

ZORK :

Zylon the Aged

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“The royal dynasty founded by Entharion the Wise ruled the Kingdom of Quendor and its seven and a half provinces for almost seven hundred years, spanning the majestic reigns of fourteen benevolent monarchs. Perhaps the most memorable of these kings was Zylon the Aged, noteworthy chiefly for his eternally young appearance and astounding longevity. Born in the impossibly distant era before the creation of Quendor itself, Zylon rose to the throne in the year 55 after the passing of Mysterion the Brave.

The king lists of Quendor calmly note that Zylon’s reign lasted nearly three and a half centuries, swallowing half of the Entharion Dynasty, before Zylon’s mysterious death in 398 AE. History has granted us very few precious details about the earlier centuries of the Kingdom, and to this day the causes of Zylon’s death are still shrouded in mystery.”

-Bilmum Foobar, quoted from A History of Early Quendor

“Thou shalt worship the Great Brogmoid to thine utmost, for upon his shoulder rests the world - thus he saveth us from plunging into the Great Void.”

-Noted Brogmoidist cleric, circa 396 AE

Zylon the Aged

Book One

“And that great dragon was cast down, the ancient serpent, he who is called the devil and Satan, who leads astray the whole world; and he was cast down to the earth and with him his angels were cast down.”

-The Ninth Scroll of Kar'nai, Book Twelve

There is a horrible darkness in his soul. Desperation. Fragmented anger and pain. For uncountable ages he has waited, the bitterness and frustration building up inside of him. His hands are burned from the heat of the knowledge he has tried to seize, and he bleeds endlessly from eight great wounds. This unbearable torture feeds his rage, and in hatred he recalls his past. Once he stood free of pain, high amongst the powers of the universe, second only to The One.

Even the Implementors, the mighty creators of many worlds, once respected and loved him. Mortal tribes in all lands spoke his name as part of the prayers to the ancients. He made his mark upon the universe, playing a part in the shaping of the beasts. While other powers rejoiced in the making of the dryads and of the elves, it is said that he took pride in the horrible monsters of the underground. The grue he fashioned with his own hands, loving this evil beast above all others. From him also sprang the troll, the hellhound, the dragon. It was in these vicious, angry creatures that he took his pleasure, and for ages he basked in the glow of his creations.

However, as the years passed, his pride grew strong, and he sought to overthrow the one true power. Rising up in challenge he shook the foundations of the mighty Timeless Halls. The ensuing struggle was to become legendary among the peoples of the earth below. The heavens shook with power, and finally he was thrown down to earth as a flash of lightning from the sky. Now he roams the earth in disguise, banished eternally from his home. He seeks the minds of those who will accept him, of those who are weak and willing subject themselves to him, and his presence is revealed by the deeds of angry, spiteful men. The great city-state of Pheebor brought itself to ruin, falling to conflicts generated by his hatred, working its way into the hearts of men. Only a few years ago, he stood at the heart of a deadly plague that shook the kingdom of Quendor. Now he seeks to make his presence known once again.

He is no longer content with his role in this world. Deep inside his mind smolders a need to return to his home, to the Timeless Halls. The traditional ways are blocked to him, for The One's power is too strong. He knows instead that the humans of ages gone by once had great knowledge. It is said that certain books of lore contain the secrets of the Timeless Halls. To this end he gathers his forces, casts out his mind upon the vastness of Quendor, and waits. Soon the answer presents itself. As he probes the insignificant minds of the mortals before him, he finds several that might be of service to him. One, a servant of the king. Another, a librarian. A vicious tribe of Kovalli natives. A descendant of princes. All of these were of little importance to the world before today. Now, they become the key to the events that are about to unfold.

Darkness, long forgotten to all, is rising again to force a final conflict. It has been much too long since his name has been praised. He longs again for the cumulative aura of fear, his faithful bowing in awe of his might. He longs again to hear the refrain of ancient prayers. He longs again for the speaking of his name. Belegur.

Belegur, the fallen god. He walks among the streets of Quendor. He hears the cries of rebellion rising in Mareilon. Reaching out with his mind, he touches those who are of interest to

him. The librarian, the insignificant mortal, has come to consume his thoughts. He knows of the truths that Belegur desires. An old tome, among the oldest volumes in a dusty collection, containing veiled hints at the true path to the Timeless Halls. For centuries, human scholars have attempted to decipher these words, and have failed. Belegur knows, however, that the words will have meaning to him, and he needs them for the power they will bring. To obtain them, he will do what needs to be done.

The weak-willed, he knows, the spineless. They fall easily into his grasp, minds bending to the shape of his evil. It is an old trick, he knows, one he has practiced often. In fact, there is one in Castle Largoneth that he controls in just that way. With a quiet surge of raw will, a well-placed suggestion can lead to action, and soon those who let Belegur into their minds are his inescapably. Surprisingly, the librarian is not one of these. It seems that his heart is pure; no stray thoughts exist to feed this beast that desires control over his mind.

Soon Belegur moves away from the librarian, searching the souls of others nearby. The librarian has told him what he needed to know. Rumors of the book he seeks have proved to be true, and now he knows where his final answer lies. Galepath, the City of Wonders. And he knows already that there is one in Galepath who will serve him, who will bring him what he needs. Soon the book will be his, and he will begin the long road back to the Halls he once roamed.

In preparation for that day, certain precautions must be taken. The king at Largoneth is strong. He is unimaginably old, and yet his eternally healthy body and spirit have held Quendor together for centuries. His name is Zylon, and Belegur knows that no earthly force exists that could overcome a united Quendor behind King Zylon. At first, the evil Belegur had hoped to avoid Zylon altogether. After all this affair was simply a struggle between the powers of heaven, and a mere mortal deserved no say in the matter. However, it soon became apparent that dragging the insignificant humans into the affair would be unavoidable. Any magic powerful enough to open a path to the stars would be detectable even by the amateur wizards at Largoneth, and steps would have to be taken to ensure that they were too preoccupied elsewhere to interfere in affairs that lay far over their heads.

But how to accomplish this? Yes... he knows now. There is one in Mareilon who has come of late to wield much power. A rogue, an outlaw, he dwells in Mareilon's darker districts, gathering the forces of the street gangs in that city. He plans to seize control of Mareilon, regaining power once held by his long dead ancestors. With Mareilon under this man's thumb, a bloody conflict with the king would become almost unavoidable. All of the provinces of Quendor and even Largoneth itself would become threatened by this man's power. Such unrest has been unheard of for over three-hundred years, and even the undivided attention of every royal advisor, general, and meddlesome mage would be hard-pressed to stop the violence. Belegur knows that the beauty of this plan lies in its unfailing simplicity. The renegade of Mareilon has been lying in wait for years, plotting his rise to power. Belegur will not even be required to interfere with his thoughts. He will merely watch contentedly, as the renegade "prince" does his dirty work for him.

And Zylon the King. If a civil war does not distract him sufficiently, a deadly illness certainly will. Yes, he has taken this precaution too. The power of life and death is no longer his to command, taken from him after his fall from grace, but others have been found, willing to do the work for him. Soon the powers of the world will be thrown into confusion. His act of thievery will go unnoticed, and so much will be his.

So much... even... yes! He remembers something else now. From the depths of his mind comes a forgotten vision of power. Belegur knows that the scrolls he seek contain great secrets. Even he had forgotten how much there was to be gained. Filling his soul with anticipation, he thinks of the very sources, the foundations of the universe. He conjures up an image of a collection of plain white cubes. These cubes were laid down by The One at the beginning of time, and it is rumored that the knowledge of their locations, while hidden from Belegur, was imparted to the earliest humans. If he could gain those cubes... how greatly it would ease his struggle. Without the cubes in his possession, Belegur faces a difficult fight opposing one who has already vanquished him once. With the cubes... how simple it would be.

How simple it would be.

“My patience is now at an end.”

-An obscure prehistoric dictator.

The crowd was growing restless. For hours the throng had waited at Beeblebrox Square to hear the news. Rumors running around the city spoke of an important leader whose speech today would mean the start of great things for the city of Mareilon.

Some spoke of a religious prophet who would lead the city and the world to a new enlightenment. Others anticipated the coming of a revolutionary prince who would restore Mareilon to its former place in the sun. Still others waited in the square out of mere curiosity. The last major war had ended decades ago, plague and pestilence had been defeated by magic, and the people were growing bored. After all, there is nothing like a revolutionary firebrand to make life interesting. It hardly mattered that no one gathering in the square really knew who or what they were waiting for, merely that something was indeed going to happen. That much was apparent from the cloud of commotion that had been hanging over Mareilon for several weeks now.

The local printing guilds had been working overtime publishing fliers and pamphlets of all kinds, often in open defiance of direct orders from the city government. No one in Mareilon knew exactly who was behind all the fliers, but it was suspected that some secret organization was working out of one of Mareilon's poorer districts. These new publications were almost never circulated near the houses of ruling class, but in the common markets and the back alleys, every wall was lined with posters that screamed out words of unrest. Initially, about three weeks ago, the posters had been few, and vaguely worded. As the days passed, more and more publications appeared, with each new set aimed at a different type of person. Some cried out against the miserable social conditions that existed in certain areas of Mareilon. Others, targeted specifically at the local religious communities, pointed out the multitude of ill-omens that have come from the gods over the last weeks. Then one night, without warning, all those posters were taken down and replaced with a simply worded proclamation: “Beeblebrox Square, 12 Oracle 398, Noon.”

This time the notice was put up everywhere in the city, even near the mansions of the nobles. By the end of the day the entire city was consumed by one conversation.

-Have you heard the news? There's going to be a rally on the 12th.

-What sort of rally?

-They say the Prince has come back to Mareilon to reclaim his crown.

A nervous chuckle follows.

-But there isn't a Prince any more. Everybody knows that. (Pause) You're not going to this rally, are you?

-Of course I am. Aren't you?

And so the news spread. Those who had managed somehow to ignore the poster itself could not help but be caught up in the resulting excitement. As news of the rally made its way from person to person, it began to take on a life of its own, growing and changing in unpredictable ways. The Prince became a King, and some even said that Zylon himself was coming to Mareilon. Soon the King became a priest completing a grand pilgrimage to spread the word of the Great Brogmoid. By the arrival of the morning of the 12th, seemingly every man, woman, and child in Mareilon was preparing to make their way to the great Beeblebrox Square, each with a different set of expectations.

Some, however, would stay away from the Square for reasons of personal safety. Hegilburg for instance, Mayor of Mareilon, had it on good authority from his own personal spies that it would be wise to keep a distance from the heat of the action on the day of the 12th. At first the mayor had been indignant at the very idea.

It was, after all, HIS CITY. He could very well come and go as he pleased. For quite some time he had held fast to this notion, and only endless persuasion on the part of his advisors had finally torn him away from the idea of attending the meeting. Hegilburg's men pointed out that in all likelihood whoever had announced the occasion was up to no good. The rally had not been cleared through any of the proper channels, and it would hardly look good for the mayor himself to make an appearance at a gathering that should not even be taking place.

And, they pointed out, what if the crowd grew unruly?

Unruly? asked the mayor. Why, there will be guards, won't there?

Sir, they replied, you know the sheer base desires of these soldier-types. Drunkenness, debauchery, rebellion. This has always been their lot. Would you rather depend on them, much too close to the people, or depend on your own strength?

The mayor nodded in agreement at that last statement, remembering an incident of some years past, during the time of his predecessor. Mareilon was groaning under the agony of what would be one of the last food riots of the Great Famine. The previous mayor had given a direct order to the city guards to curb the riots, only to find out later that they had helped to instigate them. The resulting tension between the mayor and the guards had never successfully healed.

So at last Hegilburg was convinced that it would be wiser to spend the day of the 12th at home in the mayoral mansion. Opting for the vicarious approach, he chose the select few of his men that he considered trustworthy, and ordered them to attend the rally. They were told to bring back any information they could gather: who was behind the event, what were they attempting, and how much was it going to cost the mayoral coffers to halt them?

In all likelihood, the mayor reasoned, the entire event was merely a carefully calculated prank. After all, many of the posters that had been appearing of late bore some decidedly mixed messages, and could conceivably be the work of some very secretive jokester. Mayor Hegilburg fully expected the twelfth of Oracle to pass without event, or even if this proved not to be the case, the rising of the sun to its highest point in the sky would bring the arrival of a merry band of jugglers and clowns, ready to make a killing at the expense of an excitement-starved crowd.

So hoped the mayor, but in truth he was the only man in Mareilon who dared entertain such foolish thoughts. Everyone else within a dozen bloits of Beeblebrox Square was looking forward with either enthusiasm or dread to what might prove to be one of the most memorable events in recent history. What did the entire population of Mareilon have in common that they did not bother to share with their mayor?

For years, Hegilburg had held the title of mayor, ostensibly governing the city from his official residence at the Firstone Manor. In reality, the mayor himself played very little part in the actual functioning of the city bureaucracy. Petty civil servants overtaxed the poorer parts of the town, malicious mailmen pillaged the postal coffers, and the price of food was kept obscenely high by a closely-knit group of tradesmen looking out for their own interests. All of this of course went on without the mayor having the slightest notion that anything at all was amiss. His select group of advisors did their best to make sure that he was not actually advised at all, that in fact he was kept deliberately out of touch with the true situation in Mareilon.

Now, of course the true situation in Mareilon was not horrible, by any stretch of the imagination, but it was undeniable that certain of the mayor's closest confidants had a vested

interest in ensuring that no sweeping reforms came about in city government. The end result of this corrupt political situation was a populous that was suffering just enough to be angry at the system, but was also just prosperous enough to be able to do something about it. It was with this economic paradox in mind that certain of the city's more disreputable underworld figures organized the rally at Beeblebrox Square.

Just to the south of where the actual event was scheduled to take place, in the heart of the notoriously crime-infested and run-down Millucis District, political excitement and tension were surging to heights unequalled since the days of the abortive Frobbish Revolution, 296 years ago. In those days, when the oldest graybeards could still remember the wars with Galepath and the creation of the Kingdom of Quendor, dissatisfaction with the new regime was foremost on the minds of many who lived in the Millucis. It was after all undeniable that the first mayor had been granted the title only after the city of Galepath and the new king Entharion had forcibly deposed the rightful ruler of Mareilon, Prince Argonel.

Strains of disconnect and resentment of the mayor were still alive and well in the time of Hegilburg, and one conversation overheard by the mayor's spies serves to capture the situation quite well.

"What was it you said earlier, Gezlin, some rumor about the prince returning, after all these years?"

A booming, deep voice sounded out the reply. "Not THE prince, fool. One of his descendants. At least that's what I heard, and there ain't no reason not to believe it."

"But why all the excitement? So he's a descendant of Argonel. What of it? He has no place here any longer."

Gezlin snorted his contempt at this last remark and strained his neck to look up at the frail blond man on his left. "No place here? Man, are you dreaming, or something? You the one who makes a living outta writing articles trashing the mayor. Now you say the prince got no place here? I don't get you."

The blond, Ettlwhiff by name, smiled slowly, the lines around his lips giving direct testimony to his age. "Friend," he replied wisely, "you are right that change would benefit this city, perhaps more than you yourself realize, but what you ask for is violent revolution, and that will never be the answer."

Quickly the reply came, betraying a hint of Gezlin's deep frustration. "And why the hell not? The only reason you ain't head over heels for a revolution is cuz every night you can go home to that damn mansion of yours, all safe and warm on the far side of the city. You got no sense of the pain, the anger here. Down in the Millucis, the city don't treat us any better than some week-old grue feed. You don't understand what it's like."

"And you think this impostor prince is the answer to your problems? You will simply be trading one despot for another."

"What makes you so damn sure he's an impostor? If he is a descendant of the last prince, he can not only lay rightful claim to this city, but finally overthrow the tyrant at Largoneth."

Ettlwhiff's eyes widened in surprise at his companion's description of the aged King Zylon as a tyrant. The word seemed absurd in reference to a man who had ruled Quendor with a benevolent loving hand for longer than anyone could remember. His attention was soon diverted to other matters, however, as he heard the far edges of the crowd begin to stir.

"Rightful prince or not, he approaches."

And it was true. Even from across the great expanse of Beeblebrox Square, Gezlin, Ettlwhiff, and the hundreds surrounding them could just now begin to make out a line of figures

approaching the area up Belfar Avenue from the southern edges of the city. Those closer to where the Avenue spilled out onto the Square itself could already distinguish between the two or three-dozen people that were marching intently towards the site of the rally. The core group leading the way was easily recognizable as the highest powers in the Nightwings, one of the fiercest street gangs ever to roam the Millucis.

These Nightwings, boasting over a hundred tried-and-true fighting members, competed with the Hellhounds for control over the shadowy and tenuous underground world that thrived in the lesser parts of Mareilon. The Wings themselves were a relatively new phenomenon, having only just reached the tender age of five years in existence. No one could dispute that the founders of the organization, who were now marching at the head of a proud column into Beeblebrox Square, had put those short years to good use. In no time at all the Hounds, an established gang going back years before most could recall, found themselves scrambling to make up ground that vanished when the Wings came storming onto the street scene. Just a few weeks ago, the nervous tension of Mareilon's crime world reached a fascinating peak as rumors abounded about a change of power at the top of the Nightwings' basic structure. Official word from the bartenders and thieves of the area spoke of an outsider quickly grasping for control of the gang, pushing out all those who had held the reins before. Who this strange newcomer might be, no one could tell. Certainly not a typical streetfighter, whispered conversations told of his natural intelligence and charisma, necessary to take what he wanted from the Nightwings.

To those standing at the edges of the Square, it soon became apparent that this mysterious new gang leader was also responsible for the event that found everyone gathered in that one place, waiting in anticipation. As the elite core of the Nightwings marched out from Belfar Avenue and began clearing a human corridor to the center of the Square, the focus of a seemingly endless amount of recent rumor strode confidently into view. With a disappointed sense of the highly anticlimactic, those in the crowd who stood closest to the new arrival peered scrutinously at the short, scrawny-looking dark-haired man before them. Dressed in tattered brown leathers, a dirty cap, and horribly worn boots, he looked like any number of street beggars that could be found lurking in the Millucis, and seemed to add an odd comic touch to the whole mysterious affair as he unobtrusively shuffled along after half a dozen gang members who couldn't act unobtrusive if their lives depended on it.

A rumble began to stir the crowd as an odd realization began to settle in. Many had left work, abandoned the usual routine at the marketplace, even stumbled from the local taverns to find out what all the fuss was about, and to see that it was this... He looked so common. Soon the irony began to hit them however, as they chuckled at the fact one so seemingly unimportant could command the resources to summon the mass of thousands that stood there today. Clearly there was more to this man than met the eye, and that feeling was only reinforced by the remainder of the contingent that marched into the Square after him. Filling up the human corridor that now stretched to the center of the crowd marched boldly forth some of the most important and noteworthy public figures ever to have lived in Mareilon.

First among this group came Hembiz, a robust, chuckling man easily recognizable as the so-called King of the Marketplace. Through carefully created and maintained connections, Hembiz had gradually come to control all business that went on from day to day in Mareilon's sprawling open-air market, from the countless legitimate food vendors to the clandestine groups of teenage pickpockets that also made a living in the area.

The eclectic procession of demonstrators continued with the first woman of the group, Poulizre, owner of one of the oldest and most influential printing presses in the city. As editor of

a major Mareilon newsheet, her words were read by nearly every citizen who could spare the few zorkmids needed to buy her weekly issues. In years past, her words had even reached as far as the ears of the previous mayor. However, what had seemed to many to be an inevitable rise to power through those channels had been thwarted by a mysterious feud with the city's Chief Historian.

Since time immemorial, perhaps as far back as the misty days before the coming of Entharion himself, the matter of preserving the past and treasuring the knowledge of history had always held a peculiar importance to the people of Mareilon. Strictly secular historians would argue that there was no practical purpose for this obsession with history, and would also point out that it simply had its roots in one of the primitive religions that once flourished in Mareilon. Before the rising of the cult of the Great Brogmoid, most Mareilon natives gave praise to the dead, their ancestors who had gone before them. A certain amount of respect was deemed due to those who had already walked the path of life, and suffered through all that this world had to offer. Over the years, the official post of Chief Historian became one of the relics of this now distant belief. The Historian's job of organizing genealogical knowledge and valuable historical documents had gradually developed into one that enjoyed an incredible amount of prestige, held over from the days of the cult of the dead.

It was the present Chief Historian that had in some way once been angered by the journalist Poulizre. One word from him to the previous mayor had been sufficient to end her role in city government. No plausible explanation ever came to the surface.

But lo and behold, the crowd whispered. Who marches behind Poulizre?

It is. The Chief Historian himself. Ezkinil, old and frail, yet still mighty, Ezkinil. Rumor told of his ongoing battle with a certain illness, and the fact that he had not been spotted outside his own home in over a year. And yet there he stood, walking slowly, calmly toward Beeblebrox Square, following a group of rough gang members, an unknown political and/or religious activist, and the woman who had once been one of his greatest enemies. The mysterious, scruffy man marching ahead of him must have great powers of persuasion indeed, to heal a rift as legendary as that between Ezkinil and Poulizre, the two rivals who had been peering at each other angrily from opposite ends of Mareilon for over two decades.

Following along at the heels of this remarkable trio strutted a Millucis native not easily recognized, but powerful enough in his own right. As the group approached the center of the meeting place, Gezlin, who was watching the proceedings with great interest, gasped at the site of this particular participant in the event. Mimb was his name. Tall and dressed in a sleeveless leather vest, he sported a battered and vicious looking stiletto hanging from his belt. Carved into his muscular left shoulder was a snarling, ravenous hellhound, nearly identical to the tattooed hellhound that also appeared on Gezlin's left shoulder. This symbol told of gang affiliation, loudly proclaiming alliance to the Hounds and crying for death towards any member of the hated Nightwings.

And yet there was Mimb, one of Gezlin's own Hound companions, stepping proudly forward in a line headed by half a dozen Nightwing leaders. Something odd had taken place. Thinking quickly, more quickly than he was apt, Gezlin recalled Mimb's absence of late from several Hound activities, and his unusual growing obsession with political affairs. What was the meaning of all this? Mimb had defected, joined the enemy gang, and all because of that man there in front, that silly-looking bum.

These were odd times indeed.

The procession began to come to a halt as the Nightwing bodyguards formed a semicircle along the edges of a clumsy wooden platform that had been erected in the center of the Square. Walking slowly, almost majestically up the stairs to the platform, the short, dark-haired man that seemed to be the center of the event calmly surveyed his audience. Peering out from sharp, brilliant eyes, he took stock of the thousands before him, noting their confused and suspicious glances, patiently absorbing their indifference. Glancing quickly from side to side, his hungry mind began to calculate the many ways in which this audience could be molded, sculpted, created into the mass that would soon follow him to his destiny.

Feeling the rhythm in the heartbeats gathered before him, he waited for just the right moment and then began to speak.

And his voice... his voice.

It moved slowly, with power and yet also with a grace commanding respect. Lying deep within the tired and dirty shell he used for a body rested a beautiful sound, a sound that he put to use now, to reach out to the crowd and wipe away all their doubts.

“People of Mareilon,” he sang, “the end of the Kingdom of Quendor is at hand. Behold! I am called Zarfil. I hail from the house of Iligith, my father’s father who was the rightful and only descendant of the last Prince Argonel of Mareilon. From this day forth let it be known that I now stake my claim to the throne of Mareilon, that was my ancestor’s. I cry out against the Mayor that now resides in the house that is mine, and I demand his resignation in favor of a regime that will bring about immediate and unconditional secession from the accursed league with the bastard city Galepath and its puppets that rule from Largoneth. I repeat: the end of the Kingdom of Quendor is at hand.”

Pause. Let them absorb all that. Maybe it was too much to come out with on the first day. Well, all the cards have been played now, for better or for worse. See what happens.

What happened next was something completely unexpected, perhaps even to Zarfil himself, who had spent his entire soul on the phrases just spoken. Slowly, in isolated sections of the crowd, scattered applause broke out. One or two clapping hands broke the stunned silence, and soon the enthusiasm became contagious. The crowd came alive, screaming its support for a newfound political idol. In less than a minute Zarfil had transformed himself from a scraggly street bum into a messiah. The applause came first from Zarfil’s own supporters, the ones who had marched with him, but soon nearly every spectator joined in.

Among these was Gezlin, who had just barely overcome his confusion about the apparent treachery of his comrade Mimb. After hearing this Zarfil’s words, it no longer seemed to matter. All the previous gang squabbles and turf battles faded into memory. His frustration with the city government and his vague feelings of discontent towards a system of monarchy that he didn’t understand had finally found an outlet. Zarfil had found his first new convert.

As the applause grew, swelled by new numbers, Zarfil lifted his hand in acknowledgment. Noticing the hint of a smile on his lips, the crowd fell silent again, obeying his gesture instantly, and eagerly awaiting to hear the next words he would speak.

“I have clearly said some shocking things to you today, and I promise that I will give sound basis to everything that I put forth. Standing now on my left is a man by the name of Ezkinil. I’m sure you recognize him as the honorable and most respected Chief Historian of Mareilon. He stands beside me today not only to show his support for my cause, but also to provide verification of my lineage. For years the records have existed, buried deep at the bottom of some dusty old hall, that trace the many generations of my ancestry, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt my relation to the one true Prince Argonel.”

As if on cue, Ezkinil nodded slowly, showing in a weighty head motion that all Zarfil claimed had been verified as the truth.

Zarfil continued. "History clearly records that in the last days of Mareilon's glorious independence, that dog Entharion, born in Galepath, that city of dogs, invaded the sovereign territory of our city and ended the reign of Prince Argonel using the violent methods he loved so much. In an unforgivably cruel act, he condemned my ancestor to die by the executioner's axe, but in a pathetic attempt to show his 'benevolent mercy,' he allowed Argonel's wife and son to go free.

"Those two and their descendants, including myself, were relegated to generations of miserable existence as rope salesmen and mosquito net makers. Barely making ends meet, we watched and waited while those around us praised Entharion and spoke highly of the great debt we owed him. Yes, the debt we owe to Entharion... for usurping our freedom and ending our glorious independence, for subjecting us in an alliance between unequal with that vile excuse for a city-state Galepath, and for making us pay undeserved allegiance to some holier-than-thou petty monarch on a throne over two hundred bloits away!"

Again the applause came, stronger this time, followed by strong cheers from the many who were becoming carried away by Zarfil's words. Almost all of the audience was in his grasp now, soaring with him as the energy in his voice rose to new heights. The few who still refused to cheer for him were either Mayor Hegilburg's own spies in the audience or those too deaf, dumb, and blind to understand this amazingly quick sequence of events. Even Gezlin, whose earlier anger towards his treacherous friend Mimb had cast a shroud of skepticism over him, felt himself moved deeply by the vision he saw before him.

"Thank the Implementors Above that I lived long enough to see this day," he proclaimed to his companion as Zarfil's speech continued. "From here out nothing's gonna be the same."

Ettelwhiff smiled, perhaps feeling a little less enthusiastic than Gezlin, but he too was grateful to be living through these events.

Zarfil, sensing the support that was present in the crowd, caressed his words with an even greater intensity. "Also standing before you here today is my journalist friend Poulizre. She tells me that the evil city to the west is preparing to hold an election, a mockery of popular rule. I call upon the citizens of that city, Galepath, to rise up in force and throw Umberthar Spildo, their pathetic excuse for a mayor, out of his mansion and onto the streets. For generations Spildo and his family have ruled that city in a fool's imitation of democracy. It was one of his ancestors that took up arms with Entharion against our sacred city and overthrew the might that was Mareilon. I demand the end to Spildo's reign in Galepath as the only way to avenge that city's guilty deeds."

This remark was met with a less than enraptured response.

Galepath's political affairs seemed meaningless and distant to the Mareilon natives, and all the talk of democracy and popular rule made the people feel vaguely uncomfortable. Zarfil sensed this and made a few quick adjustments. Skipping ahead a few lines in his well-prepared talk, he avoided further wasted words on archaic political systems and got right to the point. His words now turned to military force, and the power necessary to back up his words with deeds.

"You ask the inevitable question: How will this stranger enforce his demands upon our city? I give you the answer, in simple terms. Allied with my cause, and prepared to die for it, stand over a hundred Nightwings, transformed from a criminal organization into a military force with a mission. As my colleague Mimb will attest, I am also undergoing negotiations to bring about a historical truce between the Nightwings and Mimb's own organization, the Hellhounds."

A murmur rushed through the crowd at these last words. Although many had noticed Mimb's change in companions, no one as of yet had heard any whispers of a truce. Looking to Mimb for confirmation, the thousands that had gathered for the event witnessed the former Hound's distinct discomfort with his sudden notoriety, and cast a dubious frown when no sign of affirmation was forthcoming from him. Could it be that this Zarfil person was after all bluffing? Was he simply parading poor Mimb back and forth as a false trump card?

Ignoring the crowd's surprised reaction, or possibly even silently appreciating it, Zarfil continued.

"Perhaps of even more significance, I can comfortably boast of three connections of the highest rank within the city guard and the office of the mayor himself."

This was of little interest to the crowd; they expected traitors to be working in city government. It seemed as natural as those who like to fish becoming fishermen. Looking back on the speech, many would wonder why Zarfil had mentioned it at all. After all, an alliance between the Wings and the Hounds would be much more to his advantage than any odd trio of bumbling city employees. Zarfil was aware of all this, however, and had knowingly directed that particular remark not to the crowd itself, but to a certain small segment of the audience he knew would be listening intently. The spies sent as hired ears by Mayor Hegilburg eagerly absorbed the information and tensed in anticipation of more juicy goods to report to their superiors. They were of course completely unwitting of Zarfil's knowledge of their presence, and had they been, they would have shown a careful skepticism toward what could well have been a well-placed dose of misinformation.

In any event, Zarfil was showing an uncanny knowledge of his audience. As his oratory continued he began to subtly alter his vocabulary and rhythm, gradually playing to one segment of the crowd after another. After more brutishly forceful words that struck a razor-sharp chord of pleasure in the hearts of Gezlin and others like him, Zarfil moved on to a ringing denunciation of the complex political structure in modern Quendor, a topic eagerly absorbed by the likes of Ettelwhiff. He continued to speak of the purportedly unequal marriage between Galepath and Mareilon, and denounced the hypocrisy inherent in a land governed by a monarch but divided by petty squabbles between elected officials.

As his speech moved closer and closer to completion, the crowd, nearly to a man, rose higher into elation. The thousands that had gathered in Beeblebrox Square had come for many different reasons. Some had indeed been hoping for a prince. Others simply showed up for the entertainment value. Regardless of each person's own motivations, Zarfil had left no one disappointed.

The other important figures that had marched with him each took their turn to speak, and it soon became apparent that Zarfil and his movement would not be forgotten in Mareilon for some time to come. A crackling excitement lay in the air, telling of a sense of historical deeds yet to come.

Gezlin planned ahead, enthusiastically anticipating his role in the entire affair, if the gang truce that Zarfil had spoken of had indeed come to pass. City officials began to act on disturbing reports of an infiltration within the heart of the city guard. Gradually the news of Zarfil's demands began to make its way to Galepath, and even to Castle Largoneth itself, and some where, nearby, an evil serpent began to laugh.

“Utribiz oomum flaxil zobs”
 (“Don’t eat moldy bread”)

-Provincial motto of Gurth and Mithicus

The castle at Largoneth had not seen such a turmoil in over two centuries. For years, the remarkable longevity of Zylon the King had ensured a quiet prosperity and a sense of reassuring regularity. To be sure, there were occasional border disturbances, and even a plague a few years back, but all of these events had been dealt with confidently by Zylon, lord of Largoneth and all of Quendor. It seemed to all that Zylon was surely a deity come to earth to live among the common folks. By all appearances he was a strong young man in the prime of his life, and he had looked this way for well over three-hundred years. There were courtiers at Largoneth whose grandparents’ grandparents had served in Zylon’s court during the first years of his reign. It was even whispered in awe that Zylon had been friends with Entharion himself.

Yes, Zylon was indeed something special. Historians in years to come would call him Zylon the Aged. How many other names would have been appropriate. Zylon the Just. Zylon the Fair. Zylon the Beloved. As the years of his long reign passed by, he became more and more a part of the kingdom, until no one in Quendor could imagine a time without Zylon ruling from Largoneth. Even those who chose to speak ill of him remained hidden in cities far away, posing no threat to Zylon, who had weathered such talk many times in the past, and always came out better for it.

Zylon of Largoneth.

And now he lay dying.

A servant of the castle, called Endeth Belzgar, had gone to check on the king as part of his nightly rounds. For close to half his lifetime, Endeth had lived a faithful life of uneventful routine. Organize the king’s extensive book collection. Clean the king’s castle chambers. Prepare the king’s meals. Check on him as he prepared for bed. Tonight the routine was broken.

When Endeth later retold the events to Zylon’s advisors, he recalled that a feeling of foreboding had overcome him as he entered the southwest tower of the castle. Approaching the king’s quarters, he quickened his pace nervously. The king’s advisors would ask him why he had been nervous. He would not - could not - reply, but merely continued with his recounting of the events. He opened the heavy oak door and found the king lying on the floor in agony.

To Endeth, and to the group of physicians and magicians he hurriedly summoned to the king’s chambers, the following hours seemed to pass as if in a dream. As one court doctor after another examined the king, orders were hurriedly given, and hurriedly obeyed. Largoneth’s armed guards sealed off the southwest tower, allowing entrance to only the most high-ranking officials.

One of these officials was Zilbo Throckrod. A Galepath native, Zilbo has spent the last fourteen years as one of the king’s closest advisors. His family has long had ties to the court at Largoneth, reaching back even to the days of Entharion the Wise. The first Throckrod to serve the royal family did so only in the capacity of court cartographer. Those ancient maps produced by one of Zilbo’s distant ancestors still grace the walls of the council chamber at Largoneth. During more peaceful times, Zilbo has spent hours gazing at the work of his ancestors, wondering at the lands that lay beyond the edges of the maps. Often the maps came to an abrupt finish with the crude warning label, “There be dragons here!” Zilbo always doubted the accuracy

of those labels, and yearned to spend his lifetime on a grand expedition to the far reaches of the world.

Such thoughts were far from his mind now however. The king was ill, and his services were needed. He had received the summons in his room near the council chambers. At first, sleep clouded his understanding of the message, and he had merely rolled over, trying to regain his slumber. Then he heard the words again.

“The king is dying!”

Quickly jumping awake this time, he held the messenger by his arm and pressed him for details.

“Dying? How? What happened?”

The court servant was frightened, in part by the news and in part by Zilbo’s grip on his arm, and had great difficulty answering. “Sir... I don’t know, sir. Just taken ill. The whole castle is in an uproar.”

Zilbo released the messenger and leaped out of bed. In a moment he was dressed and racing through the twists and turns of Largoneth Castle on his way to the king’s side. He ran through the Hall of Mirrors, and for the first time in his memory he did not stop to gaze at the images that lay within the magically reflecting surfaces. Turning the corner, he continued past Largoneth Gate to the base of the tower where the king resides.

He soon found his hurried pace brought to a rude halt when his next running step failed to land where he had expected it to. In mid-step the ground, indeed the entire earth, had shifted suddenly underneath him. Standing still for a frightful moment, Zilbo felt the tail-end of the first abrupt movement, and then the full onslaught of the earth’s pent-up fury. Even with all his effort he had a difficult time holding his balance against the quake that shook the castle to its very foundations. Zilbo had heard of such things in his schooling, but he had always been led to believe that they took place in far-away, uncivilized lands, not the ever-peaceful Quendor of Zylon the Aged. Times, he told himself, seemed to be changing. After many long heartbeats, the earth gradually stilled its shaking. Proceeding cautiously at first, he broke into a run once again as he remembered the urgency of his task.

Arriving at the entrance to Largoneth’s southwest keep, he pulled himself to a stop to listen to a conversation between one of the castle guards and a group of some half-dozen servants that had gathered there out of fright.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t let you through. Those are my orders.” The guard was starting to feel decidedly uncomfortable. He was on friendly terms with most of the group that had gathered around him, and he hated having to keep them uninformed.

The voice of one servant rose above the rest. “Well, can ye at least tell us what’s goin’ on?”

Glancing nervously at Zilbo, the guard began chewing his lip. In response he could only shake his head.

That brought another cry of frustration from the group.

“Lemme guess. Orders, right?”

Again the guard did not reply.

Conversation among the crowd ran quickly, covering the two important recent events and their off-shooting rumors. One servant, in an attempt to explain the sudden presence of a guard at every corner, announced his suspicions that a coup had just taken place. Another cried out in religious terror, worried that the Great Brogmoid that held up the world might move again, causing another earthquake that would crumble the castle walls, killing them all.

Zilbo moved closer to the guard, and murmured softly. “Who has given the orders to post you here?”

Grateful for a question he could really answer, the soldier turned to Zilbo, whispering, “General Griffspotter, sir. He’s sealing off the Castle with the king’s troops. No one is supposed to get in or out.”

Greatly troubled by this news, Zilbo turned back toward the keep and quickened his pace, leaving the guard to deal with the castle servants. There were many questions working in his mind now, questions that he hoped would soon be answered.

What was wrong with the king?

Why was Griffspotter sealing off the castle?

Even more importantly, how had Griffspotter been able to give his orders to the troops, when Zilbo himself had known about the king’s illness for only a few minutes? This particular aspect of the situation struck Zilbo as very odd. General Griffspotter and Zilbo both held seats on King Zylon’s Council. As equally high-ranking officials, they both should have received notification at exactly the same time. Unless Griffspotter had somehow known ahead of time... was even somehow behind these events.

No! That was unthinkable. No one would dare harm the king, least of all Griffspotter. True, it was well-known that the hotheaded general was often quick to lose his temper at council meetings. Zilbo himself spent much time ensuring that the council would steer clear of Griffspotter’s drastic and often violent solutions. Yes, Griffspotter was quick to enrage, but he was no traitor.

Besides, Zilbo noted, the king was only sick. He had not actually been physically harmed by anyone, he told himself as he hurried up the steps to the king. Pushing his way through a full detail of guards that were positioned outside of Zylon’s chambers, he at long last crossed the anteroom and the receiving room where the king met with visitors, and entered the bedchamber.

Gathered around Zylon’s luxurious feather bed were the four other members of the King’s Council, including General Griffspotter, along with several court magicians and healers. One by one they turned toward Zilbo, revealing faces taut with anxiety.

After a few moments of silence, Zilbo could contain himself no longer and burst forth with, “Well? What happened?”

The oldest member of the council, the stooped and gray Hargood of Mareilon, chuckled nervously before responding. “I always knew it would happen,” he said. “Too good to be true, you know. Me getting older and older, him just the same. I always joked with him, told him I’d outlive him somehow. Guess I was right.” Hargood shook his head and continued to move his lips, as if reliving some age-old conversation with a Zylon from the past.

Not satisfied with Hargood’s answer, Zilbo took a few steps closer to the bed and gestured to king, who lay there peacefully, as if asleep. “What is this? Has he died?”

Griffspotter moved forward, brushing past Hargood and the others with impatience. “No, nothing of the sort. He seems to... well, come here and look for yourself.”

Following the General’s advice, Zilbo came to the edge of the bed and bent over Zylon. The king lay stretched out on his back, breathing in and out in a regular fashion. Nothing seemed amiss in that. But his eyes—Zilbo shuddered when he noticed the expression on the king’s face. Zylon’s eyes were open and motionless, fixed in a gaze that headed off into nowhere. He appeared to be wide awake, but after a few attempts at communication, Zilbo realized that the king was not responding.

Unable to accept the implications of the king's sudden illness, Zilbo stood silently for several long moments, watching Zylon the Aged's chest slowly rise and fall. Zilbo's own breathing faltered and began to match that of his sick monarch as he inevitably realized the impact of the sight before his eyes.

He was barely able to mutter a few jumbled words. "How can this be? They called him... a god." At this, his voice faltered and trailed off, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

General Griffspotter, not noticing or perhaps choosing to ignore Zilbo's grief and distress, launched into a crisp, succinct description of the recent events for Zilbo's own benefit. "He rang the bell as he does each night not more than half an hour ago. His personal handservant, Endeth Belzgar, heard the bell and approached the king's chambers, expecting to simply remove the remains of King Zylon's meal and wish him goodnight."

Throughout Griffspotter's words Zilbo had continued to gaze at the king, his back turned away from the General. Annoyed by Zilbo's apparent inattention, Griffspotter became quiet. He glared in irritation at each of the other council members in turn, until finally Gladius Fzort stepped forward to fill the silence.

"The funny thing was that the king kept on ringing the bell, like he was hanging on it or something. I talked to Endeth just now. The poor man seems pretty shaken up. He said he quickened up his pace when the bell kept ringing, but when he got here the king was like this, just staring off into space. The ringing had stopped and Endeth hadn't gotten here in time." Fzort stopped. His explanation completed, he stood quietly, shaking his head.

General Griffspotter spoke again, softer this time, finally sensing Zilbo's distress. "That is why you were the last to get here." Gesturing to the other council members, he said, "The four of us all live in the tower, as you know. When the King was ringing the bell for Endeth, the constant noise woke us up. We were all on our feet and halfway out the door before Endeth came for us with the news." Judging the time to be appropriate for light humor, Griffspotter attempted a smile and pointed out, "That's the price you pay for turning down royal council sleeping chambers."

Griffspotter was right, Zilbo reflected. Upon promotion to the King's council of advisors, he had refused more luxurious chambers in the southwest tower, preferring to remain in the simple rooms just around from the Hall of Mirrors. So there was a reasonable explanation for his belated knowledge of the illness. Thankfully, there was no reason to continue suspecting Griffspotter of any misdeed. Just then Zilbo remembered the guard stationed at the base of the tower, keeping the crowd of servants at bay.

As if he had known Zilbo's thoughts, Griffspotter spoke again. "I ordered the royal guard to seal off the castle. I don't want all of Largoneth going up in panic. Some of the servants that work in the tower already know the news. It was difficult to keep Endeth Belzgar quiet once he realized that his king was ill. I fear that unfortunate rumors are even now making their way outside of the castle into the countryside. We must try to contain any kind of rash behavior."

Hearing this, Zilbo finally lifted himself from silent contemplation, turning away from the feather bed towards the other royal advisors. "Will he live?" he asked, already anticipating a negative answer.

After Zilbo, Griffspotter, Fzort and Hargood, the fifth and final member of the royal council of advisors was Dinbar, a surprisingly young man who had been watching the emotional proceedings with a curiously excited gleam in his eyes. He had remained silent since Zilbo's belated entrance, awaiting his inevitable query.

"Will he live?" Zilbo demanded again, more energetically this time.

Although two or three court magicians and healers were still trying their mysterious tricks on the king, Dinbar stood forward and spoke for the entire group. "It seems unlikely. We should consider ourselves blessed. He has already lived a life long beyond normal reckoning, over four times the span of the next oldest among us."

Dinbar paused for a moment to give a nod of respect to the withered Hargood of Mareilon. General Griffspotter seized the opportunity to steer the conversation away from Dinbar's emotional reflection, onto a topic that he deemed to be much more pressing.

"One urgent matter needs to be dealt with, and soon. Put simply, he has no heir." Griffspotter's words were harsh, bespeaking a blunt practicality shared by no one else in the room.

Hargood, still lost in his own personal reminiscence, chuckled and allowed himself a moment to recall an ancient memory brought to life again by the General's words. "If only he had married that last girl... Oh dear, what was her name? Poor Zylon. He was so concerned about the impropriety of it all. What did it matter that he had once courted her great-grandmother? After all, she was so beautiful."

Frustrated by Hargood's ramblings, Griffspotter broke in once again. "No point in worrying about any of that now. The important matter is this: if he dies, who will be king?" He folded his arms and stood firmly, awaiting an answer.

Gladius Fzort was the first to step forward. "Who will be king? Griffspotter, that sort of talk... well, it's dangerous. It isn't right. Zylon isn't dead yet, after all. I don't even feel right standing here talking about him, much less figuring on who will succeed him. Only he has the right to name a successor."

The General frowned in silence as Zilbo pointed out, "And he doesn't seem to be in much of a position to do so."

"Unless..." The one word from Hargood barely escaped his ancient, shivering lips.

Dinbar, the excited gleam in his eyes growing even brighter, moved quickly over to Hargood, urging him to speak. "Is there something you know of? Is there hope?"

"There was a process once," Hargood replied vaguely. "When I was a young apprentice, before my first days in the castle. My mentor, Elthamor his name was. Ah, Elthamor, what a noble man he was."

His reply trailed off and it was Zilbo's turn to press him for more details. "Hargood! The process. What was it?"

"Hhmm. He tried to teach it to me, but poor Elthamor. I wasn't the most promising of all students. He could look into the minds of those closest to him, and read what lay there. I have known Zylon for so many years. Perhaps I might have some success today where I failed in the past."

The other four council members glanced at each other nervously. Griffspotter seemed close to opening his mouth and hastily forbidding the process, his skeptical stubbornness showing through, but Zilbo moved forward just in time to take the initiative. "Can you try it, Hargood? Anything that can help us now, we need to try."

