

Book XII  
The Truth



Prologue  
Return to the Pit

Nails appeared as he had before with the team, in one of the cubical receiving areas of the Pit. The causeway beyond was much less busy than it had been the last time--Nails guessed that he hadn't arrived just prior to a major event this time.

"Name?" droned the man sitting at the edge of the receiving area between a desk and four armed guards.

"Huh? Oh, Nails." The man at the desk scrawled the name on a thin slate reminiscent of the Arbiter's control slab. After a brief pause he looked quickly from the slate to Nails and back again.

"Place of origin?" he asked.

"Ylelon, Rond."

The man tapped his slate with his writing utensil several times, then looked at Nails again.

"Is something wrong?" Nails asked.

"We have special instructions to contact the Arbiter if any member of your entourage returns," the man replied. "I've sent for an escort to take you to the announcing booth."

Nails raised his eyebrows. "I'm flattered."

"Please wait outside the receiving area," the man drawled as if he had not heard. The guards likewise remained at attention as Nails walked past them.

Over the next few minutes Nails killed time by watching the passers-by. Less busy or not, it was still the same mind-boggling array of races. Nails thought he caught a number of them staring at him and pointing him out to others.

Soon a squad of eight guards arrived and took Nails to a flight of stairs leading to the Hall of Champions. It was a much longer walk this time. Nails guessed that he had arrived quite distant from the announcing booth.

When they reached the double doors of the booth, the squad saluted the door guards, who saluted back and opened the doors for Nails.

"Er...thanks," Nails said and ambled inside.

The Arbiter was standing at the buffet table at the rear of the booth, piling food onto an already overloaded plate. When he saw the doors opening and Nails entering he hastily set the plate down and practically rushed at his visitor.

"Nitro, my friend!" he said as he threw his pudgy arms around Nails' waist. "How are you?"

"It's 'Nails', actually. Well, it's really 'David,' but my cousin's nickname for me kind of stuck."

"'Beloved'?" the Arbiter repeated Nails' name as it came to him through the Pit's translator. "Not much of a tough guy name, is it?"

"I suppose not," Nails said as he pulled away from the strange man. "Was there something you wanted to see me about?"

The Arbiter blinked. "Haven't you heard? You and your friends made quite a splash on your last visit. Reruns of your fight are still our third best-selling pay-per-view product."

Nails shrugged. "Whatever that means."

"What it means," chuckled the Arbiter, "is that the clueless yokel newcomers became instant fan favorites and made me a handsome sum in the process."

"'Clueless yokel newcomers'?" Nails muttered as the Arbiter returned to his overflowing plate. "We can't have been all that noticeable in a place like this."

"Never underestimate a crowd's love for the underdog," the Arbiter said around a mouthful of pasta. "Plus, word ran through the fan base that the V.I.P. was interested in your fight. That alone had viewers throwing money at me for the video. But, I'm getting off track. What can I do for you?"

Nails went through the motions of taking a deep breath. "I wanted to see about arranging some training here."

"Oh." The Arbiter looked despondent. "I was hoping you wanted to fight again. Oh well, you certainly have enough credit left over to do as you please here. If you want to train, just use the White

Room.”

“The what?”

The Arbiter paused in his chewing, but only for a moment. “No one’s shown you how to use the White Rooms? Oh, we’re in for a fun afternoon. Hold down the fort,” he said to a nearby attendant, who bowed and immediately began to confer with others.

“Where are we going?” Nails said when the Arbiter grabbed his crystal-headed staff and began to waddle toward the doors.

“To the only training you’ll ever need,” the Arbiter replied through a broad grin.

They walked together to what Nails assumed was the same apartment he and the team had spent time in before. The Arbiter led him to the part of the complex the team had avoided: the door opening into the white expanse of nothing.

“Check it out,” said the Arbiter. He stepped out into the white void, presenting an eerie sight--there was no hint of any sort of surface, yet the little man stood non-chalantly on an invisible floor.

“Check what out? It’s like walking onto a blank sheet of drawing paper,” said Nails.

“An apt simile,” replied the Arbiter. “These spaces are attached to each fighter’s quarters. Each one is a blank slate, equipped with the same environment generators as the arena.”

Understanding dawned on Nails’ face. “Being here means I can fight anywhere.”

“Anywhere, anytime, and anyone.” The Arbiter waved his hand and his control slab of solid light appeared. “Let’s start you off with something nice and simple.”

As the Arbiter worked, the White Room vanished and was replaced with the deck of a three-masted sailing ship. A sunlit sea rolled away to meet the sky in a smooth seam at the horizon. Screaming gulls wheeled around the tallest mast.

“Pirates!” laughed the Arbiter. An even dozen stereotypical pirates--peg legs, hooks, earrings, eye patches, cutlasses, the whole deal--materialized around Nails.

“These should make for a good warm-up,” the Arbiter said as the simulacrum closed in on Nails.

“No pirates!” Nails shouted.

“Huh?!” the pirates said in unison and drew back. The Arbiter looked curiously at Nails.

“I had a bad experience recently,” explained Nails.

“We’ll try something else, then,” the Arbiter relented with a shrug.

“Awww!” the pirates chorused as they and the ship faded away, replaced immediately by a walled garden outside a wooden temple under a starry sky. Now Nails was surrounded by a dozen black-clad figures standing in exaggerated poses.

“Ninja?” he asked.

“The Arbiter chuckled. “A universal staple. I personally don’t care for the cinematic black pajamas each world inevitably sticks them in, but hey, people expect them.”

“At least you didn’t keep the pirates,” Nails grumbled.

“Oh, no, no, no! Bad idea,” the Arbiter exclaimed with wide eyes. “We had a fighter a while back who wanted to practice fighting both ninja and pirates at the same time.”

“What happened?”

“They turned on each other. We still don’t know exactly what happened, but the constructs wouldn’t stop fighting. The system froze up, wouldn’t let the fighter out or security in...”

“And?”

“That White Room exploded. Had to rebuild a sizable portion of that residential area. Lost millions. Mixing pirates and ninja is like mixing matter and anti-matter.”

“Cute. Can I start training now?”

“Of course.”

At a snap of the Arbiter’s fingers a new figure appeared: a man of small stature with the shadow of a beard and intelligent eyes, wearing a simple black training outfit. “This is Ward,” the Arbiter said. “He’s the interactive control program used in the White Rooms. He’ll act as a combination trainer and control system for you while you’re here.”

“Howyadoon?” Ward said. “Get a load of this guy! Best training system in the known universes and he looks like he makes the tide come in when he heads to the beach!”

“I like him already,” Nails chuckled.

“Yeah, yeah,” the Arbiter said and made a curt gesture. One of the ninja leapt forward from his place in the circle directly in front of Nails. He let out an ear-splitting kiai, cracked Nails across the jaw, struck him several times about the torso and finished with a strong side thrust kick to the stomach.

“He hits like the real thing,” Nails observed.

“Fantastic, no?” replied the Arbiter proudly.

“No, that’s a bad thing,” Nails snapped as he casually back-handed the ninja in the face. The quasi-mythical martial arts warrior flew a good twenty feet backward and smacked against a stone brazier.

“That’s the idea,” the Arbiter explained. “We start with the basics. What hero worth his salt hasn’t beat up a cadre of ninja? Each time you win, the White Room gauges your abilities and presents you with a slightly more difficult challenge. Eventually even basic training exercises will become grueling battles that will hone your skill to a razor edge.”

“Which only leaves the question of what this is going to cost me.”

“Why, I’m glad you asked,” the Arbiter said through a grin. “You have more than enough credit to do some casual training, but I get the impression you’re looking for long-term advancement. So, tell you what: we’ll make a deal. You start regular training periods of say, five days. You eat, sleep, live and train at the Pit. At the end of each training period you work off your accumulated costs in exhibition matches. You get the improvements you want and I make a fortune off of your appearances. Everybody wins.”

“Five days, huh?” Nails pondered. “That’s a long time for me to be away from home...”

The Arbiter shrugged. “It’s up to you. But if you want to get good in a hurry, mat time is what you need.”

It only took Nails a moment to decide. “It’s a deal!” he said and shook the Arbiter’s hand.

“That’s a heck of a grip you’ve got there. I’ll hang around for a while, show you the ropes and how to interact with Ward. He’s a bit of a prankster at times.”

A water balloon appeared out of nothingness in Ward’s hand and was promptly tossed onto the Arbiter’s head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Ward.

“Great,” Nails muttered. “When do I start all this?”

“Ninja. Remember?”

“Oh, right,” Nails said a split second before eleven ninja simulacra jumped him.

## Chapter I The Resting Place

Two days passed for the Lonely Winds with Nails away. Training in the Mansion during the day, patrolling in the city at night became the rigid routine. On Tuesday they cornered a pair of vampires that were attacking a homeless woman and made short work of them; on Wednesday they gave up after four uneventful hours.

It was 7:02 in the morning on Thursday when the antique phone in George's Study rang. George immediately picked it up. "Air support."

*"George, get to the nearest screen and turn on the news, quickly."*

"Harati? I thought you stayed here overnight," George said.

*"I did. I'm in the Rec Room."*

"...why are you calling me from the room next door?"

*"Because crossing a room in your house is a minor sporting event, now get your ass over here!"*

George quickly hung up the phone. He couldn't remember the last time Master Pana had spoken that way to anyone. As swiftly as he could he joined his friend in the immense Rec Room, sitting in arm chairs arranged in front of the enormous TV. Master Pana was watching a morning newscast and within seconds George understood why his friend was so upset.

The screen displayed a montage of shots inside a series of tunnels of light brown stone, interspersed with occasional focuses on long wall niches containing skeletal remains wrapped in ragged cloth. A reporter narrated the scene calmly as the camera presented it.

*"...brought to the attention of Ylelon University's Archaeology department late last evening by a group of hikers traveling along the cliffs. We're being allowed to bring you this remarkable footage of the outermost chambers, but the inner areas are off-limits for the time being. Again, this amazing breaking story: the discovery of a lost Yd burial ground that preliminary studies believe has remained untouched for at least eleven hundred years..."*

Master Pan turned the sound off and looked at George. "Someone found the Hengh Heyli catacombs."

Almost instantly George had taken his silent alarm microphone from his pocket and spoke into it, sending his voice echoing through the Mansion. "Everyone come to the Situation Room. *Right now.*"

Despite the urgency of George's summons it took nearly forty minutes for the team to gather in the Situation Room. After having been out late in the city and driving home in the early morning, seven a.m. was an unpleasant hour to be awakened.

Will was the first to arrive, still rubbing sleep from his eyes. "All right, George, what's this all--"

"Take your seat," George said curtly. He and Master Pana were standing, rather than sitting, at the table's head. Will did as he was instructed; he was still too sleepy to take much offense. When each of the others arrived in turn, George had them sit as well. Marc staggered in last, scratching his stomach. Only then did George speak again.

"You're going to the northern cliffs," he said without preamble. "Take what basic field gear you can gather quickly. I want you out the door in five minutes."

"What?" Jake groused. "What are--"

"There's no time!" George shouted as he slammed his fists down on the table.

"Gather your weapons, we will explain on the way. I'll be going with you," said Master Pana.

Seven minutes later a convoy of confused and groggy monster hunters drove off of the Manor grounds and headed down the dirt road toward the highway. Master Pana rode with Jake. He waited until they were all on the highway before he began to explain what was happening.

"Hundreds of years ago, before the wealth of the Sentinel mountains drew western settlers to Ylelon, my people lived in nomadic tribes in constant warfare with each other," he began. "Each tribe battled all of the others. They killed each other for women, for patches of barren land, for cups of rain

water. Even oral tradition does not record a time before the endless bloodshed.

“According to legend, many centuries ago one tribe suddenly rose to dominance over the others. Whispered tales held that the tribe had consorted with wicked spirits to gain the source of their power: a tin idol of the Yd goddess of truth and murder.”

“Truth and *murder*?” said Jake.

“In the old Yd philosophy, it was held that of the two, one must always follow the other.”

“*Nice philosophy*,” Will muttered.

“*Now you have some idea why his martial art style is so effective*,” George said dryly.

“The tribe, the Hengh Heyli, began to sweep out of their territory in the north,” Master Pana continued. “Time after time they defeated strong forces that rose against them. Sometimes they were ready for an attack that should have surprised them, other times they found resources and encampments that had been carefully guarded and hidden.

“The Hengh Heyli killed the people they could not assimilate. As months became years, it seemed that the impossible would happen: a single tribe would conquer Ylelon. Because of this, another impossible thing *did* happen: the remaining tribes set aside their squabbles and united against the common foe. The conquering force of the Hengh Heyli broke upon an army many times its size and receded as the crude alliance chased them back to their original lands, not sparing a single man, woman or child.”

“Not that this isn’t interesting,” Jake said, “but what does it have to do with where we’re being railroaded to?”

“Unlike the desert tribes, who burned their dead in scrub pyres, the Hengh Heyli were said to bury their tribesmen in underground chambers in the mountains. The legend claims that even as their last warriors were being massacred, the shamans who used the idol hid it with the greatest of their remaining number in one of these catacombs. Many generations of Yd would spend their lives searching for the idol, called the Kad, but no one ever found it.

“In later centuries, miners and archaeologists sometimes found simple burial galleries in the northern mountains, but these were little more than caves with a few grave goods. In time, even those who knew Ylelon’s stories best came to believe the Kad was merely a legend.”

Will thought he heard George muttering something through the Jakecams™, but he wasn’t sure exactly what.

“So...we’re looking for this legendary burial ground?” Jake asked. “How do we even know where it is? And why are we driving toward the ocean and not the mountains?”

