted to hear it again. Bulldog started it up, but it was the last verse that got stuck in Rex's head.

"Last thing I remember," Bulldog crooned. "I was running for the door. I had to find the passage back to the place I was before. Relax, said the night man, we are programmed to receive. You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!"

This time, Rex missed taking part in the chorus.

The wizard lizards were waving their hands the entire time. They were doing something, Rex suspected. Maybe they were singing too, as he thought he heard them repeating the same thing over and over. Maybe Hotel California was a lizard Golden Oldie. It didn't matter, as he had no clue what they were singing, anyway.

Rex must have dozed off. The next time he opened his eyes, it was dark and the torches were lit. The short mage had left and the two guards were asleep. The lizard in the brown robe was still standing, waving tired arms and chanting with a weary voice.

"Let him who has ears, hear, and him who has mouth, speak." The lizard droned on. "Twist and turn, cycle and churn, from ear to mouth let the Common Tongue be heard. Twist and turn, cycle and churn, from mouth to ear let the Common Tongue be heard."

Rex was sitting on the pew. He turned around when he heard that, his mouth open.

The lizard noticed his shock. "What is your name and from where have you come?"

Rex shook his head, not sure he'd heard right. When the lizard continued to start at him, he relented. "They call me Rex. I come from a place called San Diego."

The lizard grunted, but it didn't sound like grunts anymore. It sounded like happy laughter. "Fass couldn't do it! He grew tired and went off to sleep! He said, keep trying if

you like, or wait until morning when we are fresh. I said I will try, and I will succeed where you have already failed. Succeed, Fass told me, and I will reward you greatly.”

The lizard laughed out loud.

“Did you succeed?” Rex asked, still feeling the effects of the alcohol.

“Beyond question!”

“Oh. I thought maybe I was dreaming.”

“Go to sleep now, human. We will have plenty to speak about in the morning!”

“Sleep sounds like a good idea.” Rex said, as he leaned back and shut his eyes.

(November 30, 2018, 8:02 PM. Erased a short section of old italicized notes. Project is 47% complete. Music tonight is Derek and Brandon Fietcher’s one hour of Dark Music that sounds more like dark medieval / fairy tale music. Start time: 8:19 PM. At 9:44, I am seeing that my old notes are not in line with the direction I want to steer my story next. I will try to keep the original feel, but I may have to make significant changes. Okay, I came to a spot where I have to analyze carefully what direction I’m going to take next. I will call it a night for now. End time: 10:50 PM.)

The Master Sorcerer sat on a padded chair, made of sturdy oak to support his heavy weight. The chair was ornate with carvings, of long, snakelike dragons with tiny sets of wings behind the heads, and of real Erranth heroes vanquishing monstrous creatures of dark fable. This was not his chair; he’d inherited from Kellorr. Originally, Arak believed his high post would not last long. For that reason, he’d kept most of Kellorr’s belongings, including his wall tapestries, his colorful rugs and his lavish furniture. Arak felt like an outsider in that room, as if he didn’t belong in it, for nearly half the time he had spent living there. More recently, he had grown into Kellorr’s eccentric tastes. This chair that had seemed so alien before had become his most prized possession.

Certain men, and a few women as well, from his younger generation had taken it upon their selves to rewrite history. They were trying to convince the educators to teach in new ways, to teach their pupils that reptilians had evolved from real dragons in some ancient era. These reptilians were fools to think they could replace their new version of history with what was known to be true. Humans had created reptilians, and bear-men and pig-men, and other seemingly impossible creatures as well. It was no use, those stubborn and selfish thinkers would not listen. They would never admit that reptilians had not come from any fantastic dragons, but from swamp-dwelling alligators.

Arak sighed. He knew he was walking on a tight rope, after his disappointing results from the Great Experiment. Any further setbacks and that rope might be cut at the end, while he unknowingly tried to keep his balance on it.

The sorcerer left his chair to gaze out from his narrow window. There was only dark landscape out there, as the sun had set hours ago. The night covered Erranth like a warm blanket. A few stars shone in their enviable luminosity, but most were dimmed away by the two torches flickering away on the wall.

Arak stepped to a bookshelf, retrieving a bundle of long-stemmed candles and a basket full of holders. For the next handful of minutes, he place the candles in strategic spots throughout the chamber, and lit them with a magic that was more potent than a simple lick of flame.

Nearly everything was ready, he noted, as he returned to the same window. As he stood there, he decided to call out to his apprentice, by using his mind. "Fass."

"Master Arak, I regret to say that Fass has retired for the night." Minor sorcerer Bizelle replied. "He worried that you might need assistance during the night, but he did not say exactly for what matter. He passed his mental link into my head before he left."

That was a surprise for Arak. He didn't know if he should be upset because Fass had revealed a very personal and private psychic connection, or if he should feel flattered that Fass had thought to cater to him in such a way. "Did Fass retire to his home?"

The apprentice had the habit of mixing up his sleeping places. Sometimes, he slept in an extra bed in Arak's chamber, other times he would go to his quaint house outside the castle walls. The sorcerer didn't like that Fass hung out with the rabble, but then again, Fass had come from that section of the city.

"I cannot say, master." Bizelle replied. "I know he planned to visit with Captain Gruhg."

They were probably in a brothel somewhere, Arak assumed.

"Master, there is a matter you should know of. I have made a breakthrough..."

"Stop." Arak said. He had enough force in his psychic link that it would jar someone like Bizelle, who was not accustomed to such communication. "For what I am about to attempt, I need my full concentration. I must not have any new thoughts in my mind to affect this. If it is important, find Fass and tell him, not me."

"As you say."

Bizelle had been eager to reveal something to him, but Arak quickly swept the idea away, out of his mental sight. He concentrated on those foul, dangerous creatures that he would have to summon, and very soon.

"Bizelle." Arak said.

"Yes, master."

"Set a containment spell around my chamber. Make the spell strong, so that I will have to exert a stronger force to escape from it. When you are done with it, make a second containment spell around the first."

Bizelle knew better than to ask why Arak made this request. "As you say, master."

"In the morning, you and Fass are to probe into my chamber." Arak continued. "If you feel any sudden manipulation of magic, you are to collapse the spell completely."

"While you are in it?" Bizelle asked. "It would destroy you, master, and that section of the castle as well."

"Fass is aware of the predicament I am placing myself into. If the probing results in no sudden fluctuations of magic, I will emerge. Start your first spell now."

"As you say."

This time, Bizelle's mind-voice quivered with uncertainty. Arak waited several minutes, as the minor sorcerer set a magic barrier behind one wall, and then a second, and also on the ceiling and floor. When the first barrier was in place, Bizelle started on the next coating of magic. Inside, Arak created his own spell, so that in the end three full layers of magic would be formed between his chamber and the outside world.

Arak snuffed the torches, as they would suck out the air if left on. He drew manna energy from his personal reserve to create an orb of pale blue light, enough for him to see half of his chamber.

From a pouch tied to his belt, the sorcerer drew out a single ring. This ring was usually found on the king's finger. It was made of pure silver, with a highly polished and glowing sapphire inset. The king owned four such rings, but he thought it best to trust Arak with only one. In the pale blue glow, he studied the glint of the jewel, and tried to peer into it in his curiosity to find out if he could see the demon lurking within.

"How can such a great force be contained here," He wondered. "If a simple band of metal and a precious stone?"

Arak wasn't ready to release the demon, not yet. Perhaps he wouldn't release it at all that night, and Fass and Bizelle would find him safe and sound the next morning. Or perhaps he would release it, and that evil soul would destroy all it could before it was forced back into its tiny prison again.

King Lehnorack was not in a jovial mood the next morning, when Fass and Bizelle sought him out for an early audience. A page had come by to fill up his cup with water. The king had taken first the cup and flung it, and next the pitcher. Both had crashed against the wall and floor, creating a mess of fragments that the young page was in a hurry to clean up.

Besides the two mages, Castle Guard Captain Gruhg, King's Guard Branek and Royal Advisor Zowns were also present.

"Again!" Lehnorack demanded. "Tell me again what you found!"

"Bizelle and myself cleared the outer layer of magic that he created last night." The First Apprentice replied. "It was not tampered with. We cleared away a second layer of magic, and it also was not disturbed. We found that Arak had set a third layer within the other two. This one was trickier to manage, as Arak's binds are stronger than ours."

"No layer was tampered with?" The king pondered. "This means that Arak or the demon did not escape from the chamber?"

"The three layers were intact, sire." Fass confirmed. "As I said before, when we finally entered the chamber, we did not find Arak to be in it."

"And the ring? What about the ring?"

"It had vanished, the same as Arak." Fass revealed.

"Is it possible that Arak hid the ring in his chamber?"

"No, sire. That ring ebbs a strong aura of magic about it, as I'm sure you already know. Bizelle and myself scanned through every inch of the chamber. We did not find it."

"I have no alternative, other than to accuse Arak of stealing my ring and taking it with him!"

"Sire, that might be a premature conclusion." Fass worried. "Arak said that some unusual event could take place, once he attempted to draw the demon from the ring."

"As unusual as Arak disappearing, and my ring disappearing as well?"

"Well, no, not exactly. He didn't foresee disappearing."

"Then what did he say?" The king demanded.

"He only said something unusual..."

"What do you know? Get out! Get out of my sight!"

Both mages bowed, before they strode away. Lehnorack watched them as they walked to the end of the chamber set aside for teleportation. When they reached that designated area, both mages vanished from sight.

“Gruh, you search Arak’s chamber.” The king turned to his seasoned man. “Are you certain the ring is missing?”

“I supervised the search myself, sire.”

“Branek?”

“It was the ring of the water demon, was it not? With any good fortune, sire, Efrezio took Arak to the bottom of the Gaudrian and drowned them both.”

“He can drown Arak after my war is over, but not before!” The king raged. “Both of you, out of my sight! Get out of my chamber!”

As the soldiers strode away, Lehnorack aimed his hateful eye at his advisor. “You said we have a new report, of a band of pigs skirmishing with our forces just east of port Triest-Vatra.”

“Yes, sire.” Zowns nodded. “We received the news this morning, from a teleporting sorcerer.”

“And no further details than that?”

“Unfortunately, none, sire.”

“We don’t know how large the force was, or if they came from the water, from the beach or from the stinking forest! We don’t know if they attacked with sorcerers, or if they are well-armed! What do we know, Zowns?”

“Only that there was some sort of attack.” The advisor looked anxious. The king’s hateful eye was too much to behold. “I should leave your sight, sire. I should have a competent military man sent to Triest, to verify that the attack did in fact take place.”

“Yes, you should do that. You should have done that already!”

“A mistake I will correct immediately.” Zowns nodded, hurrying off after the soldiers.

Lehnorack stewed by himself. What was he supposed to do now, wait for Arak to show up with his ring? The king had four devastating weapons, or at least he had four the previous evening, right before he allowed Arak to take one of his rings. Let me speak to the demon, Arak said, I will convince him to battle for us. I will see what the demon wants, and we will exchange favors. And so Lehnorack had removed one of his rings and handed it away, and now he had three devastating weapons instead of four. What the hell had Arak done with his ring, and with his demon?

“Triest may soon come under attack.” The king knew. “The personnel was only just moved away from the mines and into that port, but we don’t have enough supplies for the men stationed there plus this new influx from the mines. We need the sorcerers to move equipment, but we also need them to teleport food and water. If we move the one, we will be lacking in the other. If we move the other, we will be lacking in the first!”

Lehnorack saw the page walking by, carrying a basket full of pieces of pitcher and cup. “Put that down and come here!”

“Yes, sire.” The young reptilian nodded. Dutifully, he went to stand before the king. “What can I do for you, sire?”

“Branek is an arrogant bastard. I can trust him to spy on others, but not to take care of important matters. Find Aydirk for me. Aydirk can get to the bottom of things when Branek cannot get even to their top. He should be in the storage chambers beneath the castle. Fetch him quickly!”

The page ran off, leaving the king alone to brood. “The sorcerers are spread out over three different regions: Vatra, Erranth and the Bear Lands. The first thing to do is to get

them into position. Half will fight, while the other half will transport, at least at the start. The ships are not filled with supplies because the merchants are moving too slow. Gods eat their children! We need to start a route for supplies right away, before the soldiers eat up all they have at the ports and they start going hungry! Blast and spit! Where did you go, Arak, when I need all of my pieces standing ready on the game board?"

That's what he could do, Lehnorack decided. He could clear off the Table Of Reckoning and set up his game board on it. He already had the pieces made to represent his troops, his assets and locations. All he needed now was to find out where the enemy was, so he could monitor their movements as well.

The moment Arak returned, and if he was still alive, Lehnorack thought he would wring that sorcerer's neck.

(December 01, 2018, 8:18 PM. Music tonight will be Derek and Brandon Fietcher's 1 hour of Enchanted Lands music. Mexico got a new president tonight, and from all appearances, he looks like he's going to shake up the establishment in humble but firm manner. He promised to achieve 100 points. Some of those I thought were unrealistic, but hey, if he does even a fifth of what he said he would, the country will be much improved. I mention this because I might work it into the storyline later, maybe in how Arak has to deal with King Lehnorack.

Other influences for this project include the TV series Bosch. Some of my characters speak in curt, short sentences, like Bosch does. Also, I've been watching another TV show called Texas Rising. This deals with peripheral events from around the time of the massacre at the Alamo by General Santa Ana. When I get to writing about battles and wars, I might have some of my sub-plots circling around the main conflict like they do in the series. I'm happy to relate that this project is at 49% completion, after, oh, how long has it been? 17 days! This gives me hope that I can finish it before December is over.

The direction of the story is changing, enough that I might not be able to incorporate some of the sub-plots I had outlined in my original rough draft, old outline and other notes. I will salvage what I can and improvise the rest, in keeping with what I've written in the 6 previous novels for this series. Speaking of that, this morning I began my final edit for Savage Lands 2. It should take me about a week to get through that. When I'm done, I will set up a pre-order price of 99 cents, until I officially release the e-book on January 15<sup>th</sup>. I'll make the pre-order announcement here and on my website when I am ready. Wait for it!

This next part is not the in the original notes. Start time: 8:39 PM. End time: 11:10 PM.)

The human prisoners had a very interesting day, Rex thought. In the morning, the lizard soldiers organized them on the pews, giving them thick oatmeal to eat. I was made with almond milk and filled with bits of apples and pears, plus berries, nuts and seeds. They could even sweeten it with honey or maple syrup. Rex couldn't complain that they were mistreated when it came to food, as the soldiers ate from the same iron pot.

When the lizard wizards came in, they had a long discussion about how the brown-robe managed to figure out the translation spell. That guy was named Bizelle, Rex knew now. Bizelle had gone over whatever words he'd said, while the little guy, Fass, kept

asking him to repeat it. They talked about it over by the dissection tables, while sitting on the pews, and even right by the cell when the humans were told to head back in.

“If you wanted to establish the translation spell ahead of time, where would you cast it?” Bizelle asked.

The wizards were seated on the pews at the time. Rex tried to look casual as he leaned near the cell door, trying to listen in.

“When we summoned the carriage, we could not communicate with the Nubian woman.” Fass related. “She was startled by us and panicked.”

“And she was killed.” Bizelle nodded.

“The same happened with the two Nubians with the magic weapons.” Fass went on. “And with this last bunch of humans. One Nubian and two Cuy-Cuhs were killed. Had we been able to speak with them, perhaps their deaths could have been avoided.”

Rex glanced into the cell. Moses must have been the Nubian the lizards were talking about, and Bryan was the one that had been killed. That meant the rest of them, the Dukes and RTD taggers, all of them Hispanics, were called... What was it again? Koo-Koos?

“If you cast the summoning spell,” Bizelle proposed. “The moment a human comes through, I can cast the translation spell right after.”

“That will not always have success.” Fass replied. “The Nubian woman was in a carriage. We could not even see the carriage through the magic fog. We only became aware of it when it lurched out of the fog and impacted against the chamber wall. Or take the case of the Nubian men. Once the fog was removed, the Nubian began shooting his weapon right away, before you would have had the chance to cast a translation spell.”

“And we need two sorcerers present, instead of only one.” Bizelle agreed.

“The translation spell worked because it is simple.” Fass conceded. “All this time, Arak has thought to ask for specific armaments or technologies, but perhaps such things do not exist in other world, or perhaps they are called by other names. In other words, the summoning spell is too complex, because Arak is being pressured to produce straight away. If we were allotted more time to modify the spell, perhaps we would have better results.”

“What if we incorporate the translation spell into the summoning spell?”

Fass took a longer time to turn that over in his head.

Rex noticed that Bulldog had come over to stand beside the open cell door.

“What are they talking about?” Bulldog asked.

“I think it’s about the magic they used to get us here.” Rex divulged. “What do you want?”

“An hour or two outside. I’m going to ask them for an exercise break.”

“Can you wait five minutes?” Rex asked. “What they’re saying is important.”

Bulldog nodded and walked off. Rex started listening again.

“...Might work that way.” Fass was saying. “Sure! We open the portal first, and cast the translation spell second, to ensure the summoning spell will carry through to the next place. If any humans or other sentient creatures come through, in theory their speech will come across in the Common Tongue. Bizelle, you are a genius!”

“You owe me a reward then!” Bizelle beamed back.

“And I will deliver one, but not this moment.” Fass replied. “Think of something good to ask for. Tell me later, when we get our other minor sorcerers back.”

“You won’t forget?”

“Of course I won’t forget! When have you known me to forget?”

Rex figured the important stuff was over. He motioned to Bulldog.

“Hey, hey!” The thug strode out of the cell. “We need to stretch our legs. Can you take us outside for a little while? How about to that courtyard we were in before? We can run around that place for a while. Is that cool or what?”

The wizards watched as the small mob of humans stood up, all of them eager to get out of the chamber. They barked out to the soldiers. The wizards vanished right away, while their two guards lined them up in a column and started leading them out.

“Yeah, next time ask if we can put our underwear on first.” Wolfie complained.

All nine of them were escorted out of the castle: five Dukes, three taggers and one Blood. When they entered the courtyard, they observed dozens of lizard soldiers already there. They were doing various exercises, such as play fighting with wooden swords or carrying large stones from one end of the courtyard to the other.

The two wizards were already there. They had cleared off a corner of the yard for the young men to occupy.

“I want to run around this courtyard.” Bulldog motioned. “Is that okay? I mean, am I allowed to run around that way?”

“You may do as you wish, other than to exit.” Fass told him.

“Okay, but I don’t want to do it while I’m naked. You people have clothes, but we don’t. We are not comfortable running around without any clothes on.”

“Oh, you humans and your hairy bollocks.” Bizelle grunted.

Fass turned and motioned for a page to approach. After giving the young lizard a few instructions, the page turned and left the courtyard in a hurry.

“Let’s just walk around the yard for now.” Bulldog suggested.

“What are you up to?” Rex asked.

“You’ll see, if we get some underwear.”

They decided to walk in pairs. Rex walked alongside Merlin, while Acer and Moses trailed them by a couple of paces. The Dukes were bunched in close together, stopping when they saw a squad of lizards wrestling. The others kept going.

“What are we doing here?” Merlin asked. “I don’t like being around three or four of these creatures, and I really don’t like being around an army of them.”

“So far, they haven’t really tried to hurt us.” Rex reminded his friend.

“Yeah, that’s because they’re feeding us until we get fat enough to eat. If they have a Thanksgiving Day dinner here, we’re going to be the main course!”

“We don’t know that.” Rex scolded. “Just chill out. Do like the Dukes are doing; keep your eyes open for when we get out of there.”

“Where are we going to go, if we do make it out of here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ever think that things might be worse for us if we escape?”

“I thought you didn’t want to be dinner?”

“I don’t!” Merlin snapped. “I don’t want to be dinner for lizards in the castle, or for whatever might try to eat us outside the castle!”

“When we walk by the wizards, why don’t you ask them to send us back home?”

“I don’t want to talk to them!”

“And I don’t think they’re going to send us back home, ever. Remember those places that disappeared from San Diego, and how the people never came back?”