Hargood nodded his head without speaking and moved forward to the bedside. The other lesser physicians and magicians backed away, sensing the importance of what Hargood was about to attempt. Slowly, as if painfully attempting to dredge the memories out from under years of neglect, Hargood moved his hands haltingly through the air over Zylon's head. Tracing an invisible and hopelessly complex pattern over the sick king, the aged magician froze more than once, pursing his lips pensively, then retracing some of his steps. Drawing several nervous,

skeptical glances from the council members behind him, he continued his motions until he seemed satisfied in some uncertain way. Then the words came forth from his lips, quietly. "Culnav yomin ront eldime." A few seconds later the words came again, louder this time. "Culnav yomin ront eldime."

Everyone present in the bedchamber drew deep, hopeful breaths as Hargood's knees buckled and he leaned forward onto the bed. His gaze lost focus and he seemed to be entering a mysterious, one-sided conversation.

"No. No, that was not it... Yes, of course I remember." A smile on his lips. "So long ago... yes, you are right, my friend... You are right. That was it."

Then suddenly his weakened body was shaken by a terrible spasm. Standing up in one quick motion, his body was wracked by convulsions that led him stumbling to the back wall of the room. Rushing forward, the council members gathered around, eager for news.

"Well?" the General demanded.

"Elinear," whispered the old Mareilon native.

"What?" came the reply.

"Elinear. Her name was Elinear, that girl from so long ago. I told him he should have married her, but he didn't listen. No, he didn't listen."

“Oh how again I yearn to go
To the majestic city of Galepath,
That wonderful jewel with a glow
Holding all the beauty of a bubble bath.”

-Quotz Garzbo, dead 8th century poet.

In all of Quendor the beauty and splendor of the ancient city of Galepath is unrivaled. The perfectly paved streets are lined with majestic, soaring buildings that rise ever-upward, climaxing in glittering spires that seem to reach out and touch the sky.

Deep in the heart of the city lies an incomparable garden, preserved by magic in a wonderful springtime glow. It is said that this garden has fired the jealousy of the mighty Implementors themselves; even those deities stand in awe of the triumph of the human spirit that is Galepath.

Every citizen of that city is immensely proud of that which they are a part. Even the lowliest rope salesman of Galepath swells with elation at the sight of the city banner, or the first note played by the Mayor’s marching band. From childhood the inhabitants of the city are taught to cherish the rich history of the city. Only a few hundred years ago Galepath was an independent state, strong and self-sufficient. During the time of Entharion, diplomats from that city played a crucial role in the formation of the Kingdom of Quendor. Of course, the same is true of diplomats from the city of Mareilon, but what has come from Mareilon in the years since? Naught but decay and despair.

From the earliest days when Galepath was but a small village, the inhabitants had the luxury of turning to intellectual pursuits. Blessed with good weather and productive farming, it was only a matter of time before the settlers began to found institutions of higher learning. The first of these, and to this day the most famous, was Galepath University.

For centuries it has been the ambition of every young student of history, of religion, of philosophy, and of magic to attend this University. It was from the great halls of Galepath that the renowned professor Antor Zilbarion delivered his famous lectures on the creation of the universe, the early years of the kingdom, and the reason for the existence of broccoli. Zilbarion, of course, is only one example of all that makes Galepath University the place that it is. High on the list of that school’s assets is the University Library. Far more valuable than any wizened professor could ever hope to be, the library holds hundreds, indeed thousands of ancient scrolls, maps, and detailed histories of events long forgotten by the outside world. When the library was founded, dozens of researchers traveled to all corners of the world in search of all forms of written knowledge, and they returned with the most remarkable collection known to mankind.

Expert cartographers can journey to Galepath and look upon a map of the world as drawn by the earliest explorers almost an entire millennium ago. When troubled times descend on the kingdom, the best sorcerers of the realm can turn to the writings of the Mages of Arbroneth. Religious leaders now have the luxury of reading the divinely inspired words of the Scrolls of Kar’nai, long feared lost in the religious wars of the north. In short, the library at Galepath represents the sum total of all human knowledge. In the darkest recesses of the library lay piles of forgotten tomes that have yet to be analyzed and revealed to the world.

Hundreds of people are employed by the University merely to organize and study these obscure works. One of these people is Litbo Mumblehum. As Chief Historian of the library, Litbo is responsible for overseeing every research project, and helping everyone, from the Elders of Eru to the youngest college student, find exactly what they need amidst the piles of dusty

manuscripts. For years Litbo has been a fixture at the library, shuffling slowly down the corridors, occasionally muttering to himself, occasionally misplacing priceless manuscripts, and almost always forgetting to go home. Nighttime visitors to the library can sometimes find Litbo in a dusty corner, cuddled up with a candle and the ninth volume of social treatises by Farn Fzort. Although many worry about Litbo's failing memory, very few question his qualifications as one of the world's most learned students of ancient writings.

On this particular day, the sun is shining brightly in the sky, and almost every citizen of Galepath has found some excuse or another to leave work and enjoy the warmth that fell on the city. Naturally, the rising popularity of the Brogmoidist faith has cast more than a little doubt on the credibility of sun-worship, but there is no use arguing with a fair-weather fan of the sun god. In any case, it goes without saying that Litbo Mumblehum was not to be found among the crowds that basked in the sunlight. While thousands enjoyed the soft touch of grass and the caress of the sun's rays, Litbo basked in the joy of his library.

Shuffling along amid the halls at the library's entrance, he carried with him a list of old scrolls that would be the source of today's pleasure. Some of the University's linguistics professors had requested permission to study some particularly obscure religious scrolls in hopes that new translation methods would prove more productive than ones used in the past, and it was Litbo's job to locate the manuscripts, which was no easy task, and approve their removal from the library.

Turning the corner he arrived at the door of the main archive room. This immense storage place lay at the heart of the impressive stone structure that was the library. The building's outer wings were filled with the standard fare of books, such as might be found at any Galepath book house. Following the halls deeper into the library, one would pass by the armies of scribes immersed in the never-ending task of copying ancient works, so that they might be sent to scholars in other, far away provinces. Continuing beyond the scribes, up several flights of ancient stairs and past a row of well-crafted wall murals, a visitor to the library would finally come to where Litbo now stood.

The entrance to the archive was paved with marble tiles that seemed to glow in a deep red. Dancing across the red tiles were streaks of white, veins of contrasting color that twisted and blended together, finally converging at the door. Massive wood panels soared upward to a point in the utmost shadows that lay almost beyond Litbo's vision. He stood there for a moment, looking upwards, lost in thought. In his mind he traveled back to another time, many years ago, when he was but a little boy. To him it seemed as if the memories came calling from another world. As a quick smile played on his lips, he remembered his first time in this special place. When most of the youth his age had been off skin diving, and sometimes even glurking, in the far away waters of the sea, little Litbo had chosen to sneak off into the Galepath University Library.

Although entrance to the library was, and always had been, open to everyone, to an imaginative boy of ten it had indeed seemed as if he was violating some sacred, unwritten commandment. Eluding professors and library employees alike, he had daringly made his way to this, the most sacred of all places. As a boy, he had listened entranced to his father speak of his work in the archives, and of all the ancient wonders that were held there. Reaching forward to grasp the mighty iron door handles, he recalled how much higher the handles had seemed then. Summoning all his effort, he brought himself back to the present day and pulled open the hefty doors.

Entering the archive chamber, he was again struck by the beauty of the hall that lay before him. It was a long, narrow room, walled to his left and right by tall, graceful arches that swept upward, upward, ever upward to meet at a peak that seemed as far away as the Star of Bobol. Lining both walls was a wondrous collection of stained-glass windows, portraying every major figure from the history of the land, even those of ill-repute. On Litbo's immediate left was the sparkling image of Entharion the Wise, the first King of Quendor. Next to Entharion stood the window honoring Mazimar Spildo, Galepath's heroic mayor during the time of the wars against the city-state of Mareilon. Perhaps Litbo's favorite window lay at the far end of the hall, on the right side. The icon of the original Mage of Jerrimore had always held a peculiar fascination for Litbo. He had always found it odd that this legendary, evil being had earned a place among the likes of Entharion and Mazimar. Perhaps it was to serve as a lesson to the people of Quendor. With the heroes, with the kingdom's share of good, must also come a compensation, one might say a prerequisite amount of evil. Even this explanation could not serve as a cushion when Litbo discovered that the library actually housed many volumes of the mage's collected works that were open to any who cared to examine them. Over the years, Litbo had decided that certain sections of the library were best left undisturbed.

Forcing aside his awe at the hall's physical beauty, he began a feeble attempt to organize his thoughts into some semblance of a work-conducive attitude. Although Litbo certainly had not hesitated to forsake the good weather in exchange for a day in this chamber, he did not relish the task of searching through immense piles of parchment in hopes of finding the proverbial needle in the haystack. Soon, however, and pleasantly enough for Litbo, his search was interrupted. Rounding a corner, he came across a frequent visitor to the library, a woman he had seen often but had rarely before had the opportunity to encounter alone.

Her name was Arabell, a strikingly beautiful student at the University. The sun's beams streamed in through the stained glass and danced in her gentle red hair, and for a moment Litbo stood frozen by the sight. Arabell's dazzling hair and innocent young face never failed to cast a spell on Litbo's poor, confused heart. Although barely into his middle years, with most of his life ahead of him, it seemed probable that Litbo would spend the rest of his days unmarried, for one simple reason. He did not understand women.

Having learned everything he knew about the world from the library's dusty old manuscripts, the dear little scholar had utterly neglected his education on the ways of the world, and when someone as lovely as Arabell crossed his path, he was utterly out of his element. He stood enchanted for a few more moments, uncertain of his next move. When at long last Arabell noticed his presence, it was as if the divine itself had come down to pay Litbo a visit.

She gave him a quick smile, and the entire world seemed to come alive. Turning to him, the stunning red-head spoke to him for the first time.

"Hello, Litbo. How are you today? You are Litbo, aren't you?"

They had never been formally introduced, but he was after all the head librarian, and quite famous in his own right. It did however catch the poor man off-guard when Arabell greeted him by name.

"Oh, why yes. Yes, I am," he stammered. "I'm doing very well. Thank you."

There was a brief silence, and then Litbo realized that although he had long ago gone to great pains to learn her name and whatever else he could about her, she was not yet aware of this. His social instincts had never been particularly sharp, but he was dimly aware that it was improper for him to know her name without her knowing that he did, and so at last he offered, "I'm sorry. I don't think I know your name."

“Arabell,” she replied. “I’m a student here at the University.”

“Oh, yes. Arabell. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Not quite knowing why he had made that last remark, he lamely added, “Your professors have had some good things to say about you.”

Smiling softly, she gestured to a pile of scrolls she had been sorting through, and said, “Actually, maybe you can help me. I’m here trying to find some information for a report. One of Professor Zilbarion’s assignments... I’m a little bit at a loss.”

Litbo, naturally, was very willing to help her out in any way possible. “What was it you were looking for?”

“Well, I’ve been teamed up to work with another student. You might know him. He’s in here often. Bizboz.”

Mumblehum nodded. He knew Bizboz well; he and the librarian had often enjoyed long conversations on all sorts of topics. The youth’s enthusiasm and love of history intrigued Litbo, and he even secretly considered Bizboz to be his one and only protégé. Bizboz had frequently mentioned his desire to return to Galepath University after graduation as a full member of the faculty, and knowing his determination, Litbo had no doubts that he would eventually do so.

In the meantime, the girl continued to explain, Bizboz and Arabell both were required to pass a course in philosophy. The two had decided to collaborate on an analysis of the writings of Entharion the Wise. However the collaboration seemed a little one-sided; Bizboz had sneaked off, no doubt to pursue one of his own private projects, while Arabella was left digging through sections of the library that even Litbo himself was uninterested in.

“And so there you have it,” she finished. “If I don’t get a hold of Entharion’s Sleeping Your Way to Power before tomorrow, I fail the class!”

Litbo, eager for a chance to make use of his vast array of knowledge to impress Arabell, immediately found himself right at home in the role of librarian-to-the-rescue. Briefly eyeing the stack of scrolls at her feet, he announced, “Well, what you have got there are Entharion’s political treatises. We stored his writings on the power of dreams in another area, along with the other manuscripts dealing with the supernatural, the occult, and the like.”

“Oh yes, that’s what I figured at first. You mean the far corner, by the maps, right? Yeah, but I could have sworn I had looked through all of those already.”

“Well then, let us go look again. Zilbarion himself was in here not over a week ago looking at the same document. It could not have gone too far in the meantime. Follow me. We will hunt for it together.”

And so the two began the long walk to the other side of the hall. Litbo’s eyes darted from side to side as he began to experience the familiar rush of hunting some centuries-old secret. Walking down the main aisle, they had soon passed by all the square holes used to store rolled scrolls, and they were halfway through the main group of actual bookshelves when Litbo came to an abrupt halt. Directly in front of him, open and facedown, was a large, leather-bound tome of great age. Distressed that anyone would carelessly mishandle any of HIS books in such a way, he bent down and gingerly picked it up.

“Odd,” he muttered. “I wonder who left this lying there.”

Quickly identifying the book as the second volume on the life of Mysterion the Brave, he reached up to the appropriate shelf to return it to its usual place. Automatically scanning the shelf, his arm paused in midair. He was holding the second volume in his hand, but where was the first volume? No one was allowed to remove books from the hall, and yet there it was, a large empty space where the first volume had rested just yesterday. Slowly returning the second book to its place on the shelf, he turned to Arabell in distress.

“It’s gone,” he said. “The first volume on Mysterion is gone!”

He then frantically began to search all the nearby bookshelves in hopes that the missing tome would show itself. Arabell, quickly sensing that if allowed, Litbo would continue on this tangent for the entire day, reassuringly pointed out, “You probably just misplaced it, you know, shelved it in the wrong place in a hurry, then forgot. I’m sure it’ll turn up.”

Unconvinced, he replied, “I suppose you are right. Well, we had best find that Entharion manuscript for you.”

Clearly disturbed by the book’s absence, he reluctantly led Arabell to their original destination. The occult section of the library, the home of Entharion’s works on the mysteries of sleep, made for some of the most controversial reading to be found anywhere in Quendor. Litbo himself had taken great pains in the past to ensure that that particular corner of the hall remain in an utterly precise state of organization, for there was no telling when some puzzled historian or powerful mage would need to pour through some of those texts at a moment’s notice. In fact, the task that had brought him into the archives hall that morning concerned a very special work that would be found just a hand’s breadth away from the very tome that Arabell had requested.

As Litbo rounded the final tall stack of ancient maps that had been gathered so long ago, he thought ahead, picturing in his mind the exact location of the two works for which he now hunted. The linguistics professor that had requested permission to analyze the Sacred Scrolls of Fizbin had seemed especially excited; new translation methods promised to unlock the age-old secrets of the mysterious hermit Fizbin. For generations, legend had maintained that the actual text of Fizbin’s writings had come to him in some kind of dream or vision from the god Eru, from whose belly had sprung the Great Brogmoid who held up the earth. Unfortunately for humanity, Fizbin wrote in an archaic script, now barely understandable. Many passages have for years seemed meaningless, referring to objects and places no longer known. However, it is said that he who completely understands the contents of the Scrolls will have power over all existence, and will know the eventual fate of the world.

It was one of Litbo’s greatest honors to have care over those Scrolls. Stored carefully in a faded leather pouch rumored to have once belonged to Fizbin himself, the Scrolls have rested in the library’s archives for as long as Litbo could remember. Only two or three times in his entire tenure as Chief Historian had anyone requested the honor of looking at the pouch. Analyzing the Scrolls was always a difficult business, as Litbo had to unravel the seven aged parchments without breaking the curious wax seals that held them bound together.

Litbo had just discovered that contemplating such a difficult task had completely erased his anxiety around Arabell when he arrived at the desired section of the hall. In a matter of one or two mere seconds his professional gaze surveyed the shelves before him and his jaw clamped down in terror. Eyes wide open, he moved forward quickly to pick up the empty leather pouch that lay before him. Resting quietly, almost innocently, on a precious bloodwood display stand, the container that had held the sacred works of Fizbin just the day before was now completely empty.

Mumblehum muttered a few stunned words under his breath and then felt himself fly into a complete state of panic. Grasping randomly at every scroll in reach, he searched nervously for any sign of the Sacred Scrolls, hoping against hope that they were simply misplaced. After a few moments it became clear that that was not the case.

He turned to Arabell with an accusing gleam in his eyes. “You were just back here, you said, looking for Entharion’s book. Have you seen the Scrolls that were in this pouch?”

Taken aback by Litbo's frantic state, her reply was timid and nervous. "No. No, I haven't. I saw the pouch, though. I didn't think it was anything important."

"Important? Important? It's unique, an original. We never even bothered to make a copy of it. If those Scrolls are missing, it's a disaster." The librarian, not being the naturally accusatory type, had forgotten his initial suspicion of Arabell and began to sink into a worried emotional abyss.

"If your Scrolls, or whatever they are, are missing," Arabell mused aloud, "it would be a little bit of an odd coincidence, don't you think? Just a few minutes ago, the first volume of Mysterion's biography, and now this pouch. Sleeping Your Way to Power is probably missing too."

A sudden thought taking possession of him, Litbo muttered, "Entharion? Missing?" and then continued his search. A quick glance on the correct shelf and then a brief search of the surrounding shelves confirmed his worst fears.

"I don't believe it," he whispered to Arabell. "Three of this library's most valuable manuscripts, gone. How can this be?"

Hours later, with nearly all of the picturesque sunny day wasted in fruitless search, Litbo had forced himself to come to the inevitable conclusion. Those manuscripts, that had stood out as prized possessions of the archives, had vanished into thin air. The only possible explanation was that an eager student or a haughty scofflaw professor had removed the three works from the hall of archives to another section of the University library. Luckily, however, it was doubtful that the zealous scholar could have gone as far as taking the books out of the library proper. Although the inner sanctum of the archives itself remained guarded only by the awesome mystique that had piqued Litbo's childhood curiosity, the entrances and exits to the actual library building were carefully guarded by Galepath University security. Cohorts of those trained brogmoids had for years ensured that not a single book ever disappeared from the library's priceless collection.

This was however little consolation to the baffled librarian. Even with the reasonable assumption that the three works were still somewhere in the building, the task ahead was no easy one. The first volume of Mysterion's biography and Entharion's Sleeping Your Way to Power were both by appearances simple leather-bound tomes much like thousands of others that could be found in the other sections of the library, and Litbo did not relish the task of opening every single book in the area in the hopes that he would soon find the right ones. But the disappearance of the Scrolls of Fizbin... that was much more disturbing. Small scrolls like that could be lying anywhere. They could even have been cast accidentally into a wastebasket.

Litbo's mood darkened as he tried to puzzle out his next move. A few hours earlier Arabell had left, clearly realizing that she was of no help to Litbo in the task that lay before him. As the librarian watched her walk slowly out of the hall, he imagined her gracefully sailing down the library's smooth marble steps and moving her way through the massive front doors out into the open air. For the first time that he could recall in many years he longed for the sunlight, for a way to escape the dust and old words that lay around him. He wanted to be with her.

But he could not, and he never would. His work beckoned him, as it always did, the only difference being that on this occasion he went to it with a heavy heart. Knowing the impossibility of shouldering an all-out search single-handedly, he was soon in a meeting with the highest library officials. Unfortunately, the conversation soon turned to accusations, as the powers-that-be confronted Litbo and charged him with negligence and careless misconduct. It was only with the greatest effort that Mumblehum was able to manage a feeble defense on his own behalf. He could not be responsible, he protested. Everyone with a legitimate request to look at any

manuscript in the archives had to ask him for permission and assistance, and no one had done so. He himself hadn't touched any of the works in question in quite some time, but he had indeed seen them all not more than one or two days before.

No, there was no doubt in Litbo Mumblehum's mind. The books would turn up somehow, somewhere in the massive library building. Of course it would help to put up a notice to all students and faculty asking for the underhanded booklover to come forth, but the books would turn up.

Unfortunately, the library and university authorities were not of the same opinion. Bolbo Ikth, a sour, pudgy-looking man with a nasty temper and a large paycheck, was one of the first to suspect outright theft. As the official in charge of Galepath University's campus security, he was naturally one of the first to whom the incident was reported. No other building on the University grounds had quite the collection of rare valuables that the library did, and so over the years, campus security had become essentially synonymous with library security. When Bolbo Ikth took charge of the investigation, he did so with a fierce passion indicative of the fact that it was the first interesting assignment he had come across after eight years on the job. Even if the books had not been stolen, Ikth would single-mindedly track down a suspect, any suspect, who would confess to that and many other much horrible deeds.

He made all of this quite clear to poor Litbo, who sat nervously in Ikth's office getting his first-ever dose of the third degree.

"Are you sure you don't remember seeing anyone suspicious in the area?" he pressed, eagerly hoping to find some single precious detail that would prove him right.

"No. No... I mean, yes, I'm sure," Litbo stumbled in reply.

"Do you know of anybody who might have a specific motive to steal those texts?"

"No, not at all. It wouldn't have done them any good."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Mumblehum paused to think and catch his breath before continuing. "Well, I'm thinking of the Scrolls of Fizbin in particular. They were only partially translated. The scholars working on them in the past could never seem to make heads or tails out of some of the phrases Fizbin used, and..." Ikth interjected a quick cough to indicate he had no desire to become any more knowledgeable in the fine art of translating. Litbo nervously wetted his lips and managed to continue. "Every part of the Fizbin that's successfully translated has already been released to the public. Everything else would be gibberish to anybody who would have stole the Scrolls."

"But rumors have been flying about this new translation process... the whole campus is ecstatic about the prospects."

"Yes," Litbo confirmed, "but only a select few in the linguistics department have any knowledge of that process whatsoever. No thief would be able to make use of this."

Bolbo Ikth frowned, aggravated that the librarian seated opposite him did not seemed to be sharing his train of thought. "Fine, but I think you are missing some other obvious possibilities. What if our thief's motives weren't exactly intellectual at heart?"

Puzzled by Ikth's naturally suspicious instincts, Litbo cocked his head and replied, "I'm not quite sure I follow you."

"Oh, come now Litbo," Ikth snorted. "Surely you're not as naive as all that, are you? You know as well as I do the tense religious situation these days. All this talk about a giant brogmoid holding up our world... My father can remember the days when everyone believed that mumbo-jumbo about the earth being round. What with all the earthquakes recently, no one knows what to believe."

Ikth faltered, possibly not able to grasp the idea of a flat earth, or even more likely simply forgetting what he had been about to say.

Litbo prodded the chief of security with, "But I don't understand what any of that has to do with someone stealing the Scrolls of Fizbin."

"But don't you see? You and your translator's have always told us how those Scrolls come straight from the mouth of Eru himself. That was simple enough to deal with when all we believe in was Eru and his Implementors, but now, with all these brogmoids running around loose, it's a religious thing. If you are wrong, and someone really did steal those Scrolls, it could send an uproar through the entire religious community. They could demand any ransom they felt like."

Mumblehum shifted cautiously in his chair, glancing around the room as if he expected the mysterious thieves to come crawling out of the woodwork. Perhaps Ikth's nervous paranoia was rubbing off onto the librarian, or perhaps Litbo was simply frightened by the security official's tirade, but in any case the best Litbo could manage in reply was, "Who? Who?"

"I don't know. I just don't know," came the answer as Bolbo shook his flabby head. "We've got plenty of motive, but no suspect. No suspect at all."

"I don't know either. I'm just not sure this makes sense to me yet."

"Well, what other plausible explanation is there for your missing books, huh?"

Staring at his hands as they rested on his lap, Litbo thought for a moment and then looked up. "Why would someone trying to steal the first volume of Mysterion's biography not want to take the second volume as well?"

"What?" Ikth shot back irritably.

"That's how I figured out that the Mysterion book was missing. I saw the second volume lying on the ground and looked up to put it back. The first volume wasn't there. It makes a lot more sense for some random researcher to have misplaced the books. If a thief wanted to make a profit or claim ransom or something, he would have not only taken the first volume of Mysterion, but also probably a lot more. It's only those three things that are missing."

"Fine," Bolbo shrugged, "but isn't it just as possible for the thief to have gone straight for the Fizbin, and only taken one or two other books just to throw us off the trail?"

Litbo sat in silence shaking his head, unable to comprehend the idea of a theft. For many years the Galepath Library had been his second home, his sanctuary, his castle, and to think that someone had crept into the library in the dark of night and made off with part of his treasured collection. It's been told that the great dragons living by the Shallow Sea guard their hoard greedily, always aware of the location of even the tiniest gleaming gem, and always ready to unleash their final fury on any would-be thief. Litbo's heart burned in much the same way, keenly feeling the absence of the Scrolls take the form of a gnawing somewhere in the dark of his mind. There was no anger here though, only hope that the works would be returned to him, somehow making up for his lack of vigilance.

"So where do we go now?" Litbo asked, feeling a new determination taking hold.

Clearly, Bolbo Ikth had already thought out his next course of action. "We've got to take this higher up. I'm just a campus official. I don't have much authority. If I'm right, if this does turn into a serious religious confrontation, we're going to need the city's help. I've known the mayor for many years. Spildo. He'll be willing to get us all the help we need, and he'll stand behind us if things start to get a bit out of hand."

Litbo nodded weakly, gradually absorbing the feeling that he was starting to get in well over his head. He began to wish even more fervently that he had finished his day basking in sunlight,

enjoying Arabell's overwhelming smile. It had already been a long week, and things were only just beginning.

“The Kovalli Desert lies beyond the mountains that form the western boundary of Quendor. It is an uncrossable wasteland believed to stretch to the edge of the world. Historical researchers believe that the Kingdom of Quendor was once invaded by Kovalli natives. The reasons behind the invasion are unclear, but one reasonable postulate is that the natives were looking for a way to return to their ancestral homelands, on the far side of the sea.”

-Encyclopedia Frobozzica, 672 GUE Edition

The sun rose slowly and painfully, stretching its burning claws across the parched Kovalli Desert. There were no shadows to provide shelter here, only bloit upon bloit of cracked, dry ground. Some legends say that the sun is a god. If that is true, then the sun that shines on Kovalli is a merciless and brutal god. No plant or animal is spared the torture of the daylight in Kovalli. In the lands to the east, across the mountains, the sun is a welcome friend, giving life and bringing change. Not in Kovalli. Not in Kovalli.

In this desert land, the sun brings no change, only a continuous waking nightmare. This sunrise, much like every one before it, seemed hot, painful, and filled with hate. However, the natives of Kovalli, the Tribes of Nezgeth, all knew that something about this sunrise was special. It marked the end of the waiting, the end of the suffering. For six years now a famine had plagued the land, and for six years the holy priests had counted the sunrises, hoping and praying that they would survive to see the start of the Seventh Year.

Despite all the death and misery that the sun had come to represent to the Nezgeth, there was rejoicing on this day. It meant the chance to be reborn, to rekindle a pride in their ancient, mysterious culture. This culture is one that holds a great stock in patience; a hardship such as this must be endured with a calm warrior strength. If the gods desire that you suffer, you must stand up to that suffering and resist it with pride.

But now it is the Seventh Year. According to the ancient decrees, action may now be taken. A famine of this duration could mean only that the approval of the gods was no longer with the Nezgeth. Action must now be taken.

This is the time for a Brith-nel-fhet.

An average tribesman will never see a Brith-nel-fhet in his lifetime. This mystic, holy ceremony is the stuff of Nezgeth legend. Some of the oldest graybeards claim to remember the last performance of this ritual in the early days of their youth. For many years the occasion never arose to enact one of the most powerful rites of the Nezgeth religion. Now the time is right. On this day, with this sunrise, the High Priests must ready themselves. The ritual will be performed again, and action will be taken.

It is part of the Nezgeth tradition that the gods cannot forsake the Tribe without granting one final gift of wisdom. To receive this wisdom is the purpose of the Brith-nel-fhet. For weeks the priests must ready themselves to enter into direct communication with their gods. After the ritual is finished, the Tribe must act on the words spoken by the gods. Sometimes the wisdom provided by the Brith-nel-fhet is vague at best. When the Nezgeth deities turn away from their children, there is often no apparent reason behind it. Perhaps one moody god quarreled with his mortal mistress. Perhaps another such god has fallen from grace, shunned by his companions. Any such event could explain the immortal anger directed at the Nezgeth in the form of the famine. Now, religion commands an act of contrition. The tribe as a whole must perform some deed to seek the forgiveness of the gods. Only the Brith-nel-fhet could reveal the nature of the deed.

The preparation for the actual ceremony had been going on for quite some time. Three of the tribe's highest priests had entered a holy shelter, a dark cavern hollowed out of the sacred rock that marked the western boundary of the Nezgeth territory. With them prayed Ath-gar-nel, Warrior of the Nezgeth. He alone as the tribal chieftain had the power to act on the words of the gods.

The priests would burn incense, chant countless verses of holy song, carve meaningless scribbles into the rock face, and mumble amongst themselves, and when all was said and done, Ath-gar-nel would give the call to action.

Ath-gar-nel himself, intently aware of the mystique and superstition surrounding the ceremony, held an inward confusion that he did his best not to betray to those around him. His years as the highest Nezgeth Warrior had been riddled with suffering and rebellion, and now he embarked on a religious experience that could in the end prove to be absolutely fruitless. Even those who did claim to remember the last such Brith-nel-fhet clearly had no idea about the outcome of that last distant ceremony. Entering the sacred cavern, Ath-gar-nel was plagued with burning questions.

What if the Brith-nel-fhet is a failure? How will I know when the answers have been given to me? And the ceremonies in the past. Were they real? Did the gods really speak, making their presence known to the Warriors who have gone before me? Or did those in the past walk back out of the cave slowly, giving themselves enough time to fabricate the word of the gods? The priests themselves seemed certain enough, going about the necessary preparations as if they were experienced masters at the rite. But what if the oral tradition that guided them had faltered in the years since the last rite?

Ath-gar-nel watched apprehensively as the High Priest moved slowly back and forth, pacing across imaginary bridges of power spanning the points between the four cardinal directions. The two lesser priests sat cross-legged in lowered recesses to the west and the east, while their elder walked from Ath-gar-nel in the northern position toward his own recess in the southern corner of the chamber. As he moved, he traced out the patterns that existed in the many intricate lines in the ground connecting the four recesses. Carved by skilled hands countless generations ago, the lines conveyed many of the most basic Nezgeth religious tenets. The diamond formed by the four points symbolized the unity of their four highest gods. Had researchers from Quendor seen the sight, they might have noted a remarkable coincidence; four was also the number that the monks of Kar'nai gave as the rank of the most powerful of the Implementors. Other patterns formed by the intricate crossing lines spoke of each ritual that has a place in the Nezgeth religious life. The circular curve connecting the four chief points depicted the sun, the ever-present, blinding, all-important sun, and the sum of the lines in the picture, twelve, represented the number of centuries legend told that the tribe would remain in exile from the ancient homeland across the sea.

In front of each of the four seated figures rested a flowing wooden model of a majestic sailing vessel, and supported by each of the main masts stood four burning sticks of heavily scented incense. Directly in the center of the four points burnt a flickering oil lamp, serving as but a weak reminder of the tyrant sun that still shone somewhere outside the cavern. Around the perimeter of the four points rose the sweeping rocky walls rising up to a point high above, hidden by the dim light and smoke. Hewn roughly into the walls are generations of pictorial images, tales of the Nezgeth tribal history. The earliest, starting on the eastern wall near the exiting passageway, told of the first conflict with another tribe, and the resulting anger of the gods. Banishment soon followed, and the time of the great voyage began. After years of wandering, the

tribe had been guided by their deities to this cruel land as penance for their misdeed. In the many centuries since, a new image has been added to the cavern walls to tell the tale of each Brith-nel-fhet. Soon, the four knew, the walls must prepare to give themselves up once again for the work of the gods. The tribe must find among its members an artisan skilled enough to carve the sacred walls.

Gaining the ear of the supreme ones who lived on high would be no easy task, and so the three priests sang with great energy, chanting the holy words that accompanied the images of the previous Brith-nel-fhets. Slowly and patiently throughout this long chant, Ath-gar-nel rocked back and forth, muttering silently to himself, so as to be sure that the priests could not overhear his words. As Nezgeth Warrior, he and he alone had the knowledge of the list of past Warriors, a list that started with that strange and difficult man who had fought for the tribe just eleven years ago, and ended with mysterious names of Warriors from long ago, from a time before the exile itself.

The younger priest in the western recess, after his third of the chant was completed, slowly began preparation for a nourishing mixture that would be necessary to receive the advice of the gods. Words that had been passed down to him from times distant dictated the use of difficult ingredients, rarely found in the desert. In expectation of the Brith-nel-fhet, the priest's apprentices had traveled for nearly a year in search of what would go into the sacrament he was preparing now. Chief among the ingredients were lorf, the Kovalli cousin to Quendoran jungle bloodworm; the sturdy morgia root that grew fairly often even in the desert; and a good amount of the disgustingly brackish water found in the Hevith Springs to the south. After using mortar and pestle to grind the poisonous glands of the lorf to an unidentifiable pulp, the blessing with the incense began. With the chant continuing in the background, the net effect was highly hypnotic. Eyelids lowering, the priest sank into trance state as he mixed the ingredients in the proper amounts.

Soon, his work done, the western priest transferred the potent mixture into a wooden bowl and raised it into the air, speaking words of praise to the god in whose corner he rested. He then quietly drank of the liquid, barely noticing its disturbing taste. As he lowered the bowl to the lines on the ground before him, the others began to share in his deepening state of inner awareness. Focusing on the dim light in the center of the chamber, the four were only barely aware when the bowl began to move of its own accord, traveling along the lines of power to the high priest in the southern corner. Lost in enlightened meditations, the priest sat for many moments before showing the slightest awareness of the bowl's presence before him. Then, without any change in his internal focus, he leaned forward slightly and took hold of the bowl. He drank his own share, and then rested the bowl on a line to his right.

Again the bowl moved, this time toward the eastern corner. As the magical liquid began to take hold, the priest in the west soon lost consciousness altogether. The effect of the poisonous glands in the potion had been counteracted by certain other ingredients, but the new combined effect was strange to behold. In the western corner the young priest's eyes closed against his will, as if touched by an irresistible force from above. The flowing lines in the ground continued to guide the bowl to the others in the chamber, who drank their share while watching the frightening motions that possessed the first two.

Suddenly the head of the western priest slumped forward lazily, almost touching his chest. His breathing grew more regular, matching the signs of deepening sleep that took hold. In a moment, however, his left hand began to move of its own accord slowly toward a smooth fur pouch fastened at his waist. The priest, entirely unconscious and unaware of his surroundings,

merely voyaged deeper into his own mind while another power made use of his body. Soon the contents of the pouch lay emptied on the ground. For years, ever since his initiation into the priesthood, the Nezgeth holy man had been told by his elders to keep sacred the contents of the pouch, and never to open it except in the time of Brith-nel-fhet. Now that the time had come the contents of the pouch lay revealed, and the priest, moving ever farther into his soul, would never remember.

Each of the four in turn moved deeper into trance and emptied out their own pouches, similarly untouched in the generations since the last such rite. Soon the ground around the burning oil lamp was scattered with an odd assortment of mystic Nezgeth artifacts. The items from the three priests were very similar in origin and meaning. Their three pouches each contained a bundle of short spense-sticks, dry and withered with age. In the next few moments the priests would one by one lean forward unknowingly to sacrifice one of these sticks to the oil lamp before them. Also found in the three pouches were ancient, fragile scrolls that the dry desert weather had preserved for uncounted ages. The three scrolls were decorated with a flowing, wondrous script, the meaning of which was long since lost. Priestly tradition and rumor about the contents of the pouch told that no Nezgeth eyes had ever gazed at the scrolls outside of a Brith-nel-fhet. For years the high priest had speculated about the scrolls in secret, wondering if some part of the ceremony would give him the power to understand the mysterious writing. He would leave the cavern at the end of the day still not knowing the answer.

Scattered amongst the sticks and the scrolls glittered several valuable gems, gathered from a forgotten hoard. Had any member of the Nezgeth tribe known such shining treasures existed among them, they would have made use of them long ago, possibly bartering with the southern tribes for safe passage to their wells and springs, or possibly using them to ask for an end to the tribal warfare that had plagued them for generations.

The objects resting on the ground before the Warrior Ath-gar-nel in the north contained entirely different significance. His pouch held leadership, future, and power. Just on the edge of the recess sat a six-inch fragment of steel, the broken end of a blade belonging to a long-dead king from the lands to the east. Quendoran legend spoke of this blade, the beloved of Entharion, and its only earthly remnant lay now at the feet of a Kovalli chieftain, unseen by his glazed stare. Near the blade lay a small tool of engraving that fitted snugly into one of the lines of power leaving the northern corner. Sitting alone regally to the Warrior's left was a small white cube, glowing simply with its own inner light.

With all these objects adorning the floor of the cavern in a haphazard fashion, all the necessary aspects were in place for the next step of the ceremony. Slowly, with ghostlike care, each of the four stood up in turn and began to enact a most graceful and eerie dance. As each priest and the Warrior glided from corner to corner in the chamber, they occasionally bent, picking up certain objects and handing them to their neighbors. In an intricate web forming an ancient juggling act, each and every object soon passed through every hand, as all the participants in turn unwittingly performed a necessary deed on their newest object with something already in their possession. This part of the Brith-nel-fhet finished, the four turned away from each other and look outward to the walls of the cavern and beyond, imagining the lands that lay to the north, south, east and west.

It was then that the gods spoke.

They would awake hours later with no recollection of the anything after the drinking of the potion. All four participants would be suffering from an intensely aching head and painfully unfocused eyes. The Warrior Ath-gar-nel would notice an acute soreness in the muscles of his

arm and hand. Resting inconspicuously in each of the four corners were the fur pouches, closed and seemingly untouched. None of the mysterious objects were in sight, returned to the pouches by four pairs of hypnotized hands. Surprisingly the oil lamp still burned brightly, none of the fuel gone even after nearly an entire day in the cavern. Ath-gar-nel stirred first, raising his head and blinking his eyes, in time to notice the other three shifting in their recesses and returning to consciousness.

Cautiously, with the patience he was well-noted for, the Warrior Ath-gar-nel rose to his feet, searching his memory for the details that seemed to be eluding him. The bowl of liquid lay before him, nearly empty. Had he just partaken of the potion a moment before, or had something taken place in the meantime? And what of this aching in his arm? As he thought back to the beginning of the ceremony and to his feelings then, he remembered his initial skepticism. He had worried about the truth of the Brith-nel-fhet. Examining those feelings again, he frowned, realizing he was no closer to the truth than at any time in the six years leading up to the ceremony. Looking around and gauging the expressions of the other three, it was apparent that none of the participants had awakened with any answers to the questions that plagued them so.

And so it seemed that the Brith-nel-fhet ceremony had been a failure, a lie, and now Ath-gar-nel must extinguish the oil lamp that lay before him and return to the outer world. He must face the harsh Kovalli sun and the hopeful, expectant eyes of his family and tribe. He would have nothing to tell them, and he could give no hope for the future. Slowly his mood worsened. Even the peacefulness that still shrouded his mind after the hypnotic sleep soon left him, chased away by demons of frustration and anger.

Moving forward to the center of the chamber he looked into the eyes of the high priest across from him, hoping to find some consolation in the well-springs of knowledge he was so used to finding there. Instead he saw only hollowness and doubt. The four stood together closely, as if by huddling with one another in silence they could banish away the famine and death that had brought them into this chamber at the start of the day.

The priest from the eastern recess near the cavern's entryway was the last to walk toward the lamp after waking up. His body was aged and frail, and had been so even before the start of the six years that had crippled the Nezgeth. The honor of being able to participate in a Brith-nel-fhet stood as an important event to him and his family, possibly the last great act in a long and holy life. Waking to find that nothing had changed nearly emptied the poor man of all spirit left within him, and so he moved forward slowly, with a heavily burdened heart. His path toward the center of the room moved over a line of power that he traced with his eyes, his head bent to the ground. When the line on the floor met the carven mandala that held the oil lamp, he raised his head and his eyes, avoiding the gaze of the two standing on either side. Looking past the priest walking towards him, his stare came to rest finally on the far wall and the western side of the chamber.

And the carvings there.

New images now graced the western wall.

The intricate patterns and pictographs engraved in the ancient stone swept to the south from the eastern entrance and had previously come to a stop just short of the western corner of the room. Now, flowering images, bold drawings of noble deeds and heroic action stood firmly, peacefully, continuing well into the northwestern corner of the chamber.

The gods had indeed spoken.

Staring in disbelief at first and then pointing excitedly, the stooped old priest moved with renewed enthusiasm toward the western wall to examine the pictorial tale of this, the most recent Brith-nel-fhet. Rushing up quickly behind him came the other three, Ath-gar-nel in particular

moving quite close to the wall, seeking whatever inspiration awaited him. Leaning forward, digging the fingers of both hands into the cracks of the wall, the Nezgeth Warrior examined the drawings that now stood in the wall before him.

Just where the previous engravings ended on the left stood the newest symbol, a round pulsating object, clearly the angry sun god punishing the Nezgeth tribe. Then the six notches in the wall for the years of suffering, followed by the symbol for the Brith-nel-fhet ceremony itself. Farther to the right stood a tall, fierce man, wearing the robes of the Warrior and facing his numerous opponents fearlessly, determined to vanquish them all. Then came many symbols, all crowded together in a very short span of wall. Voyage, mountains, war, death, another great Warrior, the symbol for magic, and once, then again, then finally three times repeated, the compass rose with the eastern arm firmly grasping the spear of justice and retribution.

The meaning of the new carvings was clear. Ath-gar-nel understood and he was pleased. A new direction lay in store for the Nezgeth tribe. No longer would the Warrior lead his peoples to the south for petty water squabbles with vicious natives. The gods had decreed a new course toward victory, to the east. Over the mountains he would lead them and into the valleys beyond. They would escape the wrath of the sun and earn the pride of the gods once again.

Ath-gar-nel turned to move out of the cave at last. The lands to the east awaited, and already he could hear the call of his destined opponent, king of the far lands, Zylon the Aged.

Zylon the Aged

Book Two

“A sure sign of ignorance and stupidity in life is the attainment of high political office...”

-From the Social Treatises of Farn Fzort, Volume 7D

The Mayor of Galepath was a short, round man. What little hair he had lay hidden, nested behind his absurdly immense, flapping ears. His obscenely chubby arms rested on a strong wooden chair like two dying whales on a dry beach, and his legs could barely be seen under the shadow of his stomach's immense bulk. His stunted growth and the greatly-proportioned furniture of the mayoral office around him combined to give the impression of hiding, not only from enemies both real and imagined, but from any kind of unexpected intrusion into his dream-world, the playground of city government.

The eighteenth member of his family to hold Galepath's highest office, Umberthar Spildo had already made his mark in history as surely the weakest and least effective of that long line of Spildos. In the peculiar form of democracy that had developed in Galepath before the creation of Quendor, time after time, generation after generation, one Spildo would hold office for several long, prosperous terms, and then quite unexpectedly announce his decision to decline re-election. At that moment, quite conveniently, that Spildo's most favored son would step forward and announce his candidacy. Thus for almost six hundred years there had been an unbroken string of uncontested elections as the city government became more and more hereditary.

However, city historians and others close to the political scene had begun to place well-advised wagers. If there was one Spildo in all of Galepath history that could manage to lose an uncontested election, this Umberthar fellow was that one.

Upon his initial election, he had insisted on complete control of all city administrative affairs, proceeding to single-handedly create the worst series of tactical blunders imaginable. Mistaking a royal seal of King Zylon for the stamp from the Fishmonger's Guild, he summarily revoked the baffled king's right to go fishing anywhere within two hundred bloits of Galepath. Greatly overestimating his own popularity, he spent millions of zorkmids from the city treasury to cordon off Bittut Avenue and organize festivities for a massive parade and rally in his honor. No one came. Mathematics never having been one of the mayor's strong suits, he soon proceeded to do some erroneous number crunching, arriving at the conclusion that all his citizens should give up 124% of their annual income to the city tax coffers. Of course this presented no problem to the Galepath natives, who, intelligent as their mayor was inept, quickly decided to do some creative number crunching of their own.

All of this was just the beginning, and in two short terms Umberthar Spildo quickly gained a reputation as the city's least popular mayor of all time. Even in all his immense naiveté he could not help but be aware of the unavoidable difficulties in the upcoming election. If he were to lose the Galepath vote of confidence, the city would be without a mayor. Worse still from his point of view, the Spildo family would be without a house and home for the first time in six hundred years. In his own feeble way he had begun to take precautions, certain measures to ensure his continued political success, not the least of which was a poorly disguised attempt to gain votes in exchange for a lowering of certain individual's exorbitant tax dues.

Also ranking among Umberthar's interesting political moves were his repeated attempts to shore up his support in the other cities of Quendor. In a rare moment of insight, he had realized that the people of Galepath, firm believers in the union of their city and Mareilon, were likely to be very impressed by an endorsement of Spildo by Mareilon's government. For weeks, emissaries had traveled back and forth between the two proud metropolises, exchanging vaguely phrased, tricky political communiqués. So far all these efforts on Spildo's part had produced no visible results. In fact, his ambassador's latest mission had taken a very sour turn. The Mareilon mayor, Hegilburg, had flatly refused to see him, and had in fact turned him away right at his doorstep. Instead the emissary had been left to wander the streets of Mareilon, only to come across the recent rally staged by Zarfil and his supporters.