“*Because the catacombs are not in the mountains*,” George said. “*Some hikers found what appeared to be a shallow cave yesterday afternoon while exploring cliffs along the north shore. It turned out to be the partially-collapsed antechamber to a much larger series of rooms and connecting passages.*”

“*Ah, so that’s why no one ever found the idol. They were looking in the wrong place*,” Will thought aloud.

“*So we assume. You are to investigate the site and find out for certain*,” George said.

“*Huh? You woke us up and threw us out of the house and you don’t even know if we’re going to the right place?*” complained Cynthia.

“You have to understand,” Master Pana said patiently. “We thought this was merely a legend ourselves until a little while ago, when I saw the discovery on the news. What has been found is much more expansive and intricate than anything else ever unearthed here. If this is the last resting place of the Kad, then others will know of it now as well. We have to be certain we get to it before they do. If the Kad is as powerful as the legends say, it absolutely cannot be left unclaimed.”

“Yeah, what does this thing do, anyway?” Jake asked. “Does it make its owner invincible in combat? Provide infinite wealth? Maybe all it does it turn you invisible and make everyone want it?”

Master Pana shook his head. “No, the Kad does something infinitely more dangerous than that. It tells you the truth.”

The team took a road that diverged from the main highway a mile before the city limits and ran northwest to join another road that framed the northern coast. Another forty minutes of driving brought

them to a picnic area atop a cliff that jutted far out above the sea.

“We’ll have to hike from here,” Master Pana said. “It’s about forty minutes north.”

“Beats our usual morning workout,” Jake quipped. Marc snorted.

They shouldered their supplies and set out along the rim of the cliff. The sky was stained a rose red as the sun began its slow climb over the mountains. The waves lapped against the cliffs in a soothing rhythm and gulls screamed as they wheeled overhead.

“How will we deal with anyone we find there?” Will asked, jarring the silence of the idyllic scene.

“We’ll handle that when we come to it,” replied Master Pana.

“I’d make a comment about our lack of preparation, but I can already hear George’s teeth grinding over the connection,” Jake said.

The hike turned out to be fairly enjoyable. The team was long since fully awake, if somewhat cranky, and their hasty but not grueling pace along a seaside vista was a pleasant way to begin the day. Cynthia and Jake were actually disappointed when Master Pana signaled for them to stop.

“I believe it’s right around here,” he said. “The hiker that was interviewed described how she and her friends stumbled across a side path just as Fessa’s Spire came into view.” He pointed at a sharp peak of the northern mountains that had just begun to melt into sight through the haze of distance.

“Right, then. Fan out, and look for a way down the cliff face,” instructed Will.

It took almost twenty more minutes of searching and working farther along the cliffs before Cynthia found the trail. It was a simple, narrow footpath that began next to a knot of small boulders right at the edge of the cliff. From there, it twisted sharply down and ran northward as a continuous ledge only wide enough for one walker at a time.

“No wonder this has been hidden for so long!” Jake observed enthusiastically. “It’s under the lip of the cliff and it would blend into the walls from the beach.”

It took only moments before the team reached the cave opening, a sharp crack in the stone that was just high and wide enough to step through comfortably.

“Do you hear anyone inside?” Master Pana whispered to Will, who was in the lead, leaning up next to the cave mouth.

“No.” Will sounded puzzled. “Maybe they’re too far inside to be heard?”

Without a word, Cynthia squeezed past Will and slipped through the cave mouth. The interior was not pitch black, as she’d expected, but was lit by a series of stands, like coat racks with fluorescent lights mounted on them. Cynthia reached out, brushed a stand with her fingers and understood. “C’mon in, there’s no one here,” she called over her shoulder.

One at a time the team entered the cave. “Where is everyone?” Jake asked in bewilderment. “It’s after ten a.m., every archaeologist in this hemisphere should be picking this place apart.”

“They ran into problems,” Cynthia explained. “Once the news got out, everyone wanted a piece of this place. Some of the scientists want to study it right away, some want to take their time and preserve it, Yd traditionalists want it declared sacred ground and off-limits forever and one of the hikers even wanted to hock stuff in here online. The guy that set this lamp up was really sad, because he was thinking it would probably be a week before he got to come back.”

Jake stopped in his tracks. “That’s quite a gift you’ve got there, Cynthia!” he said.

“Try having it and handling money sometime,” Cynthia muttered.

“*Back to the task at hand,*” ordered George. “*We’ve been unusually fortunate. Make good use of your time to find the Kad, and don’t touch anything else.*”

“I have something for you, Jake,” Master Pana said. He dug inside his pack and produced a miner’s cap, complete with forward-mounted light. “I thought you’d want this.”

“Wow, thanks!” Jake exclaimed as he took the helmet, plunked it onto his head and switched on the light. Then, as if the bearded man in black clothing wearing a bright yellow helmet was not a strange enough sight, Jake drew his paired scoped-and-silenced pistols and led the way into the caverns.

The antechamber was little more than a shallow cave by itself; but for the lamps, it was devoid of any interesting details. The only means of egress aside from the front door was a low arch at the back. The opening was smooth and even, clearly the work of simple hand tools and a great deal of patience. The

wall immediately around the archway was decorated with crude line drawings and a number of the simple, angular glyphs of the Yd language.

“Let me guess. Prayers for the departed?” Jake asked.

“No,” Master Pana said with a grimace, “they appear to be incantations to protect the dead. It seems this tribe sought to guard this place with spirits. This dialect is quite archaic, it is hard to make out.”

“Is it safe to proceed? I mean, there’s not really something guarding this place, right?” said Will.

“*They had a news crew in there early this morning,*” George replied. “*If something had spent hundreds of years in those caves waiting to attack potential grave robbers, I’m fairly certain we would have seen some rather spectacular live footage.*”

“Point taken,” Will murmured.

The scene changed dramatically once the team passed through the arch. Unlike the rough, uneven surfaces of the antechamber, the walls and floor in the new corridor were smooth and almost fluid in their shapes.

“All of this was done with *hand tools*?” marveled Will. Though the ceiling was low enough to force Will and Marc to stoop, it too was remarkably smooth and level. The corridor was just wide enough for the team members to walk through comfortably, with walls that were featureless for the first ten paces. Then the burial niches began.

The niches were set two high on the walls, simple rectangular spaces just large enough to contain the prone remains laid within them. Most of the shriveled mummies were wrapped in ancient, dusty cloth blankets, though a handful wore only the ragged remains of their funerary vestments. Various grave goods were laid with each body: weapons, small crocks, and occasional other objects of more esoteric purpose and design. The tunnel was a true gallery, stretching beyond the reach of the team’s lights into darkness.

“Any idea where this thing will be?” rumbled Marc.

“None whatsoever,” answered Master Pana.

“Why is this place even here? Wasn’t this tribe based in the northern mountains?” Will asked.

“*We could theorize on the how and the why ad infinitum,*” George said with uncharacteristic coarseness, “*the important thing right now is to find the Kad.*”

The bizarre thought *George is ignoring an archaeological question? He really must be distracted,* ran through Will’s mind. He smiled in spite of himself.

Minutes ticked by as the team worked its way deeper into the cliff. Jake became increasingly convinced that the tunnel must have been a natural phenomenon polished by later effort rather than a purely artificial creation. He simply could not imagine such an immense structure being the work of Stone Age hand tools.

As he passed by a pair of niches, a shadow leapt in the corner of his eye and he whirled about with his pistols leveled. It had been a trick of the light: the niche held only a mummy and its cracked wooden war club.

“Sorry,” Jake said in answer to the others’ startled stares. “I guess I’ve been living this lifestyle too long. I keep expecting these things to jump us.”

“You could always head back to Attenz,” Marc joked.

“What? And miss all this excitement?” laughed Jake. “There’s more wanton violence and mindless terror in an hour on this job than in a week of prime-time...”

He stopped in his tracks and his words trailed off. The hall just before him had split into four divergent paths.

“Aw, hell,” Will lamented.

“Cynthia, can you do that history-touch trick of yours and tell us which way we need to go?” Jake asked.

Reluctantly Cynthia reached toward the nearest stretch of bare wall. As her fingers came within a hair’s breadth of the stone, a thousand sinister images surged through her mind’s eye in an instant, vague and menacing, like unseen shapes lurking just beyond the light of a campfire on a dark night.

Cynthia pulled away from the wall as though it were red hot. “I don’t think so,” she said.

“Ok, we split up, then,” Will instructed. “Marc and Jake take one leg, Cynthia and I another, Master Pana and Nails--oh, right. Master Pana, do you mind taking one leg on your own?”

“Very well, but any heaps of gold I find, I’m keeping,” Master Pana said.

“Ok, keep in touch and report anything unusual,” said Will.

“Yeah, yeah, we got it, mom,” Marc grumbled as he pushed past Jake and marched into the center-most tunnel.

“Last one into the dark, scary subterranean burial grounds is a rotten egg!” Jake chuckled and ran after Marc. With a sigh, Will signaled the others to move forward.

At the same time, worlds removed, the Arbiter lounged in his chair in the Pit announcing booth sipping mead and watching the current match. The fights of late had been terribly disappointing. The last five major bouts and many of the under-card fights had been pathetically one-sided, making for bored fans and plummeting revenue. The Arbiter had completely lost interest in the one-on-one pummeling taking place in the pit when there was a knock at the booth doors and Nails was admitted.

“There you are,” the Arbiter said with only the briefest of acknowledging glances. “What do you think of the training so far?”

“I dunno,” Nails replied as he leaned against the balcony railing. “I’ve been at it for days. I think I’ve beaten up every ninja, evil spy, gang member, barbarian and chemically-enhanced baker that ever lived by now.”

The Arbiter did a double take. “Chemically-enhanced *bakers*?”

“Don’t ask me. It’s your magic training room.”

“Fair enough,” the Arbiter relented. “Is the challenge not measuring up to your expectations?”

Nails shrugged. “Yes and no. I beat the hell out of fifty cattle rustlers and none of them can even touch me. So I tell Ward to crank it up. He turns them into futuristic super-soldiers with machineguns that blast me until I scream for it to stop. It’s a good thing I don’t scar.”

“It’s the extremes that displease you, then? You aren’t being challenged to the right degree to really learn?”

“Not so much that. I could probably beat up most of the machinegun guys before I had to quit and it would be a hell of a workout. I think Ward is helping me to learn, too, but the whole thing just feels...I dunno, empty somehow. I can’t really describe it.”

The Arbiter leaned back in his chair and slowly smiled. “You don’t say. Tell you what: meet me in your White Room in twenty minutes. I believe I know of something that’ll make your training more fulfilling.”

Nails did as he was asked, returning to his White Room and waiting for the Arbiter. As the moments ticked past and twenty minutes became twenty-five Nails began to fidget and wonder what was taking so long. Finally, after almost half an hour the Arbiter appeared, strolling through the displaced doorway in the endless white. He was holding the hand of a little girl with ebony skin and bright, intelligent eyes. She was wearing a simple brown robe of something that looked like sackcloth and tiny worn sandals.

“Uh, hi. Who’s this?” Nails asked.

“This is Mia,” replied the Arbiter. “She’s going to help you learn to fight.”

“How?”

“It’s why I’m late. I had to throw a new program together. Ward!”

Ward materialized immediately. “Make it fast. I’m meeting this cute little hologram for lunch.”

“Just run program N2,” the Arbiter said, rolling his eyes.

Ward vanished and new terrain appeared almost instantly. They were now standing in the roofless ruin of a small adobe house in a desert landscape. The house was surrounded on all sides by similar ruins in what could only be described as a war zone. The air was almost vibrating with the sounds of gunfire and explosions.

“What the hell is all of this?” exclaimed Nails.

“This girl’s birthplace on her homeworld,” the Arbiter said. “You know the story: countless

generations of warfare, ethnic purges, people weeping over the bodies of loved ones in the streets, blah blah blah.

“Anyway, this is a simulation of the current situation in Mia’s city. The locals represent one side of the conflict, mostly civilians running for their lives to avoid being ‘purified’ by the encroaching forces of the other side. Guess which one Mia belongs to?”

Nails looked sidelong at the Arbiter. “You are, of course, joking...?”

“Your job is to keep Mia alive and well for the next six hours. At that time reinforcements will arrive and even up the odds. Ward is disabled for the duration of this exercise, so you can’t stop, leave, or change the program.”

“Wait!” Nails cried, but the Arbiter had already shuffled back out of the White Room.

“Good luck!” he said through a mischievous grin and quickly closed the door. The seams faded and disappeared just as Nails reached them at a run.

“Mister, where are Mommy and Daddy?” Mia asked.

A voice shouted on the other side of a crumbling wall and several pairs of booted feet came at a run across rubble. Nails took one glance at Mia’s terrified face and knew he could not hesitate. Screaming a furious battle cry, he fell upon the armed men the instant they came around the wall.

## Chapter II Interlopers

The team members worked their ways through the respective branches of the catacombs for ten minutes, searching as they went. There were many more bones and grave goods but nothing that struck any of them as noteworthy.

“We’d better hurry this up,” Jake said finally. “Red tape or not, another digging team could show up any minute.”

*“I wish Crow were here. She could find the thing by the magic in it,”* remarked Will.

*“I just came to a dead end,”* Master Pana reported. *“I’m going to double back and try the branch that we missed.”*

*“Maybe there’s really nothing here?”* Will said.

*“Let’s hope so,”* George could barely be heard mumbling.

Jake continued to marvel at the catacombs even as he and Marc searched. He was now convinced that the old tribe must have expanded an existing cave system, for the sheer size of the place would have made it a daunting project for modern mining equipment, much less Stone Age hand tools. At the same time the sheer number of bones interred in the galleries made him think that the entire Hengh Heyli tribe must have been buried there--which in turn made him wonder who had been left to do the burying. He was so deep in his morbid pondering that he walked a dozen steps out of the tunnel and into the chamber beyond before he realized it.