“The lizards probably chewed up all their bones.” Merlin grumbled. “That’s why we haven’t seen any sign of them yet.”

“Just be quiet, Merlin.” Rex huffed. “You’re not helping!”

When they passed by the wizards, Fass called out to Moses, or the ‘Nubian’ as they were referring to him. Moses split off from the walkers, while the rest kept going.

Eventually, they walked back around to where the Dukes were standing. The gang members were still watching the soldiers wrestling.

“They only have a couple of moves.” Manny said.

“Yeah, but they’re probably twenty times stronger than we are.” Bulldog guessed. “We have to find out how strong they are, and how they’ll fight against us. Rex, you weak punk, do you know how to box?”

“No. Do you?”

“Of course I do! All of us Dukes know how! What do you think, that we sit around the house all day smoking out? I know Merlin can’t do shit. Acer, can you box?”

“A little.”

“A little or a lot? Enough to box against a lizard?”

“No, I’m not that good.”

“Manny is our best boxer.” Bulldog looked at him. “What do you think? You want to go toe to toe against a lizard? You can tell their strengths and weaknesses better than any of us can.”

“Yeah, I’ll try it.” The thug nodded. “I’m not scared of them.”

“All right.” Bulldog decided. “Let’s keep walking for now. We have to keep looking for anything we can use against them.”

The group made their way around the courtyard’s inner perimeter, ending up nearly where the wizards were still talking to Moses. Bulldog was wondering if they could climb up to the walkway, to get a look at the landscape around the castle, when the page returned. The young lizard carried a bunch of long, thin towels and a basket full of shiny metal objects. He presented the items to the humans.

“What are these?” Rex asked.

“Loincloths.” The page answered, then snickered. “To cover your hairy bollocks!”

“I guess.” Rex murmured, as the page passed one to each of them. “What are those shiny metal things?”

“Brooches.”

Since Rex didn’t know what they were, even knowing what they were called, he ignored the basket and tried to figure out how the loincloth went. He saw Merlin tying it around his waist, like a skirt, and he did the same.

“They aren’t worn in such a way.” The page said.

“Uh, we don’t use these where we come from.” Rex told the young lizard. “Can you show us how to wear it?”

The page directed Rex to stretch the cloth between his legs and up toward his middle. The brooches were used like safety pins to tighten it around the waist.

“It looks like a diaper.” Bulldog made a face.

“Not a diaper, a loincloth.” Rex corrected. “It stays on tight, if you fasten the brooch on right.”

“It still looks like a diaper.”

When they resumed their walk, Moses ran over to join them.

“What were you talking about?” Bulldog asked.

“They wanted to know about the guns.” Moses revealed. “They wanted to know how they work. I don’t know much about guns or bullets, so I couldn’t really tell them anything. All I said was that I pull the trigger and the bullet comes out. They asked me about other weapons and stuff. I told them we have bombs where we come from, that can kill all sorts of people at a time, but I don’t think they believed me.”

“I don’t think we should tell them anything.” Acer worried.

“We don’t have to tell them everything we know.” Bulldog settled the matter. “Just enough to let them think we’re helping them. When we’re ready to escape, we need to grab those guns.”

“What do you know about guns?” Acer wondered.

“I know how to take one apart to clean it.” Bulldog replied. “I know how to reuse a casing and fill it up with gunpowder.”

Manny got their attention, as they neared the end of the courtyard where the lizards were wrestling. “Should I?”

“Yeah.” Bulldog assented. “They’re too strong to wrestle. See how long you can box with one. Keep moving around, try and tire him out if you can.”

“All right.” Manny nodded back.

The lizards stopped wrestling when Manny walked among them. He made his pitch; they agreed to it. Manny would fight like humans fought, while his scaly opponent would wrestle in his way. The humans thought it would go okay as long as Manny stayed on his feet. If he got knocked down, the lizard would surely use his strength to keep him down.

The battle started. Manny danced around while the lizard tried to time his moves. The lizard would lunge out with both long arms, while Manny dodged and threw a punch. Most of the time, the punch connected solidly. The lizard would grunt, but he didn’t look winded or hurt. Just when the spectators began settling in to the action, the lizard swept one long arm out in a hard slap. The thick hand struck Manny on the chest. The long claws dug into the young man’s flesh, leaving four deep gashes across Manny’s chest and arm. Manny fell over as blood began pouring from the wound.

The humans were too stunned to move, or even to react. It happened too fast.

The minor sorcerer Bizelle appeared out of nowhere, rolling Manny onto his back. Bizelle put his hand on Manny’s chest, as the young man groaned. His scaled hand started to glow as healing magic went to work on the gruesome wounds.

Fass appeared a moment later, also out of thin air. “Take him to the main chamber. Make sure he is fully healed.”

“As you say.” Bizelle nodded. He was strong enough to lift Manny in his arms, with Manny’s chest glowing, before they both vanished.

“Back to your practice.” Fass told the soldiers, as they’d gathered around to watch the fight. The short mage stayed suspended in the air, revolving around slowly to face the humans. “Is it true that humans are the only sentient species on your world?”

“What kind of species?” Wolfie asked.

“Yeah.” Rex nodded. “We are that, what you said.”

“There are no reptilians on your world?”

“No, no reptilians.”

“Are there pig-men, or bear-men?”

For a moment, Rex thought Fass was kidding, until he remembered Merlin talking about a tiger-man. “Uh, no, we don’t have those either. We have pigs and bears, but they aren’t, you know, sentient like you are.”

“Can we go up there?” Bulldog asked.

Rex turned. The thug was pointing at the walkway that ran around most of the courtyard.

“You can go there, if you wish.” Fass agreed. “Only do not fight with the soldiers. They are not trained to be nice. They are trained to maim the enemy, and to kill them.”

As Bulldog and the other Dukes went to the nearest walkway, Rex asked, “Is Manny going to be okay?”

“He will be mended.” Fass answered. “It is best if you join the rest. Once a reptilian has gotten the scent of fresh blood, especially human blood, he will seek to shed more of it. You will be safer on the walkway.”

Rex looked to Merlin and Acer, who were standing right behind him. A second later and all three were hurrying to catch up with the Dukes.

(December 02, 2018, 7:55 PM. 51% complete. Some minor maintenance; I’m erasing old italicized notes first. I moved the old Outline Of Major Events behind the last of Tagger Version 01. I probably won’t use the Valet Version at all. Let me reread the last page to catch up with the story mentally. Star time: 8:05 PM. For music, I’m playing the soundtrack to the Blizzard video game, Diablo I. End time: 10:44 PM.)

The walkway was narrow, with no guardrail to prevent someone from plummeting to the ground. As the taggers ascended, Rex saw how Bulldog had positioned the Dukes. Two were facing into the courtyard, one was facing out, and Bulldog was having a talk with Moses.

Rex sidled past the others, stopping when he was standing beside Moses. “Merlin, Acer, why don’t you two chill out right here?”

That done, Rex went to listen in on conversation.

“So you weren’t close to that guy Bryan?” Bulldog asked.

“If you mean, were we homies, no.” Moses replied. “I barely knew that guy. All I know is he just got out the joint and needed someone to pull a heist with. That’s it.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Rex cut in.

Bulldog turned it around on him. “Your friend Merlin got hurt pretty bad, right? What if he’d died? How mad would you be right now?”

“You really want to know?” Rex said. “I’m not a gang member or anything, but I would have started looking for a way to go after the Dukes. Maybe not right away, but down the line, I would have done something.”

“You hear that, Wolfie?” Bulldog asked the thug next to him. “You think this punk has the guts to pull a trigger?”

“I’ll tell you what I saw.” Wolfie answered. “I saw one tagger fall on his back and not even cover up his face. I saw another tagger run halfway across a baseball field before he came back to help his friends, and I saw this guy standing by a gate trying to fight three of us.”

Bulldog looked directly at Rex. "If I put a gun in your hand, would you use it against these fucking lizards?"

Rex looked at the multitude of soldiers still doing their exercises in the courtyard. "Is that what you're going to do? Try to kill all of them?"

"Sometimes you have to wait a while, before you can get some payback." Bulldog replied. "I don't want to kill all of them, just two. The lizards killed two Dukes. That's the kind of payback I'm looking for."

"You don't even know which two." Rex said.

"You're right." Bulldog nodded. "I don't know. We just saw what happened to Manny, so we know we can't pick a fight with a lizard. We can't even jump one, because even one might be strong enough to tear us all apart. That's why we need those guns. If I blast a couple of them, it doesn't even matter if I get the right two or not. All that matters is that they know the Dukes did it."

"I'm not so sure about that." Moses shook his head. "Maybe you hadn't noticed, but we're not standing in Stoner Town anymore. If you pick a fight with a lizards, if you kill one of them, you've got an entire fucking castle to worry about."

"I don't care about that!" Bulldog growled. "They drew first blood, not us! That makes it personal between the Dukes and them!"

"We're not Dukes." Rex reminded him.

"If you do something, that's on you." Moses seconded.

"And what, the rest of you are going to live happily ever after?" Bulldog laughed. "After all the trouble the lizards went through to get us here, do you really think they will ever send us back home?"

"We'll figure out some other way to get back." Rex reasoned.

"And what if we don't? What if we have to stay here for the rest of our lives, like those other people that disappeared from back home?"

Acer and Merlin had come in closer to listen, Rex noticed. On the Dukes' side, so had the other gang members.

"We're not letting this drop." Wolfie said. He pointed toward the training yard. "Two of them are on our hit list."

"You're going to kill two lizards and then make a run for it?" Rex asked. "You don't even know where we are!"

Bulldog turned his head to look out past the wall. He had a decent view of houses up close and trees off in the distance. The dirt road was busy with pedestrian traffic and a few wagons. Every person they saw was a lizard.

"If we escape, they might kill whoever gets left behind." Bulldog figured. "If you guys are in, we need to know now."

Rex looked to his buddies.

"I think we should stay put." Merlin said. "The lizards haven't done anything bad to us. They healed us, and they've been feeding us, and they've been taking care of us."

"Didn't you hear what they said?" Acer asked. "They need us right now, because they want us to give them some kind of super weapon. What happens when they figure out we don't have one?"

Moses added, "They killed Bryan, they killed two Dukes, and they killed some woman who was driving her car. Four people! How many more have to get killed before you figure out they don't really care about us?"

“If we have a chance to get out, I think we should take it.” Acer decided.

“There was a fucking eyeball in our soup.” Moses reminded them. “I think we should get out of there.”

“I think we should stay.” Merlin persisted. “What about you, Rex?”

The worried tagger looked to the Dukes.

“I’m getting payback for my homies.” Bulldog vowed.

“So am I.” Wolfie nodded.

Slam and Vamps both said they’d follow along.

The only dissenting opinion so far was Merlin’s.

“Rex?” Merlin asked.

Rex suspired. “I don’t trust the lizards, not after how they brought us here, which was against our will, how easily they can kill us, and how they have killed a bunch of people already.”

“They don’t even lock our cell door!” Merlin spouted out.

“The lizards know what humans are.” Rex countered. “If we escape, we might be able to find them.”

“In a medieval planet?” Merlin asked. “They didn’t call it the Dark Ages for nothing! A lot of bad things happened back then!”

“I can just see us running through the woods in our diapers.” Acer joked. “Like a bunch of dicks!”

“We can always split up, once we’re far enough away from the lizards.” Bulldog plotted. “You guys go your way, and the Dukes will go another. In the meantime, I need to know where you guys stand. I don’t want any of you ratting us out once we start making our plans.”

“I think we should try it.” Acer said.

“Same here.” Moses nodded.

“Merlin, you need to go along with us.” Rex urged. “Because I’m not leaving you behind.”

“Fine.” The tagger nodded.

“Say it.” Bulldog pressured.

“All right! If you guys make a plan to escape, I want to escape, too. And I won’t tell anyone about the plan!”

Bulldog’s face showed he wasn’t entirely convinced. He scanned the landscape again. “Okay, so let’s start putting a map together.”

“I have an idea about that.” Wolfie spoke up.

A short while later, they were all on the run. The eight humans ran out of the courtyard, surprising a number of lizards that were walking by and minding their own business. The locals watched the humans run the length of the main wall and slip around the corner, out of sight.

“Dukes!” Bulldog called out, splitting his four away from the others.

They went right, so Rex and his buddies went left. They ran past pedestrians and around a well covered over by a small, wooden roof. In about a minute, the four runners: Rex, Merlin, Acer and Moses, reached the first of the houses.

“This way!” Rex announced, running through a tight space between two houses.

They came to a dirt lane, too small for wagons, and with a bad smell to it. The four sped across the lane, before Rex figured he should randomize his route. He had his friends scramble between another row of houses, and another, before he came to a wide field that had some sort of crops planted in it.

“Through the field?” Acer asked.

“It’s too far!” Rex answered, spotting a small rise in the distance. “That way!”

They ran through a narrow lane between fields, still a long run, but not as long as it was to get to the first line of trees. Just as they were getting winded, they reached the rise. When they climbed it, they saw it was a narrow stretch of about three yards. Past it ran a river too wide to easily swim across.

“There’s a bridge over there!” Acer pointed.

Rex saw it. If they could get across the bridge, the trees would give them good cover. The problem was the same as with the fields; it was a far run either way. “What direction is this?”

“East, I think.” Acer gazed up at the sun. “I don’t know!”

“They’re coming!” Moses cried out.

Rex turned around. The first of the lizard soldiers were streaming out of the rows of houses. The good thing was they really weren’t as fast as humans. The bad thing was the entire courtyard had emptied out to chase them. “Let’s split up! Acer, Moses, take the bridge! Merlin, you come with me!”

Rex took off at a run, with Merlin lagging a few strides behind. It had been Wolfie’s idea to have the lizards chase them, as a way to really stretch their legs, and also to test the capabilities of the soldiers. Fass had readily agreed to it, promising a reward to any lizard who caught a human, as long as the human were not injured.

He ran, and he didn’t stop running until he reached the tree line. By then, Merlin was a good thirty feet back.

“Come on!” Rex urged. He clambered down the rise, wanting to cut through an edge of the farming field. Some farmer was going to be peeved when he saw Rex’s big feet all over whatever the hell was planted there. “Merlin!”

In the distance, Acer and Moses were seen clearing the bridge, with the closest lizards just reaching it.

“Merlin!” Rex called out.

His friend tripped coming down the rise, rolling to a rough halt at the bottom. Rex went to help Merlin up, discovering his friend was limping.

“Are you okay?” Rex asked.

“What do you think?”

Rex pulled Merlin along. They had maybe half a city block to traverse, a good fifty yards or so, before they reached the trees. The lizards were gaining on them.

By the time they reached the shade of the first trees, Merlin was squealing from the pain, besides huffing and complaining that he couldn’t go on. “Just go without me!”

The lizards would be on top of them in about a minute.

“Shit, Merlin!” Rex spat out in frustration.

Merlin leaned against a large tree trunk, pushing Rex’s arms away. “Leave me here!”

Rex took one last look at the lizards, before he abandoned his friend. The lizards weren’t that fast. They had short legs, and if they gained too much momentum, their long

arms and torsos would probably tip them over. They had to go slow because they'd lose their balance. That was his theory, anyway. Which direction was he running in, north or south? If the river was east... It was too hard to think about. He didn't even know if the sun of this world moved the same way as the sun of Earth.

So Rex ran, across the same narrow trail that led into the woods. It would be too easy for him to get caught, if he stayed on that same road. All the lizards would have to do was follow the trail until he tired out.

Hoping to throw them off, at least a little, Rex headed into the trees. He was running opposite the river, west then. Better not go in a straight line, he figured, starting a series of quick turns every ten strides or so. He'd better not get lost!

Jumping behind a large tree, Rex struggled to catch his breath. The bark felt rough against his bare back. He crouched, still heaving, looking behind him, but he didn't see any lizards coming yet.

"Don't get lost." Rex panted. "They're expecting me to go straight south, away from the castle. What if... What if I keep going west? I can keep the castle in sight that way, and they'll be looking in a whole other direction."

Rex stayed close to the ground, until he caught his breath. As quiet as a mouse, he peered around the edge of the tree. When he didn't see anybody, he dared step closer to the castle instead of away from it. He was out there, just past the edge of the field where he couldn't be seen. From his vantage point, he saw four lizards escorting Merlin back over the dirt path. His friend was limping so badly a lizard scooped him up and started carrying him.

"How many chased me?" Rex wondered. "Ten, maybe? I don't know!"

Giving up, he started walking through the trees. Every few minutes, he stopped to gauge the terrain ahead of him, and to listen for anyone's approach. His feet were lucky because the soil was soft and for the most part devoid of rocks. The worst thing he had to worry about was crunching a dry leaf, or tripping on an exposed root.

Rex stayed out there until night fell. He kept watch on the sun, calculating that the river was east to southeast. He'd gone south of the castle at first, but as he rounded its outskirts he ended up on the west end later. It was a pretty big castle, or actually, a walled city surrounding the castle, as big as eight to ten city blocks in Stoner Town. Outside the wall, he found many farmsteads to the west and south, and more housing to the north.

The young man noted where the three busy roads were: north, east and west. He watched the farmers leaving their fields just before sunset, and he saw the easiest way to get from the castle to the nearest woods without being seen.

The darker it got, the more cold and hungry Rex felt. He figured he'd seen all he could, except for the north end that was full of houses. For some reason, he thought he'd see all sorts of guards standing at each road entrance, but there were none. The safest route out of the city, as far as he could tell, was to have lie down in the back of a wagon and let a driver take them.

When it really got dark, Rex could barely see the scant lights inside the city. The entire area looked as black as the countryside around it. As if that weren't enough, there were so many stars in the sky that their blanket of white light unnerved him. He wasn't used to that sight, only to the spectacle of a million city lights in San Diego, including all

the stoplights, and a handful of stars in the night skies above. The eerie scenery bugged him so much, he decided to walk into the lizard city and turn himself in.

The last thing he wanted was to be out there alone, in that alien country.

(December 03, 2018, 7:35 PM. I started watching Robin Of Sherwood, an English TV series from 1984-5 focusing on the legend of Robin Hood. The series is described as being the most historically accurate. Mostly, the first episode was standard action fare in how it established its primary characters, while tossing in several action sequences to keep people watching.

I have made magic a key element in the Savage Lands series, and also introduced a number of unusual supernatural angles. What struck me most about this first episode of Sherwood was how a shaman approached Robin, setting him on a course of action to save his oppressed people and to fight tyranny. This shaman worships the Horned God, who was the main deity of England in the medieval, pre-Christian era.

So far in this project, I've kept my plot on the tame fantasy side, mostly because that was my writer's state of mind back when I first thought of the concept, back circa 1989-90. Now that I am close to leaving the original 'script,' I may delve into the darker side a bit more. The Horned God of the Celts may be a part of that, as I still need to make a few more transitions to direct this project where I would like it to go.

Do I want music tonight? Sure, why not. I am playing Medieval Camelot, a program of one hour by my favorite medieval / instrumental duo, Derek and Brandon Fietcher. Start time: 8:00 PM. I had to move the Outline Of Major Events up, as those events are about to start taking place. All right, I'm calling it a night. End time: 10:43 PM.)

"There are matters men are meant to know, and matters they are not." The water demon Efrezio said. "For all of time, certain matters are meant to be kept hidden away, known only to the gods that made us."

"The new thinkers in Erranth say the gods do not exist." Master sorcerer Arak replied. He was sitting in his favorite chair, a chair that once belonged to Kellorr, in his darkened chamber. "They say the gods are constructs of the sentient mind."

"Where you present when this world was created? Where your new thinkers there?"

"No, of course not."

"Then how can they claim to know all there is to know?"

"They cannot." Arak answered, after several moments of contemplation.

"The power of magic waxes and wanes like the moon." Efrezio related. "There are times when magic is abundant, and times when it is scarce. The time that you live in, it is a time of more magic than less."

"This is your time as well." Arak reminded the demon.

"Is that what you think?"

Again, the sorcerer was forced to turn his assumption over in his head. His gaze lingered on the demon. Efrezio had chosen to look like the silhouette of a man. Just as easily, he could have appeared to be a man made of water, or ice.