Quickly realizing that he had stumbled across one of the most important political events in his career, the emissary to Mareilon had watched the entire rally and then returned to Galepath in record time. Soon he stood in the office of the mayor himself, giving his report.

The mayor's emissary was tall and lean, with a hungry, wolfish look about him. Having come directly from the long Mareilon road without even so much as a change of clothes and a bath, the dust of travel had gathered around him and settled in a fine layer of grit. Resting his hands on Spildo's large mayoral desk, he bent forward with a sense of urgency, succinctly breaking down the details of Zarfil's heated speech in a manner simple enough for the mayor to follow.

"He urged the people of Galepath to rise up in revolution and throw you out of office."

The wolfish messenger's words came flying out of his mouth like spears seeking a target. Umberthar Spildo sat back in his seat, the ancient wood creaking with his massive weight. At first he had little to say in response to the news from Mareilon. When the confusion wore off, he managed to stammer a few hurried questions.

"What? What does he care about Galepath, or me for that matter? I've never met him, not even once. I don't understand."

The wolf's tongue moved carefully over his lips, as he shuffled and uncomfortably considered his next words.

"Well, he seems to be intent on ending the union between this city and Mareilon. He feels that the Kingdom of Quendor was never a legitimate institution, and he intends to secede from the union."

Confusion hits the mayor again. He frowns.

"Cut the mumbo-jumbo and get to the point. What does he want?"

Sighing impatiently, the emissary tried again. "Simply put, he wants power and he wants you out of power. Should he ever gain control of Mareilon, he threatens to march immediately against this city and destroy it. In simple terms, it sounds like this Zarfil fellow is carrying around a four-hundred year old grudge."

Grudge, thought the emissary. That's a simple enough word for our dearly beloved mayor.

Indeed, the concept did seem to register. Umberthar's eyes widened, and, cocking his head thoughtfully to the right, he spoke again. "What do you think his chances are?"

Considering the issue carefully before answering, the emissary slowly replied with, "Well, he appears to have a fair amount of support among the people of the city itself, at least judging from the turn-out and applause at the rally. As for actually gaining control of the city itself, it does seem unlikely, at least given the present circumstances. In any case, I'd be hesitant to underestimate him. He did boast of many impressive connections, including several spies in this city."

The mayor leaned forward quickly.

“Spies? In THIS city? Where?”

“Well, he didn’t say precisely. He could be bluffing. We don’t really know for certain.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do about this? What else did he say?”

“I’ve given you the basic essence of his talk. As for what we can do, I suggest a wait-and-see approach. This could be simply a momentary upsurge, tiring itself out within a few days. I think there’s no need to get worked up about it just yet.”

“No need? Are you kidding? This is... this is... awful.”

The emissary eyed his mayor skeptically.

“Awful,” he repeated. He seemed to have found a word that worked for him.

Suddenly coming alive with action, Spildo stood up and began ranting off a quick list of orders to the surprised emissary. “I want you to take charge of a group, a task force, a committee to report to me all news about this Zarfil character. I don’t want anything to happen without being told about it. And I want you to personally coordinate a search for these spies he was talking about. Look everywhere! Search the basements, kitchens, attics, the whole works. Every man, woman, and child in Galepath should be put under heavy scrutiny in order to locate the traitors.”

Spildo halted his rampage abruptly, letting loose an exhausted sigh. He had run out of impressive vocabulary words.

“Sir, I don’t think that a search force is such a good idea.”

“And why not, eh? We need to find these people, and you’re the best one for the job, unless you’ve got something to hide.”

Surprised by the insinuation, the ambassador took a step back and began to stutter out a response. “No, not at all. It’s just that, well, this is an extremely large city. The search you propose, it could take years.”

“Well then I suggest you get right to it,” order the mayor in annoyance.

At that moment a burly, heavily armored guard opened the office door. The city guards being almost as intelligent as the city mayors, the guard had of course forgotten to knock. In many respects, that can be considered a good thing. One knock probably would have broken the door irreparably. In any case, the mayor was not amused.

“What? What do you want?” he yelled out

Impassive as the mayor’s desk, the guard replied, “Bolbo Ikth and Litbo Mumblehum from the University here to see you, sir.”

“Hhmm? Oh yes, of course. About those Scrolls. Send them right in.” As the guard nodded, executing complex and precise military maneuvers on his way back out the door, Spildo turned to the emissary, surprised that he had yet to run off to carry out his orders, and said, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

The tall man nodded with annoyance and began to walk out.

“On second thought,” called the mayor, “maybe you’d better stay and hear this. It might be interesting.”

Pulling back from the door in response to the mayor’s command, the emissary eyed Litbo and Bolbo Ikth suspiciously as they walked timidly into the office. Litbo of course had never been in the mayor’s office before and was quite impressed, at least by the office, not the mayor. Bolbo on the other hand had shared a close relationship with the Spildo family for many years, and was quite familiar with the office and its lavish furnishings.

As Litbo's eyes wandered from the intricate wall hangings to the deep, richly colored wooden desks and chairs, Ikth moved forward toward the mayor, intent on his business. Briskly shaking hands with Umberthar Spildo, the University security chief turned around to introduce Mumblehum, only to find him peering with curiosity at a display stand on the far wall, filled with an impressive collection of very old and very official-looking city documents. The historian in Litbo had been brought to the surface, and Ikth had to pull the man away from the display and back to the mayor to start the meeting.

Introductions were made all around, the emissary to Bolbo, the emissary to Litbo, and finally the mayor to Litbo. The emissary, it was revealed, traveled under the remarkable name of Weaseldorf Foom. No one in his family would ever be able to figure out exactly what a weaseldorf was, but it had sounded good at the time.

Once the formalities were out of the way, Bolbo quickly summarized the situation for Mayor Spildo. "The Scrolls of Fizbin have been stolen from the Galepath University Library, along with several other works of great importance. We're here to discuss with you the steps we should take to recover the lost Scrolls."

"The Scrolls of Fizbin, eh?" the mayor grunted with barely concealed disinterest. "What in the name of the Great Brogmoid are they?"

Bolbo Ikth began to reply, but then deferred to Litbo, the authority on the subject.

"Many centuries ago a mysterious prophet known as Fizbin experienced a visitation by the god we call Eru, father of the Implementors. Eru gave to this Fizbin extensive knowledge of magic, certain mysterious powers of life giving and immortality, the ability to foresee and describe certain events in the distant future, and a remarkably thorough knowledge of geography that remains unequalled even today."

Umberthar Spildo sat motionless in his chair, eyes staring off somewhere in the distance.

Litbo continued, ignoring his mayor's inattentiveness. "The text of the Scrolls are only partially translated, but nevertheless are of extreme interest to the historical and religious communities."

Shaking himself back to attention, the mayor got right to the point. "So someone stole them, eh?"

"Well, to be honest we're not really sure," Litbo told him. The campus security chief cast an annoyed glance at the librarian, who hastily amended, "Theft was Mr. Ikth's idea at first. I suppose I have to agree, but it just doesn't feel right."

"What do you mean exactly by 'feel right'?" This came from the emissary, Weaseldorf himself, who now sensed that with the mayor's incredibly short attention span, he (the emissary) might have to make an effort to keep the conversation alive.

Litbo, glad for the opportunity to look away from the mass of human flesh resting in the mayoral chair, eagerly turned to Weaseldorf Foom and replied. "Well, it's just that thievery is such an act of malice and spite, directed against the Scrolls, the Library, and even the city itself. I can't imagine anyone having such negative feelings against us."

Something stirred within the mayor's bowels. Plenty of people had negative feelings towards him, and suddenly he was able to relate to the conversation again.

"Hhmm," the mayor pondered. "Don't you think lots of people would have something to gain by stealing the Scrolls. I mean, if they're so valuable, there must be something to it."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," burst out Bolbo Ikth. "The Scrolls mean so much to the religious community. Conceivably someone could hold the Scrolls and demand a very high ransom for them."

Thinking aloud along the lines of Bolbo's idea, the emissary Foom added, "Or maybe a private collector just wanted to add a prize artifact to his bookshelf. Even if the translations aren't complete yet, it would still make a hell of a conversation piece."

The mayor could feel himself getting caught up in the investigative thrill, and spoke again. "Or, if they're so valuable as an historical piece, maybe another library or museum is behind the theft."

Bolbo Ikth nodded at his friend's thought. "Send out one of their more stealthy employees to appropriate the Scrolls, and no one would be the wiser. Wait a few years for the commotion to die down, and they could proudly announce the newest addition to their priceless shelves."

"But they? They who?" Litbo wondered. "There aren't any other libraries or museums around, at least not in this city."

An excited gleam appeared in the emissary's eyes. "Not in this city, maybe, but definitely in Mareilon."

"Zarfil," muttered the mayor, making a remarkable mental leap.

"Yes," Weaseldorf Foom agreed. "Zarfil. It would make sense. He has a lot to gain from the affair."

Bolbo and Litbo looked back and forth from the mayor to the emissary, confused. "Zarfil? Who's Zarfil? What's going on?"

Foom removed from the mayor the burden of having to form intricate sentences into a coherent reply by answering the question himself. "Zarfil, the renegade prince of Mareilon. On my latest visit to that city I had the opportunity to witness a political rally organized by him and his supporters. It was quite a spectacle, I can assure you. He demanded complete control of Mareilon as the rightful claimant to its throne, and he also called for an end to the Kingdom of Quendor and the immediate overthrow of Umberthar Spildo, our own mayor."

Litbo and Bolbo both were taken aback by this news of the turbulent situation in Mareilon, Bolbo particularly so. He understood the ramifications of those events upon his friend Spildo's already shaky hold on the Galepath mayoralty. Litbo, not quite as disturbed by the prospect of losing his mayor, got right to the point.

"So what does any of that have to do with the Scrolls?" he inquired in his innocent, wide-eyed way.

"Don't you see?" Ikth shot back with a hint of apprehension in his voice. "If this Zarfil hoodlum has managed to grab the Scrolls, this could lead to a major conflict. With control of the library's works of Fizbin, he will have the religious community eating out of his hands. With all this fuss about the Brogmoid and the quakes we've been having lately, he'll become a messiah. And what if he can figure out a way to understand the rest of the Scrolls? He'd be the master of a frightening power. It would be disastrous."

"I still don't see any proof," Litbo complained, shaking his head. "Why would he be able to understand the Scrolls when generations of our best scholars have failed? And after all," gesturing to Weaseldorf, "if you saw him in Mareilon, how could he have taken the Scrolls? He's probably never even been to Galepath."

"When he was boasting of his many connections among the high powers of Mareilon, he also mentioned several spies in his employ that he insists have been at work in Galepath itself. We are not certain of the truthfulness of such claims, but in light of this theft, I suggest that it becomes a very likely possibility."

Litbo moved his lips in a silent oh, and could think of no reply.

Foom was the next to speak, slowly putting into words a question that had been bothering him since the start of the meeting. "Mr. Ikth, you mentioned that in addition to these Scrolls of Fizbin, our thief made off with several other items. What, specifically?"

Bolbo gestured to the librarian, allowing him to field the question. "Well," Litbo answered, "the first missing book I noticed was the first volume in a biography of Mysterion the Brave. Later on, when I noticed the missing scrolls, it became clear that one Entharion original, one of his works on dreams, had been taken too. At first I thought that some researcher might have borrowed them without telling me, but they never did turn up."

"A biography of Mysterion, you say, and a book about dreams, plus the Fizbin Scrolls." The Galepath emissary pursed his lips thoughtfully before continuing. "I wonder. Is there any underlying connection between these works that I'm not grasping?"

Litbo blinked in surprise. He clearly hadn't given the issue much thought before now, too frustrated by the absence of the books themselves to be worried about any connection between the works. "Not that I can see. Let me think. The three are all written by different authors. That much is certain. And the subject matters vary greatly. We keep the Entharion and the Scrolls both in the supernatural section, but they don't really relate in any way. And the third book is common history. Both the biography and *Sleeping Your Way to Power* have been copied and reprinted many times. We only keep them around because students like to consult the originals. I don't know what it could be."

"But the originals themselves are very valuable, are they not?" asked the emissary.

"Yes. Yes," answered the mayor, suddenly an authority on ancient manuscripts. "If Zarfil were to sell those books to a collector, he'd stand to make quite a lot of money. It would help him considerably."

Bolbo Ikth nodded in agreement, but Foom wasn't as quick to listen to his mayor's words. "When I saw him in Mareilon, he did not seem short of cash. He was very well connected. I'm not sure he'd have to stoop to library theft to make a few zorkmids."

While Litbo was left to figure out if his library had just been insulted, the mayor himself exploded at Foom's disagreement.

"Damn it, Foom. Listen to me. You yourself said Zarfil would have a lot to gain from the affair. Why are you disagreeing with me all of a sudden?"

Surprised by the mayor's sudden outburst, the emissary did not know how to react. Stammering, he replied, "I'm not disagreeing. I'm just not sure about what his motives are, if he is indeed connected with the theft. I'm also not sure what we can do about it."

"He's got plenty of motivation, I'll tell you that much," the mayor said, waving a finger at Weaseldorf. "You said he wants me out of office, right? Probably so he can take control of this city and have it for his own once he's conquered Mareilon. He knows there's an election coming up here. He must. The timing is too perfect for him."

"What does the election have to do with the Scrolls of Fizbin?" Litbo puzzled aloud.

"The theft places our mayor in a very difficult position," Foom explained. "Those Scrolls are one of our city's greatest intellectual treasures. If it came out that the mayor didn't make a successful effort to regain the Scrolls, it'll be politically ruinous for him, which is just what Zarfil wants."

"Those bastards from Mareilon have got some explaining to do to me," growled the mayor suddenly.

"Sir?"

“Just when we were making progress. I finally thought I could get that Hegilburg and his city government to support me. But then they turn you away without a word, while letting that kind of rally take place uninterrupted, in the heart of their city.”

“What are you going to do?” the emissary asked.

Turning to the two confused officials from the University, Spildo stood up with great effort and began to walk them toward the door. “Thank you both for coming. You’ve brought us important information, and I won’t forget that.”

“But what are you going to do?” Bolbo said, echoing the emissary.

“I’m going to take action, the kind of action that should have been taking against Mareilon long ago. With election time coming up, this will make a perfect example to the voters of how well our city government can stand up during a crisis such as this. When I recover the Scrolls, the religious community will be tickled pink. Brogmoidists and Implementarians alike will turn out in record numbers to vote me back in to office, and my friend, I will owe it to you.”

Bolbo Ikth was too baffled by the undeserved praise to muster a reply, but Litbo remained focused enough to mutter stubbornly, “But what if he didn’t steal the Scrolls?”

Spildo smiled and smoothly replied, “Then we’ll just have to deal with that when it presents itself. I’ll be more than happy to meet with you again another time to discuss the possibility.”

Ushering the two out the door amidst repeated assurances to keep in close contact with Litbo and visit his friend Ikth at the soonest opportunity, the mayor then turned and walked intently back to his desk. Pulling a blank parchment from his left-hand drawer and dabbing his quill in fresh ink, he began scribbling away furiously, all the while ignoring his trustworthy emissary. As Foom edged closer to the desk, hoping to catch a glimpse of his mayor’s writing, Spildo began to read along with himself in a soft, unconscious voice.

“...and thus resolved that the continued allowance of Zarfil, a traitor to Quendor, to freely campaign against the city of Galepath constitutes aiding and abetting a criminal.”

Weaseldorf frowned to himself, worried at the tone of Spildo’s proclamation.

The mayor continued. “Be it also resolved that the recent disappearance from the Galepath University Library of several priceless works, among them the Scrolls of Fizbin, can be nothing other than the vile work of Zarfil against our beloved city. It is proclaimed henceforth that the city-state of Galepath...”

City-state? That term hadn’t been used in a mayoral proclamation in almost four hundred years.

“...will employ any and all means necessary to ensure the recovery of its rightful property, and that if the criminal Zarfil is not apprehended and brought to justice, and the Scrolls returned to Galepath immediately, that the mayor of Galepath, Umberthar Spildo, officially authorizes the use of force against that city of traitors and criminals, Mayor Hegilburg’s...”

Halfway through scribbling the last word, Spildo turned to his emissary with a puzzled look on his face.

“Foom, how do you spell Mareilon?”

“Few are wholly dead:
Blow on a dead man’s embers
And a live flame will start.”
-Robert Grave

The sun hung precariously over Largoneth Castle, just reaching the highest point in its ascent before beginning its plummet down behind the western peaks. With the sun glowing down on the castle from its overhead position, the nervous, uncertain people inside seemed to feel a similar sense of suspension, a calm before the now inevitable downwards rush to bring their lives into chaos. There was an endless stream of activity back and forth in nearly all the rooms of the castle, as the court magicians and healers continued their attempts to discover a way to bring the ailing Zylon back to consciousness. Messages were sent back and forth, orders hurriedly given and obeyed, Council meetings held, all in a frantic rush. The sun, looking down from its vantage point on the activity below, would notice only a meaningless scurry of motion, eerily similar to the way an anthill seems to come alive the more one watches the ants in action.

Focusing in on the southwestern tower of Largoneth, it becomes apparent that the center of the action was still Zylon’s bedchamber. Gathered around him in the immediate area of the bed itself worried a trio of court physicians, trying all kinds of obscure methods in an all-out effort to help the king. An intricate labyrinth of hollow reed tubing bent around the surface of the bed and the king’s still body. Zylon had been turned over and rested in a deep sleep on his stomach. A few minutes earlier he had been force fed a ghastly looking greenish liquid concoction, and to the satisfaction of the on-looking doctors, the liquid caused his body to wrack in a series of dry-heaving convulsions. Portions of his last undigested meal had fallen from his mouth into a wooden basin sitting below his propped up neck and head. Stirring the foul smelling remains with a glass rod, one of the physicians kept a careful eye out for the telltale signs of millith disease and rotgrub infection, only two among the long list of suspected maladies. At the other end of the bed a physician patiently monitored a reed tube entering the rear of the ancient king’s body. Holding the visible end of the tube in one hand, he used his other to slowly pour in a dilute mixture of spenseweed juice and gumpwort fungus. Crowded in between these two Largoneth doctors stood a third who leaned forward towards the king, using a sharp, tiny blade to cut a small incision in Zylon’s right wrist. Squeezing the wrist with an experienced touch, he removed into another wooden container the amount of blood he felt would successfully eliminate the ill humors molesting the king’s body.

In another room in the castle, far removed from the nervous tension of the attempted healings, the king’s Council of advisors sat pensively around a sturdy wood table in their meeting chambers. It was the first opportunity for the group to meet as a whole since the crisis had initially broken out. General Griffspotter had been caught up in a flurry of activity surrounding the complete closing off of Castle Largoneth. It was intensely difficult to ensure that food and news from the outer world continued to pump into the castle like blood into a healthy body, but yet at the same time prevent news of the king’s illness from leaking out into the countryside.

Several Council members had debated the wisdom of keeping the entire affair a secret. If Zylon were to die, the people of Quendor would hear the news eventually, when the time came to coronate a new king. And if, somehow, Zylon were to live on and come out of his illness a

healthy man, the populous would be filled with renewed faith in their king's immortality. Griffspotter had argued back with the intensity of an angry orc and the stubbornness of a mule.

"What if," he had asked hypothetically, "some peasant with an overblown sense of self-importance hears the news that the king is dying, and gets the bright idea of trying to finish the job and take the throne for himself? It'll be open rebellion."

The magician Dinbar chuckled slyly and said, "Griffspotter, you've stationed half the Quendoran army in this castle, within shouting distance of the king. If a self-important peasant, as you put it, decided to finish the job, the only way in hell he'd get within a bloit of the king would be by joining the army. You've got nothing to worry about."

"All the same," Griffspotter responded, "I'd just feel a lot better about this whole situation knowing we had control over every aspect of it. I don't want any messy loose ends floating quiet up until that point. "Yes, Zilbo, you are right. Of course you are right. I know his family well, or at least I did. You may not know this, but in the early days he was extremely... how shall I say... procreative. As he got older, wife after wife kept dying on him, but through it all he managed to squeeze out fourteen kids. Eight boys, I think, and six girls. Or was it the other way around?"

He halted, puzzling over the math of long dead previous generations. Dinbar the mage encouraged him with, "And the children. What happened to them?"

Hargood grunted in disgust and continued with the tale. "Well, they were spoiled, that's what happened to them. Growing up in the castle, son of a king and all that... they were lazy. Never had any sex." The other four Council members started at Hargood's surprising words, and leaned forward to pay closer attention. "Only two or three of the ungrateful brats gave him any grandchildren at all, and of those I think only one kept the line alive. I'm sure you all heard about it. Poor Zylon outlived his last great-great-something-great-something-grandson when he died sixteen years ago. No children, no heirs, no nothing." Hargood shook his head in disgust at the lack of sexual drive that had been so common in Zylon's family.

Worried, Zilbo pressed for more details. "But surely there must be some great-aunts somewhere, or some obscure line of the family nobody pays any attention to."

Hargood soon eliminated that hope. "No such luck. In the early days, back in the first century, they still thought he would live a normal life just like everyone else, and they kept careful track of that sort of thing. The records are still on file in the library. Zylon's bloodline is dead."

Satisfied, Griffspotter once again seized control of the conversation. "Well, that brings us right back to where we were. In the past, when Zylon took time to visit remote parts of the kingdom, the five of us were always left in charge of the affairs of state and the control of Largoneth Castle. We are the heirs to the throne."

"And just how do you propose to pick the next king?" Zilbo asked with curiosity. "Surely, the five of us can't rule together. And we've already tried Hargood's technique of mind- probe. Apparently Zylon himself hasn't even given much thought to the issue."

"Well," the general mused, "it will be a difficult decision, but one we will have to make eventually. Zylon won't stay that way forever, and we need to be prepared."

"You say he won't stay that way forever, but I don't think we've exhausted all the possibilities yet." Dinbar spoke thoughtfully, his magician's mind mulling over mysterious, forgotten lore that might help them in this dark time.

"What do you have in mind?" Zilbo asked.

"I've ordered two of the castle magicians, Eable and Dirinboz, to make preparations to cast a Spell of Linking. It's a very complicated and involved spell, but one the three of us have

performed many times with a high degree of success. Basically, we will take the essence of Zylon's mentality, his soul if you will, and provide for it a magical link to a physical object other than his own body. In this case we will probably use an orb or another such object with high magical potential."

"But what's the point of all that?" demanded the general.

"Well, it will provide Zylon's spirit with a certain amount of safety independent of any damage being done to his actual physical body. Of course, if the body does really die, the orb won't keep Zylon's soul alive for more than a few weeks, but it does give us a little bit of a safety cushion to fall back on if we need to."

"In the meantime," Zilbo began, "I'd still like to figure out what exactly is wrong with him. Have the doctors had any luck? Are we any closer?"

Gladius, who had once entertained notions of a career as a healer himself, answered that question. "They're trying all the known healing techniques, and even inventing some new ones on the spot. They've emptied out and cleansed his bowels from both ends, but that didn't help anything. They bled him, but that never seems to work anyway. I don't know. I think the healing science is out of its league with this one. We just don't know what's wrong."

"Well," mused Zilbo, "if it's natural death, there's nothing we can do."

"Natural death?" Griffspotter smiled. "It's about time. He's certainly had his fair share of long life."

Ignoring Griffspotter's blunt rudeness, Zilbo continued running through the list of possibilities. "But if it's not natural death, of old age or something like that, then that confuses things even more."

"There might have been something wrong with the king's meal, with the food itself," Dinbar suggested.

"I thought about that too. The doctors are analyzing what's left of the meal, including the portions that were already eaten. So far they haven't turned anything up, but I went ahead and talked to Endeth..."

"Who?" blurted out the half-deaf Hargood of Mareilon.

"Endeth. Endeth Belzgar, the king's handservant," Zilbo explained patiently. "He prepares the king's meals every day. He has for years. When I asked him about the possibility he seemed really disturbed by the thought. In fact he was very worried that the king might be ill because of something he had done wrong with the food. I assured him that there wasn't really any proof, but that didn't seem to make him feel any better. In any case, just because the healers don't find anything dangerous doesn't mean that it's not there. The king is dying, and we have to keep that as one of the possibilities."

"Is the king dying?" asked Fzort. "I mean... really dying. It doesn't look like he's changed for the worse since the first time we saw him. He could stay that way forever."

Shaking his head, Dinbar responded. "No. He has to eat. Without his body fully awake enough to chew and swallow, he'll starve to death within a few weeks."

"It's a curse, I'm telling you. It's a curse," Hargood muttered.

"Yeah," Griffspotter snorted, "we're cursed by Zylon's damn longevity."

"No, I think Hargood as a point. A very serious one at that." The magician Dinbar paused to think before continuing. "There's quite a lot we don't understand about this world, Griffspotter. It's a very strange place, and the forces of magic make it even stranger. It could be we've been searching in entirely the wrong areas. Zylon shouldn't be dying a natural death now, after four

hundred years, any more than something should have been wrong with his food for the first time in his life. We might be dealing with supernatural interference here.”

“Who would want to put a curse on Zylon?” wondered Zilbo.

“It’s a good question, and it’s worth thinking about what the answer is. If we can get to the heart of the matter before Zylon dies, we might be able to avert the entire crisis.”

A croaking sound came from old Hargood’s dry mouth, a sign he was preparing to speak. “You young folks don’t remember as far back as I do. He’s made his fair share of enemies, I can tell you that much. And I haven’t even been around the entire time he has. Nobody likes kings, you know. Nobody.” Shaking his head, he drifted quietly back into his own private train of thought.

“But which one of these enemies you mention would be a mage powerful enough to cause such damage to Zylon over such a great distance?” asked Dinbar thoughtfully.

“It doesn’t even have to be over such a great distance,” Griffspotter pointed out. “Everyone is open to suspicion, even people within Largoneth itself. Even anyone in this room.”

“Surely you aren’t saying that one of us?” exclaimed Gladius Fzort in surprise.

“I’m not saying anything,” he retorted. “I’m merely pointing out that two of the kingdom’s most powerful magic users are right here among us.”

Of the two powerful magic users, Hargood hadn’t heard Darborn’s words, his eyes barely open and his chin falling upon his chest, and Dinbar merely rolled his eyes in annoyance at the general’s not-so-subtle accusation. Ever practical Zilbo decided to ignore the insinuation altogether. “It seems to me that looking for any kind of guilty party is like searching for a yellow grotch in a hay field. We don’t even know if there really is a guilty party. I’d be much more comfortable focusing on ways to save the king’s life, rather than marching off in search of everybody who’s ever wanted him dead.”

Hargood made a determined effort to shake himself awake, and remarked with amusement, “He joked to me once that if he ever died, he didn’t want some busy-body magician trying to resurrect him. He wanted to go in peace. Now all we can think of doing is bringing him back.”

While the other council members shifted in their chairs, uncomfortable with Hargood’s reminiscings, Dinbar laughed and said, “If that damn resurrection spell would only work once in our lifetimes, I’d want it to be now.”

“Would you two magicians mind letting the rest of us in on your little secret?” Zilbo smiled impatiently.

Dinbar gestured to Hargood, allowing him to answer the question. “Everyone who is trained the arts of magic is told at one time or another about this incredibly complex, ancient process we call resurrection, for lack of a better word.” Hargood stalled, seemingly unable to remember what he was talking about. After letting the other council members hang in suspense for a few moments, he continued. “It’s not really resurrection. It’s hard to explain. If it worked, we would take Zylon’s spirit, his soul, his mind, and bring it into the body another person, a healthy, living individual.”

“What do you mean, ‘if it worked’?” Griffspotter asked skeptically.

Hargood sat quietly for a few minutes, running his tongue over his cracked, parched lips. When it became clear that the effort of discussing the process was too much for the aged advisor, Dinbar continued on his behalf. “The process is extremely risky, erratic. Only perhaps half a dozen magicians in the entire Kingdom are trained in the art, and of those, not one of them has ever reported a single case of successful resurrection.”

“Why? What’s so difficult about it?” Zilbo wondered.

“Well, in many ways the process is similar to what we’ve already begun to do to Zylon with the Spell of Linking, except instead of linking Zylon’s intelligence to an orb, an inert object, the caster tries to link the individual to an entirely new living body. The differences in the process and the casting itself are subtle, but beyond my comprehension. I do know however that the bodies on the receiving end have a high incidence of fighting back, of being unwilling to take on the other spirit. It usually results in two deaths instead of one.”

“And you say you aren’t trained in this procedure?”

“No, not at all. Are you, Hargood?”

“Hhmm, what’s that, my boy?” Hargood mumbled. “Trained in the procedure? I suppose you could say that, in a manner of speaking. It’s one of the many things Elthanor passed on to me and I never had the chance to test out.”

“Great,” Griffspotter drawled sarcastically. “If you’re as good at resurrection as you are at that mind-reading trick you tried earlier, Zylon won’t last the day.”

Hargood missed the insult, already nodding his way back to sleep.

Zilbo spoke. “I’m not so sure I’d be willing to try that procedure. It sounds like putting all of our chances on one roll of the dice. Too risky. There’s got to be some other way.”

Another brief silence settled upon the room before Dinbar put forth his suggestion. “There is one other possibility that I can think of. Of course it has its own risks. It could be very time consuming.”

“Well, out with it then,” Gladius demanded.

“I’m sure we’ve all heard of the Pool of Stasis. Its prominent role in some events in the lands to the south are well documented and still taught in many classrooms. Scholars have assumed it to be a real place, it being mentioned too many times to be a mere legend. The problem is, no one these days seems to know exactly where it is.”

“What the hell good does that do us then?” laughed Griffspotter.

“I’m not sure just yet, but it’s worth pursuing. I am fairly well acquainted with a fellow by the name of Litbo Mumblehum, working down in Galepath at the library there. He had told me many times of these certain scrolls that make very specific reference to the Pool of Stasis. If we could get a look at those scrolls, we might have an answer.”

“An answer to what? So we find this pool of yours. Great. Then what?” Griffspotter seemed unusually opposed to Dinbar’s newest idea.

“As far as we know, the properties of the Pool’s water won’t actually cure the king, by any means,” explained the patient magician. “But it is reasonable to expect that bringing Zylon to the Pool will prevent any more permanent damage being done to his body. Basically it will ensure that the situation doesn’t get any worse. It could conceivably prevent starvation, decay, all the things that would prevent us from continuing our work on him. If none of that works, we’re no worse off because we haven’t actually risked anything. And if it does work, we can keep him that way forever.”

“Forever?” Gladius repeated in shock. “And do what, rule the kingdom ourselves? That’s not acceptable at all. It just avoids the problem indefinitely.”

“I don’t think that’s the point, Gladius,” Zilbo said, speaking for Dinbar. “But it sounds like a good idea. If we can find this Pool, we can stop all our worry about when the king is going to finally kick off. That will give us enough time to draw together our resources, summon every powerful magician and physician from all ends of the kingdom. It will give us some breathing space.”

“That all sounds fine, but we still haven’t settled the issue of the succession to the throne,” General Griffspotter pointed out.

“Damn it,” Zilbo exclaimed. “You’re beating that brogmoid to death. Don’t you understand? If we can get to that Pool and preserve Zylon’s body, we’ll never need to settle that issue. And even if the king does die, forbid, before we can do anything about it, you know how the rules work. We are the king’s council. The five of us will be the Regents of Quendor until we can work it out, with advice from anybody we can talk to. We need to try to be calm about this. There really is no rush.”

A disgruntled and put-off General Griffspotter settled into silence and waited for the Council’s decision. Zilbo took the initiative. “So what’s the next step?”

“Litbo, the librarian I mentioned, will be more than willing to help me out once I arrive at Galepath and from there we can transport the king to wherever the Pool turns out to be. I wouldn’t mind having a little bit of company looking around the library, though.”

Dinbar eyed the Council members expectantly until Zilbo spoke up. “I’d love to come. I haven’t been to Galepath in years. A little trip during all this death and illness business will do me some good.”

“What? You can’t leave now.” Gladius Fzort blurted out.

Zilbo didn’t bother to ask, “Why not?” The answer was clear, at least to Gladius, who was eyeing General Griffspotter suspiciously. There was no love lost between those two Council members, and Gladius had often criticized the General’s bold approaches and desire for power. The recent events only brought the conflict to the front.

“It’s all right, Gladius,” Dinbar said reassuringly. “We’ll only be gone for little more than a day or two. That won’t be nearly enough time for anything to go wrong.”

“It has been speculated that in the early days of the Creation, the Cubes of Foundation were linked through some unknown mystical process to six legendary Pools. The exact nature of these Pools remains unclear even today; tradition has left us only the most vague information concerning these magical bodies of water, the Pool of Stasis and the Pool of Eternal Youth.”

-Froboz Mumber, *The Early Myths of Frobozz*, 880 GUE

The summons from the mayor had come at last. Zarfil and his followers had played their cards just right, and now they marched proudly towards the Citadel itself. As the trio made their way down the main avenue leading up to the Citadel gate, they began to find themselves at the head of an impromptu parade of sorts. The people of Mareilon, knowing that the city government was highly particular about who could gain entrance to the Citadel, were curious to know just what Zarfil was about to do. The mayoral summons had been kept reasonably secret, and now many of the locals walked behind the trio or lined the streets near the entrance to the Citadel as they grew closer to it, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever might happen next.

Many of them of course stood on the tips of their toes hoping to see a confrontation between the rebel contingent of Zarfil, Poulizre the publisher, and the historian Ezkinil, and the guards that stood at the entrance to the heart of the city. They were disappointed and even a little baffled when Zarfil and his companions drew closer to the gate. Recognizing the now-famous “lost prince” of Mareilon, the traditional outfit of six guards pulled back from the gate and formed a corridor, three on either side, through which the three rebels walked confidently.

Whispers went through the crowd at the sight of Zarfil marching freely into the Citadel. Disgruntled citizens try to gain entry on an almost daily basis, only to be turned away by the business end of a spear. This Zarfil must truly have an amazing influence with the city government. It is true, several people remember, that Ezkinil and at one time Poulizre both had free reign of the Citadel as important people who circulated in the highest reaches of the city government. Zarfil on the other hand was a newcomer with no such visible background, and yet the usually formidable guards just melted away at his sight.

Zarfil, smiling wickedly at the sense of bafflement and surprise coming from the small crowd of onlookers behind him, moved forward stridently through the corridor of guards and into the Citadel for the first time in his life. As he walked under the deep, low-hanging arch that made up the frame for the gate itself, the many buildings and convoluted streets that lay sprawled within this inner sanctum became visible to him. Coming to a halt several feet out from under the arch and the massive wall it was a part of, he turned around and gazed at the entire structure from a new vantage point.

Forming the imposing border between the Citadel and the rest of Mareilon sat a hulking wall that extended far to the east and west and then curved northward, looping around to form a slightly curved rectangle of towering stone laced with fortified metal work. The walls were well guarded, not because of any real threat to the safety of those inside, but more out of a sense of tradition that stemmed from the days when the people of Mareilon had been slightly more independent and militaristic. Inside the walls stood rows and rows of government buildings, arranged in a confusing jumble of poor planning and tight space. Everything remotely official and self-important had a branch office among the countless buildings scattered in the far reaches of the Citadel. Departments in charge of horse-drawn vehicles, subsections involved in licenses to sell wiskus products, printing houses ordered to create triplicate request forms for the City of Mareilon Dental Referral Service. The list of various government agencies functioning within the Citadel seemed nearly endless. Not even the Mareilon Postal Offices, protected safely within

the womb of the towering walls, owned records that could begin to describe the location and function of every building here in the heart of the city.

Poulizre and Ezkinil, die-hard veterans who were well-equipped to deal with the city's miasmatic bureaucracy, could find their way around the confusing maze with impressive speed. Zarfil on the other hand was new to the inner workings of the area and stood for a moment in awe. Before him on the immediate left stood a small wooden structure, flimsy looking and temporary in nature, only just erected to deal with government relief of recent Mareilon earthquake victims. Zarfil was well aware of the nature of the "relief" given by the sneering, shifty officials that could be seen lurking around the wood building. It had been the topic of one of his most recent speeches. The Great Brogmoid that held up this world had been restless of late, and many among the Mareilon populace were left homeless and in terrible debt by His destructive movements. The relief agency existed solely to find those who were facing the worst of those difficulties, confiscate their property, sell its assets for the city's profit, and then slam the victims into debtor's prison. One more burning cause for the revolutionary and the discontent.

Over to the right stood a more impressive structure, two stories in height, built of proud brick, with many sculpted balconies gracing the shaded windows. This was an annex of the Mareilon Historical Society, the inside of which Ezkinil had spent most of his adult life wandering through in his duties as Historian. Farther beyond the annex and countless other building in the distance stood the Firestone Mansion, towering powerfully over every surrounding structure in the Citadel. It was in that direction that the trio moved now, quickening their pace. Zarfil walked ahead, quickly filled with an almost youthful enthusiasm, eager to see the rest of the sights that lay before him. Right on his heels marched Poulizre, the female publisher, enjoying the anticipation of an upcoming conflict with the mayor. Mumbling along grouchily behind them walked Ezkinil, keeping his distance from the two and not caring to take part in their occasional ribald jokes. He was perhaps made uncomfortable by the forced proximity to his former rival Poulizre, and was in any case jealous of Zarfil's newfound influence. To be sure, Ezkinil was firm in his condemnation of the Mareilon city government. In that respect he was Zarfil's dedicated servant. But yet there was something about him, something a little too daring, a little too casual, that worried and frightened the aged Historian.

The three had soon weaved their way through the intricate Citadel walks, each marked clearly by street signs in triplicate, and found their way to the front of the Firestone Mansion itself. A vast building, it stretched to the east and west for nearly half the length of the actual Citadel itself, and towered many stories into the sky, tapering into three intricately carved spires that gleamed in the noon-day sun. As the trio of political rebels drew closer to the Mareilon seat of power, each one could feel a sense of awe growing within their hearts. Even Ezkinil and Poulizre, who had seen the sight countless times before, could not help but be moved by the beautifully glowing image before them.

Zarfil felt his eyes widen in awe. Moving to the center of the open courtyard before the palace, he swallowed deeply and read a time-worn, engraven metal plaque set firmly in the grown in honor of the building before him.

Here Stands the Firestone Mansion Built in the Glorious Reign of Zarbonel, Prince of Mareilon and Magistrate of Its Surrounding Outlands.

"Zarbonel," whispered the renegade prince, nearing tears.

“He was one of the first. Zarbonel ruled this city-state nearly eight hundred years ago, long before the wars with Galepath and the King Entharion,” supplied the Historian Ezkinil.

His voice full of emotion, Zarfil looked toward the Mansion and found new energy in the sight. “His blood runs in my veins. His vision is my vision.” He looked toward the Firestone palace built by his ancestor and imagined the way it looked so many centuries ago.

Poulizre, her middle-aged visage shining with a soft smile, looked at the would-be prince with sympathy and said, “You’re coming home, Zarfil. You’re coming home.”

The air filled with excitement and tension as the three stood looking in the direction of the building. Finally Ezkinil shook his wrinkled head and rested his hand on Zarfil’s shoulder. “Not quite yet, I’m afraid. We’re not going to walk in there and have that fool mayor hand us the key to the city. Despite what your friend Poulizre might say, there is a lot of work yet to be done, and you’d better not let your excitement get the better of you.”

Poulizre opened her mouth to snap a quick retort, but evidently thought better of it, looking angrily to the distance. Zarfil pursed his lips, the moment ruined by the increasing tension between the two rivals.

Damn that old man, he thought. His attitude could be a grave risk to us all... but not to worry. He’s certainly nothing I can’t soon take care of.

With a newfound certainty and edge to his temper, Zarfil marched forward briskly to the Mansion’s front door. Unlike the heavily fortified outer wall, the Firestone mayoral building was completely unguarded. It was assumed that anyone that having gotten that far was on a completely legitimate errand. Before entering the tall doors ahead of him, Zarfil stood for a moment in the cool shade created by the Mansion. The entire building had been fashioned out of the highly rare and valuable rosewood, long before the blights had killed off the source trees that grew the precious material. Although a complete understanding of rosewood now lay buried under ages of forgotten knowledge, it was still believed that the strong, marble-like stone that made up the Mansion and other rare rosewood buildings was created in the final stages of the rosewood lifecycle. Early in its life, a member of the extinct species grew like any other tree, but as it got older it began to produce a sort of petrified reddish wood with the strength and texture of good Antharian marble. Only the most well-fashioned magical blades were capable of cutting the rosewood free from its mother tree, allowing it to be carried the many bloits to sites such as this in Mareilon.

Leaving the complex history of the building’s construction behind him, Zarfil followed closely behind Ezkinil and Poulizre, who now guided him with certainty to the mayor’s office. The trio walked unnoticed up several flights of stairs, their feet making soft echoing noises as they moved quickly over the rosewood floor. Soon they found themselves being ushered efficiently past a series of antechambers and into the office of Mayor Hegilburg himself. Looking with interest about the room he observed a scene eerily similar to one being played out in another mayor’s office, many bloits away in Galepath. Seated tightly in between a rosewood desk and a rosewood wall waited Mayor Hegilburg, his feet planted firmly on the rosewood floor. Although not quite as obese and unhealthy looking as his mayoral counterpart Umberthar Spildo, Hegilburg’s face lay hidden beneath years of accumulated dust from excessive and tiring bureaucratic paperwork. On the mayor’s left stood a sharply featured man who looked thin to the point of starvation. It was not known to Zarfil or either of his two comrades that this sickly looking comrade of the mayor’s was actually one of Hegilburg’s spies, his eyes and ears that wandered throughout the people of Mareilon.

This particular ear of the mayor had been present at the first rally several days ago in Beeblebrox Square, and had subsequently followed Zarfil from public appearance to public appearance, listening to his intent speeches with an efficient curiosity, and had soon returned to the Firestone Mansion to report the details to his mayor. Hegilburg's small head quickly filled with news of shadow conspiracies, inevitable revolutions, political convulsions, and numerous traitors in his midst. Already angered by his advisors' insistence that he avoid the Square on the day in question, these further tidings only sparked his desire for action, resulting in the summons that found Zarfil and his companions standing before him at that moment.

All of this of course remained unknown to Zarfil. Eager to dispense with the formalities and find out why he was here, he quickly introduced himself and his companions. Hegilburg squinted at Poulizre carefully, straining to bring back memories of the flare-up that had seen her fall from the favor of the previous mayor. Unable to dredge up the specific details, the mayor shrugged and decided it would be best to welcome flatteringly such an influential and respected publisher. After greeting her and Zarfil he turned back to his rosewood desk, giving the cold shoulder to Ezkinil. The irony was not lost on the assembled company. Ezkinil and the mayor had worked together closely in an official capacity for quite some time, but now with the Chief Historian openly favoring secession from the Kingdom of Quendor, he found himself ignored by the powers-that-be, in much the same way Poulizre had been so many years before.

The social niceties out of the way, the mayor got down to business by directing a pointed question at the renegade prince.

“Just what the hell do you think you're doing, Zarfil?”

Smiling in uncertain surprise, Zarfil replied with, “I beg your pardon?”

“All this weird talk of secession and revolution and war,” the mayor said vaguely, his hands waving. “You can't be serious.”

Poulizre chuckled softly in the background. She had reacted in much the same way when first approached by the lost descendant of princes. This time Zarfil's answer was not as gentle. He exploded at the mayor with, “Serious? You wouldn't know serious if it bit you on the nose! Your idea of serious is a chariot parking violation.”

Even the dour and annoyed old Ezkinil seemed to grow a little more cheery at the sight of the rope-salesman-turned-prince showing up the foolish Mareilon mayor. Hegilburg himself on the other hand was less than amused. “Listen up, young man. I don't take too kindly to having my visitors run wild and insulting me in my own office, but I'll let it pass for the moment. It's not really that important. What is important actually is a simple question I have for you. All these speeches, all this hot air you've been blowing around the last few days. Put it to me simply. What do you want?”

Zarfil's eyes widened in disbelief. “Haven't I made myself perfectly clear?” he answered.

Poulizre, taking great enjoyment from the mayor's readily apparent discomfort, chuckled again and muttered, “Apparently not.”

Expecting and receiving no answer from the mayor to his rhetorical question, Zarfil seized the initiative by answering it himself. “Dear Mister Hegilburg, simply put, I want your job and I want it now.”

Now foaming with rage, the mayor sputtered in reply, “You have the nerve to storm into my office and make demands like that? I'll have you dragged out of here and clapped in irons.”

Amused by Hegilburg's frustration and sensing the tide turning his way, Zarfil replied calmly. “Allow me to point out that this hasn't always been your office. Before the creation of

Quendor, my own ancestors sat behind the table you now dirty with your touch. This office is mine by right.”

Unaware of the true significance of Ezkinil’s presence as Historian, the mayor pointed out that no one had any real proof that Zarfil was a descendant of princes, from Mareilon or any where else.

At that remark, the Historian coughed politely and embarked on a long discourse, naming all the key records that had already been thoroughly analyzed, proving the point beyond a shadow of a doubt. Needless to say, the mayor was unimpressed, or at least unamused. In any case he seemed speechless, for the moment.