“Note to self: deep thought is best reserved for non-combat scenarios,” he said to himself.

“Whoa,” Marc whispered.

The chamber was really just a small natural cavern. The ceiling was higher than in the tunnel, the walls and floor rough and uneven. Unlike in the galleries, the bodies here were not neatly laid to rest in individual niches. They were strewn about the chamber, at least two dozen of them, lying on hide bedrolls or propped against walls. Many of them still wore the last tatters of their dried leather clothing. Empty water skins, weapons and other trash littered the room.

“What happened here?” Jake exclaimed.

*“What’s up? Did you find something?”* asked Will.

“Something. I’m not sure what.” Jake stepped over a prone mummy and swept his light around the room. “It looks like these people all died right here.”

*“We’re on our way,”* Will announced.

Marc kicked idly at a body leaning against a wall. It clacked like a bundle of sticks as it toppled over onto its side and spilled a cloth-wrapped bundle out of its lifeless arms onto the floor. “What kind of place is this to sit around in?” he growled.

“This is the final resting place of the Hengh Heyli clan,” said a nearby voice with an oddly hollow quality.

“Huh? Why would they sit around in the dark until they kicked it?” snapped Marc.

“The coalition that had formed against them drove them from their homes in the north,” the voice replied. “They asked me where they could hide and never be found. I led them here.”

Jake stopped in his tracks and stared, wide-eyed, at Marc.

“Why the hell did you lead them *here*?” Marc said, still oblivious. “Shouldn’t you have gone someplace you could *live*?”

*“The shamans and war chiefs asked for a place where they would be hidden, not prosperous.”*

Realization finally dawned on Marc. He knelt and began to pick apart the cloth bundle at his feet. In seconds he had unwrapped a tiny statue of silvery metal, formed in the semblance of a fierce-looking woman three inches high, standing on a pedestal one inch tall.

“Hey, are you what this is all about?” Marc asked suspiciously.

“Correct.” The statue had the sharp features of the Yd people, but it was “wearing” a long flowing jerkin and some kind of slippers or small shoes. It held a tiny dagger in its right hand and a shallow bowl or cup in its left. When it spoke its mouth perfectly articulated the words.

“You’ve been here in the dark this entire time?” Jake asked as he edged closer.

“Yes.”

Jake stopped. “Then how can you speak our language? You predate modern Nifh by hundreds of years.”

The Kad twisted in Marc’s hand to face Jake, making a high-pitched crinkling sound. “I am able to communicate in the manner best understood by my questioner.”

“So you can get your point across, no matter what you’re saying?”

“I only speak the truth,” the Kad said flatly.

“*No more questions, Jake,*” George commanded. “*Wars were fought because of that object.*”

“They were conflicts of conquest,” the Kad said. “I was merely a means to an end.”

“*That’s enough!*” George snapped.

“Calm down, old man,” Marc grumbled. “This thing can’t be that bad. Hey, let’s ask it for the winning lottery numbers!”

“I really think we should leave it alone. I kinda get the impression that most people can’t properly deal with what this thing can do,” Jake said.

“Correct,” said the Kad.

Marc reluctantly turned the idol over to Jake, who stood looking at it for long moments. When it was not speaking it was as still as any other statue, yet the cunning expression in its miniature eyes gave the unshakable impression that it was watching the world around it.

Within moments Will, Cynthia, and Master Pana had found their way into the chamber. They gathered around and looked quietly at the Kad.

“It’s remarkable,” Master Pana said in a near-whisper. “I grew up listening to tales of this relic. I would never have believed that I would come so close to it...”

“Ok, great. So if we can’t use it to get rich, let’s just smash the damn thing,” groaned Marc.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, either,” Jake opined. “There’s obviously some pretty potent magic in this thing, who knows what’ll happen if we break it?”

“To destroy me would be simple and harmless. You will not do so, however,” said the Kad.

Jake held the idol a little farther away from himself. “Yeah? Why is that?”

“Because you know that the information I can provide is too valuable to destroy.”

Jake set the Kad down and stepped backward away from it. “Somebody else take it,” he said.

Will picked it up. “Let’s move out as quick as we can. Nobody ask *any* questions.”

“A wise choice, Will,” said Master Pana.

“Very true,” the Kad said.

The Winds traveled in silence back through the catacombs, each of them reflecting in their own way upon the enormous gravity of their situation. Will’s mind was a torrent of activity, wondering if the Kad really could speak the truth about anything. Could it tell him the answers to all the questions that plagued him in his tumultuous life? Would it even be ethical to ask?

Jake’s worries were more grounded. He’d never even heard of such a powerful source of divination, much less one in the hands of an obscure tribe of aborigines. Had it really been the result of a pact with demons? The very notion chilled Jake’s blood. At the same time, he knew that the Kad had been right about one thing: he would never willingly destroy it. The power it represented was much too precious to throw away. If the Kad could really speak the truth about anything, could it forecast the future? Describe formulae to cure all diseases? Dictate plans for world peace? Even if it could, who had the right to ask such questions?

Master Pana’s thoughts swayed between fear and elation. He knew that the happenings in Ylelon, the struggle in which the Lonely Winds were little more than unwitting pawns, were founded largely upon secrecy. The thought that only inches away was an artifact that could, with the right prompting, shatter that foundation and bring about a disaster unequalled in history made him break into a cold sweat as he marched past the bones of his forebears. Yet at the same time the Kad could also shed light on the evil that had taken root in Ylelon like cancer and bring an end to a certain truce...

Cynthia kept her distance from the thing. Everything in the catacombs reeked with the psychic taint of those buried there the way everything in the home of a lifelong smoker smells of tobacco. These had not just been members of a desert-dwelling warrior race: they had been a cruel and wicked tribe and the stain of their evil acts clung to the world long after they were gone. If the walls made Cynthia sick, she would almost rather throw herself from the cliffs outside than touch the Kad itself.

Marc kept trying to think of a way to get the Kad just long enough to find out if Lenny Karl really *had* thrown the '38 Tessa Championship, he really should have been able to make that goal, it was important to know and besides, the loser had cost Marc fifty chips.

"Maybe we *should* destroy it," Jake said quietly as the group finally reached the end of the Cliffside trail. "Smash it under a rock, break it in two, throw it into the sea."

"There's so much we could learn from it," Will said wistfully.

Jake spared a pensive glance at the Kad, which looked impassively back at him. "But it's so dangerous."

"*The important thing is that we have kept it from those who would make it dangerous,*" George said.

The Kad crackled as it turned to look at Jake's camera. "That is not entirely true."

"What are you--" Jake began. A sudden growl, startlingly loud, cut him off.

"Everyone together!" Will commanded. The team bunched up with their backs together and their weapons pointed outward.

The growl was followed by a chorus of others. The Winds soon saw where they were coming from: a group of lions stalking toward them across the rough terrain a stone's throw away. There were seven of them, two of them male.

"What the hell? *Lions?!?*" Marc snarled. One of the great cats snarled back and even Marc had to admit it was more impressive than his own.

"No one make any sudden moves!" whispered Will. "See if we can creep along the cliff. Maybe they'll leave us alone."

"I don't think so," Cynthia said and pointed. Another group of four lions was approaching lazily from the direction Will had meant to go. A third group was moving toward them along the cliffs from the opposite direction. The lions continually weaved around the scrub and low hillocks, making it difficult to count them, but there were at least twenty.

"This is all your fault, isn't it?" Jake said to the Kad.

"It's mine, actually," said a self-assured tenor voice from somewhere very nearby. The owner of the voice materialized out of thin air almost within touching distance of Cynthia, who yelped and skipped backward.

"Who the hell are you?" Will demanded as he aimed his pistols at the newcomer.

"You can call me Simon," he said smugly. His black hair was slicked back in perfectly straight lines, his unremarkable frame clad in a very expensive suit.

"Don't tell me. Let me guess," moaned Jake. "You're here for *this*."

"Good guess!" said Simon. "That lets us cut to the chase. It may not be particularly original, but I'm about to threaten your lives if you don't give me the Kad straight away."

"What stops you from killing us once you have it?" asked Master Pana dryly.

"Oh, we could play it that way, but then you'll end up taking some of my lions down with you, I'll have to clean blood off of the Kad. I'd really rather just you take my word for it when I say I'll let you go without a fight if you just turn over the idol. Without a fight. Is that redundant?"

Jake smiled humorlessly. "Is he telling the truth?" he asked the Kad.

"Yes, but that is partially because he knew you would ask me."

"Fair enough," Jake said as he tossed the Kad underhanded to Simon, who fumbled it several times and nearly dropped it.

"Jake!" Will said.

"It's the only way," said Jake. "This is a fight we can't win."

"And that's the truth!" Simon said with a wink. "Have a pleasant day!"

He turned and began to stroll leisurely away. As he walked he slowly faded from sight until he had vanished completely. His lions turned and walked back the way they had come while occasionally looking back over their shoulders to growl at the team. Then they were gone too, disappearing among the dunes.

“This sucks!” raged Marc.

“Ain’t it the truth?” Jake said.

“Well, that’s just *perfect!*” Will spat as he kicked at the ground. “Everything we do lately goes wrong!”

“*Peace, William. Anger will not help this situation,*” George said.

“Aren’t you the one who was telling us how important it was to get the damn thing?” growled Marc.

“*Yes, but throwing a temper tantrum will not help anything.*”

“Oh, so now *we’re* being immature!” Jake snapped. “All right, George, we’ve been dragged out of bed and railroaded on a quest to obtain the most dangerous object in the world, only to have it immediately taken from us by some weirdo circus act. So tell us, how *should* we be reacting?”

“Enough!” Master Pana said with rare forcefulness. “We have no time for this pettiness. George, can you tell us anything about this ‘Simon’?”

“*Unfortunately, no.*”

“Then we are at an impasse until we can determine a *rational* course of action.”

“Perhaps I can be of assistance,” a new voice said out of the air. The team snapped to readiness again and pointed their weapons at the voice’s owner when he materialized in their midst a moment later. It was the wizard, Atla, in his familiar all-concealing robes and hood. This time the material was pitch black and the mystical sigils on the hems were stark white.

“A bit stressed, are we?” he said.

“Don’t mess with us right now, bathrobe boy!” blurted Marc.

“What my etiquette-impaired colleague undoubtedly means,” Jake began, “is that we have just suffered a rather unsettling loss. Your sudden and provocative appearance does nothing to improve our states of mind, ergo, it is in your best interest to *piss off.*”

“A man would think you didn’t want his help,” Atla said coolly. “If you want to get the Kad back. I assure you that my aid is your best recourse.”

Will scoffed. “You’re kidding, right? The last time you tricked us into doing your dirty work it was a complete disaster. Please don’t insult our intelligence by expecting us to fall for the same thing twice.”

“What the hell are you doing following us around, anyway?” growled Marc.

“I’m here for the same reason you are,” Atla said calmly. “I came to collect the Kad, but I was hesitant to enter the caves. I was afraid of protective wards or guardians that might have been left behind. It was surprising when you all appeared and quickly recovered the idol without incident.”

“How convenient that we were here to act as your proxies,” Master Pana said.

“You can point fingers later,” Atla retorted with a lofty tone. “Right now I would think that you would be more worried about the ‘most dangerous object in the world’ being in the hands of someone else.”

“Suppose we accept your offer,” Jake said. “You tell us about this Simon, we go and retrieve the Kad. Naturally, you will want the Kad itself as a reward.”

“Naturally.”

“No way!” Marc and Will said together, then did a double take at each other.

“*One wonders why you would expect these people to take the Kad from one unknown devil and give it to another, Atla,*” George said. “*It appears that your past actions are catching up to you.*”

“As if you were one to talk!” Atla snapped. He took a deep breath, visible as the shoulders of his robes rose and fell. When he spoke again he sounded calm. “Very well. How do you propose to find the Kad without my help?”

“Maybe I can be of assistance,” a new voice said. The Lonely Winds still had their weapons

trained on Atla but re-aimed them at yet another man who materialized out of thin air.

“Dammit, the next guy who appears out of nowhere gets his head blown off!” Marc shouted.

“Sorry,” said the newcomer. He was as tall as Nails, burly and stocky with wavy black hair, wire-rim glasses and a go-T. His clothing was unassuming street dress: a green t-shirt, unzipped blue jacket, jeans and sneakers.

“Are we surrounded by a community of invisible weirdoes?” muttered Jake.

“I *think* it was just us,” the big man said. “The three of us came looking for the Kad, but we didn’t dare start fighting over it. We were here for quite a while before you showed up.”

Will turned a scorching expression on Atla. “You said you were worried about defenses in the caves.”

“Atla is *lying* to us?” Jake mocked. “What a surprise!”

“You don’t have any business here, Wolf!” Atla snapped. “Go back to your tree house, the real wizards have work to do!”

“Would someone please explain what’s going on?” said Cynthia.

“Sorry,” Wolf said again. “I go by the name Shrouded Wolf. I just think it sounds cool. I’m a modest wizard who lives in the northern mountains. Most of the time I mind my own business, but today I got word that the Kad had been found. I got here too late to do anything but add to Atla and Simon’s stalemate.”

“It’s not--” Atla began, but Will silenced him by pointing one of his pistols away from Wolf, at Atla’s head.

“Let’s let the gentleman have his turn, ok?”

“Having a bad day, huh, Atla?” Wolf laughed in spite of the fact that most of the team’s guns were still pointed at him.

“Wild guess here: you want the Kad for safekeeping,” Jake said with razor sarcasm.