"What time was your time?" Arak inquired.

"My time passed into history a long time ago. Tell me, Arak, have you ever seen the gods walk the ground?"

"Have you?"

“How was I made to serve your king?”

“That is a mystery.” Arak said. “Kellorr deliberately did not write everything in his notes. He did not say where you originated or where you were found. He only wrote that after considerable effort, he managed to bind your soul into the ring I wear now. This is the same for the other three demons as well.”

“Was I bound before or after Kellorr went to the ruins of Atronia?”

“Before.” Arak answered automatically. “No... He wrote that he was trying to bind you and the others before he went. He succeeded in the binding after his return.”

“A calculated lie. Kellorr only discovered me in the rubble of Atronia. Anything prior to that, he wrote in after he returned to Erranth. He did not want any man to know I had come from that rubble.”

“Why would he choose to hide that?”

“Because I showed him how to see into the future.”

“The future?” Arak asked. “Kellorr never wrote that. He wrote that he’d discovered fragments of ancient manuscripts. Through the manuscripts he deciphered the pieces of the spell that later allowed him to spy on other dimensions and worlds.”

“Show me the manuscripts.” Efrezio said.

“They are kept secure, in the Halls of Mystical Discernment.”

“Have you seen them?”

“Of course. I studied them thoroughly to perfect my spell.”

“Did you see the original manuscripts, or did you see Kellorr’s notes based on those manuscripts?”

Again, Arak wondered where the demon was leading him. “I saw the notes. The pieces of the original manuscripts disintegrated from age, according to Kellorr.”

“What if Kellorr discovered me in Atronia, and he asked me certain questions? I gave him certain answers that he wrote into his notes. What if those were the notes he returned to Erranth with, and there were no original manuscripts?”

“Kellorr pretended he was already trying to bind you before he went to Atronia, to hide the fact that you gave him the information? Prove that this is true.”

“Prove that it isn’t.” Efrezio chuckled. “I will tell you how I was created, because I will enjoy watching your reaction when I do. You think that Atronia fell into ruin five hundred years ago, or a thousand. I tell you that it did, and yet it exists today, and it exists in the future as well.”

“What nonsense! Speak directly, and not in riddles!”

“Can you think back to two thousand years ago or more? Of course you can’t, because the gods have their way of hiding their tracks so their secrets will not be put to the light. Listen close, Arak. The gods grew bored in the heavens, and they came to us. The gods set foot on Grond.”

“When? How?”

“Does it matter?” Efrezio asked, shifting from a dark shadow into a clear blue color. “The important point is that it did happen, long, long ago. Before my time! When I was a mortal man, a human man, Atronia was already only a memory. Think of that! Atronia started as a kingdom led by one man, and it evolved into an empire that subdued this entire continent! For near a thousand years it existed. And then it broke apart, and it crumbled, because the gods saw fit to wipe it away, like a servant wipes away the front step to a house. Gone, Atronia was gone to the wind!”

Arak could not believe all of that. Perhaps the demon had gone mad.

“When my time came, we thought to archive the little knowledge that remained.” Efrezio continued. “We dug into the ground, unearthing the broken temples, trying as we could to decipher the old writing, except none knew how to read it. We discovered many wondrous things. Originally there were four gods, one for each of the elements: earth, fire, water and wind. My peers and I established secret orders to keep this knowledge away from the common folk. They would not have understood it in any case, because the commoners are always so stupid. If you say build here, they will build. If you say, go to war over there, they will go. The commoners were not meant to know the truth of the gods, and so it was up to us in our secret orders to keep the truth veiled.”

“After Atronia was in ruins?”

“Yes, well after. We found the capital of Atronia, called Atronia Capital, after the name of Atronia the nation. We found the temples to the four gods. Four of us devoted our lives to the gods, to the elements, learning all that we could of both. I chose water in its fluid state, and ice in its solid state. Because we remembered the old gods, the gods looked upon us with their favor. They granted us a touch of their power, enough that it made us great in a world with little magic in it. The commoners came against us like a tide of doom. At the last moment, the gods deprived us, their magicians, of their power. The commoners killed us, but they did not want our souls to roam free. They managed to bind us to the ruins of the temples, and then they buried the ruins so that we might never be found in the future, or the present, or the past.”

“I cannot grasp that entirely.” Arak said. “You say you were killed, and your soul was bound to a ruin, a block of stone?”

Granite. A block of granite.”

“And you stayed bound until Kellorr and his archeologists came to dig you up, out of the ground? What then? Did Kellorr merely transfer you from the granite and into the ring? That is a simple task! Even the minor sorcerers can make simple magic bindings!”

“An irony, yes? There we lay, the four most potent weapons your little kingdom has ever seen, caught in blocks of granite. All it took was a charge of manna on a wet surface of mercury to cause us to flow into those rings.”

“You told Kellorr how to do that!” Arak realized. “That is the reason he hid away how he found you!”

“You would have done the same, in my place. We were bound for all time, from the beginning to the end.”

“You confuse me! How can you be bound into the past, before you are bound? How can you be bound into the future, if you are already released?”

The demon pondered the question. “Imagine a wagon, Arak. Imagine one of its wheels rolling round and round. Now, in your mind, stop that wheel and look at it. Can you see the hub in the center, and the spokes radiating out to the edge? How many spokes does a typical wheel have?”

“Eight.”

“Pretend there are only four.” Efrezio detailed. “Pretend you are inside the hub, and from your place in the middle you can see the edge of the wheel turning and turning. It looks like a straight path, continuing in motion with no beginning or end. Except, you know it is not a straight path but a circular wheel. The wheel is Time, and your soul, it

can travel from the hub to the edge whenever it wants to, and when it wants to, your soul can decided to travel back to the hub.”

“We learned something similar in the magic school.” Arak recalled. “The instructors taught us that time was a wheel. The top was summer, the right side fall, the bottom winter and the left was spring.”

“Do you see why I asked you to imagine four spokes?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t explain how what is done today reflects into the past.”

“I will prove it to you.”

“How?”

“You think we are in your chamber, but we are not.”

Arak abruptly left his chair. He glanced around, thinking the demon was lying to him. To reassure himself, he went to one of his two narrow windows. Outside, the night was gray, so gray nothing else could be seen.

“Merely a fog.” Arak decided. He strode across the chamber. When he opened the door, he did not see the dank corridor he expected. Instead, he witnessed even more fog.

“Read a book, Arak. Light a candle.”

The demon was taunting him. Arak went to his bookshelf. He pulled out a book at random, finding its grainy cover to be normal. When he flipped it open, he saw only blank pages. He went to his collection of scrolls, unrolling one, and then a second, finding them blank as well. “What will happen if I light a candle?”

“Its flame will be as gray as the magic that surrounds us.”

Arak faced the demon. “You are going to kill me.”

“Am I?”

“Are you?” The sorcerer demanded to know.

“If that were true, we would not be talking now.”

“What do you want?”

“To negotiate. The last time we spoke, you said that if I helped you defeat Kellorr, you would give to me anything I wanted. What did I say in return?”

“Your answer was that you would think things over. You had not decided what you wanted as your reward.”

“And you never made good to return and ask, as you promised you would.”

“Thanks to that bastard Kellorr, the king doesn’t trust any mage.” Arak denied. “I have asked the king several times! It is only now that we are close to war, that he has granted my request to speak with you.”

“Because your king wants us to fight for him.”

“He does. He knows that if I can sway you, you in turn will sway the others.”

“And I have to wait for my reward, that may never come?”

“Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you now.”

“Are you so sure you can?” Efrezio asked, keeping his form facing the sorcerer.

“First, I will give you a few more secrets. This will convince you that I speak truth, while your simple thinkers speak stupidity. This place we are in now is a pocket world, a pocket dimension that looks very much like your chamber, but it is only a limited replica. Your magic cannot create a place like this, but my magic can. There is a problem. This place is unstable. Try to fathom this. Time-space here is different than time-space in your world. When you return to your world, you might find you have gone into the past or the future by a short duration. It cannot be helped. My magic is imperfect in that aspect.”

“How much of a difference in duration?” Arak asked. “Minutes or days?”

“You will see it for yourself.” Efrezio replied. “It will be only a short duration, but enough to prove the validity of my words. Before I tell to you what I want, I will grant you a gift. It is the same gift I presented to Kellorr, but he only chose to hide it away for himself. It is the gift of seeing into time-space.”

“Kellorr already had that.” Arak said. “He could see into other dimensions. That was the basis for my Great Experiment.”

“The entire time that Kellorr was pretending to be binding us into rings, he was speaking with the four of us.” The demon revealed. “We hinted at what magic knowledge we could give him, but he was afraid of it. Since your king kept pressure on Kellorr, and since he could not grasp what we offered, he thought to bind us and to give us away to your king. We became simple weapons of war and nothing else. We are angry that Kellorr did this to us, and eager to kill him for it. This is why we helped you, when the king released us and you told us to attack that man.”

“Kellorr was able to see into other worlds. If that is not the gift of space-time, then what is?”

“A scrying mirror, able to see into the past, into the present, and to give the most probable outcome into the future. That is two things you are being given; the truth that you can enter into a magic dimension, provided you design it ahead of time, and fill it up with air to breathe, and a magic mirror that will make your king very happy in his coming war. These two gifts will encourage your king to let you speak to us, unless you become bullheaded like Kellorr and choose to ignore us.”

“And you will fight for Erranth, when the time comes?”

“Yes. I will fight, and I will incite the other demons to fight as well.”

“What do you want in return?”

“I speak for all four of us when I say this. We want life, human life. We want to be put into the bodies of newborns. Of course, this means that all our knowledge of the past will be forgotten, as our new experiences cloud over our old memories. This is what we want; to forget having been imprisoned in granite for all those centuries. But do not worry, we will give you ample time to write down our knowledge. After having waited so long, we can show patience for a little time longer. Your king will refuse, I expect, but this agreement is between the four of us and the one of you, and with no one else.”

“The king will kill me before he gives up control of his most powerful weapons.”

“That is not my problem.” Efrezio replied. This time, he shifted from water into cold, hard ice. “I will tell you how to construct the scrying mirror. You will need a mirror of polished copper, with no glass on it. You will set a layer of concentrated manna on its face, and prepare a separate charge of manna to infuse the layer to the mirror’s surface, as if you were preparing a jolt of lightning...”

The sorcerer was only half listening, as the demon kept describing the process. Arak was more concerned with how he could get Lehnorack to go along with the plan. From what he suspected, the king would never give up his powerful demons, not for any price.

(December 04, 2018, 8: 55 PM. I’m starting up a little later than usual. I was doing research on an article I want to write, based on the ongoing Honduran Caravan Crisis. I will be posting that on my Truth blog once I have it done. More on topic, this morning I released *Savage Lands 2*. I set up a pre-order deal on *Smashwords*. The official release

date for SL2 is January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018. If you pre-order the e-book, you can get it for 99 cents.

When I'm writing long projects like this one, I have a couple of milestones I look forward to. The first is reaching 50% completion. I passed that a couple of days ago, and currently I'm at 57%. A second milestone is getting to 100 pages. On my Official Word Count, I'm on page 99, so that hurdle will be hopped over tonight. When I reach these points, and also when I get to 150 pages or so, I look over the entire project. This is to make sure it is going the way I want it to, and to project forward to where I want to be at the end, and how I will go about getting there.

This particular project is different, because it is based on an idea and outline I had way back in 1989 or 90. So far, I have kept fairly close to that original concept, but now I am at the point where my Old Notes are almost done with, and I will be moving forward on new ground. You saw this already, in the conversation between Arak and Efrezio, which had a more metaphysical slant that illustrates how I write today, as compared to how I used to write nearly 30 years ago.

Where do I want this novel to go next? Do you really want to know? Do I really want to know? My answer is: it depends. I can already see that a couple of future sub-plots will have to wait until book 8. I won't give away any spoilers! So... The focus now is on beginning the war between Erranth and its enemies, while developing my human characters to a greater depth. Also, I still have to introduce a certain ex-cop that will have a prominent role as the series progresses. I know some writers want to have a bare bones outline, or even a detailed major events log, like the one I've got in the Old Notes section. I'm at the stage, as a writer, where I like winging it, that is, just starting up on the story and seeing where it wants to take me. That's the plan!

For muzak, I'm playing the soundtrack for Diablo II, my favorite all-time video game. I loved this game so much my greatest heroine Dobrynia is loosely based on the Amazon character with her lightning spear and elemental bows and... Yes, I have to say it, her big boobs! If you've ever played the game, you know, you KNOW, what I'm talking about. Doby has big parts in SL1 and SL2, just so you know, and she does get freaky! All right, enough of that. Stat time: 9:20 PM, because I took a few minutes for a snack while I thought where I would go next. Here goes... A quick note; I created a split in the novel. Part 1 is The Great Experiment. Part 2 to follow. Oh, I forgot to credit the song lyrics. Let me go back to the beginning and do that! End time: 11:06 PM.)

## Part II

### Hostile Intentions

The Master Sorcerer was wary as the gray fog cleared away from around him. He thought he was back in his chamber, but after the water demon had tricked him, he felt he had to make sure. Arak observed two minor sorcerers sitting on guest chairs, chatting until they observed his arrival. They were Bizelle and Minos, who both stood up.

"Master Arak, we must speak with you." Bizelle said.

"Hold." Arak held his thick hand out. He strode over to his bookshelf, pulling out a random tome, and then a second, reassuring himself that both had words written in their pages. Next, he gazed at the torches on the wall, believing they flickered in normal ways. To be sure, he created a small orb of fire, as large as a coin, again confirming it to be as

was expected. Lastly, he scrutinized the silver ring he wore, and the sapphire encrusted into it. Unless the demon had tricked him further, Efrezio was bound again.

“It is urgent, master.” Bizelle persisted.

Arak slowly pulled in a deep breath, before he asked, “How long was I missing?”

“Six days, master.” The minor sorcerer replied. “We were given specific instructions from the king. We are to take you to him at once, even, regretfully, by force if we must.”

“By force?” Arak asked, still in complete shock that so much time had passed. By his estimation, he had talked with the water demon for only a few hours.

“Branek has convinced the king that you have betrayed Erranth.” Minos bowed his head. “We were ordered to apprehend you, master.”

“We don’t wish to force you.” Bizelle said.

Arak lifted his hand. “See that I have the king’s ring on my finger. See also that I have just arrived, and that I have gone to no other place. I will go directly to the king’s hall to speak with him.”

“The king is not in the hall.” Minos revealed.

“Where has he gone?”

“To Caneh-Vatra. The pigs have overrun Thilia and Triest.”

“Have they?” Arak was even more surprised. “Where is Fass? Have we lost any mages during the fighting?”

“Fass is also at Caneh.” Minos answered. “General Essenek retreated with just over half of his soldiers. We lost no mages because they never fought against the enemy. They were tasked only with moving troops and supplies.”

“The attack began suddenly.” Bizelle explained. “We believe the pig mages used a clouding spell to dull our magical energies. We did not know how close they were until just before they made the first charge.”

Arak showed his teeth. “And that motherless Branek accused me of being a traitor?”

Minos raised his hands. In moments, they began to glow as if he were about to use magic against the Master Sorcerer.

“Apologies, master.” Bizelle said, also raising his hands. “The king was quite clear on this. He said to take you to him at once.”

“No need for force. I will go willingly. Take me before the king.”

Caneh was a large populated sprawl. A thriving fishing industry and commercial port was found on its northern shore. The military fort was located a stone’s throw to the south. It was entirely made of wood, with a palisade surrounding barracks, stables, an administration building and also civilian buildings such as granaries and a grain mill. Further south were the cities industries, including animal husbandry and its associated trades, such as leather goods and dairy, and to a lesser extent, thanks to its weak soil, hardy agriculture such as potatoes and onions.

At present, the fort was stuffed full of soldiers, so many that Arak doubted the area set aside for sorcerer arrivals was left clear. Arak and his pair of escorts appeared safely in that blue section, and right away the minor sorcerers led him into the administration structure. Military captains were gathered here; half a dozen of them, and also Generals Hennen and Essenek. King Lehnorack was leaned over a table, studying various objects made to represent troops and places. King’s Guards Aydirk and Branek stood close

behind the king. The two elite guards both noted his arrival, but it was the loudmouth Branek who spoke first, in a voice full of derision.

“There is the traitor!” He said.

Arak bared his teeth, and so did Branek. When Lehnorack straightened, his glower and ire were directed at the sorcerer as well.

“I trust you have a good explanation for having gone missing all this time?” The king asked. “Branek has half-convinced me that you either fled or were killed by the water demon.”

“Branek would do well not to speak of things he knows nothing about.” Arak said.

“Where were you?” The king demanded.

“I will speak with you in confidence.”

“I am needed here.”

“It is a matter of importance.”

“Let us all listen to your excuse, mage.” Branek goaded.

“Great importance, sire.” Arak insisted.

The king relented, rounding the table to come face to face with the sorcerer. Since Arak wanted no interruptions, he reached out for the king’s arm. In the blink of an eye, they were gone from the building and standing in the area designated for mage arrivals. Arak pulled Lehnorack out of that spot, for their mutual safety.

“I was gone six days?” The sorcerer asked. “Is this true?”

“Nearly six, yes.”

“Tell me what has transpired during that time.”

“You would know already, if you hadn’t run off as you did!”

“I did not run off. The demon kept me. He told me...” Arak paused. He was in the same situation Kellorr had gotten himself into, where he could not fully divulge what he knew to the king he served. “He has shown me how to create a special object.”

“A weapon?”

“No, not a weapon, but a very powerful tool. I will put it in your hand in a moment, but tell me what has happened first. The demon had me in a place where I could not receive any news.”

Lehnorack showed irritation in his eyes, before he spoke. “The pigs attacked Thilia first. They came in force, three of them for every one of us. They pushed our last few forces away from the mines, before they halted. Our people had time to retreat to Triest without further casualties. Henchen had the defensive line, while Essenek took to guarding the southern flank. Again, the pigs came, battering us until a second retreat was called. The same as before the pigs have allowed us to retreat, here to Caneh. They sent an envoy two days, requesting my audience. I spoke with their officials. They wanted to seal an agreement with me. If I am killed, my forces are to surrender to their King Hunfrid the Second from across the Gaudrian Ocean. If their king is killed, then I would become ruler over them. They are... Fastidious creatures, in a sense.”

“Did you honor the agreement?”

“I am undecided.” The king admitted. “The pigs have given me until they march here to come up with a response. They will arrive tonight, or tomorrow in the morning.”

“Are they more powerful than our military?”

“They battle with pikes!” Lehnorack snarled. “We uses swords and spears, but their pikes are much longer. They can pierce us while we cannot reach them! They come with

a small army of sorcerers as well. The magicians are integrated well with the soldiers, where the one knows to wait for the attack of the other. They are coordinated when we are not!”

“Have our mages fought yet, sire?”

“They have not.” Lehnorack answered. “I have held them back so far, as they will surely be outnumbered. I thought to use the demons, but Branek has my head filled with worry that the water demon had killed you. It gave me doubt that I could control the other three if I let them loose. There, you are caught up now. Do you have something for me in return, or only excuses as Branek claimed?”

Arak held his hand up, showing the king’s ring. “Efrezio will fight for our cause. He will convince the other demons to join him. If you ask for the ring, I will return it to you. If I am allowed to keep it for a time, I will have better control over the demon if I am the one to send it into battle.”

“I suppose you want me to give you the other rings as well, so that you will have my four most powerful weapons in your hand? Do you take me for a fool?”

“I am not Kellorr, sire.” Arak replied. “I have never given you reason to doubt my loyalty.”

“Not until now, with your sudden disappearance.”

“I believe it would be wiser if you returned to the castle.” Arak said. “If that is the route you choose, I will manage the demons and sorcerers against our enemies. I cannot guarantee victory, as I have yet to see how powerful their mages are. What I can assure you of is that I will die first, before I allow our enemies to continue a march against the greater land of Erranth. Having the demons will give us a powerful blow here and now, instead of later when the enemy is already breaking down our walls.”