“All that’s left now, dear mayor,” smiled Zarfil, “is to give in to the tide of history. I’m going to gain control of this city one way or another, no matter how long it takes. I’d just as soon do it the easy way, and only you can make that possible.”

“You ask the ridiculous,” retorted Hegilburg.

“Maybe so, but I doubt it. You’ll see how ridiculous I seem when I storm my way back in here at the head of a column of your own armed guards. You know as well as I do that this city hasn’t seen any fighting or bloodshed in years. No feeble defense of yours will be match enough for the fighting force that is even now preparing to muster behind me.”

Hegilburg paused to consider that for a moment before speaking again. “You might be right there, but our lord the King Zylon isn’t very likely to let that last for long. Once he gets wind of what’s going on, he’ll be down here with the whole army of Quendor breathing down your back. Or hadn’t you thought of that?”

“Don’t worry,” reassured Zarfil. “I have thought of that, and it won’t do you a bit of good. By the time Zylon gets here, you’ll be long dead.”

The threat did not sit well with Hegilburg. “Now you listen to me—” he had time to yell before being cut off.

“No, you listen to me,” Zarfil exploded. “It’s time for you to stop ordering me around. You don’t have the upper hand here. I’m standing in this office talking to you now because it’s convenient for me to do so. You didn’t force me here and you have no power over me, any more than some distant mythical king at Largoneth does. Your time has come and so has his.”

Zarfil’s two companions stirred uneasily behind him. It did not pass unnoticed to them that this was the first time anyone had talked about actually killing King Zylon. The thought was troublesome.

“Okay, look Zarfil, I’ll put it to you in another way,” the mayor tried. “Personal family history aside for the moment, what possible good will it do to abolish Quendor. The unity with Galepath and Largoneth has brought internal peace, protection from foreigners, even a great deal of new economic prosperity. Why end that all now?”

“Why? Because it’s a charade. The wars against Galepath never ended. Entharion only tricked everyone into believing they did by lulling us into a false sense of peace. In the meantime, what has happened? We’ve suffered through the incredibly long reigns of three kings from, guess where, Galepath. There will never be a king from Mareilon, no, because Entharion was too clever for that. He ensured that for centuries to come his city of weaklings could continue to dominate over Mareilon by leading us to believe we took part in an alliance of equals. How long are we going to let this last?”

“Zarfil, there must surely be a way you can bring this complaint forward legitimately,” the mayor offered.

The renegade prince snorted with derision and continued to rant about how the people of Mareilon were ignored and trampled under the tyrannical boot heel of Galepath. He finally concluded with, "The only answer is revolution, and the only time is now."

A pause followed as the mayor walked around his desk and stood directly in front of Zarfil. The two opponents looked deeply into each others eyes, wondering what would come next. Ezkinil, Poulizre, and the mayoral henchman seemed to fade into the walls as the moment focused on the two in the center of the room.

The mayor spoke slowly, finally finding the strength to say the words he had been dancing around for the entire meeting. "I am not going to be remembered by future historians as the mayor that let a revolution start in his own city under his own nose without doing anything to stop it. I'm warning you right now that if you and your people don't crawl back quietly to wherever you came from, I'll do whatever it takes to see you hanged. I'm not going to do it now, at least not yet. I want to give you just enough time to see your dreams crumble around you, and then, just when you've realized how foolish you really are, I'll move in and you'll be dead. Go now."

Spitting in disgust, Zarfil whirled around and marched briskly toward the door, feeling the hot anger of Hegilburg's gaze burn a hole in his back. Patience, he told himself. Patience. The mayor will prove himself wrong in the end. He's already made his chief mistake; I walk out of the Citadel alive and he will never have me in his grasp again. Mareilon will be mine.

“And so Man plunges precipitously toward his Destiny.”

-Entharion the Wise

It was late afternoon, and the streets of Mareilon were becoming crowded. The Guilds had closed for the day, and a flood of humanity rushed away from the workplace to celebrate a few brief hours of freedom before returning once again to the dreary routine of daily labor. Shops emptied out and the giant market places, the hub of the city, grew quiet as the people went their separate ways.

A sprawling metropolis, Mareilon was heavily divided into numerous and wildly differing districts. A walk through the streets of the city was a walk into history. At the center of the city lay the Citadel, a strong, fortified structure from the days before Entharion. Outward in all directions lay the newer city government buildings. As the city grew away from the Citadel, and the need for such a fortress decreased with the foundation of the Kingdom, large portions of the Citadel were converted into historical museums. Each new city ruler, lacking any pressing problems, spent his time ordering the construction of new buildings in his honor.

To the south of this maze of bureaucratic buildings lay the marketplace. Mareilon was conveniently nestled in low hills between the vast plains to the north and the Great Sea to the east, and was tremendously well-supplied with grain and fish, not to mention the endless trade of wiskus-meat coming in from the south. As a result, the markets of Mareilon were without compare the world over. One could wander for days among the tents and stands full of foodstuffs. Local residents were all familiar with the countless young urchins who have taken up permanent residence in the market district, living well off the generosity of the prosperous merchants.

The western fringes of the marketplace marked the boundary of the dark, run-down Millucis district. In the light of day, the Millucis was nothing more than a dirty, disease-infested hole. When night came to Mareilon, the Millucis became a nightmare. Gangs roamed the streets armed with clubs and knives, looking for their rival gangs. The only people seen alone in the district at night were hurrying from some hidden brothel to the nearest tavern within running distance. As with any such district, the Millucis was a haven for thieves, escaped convicts, and even an odd mix of monsters from the outlying areas. Oddly enough, one could also find a large proportion of those from various religious orders, hoping to find new converts amidst the destitute, but those types did not go out at night, and they never stayed in the area too long anyway.

Even to those who lived their entire life in Mareilon, the Millucis seemed a mysterious and impenetrable world. Every now and then, a new mayor would burst onto the scene full of enthusiasm and promises for civic improvement. He would order tighter police involvement in the district, and would exert enormous energy towards ending the poverty of the area. Residents of the Millucis knew the routine well, and over the years it began to take on the appearance of a tired and unamusing ritual.

The city's token police force, too lazy and unwilling to argue with whatever fresh young mayor had just taken office, made a grand show of marching through the district and cleaning out the scum from the darkest corners. In reality, nothing of the kind ever took place. The police, who had long since given up on the Millucis, went to the best tavern in the area, asked a few questions, took a few notes, drank some phlog, and went home. Several reports, filed in

triplicate, would eventually reach the beautiful rosewood desk of the mayor telling him that the situation was hopeless, that the neighborhood was beyond recovery.

In the meantime, every local resident quietly went along with the charade. Most told the police nothing, resentful of the authority that the police claimed over them. Those frightened enough to answer the questions all said the same thing.

Can you name anyone who is involved with the local gangs, they would ask.

No. No, of course not, came the hurried answer.

Do you know anybody who would be able to tell us anything?

Well, I doubt he'll tell you anything, but if anybody knows about it, it's Ronatil...

Of course. Ronatil. The police knew him well. Ronatil the Loved. Ronatil the Noble. Ronatil the Bartender. For years he had owned and operated the Eagle's Claw Tavern, the only honest establishment in the entire area, and for years he had refused to cooperate with any police attempt to halt crime in the Millucis.

Ronatil.

The Anchor of the Millucis. Everyone knew him. If he wished, he could easily name the figures behind the largest and most dangerous criminal organizations in the area, and yet when the city government asked, when the city government begged for information, he only smiled.

I do not wish to get involved, he would say. I will serve them drink and listen to their boasts, and in a few weeks they will be gone from this life. What are they? Nothing. You wish to eliminate them? Let them eliminate themselves. They do not matter to me. This tavern. That is what matters to me.

This tavern. The Eagle's Claw Tavern.

As the day grew late, as the marketplace emptied, as Zarfil, claimant to the defunct throne of Mareilon, argued his case with the city government, the Eagle's Claw opened for business. On an average night, hundreds of locals would walk in and out of the pub, some staying just long enough to polish off one glass of phlog and tonic, others staying the entire night. Ronatil knew all of these people, and they knew him. The Anchor of Millucis, that was Ronatil. He was proud of his bar, his own little world. The Eagle's Claw was even part of history, in a small fashion. No one, except possibly Ronatil himself, knew how long the tavern had stood in that spot. It was rumored to be as old as the city itself, and since its first day it had been a gathering spot for down-and-out intellectuals, disgruntled ex-soldiers, and angry fringe politicians. Almost two hundred years ago it had even been, for a few brief weeks, the headquarters of the abortive Frobbish Revolution.

Now the Eagle's Claw Tavern and the city of Mareilon stood poised on the brink of another revolution. Zarfil and his ideas were causing quite a stir all over the large city, and he had gathered quite a following in the Millucis district. Large organized mobs roamed the streets screaming for a return to Mareilon's sovereignty, while robbing and beating anyone who got in their way. This was the topic of conversation tonight at the Eagle's Claw.

The booths and tables were all occupied by dozens of loud and drunken vagabonds noisily finishing their meal while somehow managing to avoid a large-scale brawl. Ronatil's waitresses were the ones left to deal with these locals. Ronatil himself stood behind the bar, serving phlog and tonic and other potent beverages to the quieter patrons of the tavern. Born with an innate bartender's instinct, he enjoyed drifting in and out of the ongoing conversations, and tonight he was blessed with a particularly interesting one.

An odd trio sat hunched at the bar. Melibar, a quiet and strangely attractive woman, sat in the middle, patiently sipping her drink as two men yelled at each other over her head. Standing on

Melibar's right was Gezlin, a Millucis native. Although he was a noticeably short man, he preferred to stand. He felt that he could think more clearly on his feet, and as the discussion grew more intense he had kicked away his stool and stood straight up, resting only two fingers on the bar.

"And why not?" he yelled. "This damn city was free once before, and I got no reason to think it couldn't be free again."

The third in the trio, to whom the comment was addressed, was a frail-looking blond man smoking a large, intricately carved wooden pipe that dangled inelegantly from his mouth. His name was Ettelwhiff, and he was a regular in the tavern, despite the fact that he made his residence on the far side of the city, in a neighborhood far wealthier than the Millucis. Slowly and deliberately he removed his pipe from his mouth while considering Gezlin's words. It was clear that despite his weak build, and Gezlin's reputation as a vicious fighter, Ettelwhiff had no fear of Gezlin. In fact, the two had spent many nights such as this arguing with each other at the top of their voices. As much as Gezlin would hate to admit it, this insignificant-looking writer, this intellectual from another district, this rich outsider had his respect. Another man who dared to challenge Gezlin's opinions in the way Ettelwhiff was known to would quickly experience the sharp edge of Gezlin's blade in a deadly spot.

After a few seconds of thinking, Ettelwhiff spoke. "Before the days of Entharion the Wise, the world was different. People were different. A city-state like this one could survive on its own. Not today."

Gezlin was quick to retort. "Why not, damn it? You've been babbling like that for hours. Now give me facts! What has changed? People are still the same!"

"No, my friend, they are not. In those days, nothing was ever in question. We had our prince, they had their prince. That was all there was to it. Now, we have a king, provincial governors, mayors, sheriffs. It's absurd."

"Course it's absurd. That's why I just plain don't get what you're trying to tell me. You complain 'bout this city's government near as much as I do, and I'm telling you, Zarfil's the man to do something about it."

Ettelwhiff snorted, apparently too annoyed to make a response. Melibar, who had been quietly sipping her drink, almost ignoring the conversation going on over her head, spoke for the first time. "It seems to me that you two are avoiding the real issue. Both of you hope to improve this world that we live in, but in a very short time it really will not make a difference at all."

"Oh now Melibar. I'm not so sure that your religion has an appropriate place in this conversation." Ettelwhiff had been through this discussion with the woman a dozen times before. Although a man of his upbringing found it hard to yell at one as lovely as Melibar, he did find that he often grew weary of her repeated attempts to grant him some kind of divine revelation. His frustration with her religious bent was only compounded by the fact that he found Melibar to be an extremely compelling woman, and was greatly agitated by the fact that he found himself disagreeing with one as attractive as she.

Melibar of course understood this, but never let it stop her from finishing her train of thought. She knew that one day, be it through her infinite patience or through her blindingly good looks, she would win Ettelwhiff over to her way of thinking. She spoke again.

"It is not just my religion, it is everyone's, and in times like these it has a place in every conversation. I know you are not yet willing to accept it, Ettelwhiff, but it is true. All of the signs are in place. Just look at the recent quakes, one only two days ago. The Great Brogmoid is growing restless."

Gezlin, the down-to-earth street lord, was much less dazzled by Melibar's beauty than Ettelwhiff, and was quicker to voice his impatience with her beliefs. "You and your Great Brogmoid. It ISN'T everyone's religion, Melibar, least it hasn't gotten to me yet. Restless brogmoids? I for one just can't even understand what you're going off about in the first place. You think me and my people are helped by some group of strange spooks? The only thing that helps me stay alive is me."

Smiling patiently, Melibar answered. "Strange spooks? No, not at all. I know how you live, Gezlin, oh noble and fearless street leader." A curve of sarcasm pulled at her lips. Gezlin frowned in annoyance, but made no move to interrupt. "The only thing I hope you realize is that, strange spooks or no, the time is approaching when your street gangs and fallen princes will not mean anything."

The short, disgruntled gang leader made a wicked noise, spitting abruptly out of his mouth and away from the bar. Turning his head to one side in annoyance, he did not reply.

Ettelwhiff leaned forward, chuckling. "She really got you that time, didn't she?"

That did it. Taking an insult from this annoying religious freak was one thing, bearable for a short time, but to suffer at the hands of this pompous intellectual... He began yelling. "You can sit there and laugh at me all you want, you fool. It won't do you a damn bit of good. We'll see where you're at when I come marching back at the head of Zarfil's new ruling army. You won't be laughing so damn hard then, will you?"

An uncomfortable silence followed. Ettelwhiff turned back to his drink, surprised by his barmate's over-zealous reaction to a harmless bit of teasing. Gezlin himself nervously remained standing, looking around in embarrassment at his outburst.

"Sorry," he muttered foolishly. The word sounded clumsy, forming on his rough, foul-spoken lips. Ettelwhiff, also embarrassed by his barmate's tenseness, did not answer. Perhaps he also felt that no words were necessary. Their unusual friendship spoke for itself. "It's just that I get so excited when I know that things are going to be so much better in the future, for us, for everybody. All this talk of the end of the world puts a damper on things."

A slight pause followed while Ettelwhiff planned his response, trying to take care not to step on the thug's bruised ego. "I understand your need for better world, Gezlin, and yes, for everybody. You know very well I'm not happy with the way the city has been treating us the last few years. Increased censorship, travel restrictions, random search and seizures, even in the most crime-free parts of town. It's a disgrace. And all this talk of a revolution will only make them clamp down that much harder. That's why I'm not sure I can go along with you on this one."

"So instead you'll stay on the side of the enemy, just because you're afraid of failure?"

"I'm not sure I'm really afraid of failure. I just don't think it's worth it. Sure, I have problems, I have complaints, but none that are bad enough to warrant a violent revolution."

"He's right, Gezlin. He's right." Melibar spoke softly, as if to carefully protect the fragile, intense tension of the conversation she was enjoying so much. "There is no pain that can justify the taking of a life in revenge."

"Sure, so says you and your brogmoid," Gezlin argued. "The streets of Mareilon say something completely different. Kill or be killed. Take what you need. Destroy what's left. Demand power, and don't take no for an answer."

Gezlin's train of thought had simplified itself to short, quick sentences to put power behind the ideas. Ettelwhiff, who had been drinking phlog and tonic with the gang leader for years, was well aware of this dramatic tendency of his and usually took it to mean that with inebriation had arrived extreme exaggeration. "Oh Gezlin, don't give me any of that, 'Take what you need,

destroy what's left, ' suffering sob story. You know as well as I do that you're so well connected in the Millucis, you haven't had to suffer in years."

"What do you know about my life and my suffering?" Gezlin shot back. "You come strutting into this bar from your rich butlered estate once a week, maybe once a month, and all you ever see in this district is the four walls around you, and lots of peasants and locals drinking themselves into a stupor. Haven't you ever wondered why all these taverns do so damn well in the Millucis? The people don't have anywhere else to go. They're hiding here, from their selves, their lives, their pain."

Getting no response from Ettelwhiff, who was sinking deeper into a contemplative silence, Gezlin turned his ranting attentions to Melibar, the nearest victim. "And you! What do you know about the people here? You think we can drop everything we're doing to run happily through the streets, dancing and singing to the Great Brogmoid. It's absurd to think that the answer to our problems is another trick religion, when the biggest problem of the day for most of these people is just finding a stale crust of bread for dinner."

The gang leader had planned to continue, but his last few words were drowned out in a black wash of violent noise soaking into the Tavern from the street. Almost at once, nearly everyone in the room turned to the windows and the door, looking to find the source of the uproar. From outside came the sound of screaming, and a random stampede of running from an unknown foe. Farther down the street one building was already breaking into flames, and a group of rioters were at work throwing any careless passersby into the blaze.

Those crowded at the window noticed that one cluster of armed looters was hot in pursuit of another such group, with no city militia to be seen. Random drunken cheers broke out from the customers, while some others simply ran, hoping to get out of the area in time. Ronatil the bartender moved quickly into a back room, coming out with a own well-polished sword to defend his bar as best he could. He ordered several waiters to empty the kegs and fill them with water for the fire.

A cry came from a distance: "Hellhounds, to arms!"

A crazed smile of glory spread across Gezlin's tired. "Those are my people," he cried. "Those are my people."

As he rushed out of the tavern to join in the fray, Melibar stood and spoke, worry lacing her words. "Just as I feared. It has begun."

“...and that is why the people of Er will never be defeated in military battle, against an enemy of any kind.”

-The last recorded words of Prince Ump of Er, 396 BE

The tiny hamlet of Er slowly nodded itself awake, peacefully breathing in the bright and sparkling early morning air. Just off to the east, the sun gradually revealed itself over the snow-capped tips of the Mithicus Mountains. Domesticated wiski ushered in the new day and summoned their human masters into the fields with the well-known low pitch wiskus groan. No animal ever encountered in Quendor and its surrounding lands was as reluctant to greet the rising sun as the wiskus, and its complaining agony seemed to be shared by the entire village of Er, as exhausted peasant and lazy landowner alike pulled their sheets farther over their heads, hoping to block out the omnipresent wiskus moan.

Soon, as the sun revealed more of its glorious body from the secrecy of the eastern sea, Er gradually came to life. First to rise were the older women of the village, long practiced in the traditional early morning ritual of preparing a decent breakfast for a hungry family easily a dozen people too large. Strong female arms went skillfully to work kneading the floury dough of Belkner Biscuits, a western variant of Borphee's Frobolli Cakes.

As the bits of dough were inevitably thrown casually into the just-heated ovens, quanta of dust were cast into the air and made captive by the bright beams of light coming in at a low angle from the windows in the eastern faces of Er's many cottages.

Of course the wealthier among this village's natives allowed their servants to prepare much more delectable fare. Frequently, mornings such as these begin with the biting sound of a young child's tearful cry upon the discovery that her favorite pet yipple had been sacrificed to feed her own parents' nearly bottomless appetite. Pointing out that she didn't feel that hungry anyway, she would storm out of one of the rare two-storied houses in the area and begin to run through her neighbors' yards.

Running by sagging piles of once firmly bound hay, the young Er girl slides under fence and climbs over tree stump in a frantic display of childhood energy quite contrary to the prevailing adult mood around her. Continuing her whirlwind voyage in hopes of escaping the memory of her dead pet, she carried herself past troughs filled with brownish lumps only vaguely identifiable as wiskus-feed. As the men in the village finally force themselves out of bed and away from the breakfast table, she speeds around barn corners and into the knees of various uncles and cousins. It seems that everybody in Er is related in some way or another. At the very least, everyone claims a heritage intimately linked with the distant figure of Prince Ump himself.

An anthropologist from the coastlands would very likely have classified every man, woman and child in Er hopelessly deranged. But then it wasn't very likely that Er would have any visiting anthropologists any time in the future. Er did not get many visitors of any kind. Once, several generations ago, ambassadors from Borphee had come, seeking to gain power over the entire land from coast to mountain. Er had of course turned the ambassadors away, without even so much as a "Come again soon!" Nestled comfortably at the base of the Mithicus Mountains, the quiet homes of Er had little need for anything from the outside world. The Mithicus peaks provided shade on the hotter days, and run-off from the mountains gave water enough for the entire village. Even in the days over seven centuries ago, when Er had enjoyed slightly greater stature as one of the areas bonded to the powerful city-state of Pheebor, the people of this village had always been uniquely separate and highly proud of that fact.

Yes, the people of Er were something else entirely. Probably nowhere else in all of the westlands did so many people live off of wiskus-meat, wiskus-meat, and wiskus-meat. Some say it is an acquired taste, but it must surely run in the blood among the Erfolk. It was a rare family that could partake of yipple, or an occasional blue thrub from the Bor River two days' journey to the north. A native of that village without love of wiskus-meat was a starved native indeed.

In a little over two-and-a-half centuries from this particular morning, the armies of one Duncanthrax the Bellicose would come marching in from the north. The invaders would find a village of people speaking a peculiar tongue, writing little, and reading less. The leaders of that invasion from a distant place called Egreth, upon getting to know the quaint little settlement of Er, would undoubtedly hear ancient village legends, passed on from the oldest uncles to the newest cousins, telling of Er's last great military stand on an early sunny morning so distant in time. Those future story tellers would be passing on the glorious deeds of Er's noble fight against a similar invader, another vicious conqueror bent on destruction.

On this particular sunny day, however, the invader would not come from Egreth in the north, but from the burnt and hellish lands to the west. In the years to come, the Er storytellers would never seem to be particularly truthful or precise about the details of the day. While Quendoran history as a whole would speak of a devastating series of battles that saw a Kovalli tribe called the Nezgeth come to dominate the entire countryside, Er natives would subscribe to their own peculiar rendition of the events. The Nezgeth, after sweeping down from the mountains to the west, were so intimidated by the ferocious Erfolk that they retreated from the area with laughable speed, barely having time to regroup for their next confrontation with another village a dozen bloits to the north.

Unfortunately for the village of Er, Ath-gar-nel and his Nezgeth tribe, after suffering six long years of devastating plague, were in no mood to compromise with the Erfolks' odd sense of history. After the Brith-nel-fhet had uprooted the entire tribe and sent them marching to the east, they made quick time covering the vicious Kovalli desert and arriving at the western edges of the Mithicus Mountains. Never having been to the mountains before, and indeed only having seen them from the greatest distance, the Nezgeth were baffled and angered by the new kind of terrain that they encountered. After years of tramping around in the burning desert sand, suddenly being forced to march every member of the Nezgeth clan over sharp rock outcroppings and frigid mountain snow did not leave the tribe in good spirits when they finally crossed to the other side.

On the very same peaceful morning that would last forever in Er legend, the Kovalli tribe awoke eagerly from an open night in the cold mountain air. The same sun that had once seemed so hostile to them now granted them relief from the unexpected Mithicus chill. Camping on a spacious ridge only a short climb from the valley below, the Nezgeth had prepared for sleep with the knowledge that the next day would bring them to battle. The long march to the mountains themselves had been surprisingly uneventful. As if aware of the peculiar destiny awaiting the Nezgeth, other Kovalli tribes had kept their distance, uneager to start a confrontation with such a powerfully obsessed leader as Ath-gar-nel. Now, however, the day had come at last. It was time to begin earning back the favor of the gods. The village of Er lay just around the mountain's edge, nestled in the basin below. They would be the first sacrifice to end the deadly six-year famine.

As the Warrior Ath-gar-nel assembled his fellow clansmen, the advance scouts returned with news of Er, telling of its small size, its richly-endowed animal farms, and its chronically lazy inhabitants. Already, for nearly two hours before the sun began its leisurely rise, half a dozen fearless Nezgeth soldiers had crept amongst the Er barns, puzzling at the oddly-shaped wiskus

creatures, and peering into the houses of the overweight, defenseless farmers. High up on the ridge, Ath-gar-nel's inner circle of warrior's received this news with excitement and anticipation, looking forward to the free blood that would soon be theirs. Ath-gar-nel himself did not share their joy, however, and he soon grew annoyed at the word of the weaklings that lay at the base of the mountains.

As chief Warrior of the tribe, he had hoped for a series of noble and glorious battles, the kind in which many of his strongest and closest friends must perish so that the gods would bring prosperity to the Nezgeth once again. Not all of his fellow warriors shared his feelings, and it was clear to Ath-gar-nel that the unfortunate village below would soon fall prey to his fellow tribesmen's pent-up sadism. The Nezgeth gathered on the ridge before him easily totaled over three hundred families, and almost every Nezgeth father went out of his way to ensure the birth of at least two warrior sons. This made for a fighting force of nearly a thousand strong, for which poor Er could surely be no match. Chuckling nastily, one of Ath-gar-nel's standard bearers suggested sending only the Nezgeth women down off the ridge into the valley. They alone, unarmed, would be fierce enough competition for those who lay below.

When the laughter among the male warriors subsided, Ath-gar-nel began giving out the standard battle orders. The oldest males should charge down the mountain first. No need to risk the tribe's young blood in a confrontation as insignificant as this. The warriors were to give the highest priority to food and water. As the sun rose, every Nezgeth had been treated to their very first wiskus-moan, and as the scouts reported, they seemed to be quite an appetizing treat. Much to the chagrin of several other tribal warriors, Ath-gar-nel also demanded minimal violence toward this newly-discovered village. Of course, minimal violence in Nezgeth terms still implied bringing a new standard of bloodshed to the Erfolk below, but nevertheless the tribal Warrior was curious to learn about the land they were about to enter, and hoped to talk to some of the people and become familiar with the ways of this new tribe.

Ath-gar-nel naturally understood that his dispensing of verbal orders was only a traditional formality, one he had gone through before every battle in the past, never to see any of his wishes actually come about. Symbolically, the Warrior commanded absolute power among the Nezgeth, but realistically, giving the cry for battle would let slip uncontrollable anarchy among the men of the tribe.

The chief Warrior consoled himself with the knowledge that his tribesmen's behavior in battle mattered little in the long run, now that the newest depictions on the wall of the Brith-nel-fhet cavern were being fulfilled. A magical prophecy had been granted to the four participants of the ceremony, and once again the holy cycle of Nezgeth wrongdoing and repentance was coming to a close. None of this would be of any consolation to the people in the village below, Ath-gar-nel realized with a sense of solemn finality. He knew, because his firm faith in the gods of the desert told him, that what he was about to do was right for his people. Nearly overcoming his faith, however, whispered a compassion and wisdom uncommon among the fiery, rash Nezgeth tribe. As he led his warrior tribe around the last rise and saw the village and the flatlands below for the first time, his mind was held captive by a quick imaginative flash that saw him become a simple farmer of Er, looking up with an uncomprehending stare as foreign invaders filled the hills above him in a formation that spelled death to everything he had known.

As was not uncommon for the powerful Nezgeth leader, what had formed in his mind in that brief instant was a very truthful portrayal of the emotional events playing themselves out in the lands below. The girl that had just a few moments earlier run crying from her hated household had returned with a different kind of tears in her eyes, tears of fear and uncertainty. Her run

through nearby yards, around small barns, and under the legs of taller relatives had seen her arrive breathless at the outskirts of the settlement, just within a few feet of the first series of large rocks that led up the mountain face. Gasping for breath and crying noisily, she threw herself to the ground unceremoniously, trying to rest in the shadow of her favorite tree. As her little body gradually recovered from her long sprint, she dried her eyes roughly with clenched fists and craned her neck upwards to look at the early morning sun.

A soft gasp of surprise escaped her mouth as she caught sight of the hundreds of warriors amassed on the ridge above her. Their tall figures and dark skin stood out in sharp contrast to the aged and gray rocks around them, and looking closer it became clear that she had not been mistaken. Not understanding the vicious looking invaders standing on the edge of her known world, nor particularly interested in sticking around to find out more, she picked herself up and ran back the way she had come.

The Er adults were surprised and even a little amused by her cries of warning when she came storming back into the village. Some frantic words about tall dark strangers with spears and axes rushed out of her in a whirlwind. At first her village relatives paid her no heed, only chuckling at the imaginative antics of an energetic young one. Upon storming back onto her parents' property, she ran screaming to her father, begging him to hide her from the ugly looking invaders. Whispering to her softly and patting down her hair, the girl's father hugged her and looked at his wife, rolling his eyes. Of course something like this happened nearly every time she stormed away from the breakfast table. It just seemed that the tale was particularly more intriguing this time around.

Then, as if from a great distance, a single powerful cry came echoing down from the mountainside. Tingles rushed down the spines of every Er inhabitant. No one was able to escape the deadly scream. No wiskus-moan or cry from a young child was this. Nervous heads turned towards the mountains in the west, in time to glimpse the last of the Nezegeth warriors pour down off the rock face. The sound of a thousand running tribesmen rose up from the hills and came swelling into the shocked ears of the sleepy-headed natives. Sensing the immense rumblings from so many moving bodies, the wiski stirred apprehensively, snorting and kicking at the confused stablehands.

As every Nezegeth warrior stormed down into the valley in response to Ath-gar-nel's cry to battle, the men of Er stuck their heads inconspicuously out the doors to witness the approaching horde. Some of the particularly brave villagers, feeling their princely ancestry come to the forefront for the first time in their lives, reached grimly for the nearest skinning knives and tree-cutting axes. For the first time since the fall of Pheebor, the proud people of Er prepared for battle. However, the brief moments allotted them were not enough. It would have taken an eternity to ready that tiny village against the Kovalli hordes.

Soon the first Nezegeth family group came flooding into the settlement, a dozen warriors easily a match for the entire population of Er. The animals were the first to die, crushed under foot by the Nezegeth as if a mere nuisance or obstacle to the overwhelming tidal wave of invasion. Soft grass fields patched with occasional wild weeds became stained with blood as the people of Er were treated to a wiskus-moan of an altogether unfamiliar kind. The few children playing on the side of the road who hadn't run away in fear at the sound of the initial battle cry were quickly trampled and kicked aside as the first Kovalli rushed toward the houses and the rest of the human population.

One daring Er father rushed forward, waving in the air a battered old sword, long stored away as a precious family heirloom. The sword would never pierce the flesh that it sought so

desperately in that moment. It fell to the ground in agony as a barbed Nezgeth spear caught the sword's owner directly in the chest, sending him falling backwards to his death.

Into the nearest house ran the first group of warriors, as the hundreds of others came streaming into the village behind them. The silence following the first victim of the Nezgeth spear was broken when the screaming began. Er natives cried out in fright at seeing blood shed on their land for the first time in memory, and the Nezgeth screamed in ecstasy as the battle lust pumped through their bodies and took control of their minds. Tables were overturned, cabinets and drawers opened and emptied, entire interrupted meals pillaged and devoured, all as the rightful owners died slowly, bleeding from a thousand different wounds.

Some ran, a few even successfully at first, only to be chased down and stabbed through the back while wading across the peaceful creek meandering aimlessly through a back yard. The children, the ones that hadn't been crushed in the initial stampede, were deliberately overlooked, allowed to escape with only a few broken limbs, their mouths hanging open in bottomless, bloody cries. As the Nezgeth embarked on a systematic destruction of Er, the children were ignored in this manner so that the impatient warriors could continue their quest for the more exciting adult game. At least the men were allowed to die honorably in conflict, or quickly in the chase. The women were given no such luxury. Dragged into corners, behind overturned, burning carts, up in the highest attics, they were subjected to the most brutal forms of Nezgeth sexual wrath. While one warrior would force himself into his most attractive conquest, the others would gather around and laugh, twisting their blades into the poor man who had been her husband.

After the first wave of Kovalli invaders made short work of what little resistance was to be found, the rest of the tribe descended in a giant predatorial cloud onto the village, like a swarm of flies gathering around dead meat. The Er foodstuffs were raided and completely devoured by the famished desert tribe. A dozen different Kovalli campsites sprung up in the immediate valley area, all circled around the settlement in a completely lethal hangman's noose. Fires began, some mysterious blazes even beginning spontaneously, the visible, burning wrath of an obscure distant god. As the sun began to make its patient way across the western afternoon skies, the very foundations of Er seemed to shift and groan. The houses came alive with dismay as the death and emptiness around them seeped into the wood and stone that had stood unmarred for countless years.

Somewhere, softly, children cried. In a copse to the south of the village, dense with underbrush and shelter, a family had managed to conceal themselves and wait. Shock had set in, an iron fist rammed deep into the throats and hearts of the surviving natives. A high attic, filled with dust, forgotten weighty trunks, and old rusty tools, became the comfort and resting place of a young teenage girl as she waited, wondering about her future and the future of every suddenly precious dusty object around her. This girl's thoughts strayed to her father's best friend's son, also alive, thankfully. He had been in the fields to the north with several of his friends. A sharp eye and quick intelligence had kept him far from the bloody action, and tonight he would rest in safety.

Yes, Er still lived, but an Er only a twisted and misshapen caricature of its proud former self. The grandfathers were gone, beaten to death, leaving no one behind to tell the ancient and glorious, albeit probably quite distorted, tales of Er's firm stand against the eastern fops from Borphee. None of the chattering, gossipy aunts and mothers remained to keep track of the village's hopelessly muddled genealogy and social scene. Most of the animals, prized so much for their tasty meat by the old and loved as pets by the young, had stampeded away in panic, scattering themselves across the empty bloit upon empty bloit of the surrounding landscape.

Darkness approached, and the random violent blazes were replaced by controlled Kovalli campfires dotting the plains. Conversation around the flames was dark and evil, merciless laughter at the day's events piercing the cold night air. Talk turned from the beautiful, defenseless Er women and their pathetic husbands to the even more exciting days ahead. Nezgeth legend told much about these lands beyond the mountains. The campfires hummed with tales of vast cities - the word was strange and difficult for the Kovalli - that spread in all directions to the horizons. Thousands of battles were yet to be won. The warriors grinned in anticipation of the pleasing violence as the taste of soft, light-colored victimized female flesh would grow more and more familiar to them.

The Brith-nel-fhet had dictated a road to the east, and each Nezgeth knew in his heart that the road would be a long one. Life in the desert was always unstable, precarious at best, but this was a different matter entirely. For the last few days, and on into the future as far as their many imaginations could see, life would run onward in a dizzying routine of camp, travel, invade, kill, camp, and begin again. For many killing was the easy part. The route ahead would be difficult. No Nezgeth knew the roads, the trails, the terrain. Drawing lots to pick the advance scouts, running a marathon and back just to bring news of an uneventful days march to come. Women and children along for the ride, the entirety of the tribe hiking at an incredible pace, fueled by a religious intensity with seemingly infinite patience and motivating capacity.

This was life for the Nezgeth now and into the future. Never in one place for more than a day, always pushing onward to escape the stench of rotting bodies that would come chasing after them. The Brith-nel-fhet had not specified how or when the war-march to the east would come to an end. Nezgeth religious tenets dictated to the high priests that the answers to such questions would become clear at the appropriate time. Meanwhile, Er was the first but would certainly not be the last. Eastward they would go, hunting and pillaging, burning and destroying, until they were granted a sign. Until the gods spoke again, revealing that penance had been done.

Three days later, the Nezgeth horde fell upon the river city of Foo, sacking its seat of local government and wrecking the provincial temple, the most expansive and beautiful of its kind within two hundred bloits. In the wide city streets, familiar taverns burned to the ground, all customers long gone, rushing to obey hurriedly given orders by the usually low-key city government. This city was no Er, and the Nezgeth were pleased, even challenged by the striking differences in this, their second battle.

For a few tense hours the inhabitants of Foo were able to mount an organized defense. The local hunting clubs and shipping hands banded together to block off certain key streets, hoping against hoped to hold off the heavily armed invaders. Even the children of Foo showed a fierceness unfamiliar to the Nezgeth, except possibly from their own young. Gangs of alley-lurking Foo teenagers, too stupid to run in fear at the sight of painted warrior faces and gleaming stained spears, actually proved an annoyance to the distracted Nezgeth fighters. They were soon dispatched, however, and eventually the sheer bulk of the Kovalli numbers proved to be too oppressive for the makeshift platoons of streetfighters. The Foo boulevards filled with the tall, dark invaders from the west, running every which way, shouting their eerie, mysterious battle cries.

Foo, without the amusing exaggerations deemed normal among Erfolk, had long existed as a major city in its own right. Its entire population certainly outnumbered the hostile newcomers, but the complacent city-dwellers provided no fair match for the Nezgeth, long hardened by years of vicious sun and unforgiving tribal warfare. In the final tally, Foo had lost many surprised, defenseless inhabitants, normal people who had just that morning been feeling normal feelings,

thinking normal thoughts. Boredom with life, satisfaction in a caring marriage, ambition for a successful promotion, all of these things and more found themselves suddenly cut short by the unexpected Nezgeth visit.

There seemed no rhyme or reason to it at all. Just when life had seemed the most routine, usual, unexciting, suddenly the screams of panic had come from the lands to the south. Runners from the outlying villages had come just a few hours before the invaders themselves. The warnings had been rushed, nearly unintelligible. The bearers of ill tidings were heard by the right people, officials high enough to give the call to arms. In some sense, Foo could be considered lucky that it had a chance to mount such a defense. Given the final results of the battle, however, that kind of luck hadn't done much good for the city, and the end had come, perhaps later than it would have, but inevitably all the same.

Again the morning and noontime of violence gave way to a more restful evening, restful for the Nezgeth enjoying their newfound conquests, and restful for the Foo natives lying quietly, bleeding in darkened houses and lying naked on abandoned street corners. The warband began setting up its traditional ring of campfires around the town. This time the fires would be considerably farther apart, the circle pushed to a larger diameter by the more expansive human settlement. Particularly imaginative Kovalli began to think ahead with amazement to the campfire circles to come. If the tales of these lands were really true, how could the warrior Nezgeth conceivably encircle a city stretching to the four horizons? Perhaps this was the challenge of the gods. Then the tribe was doomed to march onwards forever, in search of a way to surround the most immense cities with the simple Kovalli ring of fire.

These dark thoughts and many more filled the minds of the resting invaders that night. Something about the day's victory had seemed oddly unsettling, even uncomfortable. Possibly it was the city itself. Stone was a foreign thing to these desert people. Yes, in Kovalli there lay rocks strewn all around. The Brith-nel-fhet had been held in a cavern, and they had of course marched across the highest peaks in all the Westlands. But this stone was another matter entirely, huge granite chipped into magnificent blocks, stone pavement to walk on, reassuringly cool in comparison to the burning sand they had left behind, and the walls, piled high out of rocks made not for throwing and killing but for construction and progress.

Another surprising discovery by the Nezgeth in this new land came after the battle itself, a short walk to the northern edge of the city. The city of Foo had been constructed at a strategic bend in the magnificent Bor River as it rushed down from the western mountains with all its might. Shipping was one of the city's largest business. A fairly brisk ferry trade existed between Foo and the other cities downstream, including the teeming metropolis of Borphee at the river delta. All of this close association with water seemed perfectly normal for the Foo folk, but the effect on the desert people was profound. None had ever seen a well or desert oasis deeper than knee height before. The thought of a powerfully immense flow of water that could swallow the entire tribe without a trace was a frightful one indeed. Some of the more religiously inclined Nezgeth immediately concluded that a new god was at work here, a god wholly unknown in the desert lands. The rest of the tribe simply backed away from the flowing water in fright, vowing never to even get near, much less cross, something so completely foreign.

Water. So much water. And the natives didn't run to it. They didn't drink in pleasure. So much water, and completely unworshipped, unappreciated.

This was a strange land indeed.

This fact did not go unnoticed by Ath-gar-nel, who had remained aloof from the fighting. As the day progressed he became aware of an odd desire to ensure that his blade remained

unbloodied. Wandering the strange streets before him, he peered intently at the new sights, wondering at the magnificent people that had built such foreign works of beauty. He loathed the thought of killing these people.

His eyes turned westward, to the mountains that still lay visible in the distance. Somewhere, he knew, beyond those mountains were the ancient lands, the desert sands of his father and his father's father. He longed for that dry, hard world now, preferring its simplicity and tradition to the unknown twists and complications facing his tribe of late. Perhaps, he confessed to himself, he had been the wrong choice for Warrior of this tribe. Perhaps the Nezgeth needed a stronger leader to help them through these hard times, when the gods had forsaken them. It was even possible that, somehow, he was responsible for the anger of the gods. His internal torment, his guilt at the rape and death sown by his blood brothers, his longing for home.

Was this the retribution? Were the gods speaking to him again, now, telling him that he might never see his home again?

“They dance in their simple, petty way, so insignificant below me, like ants, unintelligent machines, pawns to be used and then cast aside.”

-The Mage of Jerrimore at the height of his powers, circa 275 BE.

Laughter filled the deep caverns near the coast, not the kind of laughter that could be heard by human ears, but rather the dark kind, the laughter that causes storm winds to blow and the laughter that makes mere mortals turn in fright, confused by the emptiness. At the heart of the laughter lay the evil mind of the beast, Belegur the Fallen One. The darkened Implementor felt growing confidence and comfort in his new role in the world. Although the blood of the immortals still coursed in his veins, his new physical flesh was beginning to suit him quite well. It provided previously unknown pleasures to entertain his wicked mind. He gained a new appreciation for the beasts he had once helped to create, discovering what it meant to eat, to take the life of an unwitting animal and then bring the bloody carcass into his own body, consuming it in its entirety.

Deep in these caverns that had become his home, there were many such beasts to suit his desires. The burrowers, the diggers, the furry beasts with large globular eyes nearly useless in the inky blackness. The ogres from above, the rare ones that would stumble upon the entrance to the underground and then stupidly run even farther into the caverns, into his grasp. He longed for a grue, of course, but did not dare hope for the pleasure of such company. Those that had escaped Entharion’s deadly blade so many years ago had long since hid in the most obscure parts of the underground, far away in other lands.

Yes, it was the grue he hoped to see the most, not even for the nourishment it would provide, but merely for the satisfaction of basking in its eternally evil glow. It would soothe him to know that such beasts still stalked the earth, spreading his message to all that would listen. Somewhere, he knew, there still lived vast numbers of these, his favorite creation, but that ancient king had hurt them greatly. Oh, how he had longed to let loose all his powerful wrath on that mortal fool of a king. Entharion... The Wise, they had called him. He had waited many years to bring about his vengeance, but soon the time would be right.

Entharion himself would be long dead, of course, but Belegur would see all of that man’s lifetime work undone in a matter of days. Even now he could sense the Kingdom of Quendor coming apart at the seams, straining under the pressures long left ignored when the two warring city-states had been merged into a nation. All this of course was secondary. Belegur acted not to settle some petty score with a dead mortal king, but to regain entrance to the immortal Timeless Halls. His present physical body would not be capable of the task. That is why he had taken possession of the Scrolls.

Yes, the Scrolls of Fizbin had been stolen, and not by a mischievous University student or scofflaw professor. The mysterious Scrolls had fallen into the hands of the most powerful source of evil in the land. Most powerful, yes, but not yet all-powerful. The Scrolls would help greatly. As Belegur eagerly poured over the ancient documents, their secrets filled his soul with dark hope. Told in the words of The One and recorded faithfully by the mortal Fizbin, the very fabric and texture of magic lay bare before him. He now possessed knowledge long hidden by the obsessively secretive true creator of the universe. Remembering rumors told to him by jealous Implementors lurking in the Timeless Halls, Belegur knew now that the rumors were indeed based on truths of hidden places long kept secret by The One God.

This pool, for instance, of magical water granting eternal youth. Long hidden by unknown powers in the forests near Gurth, it would be of no use to Belegur himself, but would prove extremely helpful when the time came to assemble an army of mortal followers. Once bathed in that holy water they would be a formidable host indeed.

And the Gateway... amazing how much knowledge had been granted to this mortal Fizbin. What possible purpose could the almighty Eru have in granting a human the knowledge of the Gateway to the divine Halls? It was almost as if the revelation had been granted to fulfill an unwritten prophecy of Belegur's inevitable return to heavenly power.

The Fall for him had been a painful one. Indeed, the mere memory of it still brought an agonized expression to his face. To be suddenly cast out of the company of divine spirits and into lowly physical flesh, only to then be told that he would not be granted the simple honor of a mortal death. He would live in that human body, immortal, free to wander the face of the earth for all eternity. It had been a painful wait for Belegur, but now, with the Scrolls unraveling before him, he had the power to return, to pass through the Gateway once again. He would shed his mortal form and become a being of pure spirit and energy, as he was meant to be.

But yet, somehow, the time was not yet right. Zylon, mortal king of Largoneth, still lived, hanging on to his obscene longevity with all the strength his unconscious body could summon. This was unfortunate. As long as Zylon lived, the possibility for failure still existed. Pouring over the precious Scrolls, Belegur soon realized that the magical procedures, the ceremony that would be necessary to allow his return to the Timeless Halls, would be an extremely time consuming one. Weeks of focusing all his mystical energy and putting it to use in the way described by the Scrolls would send huge ripples, psychic shock waves raging throughout the world. Such disturbances would surely not go unnoticed, even by the petty amateur magicians surrounding Zylon at Largoneth.