“No,” Wolf replied, “I want to destroy it. If it’s half as powerful as the stories say it is, then no one should be allowed to have it. For anything. *Ever.*”

Jake, Will, and Master Pana exchanged a series of quick glances.

“You don’t know if you can trust me. I don’t blame you,” Wolf went on. “I’ll tell you where Simon lives and you can deal with him on your own terms. I’ll even keep any...interlopers out of your hair.”

“Yeah? How ya gonna do that?” said Marc.

“I’m not the only one around here with backup,” Wolf replied. From somewhere nearby, a solemn howl drifted over the dunes.

“What do you think, Master Pana?” asked Will.

“I am reluctant to trust such charity from complete strangers. However, I also know that every moment we spend discussing it is another moment the Kad is in unknown hands.”

“George?”

“*I concur.*”

Slowly, Will lowered his pistols. “Let’s do this, then. Mr. Wolf--may I call you ‘Shrouded?’--you provide us with directions to Simon’s base of operations, along with anything else we need to know. Then the both of you,” Will turned and shouted over his shoulder, “along with anyone *else* sneaking around while invisible!...will stay the hell out of it while we are risking our lives.”

Both Atla and Wolf began to speak, but Will cut them off. “*After* we are safe with the Kad in our possession, *then* we can discuss what to do with it. These terms are *not* negotiable. If you don’t like them you can all go back to whatever conspiracies you spend your time on.”

“Works for me,” Wolf said. Atla was silent.

“Good. Wolf, you walk with the others and give them the details,” Will instructed. “I have something to say to Atla.”

The other team members lowered their weapons. Master Pana motioned for Wolf to walk with him. The group began to hike back to the rest stop, leaving Will and Atla standing alone on the cliff. Will waited until the others were out of earshot, then turned off his Jakecam™.

"I don't know what you're up to and I don't care," he said. "We may not know everything that's going on around here, but don't assume that means we're stupid."

"I kept my end of the bargain," Atla said flatly.

"That's as may be, but you know what? I *still* don't care. Two of my friends were traumatized doing your dirty work. Hell, we nearly *died* on your little errand.

"If you want to play the mysterious creep, that's *your* business. If you want to play games with a short-tempered dragon, that's your prerogative. But the next time your actions hurt the people I care about, I'm going to put every bullet I carry through that hood of yours. Understand?"

He turned and jogged after the others without giving Atla a chance to respond. The wizard watched him go until he had caught up to the others.

"No wonder George thinks so highly of him," he said to himself and vanished.

When Will rejoined the others, Shrouded Wolf was calmly describing what he knew of Simon's estate to an attentive Master Pana. The others were keeping their distance from the strange man, but listened to him intently.

"What was that about?" Jake whispered.

"Just clearing some things up," said Will as he reactivated his Jakecam™.

"This operation sounds fairly easy, Will," Master Pana called back from his place at the head of the group.

"Yeah, so did the last one," Will muttered. "Wolf, are you taking us where we need to go?"

Wolf shook his head. "I can't set foot on the grounds. Simon would know I was coming. He's an arrogant bastard, but in a battle of magic he'd kick my ass."

"What's the point in sending us, then?" Jake asked.

"I don't know, you can bargain with him, maybe? I don't really know what he wants, I only know *him* by reputation."

"What about your 'friends' we heard before?" Will suggested. "Can't they give us some leverage?"

Wolf looked over his shoulder at Will. "Simon has slaves, I have willing companions. I won't force my pack into a battle many of them will die in. Simon's lions are just a trademark and status symbol to him."

"I see."

"What's your interest in this, Wolf?" George asked. "If you'll pardon my saying so, we take it on a lot of faith that you really do want to help us destroy the Kad."

"It takes a lot of faith to believe that people wandering around the desert with guns have good intentions," Wolf said with a grimace at the camera on Master Pana's shoulder.

"*Touché.*"

"I've got a question for you," Jake said. "What the *hell* is with all the mages around here lately?"

"How do you mean?" asked Wolf.

"I mean, lately powerful wizards are coming out of the woodwork. We only ever ran into a few novice magic users. I didn't even think there *were* any powerful mages in Ylelon. Then, out of nowhere, we find some summoner's monster circles, Atla turns up, we get our collective ass kicked by a crazy wizard, now you, Atla, and Simon all pop up in the same morning. I thought magic was a *rare* phenomenon, for crying out loud."

Wolf heaved a sigh. "It *is* rare, which is why we're gathered in Ylelon to begin with."

Blank stares answered Wolf, who looked with increasing disbelief at the team members. "You know? Because Ylelon is a ley nexus?" he said. "You *do* know the fundamental laws of magic, right?"

"We've been taught how to defend against some of it, but we never really needed it much," Will replied. "Until recently."

Wolf shook his head. "No wonder you don't know what's going on. I'm going to keep this simple.

"We power magic with a special kind of energy. It's not terribly creative, but you could just call it 'magic energy.' Every living thing has some of this energy within, from mighty whales to blades of

grass. Magic-users work to increase their “supplies” of this power like athletes work to get stronger or faster: the more power you have, the more magic you can use.

“The thing is, there’s magic in the land, too. It’s kind of like water that way: some places have more than others. Rond is like a desert, Ylelon is an oasis. So your wizards kind of gather here, in the watering hole. The downside is that the supernatural likes magic too, so you get all kinds of wretched things in a place like this. Such is life.”

“Wow,” Jake said after a long pause. “Just...wow.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Wolf.

“Nothing,” Will said. “It’s just...we never knew. The monsters, the vampires, the weirdness...we never knew why it happened here.”

“What about Atla? What’s his whole obsession with Terek Domar about?” Jake asked.

“I’m not sure how much I can tell you,” Wolf said nervously.

“Let me guess,” groaned Jake. “There will be terrible consequences if you say too much.”

“Yes, but not for me. I’m just an observer. It’s just common knowledge that there are certain things that aren’t smart to do in Ylelon. Pissing off the dragon is one of them. Although, pissing off dragons isn’t smart in general.”

“Cute,” muttered Jake.

“Do you know why Atla and the dragon are fighting?” asked Master Pana.

“Only that it’s some kind of turf war. I’m told that the dragon was here first, Atla came later and tried to stake a claim. Neither of them will back down and they’ve been feuding ever since.”

“How long?” Jake asked.

“A very long time.”

“Why do they want the land so badly?” asked Will.

“Atla, I don’t know about. I guess he just wants access to the power in the land here, but I’ve heard enough about him that I don’t trust him.”

“And Terek Domar?” Master Pana asked slowly.

“You know about the dragon, but you don’t know why he’s here?”

“Humor me,” Master Pana said. The others were listening raptly.

“Think about it. There’s magic in the land and it drew the dragon near. But what else does Ylelon have that dragons are supposed to love?”

Jake stopped dead and whirled in place to stare at the mountains. “The Sentinels! The gold, the iron, the minerals...Terek Domar is here because of Ylelon’s wealth?”

“Actually, Ylelon is here because of Terek Domar’s wealth,” Wolf said dryly. “The dragon settled here ages ago and manipulated the earliest settlements. He’s always been here, skimming wealth from Ylelon as it went from a small port town to a prosperous city-state.”

There was stunned silence as each Lonely Wind wrestled mentally with the revelation that the entire history of the country most of them had been born in had been shaped by the greed of a monster.

“It’s mind-boggling,” Jake said. “The city’s founding, the communities in the mountains...”

“The financial empires, the wars of conquest,” Will added. “An entire nation’s history, the lives of millions, all so Terek Domar could hoard treasure.”

“Maybe we *should* help that Atla guy get rid of him,” said Marc.

Wolf shook his head. “That’s a bad idea. I don’t know what Atla’s told you, but trust me when I say that he’s not a nice guy. Besides, the two of them are entrenched here. They own businesses, communities, even the government itself.”

“I *knew* it!” Will blurted. “*That’s* why the police always look the other way over the things we deal with! I *knew* there had to be a deeper reason than just ineptness!”

“Indeed. Honestly, I don’t even know why Atla would involve you in this mess to begin with. No offense, I know you’re good and all, but you’re out of your league in this conflict.”

“How the hell do you know about us?” said Jake.

“You are the monster squad, right?” Wolf said with a shrug. “You folks are sort of an urban legend for the supernaturals around here. Word gets around.”

*“Your words are enlightening, but no less disquieting,”* George said. *“May I recommend returning to the task at hand before my charges’ worldview becomes any more fractured?”*

Wolf looked suspiciously at Master Pana’s Jakecam™. “Who is this, anyway?”

*“The benefactor of the “monster squad”.”*

“All right. I’ll take you to the edge of Simon’s estate, but keep in mind: he’s probably ready for us.”

Unlike the northern and eastern reaches of Ylelon, which were vast expanses of scrub and dunes, the southernmost stretches of the country became increasingly rocky and hilly. Sheer cliffs and uneven hills dotted the terrain, interspersed by the odd rock formation.

Simon’s estate was located at the base of a cliff facing the sea. The elegantly simple manor and the desert brush surrounding it were a stone’s throw from the cliff face and twice that distance from the shoreline on the other side. The manor’s white-washed adobe walls and black-shingled roof made the structure an eyesore amidst the region’s rugged natural beauty.

Jake systematically absorbed these details as he gazed at the house through a set of binoculars. He and the others were stationed a short hike to the north behind a large boulder at the base of the cliff. Wolf had given the team directions to the site and vanished, leaving the Lonely Winds to drive halfway down the coast and park in the empty lot of a southern beach, which was the closest they could get with their vehicles. From there it was a three mile hike along the cliffs to where the estate was located. Jake noted one other thing as he scrutinized the property: a large bell hung a short walk in front of the house’s front door. It was exactly like the one that had been used at Mr. Knight’s house to warn of Terek Domar’s approach.

“Tell me something,” Jake said as he put his binoculars back into his field pack. “What is it with these wizards and keeping homesteads in the middle of nowhere?”

*“How does it look, Jake?”* George asked.

“Bizarre. It’s just a house. There isn’t even a path to the front door. Is being a crazy recluse a prerequisite to becoming a mage?”

“Do we approach now or wait for cover of darkness?” Will asked.

*“Move now. There’s no telling what Simon may be doing with the Kad. The longer you wait, the more that can go wrong. This time, destroy the Kad the moment the chance presents itself.”*

“That may prove difficult,” Simon said as he materialized out of the aether.

“That’s it!” Marc roared, leveled his shotgun at Simon’s head and fired before even Master Pana could react. The air an inch in front of Simon’s face shimmered like heat haze as Marc’s buckshot struck an invisible barrier and scattered in ricochet.

“Really, now,” Simon said.

“Hold your fire, damn it!” Will berated Marc.

“Fancy meeting you here,” quipped Jake.

“Not at all,” Simon replied. “You’re my guests, it would be unforgivable not to greet you upon arrival.”

“How did you know we were here?” Master Pana asked.

Simon produced the Kad from a pocket and held it out proudly. “She told me.”

“So much for surprise,” Jake muttered.

“You could never have surprised me,” Simon said with a wave of his hand. “I’m a diviner by trade, you see. I literally would have seen you coming a mile away. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” said the Kad.

“If you know we’re here, you definitely know why,” Will said. “You haven’t tried to kill us yet, so what happens now?”

“You really have no idea what’s going on, do you?” Simon laughed. “This is much bigger than just you lot trying to take a powerful artifact from what you think is an evil sorcerer. Take a walk with me and I will enlighten you. I promise no harm will come to you.”

Will, Jake, and Master Pana exchanged glances again. “Is he telling the truth?” Jake asked the

Kad.

“Yes.”

“...ok, let’s take a walk,” said Will reluctantly.

“There is one caveat,” Simon said as he looked directly into Jake’s camera, “I need to work without an audience.”

At that exact moment in the Situation Room, every one of the team’s Jakecam™ feeds went dead.

“Oh, *hell!*” George shouted and vaulted from his seat. “Not again! *Not again!*”

“I’ll check the connections,” Sullivan said as she rose from her own chair.

“I’ll help!” G.R. said. “What do you need me to do?”

“No,” George commanded. “G.R., stay where you are and keep watching. Let me know the moment the signal comes back. I have work to do.”

With that George left the room at a run, heading for his Study. Once he was inside with the doors securely locked he sprinted to the podium where the enormous journal rested. Instead of touching the open book, his fingers found and traced a hidden crease in the woodwork to open a secret panel. Concealed within was a thick scroll, ragged and worn with age. George unfurled a small portion of it, enough that he had to hold it at arm’s length, revealing huge blocks of tiny, even text written in blood red ink.

“There has got to be a way to stop this madness,” he said to himself.

Chapter III  
Three May Keep a Secret...

“Did you just do what I think you just did?” Will asked.

“It depends on what you think I did,” Simon said coyly.

“You killed my cameras,” said Jake. “Why does everyone hate my cameras? I’m getting tired of having little camera funerals.”

Simon grinned. “It’s nothing personal, just a matter of security. You can trust me when I tell you it’s a matter of self-preservation not to be observed too closely by outsiders.”

“That’s not difficult to believe, since it’s the only thing about you we have reason to trust,” said Master Pana.

“Now, now,” Simon said, waving his finger. “I understand you may not approve of my motives, but I haven’t harmed any of you in the least.”

Jake’s eyes narrowed. “You were willing to.”

“You wouldn’t have given up the Kad otherwise. Walk with me and I will explain what I can.”

The Winds reluctantly fell in behind Simon as he turned and walked toward his distant house. Jake was the closest behind him and made no pretense of hiding his weapons.

“Question one,” he said fervently, “you claim to be a diviner, so what do you of all people need the Kad for?”