“What of this tool you mentioned?”

“I have it here.” Arak held his hand up. In a moment, the copper mirror appeared in his grasp. “This is enhanced with magic. It will allow you to see any person or place that you wish. The only limitation is that you must know who or what you are looking at. I have tested this instrument several times already. It will work in the hand of anyone, be they mage or not.”

“Tell me again how it operates.”

“You see a person, or you travel to a place. Once this is done, you can ask the mirror to show you where that person is at present, or what is happening now at the place. Take it and try it for yourself. Choose any person that you know, and ask the mirror to show you that person.”

“What is the incantation?”

“It has none.” Arak revealed. “The mirror has a magic charge on it that will last for many months. When its energies are depleted, I will charge it up again. I had to show it to you in confidence. Because it requires no incantation, anyone can use it. Once people know you have it, they might try to steal it from you.”

Lehnorack took the mirror, gazing into its polished surface. “Show me the face of General Mo-Dahk in the Bear Lands.”

In moments, the front of the mirror looked to swirl with magic, turning into a smoky gray, before the blur shifted over to a detailed image. Clearly, the king saw the general sitting on a chair, chewing on some bony piece of fowl.

“Show me the face of the pig official I spoke with.” The king tried again. Seconds later, that face came into focus as well. “Ha!”

“The mirror might not see through a veil of magic.” Arak cautioned.

“Show me the mines at Triest.” Lehnorack said, and again, the image came into view. “I see the pig soldiers standing there, and look! As I turn the mirror, I see more of that town, and more of their soldiers.” He looked to Arak. “If I use this properly, it will be as if I had a spy in the enemy’s camp!”

(December 05, 2018, 6:34 PM. Starting early tonight. It’s been raining here today, so I cut out from my mother’s house when it slacked off. I did not want to be caught over there later if it starts pouring again. I’ve got more Derek and Brandon Fietcher playing. This time, it is 1 hour of Dark Winter & Gothic music. Word count is at 58%, and 103 pages. I have a good chance of finishing this novel by the end of December. Okay, I will read back by one page to get into the mood, before I take a break while I consider what I’ll be writing tonight. I went ahead and wrote in a bit more on the Arak / king talk, so I could break it off there. When I come back, I’ll start a new sequence. Start time: 7:10 PM. I did pretty good tonight, going from 58 to 63%. I will probably stick my police guy into the story at around 70 to 75%. I know that’s kind of late for a major character, but as I mentioned previously, some of my sub-plots are being pushed into book 8 of the series. Everything comes together in book 8! End time: 11:20 PM.)

“An enemy mage might sense that magic is being manipulated near them, but they will not be able to hone in on the source.” Arak continued. “I believe you will be safe to use this mirror at any time that you wish, without having to fear that it will lead a mage back to you.”

“Can you guarantee that? Are you willing to stake your life on it?”

This time, the sorcerer was not so quick to answer. “I cannot say with a complete certainty that the mirror is infallible. In the case it fails, you will likely end my life anyway, so yes, I am staking my life on it.”

“Will this mirror allow me to spy on you?” Lehnorack looked evenly into Arak’s eyes.

“It will, and I will not know it. As I said, magic can cloud its view. If I enter into a magical place, the mirror’s sight will not penetrate it.”

Arak noted the look in the king’s face. Lehnorack was eager to spy on his enemies, but he was just as excited to have the power to see what his inner circle and his rivals in Erranth were up to. “What of my request to hold onto the water demon?”

“Very well. Keep that ring for now. Let us see what you can do with that unpredictable rascal. If you want the other rings, you’ll have to earn them. Bring me a worthy trophy from the pigs.”

“As you say, sire.” Arak bowed his head. “Let me return you to the administration building.”

Lehnorack didn’t answer, as he was busy snickering over his shiny new toy.

“Wiki, wiki, whack, do you like it like that?” Acer rapped out. “Wiki, wiki, whack, when you’re flat on your back!”

“No doubt, how ‘bout, I knock you out?” Wolfie returned.

Those two had been going at it for the nearly last hour, Rex calculated. Back and forth, throwing barbs. At one point, they were going to drop fists, until Bulldog humbled them by calling them skinny sumo wrestlers in diapers.

Their days were becoming monotonous. They woke up, had a quick breakfast in the chamber, and later when the sun had warmed things up, they'd go out for their yard time. Lunch was also quick, mostly fruits. Sometimes the lizards allowed them to hang out in the yard until evening, other times they brought the prisoners inside right after lunch. When night fell, they were always back in the chamber, hanging out like they were now, until the lizards told them to go into the cell. They never locked the cell, but they were adamant that the humans stay in it.

Merlin was homesick, and so were a couple of Dukes. The rest of them adapted to their drastic change in lifestyle a little better, except for when somebody got on the nerves of somebody else, the way Acer and Wolfie were doing now. Manny was back among them, all healed up from that slash he'd gotten. You could barely see the scar.

Rex would have been bored out of his mind, if Bulldog wasn't stressing to find a way to escape. During their yard time, several of the captives had taken to running around the inside walls, getting their legs ready for long runs. The humans wrestled one another, until Bulldog had the idea to pick up a long stick and attack a lizard with it. The captain of the yard later encouraged the humans to do this; he'd said the pig-men moved and fought like the humans did. Rex was out there with the rest of the captives, getting his ass handed to him just as they were, since they knew nothing about fighting with long sticks. Staves, that's what the lizards called them.

Every day, a captive or two would stroll the walkway overlooking the fighting field. The captives always ended up in the northwest corner. From what they could gather, and it wasn't much because they were out of view, the north and east gates had the most traffic. All of the foot traffic and most of the wagons came from there. The wagons were usually not fully loaded, meaning other settlements were nearby.

The one clear view they did have was to the west. Nobody ever walked into the city walls from that direction. When wagons came, they always came in pairs or more, and they were always loaded full of lumber, stone blocks, or other non-perishable goods. When wagons departed west, again they always went in groups, this time loaded with foodstuffs. The humans figured that the next settlement west was a good ways away. That was their best option for escape.

"What are they doing?" Bulldog whispered.

The thug was standing in the cell with a couple other Dukes, while the rest of the captives were loitering on the last pew. Bulldog had everyone rotating around so the lizards wouldn't figure out the humans were spying on them.

Rex got up and took a casual walk over to the window. There was nothing worth seeing out there, now that it was starting to get dark. It was a good place to watch the guards from. They were playing card games, as usual, where the one with the highest roll would win whatever was being wagered. At times, the lizards bet berries or nuts, or small nuggets of metal they called coins, but they didn't look like any coins Rex had ever seen.

After keeping a free and easy gaze on the guards, Rex walked back to the cell. "They're playing for betel nuts tonight."

The lizards had been eating those nuts ever since the humans had first arrived into Erranth. At first, it was assumed the nuts were food. Only later did the humans discover

the nuts were addictive, as several lizards once got into a squabble over them. That had been something, to hear them barking and grunting at one another, except this time the humans could understand everything that was being said. It was a whole new arena of insults the lizards used on each other.

Bulldog had asked for a few betel nuts, to get an idea of what they tasted like. Rex had tried one, finding it very bitter. As he chewed past the fruit and into the center, the nut filled his mouth with saliva, so much he had to spit into a special pot the lizards always spit in. The nut colored his teeth orange or red. Its benefits were that it gave the chewer a good kick of energy, comparable to drinking half a dozen cups of coffee. One nut would keep a human up half the night, and there was no hangover to worry about in the morning.

“Come into the cell.” Bulldog said. “Tell Wolfie and Acer to come in, too. I’ll send somebody else out in a couple of minutes.”

Bulldog must have been a shot-caller for the Dukes, because his homies always listened to him, unless Wolfie got an itch to quarrel. With the taggers, it was like Bulldog was their boss or something. He never expected them to refuse his orders.

Manny, Moses and Vamps went out to take their places. Vamps was still nervous around the lizards, but the others weren’t. Manny and Moses went right up to the table they were playing on, watching the game and pestering that they wanted to join in, despite that they had nothing to wager with. The guards growled at them, but they let the two humans watch as the game was being played.

“Talk to your boy.” Bulldog motioned to Rex. “He looks like you should be holding his hand.”

“You don’t have to say it like that.” Rex said. “None of us likes being here.”

“Don’t bother me.” The thug raised his shoulders. “Hey, the rest of us sang out every song we knew last night. I know you have some kind of gay song that you know by heart, that you’re just dying to sing to us.”

“Why do I have to know gay songs?”

Bulldog chuckled. “Come on, now. You named yourself after a dinosaur.”

“No, I didn’t!” Rex denied. “Rex means king in Latin!”

“That just proves my point. You’re a wimp, just like your two sisters. You’re such a wimp that you had to name yourself the toughest name you could think of.”

“What about you?” Rex shot back. “You named yourself after a dog!”

Bulldog started laughing.

“Why is that funny?”

The thug motioned at one of his homies. “Wolfie, tell this punk how I got the name Bulldog.”

“We both went to junior high in Langley Heights.” Wolfie recalled. “We were getting jumped by Langley boys every day after school. One time, five or six of those fools ran up on three of us right when we were about to leave. The third guy, he took off running. Me and Bully, we stayed there and had it out with those fools. Bully was so worked up he got into it with two security guards. He even broke one of their noses. Before that day, we called him Clumsy. After that day, he was Bulldog from Stoner Town Dukes.”

“I earned my fucking nickname.” Bulldog growled at Rex. “I didn’t pick it out of a dinosaur cartoon like you did.”

The thug was as edgy as the rest of them, Rex understood. Since he didn't want to start up a fight, he looked at the other gang member. "How'd you get your name?"

"I used to be plain Alex." Wolfie said. "One day, I told the Dukes, I'm going over to Langley Heights by myself, and I'm going to stab the first fool I run into. I went, and I came back with that fool's shades and bandana, to prove I did it."

"Plus the bloody knife wrapped up in the bandana." Bulldog added. "He went into enemy territory like a wolf, and he came back like a wolf."

Rex felt overwhelmed. "What about the other Dukes?"

"Manny is just plain Manuel." Bulldog replied. "Vamps got his nickname because he used to stay up all night doing hard drugs, like a vampire. Slam got named because he straight picked up a fool at a party, and slammed him on the floor."

"What about the two Dukes that didn't make it? What were their names?"

"Don't talk about them." Bulldog said. "You know what? Just sing a song, man. I don't care what song it is. I need to hear something different before I lose my mind in this fucking place. You got a song or not?"

"Yeah." Rex shrugged.

"It's a gay song, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I knew it!" Bulldog laughed. "Didn't I know it, Wolfie?"

"You called it." The other thug chuckled.

"Go ahead." Bulldog encouraged Rex. "Sing your gay song for us."

"I'm changing a couple words so it won't sound so gay."

"I don't care about that! Just sing it!"

"The only reason I know this song is because my mom was growing up just as the eighties were finishing up. This song has been stuck in my head ever since you guys started singing your songs. It kind of fits the situation, you know?"

"All right." The gang member nodded. "Go ahead, man."

"Here it goes." Rex grunted. "Dear hero imprisoned, with all the new crimes that you are perfecting... Oh, I can't help quoting you, because everything that you said rings true... And these are the ways on which I was raised. These are the ways on which I was raised. I never wanted to kill. I am not naturally evil... Such things I do, just to make myself more attractive to you... Have I failed? I am the last of the famous... international taggers. The last of the famous... international taggers!"

Wolfie grinned and looked to Slam, as if he was ready to poke fun at Rex.

"What words did you change?" Bulldog asked.

"I changed playboy to tagger." Rex shrugged.

"Sing it again, with the right words this time." Bulldog requested. He listened to the song again, staying quiet for a few moments. "I think we're ready to make a run for it. We know where to go already, and we know the guards don't watch us that closely at night anyway. The only lizards I'm worried about is the ones in the robes. They start waving their hands around and weird shit starts to happen."

"They haven't been coming around as much." Wolfie reminded him. "I think they're doing something else that's keeping them busy."

"Yeah, they may not even be in the city anymore." Bulldog nodded. "I don't know where we'll end up, but give it another day or two and we're getting out of here."

Master Sorcerer Arak was looking at a very odd sight. There was a vehicle in the sky, hovering at such a great height that only a bird could keep it company. The vehicle looked like a carriage with no wheels. It had a flat bottom and large windows on all sides. Its top was flat, but the top edges were decorated with all manner of artistic woodwork. Strangest of all, the vehicle was hued in all manner of soft colors, including blue and green, but mostly in pink with yellow lining around the obvious door and windows. In the vehicle sat two mages wearing robes in pink with yellow borders, and also many yellow stars throughout their garments.

“They want to speak with us, master.” Fass said, floating at Arak’s shoulder level.

“It is good that you have summoned me.” The sorcerer replied.

King Lehnorack had returned to Erranth, along with General Essenek and what little were left of his troops. The pigs had advanced to just east of Caneh-Vatra and formed a strong line of defense. General Mo-Dahk had sent a few squads out to test the pig forces, but so far no weaknesses had been spotted. Neither side had used mages yet.

Arak had been working on a plan of attack, where his minor sorcerers would strike quickly and move back just as quickly. This way, he hoped, they would not be out long enough for the pig mages to counter the attack. The sorcerer worried that his few mages would be greatly outnumbered and vulnerable if he kept them stationary for too long.

“Will we speak with them?” Fass asked.

“I will go alone.” Arak decided.

“No, master.” His apprentice refused. “Take me with you. They will see that I am small and assume for me to be your page, or your servant. They are two, and so are we.”

“If they suddenly attack us, we might both be killed.”

“No, I will take the brunt of it. You teleport away and find a way to defeat them.”

It surprised Arak to hear that his underling was so ready to die. “Be ready to form a shield of magic. If I have the moment I need to summon the water demon, perhaps we can both ‘port away from danger.”

“Can you really control that wild entity?”

“I have made an agreement with it. It is up to the demon over whether or not it will abide to it.”

“Take me.”

“I will.” Arak decided, noting how far off the ground the vehicle was. “Perhaps these pig-mages do not know how to teleport. Let us not give the secret away. We will exit this fort on our feet.”

“As you say.” Fass nodded.

The palisade was over twenty feet high. Arak and his apprentice were standing on its upper walkway, as it had two of them, and strode down the first set of stairs. A number of wary soldiers moved aside for them.

Upon reaching the ground, Arak called out to the nearest captain. “Will you inform Mo-Dahk that we will convene with these mages in their flying carriage?”

“I will.” The captain nodded.

Very few of the men in Caneh trusted mages, Arak knew. He waited until the man turned and called for a messenger, before he directed his steps toward the gate.

“How can they float up so high?” Fass wondered. “The farthest we can leave the ground is, how much, eight feet or ten, before our link with the earth weakens?”

“They have mastered height where we have not.” Arak replied. “Perhaps we have mastered things they haven’t.”

“Surely they don’t have weapons as powerful as the Four Demons.”

“I would hope to the gods that they do not.”

By the time the two mages reached the gate, two of General Mo-Dahk’s secretaries had arrived. The general himself would not dare step out of the administration building, as he was the most valuable man in Caneh, next to Arak. The general probably would not see it that way, but it was the truth. The king had two other generals to call upon if Mo-Dahk were somehow incapacitated.

Arak and Fass could have instantly teleported outside the gate. Instead they waited for the soldiers to pull the ropes and engage the pulleys. The gate opened by a crack. Arak could have exited then, but he chose to wait until it was open further. That way, he expected, he would be seen more in an authoritative light.

The two reptilians stepped away from the palisade, both looking into the sky to see what the carriage would do next. Perhaps the pig-mages would shoot out a torrent of fire down on their heads and fry them.

“Are you afraid, master?” Fass asked.

“You may look afraid, but I cannot.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. It is because I am the servant. You will look that much stronger if I pretend to look weak.”

The reptilians watched as the carriage descended. It ebbed magic from its form, and seemed to drop slowly, by one level at a time, instead of all at once like a stone. At the last, it rested a couple of feet from the ground.

“Come forward.” The first of two passengers called out. “We are in truce while we speak to one another. No aggression by either side.” The mage leaned to over, pushing the carriage door open. “Go on. Get inside.”

Arak lifted his robe to avoid the edge below the door. When he set his heavy weight into the carriage, it was so well balanced by magic that he did not feel it tip. Fass came in behind him.

“Sit, sit” The pig-mage motioned.

The carriage had two short benches facing each other.

“Don’t be frightened.” The mage reached over to pull the door shut. “We will rise up into the sky before we speak. We want no insects listening to our conversation.”

Arak felt the carriage ascend, again in steady steps, and not in a smooth elevation. He wondered why the pig-mage had mentioned insects. Could the pigs have mastered insects as to make them spies, or was it merely a figure of speech?

He considered the pigs. The one who had spoken was the older of the two. He had pale pink flesh and a few stringy white hairs along the ears. His head was fuzzy with an old man’s hair. The pig had small eyes with decidedly human eyeballs. His ears were large and pointed, and had several small earrings pierced into one lobe. The mage’s nose was uplifted, and his mouth was also pointed.

The second pig was much younger, with skin in a deeper pink. He had only one earring in his lobe, and a nose ring that gleamed gold.

The old one pointed at Fass. “Your kind comes in dwarf form? We have never seen one like him.”

“No.” Arak replied, wondering how much detail he should divulge. “He is my servant. He was troublesome, and I used a magic incantation to reduce his size. He will remain like this until he has shown a change in character.”

“And can you grow your kind larger as well?”

Once again, Arak wondered how much it was wise to reveal. “We cannot grow more than a few inches taller than our normal size, by using magic.”

“Incredible.” The mage nodded, and gave a quick snort. He looked outside, seeing that they were very far from the ground now. “We will stop here. Our kind has seen no reason to modify our natural bodies. I am the mage Euchius, and this is fellow mage Begemon. We are from east of the Gaudrian Ocean, from the territory Serdica. You might know our lands better by the name Savage Lands.”

“Our kind rarely travels on water.” Arak admitted. “We stay close to shore in our boats. There is no reason to travel across an entire ocean.”

“There isn’t, unless the gods tell you to.” Euchius replied. “Your names.”

“I am Arak, Master Sorcerer of Erranth. This is my servant Fass. You say the gods have sent you across the ocean to fight against us?”

“We have many gods, but our primary god demands it.” Euchius nodded.

Arak was reminded of what the demon Efrezio had revealed to him, of a time when the gods walked on Grond. It unnerved him to think that an incarnated god might be found across the ocean, leading these pigs against Erranth. “Why have you come to speak with us, when clearly your intentions are to start war?”

“We are civilized, are we not?” The old mage grinned, showing squared teeth. “We did not come here to slaughter, but to make treaty. Let me explain. Look at your people and mine, will you? Your kind is strong and powerful. You have scaled flesh that is difficult to pierce. Your claws can cut into our bellies like daggers, and spill our innards out of us. But, you have disadvantages. Your legs are short and slow. You battle with swords, but we have swords, and also pikes that are much longer. If a reptilian and a pig were to fight naked, obviously your kind would be superior. If a reptilian and a pig fight with weapons, your swords are no match for our pikes.”

“Let the battles give us a clear victor.”

“Quick to the act, but not quick to the think, are you? See this carriage we are riding on. For weeks now, we have hidden it in a cloud, and we have observed your port. Your kind has a fishing fleet of over twenty small boats, and only three larger boats that carry supplies here from elsewhere. What will happen, Arak, if we rain down fire from this carriage and destroy your supply boats? How quickly will the men of your fort go hungry? We can estimate how many soldiers are within the fort, and how many are standing before it in your defensive line. Our side has three levels of captains. A Captain One has charge over ten troops, a Captain Two has charge over one hundred, and a Captain Three has charge over one thousand. Over these is a general who commands ten Captain Three groupings. Even if you include the women and children at your port, we will still outnumber your side by over two to one.”

“Is that why you came, to boast of your superiority?” Arak growled.

“We have come to offer our rules of combat.” Euchius replied. “Already, we have given our rules to your king. If he is killed, we become rulers of Erranth. If our king should be killed, you will become rulers of Serdica. We have the numbers, and our technologies and magic are superior to yours. Let your king surrender to us, and your

lands will remain intact. If your king chooses to fight, there will be great loss of life, and the blood will be on his hands.”