And if he were somehow to awaken, and begin a search for the source of those magical disturbances? Yes, Zylon was still a threat. Angrily, Belegur turned his thoughts to the castle servant in Zylon's court. Belegur's mental powers were great, and he had without much effort secured the services of someone in an important position at Largoneth. A weak-willed handservant in a close relationship with Zylon had easily fallen prey to Belegur's manipulation's. A few well-placed suggestions, a mental nudge in the right direction, and the servant had slipped Zylon a slice of bread with enough poison to kill off a dozen normal mortals.

Time and again, however, Zylon had proved that he was no normal mortal. The poison had done great damage, true, but the king still lived, and his annoying band of advisors persisted in their attempts to find a cure. Luckily for Belegur, the magic-obsessed minds at Largoneth had spent a vast amount of time chasing after the wrong rotgrub in looking for an origin to Zylon's illness. Too shocked to conceive of a natural explanation, they searched for curses, ancient enemies, and the like. Even the meticulous search of Zylon's half-devoured meal had failed to turn up the most basic explanation, the court physicians being more skilled at treating bad papercuts than trying to cure their immortal king.

Speaking closely to the mind of his servant at Largoneth, Belegur heard news of the close guard surrounding the king's quarters. The poor king's helper felt his heart fill with torment as Belegur softly whispered thoughts of hatred and murder. Driven to return to the royal quarters to finish the job left undone, he was also held back by an instinctive loyalty, a natural belief that the king was a protector, a ruler close to the gods, someone to be obeyed, not harmed.

Providing specific instructions to the castle servant, Belegur gave him knowledge of the secret underground caverns that had become his dwelling place. If the servant proved unequal to the task of killing the king, he would be useful here, with him and his gathering army of mortals.

Also useful was this Warrior from the west. Belegur had known of and had even played a small role in the Brith-nel-fhet ceremony that ordered the Nezgeth over the Mithicus peaks, but he had not anticipated just how perfect the timing of the invasion would turn out to be. Already, several villages in the southlands lay devastated by the onrushing swarm of desert soldiers, and even now they were heading on a course that would be very beneficial to Belegur. It was only a matter of time before they stumbled upon the boiling violence in Mareilon. Manipulate the conflict in just the right way, and the Nezgeth would pose a very real threat to the Kingdom of Quendor. Even if this “Prince” Zarfil failed him, and even if the king remained alive, the Nezgeth would march on inexorably to the north and east, until their odd sense of religious penance had been satisfied.

At this thought, a seed began to form in the dark mind of Belegur, a thought of how he himself would grant a sign from the gods to the Nezgeth. He would become their chief deity, and they would be his to command.

Images from the Brith-nel-fhet came flooding back to him. Using the mind and eyes of the participants, Belegur had witnessed the entire ceremony, coming across it by chance as he cast his mind out throughout the world in search of whatever might be useful to him. Looking in amazement through the dark, bottomless eyes of the chieftain Ath-gar-nel, he had seen a most joyous sight. A pure white cube had fallen out of the Warrior’s pouch and come to rest on the ground, innocent and unnoticed. There. Belegur smiled, sensing the thrill of the hunt, the quest for powerful treasure.

Much as he had hoped they would, the Scrolls of Fizbin revealed the locations of the primary cubes of foundation, but over the countless generations much had undoubtedly changed. As he sent his servants out across the land, it became clear that several of the cubes were no longer in their recorded resting places. One, long hidden in the Eastland’s powerful peaks, had been found by a daring adventurer and carried back across the sea, leaving an easily discernible trail of rumor and legend. Belegur had followed the tales concerning this cube with great care until all news had run out at the base of the Mithicus Mountains. Now, he was pleased to discover, it seemed that after hundreds of years of travel, after barter and thievery and all sorts of improbable deeds, the cube in question had wound up in the unopened sacred pouch of an obscure Kovalli chieftain. Even more unlikely events had most likely taken place to all of the cubes he so desperately hunted, and so the search would continue. He had been patient for many, many years, and would continue to be so for as many more as it would take for him to reach his goal.

Only after witnessing the hidden objects in the Nezgeth Warrior’s pouch had Belegur realized just how appropriate it would be to bring the Kovalli tribe into the whole affair. The owner of that particular cube was marching northward, wreaking havoc as he went, and bringing the cube ever closer to Belegur’s grasp. Even if Ath-gar-nel himself couldn’t be persuaded to part with the seemingly useless cube, the evil being had a fair share of skilled thieves in his employ. Careful infiltration of the Kovalli camp by one of his minions, and the cube would be his, just like the Scrolls a mere few days before.

The thief had been particularly clever on that mission, and Belegur was proud. Dodging Galepath University security, breaking carefully into the library complex itself, and finding the works of Fizbin, all of these stealthy deeds had been carried off completely without a hitch. Showing a surprising amount of intelligence and initiative, the thief had even made away with

several other documents to confuse those who would eventually try to pick up the trail and follow it back to Belegur's lair. And yet even with the crime's skilled execution and cover-up, that librarian, that Litbo... he was still on the right track. All these theories of supernatural interferences could prove to be a nuisance to Belegur. What if the mortal librarian discovered the truth?

The fallen angel shrugged away these worrisome thoughts with a contented chuckle. Probing the librarian's mind, it was clear that he commanded very little respect among the power-wielders of Galepath. True, he held recognition as a leading authority on ancient writings, but mayors and kings were unlikely to act on the suggestions of an absent-minded bookworm. And if they did? Zylon would soon be dead and a chaotic rush for the throne would ensue. With the political mess developing in Mareilon, the kingdom would soon crumble. Every mortal capable of taking action would be too distracted by earthly events to notice Belegur's powerful spells of reentry to the Timeless Halls.

It was almost too good to be true. The recent mystic cults popping up in every major city could be very useful to him in the time to come. In gaining dominance over the earthly world, the assistance of the religious community would be priceless. Already he could sense some of the fringe followers of the Great Brogmoid turning away from the Implementors and their One true God. Probing of those souls revealed a special weakness, a need, an irresistible drawing to the darkness of Belegur in his underground lair.

The internal squabbles among the people of Quendor provided a great deal of powerful nourishment to the plotting immortal. Breathing deeply with his physical body, he could sense the uncertainty of city officials in Mareilon and the fear pulsing from the minds of that city's populace. The greed and manipulation of Galepath's mayor would play well against the rising fortunes of Zarfil, the renegade descendant of royalty. And most intriguing were the possible future lives of this General Darborn, and the webs of manipulation that stemmed outward from his great temptation to possess the throne.

Without a doubt, the pieces were beginning to fall in place. As he passed the time in his cavern, filled with excited anticipation, he continued to probe the minds of the millions of earthly mortals that would soon be his cadre of personal servants. The prevailing mood was one of deepening despair. For hundreds of years the flimsy alliance that was Quendor had been held together by frequent guiding words out of Castle Largoneth, continuing examples of the benign wisdom of the king. Occasionally, the awed masses were even treated to a personal visit from the distant royal figure himself. Entharion the Wise. Mysterion the Brave. Zylon the Immortal.

Now that the countryside hummed with disturbing rumors about Zylon's revealed mortality, the country was shaken to its very foundations. When no word came from the castle, when no guiding light was to be seen, all was set into chaos. Soon events began to take place that even the manipulative Belegur had not foreseen. The chain of human interaction began to strain and pull, feeling the power of unknown forces.

All of this pleased Belegur, for chaos and violence was what he lived for. Whether the evil that was spreading across the land stemmed from him or not, it was still to his satisfaction. He grew comfortable and reassured, knowing he did not stand alone in his darkness. He would find his way back to the Timeless Halls, to overthrow Eru, The One. His reign of darkness would begin, and the sun would shine no more.

Zylon the Aged

Book Three

“Before Davmar’s crucial discovery that Incantation could be stored on special Presence-imbued paper known as a spell scroll, spell casting was obviously a very tedious task, with each spell being highly individualized and incommunicable. Generations of magic users would become highly skilled at the inner spells that existed within the light of their own souls, only to have those spells be forgotten with their inevitable deaths.”

-Gustar Woomax, the Chronicler of Magic

The five members of Zylon’s advisory council gathered in Dinbar’s private bedchamber in preparation for Dinbar and Zilbo’s trip to the Galepath University. Under normal circumstances, diplomatic caravans left through the front gates of Largoneth amidst great fanfare and turnout. Today however the situation was a little different. The travelers to Galepath carried no diplomatic papers, and they would not leave by the front gates, but rather by the magical power of Dinbar’s soul. Afraid to admit to the castle and the kingdom at large that two of the king’s closest advisors were about to roam the roads of Quendor incognito, and also drastically pressed for time in light of Zylon’s mysterious condition, the five council members had agreed to send the two to Galepath using what Dinbar promised was a fail-safe, guaranteed magical teleport spell.

Gladius Fzort had been hesitant to let the two go. He was perhaps put off by a decades’ old mental association of Hargood’s senility with the actual usefulness of magic. More to the point, he worried that with Zilbo’s stabilizing presence gone, Darborn might make use of a perfect opportunity to take control. Darborn of course had absolutely no reservations about seeing Zilbo leave. Zilbo’s tendency to wait, question, and avoid strong action had always annoyed the general no end, and it was well known that the two were generally considered to be the most important powers on the council, caught in what Darborn perceived to be a constant struggle to gain the king’s favor. Despite all this, Darborn did not fail to put in his predictable but meaningless complaint.

“I’ve worked myself to death the last few days ensuring that the news of the king’s illness doesn’t leak out to the rest of Quendor. Now you two are going to go tramping around the countryside spreading the news to some random librarians?”

“Not random librarians,” Dinbar corrected. “One very unrandom Litbo Mumblehum. I trust him completely. If we do need to tell him, I have no doubt he will not betray our need for secrecy. Knowing him, he’d forget I told him the king’s dying before he’d ever have a chance to actually tell anybody about it. We have nothing to worry about.”

“Eh? What’s that?” croaked old, wrinkled Hargood in the far corner of the room. No one answered and he soon forgot that he had spoken.

“I’m not worried about the news getting out,” Gladius pointed out. “I’ve always said that we’ll have to let the yipple out of the jar sooner or later, so that doesn’t bother me one bit. I am a little worried about this teleport thing, though.”

“Don’t worry,” Dinbar said reassuringly. “I’ve used this spell countless times since perfecting it, and I’ve made the Largoneth - Galepath leap often enough to be confident about it.”

“But you’ve never taken another person with you.” The worry in Gladius’ voice stemmed from an active imagination that vividly pictured his good friend Zilbo forever lost in transit or mysteriously teleported to the distant deserts of Kovalli or the middle of the Great Sea.

“It shouldn’t make a difference. I’ve taken great amounts of cargo with me before, weighing much more than Zilbo does, and I haven’t experienced any ill effects. Trust me, Gladius. Zilbo and I will be back in Largoneth before you know it. I guarantee it.”

Gladius smiled but remained unconvinced. Magic was, after all, magic, a seemingly miraculous and highly mysterious thing to the uninitiated. The five councilors of Zylon lived in an era where most knowledge of the mystic arts had faded into the past, disappearing before the rational orderings of natural science. Hargood and Dinbar, the two court magicians, had been appointed to their posts by Zylon for their merits as wise and capable men, and their magical talents had been largely ignored by the other three until now. Zylon’s old friend Hargood, a great statesman in his day, had over the years drifted towards a fringe spiritualism that he called magic. Even Dinbar, the learned young man that history would come to remember as a famous and powerful mage, possessed only an incomplete and erratic grasp of magic. His many years spent in thorough study of ancient mystic writings were still to come, and he possessed only one spell.

One spell, his own inner word of magic.

The Teleport.

Similar in internal magical structure to the AIMFIZ spell that would become so popular some five centuries in the future, the actual working and feel of Dinbar’s spell was somewhat more emotional and instinctive. Rather than using a drawn out, pages long incantation in some archaic language, the young magician simply pictured in his mind’s eye the desired destination. Forsaking the power lines and pentagrams that appear in other magical traditions, too often for show, Dinbar merely performed the casting in a comfortable setting, one that was familiar to him and held his essence within its walls.

As Dinbar began focusing his mind and strengthening himself to make the magical leap to Galepath with Zilbo, his Largoneth bedchambers glowed and crackled with sharp static energy. Even Darborn and Gladius, the least magically acute of the five, were very much aware of gradually becoming the center of a circle of strength, held in place around Dinbar and Zilbo by some unknown crystal framework imbedded in the stars.

The moment grew closer and the council members said some brief parting words. During the trip to the Galepath Library, work would continue on the sickly King Zylon day and night. The Spell of Linking had been completed, connecting Zylon’s life force to a magical sphere in hopes of providing one last chance to fall back on should all else go wrong. Also set into motion was the process of preparing for a long trip to wherever the Pool of Stasis might be revealed to lie. Zilbo had ordered the court healers to make ready to move the king in a moment’s notice upon his return from Galepath. Darborn, his ever-efficient military mind thinking along avenues untouched by Zilbo, dispatched orders to Quendoran garrisons in the north, bringing in several armed units to accompany and protect the king wherever he might be taken.

In the meantime, in the flickering light of the candles by Dinbar’s bed, Zilbo and the magician stood ready to depart. Dinbar’s preparations had mainly involved instructing Zilbo on how to pattern his thoughts and mental images to arrive successfully at the Galepath Library. Dinbar knew of one place in particular in that beautiful city that captured his fancy. When casting the teleport in the past, Dinbar had focused on that place, picturing it in the most minute details, until those details had materialized around him and he had arrived. Luckily for the ease

of the spellcaster, a quick series of questions revealed that the well-traveled Zilbo was familiar with the same part of Galepath, a clearing in one of the local parks, featuring a bronze statue of Entharion the Wise now green with age.

The two travelers closed their eyes, standing patiently at the foot of the bed. Dinbar began to speak, talking Zilbo through all the steps necessary to focus on the jump to Galepath. Gradually the sound of the other three council members began to fade. Even the occasional rasping cough from Hargood went unnoticed by the travelers. Zilbo felt his eyelids jump restlessly at first, only to calm down as Dinbar continued to intone softly. The candlelight seemed to disappear and soon even the feel of the cool stone beneath their feet gave way to a void of nothingness.

All this time, the other council members noticed no change. The two at the foot of the bed appeared to have entered a deep sleep. Darborn frowned in suspicion, perhaps annoyed that they hadn't already disappeared in a flash of blue lightning.

Dinbar, already experienced and adept at this mode of travel, began to feel the change first. In the darkness of his mind a new source of light began to appear, not the dimness of nearby candles, but rather the powerful orange glow of a pulsing overhead sun. Even Zilbo began to feel it too, the new light reflecting a painful glare off a nearby metallic object, and the myriad of sensations beneath his feet gradually merging into soft prickles of grass still moist with the morning dew.

Dinbar knew the time was right. The two stood on the threshold, suspended over a yawning chasm, a magical gulf of nothingness. Failure to act now would leave them caught, forever trapped in a somewhere that was nowhere, a bridge between the reality of Largoneth around them and the imagination of Galepath several hundred bloits away.

He spoke the word.

And in a blink they were gone.

No bright lights, no smoke, no sudden shaking of the Great Brogmoid that holds up the world. Nothing. One moment they were there, the two of them, high up in the southwest keep that held Dinbar's living quarters. Then suddenly they were gone.

And the world reopened before them. Warm weather, blue sky. Surrounding trees rustled faintly by the distant breeze. Laughter somewhere down the trail leading away from the clearing. And over the tops of the trees stood the spires and noble domes, bell tower rising gracefully to the sky, the library peacefully to its left. Galepath.

Zilbo gasped in surprise, nervously relieved by the unexpectedly smooth and painless spatial transition. Dinbar smiled at his friend's reaction, recalling the first time he had taught himself the spell and experienced the quick jumping sensation it produced.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" A sly grin crossed the magician's features.

"I can't believe it," Zilbo whispered in awe. "All of a sudden, here we are."

"Here we are indeed. And we might as well get a move on. No need to worry good old Gladius any more than we already have."

Zilbo smiled and nodded at the thought as they began to walk quietly towards the edges of the clearing. Luckily for the two magical travelers, the peaceful meadow had been empty upon their arrival, all the merry people of Galepath evidently somewhere else. The two stopped briefly to gaze at the life-size bronze of Entharion, the first king of Quendor, changing color with age. The same unspoken thought occurred to them both, the chilling thought that the majesty of Entharion's works might not survive the life of the present king.

A brief walk through the park, thick with proud, towering trees and dense, low-growing bushes, brought them out onto one of Galepath's main avenues. Paved over with beautifully

rounded blocks of dark stone, the street was remarkably clean and uncrowded. Tourists from Quendor's other major metropolis, the eastern city of Mareilon, would have wondered at the pleasant state of downtown Galepath. Few people walked on the streets, even at one of the busiest times of the day. Only one horse-drawn chariot moved briskly down the road, carefully avoiding the few pedestrians. In the early years of Galepath, the city's remarkable architects had designed countless avenues of soaring apartments and mansions, glorious rooftop marketplaces, underground theatres, the likes of which were nowhere to be found the world over. All of these stunning wonders had been cleverly connected by lofty, delicate walkways, hidden underground roadworks, and intricately designed doorways that connected nearly every building. All of this resulted in a city that really had no excuse to go outside, save on the occasional days of beautiful weather.

Zilbo and Dinbar of course knew all this, being well-acquainted with the wonders of Galepath. Conveniently, their common knowledge of the area had allowed them to chose a site of arrival right across the park from the University itself, a short and pleasurable walk from the library.

In a few short minutes they pulled open the massive library doors and entered the building. A few quick questions to an assistant librarian set them on course for the main archives, where Litbo Mumblehum could no doubt be found hard at work. An overwhelmed Zilbo Throckrod, new to this section of the library and still dazed from the lightning jump to Galepath, stared in wonder at the marvelous stain glass portraits gracing that inner hallway. As he witnessed the whole of Quendor's history unfold under the colorful dancing rays of the rising sun, Dinbar peered intently around shelf corners and piles of manuscripts until he had found what they had come for.

A mole buried in his work, Litbo remained completely oblivious to the magician's presence next to him until he coughed: "Litbo? Remember me?"

Looking up to see what had disturbed him from his research, the librarian's eyes widened with pleasure. "Dinbar! My word, it's been years. How are you, my friend?"

He rose and grasped Dinbar's hand, clapping him on the back at the same time. Just then Zilbo strolled up, finally ignoring his surroundings and getting down to business.

"Well enough, I suppose," Dinbar remarked, "after years of overfeeding on that stuff they give us at Largoneth." The magician patted an imaginary belly and the two chuckled. Gesturing to Zilbo, introductions were made. "This is Zilbo Throckrod, a friend of mine from court. He sits with me on King Zylon's council of advisors. Zilbo, the most esteemed librarian and historian, Litbo Mumblehum."

The two shook hands and nodded.

With the social formalities disposed off, Litbo posed a question for the visiting pair. "So, what brings you two all the way from Largoneth?" He stressed the word "Largoneth" as if to indicate the legendary, distant quality it held for him.

Dinbar glanced quickly at Zilbo before beginning the explanation. Asking Litbo for a place to talk privately, the visitors from Largoneth soon found themselves in Litbo's inner sanctum, an office barely more than a closet, made even smaller by the time-worn piles of written word that consumed the librarian's interest.

Dinbar spoke. "I think we should start by pointing out that it is of the utmost importance that nothing we say here shall leave this room. I'm here because I know I can trust your friendship and secrecy."

Litbo swallowed and nodded, his eyes growing ever wider in his usual expression of innocent excitement.

Zilbo picked up the conversation. "Our king, the lord Zylon, is ill. We don't know if his age has finally caught up with him, or if he's been struck by some other kind of illness, or even if he's the victim of a curse from some unknown enemy. All we do know for sure is that he's dying and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do about it."

"But why have you come to me?" Strains of nervousness and worry were beginning to creep into Litbo's soft voice.

Dinbar answered. "The council at Largoneth debated all the possible courses of action. One among us suggested the obscure process of resurrection as a way to save the king. Unfortunately, we couldn't trust his aging skills to carry out the process successfully. I brought up the Pool of Stasis. We know it exists somewhere, and if we can get the king there, we might be able to help him. I seem to remember from my last visit you telling me that this very library held the scrolls describing the location of the Pool, and that the translation was almost complete."

Litbo looked away quickly, his face darkened by an odd combination of embarrassment and despair. "Yes, I remember mentioning that." He was mumbling, not sure how to break the news. "The Scrolls of Fizbin."

Dinbar leaned forward in his chair, excited. "Yes, that's it. The Scrolls of Fizbin! Those are the ones we need."

The librarian sat in silence. Zilbo sounded worried when he spoke. "Mumblehum, is everything all right? Those Scrolls, are we going to be able to look at them?"

Over the last few days Litbo had not been able to forget the pain of losing one of the most valuable pieces in his collection. Shaking his head, he neared tears. "They're gone," he whispered.

"Gone?" Dinbar exclaimed. "How? What happened?"

Litbo sighed. "I don't know. One morning I was making my rounds as always and they just weren't there. At first I figured that one of my colleagues had just taken it out on a sort of illicit loan, but they never turned up. A few other books were missing along with the Scrolls, but nothing nearly as important as the works of Fizbin. I reported them missing, and since then I haven't heard a thing."

A morbid silence descended on the room. Litbo lost himself in the memory of the missing scrolls, while the two royal advisors absorbed the stunning impact of the librarian's words. To have left the castle at such a crucial time, to have traveled the complex magical byways of the universe, to have come to Galepath all for nothing, to find out the Scrolls were gone. Dinbar, being absolutely truthful to himself, had to admit in silence that he hadn't placed too much hope in the Pool of Stasis, even though he had been the one to bring it up. Being well-preserved had always been one of Zylon's virtues in good health, and in ill health such a virtue counted for very little. It had been however the only thing his desperate mind had been able to come up with, a last lucky roll of the dice on which to rest all of his hopes. And to have that taken away so unexpectedly.

"Were they stolen?" Zilbo asked at last, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," Litbo sighed. "It seems unlikely to me. After all, no one really seemed to have any use for them, until today." He gestured towards his two visitors. "Stolen?" he echoed, shaking his head. "The authorities sure seem to think so. They've gone to all sorts of extreme ends trying to arrest some kind of fictional villain. And now this declaration against Mareilon."

Dinbar and Zilbo glanced at each other nervously. "Declaration? What declaration?"

“Oh, haven’t you heard? Apparently some Mareilon rope salesman named Zarfil is running around down there proclaiming himself the next prince of the universe, or something. Anyhow, our mayor, that Spildo fellow, is convinced Zarfil had something to do with the disappearance of the Scrolls. He’s issued a proclamation authorizing the use of force against Mareilon if they don’t arrest Zarfil and return the Scrolls.”

“The use of force? How can we not have heard of this?” Dinbar wondered in exasperation.

“It’s that damn Darborn!” Zilbo exclaimed. “Him and his silly military bubble around Largoneth. He’s so concerned about keeping the news of the king’s illness from spreading to the rest of Quendor that he hasn’t stopped to think about what news isn’t getting IN to Largoneth.”

“Have you really not heard any of this?” Litbo asked in disbelief.

“Apparently we’re completely in the dark. And we’re the ones that are running the country,” Dinbar pointed out. “The minute Zylon goes under, everything seems to fall apart.”

Zilbo’s political instincts overcame his anger at Darborn’s policies, and he asked, “This Zarfil you mentioned. Do you think he has the Scrolls?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. There’s no reason for him to. Our mayor is feeling threatened, and he’s just grasping at straws. Zarfil has demanded Spildo’s overthrow and has threatened to bring it about himself if he ever gets the military power to do anything about it.”

Zilbo was amazed. “This... this is civil war.”

“And all over my Scrolls.” For Litbo, civil war paled in comparison to the loss of “his” Scrolls. “I don’t understand it. No human could possibly have any use for Fizbin’s writings.”

“Unless someone knew we needed them,” Dinbar mused.

Ignoring the magician’s speculations, Zilbo pressed Litbo for more information. “You said ‘no human’ could have any use for the Scrolls, aside from us, of course. Why ‘no human’?”

“Legend states that the text of the Scrolls were given to Fizbin over the course of several nights of deep sleep. Apparently even he looked at his own words and could not understand them. They speak of heavenly halls, mystic places, magical connections far beyond our intellects. It was commonly believed that the Scrolls are Eru’s gift of immortality to the human race. If and when we deciphered the Scrolls, according to some, we would become like the Implementors themselves. I suppose that would have been motive enough for thievery, were it true, but the closer we got to a full translation the more confused we were by the words of the Scrolls. Eventually we just gave up. I don’t have any doubt about it. The Scrolls of Fizbin were only meant to be understood by immortals.”

“And this Zarfil is certainly no immortal,” Dinbar pointed out.

“I wonder,” began Zilbo. “You say translation was almost complete. Maybe we don’t even need to see the Scrolls. Do you remember where the Pool is?”

Litbo shook his head, keenly aware of being unhelpful yet again. “I have no idea. We translated that part in full. In fact, it was the first section we did because it pertained to this physical world. In the end we got even less out of the Scrolls than we would have just from consulting local legend. Fizbin seemed to give very specific instructions about how to find the Pool, but every detail related to geographical locations that are no longer known to us. I suppose it’s no surprise, him writing so long ago. The best I can do is tell you that we were left with a general impression of the Pool being somewhere hidden in the Southlands, guarded by a magic boulder of some kind.”

“The Southlands, eh? That’s just too broad. And I really don’t feel like marching off to Mareilon on some kind of wild goose chase, especially with Zarfil raising such a fuss.” Zilbo felt the hopelessness of the situation bearing down on him.

“It might be worth the trip just to see if we can keep this Zarfil character from making any more trouble,” Dinbar pointed out. “After all, a civil war is a civil war. We’ve had almost four hundred years of stability in Quendor, and we have to do our best to make sure it doesn’t all fall to pieces.”

Litbo, humble librarian, began to feel for the first time in his life that he was moving in high circles. Suddenly, within the last ten minutes, two men who would help decide the fate of the kingdom had come to ask for his help. Although he was always more than willing to talk at great length about obscure historical manuscripts, he now put aside his shyness about other matters, and gave the pair his advice. “Mayor Spildo has made it clear to the people of Galepath and Mareilon that the only way to avert some kind of war at this point is to return the Scrolls to this University. He’s made the Galepath Library a propaganda tool to get himself reelected. Now if we can find the Scrolls before he marches, we’ll prevent a war and possibly save King Zylon at the same time.”

Zilbo did his best to shake off the irrepressible feeling that they were talking in circles. “Do you have any suggestions as to where we can find the Scrolls?”

“Not exactly, but I have a few hunches. All the bad news that’s been piling up lately gives me an idea. The earthquakes, this war looming on the horizon. Now with the king dying, we don’t know what could happen. This is all certainly the workings of the divine: the Great Brogmoid, the Implementors, possibly even Eru himself.”

Dinbar couldn’t help but laugh at his friend’s intellectual excitement. “So what are you suggesting, that we make a sacrifice to the Great Brogmoid and everything will be okay?”

Litbo’s train of thought continued too rapidly to notice the joke at his expense. “This Library around us is filled from floor to ceiling with stories, old legends, prophecies of all kind. Every holy word that has ever been written lies within these walls. I’m sure that if we look long enough, we’ll be able to find some kind of explanation of these recent events, and maybe some kind of solution.”

Zilbo was skeptical. “This is a pretty urgent situation, if you ask me. I don’t see how hunting through a library will help matters any.”

“No, Litbo’s right,” insisted the royal mage. “All of the recent signs definitely point to some kind of supernatural interference, a mysterious force at work. Clearly we have no idea what it is, and it won’t hurt if we put all of our resources to best use trying to track it down.”

Zilbo sat quietly, weighing the options available to them. Litbo spoke. “I’ve spent years cross-referencing every book in the library that has any kind of prophetic writings. It’s a long list, but I should be able to sort through it with a little bit of help.” The librarian looked at his friend Dinbar hopefully.

The magician took the hint and said, “With your permission, Zilbo, I’d be more than happy to stay here and help Litbo in his search. I can teleport back to the council at Largoneth once we discover what it is we’re up against. You can go ahead and bring the news about Mareilon to Darborn and the others, and maybe even get them to take steps to prevent a crisis.”

“That sounds fine, but how am I going to get back to Largoneth?” Zilbo was still uncomfortable with his recent teleport experience.

Dinbar smiled. “Don’t worry. The spell will work just as well on you alone as it did on the both of us.”

“Very well. I’m eager to get back to the castle now that I know how much of a mess we’re in. Dinbar, since you’re going to be staying here for a while anyway, make it a point to talk to Mayor Spildo and see if you can’t use your royal authority to bully him around a little bit. If you

can tidy things up at the Galepath end, that will make our lives that much easier.” Dinbar nodded in agreement while Zilbo turned towards the librarian. “Mumblehum, I’ve already had Dinbar attest to your trustworthiness, but I need to hear it from you. In the next few days if the news about Zylon’s illness gets out it will give Spildo even more of an opportunity to pick a fight with Zarfil and Mareilon. You need to keep absolutely quiet.”

“You have my word on it,” Litbo swore solemnly.

“When a great king who has been hailed as a god among men approaches his last days, the entire world cracks and bends in reflection of his suffering.”

-Melibar Holzin, Brogmoidist, circa 400 AE

The woman turned to run, her long hair falling in her face as she ducked quickly, a fluid motion to pick up her child. A six-month-old bundle of tears and throaty yells firmly in her grasp, she made a dash for the back door in hopes of escape. A blow came first, a crumpling thud of pain somehow distantly related to the standard issue Mareilon militia club that impacted brutally with her left shoulder and neck. Falling painfully to the ground, she somehow managed to keep moving toward the door, her knees and free hand shuffling instinctively away from her attackers. Another blow fell and her arms and legs gave out in pain. As she lay on the hard wood floor, her mind thick and dull with the agony, a hand pulled on her shoulder to turn her over. Groveling and scrambling to put any possible part of her body between the child and yet another hurting swing of the club, she became an annoyance to one of her attackers, who kicked her out of the way and grabbed the baby.

In a brief, bright moment of rage the baby’s fearful cries were silenced, the blood dripping unevenly down the wall from the point of impact. Motherly anger flaring up inside the fallen woman, she screamed with animal fury and struggled to rise to her feet. For a hideous, unpronounceable moment, a moment just long enough to ruin that mother forever, the city guard officer that towered over her transformed imperceptibly into a fierce monster, the same breed of monster that had slaughtered the men and ravaged the women of the now-dead villages of Er and Foo. She had resisted and now she would be forced to give in.

The vacuum created by the death of the baby soon filled with the sound of the woman’s own tears. The whole incident had lasted under ten minutes. A pair of guards in the employ of the Mareilon mayor had knocked down the door, supposedly looking for some unknown collaborator of the rebel Zarfil. Not finding what they sought, tables were overturned and chairs smashed in a quick anger.

Begging, begging, she had tried to stop the violence, but the sickly satisfaction of cracked wood and shattered glass had not been enough for the intruders. They had turned to her and her child. Soon they disappeared, in search of new pleasure.

She was left crying.

Throughout the streets of the Millucis district and all of Mareilon, that grim episode repeated itself countless times. The paranoid power-wielder that ruled the Firestone Mansion had issued a blank check to his personal militia, an order to track down Zarfil and all of his supporters any way possible. House to house searches began, bringing slaughter to any who would resist. Zarfil’s forces fought back in their own way, dodging the militia and disappearing through secret alleys familiar only to them and their kind. Once again the city government stormed into the Millucis, this time not with the intent to reform but with pressing urgency of halting a budding revolution.

Every Mareilon native living through those days of rioting and guerilla violence would carry potent images with them until their last days. Fires lit in the night would burn unforgettable in the eyes of those watching from a safe yet ever frightening distance. The old men and women hobbling down the streets of their youth would jump nervously in a twisted harmony with the beating rhythm of running feet falling in the darkening night. For some it was a joyous time.

Years later, the one-time street lord named Gezlin would look back with pride on the days of revolution, ignoring its eventual consequences, including the battle that would almost claim his own life. Within hours of discovering that his gang had signed a truce to ally with Zarfil's forces, Gezlin's enthusiasm and excitement carried him to the front line for his new master. Well established and boasting many connections with the discontented youth of the city, Gezlin proved a major factor in recruitment, winning over hundreds to the cause that had so possessed his soul.

Almost immediately it became clear that the edge belonged to Zarfil. He had seized the element of surprise with his massive initial rally and had not slackened his pace since that first day. The city government had at first no idea how to react to his threats, and when they finally took the first necessary steps, they did so only to find that most of the city was openly against them. The mysterious lack of any kind of authority or news coming out of Largoneth coupled with several years of worsening poverty in Mareilon had made the moment ripe for Zarfil. Eager to find someone to blame for their misfortunes, the locals fell easily into the rebel corner. The city government and the relatively innocent but conveniently distant metropolis of Galepath bore the brunt of the peoples' hatred.

Every corner filled with the random products of destruction. Stores raided and completely gutted stood next to ever-vacant lots now filled with piles of burning debris. The large wooden sign that had hung over Ronatil's bar, proclaiming "The Eagle's Claw Tavern" in fancy, fading letters now lay abandoned in the dust.

The Backbone Hills hummed with activity. Overlooking the dirty city of Mareilon below, hundreds of Zarfil's supporters had met to plan the violent seizure of power. Almost immediately after the first outbreak of rioting, the renegade prince had given the order to disperse and reassemble a short distance outside the city. His strategy was a simple one. The city militia, unaware of Zarfil's presence in the hills, would scour the Millucis from floor to ceiling trying to find him and his followers, while encountering stiff resistance from the usual innocent bystanders. The sight of distant fires and the smell of smoke blown into the hills by a brisk wind stood as testimony to the uphill battle facing the city militia. Zarfil knew that by the day's end, Mayor Hegilburg's forces would have withdrawn in exhaustion, the frustrating full-scale search having revealed nothing. Speeding down from the hills, his people would capture the moment, swift corbies pouncing on their helpless prey.

A miracle of speed and organization, the rebels had already organized and divvied up the rag-tag band into well-structured brigades, each with a different task leading towards the "liberation" of Mareilon. Once the call to battle had been given, one unit would storm the already battered Millucis, carefully arranging several more spontaneous uprisings and demonstrations of loyal affection to Zarfil. Word from his inside sources had told the rebel leader that most of the city militia had itself reached the breaking point. Many of the young men making up the mayor's police force had come out of the Millucis in hopes of working their way to a better life. Being ordered to ransack the streets of their childhood stirred a great deal of discontent among the ranks. One aspect of the rebel plan called for storming the guard headquarters and imprisoning the highest ranking among that city militia. Without senior officers to give orders, the militia might then be persuaded to join Zarfil's ranks against Mayor Hegilburg. Even if that aspect of the plan fell through, the bulk of the rebel force would already be storming the Citadel itself, opposition too scattered and distracted by the other areas of fighting.

Night fell, and with it came an eerie void that stood in stark contrast to the overwhelming action of the day. Hundreds rested quietly in the hills, the only sound a constant subliminal hum of distant insects to accompany the soft murmur of voices from the largest tent. A deep fog had drifted in from the coast with an evening breeze, and now all light from the stars was shut out, dampened by low-hanging clouds. Faint glimmers of light drifted through the cold air from the city below. Most of the north-eastern side of the city glowed in its usual prosperous way, but the patterns of light to the southwest, the area of the Millucis, were much more erratic. The occasional house lamps were overwhelmed by the brighter lights from still-raging fires.

A quick look through the ravaged streets of the Millucis soon reveals a story behind the largest of these fires. One particularly unlucky team of city militia was fighting a desperate defensive battle, entrenched in the back of one of Mareilon's plentiful dead-end alleys. A mere two-dozen city soldiers, they had been sent into the area around dusk with orders to assist and relieve some of the militiamen/police officers that had been working there throughout the day. They were met unexpectedly by several large groups of angry locals, armed mostly with daggers and clubs, converging on them from several different side streets.

Now despite being armed not only with the usual crime-fighting nightstick but also with newly-issued, extremely formidable long swords, the relieving unit soon found itself in a hopeless situation, outnumbered by several hundred angry locals and surrounded on three sides. Opting for a brave stand, a sort of noble fight to the death, the group's commander led them down to the end of the alley where they would fight their first and last battle. Six of the two dozen were dispatched to overturn a nearby covered wagon and drag it to the mouth of the alley. With the broken wooden structure serving as partial protection, they would hopefully prove capable of withstanding the siege they imagined would come.

However, the mob of Millucis locals bearing down on the soldiers failed to live up to their expectations. Rather than send hundreds to storm the makeshift barrier and meet the sting of the government blades, one local gang member walked forward casually, a torch in one hand. Leaning forward with casual arrogance, he caressed the overturned wagon with the business end of his burning light. In a manner of a few fearful seconds, the entire structure jumped ablaze, the fire soon spreading to the two wooden houses on either side of the alley, trapping the unit in a collapsing inferno. In panic, the Mareilon soldiers turned away from the blaze in hopes of climbing the old stone wall that formed the end of the alley. It would prove to be much too high.

“This space has been intentionally left blank.”
-Unknown, attributed to the Implementors

Nighttime had fallen upon the kingdom, and the lands upon the coast lay shrouded in a quiet and mysterious darkness. As the last glimpse of the sun vanished over the horizon, the weary residents of Quendor sank into their beds, while their dreams followed the sun on a journey into a secret and feared netherworld.

Not everyone in Quendor took part in this journey into the world of sleep. At Largoneth Castle many still roamed the hallways in search of answers to the questions that had arisen so unexpectedly. Who was behind the sudden illness of the loved and respected King Zylon? Could the court magicians find a magic powerful enough to restore the King to health? And there were disturbing rumors from the south, of civil unrest and foreign invaders. These were questions that, for many at Largoneth, could not wait until the morning. As the castle servants and the nearby villagers rested, Council members and sorcerers worked on late into the night looking for some possible answer to arise out of all of their combined knowledge.

Zilbo would never be able to explain what curious urge led him to leave the Council chambers and wander the castle hallways that night. In the past, during his many years as the king's advisor, Zilbo had always been the dominating presence of the Council meetings. Even General Darborn, as much as he would hate to admit it, looked to Zilbo for guidance during times of distress. Now, with the full weight of the future of Quendor falling on his shoulders, he needed to take a long walk.

As he walked, lost deep in thought, he passively allowed his body to go wherever his feet would take him. Shuffling aimlessly through Largoneth, Zilbo found himself in rooms he had not seen since his youth, when he had eagerly engaged in exploring as his major pastime. The castle, in all its immensity, held a near- infinite variety of side rooms and obscure passages, and it was through these that he now traveled. One such room in particular is worth describing, as its appearance made a dramatic impact on Zilbo's mind.

History has recorded that Largoneth castle went through an immense amount of continuous reconstruction during the early years of the kingdom. Because of the length of time involved in erecting such a structure, many different architects were employed over several time periods, which in part explains the many incongruities and varying styles throughout Largoneth. Although most of the castle is consistent throughout, every now and then one is likely to stumble upon a room such as the one Zilbo happened upon now. It seemed to be an architectural jumble, designed almost as an afterthought by three or four different architects years apart. Nestled in a rarely-traveled maze of passages in the castle's underbelly, it had the appearance of being the center, the focal point of each of Largoneth's varying styles, almost as if each different era of building had somehow wound itself around to intersect with the others at this obscure point.

As Zilbo's tired body shuffled to a halt, he looked around in quiet confusion at his surroundings. Not easily remembering the odd room from any of his earlier wanderings, he at first felt lost, experiencing a panicky unease. Forcing his body and mind into an artificial state of calm, he looked back over the day's events.

Just a few hours before, he had left Galepath via Dinbar's teleport, arriving on his knees, gasping for breath. The court magician had instructed Zilbo to picture his own bedchamber in the northern hall of the castle and had assured him that the transition would be even easier the second time around. Unfortunately for Zilbo, something had been horribly different. Dinbar

himself would never be able to imagine the feeling of being suddenly thrust by some foreign force across great distances in the blink of an eye. Always used to having the force of magic make the travel through space with him, Dinbar had not anticipated the effects of sending Zilbo through alone. As the final steps of the spell were cast, Zilbo felt his very existence flicker on and off, a candle flame gasping for breath. An empty chasm opened up beneath him, spanning the distance from Galepath to the castle, yet this time through, the chasm was not bridged by Dinbar's reassuring presence. Zilbo arrived in his chambers full of nausea and unease, thankful for his life.

The confused jumble of brick, wood, and marble that the room had thrown together brought back those feelings of nausea. Zilbo's head reeled, his thoughts suddenly filled with brief flashing images, selected excerpts from the Council meeting following his return.

Off to his right, poor Gladius Fzort slumped in despair upon hearing that the Scrolls that might have saved Zylon's life were missing, the mysterious victim of a freak theft.

The dark echoing sound of a pounding fist on the table's hard wood accompanied a fierce barking from General Darborn.

Military action. Confront the rebels. Immediate march.

Zilbo's news of a looming war between Galepath and Mareilon had arrived in court only minutes after disturbing rumors of a large force of invading barbarians farther to the south. Zilbo had stood up immediately, arguing with Darborn against any kind of military interference. The royal Council of Quendor, a usually peaceful and calm kingdom, suddenly found itself in the midst of more action than any of its members could recall.

Zilbo pleaded with the General. "Darborn, give the mayor of Mareilon a chance to do his job. As long as Hegilburg is still in power there, we don't have to act. Marching out ready to kill isn't the way to prevent a war."

"And what about Galepath?" the general had retorted. "They don't share your hesitation, your fear of battle. From what you yourself have just told me, Umberthar Spildo will stop at nothing to get those Scrolls back."

"I left Dinbar there for a reason. When he goes to see the mayor and uses the full weight of royal authority, Galepath will have to back down. I think that's the best way to settle this: find a diplomatic solution, not a violent one."

"And what about Zylon? If he dies and word gets out, there's no way we'll be able to control this situation."

"I agree with Litbo and I have faith in him. This whole thing smells of supernatural interference, and he's the man to find out exactly what's going on. Once he gets back to us, we'll know exactly what we're up against and how to combat it. In the meantime, just give me a little time. If nothing happens at the end of three days, you can march and fight all you want. Until then, wait."

Darborn did not answer. Zilbo had spoken with authority, his voice finding a new tone. He had given a command and expected it to be obeyed. That was the type of convincing that Darborn responded to, and in the end he had backed down. Zilbo had won the first round of conflict, but as the day came to a close he began to doubt his own actions.

The long walk through the castle's inner passages had given him time to reflect and had eaten away at his confidence, filling him with uncertainty. What if Darborn had been right? What if Zilbo's hopes for peace led him to wait too long, eventually missing the crucial moment? What if... what if... Zilbo began to understand the immense responsibility and nagging anxiety that

comes with royal authority, and wondered in amazement that Zylon had managed to live for such a long time while suffering under such a great burden.

Looking with his mind's eye at the futures that lay before him, he saw a curious parallel between the history of the kingdom and the walls around him. Born over halfway through the fourth century after Entharion, Zilbo had been brought up in a world where all of the elements leading up to the current situation had already been long in place. Zylon, king since Zilbo's distant ancestors had been young. Galepath and Mareilon, the two city-states seemingly made one by the happy unity of Quendor. Despite all of this continuity, Zilbo himself could even remember a time when no one had worshipped the Great Brogmoid, and the tales of such a beast wouldn't yet be told for many years. Now that monster had shaken the world nearly half a dozen times in the recent weeks, a sign of great changes to come.

Would Zylon live? Two possibilities: yes or no.

Can Quendor survive the impending conflict? Again, only two possibilities: yes or no.

And Zilbo's sudden flair of regal authority earlier in the day... What exactly did that hold in store, if Zylon were to die?

The questions and possibilities began to come together, soaring in from previously unknown distances to meet in the jumble of Zilbo's mind, just as the crumbling brick, Antharian marble and ancient wood foundations met at odd angles in this empty room. Subtly the weight of decision-making and future-shaping turned from an insurmountable hindrance into a motivating, driving force. He left the room, not accepting its confusion, and found his way above ground once again, into the more heavily traveled corridors of Largoneth.

Several minutes passed and gradually Zilbo's mind turned away from political matters and drifted into idle daydreams. He remembered the relaxing pleasure of the warm Galepath sun, and from there his mind wandered to the many other journeys of life. As his head filled with reminiscences, he walked slowly into the southwest keep with the distant thought of finding Gladius to share a late-night game of hootch snarfem. Lazily turning a corner, he began to pass by a branching corridor leading off into the servants' quarters when he heard the odd strains of a haunting voice from one of the nearby rooms.

His thoughts interrupted, he turned towards the source of the sound, puzzled that any of the servants should still be awake at such a late hour. Standing outside an unmarked wooden door, he bent closer, listening to the confused babblings that came from within. As bits and snatches of a weak but mysterious chant drifted through the door, Zilbo's mind suddenly flashed an image of Litbo the librarian mumbling about "the workings of the divine."

Inside the room, candles flickered dimly, giving off just enough light to reveal awkward chalk drawings, almost scribbles, on the ground that seemed to be the initial preparations for some unknown ceremony. Smoke filled the room, from the candle and from the burning remains of some unidentifiable hunk of flesh. A shrouded figure bent over the burnt offering, scattering colored dyes among the ashes while continuing his haunting chant. Outside the door, the words became solid and audible to the frightened listener.