“The same reason as you: information,” Simon replied. “I can use magic to predict the possible future or discern the past, but I can only see so much and so far. The Kad does not squint through the mists of reality in clumsy efforts to view small sections of the truth. It simply tells you the *way things are*.”

“And what does a seemingly private interest such as yourself need with such accuracy?” Master Pana asked warily.

“I thought you would have guessed that by now. You might say I’m a broker in futures.”

“You’re going to *sell* the truth?” said Jake.

“Bingo. I’ve made my living selling portents and auguries for paltry fees. No one’s willing to pay much for a prediction that *might* come true, you see. But now, I’ll be selling the future itself! The outcomes of wars, the advents of new governments, new technologies--the most powerful men in the world will *throw* their wealth at me for this information.”

Will and Jake exchanged horrified looks. “You know we can’t let you do this,” Will said.

“*You* know that you can’t stop me,” was the stern reply. “We’ve already been over this. I’m not the most powerful mage in Ylelon--yet--but I don’t need mystic foresight to know to bring some muscle to back me up.”

As if to punctuate the point, an unseen lion growled from somewhere nearby, alarmingly close.

“You may have safeguarded against us,” Master Pana said, “but you surely understand that others will soon be coming for the Kad as well.”

“Oh, I am perfectly aware of this. I’m the one playing tutor here, after all.

“As I’m sure you learned in school, many hundreds of years ago Ylelon was inhabited only by the Yd. The tribes warred endlessly with each other and with the creatures drawn by the power in the land.”

“I didn’t learn that in school,” Marc protested. Jake made a hushing motion. Simon continued unabated.

“Something like twelve hundred years ago, Terek Domar migrated here and claimed the land as his own. For some reason, he seemed to have abandoned his centuries-old hobby of destroying population centers to relocate to Ylelon, far from his homeland.”

“Yeah, where was that, anyway?” asked Jake.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Simon replied. “I say that knowing full well that I’m holding an object that can verify my every word.

“Back to the story: Terek Domar hangs around for a while, hoarding wealth from the mountains but strangely keeping a low profile. Fast forward a little to the development of Ylelon as a full

independent state. Terek Domar somehow manipulates the discovery of the wealth in the Sentinels. Overnight, the tiny fort meant to give shelter to passing ships becomes a bustling city. Industry, commerce and crime become the equal of any other place on Rond. In the middle of it all, a puppet master in the shadows, is a certain emperor dragon.

“Which brings us to the modern day. Why is the government so corrupt? Why do the most powerful mages in the hemisphere have to keep their heads down? It all stems from that dragon and his greed.”

“Fascinating. Are you getting to the point where you try to justify keeping the Kad?” Will grated.

“Gradually. I wanted to show you around the place first.”

The group had come to the porch of Simon’s odd house. It was even more strange up close: no furniture could be seen through the windows and the structure did not even appear to have a proper foundation.

“Welcome to my home away from home,” Simon said proudly. “It’s just a hastily-assembled construct, but it should suit my purposes nicely.”

Jake was poking at a wall with one hand and holding the Osborn Eye in the other. “This is, what? Your equivalent to a pup tent?”

Simon grinned. “Something like that. It has some things in common with a movie set, too. Being disposable, for example.”

Cynthia reached out toward a porch banister, came within a hair’s breadth of touching it, and pulled back. “You know he’s coming,” she said with a tone that bordered on accusatory.

“Bingo!” Simon laughed. “Terek Domar undoubtedly knows that I have the Kad. I expect that very soon he will arrive, crush me like a grape and take the Kad for his own. Or he would, if it weren’t for one little problem.”

“That being?” asked Master Pana.

A sudden roar startled the team members. This was not the mundane voice of a lion stalking nearby, but the call of a vastly greater and more powerful creature that came from above the nearby cliffs. It was followed closely by a rumbling in the ground that grew quickly into tremors.

“Remember what I said about keeping muscle around?” Simon said and pointed to the cliff tops above. The team squinted through the light of the sun and were startled when it was blocked out by a colossal silhouette that lunged from atop the cliffs and spread enormous wings. A second roar and the sound of most of the windows in Simon’s mock house breaking accompanied the crash of the dragon landing next to the structure.

“Lady and gentlemen, allow me to introduce my associate, Kenthis. “Cinder” to us,” Simon said.

The dragon bowed at his introduction and made a motion with his wings that remarkably resembled a flourish with a cape. He was an amazing sight, clad in scales in a variety of shades of red that made his nickname very fitting: he looked like a creature of living flame.

“It is a pleasure,” he said in a rich bass voice that made the linings of the team’s stomachs tremble. His eyes did not glow like Terek Domar’s, but were a vibrant yellow, like the soothing flames in a fireplace.

“Cinder and I have an arrangement,” chuckled Simon. “Terek Domar has become too greedy. There is magic and wealth in this land enough for many, but he is so determined not to share that he wages an ongoing war with Atla. Dragons are notoriously greedy--no offense, Kenthis--but this is ridiculous.”

“What can you tell us about this? About Atla?” Master Pana asked.

Simon shrugged. “Not much. I never cared for him. He thinks he can achieve some kind of mystical ascension with enough power. This was the nearest place that fit the bill. The problem was, a whole country isn’t enough space for Terek Domar and Atla’s too stubborn to leave, so the two of them are locked in a cold war when it would be much easier for one of them to relocate.”

“What about the summoning circles?” asked Jake.

For the first time, every trace of cockiness and mirth vanished from Simon’s face.

“What summoning circles?”

George threw open his liquor cabinet, grabbed a bottle of brandy and took several long draughts directly from it. He looked like a man who had awakened from the worst nightmare of his life. Behind him sprawled across the Study floor was his copy of the Truce, along with several notepads covered in scribbled handwriting in multiple languages. Clauses had been dissected and examined from every angle George could think of, always leading him back to the same conclusion: there was no way for him to warn the team. They had no idea what was coming and telling them would only make things infinitely worse.

He upended the bottle and drank again.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Simon said. "I've never seen 'magical rooms' like the ones you describe. Besides, if anyone had expended the kind of moving energy needed to bore something like that into the land, I'm sure I would have known about it."

"We've been in them. We've nearly died fighting what comes out of them," Jake snapped.

"Be that as it may, your mysterious rooms have little bearing on our current situation," Cinder said. "What is important now is that you understand that you cannot interfere in our scenario."

"Sez *you*, ya big lizard!" Marc snarled, to the horror of the others.

"That was a statement, not a threat," the dragon said smoothly. "Terek Domar will arrive soon and I will challenge him. When he is defeated I will claim lordship of this land. Simon will gather power through his vocation and pay me tribute. Ylelon will at last be free."

"What makes you so certain you're going to win?" asked Jake. His eyes kept shifting between Cinder's eyes and his enormous talons, half-buried in the sandy ground.

"Age breeds power in dragons, but it also breeds complacency. Terek Domar has not faced a worthy adversary in ages. I will take him by surprise and overwhelm him. His bones and teeth will adorn my lair."

"It's a dragon thing," Simon said in response to the silence that followed.

"You should seek shelter. When the battle begins this area will not be safe for you," said Cinder.

"You should get under cover yourself," added Simon. "You're not going to surprise anyone standing here."

"As you wish," Cinder turned and began to canter down the beach, quickly accelerated to a full run and took to the air with a tremendous leap. He flew back above the mock house and wheeled overhead for several seconds before turning inland. In spite of himself Will had to marvel at the majesty of the sight.

"I never get tired of that," remarked Simon. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to consult with my friend here." He held up the Kad by its base and Jake was startled to see that it was much more animated now, turning freely to look at those present and even shifting its feet on its base, making its high-pitched crinkling all the while.

"Why is it moving like that now?" Jake asked.

"Witnessing great events in motion is very fulfilling after centuries in darkness," said the Kad.

"Don't you just love her?" laughed Simon. "So, how long before Terek Domar arrives?"

"This very day. He fears what you may accomplish through me and comes with thoughts of destruction."

"Aren't they always," quipped Simon.

"No," the Kad said flatly, causing Simon to do a double take at the idol. "He often longs for quieter times."

"That's going to take some getting used to," Simon said.

"I don't doubt it," said Will scathingly. "Let's go, team."

The Lonely Winds walked solemnly along the beach back toward the spot where Jake had first observed the mock house. Will led the way with his hands in his pockets and a sour expression. Cynthia trailed at the rear, her vacant eyes showing a hint of worry.

“What are we going to do?” Jake finally asked.

“I have no worldly idea,” Will admitted. He turned and led the team to the cliffs under a large outcropping. “We can’t get the Kad back, but we can’t leave it in Simon’s hands. I’m so damn tired of these no-win situations...”

“What if we sneak back after dark? I bet we could break into the place and get the statue,” suggested Marc.

“We don’t have time, big guy,” Jake said. “Any minute now Terek Domar is going to show up and level the place. Either Cinder kills him and power shifts to an unknown and a mercenary truth-monger, or worse, Terek Domar claims the Kad--”

“We don’t need those nightmares, Jake,” Will interrupted.

“We shouldn’t lose heart just yet,” said Master Pana, “there may yet be an opportunity for us to make good on our mission.”

“How?” Jake scoffed. “Terek Domar is going to trample the place into the bedrock!”

“Maybe we can try to get it now, before he gets here,” suggested Cynthia. “I mean, we can watch for him, right? It would be hard not to see a dragon coming.”

“Is that what you think?” a familiar voice rumbled from overhead. Cinder melted into view, clinging to the cliff above them with his head held suspended just at their level.

Marc looked from his shotgun to the dragon and back again twice, huffed, and slung the weapon over his shoulder.

“Are we the only people in this country that don’t know how to turn invisible?” groaned Jake.

“Hardly,” replied Cinder. “Tell me, why are you so determined to take the Hengh Heyli Kad from Simon?”

“Well, he did steal it from us first,” said Jake.

“The Kad is too dangerous a thing for anyone to have. Even someone with the best intentions could do a lot of damage with it. Simon doesn’t have the best intentions,” Will said.

The dragon made a deep rumbling sound; it was difficult to judge if he was chuckling or growling. “Are you so certain of everything? Simon will peddle his information as a vassal of mine. The great truths of existence will be laid bare, first to myself, then to the whole of this world. Guided by my wisdom, your race will emerge from the dark age entombing its consciousness to join the great community of worlds beyond.”

“Like the Pit. We were there recently,” Jake said.

Cinder nodded. “Your discovery of a universal hub like the Pit is as Stone Age hunters finding themselves in a modern city. Circumstance has deprived the Jerud race of the knowledge that is its birthright. Primary among these is the dismally low level of magic on this world. You must be educated in its nature and use, so that you can best benefit from its existence as a universal force.”

“You’re going to tell the world about magic and the supernatural?” Will said, aghast. “You can’t do that! It’ll cause a revolution. Governments grabbing for a new source of power, monsters that don’t have to keep their existence hidden anymore--”

“Change can be painful, but it is necessary for growth,” Cinder replied patiently. “Would you have your kind go on forever ignorant of those they share the world with, prey for beings they refuse to believe exist? Or would you have them grow to meet their potential, able to fend for themselves in a larger universe?”

“I can guide your race through this rebirth, sparing you much of the pain of change into the unknown. In time all of the secrets that have been so wrongly obscured from you shall be revealed, even to the purpose of this world itself, when you are prepared to know it.”

“Purpose? Um, it’s a *planet*, isn’t it?” scoffed Jake.

“Few things are as simple as they first appear,” Cinder said, betraying for the first time emotion in his voice: a hint of sorrow.

“You realize that we must take it entirely on faith that you are as benevolent as you claim,” said Master Pana.

“You are standing on a beach, holding your crude weapons, having only the most peripheral

understanding of the circumstances, holding discourse with a being that is older than any existing nation. What you believe is true will have no bearing on future events.”

“How old *are* you, anyway?” asked Cynthia.

“I am twenty-two hundred and eighteen years old.”

“And Terek Domar?” Master Pana said with a raised eyebrow.

“Nearly twice as old.”

Again Will and Jake exchanged startled glances. “Terek Domar is *four thousand years old*?” Jake whispered.

“As I’ve said, the forces at work are beyond you,” Cinder replied. “You could as soon alter the course of the rising sun as influence the events to come. Trust in me and I will be the rising sun of a new dawn for your people.”

“Whatever. Ya got any beer?” Marc asked.

Cinder grinned, a well-meant gesture that was somehow a chilling sight. “I will share libations from my private stock with you in celebration of my victory.

“I must go. Terek Domar will arrive soon, thinking to bully Simon as he has bullied so many others. I will give him the worst--and final--shock of his life.”

With that the ember-skinned dragon turned and climbed the sheer cliff with incredible speed, disappearing over the top with almost unnatural grace and quietness.

“I am awake, right?” said Jake. “I would totally believe it if everything that’s happened today turned out to be a dream.”

“I don’t even know what to make of it,” Will gasped. “The big red creature from a bed-time story just told me that it was going to cause social upheaval unlike anything in history. It’s a little hard to wrap my brain around.”

“Whatever,” Marc groaned. “Can we get some beer while we wait?”

“I wish we could talk to George. He’d know what we should do,” Cynthia said quietly.

“We could stand here discussing the possible ramifications all day, but I think it’s a little early to start celebrating global reform,” said Jake.

“Why do you think so, Jake?” asked Master Pana.

“Well, it’s been a while since we’ve seen him, and I never really wanted to look that much, but isn’t Terek Domar kind of...bigger than Cinder...?”

Chapter IV  
...If Two of Them Are Dead

The team whiled away the next half-hour in the shadow of the cliff, unwilling to leave but uncertain what, if anything, they should do next. They knew they likely could not influence what was coming, but at the same time they did not dare leave Simon's bizarre estate unattended: whatever happened, George would need firsthand accounts.