“You threaten us with war, and blood will be on our king’s hands?”

“Of course. Our god sent us. Where is your god to tell us we are in the wrong?”

“You cannot claim that your kind are superior to ours.” Arak argued. “We were both created by humans! It is the humans who answer to the gods, and not our ancestors who were animals of the wild!”

“You have it wrong, Arak.” The old pig said. “Human mages created your race of men after experimentation. It was not so with us.”

“Did the gods create you? You came from pigs!”

“No, you are wrong. Human men mated with female pigs. Human women mated with male pigs. It was human sorcerers who manipulated our forms while we were in our wombs, to create us as we are today. Your kind was first created, Arak. Our kind was born!”

Arak was too stunned to speak.

“And now, our god has sent us across the ocean to conquer new lands for him.”

Euchius finished.

“What is the name of your god?” Fass dared to speak.

“Gladius, the god of the red planet.”

Arak could only wonder if the revelation were true. It was known that human sorcerers had taken gators and given them human attributes, and molded sentient minds into the humanoid bodies. As the pig had mentioned, reptilians were first created through magic, and modified time and again until they were able to think, and reason, and breed. What Euchius disclosed about the pig-men was impossible! It was abomination!

LEFT OFF HERE.

Notes for later:

Hostile intentions, beyond redemption, get in my face and I’ll put you in detention!

03.16.2018 - In the Ranth / New Avalon Mage Wars, here is a tactic the mages for when the mages begin waging war against the population. The mages are able to project the thoughts of animals into the minds of people. This is an area of effect spell and includes rodents and insects. The effect is that humans become crazed enough to flee in random directions. If they stay still too long, they become insane.

11.21.2018 - The only edible part of a dove is the breast. Smaller birds such as thrush or sparrows have bones thin enough that they can be eaten. Erranthan can eat the entire bird except for the beak and claws. At one point, Rex sees a number of finches, each about the length of his fingers, hopping about following him for food scraps. The Erranthan may farm small birds or ducks as a delicacy.

Terrain descriptions include short grass with moist patches of dirt. Rex might walk by a marshy area, but probably won’t travel through it.

11.24.2018 - When Pederson first appears, send Talek in first. Also, Talek could be the reptilian mentioned in Snatched Up.

“The gods created humans, and in turn, humans created the reptilians. If humans are barbarous, and the reptilians are barbarous, what does that say about the gods?” - Quote for when Rex’s bunch end up on the run.

The gods are helping the pigs. The gods want the pigs to attack the reptilians. Save this for a shocker!

“I never wanted to kill, I am not naturally evil...” - Morrissey

Don’t forget the talking turkeys! Gobble, gobble, danger, danger!

11.25.2018 - Population numbers for Erranth settlements:

The mining operation at Kuy-Kuh-Thilia has 1,000 soldiers and 3,000 miners.

The port at Triest-Vatra has 1,000 soldiers and their families (2,500), plus 2,000 additional civilians.

The port at Caneh-Vatra has 1,000 soldiers and their families (3000), plus 4,000 additional civilians.

The industrial town of Sendoah has 1,200 patrolling soldiers and a male criminal population of 2,000.

The population of Castle Erranth is separate from the rest of Erranth. A high number of women and children live there, as Thilia and Sendoah are male settlements. Thilia has 4,000 men. Sendoah has 3,200 men. Roughly, this would mean their families would mean 20,000 women, children and elders in Erranth. Normally, an army is only 1% of any given human population. With 4,200 reptilian soldiers already, we’re talking about a full population of 42,000 people, not counting the guards and soldiers in Erranth or Castle Erranth yet. My rough estimation is for Erranth having a total population of 60 to 75,000 inhabitants.

Kuy-Kuh-Thilia - 1,000 soldiers, 3,000 miners (10,000 family members elsewhere)

Triest-Vatra - 1,000 soldiers, 2,500 family members, 2,000 civilians

Caneh-Vatra - 1,000 soldiers, 3,000 family members, 4,000 civilians

Sendoah - 1,200 soldiers, 2,000 sentenced criminals (8,000 family elsewhere)

Subtotals:

Thilia - 4,000

Vatra - 5,500

Caneh - 8,000

Sendoah - 3,200

Total population OUTSIDE of Erranth: 20,700

With base of 75,000, total population INSIDE of Erranth: 54,300

Minus family members of men OUTSIDE of Erranth: 54,300 - 18,000 = 36,300

Under the 1% human standard, 3,600 troops should be stationed in Castle Erranth and its immediate surroundings. These figures are rough and rounded. The reptilians are more militaristic than humans, so I might raise their army numbers slightly higher if I need to. They won’t be having too many artisans or cobblers, for example!

Character Names

Reptilians Of Erranth

Sorcerers

Arak is Master Sorcerer.  
Fass is Arak's First Apprentice.  
Bizelle is a minor mage and friend of Fass.  
Minos is a minor mage.  
Kellor is the former Master Sorcerer, who led a rebellion against Erranth.

#### Military

Lehnorack is the king of Erranth.  
Zowns is the chief royal advisor.  
Henchen is a general of the southeast territories in Vatra.  
Mo-Dahk is a general of the west territories in the Bear Lands.  
Essenek is a general of the east territories in Kuy-Kuh.  
Branek is one of King Lehnorack's favored King's Guards and rival of Arak.  
Aydirk is a King's Guard.  
Gruhg is the Captain of the Castle Guard.  
Vouhl is a young page under the authority of Grugh.  
Talek is a dumb soldier.  
Krayuhl is a competent soldier.

#### The Four Demons

Air - Racan of the Storms  
Earth - Terremo of the Quakes  
Fire - Yamas of the Flames  
Water - Efrezio of the Icy Depths.

#### Humans From Earth

Moses arrived first, with deceased Bryan.

#### RTD - Roll Them Dice Crew

Rex, real name of X Clemente  
Merlin, real name of John or Jonathan Summers  
Acer, real name undecided

#### Stoner Town Dukes

Bulldog  
Wolfie  
Manny  
Slam  
Vamps

#### People from Serdica

Euchius, old mage  
Begemon, young mage

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*Note: Writing in italics has been absorbed into the main work and will be deleted soon.*

Old Notes Table Of Contents  
Original Tagger Version 01  
Outline Of Major Events  
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Outline Of Major Events

The Skullcracker - nickname for Boxer, as in, when modern characters start adopting fanciful monikers.

The Age of Man- The time when mankind ruled the world, and controlled all of the animals, using them for their own purposes.

The Dawn of the Animals- the period of time when the sentient animals broke away from their human masters and built kingdoms of their own. Coincides with The Fall of Mankind.

Conversions- Human sorcerers began experimenting with using magic to enhance the abilities of animals, some tests were successful, but others produced volatile and even dangerous results, eventually, the sorcerers began to create new species of animals, mostly for cultivation of crops, or construction of homes, but these new beings, and modified beings took control over their own destinies, and began their own societies

Later story developments- these events occur after the prisoners are joined together, but before the Altecian battle at Castle Ranth

Earth- Ruben watches news stories connecting people's disappearances to the strange fog, and wonders how he can enter it, but cannot figure out why some people are taken and others are not,

Ranth- Vulture messengers estimate the Altecian armies to be twice the size of the Ranthan,

Rex follows the path of one of the gangbangers urine to a concealed sewage duct (hidden by darkness and hay), just big enough for them to squeeze through, and begins to talk to the others about escaping,

Earth- Ruben goes to the public library to obtain copies of the strange fog stories,

the cell guards are summoned to the courtyards to review emergency procedures,

Castle Ranth- Magik, playing with a spray can cap, drops it and watches it roll several feet away from the cell bars, he casually reaches out and retrieves it, Rex and \_\_\_\_\_ watch his arm stretch twice its length, pull him into a corner, and try to duplicate the action, Magik is unable to do it right away, but can when relaxed, later he slips between the cell bars and goes to the drainage hole, confirming its size,

Castle Ranth- the king's timegazer, the vultures and Arak's spies give conflicting ETA's (several hours difference) for the incoming enemy due to sorcerous influencing of the venues, causing disputes between them, finally the king orders his generals to stand by for immediate action,

Arak is ordered to prepare the Dark Demons for battle,  
the king privately reveals distrust of the Dark Demons,  
Arak plans to meet the Altecian sorcerers in the skies, prepares Faas,

Castle Ranth- one gang member predicts the upcoming battle  
prisoners plan an escape, using the fray as a diversion, some dissenters among them,  
how many will go through with it?

Castle Ranth- the Ranthan battle horn sounds,  
the Altecian army is spotted, and they quickly surround most of castle Ranth's  
perimeter, except for the forest side,

Arak estimates that the enemy sorcerers are weak from transporting so many troops,  
but he is incorrect due to their volume,

the king allows the enemy to approach dangerously close to the castle, ordering the  
archers to release weak volleys to confuse them,

Arak and Faas engage the enemy sorcerers in aerial combat, the Altecian Master  
Sorcerer splits his being into three fully functioning entities,

the Dark Demons are ordered into the battle, decimating the Altecian troops at the  
forefront by raining fire, ice, and earth on them,

Altecian minor sorcerers quickly counter some of the Stalkers, keeping them out of  
action,

the Earth Demon opens the ground around the Altecian soldiers, swallowing  
Alteicians and releasing Ranthan troops which were hidden underground,

Arak and Faas destroy the enemy Master Sorcerer,

the Altecian sorcerers open holes in the walls of castle Ranth, allowing soldiers to  
enter and engage Ranthan guards and Royal guards within,

Ranthan minor sorcerers work fruitlessly to counter the Altecian spells,

the main Ranthan army, standing and concealed inside the castle, rush out into the  
battle, pushing the Altecian forces back,

Gruhg takes a third of the castle guards into the lower levels, where Altecian soldiers  
are infiltrating,

the king, with augmented armor and weaponry, joins the battle by walking out  
through the front gates,

Arak throws the head of the Altecian sorcerer into the midst of the battle

upon seeing the return of the Ranthan Master Sorcerer, the outside Ranthan army fights with renewed strength,

Castle Ranth- inside the cell area, the cell guards hear the commotion of the Altecian soldiers fighting the Ranthan guards, and rush to help, leaving the cell unguarded,

Magik is able to retrieve the keys to the cell door, by stretching out, the sewage opening is forced open, and most of the prisoners manage to escape,

Castle Ranth-Arak and Faas eliminate the Altecian minor sorcerers one by one, until they become aware of their actions, and band together against them,

another sect of Altecian sorcerers band together and destroy the king's immortality headband, proclaiming him vulnerable,

Altecian soldiers rush in to attack the king, who throws the headband at them, and challenges them all with renewed fervor,

the Altecian champion sets his sights on the king,

Castle Ranth sewers- the escapees encounter little danger other than olfactory pollution in the sewers, and exit to a small stream, they narrowly avoid Ranthan troops, and the leadership of the group comes into question,

Castle Ranth- Arak and Faas destroy their magical opposition, and go after the magicians pressuring the king,

the king defeats the Altecian champion,

the tide starts turning in Ranthan favor,

the escapees follow the stream to a river a few miles down, to a small village, where several boats are tied to a small pier, the village is in enemy hands, although there are few Altecian present,

two guards are by the pier, one asleep, the other very alert,

the humans are spotted by one guard, who chases several away,

another human hits the sleeping guard with a large rock, then takes his sword,

the human stabs the second guard from behind, the humans untie the nearest boat and slip away, undeterred,

Castle Ranth- the Ranthan forces overpower the Altecian, and enemy troops surrender,

the cell guards find the prisoners have escaped, but the escape is given low priority, against Arak's wishes,

the king blames Arak for the prisoners escape,

Arak secretly sends out two minor sorcerers to search for the escapees,

the king sends out massive troops and sorcerers to reclaim the neighboring towns and villages,

the Ranthan execute all prisoners not pledging allegiance to Ranth,

Earth- Ruben studies the newspapers, intent on searching for the mysterious fog again,

the escapees pass an enemy controlled town, and are shot at with arrows, but not pursued when it is discovered they are humans, and not Ranthan,  
they reach a fork in the river, and have a big argument over which direction to follow,

Arak and Faas help in bringing the towns back online, but once the major nearby ports are controlled, Arak is ordered to return to the castle,

the escapees finally they turn east, and approach a big pig-controlled port,  
they are caught at the large port, and questioned, then captured when it is discovered they have come from castle Ranth,

Thunder, a minor sorcerer, and a squad of Ranthan troops appear, disrupting the proceedings, the Ranthan sorcerer kills two Altecian minor sorcerers, but the humans manage to kill him and Thunder with magical weapons they take from the Alteicians, some humans are lost in the fray, but the survivors manage to escape by boarding another boat,

Earth- Ruben realizes the fog only appears around violence, and wonders if there is a way to bring the fog to him, he hears of a protest downtown, held by distressed citizens, and plans to attend, to try and talk to some of the witnesses

Faas, Ice and another minor sorcerer appear with a tired squad at the large pig port, and find the dead Thunder and other minor sorcerer, Faas must return and reveal the activity to Arak, but is too exhausted to teleport back, he assumes the humans are heading towards the human castle,

Castle Ranth- Arak, back at castle Ranth, is commanded to open the portal and retrieve military information, or be forbidden to open it anymore, by the king, Arak formulates a modified spell to prolong the time the rupture is open,  
the king, anxious to attempt a takeover of the entire planet, refuses to wait until Arak uncovers something, and begins amassing troops at key points, poised to attack Altecia,

Nessen- at the port of Nessen, the humans find a multisocial, multispecies town, and learn to use currency, they buy peasant clothing, find other humans to converse with, enter the taverns, and rent rooms for the night, some plan to go out at night, others remain at the inn instead,

Castle Ranth- Arak opens the portal to earth,

Earth- Ruben waits impatiently at the police protest, then hears on the police radio of a large cloud spotted a few miles away, he hurries to his vehicle and speeds towards it,

Nessen- the humans out on the town attend a brothel, then visit a fortune teller, who tells them their destiny is dark if they don't leave soon, and urges them to travel to the oracle to get a better vision of their future,

Earth- Ruben finds the gray cloud and speeds towards it, a police car gives chase and is unable to avoid being swept in with it,  
the two vehicles appear in Ranth, and both the officer and Ruben are taken to the holding cells,

Nessen- the humans fight over their destination, the oracle, or the human castle, finally they split up, a serving maid is taken along with the group, the humans rent a ship, and plan to go separate ways once they pass Dog river,

Castle Ranth- Faas returns to castle Ranth, ill from overexhaustion, he announces the death of Thunder, stunning Arak, and angering the king, the king, familiar with the prophecies, orders no further tampering with interdimensional forces, trying to keep the humans from banding together and gathering strength, and Arak banishes the officer and Ruben to limbo until he can figure out what to do with them, the majority of the army is gathering near Altecia, but a large platoon is ordered to travel to the human castle to try to cut off the escapees,

Limbo- Ruben and the cop encounter dangers in limbo, uncertain about their future,

Ranth- buzzards bring news of border skirmishes between the lion kingdom and the ape jungle, the king tries to pressure either to quit bickering with each other and join Ranth, or face war,

Dog river- the riverboat humans pass lands inhabited by canines, civilized and friendly to humans, romances emerge among the humans,

Limbo- Ruben and the cop are befriended by a snake with Rex's face, and after overcoming the shock, follow it, the snake does not know its own name, or how it obtained its powers, yet it is evident that it is a powerful magician,

Altecia- the Ranthan surround the huge Altecian castle, which seals itself off, and prepares for war, the king uses a chain of minor sorcerers to teleport himself to the front lines, and orders the war to commence while he rests from the travel, the Dark Demons linger over the castle ominously, but don't attack yet,

Limbo- the snake leads Ruben and the cop to a maze of inner caverns, where magic hides one area, the snake asks Ruben to open the area, and the pair try several ways, finally succeeding and entering it, they find maps, tables diaries, and ancient clothing,

Dog river- at a designated port, some of the humans stay to head towards the oracle, while others continue towards the human castle,

Altecia- once the sun starts setting, the king assembles a small party to be teleported inside the castle, Arak, Faas, the Dark Demons, and the Royal guards are included, the group appears in the Altecian Royal Court, and surprises the Alteciand guard, the king, using an enlarged shotgun, blows the king of Altecia away, the Altecian High Council of Three step in immediately to declare a general surrender,

the Oracle- the travellers are attacked by freak animals which were produced in one of ancient man's most embarrassing acts of magic, the animals were mass produced and consist of different parts of various animals

Altecia- except for minor skirmishes, the battle is over, the king makes arrangements to return home.

the Oracle- reaching the Oracle the humans encounter the Seer, a graying ancient wolf, he tells them of the various prophecies, and their roles in the upcoming crisis, he also give them gifts for advancing thus far, including a magical horn (which is to be used to wake the dead), the humans ponder the new developments, then set out to join with the others who went ahead,

“There shall be a great roll of thunder, and a clamor throughout the heavens, and a roar which will awaken the dead from their slumber, that they may walk the earth once more.” The Oracle reveals a dark prophecy to an absorbed Rex.

“The moment will come, and your must not hesitate, but use your weapon.” The oracle answers Rex, who holds the horn up questioningly.

Dog port- the first group of humans learn they must pass through the dog kingdom to reach the human castle, and hire guides for the trip, one of the guides, a one eyed wolf, seems suspicious, and laughs at their plans,

Limbo- Ruben and the cop exit limbo through one of the strange doors presented by the snake, they encounter problems along the way,

Dog river - the second group of humans hire a small vessel to take them to Dog port,

Human castle- buzzards and vultures scout for signs of strange humans, and two Ranthan minor sorcerers teleport outside of the castle walls with a squad of twenty Ranthan soldiers,

Dog road- the first group, camping out for the night, is attacked by merciless bandits, who kill the most guides and some of the group, the attack was setup by the wolf,

Human castle- the human king wonders what will occur next, and is told of the prophecies which will unfold in the near future, either dooming or reestablishing the human race, he rereads the many prophecies and hears other's interpretations,

Lion Kingdom- Ruben and the cop exit limbo here, and are immediately captured by huge guards, who take them to the king, their Master Sorcerer demands evidence that he

is the indeed the prophesied one, evidence which Ruben didn't realize he had until he displays his belongings, it is an amulet displaying the ancient human symbol, a room is given to them, and a meeting of the Warlords is set for that night,

Dog port- the second group reaches here, then are shunned by the inhabitants, who were warned by the minor sorcerer not to help them, they decide to forge ahead, without a guide, and in their travel, are met with dog sympathizers, who support their cause,

Human castle- the first group is spotted by vultures, then later attacked by the Ranthan squad, but the attack is thwarted by human soldiers, who overwhelm the Ranthan, vultures rush back to Ranthan posts to report the news, the humans are captured by the castle soldiers,

Ranth- the king demands to see the old prophecies, learning the approximate location of the first human fortress, where the humans first retreated when the animals began challenging their superiority, north of gorilla jungles, he sends troops towards the area, some to track down the whereabouts of the human castle, and others to protect the border between the lion kingdom and the gorilla tropics, and orders Faas to accompany them, then sends an army to attack the human castle, intent of destroying it, the Ranthan high council warns that it is too soon to begin another war, and that the troops are still weak from their previous encounters, the king ignores them, and continues with his plans,

Lion Kingdom- at the meeting of the lion warlords, Ruben is told about the humans stronghold, and the weapons it hides, he is determined to go there, a small squad is organized and sets out to enter gorilla jungle, war is declared on Ranth, the lion king secretly sends out negotiators to confer with gorilla political allies,

Human castle- the second group reaches the castle, and are brought before the king, who refuses to hear them or his own people, worried about making a wrong decision, the other humans are freed, and they join to reveal the new findings from the Oracle, the human king prepares for war, and assigns all able bodied males to the army,

Ranth- bulletins about the human castle reach the king, who mobilizes his army, sending them out against the humans, and another against the lion kingdom,

Human castle- the humans convince the worried king that they truly are the humans from the prophecies, and prove this by awakening the human's greatest champions from the dead, for the Battle to Reshape Destiny, when Rex blows the magical horn, the king ponders the current events, consults his wise men, and reaches a final decision to declare war on Ranth,

Ranthan troops begin to amass around the castle in preparation for war,

On the road to the Ancient Stronghold- Ruben hears rumors of the mobilization of Ranthan troops, and hastens to reach the ancient fortress before the Ranthan do, as they approach the colder regions, the lions are having trouble adjusting to the weather, and

provisions are running low, Faas is notified to travel to the human castle for the impending battle, he is angry he is unable to dispose of the humans personally,

Dog castle- after a heated debate, the dogs vote to ally themselves with the humans, and prepare for war with Ranth,

Ancient Stronghold- Ruben finds the old fortress, and at first, nothing else except ruins and skeletons, until by accident he discovers hidden scrolls which lead to another Ancient Human Fort, the group, just two days ahead of their Ranthan followers, hurry towards their new target, just as a heavy blizzard hits, the scrolls have the following prophecies;

“the hands which touch the sky”- several large mountains whose peaks are covered with clouds, and unseen

“the woman which bathes in the sun”- a huge mountain top which is unseen until the group climbs the aforementioned “hands”

Human castle- Ranthan troops attack the castle in a first light initiative, then increase attacks when the humans do not readily surrender, they threaten to exterminate the humans if their demands are not met, the Dark Demons are released into the fray, Faas arrives with a few sorcerers,

Ancient Fortress #2- Ruben finds a large cache of ancient magical weapons, which he and the surviving lions use to fend off and defeat the pursuing Ranth troops,

Human castle- the dog armies arrive from the west, and surprise the Ranthan troops from behind, they then distract half of the Ranthan troops away from the castle, Ranthan sorcerers arrive in force, and begin weakening the magic spells which prevent them from entering the castle,

Ancient Fortress #2- Ruben and the lion sorcerer are able to decipher more scrolls which reveal the identity of the nameless snake, who is a long ago banished legendary wizard, and return him to his proper form, the supposedly fierce wizard is in reality a thin, beaten old man, who tells them the story of his false rise to power, and his eventual uncovering as a fraud,

“That is why I was turned into a snake.” He said, looking down at the floor, ashamed. ”Because the snake is truly the king of lies.”