Ilugith gauntog beneel
Ilugith benaug izkineel
Ilugith harmaul belegur
Ilugith gauntog beneel

Repetitive and hypnotic, the words drifted eerily through the flimsy wood, filling Zilbo's mind with a hauntingly evil beat. The language was completely unfamiliar to him, but the words held a peculiar, recognizable texture.

Ilugith.

A billowing wisp took form in Zilbo's imagination, dancing to the dark syllables of the new word. His head reeling from the power of the chant, Zilbo's imagined black angel soon ran off into the distance, chased by the knocking, the dismal drive of the following phrases.

Gauntog.

Beat.

Benaug.

Beat. The rhythm shook him as it cycled through the syllables again.

Harmaul Gauntog Benaug.

Harmaul Gauntog Benaug.

A command whispered through his being, a summons. Irresistibly he felt himself moving toward the door, his left hand moving up toward the wood, cracked with age. And then suddenly, inexplicably, a thought of Litbo entered his mind again, a flash image of the librarian enthusiastically pursuing some obscure intellectual point of fascination. Litbo had suspected some kind of supernatural interference, a meddling spirit working in the human sphere and bringing about the recent events. What would Litbo make of this, he wondered, these mysteriously foreign chants calling out the tenets of some forgotten religion? Never had such sounds tainted the walls of Largoneth Castle.

The sounds came again, forming new words and shaping a subtly different rhythm.

Vibinai arktuth k'nii

Vibinai embell gernaugh

Vibinai arthuun belegur

Vibinai arktuth k'nii

This time the summons could not be resisted. Horribly, disgustingly, Zilbo felt himself pushing against the door, his mind rebelling against his body's actions. Torn somehow between the desire to run and hide, the need to unmask the maker of the vile sounds within, and the passionate temptation to give in to the power that shaped the pounding words, Zilbo broke open the door and stared in horror at the sight within.

Colored smoke shifted around the cramped quarters, different shades and tones of light flickering in and out of the billowing clouds from scented candles and incense. The room seemed divided into vertical levels, the colors changing drastically closer to the ceiling. A deep glowing blue lurked just over the ground, hiding the floorboards that creaked as Zilbo moved forward in a trance. Circulating out of nowhere, a light breeze moved the colors and scents away from the floor up toward the heights of the room. Flying up on the breeze, the smoky blue gradually changed tone, achieving a stunning blood red in the room's upper recesses.

Zilbo walked forward in a daze, an insurmountable barrier preventing his mind from understanding the sights before him. As he moved through the smoke aimlessly, an inner feeling

told him that he had already walked through where the room's far wall had once been. He had stumbled unknowingly into a far greater space, filled with hideous sounds that came screaming in from vast distances. From somewhere off on his left, the chanting came again, more aggressive this time. The beating syllables pursued him, biting at his heels. Turning away from the sound, hoping to run, Zilbo let loose a shriek at the sights that stood before him. Immense faces drifted in and out of the mist, bodiless and taunting. He struggled to find a way past, but their leering and constant laughter blocked all exits. Within a few brief moments, one face in particular grew larger and seemed to take a real form, leaving the larger space beyond to enter the small wooden room. Leaning in to the reality of Largoneth Castle from somewhere quite distant, the voice whispered, not to Zilbo but around him, in answer to the chants.

Words were spoken, questions asked and answers given. The powerful spirit knew of Zilbo's presence but seemed content to ignore it, at least for the time being. As the unholy conversation drew to a close, the faces phased indescribably out of existence, leaving Zilbo alone again. Soon the breeze stopped as well, almost too suddenly, as if some magical open window had been abruptly thrown shut. The smoke began to clear and Zilbo reassured himself with the knowledge of four walls and a door, a simple servant's room at Largoneth Castle. Catching his breath and turning to leave, he stumbled awkwardly over a large cloaked object at his feet. The object stirred and moved, throwing off the heavy cloak to reveal a human shape balanced on bent knee, a hungry animal ready for the attack.

Zilbo backed uneasily towards the door, trying desperately to remember which of the castle servants lived in this mysterious chamber of horrors. The figure moved again, rising to its full height, clearly a human wearing Largoneth garb. Slowly the man turned and looked in Zilbo's direction.

It was Endeth. In a flash of confused recognition, Zilbo began to speak, ready to extend a friendly greeting to King Zylon's trusted handservant. A harsh guttural growl forced its way out of Endeth's mouth, abruptly cutting off Zilbo's words. Looking closer, Zilbo flinched in surprise as he watched Endeth's unremarkable dark brown eyes transform suddenly into gleaming, bright red orbs.

That last surprise was too much for the royal advisor. The trance that had brought him into the room unwillingly had broken completely. Turning away from Endeth, he ran sweating out of the door in the direction of his own distant chambers and the safety of his bed.

“Things just seem to be getting worse and worse, don’t they?”
-Anonymous

Try as he might, the mayor simply could not lift the heavily laden wood coffer. It might have been something in the way his hands shook with fright. The Mareilon Mayor Hegilburg had spent the better part of a sleepless night resting uncomfortably in his office’s hard rosewood chair, nervously absorbing the various intelligence reports that gradually leaked in from beyond the Citadel walls. Rumors abounded. Fueled by the eerie half-darkness of moonlight, the rumors became long flickering shadows dancing around the inner chambers of the Firestone Mansion, granting to Hegilburg a most hideous and distorted vision of reality.

The simple truth that a number of Millucis homes had been struck by arson spread through the interlacing networks of word-of-mouth communication that gradually inflated the story into the epic proportions that reached the mayor’s ears: the entire city would soon be up in blazes, or in fact already lay in ashes.

Three different reports left Hegilburg with three different figures describing the size of Zarfil’s rebel forces, the last of which was several times the population of Mareilon itself. A bloodied and frantic lieutenant had forced his way into the mayor’s office at one of the darkest hours of night with a first-hand account of the vicious struggle on the street. Heavily burdened by rebel advances in nearly every major city district, the local militia was loosing ground and hurting badly.

“We can’t last long out there, sir.” The lieutenant seemed almost equally frightened by the mayor’s potential wrath as by his earlier encounters with the enemy.

Surprisingly, Hegilburg had shown no visible reaction to the news. His tired face, already wearied by years of dusty bureaucratic triplicates, had merely settled into a mask of glum resignation. Despite the bitter chill in the night air, the delicately paned office windows stood open, facing towards the fighting to the south. Turning his back on the worried soldier, the mayor leaned out the window, stretching and straining his senses. He would never be certain if the wind had truly carried the clang of metal on metal and the cries of the wounded all the way to the Citadel. Even in the complete absence of sound, his paranoid imagination would have worked overtime to supply the unwelcome details.

“Sir?” The lieutenant’s voice cracked in hesitation, the sound swallowed by the silence of the moment.

Turning once again, the mayor moved toward him and asked the inevitable question. “How long do we have?”

“I don’t know, really. If we can somehow rally the forces and meet at the entrance to the Citadel... Strategically it’s the most defensible place in the city. From there we could probably hold them off until sunrise, and then we’ll have enough visibility to gain the upper hand.”

“And if that fails?” Bitterness broke into Hegilburg’s voice. He knew that question’s answer already.

The lieutenant looked away uncomfortably, unable to keep eye-contact as he told the mayor just how much longer he’d be safe behind the Citadel walls. “Two hours, maybe. Three at the most.”

A few minutes later the lieutenant left the mayor’s office for the last time, hurrying away from that place of dust and stagnation towards the front lines of battle, bestowed with Hegilburg’s task of mustering the city militia for a final defense. The mayor would never know

the outcome of his mission. In the half hour that the messenger had needed to run from his unit's entrenched position in the Millucis to the inner Citadel, and back again, the flow of battle had grabbed his unit forcefully and cast it aside like so much useless driftwood. His command nowhere to be found, the lieutenant would run back and forth through the darkened, confusing Millucis street corners, retracing his steps countless times in hopes of finding a force long since scattered and broken.

Meanwhile, in the Citadel, the mayor sank into a childish sulk as he lived out the final minutes of his life-sentence. Accepting as literal the lieutenant's decree that he had a mere three hours left, he flew into a futile rampage, soothing his fright by exercising power that no longer existed. Ordering the Citadel guards away from the building's front doors, he assembled them all in the outer hallway leading to his office. They would be his company, his own personal armor in the surreal deathwatch that he insisted on enacting.

The dark of night being blessed with no natural timekeeper the likes of the sun, the city of Mareilon had installed many centuries ago a bell tower that rang each hour, tracking the progress of the night. Mere minutes after the lieutenant's distressing appearance and departure, the bell, housed across a small courtyard two buildings away from the Firestone Mansion and operated manually by a special unit of the Mareilon militia, began the long ringing count towards midnight. Seven claps of the bell chimes filled the night air ominously before the tower's ringing came to an unexpected halt. Hegilburg and his companions in their late night vigil rocked tensely back and forth, anticipating the next ring that refused to come.

As it became more and more clear that something had happened at the bell tower, Hegilburg unleashed a series of urgent orders, his makeshift dam to prevent the onslaught of the tide.

"You! Yes, you! Go to the tower right now. Get the name of the officer on duty and put him on report. And you, Captain. What's your name? Take ten men to the gate and find out how the defenses are progressing. Bring back a report in half an hour. And you, Eeble, come here. We have work to do."

Eeble, one of the mayor's closest advisors and friend of many years, walked down the hallway with Hegilburg as they whispered together, arranging some last minute details.

"It doesn't look good, does it, Eeble?" The mayor had finally come face to face with the situation. His companion nodded quietly in agreement. "Zarfil might win this one after all. I should have thrown him in jail while I had a chance."

"There's no good in worrying about that now, Silbarium." Eeble was one of the few who felt close enough to the mayor to use his first name. "At this point in time it's a little more important to find you a way out of this situation."

"Oh, don't worry," the mayor reassured with an odd gleam coming into his eyes. "I've been giving that a lot of thought. From what we've heard, all of Zarfil's effort is directed towards the south side of the city. Head north from the back side of the Citadel and we've got a clean escape route all the way to Largoneth and beyond."

"Are you going to try to head to Largoneth?" The question sounded skeptical.

"I don't know," admitted Hegilburg. "If Lord Zylon hasn't acted by now, he probably never will."

"Rumor says that Zylon is dead," Eeble put forth bluntly.

"Rumor says many things, my friend, not of all of them true."

"But then why haven't we heard anything from Largoneth in over a week? Times like these call for a strong king getting out and traveling the land, calming the people and putting down rebellion. If Zylon is still healthy, then why is he hiding away in Largoneth?"

“Please, Eeble. Allow an old man his last futile hopes.”

The quiet plea surprised the mayor’s advisor. Never had he heard his friend so tired. Looking about him, Eeble found that the mayor’s wanderings had taken them to the basement of the Firestone Mansion, to the dark rooms formed by the sturdy pillars and ancient base foundations. The stairs leading down to the dusty chambers had been empty, the route down to the city’s treasury not heavily frequented after midnight. Even the guardpost by the doors lay abandoned, every available soldier sent off to the battle in the streets.

Looking around him nervously, the mayor quickly removed a massive bronze key from the inner folds of his cloak and thrust it hastily in the lock. Pushing his way into the wealthiest single room in all of Mareilon, he turned and shot an order at his companion.

“Put it all in one pile. We’ll try to get as much of it as we can.”

“I don’t know about this, Silbarium,” said Eeble haltingly.

Wasting no time with a reply, the mayor immediately grabbed several heavy velvet pouches, filling his greedy fists with the wealth of the city. Around him on all sides lay immense piles of gold and silver coins of all denominations, many counted and bagged systematically, others lying loose in a haphazard fashion, still untallied from the last tax season. Nearly every coin in the chamber bore the wizened likeness of Lord Zylon the Aged; no other king had held the throne in over three hundred years. The gold pieces minted in the distant age of Entharion the Wise and Mysterion the Brave were now valuable collector’s items almost impossible to find.

Taking a quick break from his task, Hegilburg eyed his motionless friend in annoyance. “Don’t just stand there. We’ve got work to do.”

Reluctantly, Eeble busied himself with the impossible task of making off with the whole of the city coffers. Securing a large wooden chest from the far recesses of the treasury, he began filling it with the endless stream of valuable coins, unable to forget his misgivings. Someone at the bell tower had stopped just over halfway through the midnight ring, with no possible explanation other than the unexpected arrival of Zarfil’s forces. The bell tower was only a couple of blocks away, and the ringing had stopped over half an hour ago. Every fiber of instinct in Eeble’s body told him that the only time for escape had come and gone. They were deep in the bowels of the most dangerous place in Mareilon, worried about escaping with a sufficient horde of wealth when they should be worried about escaping with their lives.

“All right. That should do it.” The mayor’s words snapped Eeble out of his contemplative gloom. Surveying the nearly filled chest with satisfaction, Hegilburg rubbed his hands to clap off the years of dirt that had accumulated in the city’s treasury. Bending down to move his spoils, he strained every muscle with the effort. In his hurry to provide for a wealthy future, he had grabbed more than he could carry. Try as he might, he simply could not move the heavy wooden coffer.

In the many weeks leading up to the massive initial rally at the Beeblebrox Square, Zarfil had spent most of his time building up an impressive array of connections, a network of advisors and supporters all moving in unison to guarantee his victory over Mayor Hegilburg and the hated city of Galepath. As the nighttime battle for the streets of Mareilon grew more and more desperate for the city militia, it became clear to them that Zarfil had been much more powerful than they had anticipated. A shrewd player, the one-time rope salesman had been determined to keep his greatest card a secret, holding it in reserve until the decisive moment.

A resident of the darker side of Mareilon, Zarfil grew up frequenting the illicit temples and shadowy ceremonies that most citizens turn away from in shame or fear. Many of Zarfil’s friends in the Millucis paid homage not to the Implementors or some Great Brogmoid, the officially

approved beliefs, but worshiped instead constantly hungry and demanding demons. Familiar with the forms of dark communion employed in those mysterious halls of worship, Zarfil had arrived at the conclusion that the best possible weapon in the struggle that lay ahead would be the force of dark magic.

The renegade prince himself lingering a safe distance behind the lines of the fiercest fighting, he watched the magical havoc wreaked by his powerful allies and smiled at the memory of Ezkinil's initial opposition to the idea.

"I just don't see why we need to get involved with that kind of thing." The aged historian, a firm traditionalist at heart, shook his head in disapproval.

"Ezkinil, maybe you don't understand. We're talking about revolution here, and we are going to need every weapon we can get our hands on."

Zarfil had pointed out the unlikelihood that the Bloodworms and Nightwings could overcome their own inherent stupidity and hate for each other in time to form a viable fighting force.

"Maybe you're right about the gangs," Ezkinil conceded. "But no good ever comes out of tangling with the dark ways. It's dangerous for the soul."

Zarfil chuckled at that. "Oh, Ezkinil. I had no idea you were so superstitious."

"It's not just me. No one in Mareilon will support a revolution if it's backed by demons and evil spirits."

"That's why we're not going to tell them," he said, laughing again.

True to his word, Zarfil had marched next week toward the rally with no magicians by his side. Even his own rebel soldiers were kept in the dark about the mysterious tents that had been erected a safe distance from the rest of the encampment in the Backbone Hills. The magicians had worked in secret, isolated even from each other, toiling ceaselessly in creation of the powerful spells that would destroy the opposition.

"But-" Ezkinil had protested again.

"Don't worry, Ezkinil. Don't worry. I've been talking to one fellow in particular, Marboz they call him. He assures me that we will be perfectly protected from any magic they cast. See, we won't be the ones tangling with the dark ways. They will. It'll be their souls on the line, not ours."

Ezkinil remained unconvinced, but in the end he had relented. He would however steer clear of the sorcerers' tents and the plotting conferences held between Zarfil, Marboz, and the other dark mages.

Magic of any kind was a rare commodity in the age of Lord Zylon, Marboz had explained to Zarfil. Mystified historians had recorded that most knowledge of the sacred arts had been lost with the fall of the city of Pheebor some eight centuries ago, and the sudden unexplained death of every member of the Jerrimore clan about two hundred years after that. In some places the spark of magic still survived in the forms of those like Dinbar and Hargood, brilliant but untrained, often erratic. However, magicians like those were usually limited to flashy pyrotechnics, and would never be capable of using their skills towards destructive ends.

"Magical powers of any kind come as gifts directly from the Implementors," Marboz continued to explain.

Zarfil blinked in surprise and pointed out the commonly held belief that dark mages did not pay homage to the Implementors.

"There are many different kinds of Implementors." The mighty rebel Zarfil had become but a child at the feet of a patient and willing instructor. "There are of course the creators of light, the Implementors of Atrii, the ones we are all familiar with. Less well known but equally as

powerful are their dark brothers, the makers of all that is powerful, the vicious beasts and the deadly warriors. We pay homage to these Implementors and gladly receive our powers from them. They give us the power of destruction, and in exchange we are theirs to sacrifice.”

The mention of sacrifice did not settle well with the rebel leader. Even as accustomed as he was to the darker side of Mareilon life, his natural instinct was frightened off by the image of bloodied monsters lying on a stained altar to a heathen god. For several weeks Zarfil worked in preparation for the final seizure of power, and he had managed to ignore his hired magicians as best he could. Giving them the autonomy to work entirely on their own, Zarfil had not known what to expect from the dark mages. Come the night of the battle, he was favorably impressed.

Sounds of violence flying through the air in every direction, Marboz sat peacefully in the middle of Belfar Avenue, oblivious to the commotion around him. A mere half block from one of the hottest points of conflict, the mage had crossed his legs and faced away from the street gangs and militia that would unwittingly become his focus of attention. Hunching in closely, as if to keep out the chill in the cold Mareilon night, Marboz focused intently on a flickering, hazy spot of air. Casting his mind out, he flew along darkened, flapping wings to the spot of the battle behind him and viewed the scene with dispassionate, analytical eyes.

The patch of air in front of his eyes warped itself cautiously, as if testing the possibilities and exploring the magical routes of the mind of the concentrating sorcerer. Gradually the haze shifted and almost imperceptibly went opaque, becoming a negative space, a sort of polarized mirror. Straining his efforts even further, Marboz passed his mind over the site of the battle once more and cast an image of the warring soldiers into the mist of the mirror before him.

Mareilon night air glowed dimly, miniature Bloodworm gang members giving battle to hard pressed city militia in the cramped expanse of a burnt Millucis street corner, all within the tiny arena of magic dancing before the huddled mage. A pause followed, Marboz concentrating, consolidating the reality of the image before him. Taking a few minutes to distinguish the opposing sides, he nodded, satisfied. A gnarled hand reached forward, moving away from the hunched ball of the sorcerer’s body towards the reflecting image. Moving over the battling figures, his hand paused selectively, ignoring the allied rebels and waiting for an isolated and defenseless enemy to appear in the image of haze.

Waving his hand carefully through the image, the reflection of the Mareilon militiaman shimmered lightly, blinked, then disappeared. Somewhere behind him in the darkness, a nineteen- year-old boy also blinked, then disappeared. The mage chose his next target.

When Zarfil entered Mareilon’s Citadel for only the second time in his life, it was with the first hints of sun revealing themselves over the city’s western walls. The long night of battle lay behind him and victory had been won. He sat now in the same chair that Mayor Hegilburg had vacated only several hours before, looking out at a ring of his most loyal supporters. Several magicians slumped in the chairs nearest the walls, exhausted by the night’s effort. One by one, over half the city’s fighting force had been blinked out of existence. Panic had run through many of the militia units as young men already unwilling to fight saw their life-long friends disappear before their eyes. Some units however had been spared the devastation.

“We found almost no resistance along the eastern half of the marketplace,” one of Zarfil’s select gang members reported. “The special guard for that area had backed themselves into a warehouse and camped there for the night.” He shrugged, at a loss to explain his opponents’ cowardice. “One of my men broke off from the group chasing after somebody. When he found them in there, they surrendered almost immediately.”

Zarfil nodded, sensing the irony. "It seems that our beloved mayor commanded very little loyalty among his troops. Speaking of our beloved mayor..." The victorious revolutionary turned towards another of his high-ranking street soldiers, a short, well-built southerner named Gezlin.

"We searched the whole place, sir, from top to bottom. From the looks of things, he got out of the building just a few minutes before we did."

Gezlin looked nervous, uncomfortable, almost as if his new leader would kill him simply for bringing the news.

"I want him found," Zarfil ordered, bringing a fist down on the table, "as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." He turned to leave in a hurry, but not before Zarfil could shoot out another order.

"And another thing. I don't want you thinking you can get on my good side just by calling me 'sir'. I'm tired of it."

"But Zarfil," Poulizre interjected, "you have won. Now you are lord of Mareilon. Perhaps not 'sir', but some title is befitting."

Zarfil turned sharply and advanced towards the woman. "Do not deceive yourself, Poulizre. The storming of the Citadel will make great copy for your little newspaper, but just because we stand in this room now does not mean the battle has been won."

Poulizre eyed the descendant of princes quizzically but remained silent. Seeing her doubt, Zarfil went on to explain his feelings. "Mareilon is not yet ours. There are those who fought against us, who do not follow me and do not believe in our cause. They all must be told, and they all must join us."

"Join us? For what?" The aged historian Ezkinil sounded skeptical, even a little mocking.

Zarfil's voice grew louder in reply. "All of Quendor lies before us for the taking. This is just the beginning. We've all heard the proclamations coming out of Galepath. We can't let those kind of threats go unanswered. What we have here is a perfect opportunity just waiting to be seized."

"This is not at all what I had bargained for." Ezkinil shifted his tone subtly, becoming a disapproving elder lecturing an impudent boy some forty years his junior. "I agreed that Mareilon was yours by right. The records prove that. But I will not stand by and watch as you march against the entire kingdom."

"Damn it, Ezkinil! Haven't you been listening to me the last few weeks?" His voice now rose to a sharp scream. "How many times have I demanded Zylon's abdication? I said so in every speech, in every open letter, countless times. Did you think I was kidding?"

Ezkinil's embarrassed silence stood as an affirmative answer. The new prince of Mareilon shook in anger, glaring at the chief historian. Poulizre, glancing nervously back and forth at the two, quickly intervened. "Look, Zarfil, this has been a new experience for all of us. None of us were certain of what would happen, and we've just been taking things as they come. I'm not at all surprised that we've had a few misunderstandings. After all, you have to admit that it is damn near impossible to tell when you're bluffing."

Poulizre's soothing tone erased the hostile cloud that had been building in the room. Zarfil meekly returned to his desk without a glance in Ezkinil's direction.

"In any case, we have to take firm steps to make sure we don't lose what we already have."

The talk turned gradually to consolidation, of orders and actions, declarations and demands. Almost completely unnoticed, Ezkinil headed for the door, his input no longer needed or appreciated. The soft hues of sunrise filled the room and another day in Mareilon began in earnest. Outside the walls of the Citadel, the city shook itself awake, wiping away from its many thousands of eyes the collective vestiges of left-over nightmares from the night before. The many

raging fires that had threatened the Millucis district for several days began to give out, almost as if burning a hellhole to the ground would be worth neither the time or the effort.

Most local militia failed to report to work that morning. Zarfil's message was clear; the city-state of Mareilon had found a new fighting force, the united street gangs known as the Hellhounds and Nightwings, once known only for fighting each other at the drop of a fromp. The poor Mareilon city guards who had managed to make it through the night were no longer welcome in Prince Zarfil's barracks.

At noontime a proclamation went up around the city, Poulizre's printing press running overtime to ensure that Zarfil's latest order be pasted up on every local street corner still standing. For centuries the city heralds had been nothing but a local joke, having nothing better to do than wander the Mareilon avenues shouting, "It's five o'clock and all's well." Now they were riddled with scorn as they proclaimed the wording of Zarfil's latest order for all those who could not read.

"A general warrant has been issued for the interrogation and arrest of all those citizens known to be in the employ of the outlaw regime of former mayor Hegilburg. All engaging in trade and/or military espionage with the city of Galepath and the Kingdom of Quendor are declared to have forfeited their rights and property to the state. All citizens discovered giving aid and shelter to the enemies of Prince Zarfil and the city of Mareilon do so under the penalty of death. The Rulers of the Citadel have spoken."

House to house searches began, similar to the raids put into motion by Hegilburg mere days ago in hopes of finding Zarfil and his supporters. This time the search began not in the dark alleys of the lesser southwestern districts, but in the large, luxurious halls to the north of the city. Ettlwhiff, the small blond intellectual known for sporting his hand-carved pipe in the best Millucis taverns, felt the hand of the new prince when his house was chosen, quite at random, for one of the first searches.

"Now what is this all about?" he puzzled sarcastically, blocking the doorway. "I dare say that all you'll find in my house are books, books, and more books. Farn Fzort, actually. He's my favorite. Would you like a copy?"

Unaccustomed to this peculiar brand of intellectual resistance, the street fighters pushed their way past the slight looking man. One of them growled something in a harsh Millucis accent: "Orders from the Prince. We're looking for criminals, enemies of Mareilon."

Ettlwhiff coughed in surprise, nearly choking on his pipe. "Orders from the Prince, eh?" He followed behind them hesitantly, sending a constant stream of nervous chatter addressed to their turned backs. "I know your damn silly prince. Well, actually that's not true, but I know Gezlin! You've heard of him. I understand he's one of your prince's right hand men."

The intruders ignored his babbling pleas of innocence and went right on with their search. Eventually, finding nothing of value, they would continue on to the next house, leaving Ettlwhiff with only a vague feeling of violation and confusion.

Others were not as lucky. A special but not nearly as publicized order had been issued by the prince to his most trusted foot soldiers. One member of the fledgling Mareilon administration had been less than enthusiastic in his support of Zarfil's latest string of declarations. In fact, city historian Ezkinil had been downright opposed to nearly every move the rebel leader had made since the initial rally. An example had to be made.

Ezkinil would not be seen in Mareilon again.

His disappearance and subsequent rumored death were by no means unique. Nearly every city employee, from the most hated tax collector to the menial stablehands, fit the description of

those covered by Zarfil's arrest warrant. Baffled old Citadel janitors were hauled off and thrown into the same cell as the mayor's personal advisors.

One particularly lucky patrol group did a little bit more than find one of the mayor's advisors. Near the northern gate, on the road just inside the city walls, they found the mayor himself. Barely twelve hours had passed since Hegilburg had trembled in fright, listening to the aborted midnight chimes. With just enough time for a brief stop-over at the Mareilon coffers, Hegilburg had sneaked out of the Firestone Mansion through the rear supply entrance at nearly the same time Gezlin and his troops marched from the bell tower into the mansion's massive front doors. Dodging from house to house with only his friend Eeble for company, the mayor managed to avoid the patrols quite successfully until his urgent desire to reach the gates brought him out into the open just a moment too soon.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" Zarfil smirked as Hegilburg was dragged before him.

The two rulers of Mareilon stared at each other resentfully. Neither had slept in several days, but only Hegilburg showed any signs of fatigue. Zarfil on the other hand shook with nervous excitement, a triumphant spark gleaming in his eyes.

"Where was he?" the prince snapped at a newly-arrived lieutenant.

"We found him just inside the city gates, sir." In the hours that had passed since sunrise, the formal address had come to sound quite pleasing to the victorious rebel. He straightened slightly in an effort to look that much more regal as the soldier continued with his report. "He was carrying this."

A bulging velvet pouch traded hands. Evidently the desperate mayor had abandoned the heavy wooden coffer and had settled for one single bag filled with Mareilon gold. The loot pouring out noisily onto Zarfil's firestone desk, the prince turned to Hegilburg, his expression filled with disbelief.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, gesturing at the table with a sweep of his hand.

Glancing quickly around the room, Mareilon's former mayor found little support in the hostile eyes that met his. Mustering the strength to answer from some deep inner reserve, he raised his head and looked at Zarfil. "That money is mine by right," he managed to whisper. "As mayor of Mareilon I am caretaker and overseer of all city funds. But I suppose that's your responsibility now, isn't it?"

With a quickness that surprised everyone present, Zarfil's right hand lashed out and struck the mayor's jaw. "You dare call yourself mayor of this city when your idea of financial responsibility is stealing from the poor and the hungry? The people of this city supported your bid for office because they thought you'd bring the change that everybody needed. Prosperity, expansion. Sure, but only for you and your family."

He gestured to a guard impatiently before ordering, "Take him away. He makes me sick."

Storming with energy, he drafted another public notice, this time detailing Hegilburg's crimes against the city of Mareilon. Trial proceedings were brought against the former mayor the next day. A formal charge of treason was announced, and the jury hand-picked from among Zarfil's Millucis revolutionaries. The outcome of the trial was never in doubt.

Former mayor Hegilburg died at the scaffold early the next morning.

“No single document has contributed more to our understanding of the religious world than the
Scrolls of Kar’nai.”

-Litbo Mumblehum, in his Prophet of the Northlands

The following is excerpted from Manifestations of Eru and His Implementors (written by Antor Zilbarion in 386 AE), one of many books perused by Dinbar and Litbo in their quest for an explanation of the current events:

...However, the chief body of religious literature comes from several centuries before the birth of the Kingdom, in the form of the Scrolls of Kar’nai. Penned by a handful of anonymous believers living a hermetic life far in the frigid Northlands, near the ancient and mystic religious site of Kar’nai, these divinely- inspired works have been organized into books that scholars believe to have been written by different unknown hands...

The First Scroll of Kar’nai, Book Three

Know this now. The lord, chief among the Implementors and creator of them all, weaves an unfathomable future. His hand is an intangible force guiding our lives, moving them in inconceivable patterns, by rules beyond our understanding. Witness the fall of the mighty Nezgeth Empire as proof of His majesty. In glory and pride the dark-skinned warriors built mighty castles, souring high to challenge even the Grey Mountains themselves. The entirety of the lands to the east were theirs, across the Great Sea. Giant temples built they, carving into walls of rock, profaning the sacred earth that is Eru’s with false idols of rodents and serpents, the hollow beasts that crawl in the dust.

The lord conferred with his elders and among them there was much argument. Rebellious Implementors cried out in anger, hesitant to see their creations destroyed. Eru in his mercy heard the elders cry and His holy answer will stand the test of the ages. Witness the providence of the One. The Nezgeth in their hubris likened themselves unto the gods. He smiled and understood. Nezgeth pride is merely part of That Which Is.

Causing the golden sword of the sun to fall upon the Nezgeth, He bade them to leave their mighty castles and wander the face of the earth in loneliness. Crossing the sea, the mountains, and the desert, they left their empire behind and now live to serve Him. Understand this. Rather than destroy His own children, He sees the future and finds a place for them in His web of truths. He sees a day when they will arise to their former splendor and destroy His greatest of enemies.

[Author’s note: Comparative historians have been surprised by the similarities between this story and equivalent legends in other cultures. Nearly every civilization ever studied passes on tales of a great warrior empire in the lands across the ocean to the east. According to the legends, age-old castles now stand empty, testifying to the existence of a wandering tribe that will one day bring salvation from a great evil. Kar’nai scholars conjecture that the evil in question is none other than Belegur, the fallen Implementor mentioned throughout the Scrolls, particularly in Book Twelve of the Seventh Scroll.]

Book Five

Beware of the doubters, for they ask many questions. In their quest for science and deep wisdom even the most basic foundations come under their vile scrutiny. How can the world be flat? they wonder. Those at the edges would most surely perish. The doubters ignore that with

the Implementors, all things are possible. Why, they ask, do these powerful gods allow the death of their prophets at the hands of infidels from other lands? The answer laughs at its own simplicity. Sacrifices must be made. And why do these gods tempt a human lord with life of four hundred years, only to take it suddenly away and throw the land into chaos?

The doubters ask many questions, spending their time wasting the precious gift that has been given to them. While they sit deep inside unholy halls debating their empty ideas, the final answer descends inexorably from above, proclaiming the word of a new world. Nobody lives forever.

[This is perhaps one of the most hotly debated passages in the entirety of the Scrolls of Kar'nai. Some view these words as verifiable prophecy, while most others take them merely as creative prose. Scholars in the former camp point out that the prophets of Kar'nai would eventually perish by the sword in the reign of Mysterion the Brave, events hinted at, albeit rather obliquely, in the lines above. Even more compelling evidence lies in the fact that Quendor's current lord and protector, King Zylon of Largoneth, is already in his four hundred and eighteenth year of life, a striking parallel to the words spoken in this Fifth Book. If these words are indeed prophecy, we have in our hands the remarkable opportunity not only to analyze the predictions that have come to pass, but also to look into the future and speculate about the possibly unfulfilled events still to come.]

The Third Scroll, Book Nine

One day a king will rise to change the world. The first dynasty shall make its mark for seven centuries, and the new king will have the power to bring it to its knees. His dreams will lie deep underground, a burning ambition for the hollow cavern and the cold stone sky. Inspired by fear and driven by pride, he will tunnel into new realms, lower and lower in search of the truth. He shall build his vision, a mighty castle where the river gives tribute to the sea. An empire he shall create from the tools around him.

When the fallen angel, the Beast, walks among the mortal lords, tempting and buying their souls, his vile actions will give rise to a great battle in his underground lair. Defeated by the desert tribes and the servant of a dead king, he will lie for centuries, smoldering in wait. Hundreds of years to pass and the dead king's dynasty will have perished. A new empire shall have risen on the site of the great battle at the sea, and the new king will be noticed by the sire of the Beast. He will be owned by the devil and known as a warlike evil. A great price will be set upon each victory of the new empire. Behold, this proud and fearful age will have a number set upon its days, and its name shall be confusion.

The Seventh Scroll, Book Twelve

Beware of a time that shall soon come to pass. The heavens will become cold with unease and fear, and the companions of Eru, they who Implement His Desires, will be faced with a great temptation. One of their number will fall victim to his own greed and anger, and he will seek the overthrow of Eru. Know now the name of this evil one. Call him Belegur. Know also that his dreams shall come to naught. He will be cast out of the Timeless Halls, and he will be thrown down to earth. When that day arrives, when Belegur walks the earth, tremble, for the one he seeks out is you! How will you recognize the arrival of the evil one? I tell you now that three warnings will be given to mark the coming of this fallen angel. Even the great towers of the world will tremble in fear of his arrival, and the ground will quake. This is followed by the

illness of an aged king. As the realm stands leaderless, no one gives the orders to face the invaders from a distant land. When these three signs have come to pass, be on guard, for he will seek possession of your soul.

[This bears a striking similarity to several other passages in the Kar'nai that describe Belegur as a powerful god cast into the body of a mortal. The monks at Kar'nai evidently possessed a very thorough knowledge of how this evil would manifest itself when the time became right. Unable to use his mortal form to reenter the Timeless Halls unassisted, other less powerful mortals would be forced to succumb to his unique psychic powers of persuasion, aiding him in his ongoing struggle against The One Father of the Implementors.]

Litbo Mumblehum read the words again in growing excitement, the answer growing clear to him. All the elements were in place, described in full by the esoteric Kar'nai texts. He had been familiar with these writings for many years, but always considered them to be vaguely allegorical at best. It now seemed that the words recorded nearly a thousand bloits to the north, countless years ago, were beginning to take on a very real meaning.

A fallen god meddling in human affairs. Quaking of the earth's crust. Civil unrest. Mysterious invaders from a long-forgotten empire. And most compelling of all, the sudden illness of an aged king.

"The references are a little vague, Litbo." The cold rationalist in Dinbar slowly rose to the surface. Reading over the Scrolls of Kar'nai, he seemed hesitant to place the future of Quendor in the hands of several religious prophecies.

"Dinbar, I don't think you understand what this means. We've found our thief!" Litbo gestured in the air madly to enforce his point.

"Who?" the magician laughed incredulously.

"Belegur, the Fallen Implementor. Who would need the Scrolls of Fizbin more than he would?"

"Wait a minute. I think you'd better slow down and start from the beginning." The answers that seemed so clear to the librarian were a complete muddle to the royal advisor.

Litbo took a deep breath, giving himself time to organize his thoughts before beginning. "The earliest memories of the human race have told us that in the beginning, when the foundations of the world were being laid down, Eru, the God who rules the Timeless Halls, kept certain things secret from his children, the Implementors. The Implementors were given many powers: the ability to create and destroy, to shape history, even to build new worlds. However, legend tells that us two things were withheld from them at the start of the world, knowledge of the Cubes of Foundation and of the gateways to the Timeless Halls."

"Wait. The Cubes of Foundation?" Dinbar interjected.

"Yes. Apparently Eru caused the creation of several plain white cubes that were the physical manifestations of the magical links that hold our world in place. Tradition has it that Eru grew distrustful of the haughty Implementors and withheld from them the knowledge of the Cubes, fearing that should one Implementor grow too powerful, the Cubes could be used to undo all of Eru's work. The same is apparently true of the Timeless Halls. Certain ancient writers tell that the Halls of the gods are made up of many different Plains of Existence, lesser deities dwelling on the Plains of Atrii and Irina, the greater beings living in the Inner Halls themselves. For some reason that the ancients did not record, Eru was only known to grant the Implementors one-way

tickets out of the Halls. Even this Belegur for instance. He was supposedly chief among the Implementors, but now he can't even find his own way back home."

"So what does this have to do with anything?" asked the baffled Dinbar.

"Well, like everything in the religious world, there's a catch. Working in His unknowable ways, Eru apparently saw fit to grant to the human race everything He withheld from the gods. The secret to the Timeless Halls, the final locations of the Foundation Cubes, everything. All that information was given to us, to do with it as we see fit."

"And?"

"And... Where, you ask, has this sacred knowledge been kept? Up until a few days ago, right here in this very library! The Scrolls of Fizbin! You came here hoping to find information on the Pool of Stasis, but that section of the Scrolls was only a small portion of the entire text. Hundreds of years before the founding of Quendor, an otherwise completely unknown holy man or mystic of some kind, Fizbin, was visited by Eru in a dream, and told not only about your Pool of Preservation, but about the Cubes, the gateway to the Timeless Halls, and even the very nature of magic itself."

Dinbar answered slowly, thinking aloud. "And Belegur needs the Scrolls to get back to heaven to fight the final battle with Eru."

"Exactly. His powers of mind control would be more than enough to trick almost anyone into stealing the Scrolls for him. He'd never even need to get anywhere near Galepath itself."

"If it is Belegur that's responsible, that means he's probably behind everything else that's been going on as well. After all, it would take a power like Belegur's to cripple Zylon and undo the work of Entharion the Wise. That Zarfil in Mareilon is probably in Belegur's grasp as well."

"And even if he isn't, Belegur is bound to be benefiting from the entire situation anyway."

"So what now?" Dinbar wondered.

Once again Litbo felt himself settling smoothly into the realm of world affairs, more than happy to give out his tactical advice. "It seems to me that if we can find Belegur's lair, we might be able to prevent him from using the Scrolls to battle Eru, and if we're lucky we can force him to release his grip on Zylon as well."

Dinbar nodded without much conviction, gradually coming to understand the web of events that had been unfolding over the previous weeks. The Great Brogmoid, child of Eru himself, had given the first sign, shaking the world in warning of the events to come. Meanwhile the king's illness and the disturbances in Mareilon provided adequate distractions while the thief made his way unmolested to Belegur's lair with the secrets that would give him power over all of creation. A nervous anticipation began to come over Dinbar as he realized that never before had Zylon the Aged and his councilors been faced with such a powerful foe.

“The Guardians of Zork are a military order of ancient lineage, the memory of which has been preserved in the form of two massive, identical stone statues in the Eastlands, deep underground. These statues, portrayed as heavily armored warriors standing at ease, hands clasped around formidable bludgeons, come alive and destroy all intruders trying to gain entrance to the Treasury of Zork.”

-The Encyclopedia Frobozzica, 966 GUE edition

The long, peaceful Largoneth night stretched into day. As the first hours of morning past, the castle shook itself awake, rolling out of bed, reluctant to deal with the tasks that lay ahead. A small contingent of Quendor’s token army lay encamped at the base of the Lonely Mountain, just around the bend from the castle itself. Weapons gleaming smartly in the sun, the proud soldiers of the kingdom worked efficiently, wiping their packs clean of the soft morning dew. Inside the castle, General Darborn had finally won his own personal battle, securing the permission of the other council members to march on Mareilon as soon could be arranged.

Stretching into the past for several generations, Zylon’s Quendor had basked in a sleepy, oblivious peace. The first century after Entharion’s death had been scarred with a long string of bloody conflicts, beginning with the Wars of Kar’nai in the northlands and ending finally with Mareilon’s abortive, near-comical Frobbish Rebellion. In the several hundred years since those forgotten events, the military forces of Quendor had dwindled almost to the point of non-existence. Although a distorted sense of tradition still led the kingdom’s generals to arm a string of guardposts along the northern border in the unlikely event of renewed hostilities, General Darborn and his peers were truly nothing more than figureheads commanding a powerless force. The few naval battleships built so long ago had been put to work as fishing trawlers, and every available soldier of the Quendoran army that wasn’t stationed along the northern border made a mind-bogglingly boring living guarding trade caravans from the fiendish, imagined raiders that might happen along every fifty years or so.

Nevertheless, the young men of Quendor still took a great pride in serving their land by joining the army. The gleam of armor and the pageantry of decorations and honors still held a great deal of appeal for the impressionable Quendoran youngsters. Many would-be soldiers traveled far bloits from their countryside homes to the nearest recruiting post, seeking an escape from the doldrums of life as wiskus-farmer in the Backbone Hills or as a Foo morgia-grower. None of these enthusiastic, bright-eyed soldiers had ever seen a violent loss of blood, much less a full-fledged battle. Even General Darborn, a die-hard veteran of the northern frontier posts, had to be counted as a stranger to the mysteries of war.

“So Darborn, I hear the orders went out last night.”

“That’s right, Gladius. That’s right. And I think it’s about time, too. We should have taken action quite a while ago. But I suppose it’s better late than never.”

“So what are your plans?”

“Well, it’s very simple really. The Lingolf Garrison is our closest military unit. Of course you knew that already; those are the soldiers we have stationed near here simply as a sort royal bodyguard. I’ve already made the arrangements with the captain of the garrison. They’re getting ready to march as we speak. I’ve also sent word by messenger to some of the forts scattered along the Long Road and the northern frontier, as well as the coastal units closer to Mareilon. It will be a few days before they receive their marching orders and catch up with us, but we will soon have quite a formidable number on our side to secure the city of Mareilon.” Darbon

finished his impromptu briefing with a satisfied nod, obviously enjoying his first opportunity to flex his military muscle.

“How many people are stationed at the Lingolf Garrison?” Gladius still held immense reservations about Darborn storming off to battle, and was determined to learn all the details.

“Exactly two hundred and nine.” Darborn recited the figure without even pausing to think. He had spent the entire previous evening with the Lingolf captain, working out the operation down to the finest detail. The general knew, for instance, that the original number had been 215, but that three had been given sick leave, one had been transferred to the western border of the Frobozz Province, and the last two had requested furlough several weeks before with the purpose of making a religious pilgrimage to the Great Brogmoid that holds up the bottom of the world. Neither of them had seemed to have any workable plan for how to make the pilgrimage, but in the peaceful kingdom of Quendor, two soldiers more or less wouldn’t make a bit of difference, or so the furlough board had thought at the time.

Gladius Fzort, who of course knew none of this, widened his eyes in surprise upon hearing Darborn’s figure. “Two hundred and nine? You’re marching off to stop a civil war with two hundred and nine soldiers?”

“Well, yes...” The general ran his fingers through his hair, puzzled by Fzort’s surprise. “But it’s not really a civil war. It’s just a gang of hoodlums cooking up a little bit of trouble. We should have Mareilon back to normal in no time at all. And with Zarfil behind bars, the mayor of Galepath won’t have any reason to be angry any more.”

“But what about the king?” Gladius pressed. “Do you expect things to go back to normal if Zylon dies?”

“If Zylon dies, we’ll crown a strong king who will be willing to keep things from getting out of control.”

“And do you have anybody in particular in mind, my dear General Darborn?” Gladius asked derisively.

“Look, Gladius, I’ll be the first one to admit that I haven’t handled this situation as well as I could have.” Darborn spoke softly, attempting to sooth his fellow council member’s antagonism. “If I hadn’t demanded that Largoneth remain isolated, as I did early on, maybe none of this would have happened. We would have heard about Zarfil a few days earlier, and we could have stopped him then. Well, now, at least we’ve learned from our mistakes. I’m willing to admit that I’m not always right, and so is Zilbo. He’s finally agreed that we should march as soon as we can, because being aggressive is going to be the only way we can take care of this problem.”

Gladius grinned with an acute sense of sarcasm. Thinking back upon the night’s events, Fzort remembered how frazzled and confused Zilbo had looked after he had returned from his long walk. The four council members present in the castle had spent nearly the entire night together, drifting from official business to casual conversation and back to official business again. Somewhere during a particularly long lag in that nervous cycle, Zilbo Throckrod had left the chambers to get a breath of fresh air and get his legs moving again. Towards the end of his aimless wanderings, he happened upon the bizarre supernatural ritual in Endeth’s bedchambers. Too disturbed and preoccupied to relay the tale to his fellow council members, he sat in nervous silence, crossing and re-crossing his legs, tearing his nails to shreds.