So Marc kicked listlessly at the sand and tossed stones at the surf; Will sat against the cliff in deep thought; Cynthia stared into space with her empty, haunted expression; Jake tinkered with his camera, occasionally speaking into it; and Master Pana slowly paced back and forth, keeping an eye on each of the others.

The quiet was finally broken by a single sound: the padding of soft feet upon the sand. Master Pana heard it first. He was only mildly surprised to see an enormous wolf with shaggy brown fur and brown eyes padding toward the team. The other team members took notice of it one by one as it came closer.

"Nice outfit," said Master Pana dryly.

The wolf blinked once, made a curious head-bowing motion and stood up into Shrouded Wolf in a seamless metamorphosis that even the most fantastic cinematic effect could not equal.

"That's a nice trick," said Jake.

"Thanks, it's fun at parties," replied Wolf. "So, where is it?"

"We didn't get it! That jag in the cheap suit kept it!" Marc snarled.

"...you didn't get it?" Wolf said.

"Simon was unwilling to part with the idol--" Master Pana began.

Wolf cut him off. "Don't you understand how important this is? The Kad can't be left where some tyrant can come and take it!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Jake huffed.

"This can't wait any longer. If you won't take action, then I will!" Wolf turned and sprinted toward Simon's mock house.

"Wait! You don't--" Will called after him, but the mage had already raced to the edge of earshot.

"Let him go, Will," Master Pan said, laying a hand on the young man's shoulder. "This is not our fight anymore. Besides, the two men may reach a peaceful agreement on their own. I'm sure there is no need to panic."

A sudden growl from thin air made the team jump. It came from the same direction Wolf had. When the team looked they were confronted by the sight of a large, gray-furred wolf standing not ten paces away, watching them. Other wolves appeared around him, melting into view as so many others had that day, running past the first wolf to join their master. At first there were only a few, but in moments there were over a dozen and a heartbeat later more than two score. They hurried along, the absurd sight of a huge pack of wolves at the beach, leaving the big gray beta staring down the Lonely Winds. He left last after giving the team a final disdainful look. The once-pristine beach was now covered with paw prints. Angry howls filled the air.

"All right, I believe we can panic now," Master Pana said.

"Simon!" Wolf shouted. He stood a short sprint away from the mock house with his wolves falling in around him. His voice echoed off of the structure and the cliffs and resonated out over the sea. "Give me the Kad, or I'll take it by force!"

"Holy crap, would you stop yelling?" Simon complained as he stepped out of the house's front door onto the porch. Many of the wolves halted in their tracks, arched their backs and snarled at the sight of him.

"I'm not playing games here. Give me the Kad, now!" Wolf demanded.

"No, I think probably not," Simon said as he walked off the porch and boldly stopped within reach of the much bigger man. "I already dealt with your naïve friends. Did you really think I would just hand

over the most valuable object on the planet to them?”

“The Kad is an evil thing. It was made by demons and nothing good can come from it,” Wolf said.

“I suppose that’s my problem, then,” Simon retorted.

One of the wolves growled and was answered by a liquid rumble. Simon’s lions were appearing all around them, the magic that made them seem part of the ground where they rested fading as they stood and flexed and bared their fangs. Both groups of predators began a calculated dance of circling each other, punctuated with fearsome snarls.

“You’re not the only one with hired muscle here!” Simon laughed. “Your little friends understood that this is something bigger than any of them. I suggest you come to the same realization.”

Shrouded Wolf said nothing, only regarding Simon with the same steady gaze his wolves were giving the lions.

“As you like,” Simon said casually.

His lions sprang to the attack, lunging at the nearest wolves with claws extended. The wolves responded with equal ferocity. The quiet beach became an unreal battleground where the keystone predators of two foreign environments fought savagely at the behest of their masters.

A male lion struck a wolf dead with a crushing blow to the skull only to be dragged down when four others pounced on him at once while a fifth sank her teeth into one of his hind legs.

Two lionesses fought back to back, desperately keeping the ten wolves circling them from closing in.

One male wolf staggered away from a fight, half of one ear torn away and bleeding from long gashes down his flank. For a moment he swept the battlefield with his gaze, watching the slaughter of his kin and the sand running red with blood before collapsing.

Wolf and Simon waged a battle of their own. Wolf had drawn a huge sword with a broad blade of silver metal from within his robes. A quick enchantment had given the blade a green aura. Simon had no weapon of his own but directed a pair of lens-shaped shields of light that buzzed about in the air, defending him from Wolf’s furious attacks. Every time the sword struck a shield a brilliant flash of light filled the air. One such flash was many times brighter than any of the others and caused Wolf to stagger; when he did Simon created a sudden rush of wind that engulfed him in a torrent of sand.

When the miniature sandstorm cleared a moment later Simon was gone. Wolf held his sword at the ready and turned in place to look for his adversary, but instead saw only the ongoing butchery of wildlife forced to fight a battle that was not their own. His eyes came to rest on the fallen Beta and he rushed to the creature’s side. The Beta was dying, but when Wolf laid his hands on the animal’s wounds, the gashes closed, the ear stopped bleeding and the wolf stood up and ran to join his pack again.

“Give it up, you big palooka!” Simon’s called. He was standing on the edge of the roof of the house with one hand held out to his side, a swarm of fist-sized fireballs buzzing around above it.

“Stop this, Simon!” pleaded Shrouded Wolf. “This slaughter is meaningless!”

“Meaningless? Ha! You trespass on *my* turf, then beg for mercy when you’re losing? Your mutts are being hammered and you’ve only done minor damage to my pride!” The mage smiled at his own sick joke.

“I’m not leaving without the Kad.” Wolf bellowed. The aura around his sword flared to twice its original size.

“Have it your way.” Simon slung his fireball swarm at Wolf with a relaxed motion, as though he were tossing a water balloon. The fireballs screamed high-pitched whistles as they hurled toward Wolf, who raised his sword in their path. When they touched the aura of green energy they began to race around inside of it, trapped within. Wolf raised his sword with the fireballs still orbiting it above and behind his head, then swung it toward Simon with a furious cry. The fireballs burst from the sword’s aura and shrieked toward Simon.

“Oops,” he said and threw himself flat on the roof away from the edge an instant before the projectiles reached him. Half of the swarm struck the upper wall, blasting away chunks and scorching the wood, while the other half screamed away into open air and dissipated.

Simon cursed as he rolled to his side and pulled the Kad from his pocket. “This is one determined

bumpkin.”

“You could defeat him in open battle,” the Kad said.

“Of course I could, but I need to save my power. How long do I have before Terek Domar arrives?”

For once even Simon Carter, oracle extraordinaire, was caught off-guard. He had assumed that Terek Domar, who was active mostly at night, would arrive sometime in the evening. He expected to be given a period of hours before Ylelon’s ruler appeared and planned to calculate his strategy for fending off Wolf based on that. Thus, he was completely unprepared for the Kad’s answer:

“Seconds.”

Wolf was also considering his options. His mind raced, pondering courses of action as lions and wolves killed each other all around him. Though he was no novice, he knew he was not as skilled in magic as Simon. The fact that the seer appeared to be holding back also worried him. Part of Wolf felt that he should press his advantage for as long as it lasted, while another part pleaded for him to retreat before any more of his companions died. There was even a tiny voice in the back of his head that argued to press any advantage, even to burn the house with Simon atop it, in order to destroy the Kad, but the better portion of his nature quickly silenced it.

Seconds ticked past and Wolf made a desperate decision: he would expend the energy for a spell to reach the rooftop and bluff Simon, threatening him at sword point to end the slaughter and give up the Kad. He closed his eyes and shut out the hideous scene all around him while he focused. That was when the thunder came.

It was deafeningly loud, rolling for several seconds and echoing from the cliffs. Everywhere wolves and lions froze in place, some even stopping in the midst of biting each other. The thunder rolled away over the sea, replaced by an unnatural silence. Wolf chanced to look up, stumbled and fell backward at what he saw.

Terek Domar descended from the sky like a falling mountain and landed beside the cliff with an impact that shook the house and sent sprays of sand out from underneath his taloned feet. For one breathless moment the scene was still, with mages and carnivores staring up at the dragon, who glared down upon the whole scene with his baleful red eyes glowing and his fangs bared. Then he reared back his head and roared a challenge that made the ground tremble again.

Whatever enchantments or loyalties had kept the wild beasts holding their ground were instantly broken in the face of the dragon’s rage. Those that could still stand turned and fled, the battle forgotten. They raced on spurred by panic, leaving the wounded to fend for themselves and ignoring the enmity they had been fighting to the death over only moments before. A lioness and a she-wolf that had literally been at each other’s throats now sprinted side by side toward the horizon.

Even Wolf’s courage failed. His resolve to spare the world whatever evil might arise from the Kad’s use was no match for the power of the ancient terror towering above him and he knew it. He faced the horizon he had come from and lunged. When he touched the sand again it was with paws, not feet. As the great wolf he chased the scattering animals, never daring to look back as he fled. Within moments he was passing the Lonely Winds as they stood staring in horror at the scene behind him. Only Master Pana seemed to realize he was there. The venerable monster hunter exchanged glances with Wolf as he ran past, both fear and sorrow in his eyes. Then the mage was beyond the team and still running. With a thought he sent a mental summons to his wolves, calling them to join him again when they recovered their wits. As he chased the horizon wolfish tears ran from his eyes and fell to the sand.

“You honor me with your presence, lord!” Simon called up from his place on the roof. Terek Domar still loomed above him like a storm cloud, casting a huge shadow over the house and a battlefield strewn with the bodies of lions and wolves.

“Give up the Kad, Simon Carter,” the dragon rumbled in a voice laced with threat.

Simon made a mockingly low false bow. “Surely, my lord, there is some more suitable tribute you desire from me?”

Terek Domar settled forward onto his front legs. The house shook so violently that Simon nearly lost his footing.

“Enough games, merchant soothsayer!” the dragon roared. Furnace-like heat swept over Simon, carried on breath that blew his hair and suit jacket like a strong wind.

“Very well, my lord,” Simon chuckled. “I have only one thing I wish to say.”

Terek Domar narrowed one eye and looked askance at the tiny mage grinning up at him. “What?”

Simon shook his hands loose from his jacket pockets, raised them to frame his mouth and shouted at the top of his lungs: “Now, Cinder!”

From high above and behind Terek Domar the colossal silhouette of Cinder leapt from the cliff and plummeted, wings outstretched, toward the beach below. Terek Domar seemed to sense something was amiss, turned slightly and began to raise his head. Cinder fell upon him like an avalanche, landing squarely on his back and hammering one massive fist down on the elder dragon’s skull with a sound like two boulders crashing together. Terek Domar was driven into the beach so that half of his torso and all of his head was buried by settling sand.

Cinder didn’t waste a moment continuing his assault. He clawed and struck at Terek Domar’s back while great black wings buffeted him on both sides, until the elder dragon planted both forelimbs and hefted himself free of the ground. Sand fell from him in waves as Cinder toppled off of his back, only to roll smoothly up onto his hind legs.

Terek Domar quickly turned to face his adversary. Even where they watched in the distance the Lonely Winds could clearly see the two creatures of legend as they stared each other down, one shaded like wildfire, the other black as a nightmare. They could see one other thing: Jake had been right. Terek Domar was almost *twice* as large as Cinder. When he raised his great black wings in display of aggression he seemed to blot out the sky.

Now the dragons spoke to each other in what Jake could only suppose was their native language, exchanging phrases composed of words both beautiful and powerful. They began to circle each other slowly, the ground trembling at every step they took. Their words became harsher and more forcefully spoken. Cinder suddenly lashed out with a speed no creature so massive should be capable of and bashed Terek Domar in the jaw with a roundhouse punch hard enough to make him twist in place on the loose terrain, digging furrows in the sand with his claws. For a moment he held that position, turned away from Cinder with his eyes clenched shut. In that one instant Will dared to hope that the dragon was truly stunned, but then Terek Domar began to swing smoothly back around with deliberate force and struck Cinder square in the chest, hurling him backward into the cliffs. Shale and boulders broke free and rained down on his head and shoulders.

The fire dragon let out a furious bellow, shook much of the falling stone away with a violent shudder and exhaled a huge jet of flame back at Terek Domar. The fire engulfed the elder dragon where he stood his ground. When Cinder stopped exhaling several seconds later the flames cleared away, leaving only a handful of tiny fires that burned in Terek Domar’s very flesh in the narrow spaces between his scales. Terek Domar bared his teeth in an expression eerily like a grin and breathed forth his own gout of fire, larger and hotter than Cinder’s. The younger dragon bulled his neck and charged forward through the fire to plow into his enemy. They missed Simon’s house by a hair’s breadth as they grappled, still ablaze, toward the shoreline. Great billowing clouds of steam engulfed them as they plunged into the surf and the fires in their flesh were extinguished. Huge sprays of seawater like geysers were hurled into the air as the two ancient forces battled.

The Lonely Winds watched all this from their place by the rock wall. Wrenching silence gripped them as they beheld the terrible melee, for each of them understood in their own way that this bizarre day would have enormous ramifications for the future. So they watched, helpless bystanders to one of the most important conflicts in history.

“It’s...dreadful,” Master Pana finally said in a half-whisper. “George had told me what it was like to see Terek Domar fighting, but I never imagined...”

As if to drive the point home, Terek Domar gouged Cinder deeply across the chest with his enormous claws. Torrents of dragon blood, like liquid fire, gushed from the wounds and made the ocean

churn and steam as though it were magma.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Simon chuckled as he popped out of thin air between Master Pana and Cynthia. “We’re very lucky, you know. Two dragons fighting is something few people ever get to see. Not to mention we’re watching one of the cornerstones of future history taking place.”