Ruben convinces him to don his old, preserved robes, and return to place fear in the hearts of the enemies of humans, eventually, the old man agrees, and he is able to transport the group to the lion kingdom,

Human castle- the Dark Demons wreak havoc alternately between the human and dog armies, heavy losses are inflicted to the humans, and their champions,

Lion kingdom- Ruben returns to the kingdom, finding that lion mediators have arranged a truce with the gorilla troops, the gorillas have captured a considerable number of Ranthan troops sent to help protect the borders, lion sorcerers have already been

posted in key locations, to facilitate magical travel, and troops have begun amassing east, Ruben, the human wizard, and a group of highly skilled lion sorcerers and warriors are the first to be transported towards the wartorn area,

Human castle- Ruben and his group arrive, joining up with the dog army, then later transport into the castle, Ruben finds that Rex has been killed by the Dark Demons, and remorse his death, the wizard convinces the Demon Fire to abandon his current allies and side with the humans,

“I ask again!” He yells angrily at the confused spirit. “Who is your true master?! Who created you?!”

after much confusion, Fire turns on the Ranthan army, injuring Arak, and destroying Water, Faas takes control of the minor sorcerers, and recklessly pummels into the castle, more lion warriors appear, their roar frightening and intimidating the Ranthan soldiers, the wizard announces his return from the dead, threatening to vanquish all opposition into the limbo which hea has just been released from,

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#### Original Tagger Version 01

“Baaahh!!” Faas shouted into the fierce wind. “You bring us to the mountains, demon, in order to bring about our deaths! But you shall not have them!”

Through the heavy pelts of snow, the Master Sorcerer looked back to his complaining apprentice. “Be silent. Enclose yourself in a warmth bubble, as I have done, and keep pace, as you may easily become lost in this storm.”

“Baaahh! Stupid demon!” Faas cursed nevertheless, once he’d wrapped himself in the simple spell. Even within its mystical wall, the apprentice could still feel the constant chill from the outside air, and the occasional impact from the debris being tossed about by the blizzard they had teleported into. The short mage briefly deliberated on whether or not to conjure a second warmth bubble within the first, then realized it would drastically impair his ability to communicate, and decided against it. Instead, he grumbled profanity at the amused specter. “I fail to find the humor in this situation.”

“Might I assist you in providing heat?” Yamas asked. “Perhaps four or five hundred degrees worth, enough to roast and dry out your worthless bones.”

“It is you that seeks death, is it not?” Faas snapped back. “I would be more than content to oblige you, were the opportunity to present itself.”

“And so you shall,” Yamas agreed. “For it is toward my own demise that I now lead the two of you.”

“But here, in the mountains?” Arak protested. “There is nothing to be found out here save for this accursed snow and barren landscape!”

“Some time ago, over one thousand years by your calendar, these mountains were occupied by human settlements.” Yamas explained as he led the trio. “The humans fled here during the Great War, when the enhanced kingdoms were gaining the upper hand in battle.”

“By enhanced kingdoms, you are referring to the Ranthan, and the other civilized societies, are you not?” The Master Sorcerer questioned.

“Of course.” Yamas nodded. “The subservient animal kingdoms.”

“Such blasphemy!” Faas cursed. “The Holy Book of Ranth clearly states that the Ranthan species, as well as the other kingdoms, were created by the Holy Creator. Mankind was the species added later, to serve the animals!”

“This way, you misled cretins.” The fire demon directed, seemingly amused. “Don’t you find it an incredible coincidence that every animal kingdom has their own version of the Holy Book, all of them identical save for their intended species.”

“All counterfeits!” The apprentice replied. “The Ranthan version is the only genuine version!”

“I dare venture that every animal kingdom would feel that way about their own Holy Book.” Yamas theorized. “But regardless, you will soon find the truth for yourselves, as Kellorr did before you. Arak, I believe, has already begun to suspect what I am about to reveal, since he closely studied Kellorr’s work.”

“I found only heresy and rumors.” Arak commented. “No real evidence.”

If a demon could smile, then Yamas was grinning as he stopped before the side of a rocky hill, its base covered in several feet of snow. Reaching out with a single arm, Yamas called forth a stream of liquid fire, which easily bore into the thick snow. By widening his fingertips he increased the width of the tunnel he created, and within the span of a minute, had created an opening wide enough for the tall sorcerer behind him. “Are you prepared to receive this knowledge, Arak?” The demon called back. “Are you prepared to deal with the consequences of what you are about to learn?”

Confidently, the demon strode into his artificial cave, with the two mages close at his heels. Several feet in, and out of the flurries of the blizzard, Yamas abruptly halted, and stood in complete silence.

For several seconds, the two wizards dared not venture further, until Arak finally broke the silence. “What is it, demon? Why have you stopped?”

This seemed to rouse Yamas from his deep concentration. “There was a door here, one hewn ten inches thick from the strongest oaks of what you now refer to as the Bear Lands.” It revealed. “It was sealed by the hand of Kellorr himself. But look, now there is only solid rock. Reach out with your own energies, sorcerer, and tell me who is responsible for this.”

Arak stepped up beside the demon and did so, gingerly feeling about with his mystical energies. “The signature is Altecian.” He informed them. “A portion of the sealing spell is cloaked, undoubtedly to conceal a magical trap.”

“Shall we use your apprentice, then?” Yamas baited the Master Sorcerer. “And allow him to spring it?”

“You are immortal, are you not?” Faas countered. “Perhaps you should bring any danger upon yourself.”

“What was hidden away within these walls,” Yamas replied. “Included spells for fates worse than death.”

“Is there any other entrance?” Arak asked.

“Not a simple one, no.” Yamas shook his head. “This entire region is the northernmost axis of this world, where the sorcerers of my age were able to manipulate the planet’s weaker magnetic fields into unbreakable barriers of magic. Most of the mountains in this vicinity were hollowed out by the last remaining bands of human resistance, with only a single entrance, and the entire mountain protected by impenetrable

magic. These spells feed upon the strength of the entire planet, so even after a thousand years, I am certain that they have not weakened even the slightest bit.” The demon chuckled. “Have you enough strength to counter the energies of an entire world, Arak?”

“Then we are at an impasse.” Arak frowned. “Also certain is the gravity of the trap set by the Altecian. Whatever spell they set upon this entrance is bound to destroy not only the person attempting to breach it, but also to destroy whatever lies beyond, in order to prevent anyone else from having it.”

“Then why are we still here?” Faas whined. “Let us return to civilization and be out of this unbearable cold!”

Yamas turned to face the Master Sorcerer. “There is an alternative, Arak. Although I am afraid you will not be pleased to hear it.”

“Out with it!” Arak demanded. “What alternative?”

“Break the ring that imprisons me.” Yamas suggested. “Then I will be able to transverse through these mystical barriers.”

“Oh, yes, right away!” Faas cut in. “Surely we can grant you your freedom, so that you can whisk away in an instant, and let us return empty handed to Castle Ranth! Perhaps you’d be gracious enough to attend our immediate court-martial, and eventual execution.” The short magician nodded. “It sounds like a reasonable request, does it not?”

Arak only grimaced at the thought.

“I do grow weary from the bantering of your animated stump.” Yamas addressed the Master Sorcerer. “Might it not be in our best interests to send him back?”

“I will stay beside my master!” Faas shot back. “You’ve already tried to murder him once. I will not allow that to happen a second time!”

“That was merely a test.” Yamas replied, then turned back towards the other. “Arak, may I have your permission to kill your apprentice?”

“I will not dignify that question with an answer.” Arak stated. “Explain how breaking the ring would allow you to breach through these walls.”

“Simple!” Yamas exclaimed. “I would no longer be bound by Ranthan magic, which this mountain is protected against. Since I was created through human sorcery, and I’ve learned a quite bit of it from centuries of study, I could easily open a portal elsewhere to allow us access inside.”

“I do not understand.” Arak said. “Kellorr’s research indicated that he himself created you, as well as the other Roaming Demons. The means to do so were found in ancient Zenterian writings, which he discovered during one of his expeditions to the Wastelands.”

“Sorcerer, I am quite positive that your greedy monarch requested for you to create even more Roaming Demons, did he not?” Yamas waited for the sorcerer’s confirmation before continuing. “And certain elements were intentionally left out of the incantation by Kellorr, preventing you from doing so. Correct? Are you prepared for the truth?”

Arak took a deep breath. “I suppose.”

“The Wastelands are where humans once thrived in the height of their civilization.” Yamas revealed. “That is why they are so completely decimated. Animals wanted no reminders of who was once their master, humanity.”

“More blasphemy!” Faas cried out.

“Is it?” Yamas queried. “Kellorr did not create me, he found me, along with my other companions, trapped inside another nearby stronghold. We were imprisoned in this mountain, which was later named ‘The Pit’, by a collective union of the most prominent animal sorcerers, including your own infamous Saarkonus, --”

“The great Saarkonus!” Faas said in astonishment. “Formed by the Grand Creator during the Genesis of the universe, and instrumental in bringing about the Dawn of Animalkind!”

“That is myth, and nothing more.” Yamas corrected. “He merely aided in herding the last few pockets of rebelling humans into these very mountains, then partook in their slaughter. He was not the hero that legend has made him, although he, along with the other animal sorcerers, did indeed succeed in imprisoning my cohorts and I into The Pit. We were imprisoned for the better portion of one thousand years, until Kellorr stumbled upon this area and began to uncover the secret tunnels beneath the mountains.”

“How much more of this can you stand?” Faas asked his mentor.

“According to Kellorr, the Roaming Demons were created through the mystical harnessing of the forces of nature.” Arak commented to the demon. “What is your rendition of your creation?”

“I am not a force of nature.” Yamas responded. “I am, or stated more precisely, I was, a knight who volunteered to undergo magical metamorphosis into an all powerful deity. It was the wizard Merlin who imbued me, along with the others - -”

“Merlin led the Great Insurrection against the animals!” Faas blurted out.

“Incorrect! He led the last attempt by mankind to regain their domination of this world, and failed miserably.” Yamas returned. “He was destroyed by the wizard union, soon after these strongholds fell, near what is now Toranthoria. From what little I’ve been able to gather, a few pockets of uncivilized humans still inhabit the area, although I fail to see why humanity wasn’t completely exterminated long ago.”

“Just before Merlin died, he cast one final spell.” Arak revealed. “He used his last energies to enshroud the entire land of Toranthoria in thick mist, which continues to cover the area to this day. According to the Holy Book, humans were banished into the mist, and forbidden to leave under penalty of death. Some societies use humans for slave labor, but for the most part, this statute has been enforced.”

Yamas continued. “When Kellorr discovered these strongholds in the mountains, he commenced an exhaustive search, and came upon The Pit, as well as the many tomes which Merlin kept hidden behind this wall. Among them are books of sorcery which would undoubtedly gain you the position of supreme sorcerer of this world, as they did your master before you. Also, there are instructions on creating, imprisoning and destroying the beings you refer to as the Roaming Demons. If the Altecian have already taken these tomes, then perhaps the fate of your kingdom is already sealed.”

Arak placed a hand to his worried forehead. “We must find a way to enter this chamber, if only to know that.”

“The demon lies, master.” Faas said. “There is nothing in his words that can be proven.”

“But there is.” Yamas disagreed. “Also inside this chamber are the Chronicles of Merlin, which is a chronology of all the events I have just spoken of, from the time of the great crossing over from the Old Earth, until - -”

“Earth?” Faas asked, suddenly worried. “What is Old Earth?”

“Old Earth is the place from where humanity first came.” Yamas related. “Merlin travelled through a passageway in space, which I believe is what Kellorr rediscovered and named Kellorr’s Finding.”

The uneasy Faas turned towards Arak. “Master, one of the humans we produced through the Great Experiment claimed to come from a place called Earth!”

“Are you certain?” Arak demanded to know.

“As certain as I breathe!” Faas replied. “Bizelle may also attest to this.”

“In that case, this should be of great interest.” The fire demon drew back their attention. “The reason Kellorr refused the king’s order to further explore his Finding was this; he began translating the Book of Prophecy, with my help. This book reveals how a saviour will arrive from Old Earth, one like a sword with two distinct, sharp edges, into this world, the New Earth, and bring about such cataclysmic changes that the New Age of Mankind will emerge.”

“What manner of changes?” Arak asked.

“After an imprisonment of one thousand years, the sudden release of the demons from the pit.” Yamas sounded as if he were boasting. “Demons which cause fire to rain from the heavens, and rivers to overflow their boundaries, and lands to tremble open and swallow their victims alive. Then there will be wars and rumors of wars, and a final Great War between all the nations, that will decimate the population. The sun and moon will be darkened, the stars shall fall from the sky, the dead shall rise from their graves, and this two-edged saviour of mankind will lead the final battle that will bring about the end of the present system, and usher in the New Age.”

The Master Sorcerer backed up until prevented from going further by the side of the mountain. “Kellorr unwittingly set all of this in motion.” He said, sulking down into a sitting position. “And now I am continuing where he left off.”

“This book of prophecy, it is a thousand years old!” Faas refuted. “So what if a few of the events mentioned are similar to what is happening today? Those same events might have applied to several dozen periods during the last millenium. It doesn’t prove a thing, in fact, it doesn’t even prove the veracity of anything Yamas has told us at all! I think the demon is creating the entire yarn solely in order to trick us into freeing him.”

“Kellorr believed it, I read so in his notes.” Arak countered. “And most of the members of the Sorcerer’s Circle shared in this belief, even unto their death.”

“It is religious superstition, that’s all.” Faas negated. “Do you believe it?”

“I must investigate these coincidences further.” Arak admitted. “But the parallels are too strong to be ignored.”

“Upon our return to the castle, we should kill off the entire lot of humans.” Faas reasoned. “They are useless to us anyway, and it will put this matter to rest once and for all.”

“Yes, we must do that.” Arak agreed. “But first we must gain access to this chamber, if there is even the slightest possibility of our finding knowledge which we can use against Altecia. And to that end...” The sorcerer reached into a side pouch to extract a single ring, which he placed as far away from his position as the warmth bubble allowed. Then, Arak withdrew the bubble until the ring rested on solid ground.

“Are you seriously contemplating breaking it?” Faas asked in astonishment.

A bright spark burst from the ring, but the piece of jewelry simply bounced away. Mentally, Arak rolled the ring back to the same position. "Faas, lift the ring about two feet from the ground, and hold it in place while I discharge energy from its center."

"I will not be party to this." Faas refused.

"Duly noted." Arak replied. "Now, hold this damned ring steady before I further shrink you to the size and shape of my right foot."

Reluctantly, the apprentice did as he was told. "The demon will be free alright, free to roast us into oblivion."

"Yamas has given his word, and is bound to carry out his end of our bargain."

Arak reminded him, while at the same time magically attempting to stretch the golden ring. He succeeded only marginally, as the item was only enlarged by a few quarters of an inch. "Now use your power to keep the ring in place. Kellorr has strengthened the metal with powerful spells." The mage conjured up a small concentrated energy ball inside the ring, then further wrapped a second, separate energy ball which surrounded, but did not touch the object. "The first miniature bomb will explode, and set off the second, which will implode back on itself."

"Ready, master." Faas signalled.

As the pair of wizards observed, the outer ball of energy flashed a bright white, then detonated inwards. From the small puff of smoke, the now unsupported ring dropped down onto the hard ground with a sharp clink. Other than some minor scuffs, it was still intact.

"By the Jaws of Ranth," Arak said in amazement. "It should have disintegrated into nothing after that."

"Let me try, master." Faas made the request, to which the other sorcerer readily consented. The apprentice again levitated the ring into midair, then positioned it just before the entrance to the tunnel Yamas had created. He then cast a heat spell around it, and rapidly raised the temperature around the ring until it began to glow a bright red. "I will need a second spell, of extreme cold, to be placed perhaps six inches below the ring, and set to react as soon as the ring drops into it."

As Arak complied, Faas raised the temperature even further, and the ring graduated from red to yellow, and continued to brighten into white. "Ready, master?" The apprentice asked, then after Arak confirmed this, he further instructed. "I also require a small mass of solid rock, to be placed a few feet above the ring. When the ring reaches maximum heat, I will withdraw the spell, and allow it to drop. The instant it activates the cold spell, propel the rock downward so that it may strike the ground with maximum force.

The Master Sorcerer magically dislodged a section of rock from the wall, and set it into position. By this time, the ring had begun to collapse into itself, and melt.

"Okay, master, on three." Faas directed, as the ring liquified and began to boil. "One, two, three"

It dropped down into Arak's cold spell, a vapory transparent mist which solidified into a ball of ice upon contact with the superheated ring. Just as swiftly, the rock slammed downwards, forcing the captured ring down with it, and smashing it into the ground with such an impact that bits of dirt and rock and ice streaked out, snapping and cracking as they collided into the mountainside around them.

“Incredible!” Yamas exclaimed. “The midget has done it!” With a sudden swoosh of air, the fire demon blew past the two stunned sorcerers.

“I dislike being the bearer of bad tidings, but I am afraid our bird has flown the coup.” Faas sounded disgruntled. “On the other hand, we can lay claim to having survived unhindered contact with one of the infamous Roaming Demons.”

Arak took a few steps forward, kneeling to scrutinize the specks of gold, formerly part of the feared ring, which were now embedded in the soil. “He shall return, if only to gloat over the loss of the tomes.” The sorcerer stated. “I am beginning to suspect that is his nature.”

“The entirety of his words, about humans being masters, nay, creators over animalkind, this is all gibberish!” Faas reiterated. “I cannot fathom why you allowed the demon the opportunity to air his fables.”

“Fables, are they?” Arak questioned as he rose, watching particles of dirt drop from his scaled fingers. “You asked me earlier if I believed Kellorr’s nonsense. Up until a short while ago, I myself would have considered it absurd. But now, in light of these revelations, corroborated by the Pathways, and even by the existence of these strongholds, I am beginning to reconsider.” The sorcerer took a few steps towards the end of the tunnel, where snow and wind still raged. “Come, Faas. We must ascertain whether Yamas is in fact attempting to gain entrance into the mountain.”