Only Gladius was close enough to Zilbo to notice that anything was wrong. Hargood on one hand sat drifting in and out of a fitful sleep, entirely oblivious to the other three. General Darborn on the other hand twitched in excitement, looking forward to his upcoming mission with the Lingolf Garrison. When he remembered to bring the issue before the council for their official

approval, Zilbo could barely mutter a word one way or the other, much less actually agree with the would-be military hero.

“Well, I hope you’re right,” Gladius finally admitted to the general. “I’d hate to see anything happen to you down there.”

An awkward moment of silence followed before the general looked at Gladius and smiled shyly. The two had worked together on the royal council for the better part of two decades and had never once spoken a kind word to one another. What had passed stood as a simple acknowledgment, a grim nod of approval; the two might not always agree, but they would always fight for the same side.

As the conversation came to a close, the thought of fighting began to seem very real to Darborn, now filled with doubt at the upcoming mission. Gladius was right. Two hundred men was a ridiculously small force, even for Quendor. Walking through the encampment at the base of the mountain, his imagination took him on a journey forward in time to the next few days. Taking in the sight of rows of gleaming spears, his usual smile was destroyed by the thought of Mareilon blood staining the clean metal. A grim uneasiness settled in.

This isn’t what I signed up for, he realized in wonder. Precision, authority, cleanliness. All of that I love. An order is given and obeyed, efficiently. Things get done. What’s wrong with that?

None of the young farmhands and failed apprentices in the camp around him could give an answer. At the sight of the approaching general, each soldier in turn would quickly turn his head and avert his gaze, suddenly taking great interest in the empty water bottle before him. Many would take no notice of the general at all, studiously analyzing their own images in a way they never had before, looking deep into their own eyes reflecting off shining spear tips and recently polished armor chestplates. No answers presented themselves to the introspective soldiers, only new, curious facts coming to light as they began to know themselves for the first time.

A call to the breakfast meal was given, incongruously merry bell chimes drifting in from the center of the camp, accompanying the tell-tale smoke and smell of roasted left-over meat. As the sights and smells assaulted the worried general, he felt a wave of nausea sweep over him, along with a mysterious feeling of loneliness amongst his two hundred men. Turning hastily, he walked back in the direction of Largoneth and the shore, suddenly very anxious to be on time for the final council meeting before his force broke camp.

Back in the council chambers, Zilbo and Gladius Fzort were whispering quietly to each other. Both showed the strain of several nights with little or no sleep, speech slurred and eyes drooping. Both advisors were nervously aware of the fact that after Darborn marched in a few hours, they would be the only two royal officials left standing between Largoneth and the impending chaos. Dinbar had yet to return from Galepath, and Hargood of Mareilon was sinking deeper into his own senile abyss.

They both looked up when the general returned to the room with his report. “We’ll be ready to march in a matter of hours. Travel time to Mareilon should be a little under two days. Our latest reports out of Galepath show that the mayor there is also preparing to move against Zarfil, but we’ve got a bit of a head-start. With any luck we’ll meet Spildo’s forces en-route, perhaps in the forests to the west of Mareilon. They’ll have no choice but to turn back, faced with orders from Zylon’s royal council,” Darborn concluded, his voice laced with a sense of importance and power.

“Gladius tells me that you’re only marching with two hundred men.”

“Zilbo, two hundred men ought to be more than enough to arrest one random renegade. And even if it isn’t, reinforcements will be hot on our heels. The situation is bad, I’ll admit, but now that we are finally taking initiative, we’ll have the element of surprise on our side.”

Annoyed by his fellow council members’ lack of faith in his military abilities and still disturbed by the tension that had been running through camp earlier, Darborn retreated to the far side of the room and sat down sullenly in his customary chair. Almost at once, the doors to the chamber opened unexpectedly and two of Zilbo’s personal guards walked in the room towards the advisor.

As the two guards made their hurried confidential report, a great look of worry filled Zilbo’s features. Turning to the others in the chamber, he briefly relayed to them the details of his encounter in Endeth’s quarters the night before. Even Hargood leaned forward in interest, drawn back to reality by Zilbo’s description of odd sounds, horrible visions, and strangely colored smoke. “Maybe I should have mentioned it to the three of you right away, but I wasn’t really sure what it meant. I asked these two to keep an eye on Endeth’s quarters and keep track of his movement for me. They were to arrest him should he try to leave the castle or do anything to arouse suspicion.”

Zilbo gestured towards one of the guards and asked him to repeat his report to the council. Nervous to speak in front of the most powerful group of people in the kingdom, the guard gulped and began slowly. “Well, sir, we kept an eye on Endeth, just like you told us and all. About an hour ago he left his room and headed out the castle gates. At first we figured he was just doing a little shopping, you know, because he’s a cook and all. We followed him as far as the nearest village to the south, but he didn’t go anywhere near any of the stores or anything. Finally we figured we should try to grab him, but once we made our move, he kind of disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared?” Darborn snapped rudely.

“Well, I can’t really explain it, sir. He was walking down a crowded main street. I got near enough to put a hand on him, and his whole body sort of blinked, then he was gone. At first I thought I had lost him in the crowd or something, but we never did find him. He just sort of disappeared,” the guard repeated with a shrug.

Zilbo thanked the guards for their report and grimly asked them to leave. A few minutes of aimless conversation followed, the council members trying to find some meaning hidden in Endeth’s strange ritual and sudden disappearance. They came to no conclusions and soon lapsed sadly into silence. Hargood’s first words in many hours came with an unexpected clarity that jolted them back to attention.

“Zylon nears death,” he uttered, his eyes widened with a newfound clarity of vision.

The others looked at each other uncomfortably, embarrassed and fearing that Hargood had just crossed another bridge on the road away from sanity. Hargood had served on the council for a long time, perhaps too long, kept on the council as the result of a close friendship with Zylon, the youthful king who refused to acknowledge the signs of aging in others, in the same way that he had refused to allow those signs to show on his own ancient body.

“Zylon nears death,” he repeated, determined to get his point across, “and there is nothing any of us here can do about it.”

“We’ve known that for quite a while, thank you,” Darborn pointed out mockingly. “You didn’t need to rub it in.”

Stubbornly, the old mage rose from his chair and moved towards the general, his arms and legs showing a surprising strength. “I have powers the likes of which you will never understand, Darborn. I have studied with Elthanor and witnessed his Gatherings of the Arcane. I have read

the old books. Yes, to you I look frail, old, but the spark of magic still flows within my veins. I have cast out my mind upon the shifting winds of time, and I have seen what is to come.”

The magician’s fierce explosion left Darborn shifting uncomfortably in his chair, trying desperately to avoid Hargood’s burning gaze. Zilbo, attempting to take advantage of the old man’s sudden return to clarity, pressed him for more details.

“What do you know? That Zylon is to die? And what else?”

Narrowing his gaze in Zilbo’s direction, Hargood spoke again. “Yes. Yes, he is to die,” he answered vaguely. “And at least one other here, in this room. I know not who.”

“Nonsense,” Darborn laughed with certainty as Hargood returned to his chair, exhausted.

Before any of the four could open their mouths to speak again, the empty space at the head of the council’s large wooden table blinked hastily and then filled itself with a small dim haze that soon materialized into the solid form of a new arrival. Turned away from the four royal advisors, the unexpected newcomer stumbled forward a few feet, uncertainty in his steps, before General Darborn raised the alarm.

“Guards, to arms! Arrest this intruder.”

The alert was met with a prompt response, half a dozen Largoneth militia quickly pouring into the chamber from the outer hall. As they seized the intruder and turned him to face the council, Zilbo broke out in relieved laughter. Gesturing casually to the dutiful guards, he bade them release the surprised librarian and return to their posts. Still chuckling heartily, Zilbo reassured the angered general and the other two advisors by introducing them one by one to Litbo Mumblehum, Chief Historian of the Galepath University Library.

“Litbo, you scared the living daylights out of us! I had forgotten that you’d be traveling in such a spectacular manner.”

Mumblehum, visibly shaken by the sudden jump across the spatial chasm from Galepath to Largoneth, smiled weakly and mustered a response. “And I hope I never have to travel that way again. It’s not something I’ll soon forget.”

As the librarian set to work straightening his clothes, rumped from the brief contact with the Largoneth guards, Zilbo reminded the other council members that Litbo had been searching the Galepath Library for any kind of information that might be useful in the days to come.

“Oh, that reminds me.” Litbo smiled, once again moving out of his librarian’s shell into the role of skilled royal advisor. “Dinbar and I have come across some good news.”

“And what of Dinbar? Where is he?” Darborn pried suspiciously.

“Oh, well, he stayed behind in Galepath. He cast that spell on me” - Litbo grimaced with the memory - “and now he’s probably getting ready to meet with the mayor, Umberthar Spildo. Hopefully he can prevent Spildo from marching on Mareilon.”

“Good, good,” the general nodded in affirmation. “That ought to be one less thing to worry about.”

“And the news?” Zilbo prompted.

“Well, we think we’ve found something that might help us, not only by explaining recent events but by giving us some suggestions about how to proceed.” Litbo then went on to explain the prophecies that described Belegur, the fallen Implementor. The earthquakes, the violence in Mareilon, the conflict that forced Belegur to accept the body of a mortal, and Belegur’s driving need to find the Scrolls of Fizbin as his only key back into the Timeless Halls to regain his immortality; all of this was absorbed by the awed royal advisors as they gradually felt that the curtain covering a great mystery was being rolled back before their very eyes.

“So you’re suggesting that this Implementor, Belegur, is behind our king Zylon’s illness?” Gladius seemed puzzled and more than a little frightened by the idea.

“It seems very likely,” Litbo nodded.

“But what would Belegur have to gain by harming Zylon?” Gladius asked incredulously.

“Well, if Belegur really is behind the theft of the Scrolls, it certainly would be in his best interests to have the king out of the way.” Zilbo’s hands waved in grand gestures, following his quick mental leaps. “We’ve been paralyzed so far without Zylon, but if he had been around, who knows? We might have tracked down the thief and recovered the Scrolls long ago, before any of this civil war business got started. All this violence, strife, lack of authority. It’s kept us from getting at the real answer, at Belegur and his goals: control of the Scrolls, and maybe even of the very universe itself.”

“That’s a good point,” the general granted thoughtfully, “but it isn’t exactly easy for any fallen Implementor just to waltz in to dear old Castle Largoneth. It is fairly well guarded.”

“Conceivably, he wouldn’t have to get anywhere near the castle. The Books of Kar’nai are very detailed in describing Belegur’s powers,” Litbo noted. “They seem to imply that anybody who isn’t on guard, careful, or somehow more innocent and pure, is very susceptible to being magically controlled by Belegur, even from a great distance. Anybody here in Largoneth could fall victim to him, and possibly never even know it.”

“Endeth!” Zilbo exclaimed, finally understanding his disturbing encounter the night before.

“Endeth?” Litbo asked, not familiar with the servants of the castle.

“One of Zylon’s own servants. He has been for years. Last night I heard this dark, gloomy chant of sorts coming from his quarters. I went in to find out what was going on, and I saw some things I couldn’t believe: candles, strange sounds, faces appearing from the middle of nowhere, a strange sort of misty haze. Do you think that could have had something to do with Belegur?”

“It sounds very likely. Other sources I’ve read on Belegur describe very similar ceremonies, a dark form of mystic communication with the Implementor.”

“But why,” interrupted Darborn, “would Belegur want to bother with somebody like Endeth? It seems much more simple just to kill the king outright and have done with it.”

A wealth of arcane knowledge, Litbo pointed out that when Belegur fell from the heavens, cast out of the Timeless Halls, he lost the power of life and death over the human world and was forced to work his way in the body of a mortal. Retaining his knowledge of magic and telepathy, he still would be unable to kill the king directly without actually breaking into Largoneth, bypassing Darborn’s famous security measures, and greeting Zylon in person with the sharp edge of a blade. It would however be a relatively simple task to search the minds of those in the castle for one weak enough, one who would be willing to do the deed for him.

“So he found Endeth,” Zilbo put forth again, still arranging all the pieces to the puzzle. “And Endeth was the last one to see Zylon, when he brought the king his last dinner.”

“Poison?” Gladius gasped.

“It would have to be. There’s no other way it could have been done. We already figured that it wasn’t just old age, that it had to be some kind of unknown weapon, like a curse or something. It seems unlikely that someone as strong-willed as Zylon would fall prey to a curse, but poison would explain it completely.”

Ever-dubious General Darborn did not share Zilbo’s satisfaction at finally having arrived at the answer. “That doesn’t seem very likely. Our court physicians turned Zylon inside-out trying to find something wrong with him, and they couldn’t.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Gladius scoffed. “Our court physicians couldn’t even diagnose a rotgrub infection without cutting open the patient’s skull and hunting through his dead brain. Poisons are tricky things, and it’s no wonder this one went undetected.”

“But if it really was a poison, and not the final onslaught of old age, then why is he still alive?”

The general’s question was answered by Hargood, who until now had been listening to the news in unsurprised silence. “Our lord Zylon is a strong man, Darborn. Anyone who lived as he has, for centuries longer than us all, is fueled by an inner power too strong to be killed by some simple little poison.”

“Well, if that’s true, there’s still a chance that Zylon could come out of it and recover.” Gladius’ hopeful thinking received no answer from the old man and a moment of silence followed before the librarian turned to Zilbo with a suggestion.

“If we can talk to Zylon’s servant, he might be able to give us a clue as to Belegur’s whereabouts.”

“What good would that do?” Gladius asked skeptically.

“Gladius, if we can track down Endeth, he might be able to give us some kind of antidote, a cure. And even if he can’t, we still might be able to find the Scrolls. We could stop Belegur and Galepath at the same time.”

Litbo quelled Zilbo’s excitement by asking, “What do you mean, ‘if we can track down Endeth?’”

Zilbo looked downcast and almost embarrassed as he admitted that Endeth had been allowed to escape. Repeating his guards’ report to Litbo, he finished with, “He left the nearest village heading south. There’s no way to tell where he might be going from there.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Well, we got the word from my guards just a few minutes before you decided to drop in. Endeth can’t be more than half an hour away from the castle.”

“Then there’s still a chance that you can track him down,” the librarian urged.

Darborn leaned forward in excitement, stricken with the idea of a hunt, a noble pursuit to save the king’s life. “Zilbo, he’s right, but only if we leave right away. I can order my men to break camp in a matter of minutes. We’re heading south and probably by the same route as Endeth. I think we can catch him and take care of Zarfil as well, all at the same time. Zilbo, will you march with me?”

Zilbo felt the weight of too many wasted days of inactivity lift thankfully from his shoulder as the inevitable course of action became clear before him. He answered the general with a smile, and, “Yes, Darborn. Yes, I will march.”

Zylon the Aged

Book Four

“Matched and beaten in their eccentricity only by the remarkable Flatheads, the Jerrimore clan is to this day shrouded in a veil of magic, greed, half-truths and lies. The great Mage of Jerrimore himself left his home city in favor of a voluntary exile to his country estates, estates so closely guarded and tremendously feared that no outsider was to visit the area until the brief civil war that scarred Quendor in 398 GUE.”

-L. Foozilbarmumboz, The Midlands of Quendor

Endeth shifted uncomfortably in his sleep, the ground underneath him filled with mischievously hard rocks and crooked tree roots. His last few days on the road from Largoneth served as a ceaseless reminder that even the lowest of castle servants lived an astoundingly luxurious life. Years as Zylon the Aged’s personal handservant had given him a room to himself, a comfortable down bed, and enough warm garments to clothe an entire village. Now, on the run from his former masters, he had lost all of those treasures. His thin leather traveling tunic did little to shelter him from the brisk winds that blew in off the coast of the Great Sea at night, and the hard, packed earth underneath was a poor substitute for good old Largoneth bedding.

Unable to rest peacefully, his tired mind drifted into nightmare imaginings. His last night at the castle. Images. The many faces of his new master interposed dramatically with the startled look of horror on Zilbo’s innocent features. A message of flight and a near desperate sense of urgency repeating itself again and again in his head. Endeth’s mission failed, his master bade him flee to join him in the underground lair, safe from the accusing stares. Unbidden came the memories of a royal bedroom, and a prone figure of great age. Near the bed, resting on its fragile wooden stand, a small crystal orb barely the size of a human fist hummed in weak resonance to the sound of Zylon’s fading soul. The man on the bed stirred, tossing violently in his sleep. Arising suddenly, he came awake and looked directly at Endeth. Surprisingly, inexplicably, his features filled not with hate or anger, but sympathy and forgiveness.

Endeth screamed.

The four men gathered around him in the forest clearing jumped at the unexpected noise. Dispatched as the advance scouts from Zarfil’s onrushing Mareilon army, they had come across the sleeping servant just moments ago.

“Prince Zarfil’s always looking for new recruits,” one of them had chuckled as they drew closer.

Their resolve shaken only temporarily by the painful cry, the four moved in closer, weapons drawn and ready for a conflict. Endeth blinked himself awake, perhaps disturbed by the soft rustling of leaves and broken twigs as his would-be captors circled around. The dark voice that had become so familiar to him over the last few weeks spoke to him again, repeating the urgent message of flight. In a single, fluid animal movement, Endeth bounded to his feet and ran at the narrow gap between the two nearest men. Prepared for any sudden movements, the four quickly closed in on Endeth, grabbing him firmly to prevent his escape.

One burly Millucis arm wrapped itself around his weak chest. Two others came from behind and held his shoulders. As the reality of his captivity sank in, Endeth let out a plaintive wail, a feeble cry of frustration. When the fourth moved to clamp his hand over Endeth’s screaming lips, the castle servant bit down hard, sinking his teeth into the intruding flesh, a low growl moaning

forth from his throat. Pulling his bleeding hand free, the surprised soldier slammed Endeth across the temple with his other fist, knocking him unconscious.

Dragging him the several bloits back to their central camp, they dumped him unceremoniously at the feet of their leader.

“We found him about an hour from here, sleeping in a clearing just off from the main road.”

Gezlin, who had been discussing the planned route of travel to Galepath with the rebel leader, looked at the groggy, disheveled servant and chuckled. “Doesn’t look like much, does he?”

“You never know, Gezlin,” the prince warned. “Umberthar Spildo didn’t get to be where he is today just by blind luck.”

Gezlin frowned, still unaccustomed to his leader’s extreme paranoia. Word around camp said that Spildo was nothing more than a half-witted moron and that victory against his forces was a foregone conclusion.

“Search him,” ordered Zarfil, leaning back on a makeshift stool set up in his tent.

Endeth was stripped and left shivering in the brisk morning air. Turning his garments inside and out revealed nothing incriminating. No special orders from the city of Galepath, no concealed weapons, only a few copper pieces and a specially woven handkerchief. Turning the piece of cloth over and over in his hands, Zarfil peered suspiciously at it and back at the prisoner.

This was made at Largoneth, he realized, eyeing the royal monogram woven in one corner.

“Where are you from?”

No reply came. Endeth stood silently, his jaw hanging at an awkward angle and his eyes glazed over, uncomprehending. One of the scouts that had found Endeth in his sleep moved to strike him, looking first to Zarfil for approval. The rebel leader waved him off and moved closer to this newfound curiosity. As he approached, Endeth’s upper lip twitched, curling itself into a snarl and a growl.

Backing off in surprise, Zarfil motioned to the nearest guard. “Get Marboz.”

As those gathered in the tent waited for the arrival of the mage, Zarfil continued his interrogation. Each further question was met with stony silence, and Zarfil’s temper rose to the breaking. When the tall, long-haired man appeared in the tent’s entrance, a nervous hush spread over the group. Walking forward confidently, Marboz eyed Endeth with unsurprised contempt. Asking for no explanation, the magic user seemed to know all about Endeth, almost as if he had been expecting his presence.

Zarfil, jaw clenched and arms crossed, ignored the mage, who understood what was required of him. Moving closer to the prisoner, Marboz looked into his eyes, and through them, deeper into his mind, seeing the answers hidden behind his silence. A few words were spoken and the air crackled with the energy of the bond forged between the mind of the mage and the servant before him. Probing his thoughts, Marboz narrowed his glance, intrigued to find Endeth’s essence connected in some way to another, deeper well of existence. Casting out a mental probe across this precarious bridge, the mage explored the pathway, journeying from the tent through Endeth to a deep underground lair, where something lurked, waiting. Powerful, a vastness...

He gasped. Reeling backwards in confusion, his back met the clothe of the tent behind him. His eyes widened suddenly, matching exactly a lurching spasm that seized his body and left him kneeling on the floor. Filled with understanding, the mage lifted his arms in praise of what he had seen.

“O Father, Maker of evils. We await you!”

Shifting and sagging imperceptibly, his body relaxed, control returned.

“Marboz?” Zarfil ventured, a worried look spreading across his features.

“Yes. It’s all right,” the mage sighed reassuringly, rising to his feet. “He is not what he seems.”

Zarfil looked at Marboz, glanced suspiciously at the prisoner, then turned back to Marboz. “Well, what is he?”

“I don’t even know if I can explain,” Marboz whispered, plainly awestruck.

“Well, you’d better do your damndest!”

“He is from Largoneth,” Marboz nodded, confirming the rebel leader’s suspicions. “And apparently, a servant of Lord Zylon himself. It seems he used to serve the king his meals and take care of his private chambers. I get strong flashes of guilt though, almost as if he’s running from something.”

The mage trailed off with a shrug, leaving Zarfil in suspense. “And?”

“I... I don’t know.” Marboz seemed hesitant to continue. “Probing into his mind, I saw something that shouldn’t have been there, a dark abyss, almost as if his thoughts are controlled by something far away, a power of some kind.”

“You called out to your father.”

“I could have been mistaken. The pathways of the mind are very intricate, almost too much so for me to be certain of anything. I got the definite sense that he is receiving orders from the dark source itself, the same well of powerful inspiration that all of my kind give praise to. I don’t understand it, thought. This fellow here is no magic user. Why he should have such strong ties with a fallen Implementor is utterly incomprehensible.”

“A fallen Implementor?” Zarfil looked at Endeth apprehensively, half expecting the disheveled servant to erupt in a towering flame of evil demons.

“We give praise to one such Implementor in particular: Belegur, He Who Walks The Earth. This man here... his ties to Belegur are powerful indeed.”

“Are we in any kind of danger here?”

Marboz shook his head, casting a mocking glance at Endeth’s deteriorating physical appearance. “Belegur knows his servants well. I count myself among that number. He will not harm us.”

“I hope you’re right on that count.”

In the far corner of the tent, Gezlin moved forward to join the conversation. Frightened at first by the baffling forces of the supernatural at work, his feeble brain had finally made a useful conclusion. “Sir,” he said to Zarfil, “if he’s the king’s servant, maybe he can tell us what Zylon is doing and how we can be prepared for it.”

Marboz negated the thought immediately. “There doesn’t seem to be anything to worry about on that front. Zylon is dying.”

“So it’s true, then?” Zarfil pressed the magician for more details.

“This one,” gesturing towards the prisoner, “they call him Endeth. He seems to have very tormented feelings towards Zylon. Love, anger, guilt. His mind met with mine only briefly, but again and again I was flooded with images of Zylon lying still in his bed, poisoned somehow, and nearing death.”

“Then the rumors were right.” Gezlin looked at his leader with enthusiasm.

However, Zarfil seemed skeptical, hesitant to embrace the good news. “How do we know he wasn’t sent from Largoneth to spy on us?”

“Just look at him, Zarfil,” Marboz laughed. “He can’t even talk. It looks like his mind was so unprepared for contact with Belegur that it’s killing him.”

The magician's observations were correct. Endeth drew his breaths quickly and heavily. Nearly every muscle in his face seemed alive with violent twitching, and his eyes were bloodshot, deep red from fear and fatigue. Looking out on the tent through his eyes, he saw no fellow human beings, only a ring of tormenting monsters, holding him in a trap for their own angry purposes. His whole being filled with the need to join his master in a land far away, hidden from the sun's piercing rays.

Zarfil thanked the mage and gestured to the guards. The prisoner was hauled away and tied unceremoniously to the wheels of one of the army's supply wagons. Reluctant to allow Endeth to go his own way, but uncertain exactly what to do with him, they dragged him along in captivity as the march towards Galepath continued.

Several days later, little progress had been made. The Millucis gangs, familiar with little more than their own back alleys, were unaccustomed to long marches laden down with camping and military equipment. Zarfil's frustration at the slow progress was tempered by the intelligence that Spildo's own armies lay encamped a mere three bloits in the distance. The mayor of Galepath had indeed acted on his threats, undeterred by Dinbar's attempts at persuasion. Ordering the Galepath city militia to hit the road, they had headed out to Mareilon ostensibly to recover the priceless Scrolls of Fizbin from the "thief", the self-appointed Prince Zarfil. Knowing that a successful campaign would improve his chances for reelection, the mayor also entertained thoughts that defeating Zarfil would earn him great recognition from the royal government at Largoneth, perhaps even knighthood, or the title of lord.

Nevertheless, Spildo remained a complete stranger to military strategy, and his efforts so far had been marred with failure. Ordering his troops due south from the Galepath city gates, he quickly realized that he actually had no true sense of where Mareilon in fact was. After several lengthy and heated discussions with his advisors, the army finally arrived at a reasonably accurate marching plan, but only after the delay cost nearly a day of marching time.

On the same day that the sleeping Endeth was surprised and captured by Zarfil's advanced scouts, Spildo's camp lay swamped in a mass of confusion. The mayor himself had been taken ill, apparently experiencing a painful reaction to the switch from rich city food to spartan military fare. The highest ranking militia lieutenants, uncertain how to proceed without the instructions of their leader, milled about camp aimlessly, delaying the order to march. As dark came on the previous night, tents had been set up in a convenient clearing, near a stream running from steep, ridged hills to the east. For centuries the land had belonged to the Jerrimore clan, one of the most notorious families in history, noted for their powerful magical abilities and fiercely selfish pride.

The beautiful forests and rolling meadows of the vast Jerrimore Estate was punctuated on its northern edge by an ancient wooden structure, a brooding mansion resting alone just within sight of Spildo's encampment. No one from the Galepath army had gone to the house, perhaps put off by its evil, abandoned look. Unbeknownst to any at the campsite, someone did still live in that ancient place. Staring out at the newcomers, a mind angry and resentful at the intrusion worked secret magical spells that wove themselves among the sleeping soldiers that night.

Many would wake the next day filled with memories of discomfiting dreams. Several even ran screaming through the camp hours before the break of dawn, frightened by some mysterious intrusion into their thoughts. Disrupted by the dark images that had invaded the hours of sleep, many soldiers grumbled openly, speaking out against the foolishness of naked aggression against Mareilon. One even suggested that the only reasonable choice was to turn back while they still had a chance.

As the hours moved on and the sun approached its highest point in the day, the Galepath army still had no decisive course of action. Looking apprehensively to the east, Spildo's men caught the first fleeting gleams of metal as Zarfil and his forces filled the ridge above them.

A cry went up throughout the camp as it sunk in that they had been caught unawares, surprised by the realization of Zarfil's threats. Several lieutenants immediately issued the call to arms, only to have the order countermanded in the heat of confusion. Restless soldiers raced for their arms, but the camp was in chaos, men separated from their units, leaders unable to find their commands. Guards from the southern periphery of the camp returned with even darker news, mysterious frantic reports of a much larger force arriving from the forests to the south. Doubt swept through the Galepath commanders. Could Zarfil's forces truly be that vast? And how had he known to attack from two different sides?

The call to arms was given again, this time in a hurried rush to throw defenses of any kind against the southern edge of the camp. Trees and undergrowth stirred and the wind carried a hideously foreign battle cry as the mysterious southern force grew ever closer.

On the ridge above, unaware of the news that caused the disruption in Spildo's camp, Zarfil drew his breath in excitement and led the charge down the hill to give battle with the enemies from Galepath. As the Mareilon tide swept down the hill, the Galepath militia hesitated, their attention divided by two different conflicts. With no guidance and no battle experience, much of the force broke in panic and ran, hoping perhaps to find shelter in the distant house or the forest beyond.

The Nezgeth invaders ran from the cover of the trees out into the open fields before them. After many weeks, the long trail from the dry Kovalli desert had brought them here, to the Jerrimore Estates. In their wake burned a long string of pillaged towns and villages; Er, Foo, Bilbug, and Termum all reeled from the unexpected and senseless invasion. Ath-gar-nel, initially nervous and apprehensive about such a campaign far into unknown territory, soon warmed to the task at hand. Cavern walls had spoken to the Nezgeth, the Brith-nel-fhet bringing the will of the gods to their desert children. A multitude of new experiences had unfolded, each one coming quickly on the heels of the one before.

Before them lay a virtually overwhelming tide of green. The color was virtually unknown to the Kovalli, life of any kind such a rarity in their homeland. Soft grass smothering the roots of tough, gnarled old trees. Water. Water flowing endlessly away, forever out of reach, like sand falling through groping fingertips. Massive buildings straining to the sky, not the work of gods, no, merely houses or even temples to foreign demons and unknown monsters. The Nezgeth warrior peering out at Quendor had much in common with a particularly brutish ogre suspiciously watching his human neighbor make the leap from crude spears and rags to gleaming armor and magic spells.

In the heat and frustration of over six years of deadly famine, the Nezgeth had been given a task: venture forth to the east and placate the gods. Now the final opportunity was at hand. An enemy force lay before them, armed and entrenched. They would perhaps present a much more challenging foe than the pathetic villagers of Er. The battle had at last been joined and Ath-gar-nel urged his warriors into an intense final frenzy.

As Zarfil's forces streamed down from the eastern ridge, the dark-alley Hellhounds and Nightwings launched themselves upon the firm right flank of the Nezgeth invader. The truth be told, no one in Zarfil's employ, the rebel leader included, had ever actually been to the hated city of Galepath. It was some time before the rebel army came to the realization that a large portion

of the foe sported dark skin, barbed spears, and animal hides for clothing. Clearly a grave mistake had been made; these were not Galepath natives.

Zarfil himself, eager for battle, ignored the conventional wisdom that a prince's life was too sacred to risk in warfare. He soon found himself face to face with a naked, wild-eyed apparition. The deadly, intricately carved Nezgeth spears took to the air, bombarding the Mareilon force from all sides. A core group of rebel street fighters unsheathed their well-worn blades, crouching and moving in low in the style of a dirty Millucis knife fight.

The massive tide of clashing humanity soon fragmented and broke into clusters of heated action separated by ever-shifting barriers, marked by the motionless fallen. Separate militia units in Zarfil's makeshift army split away from the main group, moved by the momentum of thousands of different individual points of combat. The one Nezgeth spear that hit home on the far southern side of the field created a few square feet of vacuum as the companions of the Mareilon target backed away and regrouped to find another point of attack. Their retreat inadvertently forced the hand of an isolated band of Nezgeth encroaching behind them. The resultant hasty motion sent a ripple across the eastern edge of combat, forcing the Mareilon rebels nearly halfway back up the ridge.

And so the battle flowed, the entire sum of several thousand warring beings suddenly transformed into one larger creature, a hungry monster. Looking at the fight from a distance, a rhythm could be seen. The sum noise from each pair of clashing weapons matched the beat of each human heart, the bottomless appetite of the monster being fed with each new sacrifice to the growing bloody piles.

Umberthar Spildo made a desperate attempt to shake off his worsening stomach illness to guide his troops. Leaving his tent at the first sound of conflict, his short sword waved wildly into battle. Turning quickly to his trumpeter, he yelled a quick order to sound a single note. Spildo would muster the army to his side with one trumpet blast and throw back the invading barbarians.

The trumpet note lurched and died mid-breath, the trumpeter stabbed from behind by a double-edged Nezgeth stiletto. Spildo soon found himself surrounded on three sides by the forces of the onrushing horde. Separated from the bulk of his force, which had been drawn off into a vicious melee farther to the west, Spildo stood with only his own personal group of guards to prevent the fatal wound that must inevitably get through. Looking desperately for a way to avoid the crushing grip of the surrounding force, he took the only option available, shifting away from the three-sided advance and backing even farther into the center of the battlefield.

What was only minutes ago an orderly campground for the Galepath army was now a chaotic mess of debris, dirtied supplies, wrecked tents, and human bodies, living or otherwise. As the Galepath force sought to orient themselves towards the man-made landmarks they had laid down the night before, confusion reigned, the three armies wiping the plains clean of all former signs of life.

Every available Mareilon soldier busy fighting for his own life, Endeth was left unguarded, crouching silently behind a tree, his instincts for self-preservation forcing through the clouded marsh that had become his mind. For years he had served Zylon the Aged as a loyal and true citizen of Quendor. At first, when the voices began to talk to him at nights, he had resisted. His thoughts were troubled and his dreams plagued with unspeakable images, but for awhile at least he was his own man. Belegur would not give in, however, and soon the deed was done. Done but somehow still unfinished. Endeth spent long days in torment, bent with the agony of watching his king at the brink of the end. Finally, the summons from Belegur had snapped his last firm

links with reality. An animal on the run, he twitched in fear at the edge of the battlefield, only dimly understanding the events before him and their relation to his own deeds.

The sea of battle growing more and more complex, Zarfil soon felt the irresistible tugging, the pull that guided him towards the center of the Jerrimore Estates. Some fallen soldiers looking up around them saw a confused patch of sky, crisscrossed with various tattered banners and piercing arrows. The fighting around Zarfil grew particularly dense, as if the rebel leader and the soldiers surrounding him served as a magnet for every loose blow or wild swing of the sword. His back facing the rebel leader, Mayor Spildo continued his desperate retreat, moving within feet of Zarfil and his men.

Fiery and elated Nezgeth warriors continued to tighten their grip on the Quendoran armies, using their sheer numbers to divide the defenders, preventing any effective counter-attack. More and more of the Galepath army began to make a final attempt at retreat towards the western edge of the clearing, filling that edge of the battle with a growing calm. A few Nezgeth warriors broke off from the main group to clean up the stragglers, while the bulk of the invading army continued to circle around and engage the Mareilon militia.

Even the strongest of the Hellhounds began to succumb to the overwhelming Nezgeth pressure. Short street knives and leather tunics were no match for the viciously barbed spears sported by the Kovalli natives. One by one, Zarfil's own guards fell to the ground, leaving the rebel prince open to any who would attack him. In a brief hurried moment, the newly-crowned leader of Mareilon swiveled and looked up at a nearby Galepath banner. Under the dirtied flag stood Mayor Spildo, his voice hoarse with a last attempt to rally his army. The mayor turned his head at random and made eye contact with the rebel leader. A moment of calm passed in the center of the battlefield as the two enemies shared an impossible flicker of recognition and a smile of acknowledgment. The moment ended with Zarfil toppling to the ground, a broadside blow to his head ending his brief, blinding time of glory.

Ath-gar-nel continued his victorious advance, single-handedly defeating nearly a dozen hard-pressed Mareilon militiamen. Thankful at last for the opportunity to fight more than local peasants and bankers, the Warrior inspired his men to prove that the Nezgeth had no equal as fighters anywhere in Quendor or the world. The day had begun with the two armies of Spildo and Zarfil marching inexorably towards civil war. All thoughts of hatred between Galepath and Mareilon long forgotten, the defenders soon found themselves collapsing in fatigue, while the advancing hordes seemed to be further invigorated with each successive skirmish.

Where Mayor Spildo had stood alone but minutes before, he now shared company on the blood-soaked ground among the fallen dead. The two leaders that had stared at each other in anger and jealousy across the many bloits that had separated them now lay lifeless within feet of each other.

The harsh, guttural cries of the Nezgeth warriors filled the clearing, finally drowning out the last cries of resistance. After an uncertain pause, the monster of battle lurched grumpily back into its hiding place, temporarily sated by the day's festivities. Two armies, the fighting forces of two proud, ancient cities, had suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth, sand castles crumbling against the tide.

“To this day, the true origin of the Nezgeth tongue remains a mystery. Kovalli legends tell that their forefathers came to the desert from across a great ocean, exiled from their magnificent castles in the east by some unspeakable gods, punishment for worship of false idols, rodents and evil serpents.”

-Litbo Mumblehum, On the History of Language

“Do you mean to tell me we’ve come all this way for nothing?” General Griffspotter glared angrily at the poor scout, frustrated with this latest piece of bad news.

“I’m sorry, sir. The trail just gives out. There’s nothing we can really do about it.”

The young lanky blonde had been leading the effort to track Endeth’s movements from Largoneth. Although Griffspotter himself had privately scoffed at Zilbo’s fascination with the Scrolls of Fizbin, as a gesture to his equal, he had changed the course of the march many times so that Zilbo and his librarian friend might capture the servant and find their way to Belegur to regain the Scrolls. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, the embarrassed scout was clearly aware of Griffspotter’s wrath.

“We’ve been following this damn castle cook for over a hundred bloits. Now you’ve lost the trail, and we’re still days away from Mareilon.”

Stepping in quickly to avert an argument, Zilbo pressed the scout for more details. “You say the trail gave out. How? There should still be some sign, no matter how small. He couldn’t have vanished into thin air.”

“Well, the trail didn’t really give out... It was obliterated, like hundreds of passing feet just marched over the trail and erased it.” The nervous scout seemed unaware of his statement’s importance.

“Zarfil,” the General muttered, a light gleaming in his eyes.

Zilbo nodded in agreement. To verify the scout’s report, the two members of the royal council took the brief walk from camp to the place where Endeth had been sleeping earlier that morning. The forest had been devastated, branches broken and bushes trampled, clear evidence that a large scale force had passed that way headed westward to Galepath just hours before.

Excited that fortune would bring the royal army within such a short distance of its goal, in such an unexpected manner, Griffspotter urged his soldiers forward, determined not to waste a single moment of daylight. The enemy would be engaged before sunset, and if all went well, the army could be Largoneth-bound by sunrise. Hurrying on at an impressive pace, the two hundred Quendoran soldiers tore through the forest in search of their goal, with Litbo, the poor resident librarian, barely able to keep up.

A textbook case of complete chaos and randomness, the royal army spilled out of the forest’s western edge onto the ridge just above the Jerrimore Estates. As each soldier in turn, eager to finish the chase, came to the beginning of the downward slope, they lurched to a halt in surprise. Expecting to find at most several dozen drunken Mareilon rebels ready to be whipped into shape at the slightest verbal threat, Griffspotter and his men were ill-prepared for the sight before their eyes.

Not even one dozen of the Mareilon force still lived in the valley below, but the ground, fresh with a new coat of red, had been covered with the bodies of many times that number. Also unexpected were the colorful remnants of the Galepath coat of arms strewn among the wounded and dead. Apparently the civil war had already come and gone, the royal army merely late entries in a finished game.

But these others, these... monsters. What were they? Amidst the colors of the newly dead, the valley was speckled with a dark desert brown, a skin color never seen before in the mild meadows of Quendor. From their high vantage point above, the new arrivals could just make out the deep set eyes of the invaders, the remarkably fierce contrast between the dark skin and the pure oval white. As the Nezgeth warriors turned towards the ridge and raised their heads in the direction of the newcomers, a low sigh escaped from the tired valley, followed quickly by a dry chuckle from one of the Kovalli natives. The day's bloodshed had not yet ended.

To look at the baffling, gruesome sight they had come across, the foot soldiers of the king's army lined up along the ridge shoulder to shoulder, creating a single strand that served only to tell the Nezgeth exactly how many Quendoran youth were waiting for the slaughter.

"Griffspotter, I think we've got a problem here." Zilbo looked nervously down into the valley below.

"I want to know what the hell is going on." Surveying the scene below, the general sounded indignant that someone would dare invade Quendor without notifying him first.

"It looks like somebody beat us to Zarfil."

"But who?" the general demanded.

"We could always go ask them," Zilbo put forth, not entirely serious.

"A horde of invaders has swept into our country and wiped out the combined forces of two city-states, and you want to go have a little chat with them? Be my guest!"

"Well, at the very least we could find out why they're here, and what they want."

"I know damn well what they want!" Griffspotter exploded in anger. "And if they march a single step further into Quendor, it'll be over my dead body."

Zilbo was worried at the direction of the general's thoughts. "What do you have in mind?"

"What I have in mind is killing them before they kill us."

"You're going to march down there?" The royal advisor pointed to the Kovalli forces below, his arm waving in a full extension.

"Do we have any other choices? We can't crawl back to Largoneth and let an invading force run rampant through Quendor."

Zilbo looked at the general in silence.

"We fight now or lose the chance forever." Griffspotter was insistent, and Zilbo had lost the will to argue.

As the Nezgeth warriors banded together on the field below, awaiting the inevitable charge, the Quendoran general talked briefly to his lieutenants, dispensing a few final orders. The royal force was to be split in half, one hundred men waiting on the highest point of the ridge, to advance only if the first attack proved a failure. Zilbo reluctantly agreed to head the reserve force, allowing himself the fleeting hope that a victorious Griffspotter would save Zilbo from leading his men into battle.

Griffspotter, face flushed with excitement and heart pounding in his chest, began the cautious march down the ridge to the Jerrimore Estates. Much like Zarfil before him, the brave soldier knew no concept of the general as a remote, uninvolved overseer. A leader must be at the front of his men, setting a firm, noble example. So that the men of the Quendoran royal army might arrive in the valley all at once, the order had been given to disperse the marching columns and have the soldiers proceed down the hill abreast of each other, a long thin line stretched across the horizon. In the middle of the line and just slightly ahead of the rest strode the general, accompanied on either side by one of the force's several trumpeters and the Largoneth standard bearer.

As the approaching force arrived at the base of the hill, the watching Nezgeth warriors silently arranged themselves in a similar formation, a parallel line just as long but several times as deep making its way across the scarred meadow.

Eyeing the newcomers, the Nezgeth chieftain Ath-gar-nel pursed his lips in silent frustration. Of course it seemed no formidable force that approached from the distance, but nevertheless, the arrival of these newcomers had been something entirely unexpected. The long string of sacked cities capped off by the final victory seemed to be a stunning achievement to offer up to the gods, more than enough penance for whatever unknown sin had led to the many years of famine and drought. Shaking his head, the Nezgeth Warrior reflected that the gods seemed determined to keep the tribe on the road eternally, forever struggling to fulfill an obscure quest of the Brith-nel-fhet.

And there were the ancient traditions of warfare, not to be carelessly cast aside after so many years. Ath-gar-nel himself remembered an especially violent campaign that had been the glory of the Nezgeth tribe during his sixteenth year. A rival tribe to the south had challenged the Nezgeth oasis rights, one of the more ambitious enemy warriors moving to strengthen his stranglehold on the region. For many months the battle waged on, interrupted more than once by an obscure Nezgeth religious tradition. The Nezgeth forefathers in the lands across the sea had sinned against their gods. Giving homage to false idols, they had fallen prey to pride and aggressiveness. As their true gods watched in disappointed silence, the early Nezgeth empire took hold of vast stretches of foreign land, pushing ever onward in one military conflict after another. When finally the gods acted in revenge, their empire fell to pieces, the mighty Nezgeth castles destroyed.

Over the countless years of exile from their homeland, wandering across new uncharted lands and vast oceans, the homeless tribe took the lesson of their glorious rise and abrupt fall, adhering to the strictest principles of pacifism. Generations later, the Nezgeth would find a home in the hellish deserts of Kovalli, and every day became a constant struggle to stay alive. Gradually the tribe returned to its former warlike ways, but even then refused to give battle no more than necessary. Even as Ath-gar-nel grew up, some elders continued to insist that to fight more than one foe was unholy, akin to the evil deeds that had brought about the fall of the Nezgeth empire. This thinking had stamped itself firmly in the proud Warrior's traditional mind, stirring up great anxieties as Griffspotter's army grew closer.

The two lines stared at each other over an ever-lessening distance, neither enemy leader quite willing to give the order to charge. Soon, Griffspotter and his men stood some twenty feet from the Nezgeth Warrior, suspiciously eyeing his wild garb and dark skin.

Ath-gar-nel opened his mouth, ready to cry out to Griffspotter in his foreign tongue. The general jerked his hand towards his sheathed short sword as the chieftain began to speak. As the two leaders focused intently on each other, their worlds narrowed and dissolved until only the other remained, deep eyes, slow, strong breathing, hands at the ready. Neither saw a lone Nezgeth warrior ready his bow, the arrow flying straight and true towards the Largoneth general.

Piercing his chest with a soft crack and thud, the arrow sent Griffspotter staggering back, away from the invaders. He looked at Ath-gar-nel, the arrow, and back to the Warrior in disbelief. Finally he fell.

A wind of confusion followed. The Nezgeth chieftain whirled in anger, seeking out the lone archer. At the sight of the arrow hurtling toward the general, several of the Kovalli tribe had edged into motion, ready to run at the enemy at the sound of the order. Looking at their leader in surprise, it soon became apparent that no order would be given.

From atop the ridge, a single trumpet blast called out to the Quendoran army.

Eyes widening in dismay, Zilbo had stared at the fallen general, barely able to gesture to the trumpeter at his side. "Get them up here. Sound the retreat." The only hope now lay in regrouping and hoping to last long enough to greet the arrival of the reinforcing units from the far north.

Standing stock still, as if entranced, the soldiers of Largoneth in the field below heard the lonely sound of the trumpet but could not answer its call. The sight of Griffspotter's face turned motionless toward the sky seemed to swallow their own will to live. Finally a few did break off and run back up the ridge to join Zilbo's small force.