“Are you *insane*?” Will blurted. “Is this what you *wanted* to happen? They’re tearing each other apart!”

“Birth pangs of a new world order,” Simon dismissed with a wave of his hand. “Besides, you can’t tell me that seeing the tyrant holding this nation in an iron grip getting the snot beaten out of him isn’t gratifying.”

“Just enough to distract from wondering if the new tyrant will be any better,” scoffed Jake.

“Why can’t you see what Cinder and I are trying to accomplish?” Simon asked.

“Cinder is trying to cause a worldwide revolution starting with a brawl to the death, you’re trying to make a chip selling information. It’s not hard to understand,” Will said.

Simon frowned and shook his head. “Fine, be that way. Me, I’m going to enjoy the show.” He took the Kad out of his pocket and held it out before himself. The idol was dancing now, furiously weaving on its tiny pedestal and making constant crinkling noises as it waved its body about in some provocative, forgotten tribal dance.

“Ha!” Simon nearly shouted. “Even she knows how important this is! Dance, little tin goddess, dance!”

“You’re crazy!” Marc snapped.

Simon stuffed the Kad unceremoniously back into his pocket. “Says you. I’m going back for a closer look. Ta ta!”

“You know,” Cynthia said with her half-awake flat tone, “knowledge of the future is only valuable if you can put it to good use.”

“I’ll remember that,” Simon said, and vanished.

“Well, this is just dandy,” groaned Jake. “Here we are, stuck watching the fracas, while that guy is losing his mind and still has the Kad.”

“Not quite,” Cynthia said. Ever so slowly, her distant expression melted into her characteristic self-satisfied smirk.

“What do you mean?” asked Will.

Cynthia knelt and brushed away a patch of sand at her feet. The turf was slightly looser there in a tiny hole, where Cynthia’s slender fingers found something and held it up for everyone to see: the Kad. The idol shook the sand from itself as it continued to dance, undistracted at having been completely buried.

“Cynthia!” Will exclaimed. “How did you get this?”

“I grabbed it mentally just before he took off. I couldn’t have done it if he were paying any attention to what was going on. I pulled the thing out of his pocket, dug the hole and buried it so he wouldn’t notice all the crinkling it’s making.”

“That’s brilliant!” Jake said.

Cynthia smiled. “Just being a team player.”

Simon again appeared atop his mock house where he indeed had a front-row view of the battle. Now both dragon’s bodies were criss-crossed with deep gashes and bite wounds. Here and there scales were missing in small patches where an impact had stripped them away, leaving raw, bleeding flesh beneath. The surf churned and boiled violently as streams of red and black dragon blood fell into the sea.

Presently the titans drew apart, just beyond striking distance. With eyes full of rage they regarded each other while they breathed like massive bellows from their pain and exertion. They spoke to each other in their native tongue and Simon was fortunate, for he was one of few people on the planet fluent in the language.

“This is your last and only warning!” Terek Domar said in words of rolling desert thunder. “Leave me the relic and abandon this land. I have claimed it as my own.”

“Your claim is null and void!” Cinder replied, his own voice like the roar of hot air above a forest fire. “You took this land in bygone days with natives who were as ants crawling at your feet, with no one to challenge you. Now *I* challenge you! This land is mine!”

“So be it!” bellowed Terek Domar.

The two dragons came together again with a crash that shook the very air. Now there was no holding back: both of the mighty creatures unleashed everything they had on each other. What the naïve mortals watching had assumed before was a serious conflict had merely been grandstanding. There was no restraint now, no posturing by either combatant in hope of intimidating the other. Jabs with mighty talons became vicious gouges: quick bites became crushing assaults that tore away immense chunks of flesh. It was a duel to the death unlike anything found in nature, between creatures with strength and vitality beyond anything else in the world.

Cinder lunged forward and tore a ragged gash in the arm of Terek Domar, who retaliated with a hammering blow to the skull that broke Cinder’s left horn with an echoing *crack*. They locked together and toppled into the surf. Gouts of fire, clouds of steam and bursts of sea spray billowed around them again.

Yet Simon cheered from his rooftop perch like a manic sports fan certain his team was on the cusp of victory. He screamed and danced around right up until a thunderous crash shook the air, a huge spray of seawater showered down upon the beach and Cinder landed like a huge bundle of rags on the ground by the house, barely missing it.

“Kenthis? What the hell are you *doing*?” Simon said.

Cinder shuddered in pain as he rolled onto his belly and began to stand again. “He is much stronger than I had anticipa--”

Terek Domar pounced on Cinder by leaping the entire distance from the surf to the house and tackled him to the ground again. Simon’s mock house shook like the flimsy edifice it was, throwing the mage onto his back and knocking the wind out of him.

“Something’s...wrong,” Simon gasped to himself as he struggled back to his feet. He reached into his pocket for the Kad and was horrified to find that it was gone. In near-panic he turned his will to teleporting away from the battle and was again horrified when nothing happened. Only then did he realize that Terek Domar was glaring down at him from high above, scrutinizing his every move even as he mauled the fire dragon he pinned to the ground. His eyes flashed, that eldritch flare that lit up the sky like blood-red lightning.

Simon wet himself.

“Anyone else think we should get the hell out of here?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, let’s move!” Will said.

“If you leave now, you will miss an event of great significance, both to history and for yourselves,” the Kad said in its dry, hollow voice.

“Quiet, you!” Cynthia snapped.

“No, wait.” Will moved closer to the Kad and studied it as it continued to dance on its pedestal in Cynthia’s hand. “What do you mean, ‘an event of significance’?”

“Hey! Simon’s in trouble! Jake said. He was watching the battle intently through his binoculars.

“What is happening?” asked Master Pana. Terek Domar was still pummeling Cinder. The two of them overshadowed the mock structure like a doll house.

“He’s trying to climb down from the roof!” Jake said. “I don’t know why he doesn’t just--ouch, he fell from the overhang. He’s got a limp now, I think he hurt himself.”

“Why’s he running?” Will thought aloud.

“He is very afraid,” said the Kad.

“No, I meant--” Will stopped in mid-sentence and hesitantly asked, “Why is he afraid?”

The Kad looked up at Will without stopping its dance. Will thought he saw the tiny features twist into a malicious smile.

“Because he knows that Terek Domar is going to kill him now.”

“I think we’ve seen enough,” Master Pana said. Will nodded and signaled the others to run. They sprinted as a group back up the beach along the cliff wall, hoping Terek Domar did not notice them.

Terek Domar had his mind on other things. Cinder continued to fight back desperately through the horrific wounds he had suffered. Muscles had been gouged, ribs laid bare, huge chunks of flesh torn away by teeth or burned away by dragon fire. Clumps of sand hissed and popped like hot grease and fused into twisted glass sculptures where fire dragon blood fell upon it.

Cinder lashed his tail upward and beat Terek Domar about the head with it. Terek Domar drove all ten foreclaws into his enemy’s chest, trying to pierce the heart and lungs. The fire dragon roared and flailed and raged against the foe that stood atop him, tearing the life from his flesh: the emperor dragon weathered the storm of assaults, shrugging off blows that would topple trees and shatter walls as he mercilessly barraged his opponent.

In a last-ditch effort Cinder exhaled a gout of fire, point-blank, into Terek Domar’s face. The ancient lord of Ylelon flinched away and shielded his eyes, giving Cinder just enough leverage to heave the larger dragon off of him and scramble to his feet. With a visceral roar he clamped his teeth onto Terek Domar’s neck just below the jaw line and dug his claws into his adversary’s side and back. For just a moment, he believed he had turned the tide of the battle.

Then Terek Domar’s massive elbow struck him soundly in the jaw, breaking it with a sickening *crack*. His vision blurred from pain, his grip loosening, Cinder shook his head to clear it, too late. Terek Domar pivoted and struck him with a backfist, hitting him dead in the chest harder than he’d ever been hit...almost harder than he thought it was possible to be hit. The blow sent him toppling backward into Simon’s house, demolishing it. Cinder raised his head with the last of his strength and cried out to the heavens a moment before Terek Domar drove the talons of one hand through the younger dragon’s skull and smashed it back down into the ruins of the house, silencing him.

Terek Domar inhaled deeply and breathed a long burst of fire into the wreckage. The fire dragon’s lower body, still protruding from the ruins, thrashed about wildly for several seconds before stopping with a last spasmodic jerk.

Simon felt the shudders of the battle in the ground as he fled. His ears rang from the roars of the beasts. His ankle was swollen inside his shoe, turning his flight into a loping stagger. Simon fled blindly, hoping that Cinder could keep the brute busy enough for him to escape the area of influence of the spell that had rendered magic useless so he could teleport to safety.

It was not until several seconds after the roars had stopped that Simon realized how oddly still the air had become. Now there were only rhythmic tremors in the ground, one for every several steps Simon managed to take. Resigning himself to his fate, the mage stopped his awkward flight and turned to face Terek Domar.

The dragon was walking at a pace so leisurely he might have been taking a casual stroll at the beach. His wings, tattered and bloody in a dozen places, were folded neatly along his sides. Black blood still flowed from the wounds all across his body and dripped onto the sand, where they left a long trail of small patches of liquid glass that spouted hissing trails of gray steam. Very few people on the planet could have properly interpreted the dragon’s facial expression, but Simon did and laughed bitterly to himself when he saw it: subdued irritation with a hint of curiosity.

“I’ve been such a fool,” gasped Simon. “I had all the answers and asked all the right questions, except the most important one.”

Terek Domar now overshadowed Simon. The diviner straightened his tie and did his best to stand without trembling.

“I don’t suppose it would do me any good to ask for amnesty,” Simon said.

With a deep growl Terek Domar raised one clawed foot and brought it crashing down upon the seer.

The team ran the entire distance back to their vehicles. They were quite out of breath when they

arrived: Jake actually fell to his knees and leaned against his car in exhaustion. Even Will looked unsteady.

“Oh, man,” Marc gasped, “I think...I’m gonna...throw up everything...I’ve ever eaten.”

“Steady on, big guy...aim for the ocean if you have to,” wheezed Jake. “I can’t believe that worked! How...did we manage to get away?”

“We don’t know that the dragon isn’t following us!” Will said.

“If Terek Domar were trying to catch us, I think we would know it by now,” Master Pana remarked dryly. “Is everyone good to drive?”

Tired nods all around.

“Then let’s do so. Quickly. We’ve tempted fate quite enough for one day.”

The first portion of the return trip was quiet and uneventful, yet the individual team members were quite tense. Jake reflected bitterly that watching the skies through rear-view mirrors while returning to the Mansion seemed to have become a trend for the team.

When the convoy was roughly a third of the way along the highway to the dirt road leading to the Mansion, G.R.’s frantic voice suddenly broke over the Jakecam™. “*Holy crap! Are you guys ok? What happened?*”

“G.R.?” Master Pana’s voice filtered over the network of Jakecams™ in the convoy. “*Did our signals just come back? Where’s George?*”

“*Call me Fierce,*” G.R. said irritably. “*George is in his Study. He locked himself in the moment your cameras went out.*”

“*Call them Jakecams™,*” Jake said proudly.

“*Whatever. I came back just now and your signals are all back.*”

“You ‘came back’?” Hasn’t anyone been on monitoring duty?” asked Will.

“*Yeah...sort of. George told me to watch the screens, but I kind of got bored watching blank monitors, so I went to the Library to do some research. Did you know that the Hengh Heyli were the only Yd tribe to practice cannibalism?*”

“*Yeah, that sucks, put George on, fatass,*” Marc growled.

“*Fine,*” G.R. snapped and the lines went quiet.

G.R. dashed out of the Situation Room and ran to the doors of the Study as fast as he could go. He noted with detached satisfaction that the daily morning workouts really were doing him a lot of good, as the run didn’t even leave him out of breath. At the same time he wondered absently just why the hell the place was so huge: in a building where almost every room was large enough to contain an ordinary house, just going from one room to another down the hall was a chore.

G.R. was so absent in thought that he nearly forgot to slow down in time to avoid slamming into the Study doors. He skidded to a stop within arm’s reach of the doors and began to pound on them relentlessly.

“George! George! Open up! The team’s back on the monitors!”

It took several moments of pounding before George answered. He looked even worse than he had before. His eyes were red as though he had been crying, and the smell of potent liquor hung around him in the air. “G.R.? The signal is back?” George spoke with a distant quality, as though he were half-asleep.

“My name is--oh, to hell with it. Look, I came back to the Situation Room a few minutes ago and the cameras are working again.”

“I thought I told you to stay in the Situation Room!” George’s voice had gone from distant to frightening.

G.R. took a step back, startled. “I just--I was just--”

“Never mind. We’ll talk later. There are more important things to deal with right nowNO PEEKING!” George roared as he stepped through the doors and slammed them shut behind himself. G.R. had only the briefest view of a room lined with bookshelves and a floor covered with notebooks and some kind of oversized scroll. Then the two were running back to the Situation Room.

Cynthia held the Kad in both hands as she rode in the passenger's seat of Will's car. When she had been in the Hengh Heyli catacombs the psychic miasma of the place had her afraid to even touch the Kad for fear of what she would see in it. As the day had worn on, however, something else about the relic had caught her attention. Cynthia's natural curiosity had quickly overridden her fear as her psychic senses revealed a unique property of the Kad: it had no aura.

An aura surrounded all physical objects as an invisible nimbus of psychic energy that reflected the properties and often, the history, of that object. Yet the Kad had no aura at all, no radiant colors and patterns that told of its nature. There was only an empty black abyss, a tremendous nothing that no amount of mental probing could pierce. To one who could perceive such things, the Kad was as impossible as a free-standing shadow in a brightly-lit room. The artifact that professed to speak the truth would not reveal its own truth to those that could literally see it.