“But master, the cold!” Faas whined.

“What of it?” Arak replied. “Much worse will be the wrath of King Lehnorack if we return with our hands empty.”

The apprentice watched the soft glow of Arak’s warmth bubble disappear into the snow. Clenching his hands into fists, he cried out. “Baaahhh!” Then he too left the debatable refuge of the tunnel and walked out into the snow.

## New Chapter

Minor Sorcerer Bizelle popped into existence in the remote corner of Arak’s chamber reserved for teleporting. He drifted down, scanning the tidy chamber for his partner in crime, Minos.

“Minoss, you wretch!” Bizelle called out in a rough whisper. “Where are you?” He waited impatiently for a few short seconds, then urged, “Answer me, you heathen!”

The second sorcerer emerged from the Master Sorcerer’s private study, the room from where Arak and Faas had vanished earlier. “I am here, I am here.” Minos acknowledged. “How went your meeting with the War Council?”

“I ssstood before the king,” Bizelle started. “I believe they suspect usss!”

“Suspect us of what?” Minos asked. “A citizen has to commit a crime before they can be suspected of anything, and I have committed no crime. Your actions, on the other hand, are a different matter entirely, for it was you who removed the magic seals from the study, even though it had been expressly forbidden by Master Arak. I simply followed you in.”

“Minosss, I am referring to our plansss!”

“First, how went your meeting.” Minos drew closer. “Have either of us been promoted to Master Sorcerer?”

“No, the council wouldn’t concede that Arak and Faasss could be dead.” Bizelle informed him. “Not until conclusive proof can be found.”

“A pity.” Minos replied. “I rather fancy the notion of being the bold captain, standing at the helm of his ship as it begins sinking.”

“You would be the first to abandon ship, and you know it.” Bizelle snapped back.

Minos considered the remark. “Nevertheless, it is a gallant concept. It was the famous General Estunock who once said, ‘Let the sharpened blades of mine enemies strike against my shield, but I shall never retreat from a battle’. Regardless, continue. What else did the council say?”

“Nothing more. Only that the castle has been searched and there is no trace of the sorcerers.” Bizelle admitted. “But the next time one of us is summoned by the War Council, coward, you will be the one appearing before the king.”

“So many social engagements, so little time.” Minos replied. “I would make a much better presentation than you, in any event.”

“Then why did you disappear when Branek arrived to summon us?”

“I was not presentable.” Minos tried to excuse himself. “One must be in top form when before royal audience.”

“On the next occasion you decide to so conveniently become absent, I will gnaw off one of your hands at the wrist.” Bizelle threatened. “Do you have any doubts that I will not do so?”

Minos gulped audibly, then took a step back from the snarling minor sorcerer. He opted, quite wisely, to pursue another subject. “You referred to our plans earlier. Do you still intend on performing the Great Experiment on your own, without Master Arak’s permission?”

“Yes, WE still intend on performing the spell.” Bizelle corrected, then muttered. “Had I any choice, I would have chosen a minor sorcerer with some sort of backbone. As it is, so that you will not betray me as the sole conspirator later, you will be the one casting the spell.”

“Me?” Minos gaped back. “But you’ve seen the spell cast before, many times. You understand some of its characteristics and limitations. You should have the honor of partaking in the Great Experiment!”

“You have such nice, soft hands, Minos?” Bizelle complimented, holding a palm upward into the air. In an instant, his notes appeared in his grip. “It would be a shame for you to lose one of them. Perhaps then you’d be known as Stumpy.” The minor sorcerer found his words to be so hilarious, that he emitted a sharp, disconcerting round of laughter.

“You are a twisted toad.” Minos said, holding his hands close to his body.

Bizelle searched through his notes, until he came to the page he wanted. “And soon, you yourself might be hailed as a Ranth hero, much like General Estunock before you.” He held out the selected page. “Now cast the spell, you effeminate imbecile.”

“Such language!” Minos snatched away the page. “So unbecoming for a member of the Royal Sorcerer’s Guild.”

In response, Bizelle bared his teeth.

“Oh, very well! I will cast it!” Minos gave in, then read the incantation. “Let it be known that I did not partake in this action voluntarily.”

“I am surprised that a glory seeker such as yourself would have so many misgivings.” Bizelle stated. “Was it not the Muse, Frenise, who stated that many steps must be taken during one’s most important journeys.”

“The great philosophers would cringe in their tombs to hear you butcher their words.” Minos berated. “It was Effreniette the Muse, and the correct quotation is ‘The first step is always the most difficult to take, when embarking on a great journey’. Now you take your first step to one side as draw forth the necessary magics.”

Suspending the single page aloft, the minor sorcerer read the incantation, and suddenly, unexpectedly, . . . nothing happened.

“Again!” Bizelle demanded.

A second time, Minos went through the motions, and a second time, no discernible results could be confirmed.

“You degenerate! You’ve bastardized the words somehow!” Bizelle howled, ripping the page from its invisible pedestal. “Give it to me!” The sorcerer quickly scanned through its contents. “The words are correct, so what are you doing wrong? Maybe its the soft tone of your voice!”

“Dare you belittle my voice? I’ll have you know that these soft tones have conquered twice as many females, just in Castle Ranth alone, than you have ever seen unclothed in your entire lifetime!”

Bizelle glared at his contemporary with such intensity, that Minos felt compelled to take a wide step back. Finally, the angered Minor Sorcerer growled, “Fine! I will cast the spell myself!” Within a few seconds, he did, but regrettably, he reached the same empty conclusion his peer had. Had the Ranthan any hair on his scaly gourd, by this point he would have most assuredly been pulling it out by the roots. “Yeearrggggg!”

“Did you not say earlier that most of Master Arak’s attempts were also without success?” Minos asked.

“These setbacks were supposed to have been corrected!” Bizelle yelled. “Faass himself was able to summon a group of humans! Why can’t we!”

“I have no explanation for that.” Minos replied. “But I do have a suggestion. Perhaps by increasing the length of time the spell is activated, we can have better success.”

“We cannot increase that!”

“Why?” Minos countered.

“Because sorcerers on the other end of the spell might have time to devise a countermeasure.” Bizelle explained.

“Humor me, Bizelle. How many times have Master Arak, or his apprentice, cast this same spell?”

The minor sorcerer threw his arms up in the air. “Who can guess? A hundred? Several hundred? What are you getting at?”

“It seems to me,” Minos considered. “That if there were sorcerers out there, ready to pounce upon us, they would have done so already. They’ve only had, by your estimation, several hundred opportunities. How long would it take you to isolate a conjurer repeating the same spell, from the same vicinity, over and over?”

“Why, three or four castings, at most.” Bizelle calculated. “That is one of the more fundamental concepts we were taught. ‘When entering enemy territory, keep on the move.’”

“Precisely, otherwise a savvy wizard might latch on a counterspell that would reach our location.” Minos finished. “So either our intended targets are not accomplished practitioners of magic, or they do not practice sorcery at all.”

Astonished, Bizelle rushed towards the remainder of his notes, which he had placed on a nearby counter. “I have that in my paperwork!” He shuffled through the small stack rapidly. “Here it is! At Captain Gruhg’s suggestion, Master Arak omitted the words magically protected, magically enhanced, magically altered, all words, in fact, which referred to their being magic in the new dimension. Between this and their concentration to human based artifacts, Faas claimed they produced their greatest achievements, including the two savages which killed several of the cadets.”

“If we produce any weapon-toting humans, we’ll deal with them in the same manner we deal with the pests here; enclose their heads in air pockets, then force the air out through a vacuum burst.” Minos resolved. “I’m surprised the tactic wasn’t used in the courtyard.”

“Master Arak and Faas both thought the humans were holding nothing more than blunted spears.” Bizelle revealed. “Once the humans began discharging the metal pellets, Faas claimed the cadets were too close to the attackers for them to counter attack with any precision.”

“These spears, I regret not having been there to witness them in operation.” Minos mused. “They fascinate me.”

“Back to the matter at hand,” Bizelle reminded the other. “How long do you believe we should have the spell open?”

Minos scratched his gray head. “As it is, it is instantaneous. Perhaps a quarter of a minute?”

“Agreed.” Bizelle nodded. “We shall alternate, with you going first.”

“Step back, then.” Minos grumbled.

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### Original Valet Version

03.06.00 – Quote “Let’s get rowdy!”

Rex to gangbangers, starting fight.

01.09.99 – possible new character – surfer dude, to enter story in same place where 2 girls, 1 nerd come in, he is quiet, thoughtful, observant, well defined muscles, shark tooth necklace, committed to action once decision is made (might wear neck or ankle bracelet made of beads, and is ridiculed by gang members for this)

### One

Glancing down at the clock display on his car stereo, Jason Wilkes knew he was at least twenty minutes late for his evening job. Zigging and zagging through the tight streets of downtown La Jolla, while at the same time keeping a wary eye out for any police cars, the young man alternately and expertly switched his feet from the gas pedal to the brake pedal until he rounded the final corner at Prospect street, at which point he

zoomed his late model beetle down the avenue at full throttle. Heck, the valets drove like this all the time, he reminded himself, finally slowing down just before the entrance to the small underground parking garage.

Impatiently, he waited for a pair of young ladies to cross over the garage's driveway, his gaze following the sway of their shopping bags, emblazoned with the logo of the lingerie shop located on the first floor of the building, as well as admiring the curves of their tight designer jeans. One of the women noticed his more than casual attention, and smiled in his direction. Jason, being Jason, smiled back and waved, wondering if he should offer them free parking on their next visit to town.

Then, with the path clear, Jason gunned the motor on his blue beetle and sped down the short length of driveway before skidding to a stop beside the parking booth. Inside the booth, the Somalian co-worker he was relieving stood grimacing, his arms crossed and his head shaking.

"Sorry, Yohannes! There was too much traffic!" Jason blurted out, again pressing down hard on the accelerator and zipping into the first available parking stall. Hastefully, he ejaculated from the vehicle, and hurried over to his post.

"Look, you're not even in uniform!" Yohannes complained, motioning towards the young man's polo shirt and jeans. "What if our boss comes in right now and finds you like that? We'll both be in trouble!"

Jason took a quick glance around the parking lot, of which a third was visible from his present position. "It doesn't look too busy right now." He noted. "I'll just run up into the hotel and change." He started back towards the car, then paused. "Hey, did you clock me in on time?"

"I'm not supposed to clock you in."

"I know that, but did you?"

Without any verbal admission, Yohannes nodded. "I can't wait for you to change. I have things I must do."

"Okay, no problem." Jason replied. "Go ahead and lock up. I'll open the booth as soon as I'm in uniform."

Begrudgingly, Yohannes shut the booth door. "Work should always be a top priority." He reprimanded with a shake of his head. "You Americans have things much too easy."

Jason couldn't help but chuckle. "Thanks for covering for me. I'll make it up to you!" He dove back into his car, retrieving the black slacks and long sleeved, white dress shirt that constituted his attendant uniform. As he jogged over to wait for the elevator, he saw Yohannes ambling towards his own car, an old beat up import. "See you tomorrow!"

"Have a good evening, Jason." Yohannes called back.

He wasn't such a bad guy, Jason considered, stepping in for the short ride up to the building's second level, which was subtle to the prestigious, if not snobby, Hotel Paparazzi. As soon as he stepped from the elevator, he glanced over to the small and cozy front desk, and frowned when he saw who was sitting behind it.

"You're late." The clerk, Jimmy Haynes, or Jimmy the Twit, as he was known to the small squad of parking attendants and valets, glanced over at the projected image of the hotel's fancy timekeeper. "Since it's almost five thirty, that makes you half an hour tardy."

“I cleared it with my boss.” Jason lied. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have to go and change, so I can get back to my job.”

“I’ll just jot down what time you arrived in my log book.” Jimmy told him. “And you’re going to need a hotel vest for tonight.”

“You don’t have to write it down.” Jason said, knowing full well that the information would undoubtedly be used against him later. “And why am I going to need a vest?”

Jimmy looked up from the log book. “Because our room service attendant called in sick tonight. You will have to take food to our guests in his place.”

“That’s not part of my job!”

Jimmy smiled smugly. “We already cleared it with your boss.”

Suffice to say, Jason was monumentally peeved as he returned to the parking booth. He’d taken the long route through the back stairwell, deviating from his course long enough to obtain an appropriately sized gold and black vest from the hotel’s uniform rack, as well as to raid the hotel’s tiny kitchen for dried fruits and soda, and finally, to retrieve his textbooks from his car. He’d just settled in for an evening of number crunching, due to an upcoming exam for his Business Management class, when one of the more disreputable valets made his way down the driveway.

“Hey, Jason!” The stout Robert, or Bert for short, announced as he stepped up to the parking booth. Without asking, he reached out to confiscate a couple of Jason’s dried peach slices. “How’s it hanging?”

“Hey, Bert. What’s going on?”

“Aww, nuthin’ much.” Bert replied, between chews. “What are you doing?”

“P and L sheets.” Jason answered, then elaborated when the valet looked back at him with perplexion steaming out of his ears. “Profit and loss statements. I have this class where I’m pretending to run a restaurant, and I have to total up all of my expenses and compare them against my income.”

“Oh, I knew that.” Bert replied smartly. “Anyways, I was wondering if I could borrow your car for a little while. I want to run over to the store and pick up a pack of brew.”

“You’re going to drink on the job?” Jason asked in bewilderment.

“Sure, why not?” Bert shrugged his shoulders. “Ain’t nothing else to do around here.”

Jason shook his head. “What if you have to park somebody’s car?”

“Hairy Lou’s out front covering.” Bert told him. “Its not going to be busy enough for two valets tonight. The hotel only has something like five reservations coming in. Besides, I’ve got some breath mints.”

Jason tossed over his car keys. “Where’s your car?”

“In the shop, with a broken water pump.” Bert replied. “You want me to bring you something?”

Jason shook his head, and motioned towards the vest resting on his chair’s backrest. “No, I got screwed into doing food service upstairs.”

“What?” Bert asked. “I thought you were a parking attendant?”

“I thought so, too.” Jason admitted. “Our boss, however, is what you call a grade A kiss-ass. Anything to keep our accounts happy.”

“Sucks for you.” Bert sympathized. “Anyway, I’ll be right back.”

Jason went back to his studies, but just as soon as Bert drove out, the phone rang. It was Jimmy the Twit. “We need you upstairs.”

“What for?”

“Room twelve ordered a Reuben sandwich from the deli across the street.” The front desk clerk explained. “You need to pick it up, unwrap it and set it on a plate, then deliver it to room twelve.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

“Because I’m running the front desk.” Jimmy answered sarcastically. “The manager’s out, so he can’t cover the desk for me, and I’m sure as hell not sending one of the housekeepers to pick it up.”

“I wasn’t hired to pick up sandwiches.” Jason refused. “I was hired to man the parking booth and collect money from the cars that park here. That’s it!”

“Let me jot that down.” Jimmy’s sarcastic voice echoed in his ear.

Fuming, Jason slammed the phone into its cradle, then snatched up the innocent hotel vest and began looking around for his booth keys. He’d do it, he told himself, but he wouldn’t like it, not one bit. As he locked the booth door, he began to wonder how he was going to keep from strangling Jimmy at some point during the shift.

It was a good fifteen minutes later before the elevator doors slid open and Jason stepped out. The errand hadn’t been too bad, he smirked, fondling a crisp new ten dollar bill, his tip from room twelve, before finally placing the currency in his hip pocket. He hadn’t quite made it all the way back to the parking booth when he heard the phone ring, and with some haste, he unlocked the booth and picked up the receiver.

Wouldn’t you know it, it was Jimmy the Twit again.

“Why didn’t you pick up the phone right away?”

Jason was growing more irritated by the minute. “I just came from upstairs, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Jimmy dismissed his concern. “I forgot to tell you something when you were up here.”

“Wasn’t that like ten seconds ago?”

“I only remembered after you’d gone into the elevator.” The clerk excused himself, then paused.

Jason couldn’t stand the suspense. “Okay, what is it?”

“Well, its regarding the attendant on the day shift.”

“Yohannes? What about him?”

“Well, earlier today,” Jimmy began haltingly. “One of our guests reported that they saw him smoking in the back stairwell. This guest was quite upset because it was their first time here, and there was noone around to tell them how to get up to the hotel.”

“Jimmy, this is a two story building.” Jason said, fighting to keep his voice level. “If anyone drives into this garage, they’re going to see these huge arrows that point them to the elevator, and if they step into the elevator, they’re going to see a grand total of two buttons. The first one reads; first floor- shopping, and the second one reads; second floor- Hotel Paparazzi. Do you really expect me to believe that one of your guests couldn’t figure that out?”

“The point is,” Jimmy abruptly changed the subject. “That the attendant was smoking in the stairwell. I believe your supervisor should be informed of this at once.”

“Well, why don’t you give him a call?”

“No, this falls under your jurisdiction.” Jimmy retorted. “You should be the one to call, not me.”

“Fine, I’ll do that.” Jason grinned. “My boss is going to think its pretty funny, though.”

“And why is that?”

“Because he knows, as well as I do,” Jason replied. “That Yohannes doesn’t smoke.” With that, the irate young man slammed the phone down.

Not ten seconds later, it was ringing again, but by then, Jason had stepped out of the parking booth. After sliding the door shut behind him, he strolled over to the back stairwell, and started a quick descent into the lowest part of the tri-level garage. That was where Bert would be, Jason knew, and maybe he was going to have that drink after all.

True to form, the careless and insensitive form of Bert lay sprawled across the passenger side of the beetle, his head tilted back on the headrest, and one of his legs stretched out past the open door. A couple of empty beer cans already lay on the concrete just below the door.

“Bert, you freak!” Jason called out, stirring up the slumbering oaf. “Can’t you at least hide the evidence.

“Whah furr?” Bert slurred back, pointing out at the the plethora of empty stalls. “Nobody’s down here, anyways. That vest looks good on you, by the way.”

“Shut up about that. How many beers have you had?”

“Jus’ three.” Bert burped loud and obnoxiously. “Still got nine left. Want one?”

“Just looking at you is giving me second thoughts.” Jason admitted. “Hey, listen. I’ve got to ask you something.”

“Yeah? Go ahead.”

“You know that new guy?” Jason asked. “Yohannes?”

“The black guy?” Bert asked. “What about him?”

“I think the hotel’s trying to get rid of him.” Jason revealed. “They keep looking for excuses to get him in trouble.”

“Whut did you expect? <BURRRP> This is La Jolla, remember?”

“Do you think its because he’s black?”

“Like I said, this is La Jolla.” Bert repeated. “You want a beer, or what?”

“Yeah, pass one over.” Jason leaned in to retrieve the can from the lethargic valet. As he popped the can open, he noticed some soft whisps of smoke coming from near one of the garage walls. “What the hell is that?”

“What?” Bert groaned as he propped himself up, then sobered quickly as he became aware of the threat. “The building’s on fire? Oh, crap!”

“No, its not.” Jason calmly responded, walking closer to the curious phenomena. “It’s not like smoke at all. And check this out, its just hanging here, in the middle of nothing.”

“Let me take a look.” Bert cautiously approached the undulating, shimmering material, then glanced over nervously at Jason. “You see it too, right? It’s not just the beer talking here?”

“I see it, Bert.” The other confirmed. “I don’t know what it is, but I see it.”

As they observed, the silvery-gray fog began to palpitate, and with every subsequent beat, expand outwards several inches. Within the next couple of minutes, it went from being barely discernible, to the girth of a full-sized refrigerator.

“I know what this is!” Bert shouted excitedly. “It was in the news the other day! Its that gray fog that people keep talking about!”

“You mean the fog that appears just before people start to disappear?” Jason asked, suddenly agitated himself. “I thought that was just a hoax!”

“Part of it was a hoax, yeah.” Unexpectedly, Bert took a step towards it, and the fog, in turn, seemed to darken, to solidify, at his approach.

Jason noticed the change in density. “Maybe you shouldn’t be getting too close to it.”

Bert remained rooted to the same spot, although he swivelled his body around to reply. “I was watching this talk show the other day, where they asked all these local psychics what they thought about all those people disappearing, and what they thought this gray stuff was, and you know what they said? They all had the same answer, that this fog, this cloud, was some kind of portal, some kind of opening that would lead into another dimension.”

“Did they say who was behind it?”

Bert glanced back at the menacing apparition, now only a few inches away from his body, and shook his head. “They didn’t know. Maybe aliens, maybe people from the future.” He said with wonder. “But I’m going to find out!” With that, the burly young man shoved his arm into the grayish substance. “Hey, this stuff is warm, its almost like sticking your--”

Abruptly, the speaker was cut off, as several thick tendrils of the silvery smoke lunged out and adhered themselves to his face. As Jason stared at the struggling valet, a growing sense of morbidity began to fill his stomach, but before he could backtrack a single step, even more of the insidious tentacles shot from the fog, and began to encircle his own panicking form.

“Oh crap!!” He shrieked, trying to yank himself loose. With one arm and most of his upper torso already trapped, Jason lashed out with his other limb, and away went the beer can, leaving an airborne trail of alcohol until it smacked into the still-growing phantom fog. As the can itself became embedded into the menace, its fluid contents spilled over the shimmery surface, causing the surface of the gray substance to recoil briefly. In a split second, however, the fog corrected itself, and began a hasty effort to collect the randomly scurrying drops of beer. Jason would have seen more of this, except by this time, the thick gray tendrils had enveloped most of his head and blocked his vision. Then, with a mighty yank, the sinister tentacles forced Jason closer to its form, and even more of its fingers reached out for him, soon completely shrouding his body.

The gray substance constricted itself, and with a shudder, Jason realized it meant to suffocate him. Summoning into his lungs the small amount of air that remained between him and the collapsing entity, Jason struggled to fight off the panic and keep his mouth closed. The cold and clammy material clamped onto his face and body, clinging so tightly he could no longer move.

Had someone been around to witness the event, and standing far enough away to avoid being a direct participant, they undoubtedly would have seen the pair of young men grappling with the gray smoke, until it enlarged enough to cover them from head to toe. Then, as if some unseen vacuum had just been activated, this observer would have seen the shiny material being sucked away into nothingness in a matter of seconds.

The only objects remaining in the bowels of the small parking lot were Jason's beetle and a couple of empty beer cans resting beside it, and the only sound was the quiet hum of the vehicle's still playing radio.

A swirling and dizzying array of images flashed across Jason's eyes. Jagged streaks of color swam by, disturbed by frequent and brilliant psychedelic explosions, each captivating the youth so much that he lost track of time. It might have been seconds, or minutes, or even longer, he couldn't fathom, until abruptly, the floral visual landscape was replaced with a cruel shade of black, and Jason felt his body drop down several feet until it impacted with a hard and bumpy floor.

Just as the young man began to sit up, a heavy foot implanted itself on his chest, driving him back to the ground. Instinctively, his arms reached out to grasp the limb, but instead of the pants leg, or even the human skin and hair he might have expected to find, his hands clasped themselves around something else entirely. It was a cool and almost metallic feel, and as his fingers probed further up, he was shocked to feel tiny scales along the length of what must have been somebody's calf and ankle. Severely perturbed, Jason flinched his arms back, taking a deep breath of the most foul smelling air he'd ever breathed. It seemed a cross between an unkempt zoo cage and an overflowing sewer, but as bad as that was, it paled in comparison with what came next.

From all around him, several rumbling growls could be heard, their issuers almost certainly beasts. Terrified, Jason tried to push himself away from whatever monster was stepping on him, unwittingly drawing the attention of his captor, who placed a weapon with a sharpened edge on his throat.

"Jason?" Bert's voice called out from several feet away. "What the hell is going on?"

Jason opened his mouth to reply, but a new round of grunts cut him off.

"Aagh!" Bert yelled out, his cry met with a fierce slap which stifled any further outbursts.

Immediately following this, whatever curse that impeded his vision was lifted, allowing him to see for the first time exactly what it was that they were up against. The two young men were lying in a small and unfurnished chamber, clearly lit by many wall mounted torches, and composed throughout of gray brick and mortar. They were surrounded by perhaps half a dozen mutant beings, a gruesome cross between human and reptilian, each clad in a dark purple tunic and carrying a long, metal tipped spear. The working end of one spear was resting against his neck, he realized, and no less than three on various points of Bert's body, who rested a few yards away from him.

"Jason?!" Bert called out, only to have one of the creatures reach down and give him another unforgiving slap across the face. Several streaks of blood were evident on the frightened valet's face.

The six armed beasts were poised to kill them both, he realized.

Another of the lizardmen stepped between the two captives, clad in the same purple hue, but with the added distinction of a gold band embroidered around the ends of the short sleeves. In addition, this monster wore a broad neckband, adorned with a fist size amethyst, and similarly decorated bracelets. With an open hand, the creature motioned to the pair of prone humans, then snarled contemptuously at another of his contemporaries out of Jason's line of vision. The decorated lizardman made a complete turn, ranting and raving in his loud snarls and growls, as if berating their meager captures, or perhaps belittling the guards themselves. Then, the beast stormed away, followed soon afterwards by the slam of a heavy wooden door.

As if that weren't enough, still another walking dragon approached the tense group, this one wearing an ankle length purple robe, in the same hue as the others, but also displaying several gold and jewelled rings on both his scaly fingers, as well as on most of his toes. If a lizard could show emotion, Jason surmised, then without a doubt, this one was sullen and grim, almost disappointed, and after a short series of grunts and a casual wave of its hand, set the guards in motion.

Much to Jason's relief, the spear was withdrawn from his neck, and the soldier quickly and deftly turned it around, so that the opposite end was soon prodding at Jason's shoulder.

"Jason?" Bert loudly asked, his nearest assailant making as if to deliver another blow across his face.

The young man chose his words, and more importantly, his tone of voice, carefully. "I think they want us to go with them." Jason said, slowly rolling onto his side, and without any sudden jerks, rising to his feet. "Just stay cool, alright?" Keeping his arms at his sides, he allowed one of the guards to step before him, and in a steady march, lead him towards the huge wooden doors across the chamber. Two sentries hurried ahead to pull the doors open for them, and he found that he had an armed escort both in front and behind him, and in most probability, Bert would have the same.

The corridor they stepped into was wide, allowing ample space for the numerous lizard people milling about to pass. There were dozens of them, Jason realized, clothed in tunics similar to their escorts', although these creatures' were hued in differing shades of green, brown and an occasional royal blue. Whatever they'd just stumbled into, the young man realized, was something not of their world.

"There, the cloaking spell has been removed from their heads." Master Sorcerer Arak informed the small group of rowdy guards. "There is no need to further agitate the prisoners."

The sorcerer had been casting the spell repeatedly for the past few hours, and it appeared that his own trying effort had shortened the soldier's patience considerably as well. Unfortunately, most of his endeavors had met with little, if any, success, and now, with this latest arrival of two more humans to add to the ranks of those he'd produced earlier, he knew it was time to end the proceedings. Before he could open his mouth, however, the accursed Elite Guardsman, Branek, stepped forward to denounce his work.

"The well that doesn't produce should be abandoned." Branek berated him loudly, more for the benefit of the guards than anything else. "We should be preparing for war, not wasting our time fiddling with magic spells that do not work."

“You must give me time.” Arak had answered impatiently. “I’ve only just recently completed a working version of the incantation. As with anything else, fine tuning is required to--”

“Do you hear that?” Branek had interrupted him, stepping in the midst of the sentries and their two prone captives. “An army is on the march against us at this very moment, and all Arak wants to do is his ‘fine tuning’. All so we can produce these filthy humans.”

A few of the guards had glanced over at the sorcerer, albeit briefly. A wizard, after all was said and done, was not one to trifle with.

“I shall put an end to this farce once and for all.” Branek had boasted. “I shall tell our worthy king of Arak’s failure, and petition that he concentrate our efforts towards victory on the battlefield, and not waste any more funding in such an obviously flawed direction as this.”

Of course, Arak possessed more than enough knowledge of sorcery to end the arrogant guardsman’s life in the blink of an eye, although he dared not use it on one of King Lehnorack’s favorite subjects. One day, Arak knew, he would have his opportunity for revenge, and until that day came he’d simply bide his time and allow the fool to say whatever he wished.

Branek had left the chamber then, most contemptuously and publicly, leaving Arak to brood over his shortcomings in silence. “Place these two in confinement, along with the others.” He motioned to the captain of the sentries.

Gruh, always unwilling to choose sides, simply nodded and motioned his guards to carry through the order. With practiced efficiency, the soldiers escorted the pair of prisoners from the chamber.

A Master Sorcerer by default, the downhearted Arak stepped over to observe the fallen red and white beverage container, which had long since stopped spilling its odorous fluid. As he contemplated the last of the liquid seeping into the cracks of the floor, he mentally reviewed the many things to consider, the foremost of which would be his role in the upcoming battle against the Alteycian army.

## Two

“This is freaking embarrassing!” A naked and distraught Jason hissed under his breath, even as two dragonmen motioned with their spears towards the opposite end of a small chamber, where two crowded cells awaited them.

“Tell me about it.” Bert replied from somewhere behind him.

Another sentry, the cell guard, stepped past them. After removing a large keyring from his leather waistband, the guard expertly unlocked the cell door and swung it open.

With no other option, the young men stepped in, and as soon as they had done so, the door clanged shut behind them. Once it was locked, the sentries in unison retreated from the chamber, while the remaining dragonman took one of the two seats beside the small wooden table by the chamber door. On the floor beside the door, Jason noted, were his and Bert’s clothing, and from all appearances, the clothing and belongings of the cell’s other captives as well.

Jason took a quick glance around his immediate cell. It was perhaps ten feet long by ten feet wide, and it was occupied by a handful of other people, the only other human

beings they'd seen since their abrupt entrance into the strange dimension. Present were a couple of older people, a black man somewhere in his thirties, and a tiny oriental girl with several bruises on her face.

The second cell contained a couple of hispanic hoodlums sulking in the farthest corner, a trio of scraggly, yet well built anglo men, and, circumstances notwithstanding, what must have been the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. With flowing, rich red hair and a curvy figure, the young lady rested with her arms on her upraised knees, seated facing away from the other occupants of the cell. Casually, she glanced over in Jason's direction, and once their eyes met, Jason again became agitated over his unclad state, and after awkwardly covering his crotch, turned away to face the burly valet standing beside him.

Bert's face was streaked with several long scars, the results from the sharp claws and heavy slaps he'd received from his captors. His right shoulder had been punctured by a spear as well, although direct pressure had long since reduced the bleeding to a slight drip. Although his face and chest were caked with blood, Bert's demeanor was not one of fright, or even apprehension at their situation. In fact, the valet seemed to be brooding quietly as he stared through the thick cell bars at their lone adversary.

"Bert, you look like crap." Jason said.

"Thanks." Bert replied, glancing the length of Jason's body. "Nice tan lines."

"Aren't you the least bit phased by what just happened?" Jason asked, careful to keep his voice down. "Don't you even care what's going on around you?"

"You seem to have forgotten, I've still got a decent buzz." Bert explained. "Everything will be fine once the brew wears off."

"Bert, I'm not drunk, and I'm seeing the same things you are!" Jason exclaimed. "What if this place is real!"

Bert simply shrugged his shoulders. "Then there isn't much we can do about it, is there?"

"You're hopeless." Jason shook his head, then recalled the woman from the second cell. "Hey, Bert, did you see the hottie next door?"

Very obviously, Bert leaned back and glanced over.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked. "Do you want her to think we're leering at her, or something?"

"A little late to be tactful, don't you think?" Bert replied, then looked down at his own stocky figure. "And modest, for that matter."

"Whatever." Jason said, then turned towards the occupants of the cell. "Can anyone tell me what we're doing here?"

Four sullen and weary faces looked back at him.

"Well?"

A long moment passed before the black man cleared his throat. "The name's Moses. Moses Jeremiah Jackson." He introduced himself. "You want the long version, or should I go straight to the skinny?"

"At this point, anything will help."

"A'right." Moses answered, using his head to motion towards the lone guard. "These freaks of nature have kidnapped us, and brought the bunch of us to whatever God-forsaken planet they call home."

"An alternate universe?" Bert asked.

Moses shrugged his shoulders. "Something' like that. Only there's no regular people, just those... those things out there."

"The dragon people?" Jason wondered.

"If that's what you want to call 'em." The black man told them. "They're just monsters to me. They seem to be pretty well organized, though. Each one has a job, like watching over us, or bringing us some slop to eat. They behave just like humans, but I guess they haven't advanced very far, since they all seemed to be stuck in the Dark Ages."

"What's the Dark Ages?" Bert asked.

"You know," Jason informed him. "Castles and dragons, kings and knights."

"Oh, I knew that."

Jason addressed Moses. "The two of us, we got sucked into this big gray cloud. How'd you get here?"

"I don't want to talk about that." Moses said, turning away. After a moment, he turned back. "Oh, and a couple of words of advice. Whatever you do, do not raise your hands towards these monsters. Maybe that's their way of flipping each other off, I don't know, but they sure don't like seeing that."

"Why do you say that?" Jason asked.

"You see those bloodstains on the floor, by your feet?" Moses motioned downwards. "They used to be somebody."

Jason stared at the crimson marks on the bricks, then looked back towards Moses, but it was clear he no longer felt like speaking. He glanced over at the older couple, but they seemed to be fast asleep, if not dead. The only other person in the cell was the oriental girl, and as Jason turned to face her, he realized that she was staring at him. Or more accurately put, she was staring intently at his exposed crotch.

Reflexively, Jason covered himself before speaking. "What about you? How did you get here?"

Quietly, the girl repositioned herself, turning her small back on Jason.

The strikingly good looking woman in the next cell suddenly stood up. "I can tell you how she got here!" She said, striding purposefully towards the wall which partitioned the two cells. "I can tell you how the little bitch got the both of us stuck in here!"

"It wasn't my fault!" The asian girl protested.

"You're lucky we got thrown into separate cells." The woman threatened, then cast her gaze at the two latest arrivals. "Me and a couple of my girlfriends crashed this party, over on Dog Beach."

"Dog Beach?" Jason cut in. "That's just a few miles away from where we were!"

Impatiently, the woman paused until Jason was through. "As I was saying, we crashed this party. It was a lame get-together, and we'd just turned to leave, when this fight broke out between some skinheads." She glanced down menacingly at the oriental, who cringed even though the bars kept them apart. "Nothing to get all worked up about, just two guys settling their differences in the usual manly fashion. Dipshit over there, along with her little preppie friends, decide to run for their lives, knocking over chairs and tables, and me, when that gray stuff appears. By the time I got the chairs and that dumb ass off of me, I'm already bound and being dragged in. Just wait 'til I get my hands on her."

"I guess that explains why she's all bruised up." Bert said, with open contempt.

“Oh, no. I would have done much worse.” The woman denied. “She got her bruises from those things that captured us, because she wouldn’t stop screaming. Is that how you got yours?”

Strangely, Bert found the taunt amusing. “What’s your name?” He asked, stepping out from behind Jason.

“Call me Kate.” The woman answered, giving Bert a long and lingering up-and-down. “And yours?”

Bert likewise returned the appraisal. “Robert, but my friends just call me Bert. How long have you been down here?”

“No idea.” Kate placed the side of her face against the bars, then sighed. “All we’ve got is these torches against the wall. No windows, no visits to the outside for good behavior. We left Earth on the thirteenth.”

“That was two days ago for us.” Jason calculated. “Moses, what date did you get here?”

“The tenth.”

“I’d much rather be back home,” Kate regretted, her gaze fixed on Bert. “Sipping on a cold one.”

“I should have brought one back for you.” Bert flirted back. “Why don’t I just run to the liquor store and get us a six pack? How much cash you got on you?”

Kate laughed. “I left my wallet in my pants.”

Jason stepped over to address the other occupants of the second cell. “What about you guys?”

The two hispanics glanced at each other, then glared back in unison, while the other three men all spoke up at once. A few moments of gibberish and confusion ensued, until one of the anglos, the only clean shaven one, silenced the others.

“Alright, you two pipe down.” The man introduced the trio. “I’m Mathews, and this is Sykes and Vender. We work construction, and we were setting up the drywall in some new offices in the downtown courthouse. Since we were busy doing a rush job, we didn’t see that gray smoke until it was right behind us, and by then, it was already reaching out for us.”

“We get paid by the day.” The mustached Sykes explained. “The faster we finish the job, the more we get paid.”

“Yeah,” Mathews agreed. “Hell, if we would have known this was going to happen, we would have never taken the job in the first place.”

“Had the vacuum on full blast, too,” Sykes added. “Cleaning up all the drywall dust off the floor, we never saw it coming...” The two men droned on for several minutes, although in the end, they contributed very little to the growing pool of knowledge.

Finally, Jason politely excused himself. He glanced over at Bert, who was by now exchanging sweet nothings with the volatile Kate, then decided to retire himself towards the front of the cell, mainly since the back wall and corners were already taken.

“They got powers.” Moses spoke out as he walked by. “Magical powers. That’s how they got us here. They opened up a hole into our world, and just reached in and pulled us out. Then, they put this darkness spell around our heads, so’s we can’t see them, but they can see us. They pin us down, until they’re sure we won’t be a threat, but they don’t kill us right then, not unless one of us tries to get rowdy with ‘em.”

“Okay.” Jason said. “Then everybody ends up here, in these cells. But for what?”

Moses shrugged his lean, bare shoulders. “Don’t know that yet. Maybe they’re planning on eating us, since they don’t exactly look like vegetarians.”

Jason gulped.

“The little one, I’d advise you to stay away from him.” Moses continued. “He’s the one that ordered the guards to kill the last guy who made a scene in here. He is not what you might call people friendly.”

“What little one?”

“You ain’t seen him?” Moses asked. “He’s a little... , what’d you call them? A little dragonman, about half the size of the others. I guess you’ll see him soon enough, since he comes in here so damn much. He’s gonna stand right outside those cell doors, waving his hands and growling at us, like he’s trying to turn us into frogs or something. Or maybe into things like them.”

Jason glanced over at the chamber door, then at the single sentry who guarded them.

“That little one,” Moses reiterated. “That’s the one you want to stay away from.”

Minor sorcerer Fass was the second most powerful wizard in the entire kingdom, although you wouldn’t know it by merely looking at him. He stood at just under three feet in height, his true stature halved by the Master Sorcerer, a hard punishment received for neglecting his studies. The dragonman made up for his lack of height tenfold, by exhibiting the foulest demeanor towards anyone and anything unfortunate enough to be taller than him. Currently, the mage levitated himself towards the prisoner’s chambers, gliding high in the air so as to be at eye level with his fellows, as well as to avoid being bumped into or stepped upon, or worst of all, being mistaken for a child of his species.

“Move from my path, wench.” He growled at the rotund female before him, whose considerable girth prevented him from passing her by. “I am on urgent business.”

The female was not so easily convinced, as neither did she comply with the command, nor turn to face her pursuer. “Whoever you may be, know this, I carry two baskets of potatoes for the royal kitchen, and I do not intend to stop until I reach the place. If you persist with your badgering, I shall have no choice but to halt, which will only further delay the both of us, and use my peeling knife to speed your way towards the Next Kingdom.”

Faas was not amused. “Woman, how would you prefer having your ugly head and your sweaty buttocks interchanged?”

Immediately, the peasant female dropped her baggage, spilling a few potatoes along the floor of the dank passage, and began fumbling through the pockets of her apron for her weapon. It wasn’t until she’d turned about, however, that she caught sight of the minor sorcerer, at which point her stern countenance switched into one of sheer terror.

“Master Faas, forgive me! I had no idea it was you who followed in my steps!”

The wizard floated by her with both a steady glare, and a dire warning. “Since I am hurried, I shall postpone improving your gnarled appearance until another time.”

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