Cynthia was wishing fervently that she could simply ask for an explanation when George's voice broke over the Jakecams™. *"How ya'll doin' today?"*

*"It's nice to hear your concern for our well-being in your voice, George,"* Jake said sourly.

*"I trust G.R. would have told me if any of you were hurt. Is there any information that should be imparted before you return?"*

*"We got the statue,"* Will said without any satisfaction.

*"I see. What of Simon?"*

*"Oh, man, is that ever a long story,"* moaned Jake.

*"Simon had an ally, a dragon,"* Master Pana explained. *"The two planned to lure Terek Domar into a trap using the Kad. Terek Domar appeared, killed them both and demolished Simon's house."*

*"Terek Domar arrived, yet you managed to procure and abscond with the Kad,"* George observed. *"My faith in you is well-placed."*

*"That last part was mostly Cynthia. She grabbed the thing with her telekawhatsit,"* said Will.

*"It's nothing,"* Cynthia said. No one realized she wasn't being modest.

As usual, George, G.R. and Sullivan were waiting for the team in the Foyer when they returned. The exhausted team members gathered in the enormous room and stared in uncomfortable silence at the Kad, still clutched in Cynthia's hands. The idol had long since ceased its dance and returned to its original pose, yet there was somehow an almost tangible sense of guile and menace about it.

*"What should we do with it?"* Jake finally asked. He was avoiding looking at it as much as possible.

*"We ask it for the winning lottery numbers!"* Marc blurted.

*"I know what we should do,"* said Will. *"Wait here, I'll be right back."* He ran up the stairs and down the hall toward his room. Moments later he returned with a familiar trinket in hand: the jeweled medallion Atla had given him the week before.

*"You're calling Atla?"* Jake and George said simultaneously.

*"I'm just making a point,"* Will said as he jogged to stand next to Cynthia. *"Marc, hammer."*

Marc looked from Will to George, hesitated, then opened his duffle bag, found a short-handled sledge and tossed it to Will with a visceral curse. Will caught the hammer with his free hand and held up the medallion.

*"I'm still not sure how this thing calls Atla,"* he said.

Immediately the familiar opaque image of Atla materialized in front of Will. He was facing away from any of the team members and holding his arms out before himself, apparently holding something in his concealed hands.

*"Look, sweetheart,"* he said in a demeaning tone, *"a minute ago it was twenty for the hour, so if you want fifty now you can kiss my--"*

He stopped abruptly and his hood turned from side to side. *"Hold that thought,"* he said to empty air and turned to face Will. *"Hello there! I understand the situation at the beach got a little sticky."*

*"You have a gift for understatement,"* Jake said coolly.

“And *you* have the Kad! Have you changed your mind? I can offer you a very reasonable price for it.”

“You’re not getting your hands on it,” said Will. “Cynthia?”

Cynthia stepped forward and set the Kad down between Will and Atla’s image. Atla’s hood shifted slightly: Jake guessed that he was looking from the idol to the hammer in Will’s hand.

“You can’t possibly intend to destroy it!” he cried.

“He does,” the Kad said.

“I told you earlier not to think we were stupid,” Will chided. “Are you really so totally wrapped up in your agenda that you think we’d ever let anyone have something as dangerous as this?”

“He is,” offered the Kad.

“Stuff it!” Will snarled. “You haven’t seen fit to explain to us what the hell is going on, but you’ll bargain, cajole, lie and trick to get us to be your patsies,” he said to Atla, sounding angrier than Cynthia had ever heard him. “You talk at us endlessly about how important it is for us to do whatever you say, yet we’ve never seen your “recommendations” have a positive result. Mostly, you just seem determined to piss off Terek Domar, which keeps coming back to bite you in the ass.”

“Terek Domar is a *monster!*” Atla nearly shouted. All of the usual cockiness and confidence had left his voice. “He destroys cities and slaughters thousands on whimsy!”

“Yeah, you keep telling us that,” Will said. “But you know something? When we’re out driving to and from the city every day, I have a lot of time to think. I’ve noticed that for all you shout about what a menace the dragon is, all we’ve ever seen him do is respond to things you and schemers like you do. Hell, he’s been in a position to *kill* us at least four times and the most he’s ever done is toy with us.”

George shuddered.

Atla raised one covered hand to his hood as if to rub his forehead in frustration. “We’ve been over this. Terek Domar is held in a stalemate because of *me*. It is *my efforts* that keep him from having free reign in Ylelon!”

“Yeah, that’s another thing,” Jake put in. “You’ve never really explained how that works. Just what kind of leverage do you have that the mighty Terek Domar, Destroyer of Armies, Bane of Wizards, Slayer of Small Fuzzy Woodland Creatures, can’t act freely with you around?”

Atla did not reply, but his apparition turned toward Jake. It was visibly shaking.

Will pointed his hammer at Atla again. “You presented yourself to us in the spirit of friendship, then tried to make us into your witless pawns. Maybe that’s acceptable to you mysterious hooded wizard types, but around here it’s considered *extremely* rude.”

“Preach it,” George muttered.

“Wait!” Atla shouted as Will knelt by the Kad and raised the hammer over his head. “The Kad is your only hope of discovering the truth! Without it, you will never know what is coming!”

“It will make no difference,” the Kad said mockingly just as Will smashed it into the floor. He crushed it repeatedly until it was a flattened piece of scrap.

“I coulda done that,” pouted Marc.

Atla’s image was still shaking with rage. “Damn you!” he spat, and vanished.

Will cried out suddenly and threw the medallion, still in his off-hand, to the floor. The gem was glowing with a fearsome intensity and for just an instant a thin wisp of smoke rose from it as it lay on the floor. Then the light flashed and went out, accompanied by a sharp *pop!* The wisp of smoke became an acrid cloud that reeked of hot chemicals. The gemstone, once of fine hue and luster, was now cracked and discolored, like glass broken in a fire.

“I’d say he’s a bit upset,” said Jake.

“Well?” Will said as he looked at George. “Aren’t you going to launch into a speech about how we shouldn’t be acting so impulsively, or how we should have trusted you when you first told us dealing with Atla was a bad idea?”

All eyes turned to George. Instead of retorting or beginning a long-winded reply, the old mentor merely smiled.

“I have never been prouder of you all than I am at this moment.”

“That was easily the most nerve-wracking experience of my life.”

It was late in the evening. The sun was disappearing behind the horizon. George and Master Pana were walking the Manor grounds. The team had long since conferred in the Situation Room, given detailed reports and retired for the evening, leaving their mentors to ponder the possible consequences of the day.

“Facing Simon?” George asked.

“All of it,” Master Pana replied. “Being so close to a relic with so much historical meaning for my people...yet, one that could have ruined everything with a simple answer to any of a hundred wrong questions.”

“Yes, think of the future blockbusters it could have spoiled the endings of.”

“I’m serious, George!” Master Pana said in a rare overt display of anger. “Today was far too close a call, even by our standards.”

“You think I don’t know that?” George said. “Do you think for one *instant* that this hasn’t preyed upon my thoughts since the moment I saw that newscast this morning?”

“I’m sorry, my friend. I forgot myself.”

“It’s all right,” George muttered. “I shouldn’t have bitten your head off. I’m...it’s just...I’m so damn tired of feeling helpless all the time! I’m so fed up with petty tyrants and their games!”

Master Pana nodded. “What can Atla be thinking? The *risks* he took today...”

“Atla is beyond overconfident. He’s come to believe that his leverage is worth more than exactly enough to not get himself killed at any given moment. When the time comes, that miscalculation is going to have consequences.”

“Do you think it will come to that?”

“I think by now, it is inevitable.”

“What of Wolf? We had not heard from him in so long I had all but forgotten about him.”

“As is so often the case, Wolf’s actions were misguided, but he meant well. I think he might have tried to help even if he’d had the faintest idea what is really going on.”

“If he did, he’d probably only get himself killed.”

“Quite true.” George didn’t even blink.

“So what do we do now?”

“The same damn thing we always do!” George threw his hands into the air in frustration. “The same hopeless losing proposition that we’ve been in for longer than I care to think about. We wait. We wait for someone else to make a move and hope it’s one we can counter.”

“The coming days will be difficult,” Master Pana said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Will you be able to join us for some extensive training in the next few days? I think we’re going to need all the conditioning we can get.”

“Of course. I will call the studio tomorrow and have Master McCoy and Master Cole take over my sessions. Will you be making a journal entry tonight?”

George looked up at the stars, which were veiled in places by jagged wisps of cloud blowing in from the ocean on their way to nowhere.

“Yes. A very long one.”

## Epilogue

The Arbiter leaned back in his chair, popped a grape into his mouth and sighed heavily. More bad fights, more crowd boredom. Things would inevitably pick up as winners of undercard fights worked their way toward main events, but the meantime remained increasingly disappointing. Of late the Arbiter's thoughts turned more and more frequently to pondering the benefits of retirement, but that felt too permanent a solution for temporary boredom. Perhaps Stillwater or another subordinate could be recruited into managing the lesser fights.

As these thoughts ran through the man's mind a knock sounded at the doors. The Arbiter absently signaled for a nearby servant to answer the knock and returned his attention to the fight.

The servant grasped the door handles, began to push the doors open and was hauled forward off of his feet as the doors were yanked outward. The booth attendants, guards, and the Arbiter all turned in time to see the outside guards' limp forms hurl through the door, with a furious Nails storming over the threshold behind them.

When the booth guards raised their halberds, Nails grabbed a pewter flask from the table and beamed one man with it, then picked up the table itself and swatted the other defender, flinging him against the back wall amidst a hail of scattered foodstuffs.

"What is the meaning of--" The Arbiter's question was truncated as Nails flashed to his side, seized a handful of robe around his neck and slammed him against a side wall with bone-rattling force.

"You *slime!*" he shouted so loudly that the fans in the five rows nearest the booth looked toward it. "You vicious little bastard!"

"Have I...done something to displease you?" wheezed the Arbiter.

Nails punched the wall beside the Arbiter's head, cracking the gray stone. "I just spent six hours fighting non-stop to keep a small child from being killed by your funhouse! Did you think it was funny to lock us in that room? Is this your idea of entertainment?"

"Would you be referring...to this small child?" the Arbiter gasped and snapped his fingers. Mia popped out of nowhere next to Nails.

"Mister, were are Mommy and Daddy?" she said, exactly as before.

"What the hell is this?" Nails growled. He let go of the Arbiter, who dropped heavily onto his feet. "I left her with her tribe. The ones in the program, I mean."

"She isn't real, you oaf," the Arbiter said around a short coughing fit. "She's a simulacrum I had put together." He snapped his fingers again and "Mia" vanished. "Don't look at me like that! You said your training felt empty, so I gave you something to fight *for*. You're one of those altruistic types that needs to be fighting for some good cause. Think back to how you managed when you thought you were protecting a helpless girl from a small army. Are you proud? Did you make use of every attribute and bit of skill you possess to successfully defend a fragile life?"

Nails looked from the Arbiter to the floor and back, very slowly. "...yes."

The sound of tromping boots filled the hall outside the booth. In seconds a small platoon of Pit guards filed into the room and took aim at Nails, but they lowered their arms at a signal from the Arbiter.

"You came here to learn to be a warrior. If you want to play around, then keep wasting time with weaklings. If you want to become a warrior, start learning how to *fight!*"

Nails stared thoughtfully into space for a long moment. Then he gave the Arbiter a last reproachful look, turned and marched toward the exit. As he went he weaved around the watchful guards, some of whom were attending the fallen men, who were only moderately shaken. He went without stopping back to his room with a look on his face that made others scurry to keep out of his way. When he had returned to his quarters he went directly into the White Room and slammed the door behind himself.

"Ward!" he shouted before the door's seams had even finished fading from sight.

"You rang?" Ward appeared on Nails' right and flashed a grin.

"I'm continuing the training," said Nails. "Do you have any programs for where I'm from?"

Ward's expression shifted to one of thoughtful consideration. "Ylelon, Rond? Only a few basic scenarios, but I could customize them for you."

“Fine. Give me a hard one.”

“Hard for *you*? In Ylelon?” laughed Ward. “Care to take on the Harbor Storms in their training grounds with gunships overhead?”

“Not that kind of hard. I want...give me people. I need to be protecting people.”

Ward instantly vanished and was replaced by a landscape both alien and familiar. It was a Yd village in the rocky southern expanses of Ylelon, set atop a modest plateau. Yd tribesfolk cowered in the ragged hide huts, mostly children and elderly members. In the distance, just visible through the glare of the scorching desert sun, an immense dust cloud stood against the horizon.

“What’s happening?” Nails asked loudly. The scenario was so perfect it was disorienting: the heat, the smell of the air, the frightened crying of the tribe’s children--all were so perfectly rendered that it was easy to forget that none of it was real.

Slowly, an old man with a pronounced limp emerged from a nearby hut and shambled to Nails’ side. He stood looking at the dust cloud in the distance, apparently unconcerned that a pale-skinned giant had materialized in his home.

“The Whites are coming,” he said. “Our strong fighters were to wait in ambush for them at the cliffs. They must have failed. Only the invaders’ riding-beasts make so vast a trail. When they arrive, they will kill the old and the very young and take our young women as their own.”

Nails looked from the cloud on the horizon to the interior of a nearby hut. There an old woman crouched in the shadows, cradling a girl of perhaps fourteen and a terrified boy no more than five.

“No, they won’t,” Nails said. He stooped and picked up a large stone, stood again and squeezed until it cracked into several pieces. “I won’t let them.”