None even spared a glance in the direction of the fierce enemy Nezgeth. Across the small gap that separated the two armies, Ath-gar-nel began spitting out orders at a furious pace. Again and again, several clusters of the Kovalli tribe broke loose and headed towards the royal army. Each time the Warrior held them back, threatening them in deep, incomprehensibly crude, barking tones.

We must not give into the temptation, he pleaded. To fight again on this day would be unholy, a blasphemy against the gods. We have been victorious of late, a ray of glory. To fight now is to try the patience of the gods.

The royal army, smaller now by one, reassembled on the ridge according to Zilbo's order. Litbo Mumblehum, the group's token librarian, pushed his way through the mass of crowded soldiers to the royal advisor's side. Far from his home in Galepath and wanting nothing more than the recovery of his Scrolls and a safe passage back to the university, Litbo had found himself quite alone among the band of base, sweaty infantry. He turned to his only friend in the group and asked, "What's going to happen now?"

"Don't worry. It'll be all right," Zilbo smiled reassuringly, wishing that his inside feelings could match his calm outer demeanor.

When the captain of the Lingolf Garrison, a fellow named Heffilmurm, approached Zilbo and asked the same question, the reality of the situation began to sink in. Zilbo Throckrod, who liked to think of himself as nothing more than a middle-age gentleman, had suddenly been thrust in command of the Quendoran royal army, trackless bloits from the castle and the king in whose name Zilbo acted.

Ath-gar-nel took no more than a few seconds to gain control of his own situation. As much as the younger, more bloodthirsty warriors looked towards the enemy with relish and excitement, they still bowed to the chieftain's ancient authority, and soon entire Nezgeth force waited peacefully as its leader strode forward to the base of the ridge. The tall, dark Warrior took long bold strides, somehow combining ferocity with the utmost grace. Watching the Nezgeth native complete his approach, several Quendoran soldiers chuckled nervously. Was this poor fellow planning to attack the royal army single-handedly?

Coming to an abrupt halt just within earshot of Zilbo and his company, the lone Warrior swung his hands high into the air and cried out to his foe.

"Mokk-Nezgethil abtelune ah-neth-tuk, arn Nezgethim tim- sakri!"

The strong cry echoed across the plains, filling all who would listen with awe and dread. Zilbo blinked in confusion and muttered under his breath. "Uh oh. I'm starting to get a very bad feeling about this."

"Quendorim mith brih-neth Zylon-uk, bronyir reme amaille Honith-uk!"

The harsh, foreign words came not from the valley below, but from the confident mouth of the librarian shouting back a firm reply. A shiver of uncertainty ran through the Nezgeth

warriors. Ath-gar-nel himself edged backwards, apparently surprised at the answer. A murmur grew amidst the Kovalli tribe. Who were these foreigners? Even in the heart of the desert, none of the neighboring tribes knew the secret of the sacred Nezgeth tongue, and yet here was this man, short of stature and pale of skin, speaking the tongue an untold distance from where any Nezgeth had gone before.

Slowly, reluctantly in fact, the proud Nezgeth Warrior fell to his knees, bowing in praise. “Argonel eme Harbreth-fel- niktme!”

“Uh oh!” Litbo chuckled at the sound of Ath-gar-nel’s words.

“Litbo! You want to let the rest of us in on this little secret of yours?” Zilbo was completely flabbergasted. Apparently the feeble-looking librarian was a man of many resources.

“Well, it seems he thinks we are his long-lost ancestors. He used the phrase ‘The Fathers from the East’.”

Litbo seemed lost in a distant fog of intellectual fascination. In an attempt to bring him back to reality, Zilbo pushed another question. “What does this mean? Are they not going to attack us?”

“Attack us? They think we’re on a mission from their GODS!”

The cry came again. “Argonel eme Harbreth-fel-niktme!”

“What’s he saying?” Zilbo snapped.

“He’s giving praise to his ancestors. It’s a little confusing to me, really, because he seems to think we’re his forefathers. Fascinating.”

“Fascinating?” exploded Zilbo. “Do you mind telling me what’s going on?”

“Oh, it’s simple, really. I don’t know exactly who these people are, but the language itself is very familiar to me. It seems to be nothing more than a simple variant on the tongue of a peaceful tribe that migrated across the land of Frobozz nearly six centuries ago. Careful records were kept at the time, and the language is still studied today as a sort of historical curiosity. It doesn’t seem to have changed much in the last few hundred years.”

Throughout the lengthy explanation, Ath-gar-nel enacted a complicated form of ritual prayer, alternately whispering to himself and chanting loudly to the rest of the tribe. Finally he returned to his knees, face buried in the ground.

Intrigued by the ritual, Zilbo shook his head in amazement. “What did you say to him?”

“When he first came forward, he called out one of the language’s traditional greetings. Apparently, he’s the chief of this tribe that calls itself the Nezgeth, and they demanded to know the names of our ancestors.”

“What?”

“I told him we’re Quendoran, children of the Zylon the Aged, beloved of the Implementors.” Litbo permitted himself a smile at his own cleverness.

“And now he’s like that?” The royal advisor pointed at the praying Warrior in disbelief.

“He certainly does seem to have lost interest in fighting us.”

“Well, let’s go.” Zilbo led the librarian and a few of the higher-ranking foot soldiers down the slope to the kneeling barbarian. Using Mumblehum as a willing intermediary, Zilbo managed to convince the Nezgeth Warrior to abandon his worship and join in conversation. Confused by Zilbo’s clear use of the other language, the one that their many other victims had used in the previous weeks, Ath-gar-nel was nevertheless awed and even honored by Litbo’s nearly flawless knowledge of the Nezgeth tongue.

Convinced he stood in the presence of the physical incarnation of generations of tribal legend, the Warrior introduced himself haltingly and begged forgiveness for the ignorant attacks against the sacred Fathers from the East. Zilbo Throckrod was more than willing to oblige.

“Let the die be cast and the circle not be broken
In the dark land of Kovalli, where the angels are.”

-Zibbin, ancient Quendoran poet circa 500 BE

The hours passed and dusk approached. Zilbo, Litbo, and the captain of the Lingolf Garrison sat cross-legged on the field of the Jerrimore Estates. Across from them, making a circle of conversation, rested the Nezgeth Warrior and his religious elders. In the distance, the royal army and the Kovalli tribesmen worked together at the solemn task of gravedigging. The work had been going on for some time and now the Estates were gradually being restored to their former state. At first the Nezgeth had been hesitant to help in the work, almost none of their dead being counted in the number. However, Ath-gar-nel had insisted; they had slain the holy men from the east, and to dig their graves would be only fitting recompense for the misdeed.

As a gesture of good will between the two peoples, a particularly young Nezgeth fighter, barely over fourteen years, approached Litbo and the royal advisor with the bowls of ceremonial make-up. Intrigued, Zilbo nodded to the boy in approval, the youth drawing broad colored lines under Zilbo's eyes and across his bare arms. After repeating the complicated markings on Litbo and the captain, the boy backed away shyly, barely able to look at the strange men before him.

Very little was said. Ath-gar-nel sat quietly, occasionally looking at his former foes with a smile, usually gazing peacefully at the setting sun. Zilbo observed in quiet puzzlement as the Nezgeth elders seemed content to breathe deeply of the encroaching night air. When the few rare words were spoken, the librarian provided a prompt translation and returned Zilbo's answer in equally prompt and fluent Nezgeth.

Finally one of the Kovalli religious leaders, a particularly slow and frail elder, rose from the circle and turned towards the sun in the west. Bowing once, he intoned a short chant. The gathered Nezgeth nodded in approval, but the Quendoran natives understood only through Litbo.

“It has begun. Let the circle not be broken.”

The old man walked carefully around the outskirts of the circle of seated warriors, making the full circuit and returning to his starting place. Moving then towards the center of the circle, he opened a pouch hanging from his waist. He carefully removed a small stick not more than the length of his own shaking hand. Carefully twisting the stick halfway into the ground at the circle's midpoint, he waved his hand cautiously over the focal point and uttered several quiet words. Suddenly the stick flared to life, growing brightly at the heart of the circle. As the sun fell behind the western forest, darkness was forced back by the power of the Nezgeth magic.

“We are Nezgeth, people of the Western Sun,” Ath-gar-nel intoned, more of song than a real introduction. “We have sinned against the gods that give us life, and for six years we have languished under the torture of unceasing famine and drought. The Brith-nel-fhet sends us here to redeem ourselves. Thinking the answer to lie in combat, we smote your cities and your people. The truth revealed, we now beg your forgiveness and rest our service in your hands, the true path to redemption.”

Zilbo bent slightly toward the librarian to catch all of his whispered translation before beginning a reply. “The people of Quendor thank you for your words, and on behalf of our king, Lord Zylon the Aged, we ask simply that you return from where you came.”

Litbo frowned at the words of the royal advisor and did not translate the request. “Zilbo, they offer your their service. It would be a violation of their warrior etiquette to refuse such an offer.”

“Well, what if the service I want of them is for them to go home?”

Ath-gar-nel watched the growing debate with interest, but little understanding. Finally, he interrupted with a question of his own. “Peneth mith-tu?”

Mumblehum blinked in confusion and offered no translation. “What’s wrong?” Zilbo pressed. “What did he say?”

“Well, I’m not really sure. Literally, it sounded like ‘Why are you?’ That wouldn’t seem to make any sense, though.”

“Why are we... here?” Zilbo ventured, searching quickly for possible answers. “Tell him we search for the man who would kill our king.”

The answer seemed to startle the warrior chieftain. Leaning to his right, he conferred hurriedly with the old man who had given power to the magic light at the circle’s center. After a brief flurry of low whispers and solemn nods, the chieftain turned back to Zilbo and his companions.

“Good. Then, it’s settled,” he nodded with satisfaction.

“What? What’s settled?” Zilbo blurted out to the librarian in confusion. “What’s he talking about?”

“You are the Fathers from the East, the Old Ones,” Ath-gar-nel stated simply, as if that answered the entire question. “Your king is ours, your enemy ours. We will search with you.” The matter was settled.

“Is he serious?” Zilbo asked dubiously.

“He called us the Old Ones,” Litbo pointed out. “When their ancestors crossed these lands those many centuries ago, they left behind them many legends of the pure people, those without sin. They seemed to think those people lived in the lands to the east, and they looked up to them as holy men, akin to the gods.”

“And he thinks we’re them?”

“Apparently. We’ve got no reason to argue with him, really. It could be a great advantage in whatever we’re up against.”

Zilbo looked the barbarian chieftain with renewed interest. Speaking to him again through Litbo, he said, “We face great dangers ahead of us. The enemy that plagues our land is a fallen god. We call him Belegur. His evil magic brought chaos to our land, even causing one among us to poison our beloved king.”

A growing warrior pride filling Ath-gar-nel’s voice, he answered with a smile. “The dangers do not daunt us, my friend. We have done a great wrong. For six years now the gods have withdrawn their favors from us, and we seek forgiveness. A quest such as this, to help the Old Ones in their time of need, is a worthy one indeed. We shall at last earn the approval of our gods.”

Zilbo inclined his head in what he hoped was an appropriately noble yet grateful gesture. The librarian mused over the situation quietly before throwing in some words of his own. “Ancient prophecies tell us that our goal lies deep underground, in caverns near the coast. The journey will be a long one.”

“We will follow, wherever you might take us.”

A cry broke out, followed quickly by sounds of running somewhere in the distance. The group rose to their feet, breaking the circle. Looking to the south, where a large number of fallen bodies still lay uncovered in the night sky, Zilbo and the others noticed a commotion disturbing the peaceful shadows. Finally the sounds of struggle quieted. Two tall Nezegeth warriors walked towards the group, marching on either side of their prisoner, a hunched and unrecognizable shape.

As the approaching warriors yelled a few brief words of explanation to Ath-gar-nel, Zilbo gasped with surprise. Shuffling in resignation between his two captors, Endeth glared at the group with visible hostility.

Once again, Litbo provided the translation for the Nezgeth words. "We caught him searching through the bodies, scrounging for food. He looked ready to sink his teeth into the dead themselves."

The royal advisor whispered a quick explanation to the librarian, detailing his suspicions of Endeth and his deed against the king. Just as Ath-gar-nel seemed about to wave Endeth and the warriors away in disinterest, Litbo called out, "Wait! Don't take him away. He is the one who poisoned our king."

Looking back and forth from Litbo to Endeth, Ath-gar-nel finally drew forth his dagger and moved towards Endeth, prepared to wreak his own vicarious vengeance. Only a frantic cry from both Litbo and Zilbo prevented the servant's untimely end. The royal advisor moved to Endeth and looked him over. Absolutely no hint of recognition showed in the poor man's eyes. Questioning seemed absolutely useless, met only with crazed stares and unintelligible growls. He was no longer who he had once been.

“It is important for historians of Quendor to remember that when the nation’s capital was moved from Largoneth to Egreth in the seventh century After Entharion, the nearby Fort Griffspotter had already been in existence for over three and a half centuries. The distant outpost was established by King Zilbo the First on the very site of his legendary battle with the evil Implementor called Belegur.”

-The New Year’s Revolt, by Jezbar Foolion

“But the ancient prophecies can’t be wrong,” Litbo insisted with an annoying whine.

“We really don’t have any proof at all,” Zilbo pointed out. For the last several minutes, the Galepath librarian had been trying to convince Zilbo that they should continue their desperate search for Belegur’s lair, despite the fact that it no longer seemed likely to expect much help from Endeth, voluntary or otherwise.

“Of course we have proof,” Litbo shot back, gesturing to a worn piece of parchment in his left hand. “I have the passages right here. Chapter after chapter of the Scrolls of Kar’nai insist that Belegur cannot be defeated without the help of what they call ‘a desert tribe.’ These Nezgeth fit that description more than anything we’re ever likely to run into.”

“That seems a little coincidental to me.”

“Is it coincidental that the prophets of Kar’nai also knew about Zylon the Aged? They describe a king who will live four hundred years.”

“Maybe so, but I just don’t think it’s a good idea to send the royal army of Quendor tramping around in some uncharted wilderness.” Still somewhat annoyed by the Nezgeth tribe’s refusal to return home without performing some magnificent, heroic deed, Zilbo wanted nothing more than to turn his back on the warriors and return to the snug safety of Largoneth Castle.

Undeterred, Litbo consulted his parchment paper, upon which he had written several direct quotes before departing from Galepath so long ago. “The Third Scroll of Kar’nai, Book Nine, describes Belegur’s hideout almost exactly. A deep underground cavern where a river spills to the sea.”

“Litbo, there isn’t a river within a hundred bloits of here, and you know it.” Zilbo was growing irritated.

“But we only have this one chance to save Zylon. Maybe the Scrolls of Fizbin won’t help us with that, but if we let Belegur keep the Scrolls, it won’t matter. Nothing will matter. He’ll find his way back into the Timeless Halls and destroy us all.”

Zilbo said nothing at first, then finally nodded in grudging acceptance. After a brief explanation to the eager Nezgeth warriors and the giving of marching orders to the royal army, the search for Belegur had begun. The captain of the Lingolf Garrison, well versed in the geography of Quendor’s outlying areas, informed Zilbo of a fairly significant river that flowed to the sea not far to the south of the Jerrimore Estates, just a few day’s journey away. Satisfied, Zilbo turned to east, in the direction of the Great Sea, and began the march.

Walking in amused silence, the royal advisor eyed his learned librarian and the mysterious Nezgeth chieftain. The two had been deep in talk for the greater part of the last three days, exchanging arcane words of wisdom in harsh syllables utterly unintelligible to Zilbo’s untrained ears. To Zilbo, something in the way the two contrasted when together seemed utterly natural. The Warrior Ath-gar-nel towered over the little Galepath scholar, barking his words in a dry voice born of years of harsh desert life. Litbo meanwhile whispered softly, often scratching his

chin or folding his hands, unknowingly striking a deeply contemplative pose. As the two marched through the open, sunlit paths that wound through the forests of Quendor, the librarian seemed not at all out of place with the Warrior, forming a relationship that would no doubt become the material of some vast scholarly work, years in the future.

Of course, there were certain side effects to Litbo's growing closeness with the Nezgeth, Zilbo thought with a chuckle. Ath-gar-nel spent much time in silence watching the workings of the royal army, somehow managing to catch every detail, from the smallest scout reports to the grandest conferences Zilbo held with his lieutenants. After several days of these events, explained to the chieftain via Litbo's translations, Ath-gar-nel finally pointed at Zilbo and said, "He would do me a great honor to speak to me directly."

Putting aside any fear of the invaders he had left inside him, Zilbo ordered the librarian to tell Ath-gar-nel the truth. "He does not speak your tongue. I alone know the words of the Nezgeth."

The Kovalli chieftain had seemed surprised at the explanation, and for years Zilbo would suspect that Litbo had slipped into the translation some further elaborations of his own, such as, "Only the most exalted and noble wise men of Quendor are permitted the honor of studying your language. I am such a man." In any case, the common Nezgeth attitude soon developed to the point of holding Litbo in awe and Zilbo in utter indifference. Every communication to the Nezgeth tribe came from Litbo's mouth. Marching routes, distribution of provisions, campground layout, everything. None but the tribe's eldest graybeards could remember a time when Ath-gar-nel had not ruled over them, and to watch their beloved chieftain nod and bow at each of Litbo's utterances filled them with a confused sense of awe.

So, after days of hiking over proud hills and through ancient forests, the two armies finally reached the Great Sea. The group experienced an unexpected setback when one Kovalli warrior after another topped the final sand dune and saw the ocean for the first time. Sand of course they were familiar with, it being the standard daily fare back home in Kovalli, but such water they had never seen. The first rivers encountered in their travels had caused quite a stir among the roving tribesmen. So much water flowing wasted and ignored. It seemed unholy. But this...

A few of the more playful Nezgeth tried the water, getting their first taste of the powerful ocean tides. Some of the old men fell immediately to their knees and thanked their gods for the gift of such a splendid oasis. They soon discovered that the salty water was quite undrinkable.

For his own part, Zilbo had lived by the sea since early childhood, and had never been so far from home in his entire life. His life's adventuring had consisted of staring at his ancestors' hand-drawn maps that still hung in Largoneth, letting his mind take him where it would. Soon, after several days of tramping through dank marshes and sinking sand dunes with absolutely no fruitful results, he finally concluded in frustration that they had absolutely no idea what they were doing. In disgust, he waved his hands and gave the order to pitch camp right where they stood, at the base of a large hill just to the south.

Relieved, the tired soldiers of Quendor dropped their packs to the ground and prepared for a long night's sleep. For several days they had followed a wide westward detour, forced by the tricky marshlands along the coast into completely unfamiliar territory. The last half of the afternoon had been particularly arduous, not only physically but mentally as well. On earlier days, the going had been relatively cheerful for numerous bloits, the sunlit trees filled with many carelessly chirping birds to lighten the mood, the sea and beachlands a short, pleasant walk to the east. Then, without warning, the entire landscape had changed. The trees became sickly and twisted, a mocking caricature of the way a real forest should be. Gradually, all undergrowth disappeared entirely, replaced by barren ground of a not entirely healthy color.

One moment in particular stood out in the minds of the marching warriors. From out of one of the forest's many dark recesses, a hellhound suddenly charged the group, not one of Zarfil's Mareilon gang members, but a true-to-life, ravenous hellhound. The skilled Kovalli archers soon made short work of the poor hellhound, but not before the angry creature managed to sink its teeth into several of the more careless Quendoran soldiers. Even the stoic Nezgeth seemed shaken by the brief encounter, all thoughts of violence left behind them long ago, with the departure from the Jerrimore Estates.

As the armies settled down for the night, Zilbo and Litbo strolled amidst the low-lying hills along the forest, near the edge of the sea. Lost in the expanse of open air and the freedom of the wilderness, it was some time before they finally began a conversation.

"It seems such a shame about Endeth," Zilbo sighed, shaking his head. "He was such a good man. I've known him for years at Largoneth, and I never once would have suspected that he'd end up like this."

A non-stop guard had been placed on the former royal servant, his abnormal strength and beastly temper too much for Zilbo to safely ignore. Litbo nodded, sharing in Zilbo's sadness. "Belegur's powers of the mind are great indeed. It seems ironic that someone who should have so much control over us still needs our assistance to fight his own battles."

"I almost wonder if it wouldn't be best to let him go, or even to..." Zilbo hesitated. "To kill him. That glow in his eyes and the noises he makes when he's talking to himself. He's in such great pain. I don't see how he can stand it."

"We'll never know, really. Endeth might return completely to normal, once Belegur dies and his power over Endeth's mind is broken. I think it's worth waiting to give him that chance."

Silence filled the air as Zilbo contemplated the librarian's words. Gradually, his thoughts turned to the camp behind him and how grateful he was that he could be away from it now. The brief encounter with the hellhound had left many on edge. Soon the camp had filled with disturbing rumors, as the soldiers tried to make sense out of the recent events. When Griffspotter had still lived, he and Zilbo had decided together that it would be best to keep knowledge of Belegur to themselves. It simply wouldn't do wonders for military moral to tell the soldiers that not only were they marching from Largoneth into the midst of a civil war, they must also soon be prepared to do battle with nothing less than Belegur, a fallen Implementor and minor deity in his own right.

Some time after Griffspotter's death and the eventual peace with the Nezgeth tribe, Zilbo had announced to the royal army that they would continue on in search of Litbo's lost Scrolls of Fizbin. Something in the royal advisor's tone had told the soldiers that they were not being given the entire story, and soon, grumbling word-of-mouth began working its way through the lines. As Zilbo stood by the sea reflecting on the last few days, the camp behind him stirred restlessly. Conversation lagged as the royal militia listened nervously to the ongoing noisy battle between chattering forest nightlife and the unusually powerful roaring of the sea. Campfires flickered merrily, but those gathered around seemed determined not to notice. Something in the night air and the tremendous distance from home had ruthlessly destroyed the usual manly campfire joie-de-vivre.

The next series of events followed in a tight sequence, one happening immediately after the other in a barely distinguishable progression. In a flicker of audible clarity, the warring sounds of nature broke down and separated themselves from each other, only moments before disappearing entirely. The rustling whispers as the malicious wind moved through the closest fringe of twisted trees came to a complete halt. Birds silenced themselves, or perhaps were silenced by something

else entirely, a firm iron mask thrown over the entire land. Even the impressively massive beat of the ocean seemed to fragment and break into pieces of incoming tide, separating imperceptibly to reveal the previously disguised sound of a nearby river flowing to the sea.

Then, somewhere, in an impossible defiance of nature and human comprehension, a vast invisible hand moved in, sweeping in a broad gesture vaguely reminiscent of a burning matchstick held carefully to the ready wick of a bright oil lamp. And then, from the south, a massive, impenetrable column of blue light revealed itself just over the tip of the nearest hill. It seemed to soar with a crackling glow right up from the very ground below, surging ever upwards towards the heavens in one continuous strand of light, searching, searching, for a passage, a door, a way out. Finally the column surged with intense energy, rippling outwards and expanding to twice its former size. The expansion subtly changed the image's perfection, giving it a noticeable bulge at the top and bottom, a massive concavity reaching to the sky.

Zilbo and Litbo faced the image in motionless surprise, two shocked animals frozen by the radiance of a bright light. Finally, the sounds of disarray and confusion from the camp below reached their ears, breaking the trance. Turning together, the two ran back to the main party and breathlessly began planning a course of action.

"This is Belegur's work. It must be." Litbo had to shout at Zilbo to be heard over the frightened din of the Quendoran royal army and the Nezegeth Warriors.

"It doesn't look like finding him is going to be as hard as I thought it would," Zilbo joked grimly. "Get Ath-gar-nel and tell him what's going on. And get him to calm his people down."

As Litbo dashed off in search of the Warrior, Zilbo turned quickly to Heffilmurm, the captain of the Lingolf Garrison. "Line up the men," he ordered. "We're going over that hill." Heffilmurm looked nervously at the tower of light and seemed to hesitate. "Now!" Zilbo's yell did not leave any room for argument.

Soon, the initial shock brought by the appearance of the massive blue tunnel in the sky had worn off, and the camp returned to some semblance of military efficiency. The Nezegeth warriors, their dark skin reflecting the peculiar blue light, stood together awaiting Zilbo's next words. In the night air of southern Quendor, they seemed a ghostly apparition, war paint and jagged blades speaking of vicious animals from unknown lands. Even the Quendoran royal army, once gathered to order, managed to find a new glow of nobility. After many days of marching, a task had finally presented itself. Starting the walk to the top of the hill, many backs seemed straighter, many heads held higher.

Nearly half an hour later, the party found themselves at the base of the strange column of light. Reaching the peak of the descent, Zilbo had found that the mysterious river referred to in Litbo's prophecies had been no more than a few hundred yards away from the campsite, completely disguised by the sounds of the nearby sea. That obstacle behind them, the now wet but nevertheless determined group had moved in closer to the column of light. It was large indeed, even more so than it appeared from a distance. Having perhaps the circumference of a fair-sized lake, the column itself seemed strangely impenetrable.

Zilbo moved toward the gleaming light, but Ath-gar-nel promptly waved him away, insisting on taking the risk himself. Reaching out to the beam, the Warrior felt a sharp but not unpleasant crackling and a vague sort of warmth. Pushing further in, Ath-gar-nel felt a sudden burst of resistance from the column. Stubbornly hurling himself against the beam, he bounced painfully away, with nothing to show for his efforts. A quick surveillance of the column's perimeter gave similar results all the way around. Even at the base of the beam, where the light mysteriously vanished into the ground, no sign could be seen of an entrance of any kind.

Frustrated once again, Zilbo stood staring at the column in defiance, hands on hips. Even now, at the end of their quest, Belegur's fortress seemed impenetrable. The blue column of light, reaching out to the distance of another dimension, smiled mockingly as Zilbo felt his vigor slip away.

Standing in silence between a pair of motionless Nezgeth guards, Endeth eyed the blue pillar of light with a growing combination of hatred and rage. Taking deeper and deeper breaths, Endeth was reminded of his old room at Largoneth, and the dark communications held with Belegur. Remembering the evil being's first attempts at persuasion, the castle servant tensed involuntarily, a physical manifestation of his failed mental attempts to resist the Implementor. The two towering Nezgeth on either side of Endeth stared at Belegur's column of light in superstitious awe, no longer turning a watchful eye to their captive. Noticing the slip in vigilance, Endeth began to feel the call of Belegur once again. Slow tendrils of thought reached out and touched his mind, begging, cajoling.

The words came softly into his mind.

I am here. Come to me now. Our work is yet undone.

And images of the sky opening, gateway to another place, another time. Belegur passing through, unmolested. And Zylon, dying, his deed.

"No!" Endeth's cry split the silence of the night. "I won't let you!"

In a massive spasm of strength, he threw away the arms of his careless Nezgeth captors and broke into a run. Pushing his way recklessly through a crowd of Quendoran soldiers, he ran past Ath-gar-nel and Zilbo, barely pausing to spare them a bloodshot, frenzied glance before heading towards the edge of the forest. The royal advisor gave a yell and took off after Endeth, followed quickly by the nearest group of Kovalli warriors. Slipping on a patch of loose gravel, Endeth stumbled, breaking his fall by taking a vicious scrape on both of his outstretched hands.

Skidding around the circumference of the giant magical pillar, he barely evaded the grasp of his captors before plunging headlong towards a clump of sickly, mangled bushes lying at the base of the hill, stretched between the roots of two massive trees. Closing in behind him, Zilbo and Ath-gar-nel blinked and hesitated in amazement as Endeth pushed his way through the undergrowth, breaking the fragile, dead branches that reached out to grab him, revealing a dank, hidden hole leading into the side of the hill.

Leaning down into the dim moistness of the tunnel, Endeth disappeared into the black, shuffling away quickly on all fours. Ath-gar-nel moved towards the bushes after him, but Zilbo put out his arm, holding back the Kovalli chieftain.

"Wait! Wait!" he called out to the Nezgeth, many of whom continued to surge forward to finish the chase. Litbo provided a quick translation, explaining the reason behind Zilbo's hesitation. "We need to get some light. We can't go stumbling around there in the dark without knowing what we're up against."

A quick check with the embarrassed Captain Heffilmurm revealed that in their hurry to begin the search once the blue column snapped into the sky, the soldiers of Quendor's royal army had made a quick grab for their fiercest weapons but had neglected to bring any other basic supplies. The burning campfires and other potential light sources were back across the river and over the hill, a good distance away. Sighing in disgusted annoyance, Zilbo turned away from the newfound tunnel and began walking back to the camp.

He found his path blocked by the slow shuffling approach of an especially weak and stooped Nezgeth elder who had listened to Litbo's translated calls for light without reply before stepping in front of Zilbo. Without saying a word, the bent old man calmly extended his arms, holding out

to Zilbo a smooth, opaque sphere made of some unknown material. Zilbo paused for a moment, waiting for the man to speak. Taking a step forward, the elder held out the sphere again. Nodding his head in uncertain thanks, the royal advisor took the globe, which fit snugly in the palm of his hand. He looked at the object dubiously before turning back to Litbo, anticipating some translated explanation.

Finally the elder reached out again, grasping Zilbo's hand in his own and passing his other slowly over the top of the sphere. Suddenly the sphere flashed in an explosion of bright white light. As the old man backed away, his task completed, the glow from the object calmed, settling down to a steady stream that bathed the entire hillside in warm, cheery light.

The Nezgeth elder looked at Zilbo and chuckled softly, his wizened eyes reflecting the light from his magical globe.

Blinking rapidly in surprise, Zilbo took a moment to recover from the sudden bright light before bowing gratefully to the elder. They then turned back to the hole into which Endeth had disappeared just minutes before. A quick discussion between Heffilmurm, Zilbo, and Ath-gar-nel followed, leading to the agreement, mostly at the insistence of the Kovalli chieftain, that the Lingolf Garrison would remain behind and guard the tunnel's entrance. The Nezgeth, their moment of absolution finally at hand, would follow Zilbo and the librarian boldly into the tunnel in search of what lay within.

Shaking hands with the royal advisor, Heffilmurm wished him luck and watched as he crawled through the densely-packed bushes into the cavern beyond, the sphere in his hand gradually growing more and more distant. Soon the Kovalli warriors were gone as well, crowding behind Zilbo and the only light in the midst of an impenetrable darkness.

As the last sign of Zilbo and his party vanished, Heffilmurm shivered and turned away from the blackened entrance. A glance at the solid blue beam of light revealed that its top, high in the night sky, had spread apart, forming an even wider circular opening that surged with an ever-increasing intensity.

Then, from somewhere in the crackling blue darkness, came the growl of a lone hellhound.

“Know now that he who gains entrance to the Timeless Halls
shall be granted life eternal.”
-The Scrolls of Fizbin

Deeper and deeper they went, into the inky blackness of Belegur’s tunnels. At first the path took an abrupt downward slope, only the most cautious among the party able to avoid a long and painful slide to the bottom. Zilbo himself, holding the glowing sphere as a drowning man would grab at a floating piece of wreckage, had only one hand free and found the going most difficult. As the last of the Kovalli followed the royal advisor down through the initial incline, a quick look back to the entrance revealed only a dim hole somewhere above, vaguely outline by the rustle of branches and a crackling blue glow.

Light from the sphere seemed to disappear into the walls of the cavern, swallowed greedily by some unknown dark spirit. Zilbo’s progress was slow, the sphere inexplicably unable to penetrate the darkness more than a few feet beyond his outstretched arms. Litbo and the Kovalli warriors following behind could see even less, the flickering sphere a lonely guide somewhere in the darkness ahead. The sense of sight all but gone, the other senses soon began to compensate. Walking barefoot, the Nezgeth tribesmen felt the lightest sensation of smooth animal fur breezing around their ankles. Occasionally the clammy touch of damp earth would be unexpectedly replaced with a hard patch of ground, the crunch of small brittle bones cracking under their nervous steps. And once, lifting his right foot to take the next step, a Nezgeth warrior met resistance as some invisible animal was kicked out of the way and ran squealing into the darkness.

Finally Zilbo drew the company to a halt. In the uncertain blackness before him, the tunnel split into two passageways, each diverging sharply from the path of the original. Shining his light as far down each passage as he dared, he then turned to Litbo and snapped, “Now what?”

The poor librarian threw his hands up in a shrug, as if to say, “I told you he lived underground but I didn’t say I knew which tunnel to take.”

Turning back to the junction, Zilbo knelt down to examine the ground below him. “Endeth seemed to know what to do. If we could figure out which way he went...” His voice trailed off as he bent closer to the heavily marked earth. Drawing his breath in excitement, he traced the outline of an undeniably human footprint heading down the left corridor, covered over and obscured by the marks of several other animals, small paws and deep-set claw marks. Looking deeper into the tunnel, he blinked in surprise at the sight of two more pairs of human tracks, heading back out of the tunnel.

“Zilbo, over here too.” Litbo bent over the ground at the start of the right-hand corridor, just within the range of the glowing light. Zilbo hurried over and followed the line of Litbo’s pointing hand to yet another footprint heading into the darkness, this time accompanied by an even larger mark in the ground beside it.

“What do you think?” Litbo whispered.

“I don’t know,” Zilbo admitted quietly. “These tracks are running everywhere. Any one of them could be Endeth’s. That pillar of light up there, it seemed to be more in that direction,” he added, waving to his right. “But this tunnel has been twisting so much, even that’s just a guess.”

“Well, that guess is as good as any,” Litbo smiled reassuringly.

“All right, then. Let’s go.”

A few minutes later they came to another junction. And another. Each stretch of passageway seemed to be filled with side corridors and nearby rooms, the explorers entering a more and more

complex, self-contained universe. At each branch of the main thoroughfare, Zilbo called the party to a halt and gave a brief order to Ath-gar-nel. A Nezgeth spear soon stood imbedded in the ground, marking the path. As the maze of honey-combed passages grew increasingly intertwined, Zilbo refused to take any chances.

Soon too the passageway began to narrow, forcing the column to lengthen itself into an ever-thinner line. Like some many legged centipede, the Nezgeth tribe wound ever deeper into the bowels of the earth, those at the rear of the line forced by the close quarters to trail farther and farther behind Zilbo's sphere of guidance, sometimes losing sight of the glow due to unpredictable twists and curves in the tunnel's earthen walls.

At the front of the long line, Zilbo found himself staring face to face with one of the most peculiar creatures he had ever laid eyes upon. Out of the corner of his vision, he had noticed a brief flurry of motion as this low-crawling, four-legged beast had run out in front of his path a few feet farther down the tunnel. The large, malformed rodent had apparently been startled away from its meal by the approaching visitors, a scarred and bloody carcass of some kind visible on the right side of the tunnel. Momentarily entranced by Zilbo's blinding light, the little monster twitched frantically just before leaping into the air. The royal advisor flailed his arms about to protect himself from the beast's airborne charge, barely managing to knock it away and send it scrambling to the ground. Just as it spread its claws and prepared for another leap, a Nezgeth dagger embedded itself in the creature's side with an audible thump, knocking the life out of it.

Zilbo turned to Ath-gar-nel as the Kovalli chieftain bent to retrieve his blade. "Thank you," he sighed, his breath heavy with surprise. "Thank you very much."

Ath-gar-nel made no reply as Zilbo translated the thanks, acknowledging the royal advisor with a mere nod and smile.

"Ever seen anything like this before, Zilbo?" Zilbo asked, bending down to examine the creature.

The librarian barely managed to shake his head and frown in disgust at the sight. Large, bulbous eyes unaccustomed to the light. Scarred flesh of an unnatural, blackened color. Sagging, fleshy earlobes ripped to shreds by the claws of countless underground dangers. Small but efficient fangs, still wet with blood. Moving over squeamishly to the other animal, the interrupted meal, Zilbo was greeted by a similar sight. A partially chewed carcass attached to a vicious looking head. Large, bulbous eyes. Immense ears. Sharp fangs. Zilbo's attacker had eaten one of its own kind.

Standing, Zilbo held the globe aloft, his shaky right arm growing tired with the burden. Several deep breaths later, the party continued, more determined than ever to get to their goal and depart victorious. On the left side of the tunnel a shallow chasm appeared out of the darkness. Zilbo's light could illuminate a large fraction of the crack, nearly to its floor some ten feet below, just enough to reveal an entire nest of some gruesome looking creature. Smaller than the deformed rodents encountered earlier, dozens of these solid, shelled beasts crawled around each other or over the motionless bodies of several hundred more of their comrades, small tentacle-like claws clicking, clicking.

Shuddering at the prospect of any among them falling into such a painful abyss, Zilbo sent back the word to stay to the far right of the tunnel. Some moments later, two junctions removed from the pair of dead beasts, the tunnel sloped again, even steeper this time into the heart of the hill. The massive pressure of the tunnel walls and the very earth itself seemed to push in on the party, filling the air with a taste of dense oppressiveness.

When the sounds started, Zilbo continued for several steps, certain that his delirious, starved senses were playing tricks on him. Finally, Litbo halted the march with, "Zilbo, do you hear that noise?"

"I hear it," Zilbo admitted. He would perhaps have preferred delirious senses to the reality of the sounds around him. Impossible voices, a distant chanting from somewhere within the hopeless maze of passages, the magnified echo of rustling and high-pitched squeals. The blanket of silence had suddenly been lifted, bringing a babble of audible confusion.

From far back in the Nezgeth rank, perhaps halfway down the long stretch of warriors, an angry voice yelled out, met in response with several approving mutters from the rest of the crowd. A furious expression twisting his normally calm features, Ath-gar-nel pushed his way through several of his warriors toward the defiant voice. Following him anxiously with the globe of light, Zilbo looked to the librarian for a translation of the growing argument.

"It seems that they're refusing to go on any farther," Litbo explained as the two hurried back down the passage. The source of the angry voice proved to be an unusually tall young Nezgeth warrior surrounded by a group of similarly-minded friends, arms crossed and eyes glaring brightly out of the darkness.

Ath-gar-nel immediately strode forward to confront the group, leaving Zilbo and Litbo to look on in uncertainty.

"This is just what we need," Zilbo said, his mutter overflowing with sarcasm. "Our great avenging army to sneak out at the last minute."

Litbo brushed aside the royal advisor's remarks with impatience, paying careful attention to the heated Nezgeth argument. "That one there, the tall one. He says it's unholy for them to march any farther. Apparently he thinks these caverns are inhabited by demons and evil spirits. And this is a land where the sun cannot shine. The gods have withdrawn their favor from this place."

Ath-gar-nel's eyes grew wider, his hands tensing in the air with the physical effort of persuasion, but still the warriors would go no farther. He continued to plead, going on about the six-year famine and the holy quest of the Brith-nel-fhet. Still the warriors shook their heads in silence. He damned their souls with the heavy weight of the wrath of gods. Nothing.

Finally, in disgust, he spat at the stubborn dissidents and waved at Zilbo, mouthing an insult before striding off into the darkness. The warriors looked at each other with embarrassment as the initial voice of protest swallowed in shame and muttered, "We will walk with you. Be our guide."

Litbo chuckled softly and indicated to Zilbo that the crisis had past. Walking back to the front of the line, Zilbo turned to the librarian for an explanation. "What did he say, Litbo? How did he convince them to go on?"

"Oh, he didn't really say much of anything," Litbo mumbled vaguely.

"Then why did he point at me?" Zilbo demanded.

"I don't know." Litbo looked away, swallowing another chuckle.

"Damn it, Litbo. If you don't tell me what he said, I'm going to throw you down that pit and forget about you!"

"Well, um... he said that they ought to be ashamed that the brave and noble desert warriors aren't strong enough to follow in the footsteps of..." Litbo's words trailed off into a nervous smile.

"Yes?" Zilbo prompted.

"Of a soft, pale-skinned weakling."

Zilbo stopped for a moment, speechless. Then, finally, an insulted grunt. "He said that?"

A nod from the librarian. A deep breath from the royal advisor.

“Well, let’s go,” Zilbo ordered, attempting to salvage his dignity. “We’ve got work to do.”

Once again the line moved forward, with reaffirmed purpose and determination. Soon a subtle change was noticed in the layout of the passageways. The vast number of junctions and secondary tunnels no longer turned away or branched out from their main course, but seemed to converge on it. One passageway after another blended quietly back into the central route. Much like a flowing river grows ever wider as its tributaries give offering, the darkened passage swelled with pride, again allowing more and more to walk abreast.

Moving forward with an ever growing sense of urgency, Zilbo and his party turned one last corner and there finally, in the distance, lay the all too familiar blue glow. A howl of glee erupted from the excited Nezgeth warriors, an intangible sense rapidly spreading through the ranks that battle was to be joined at last. Zilbo too felt himself carried away with excitement, and soon the whole long string of warriors was running recklessly down the darkened tunnel, all caution thrown to the wind.

With no warning at all, the passageway soon expanded into an immense cavern. The party of voyagers tumbled at random out of the tunnel, quickly filling up the huge cave’s initial entryway. Halting his headlong advance in surprise, Zilbo glanced about the cavern, wide-eyed. Such a sight he had never seen.

The cavern itself was mammoth, the ceiling and far walls both obscured by the distance. Random other tunnels opened onto the chamber at scattered points around its circumference. Zilbo’s hand-held globe cast but a feeble, insignificant glow about the room, paling in comparison to the brilliant blue pillar that originated here. At the very center of the cavern the shimmering tunnel of light stemmed up and outward from a flickering gem that resonated with the magic forces filling the room. The pillar itself seemed to flatten out vertically as it approached the cavern’s ceiling, disappearing into the earth above only to reappear as a vision in the night sky.

Strewn around the gem and the base of the pillar were dusty mounds of animal skins and furs of all kinds, arranged as comfortable resting spots amid the rocky chaos of the underground. Adding to the blue light from the pillar, several oil lamps rested at various points around the center of the room, marking off what seemed to be a focus of activity, a sort of living room for whatever creature it was that made its home here. Amid the comfortable-looking chaos could be seen scattered reading material, piles of fading scrolls and massive tomes that, even from the great distance at the edge of the cavern, appeared to be ready to crumble with age at the slightest touch. Writing implements. An inkwell and several feather quills. Random bits of cloth, perhaps once a robe of some kind. Jewelry gleaming in the unnatural light. In plain view, a knife, ornately decorated and ominously free of any blood.

And amidst it all, a man.

Short and lean, well-groomed black hair, a calm and quiet smile completely at odds with the shambled mess of his surroundings. He wore a simple robe, hands tucked humbly away in the pockets. As the rowdy newcomers stormed into the cave, they all stumbled to a halt, frozen in surprise at the sight of him. He merely look back with an ironic twinkle in his playful brown eyes.

Moving forward in a relaxed stroll, he came closer to his newly-arrived guests, stopping within an arm’s length from Zilbo. Smiling in the way one welcomes an old but respected rival, he spoke simply. “So, you have come at last.”

Zilbo froze for a moment, hypnotized by the man's charm. Finally, almost skeptically, he ventured, "Are you Belegur?"

Again, the disarming and unexpected smile. "Some call me that, yes."

A long moment passed, Zilbo staring at the little man in disbelief. He had come here to fight a fallen god... and now this? Almost at a loss for anything else to say, he asked, "Are you the one who tried to get Endeth to poison the king?"

The little man's eyes narrowed, his head cocked to the side in puzzlement. "Endeth? Who is this Endeth? I don't believe I know this name."

Belegur, Zilbo thought, if this is indeed Belegur, is being remarkably evasive. Frustrated and bewildered, the royal advisor said nothing in reply.

"Zilbo, your king is dead. You know that, don't you?" Belegur had used his first name, had known it without being told.

Zilbo flinched and took several steps back, partly in reaction to Belegur's words but even more in surprise at the activity going on behind Belegur himself. The ever-adventurous librarian, Litbo Mumblehum, had taken advantage of Belegur's attentive exchange with the royal advisor to edge along the side of the cavern. Safely behind the little man's range of vision, Litbo began the unprotected crossing to the middle of the chamber. Somewhere in the dusty pile of manuscripts that was Belegur's collection lay the Scrolls of Fizbin, and if Litbo could just make it to the shelter of that rock pile...

Zilbo spoke abruptly, his voice suddenly growing louder with nervousness at Litbo's boldness. "How do you know that, if you're here and Zylon is safe at Largoneth?"

Belegur drew his breath in annoyance. "Very well then," he nodded grimly, as if some important order of business had just been settled. "Let's begin."

"Begin? What do you mean?" Zilbo blurted out, again too loudly.

An impatient gesture at the horde of Kovalli warriors. "Send them at me. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Zilbo did not answer.

And there were the Scrolls. Heart beating loudly, eyes widened, Litbo reached out with excitement, just inches from his lost manuscript.

Belegur spoke without turning around. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Litbo froze mid-step.

"Yes, that's right. I see you." Finally he turned around, looking at Litbo with a glint of superior amusement in his eyes. "The Scrolls are no good to you now. I'm taking them home."

He walked calmly toward the blue pillar, back turned to his stunned audience. They watched him go, motionless and stunned by the quick progression of events. He now stood within feet of the blue pillar of light, his tunnel to the Timeless Halls.

And Ath-gar-nel moved. Moved and ran at the fallen Implementor, spear high in the air.

The spell was broken. In striking unison the entire Nezgeth tribe split the silence with a piercing battle cry, rushing towards the center of the cavern. Angered at the distraction, Belegur turned away from the crackling blue light to face his attackers. Seizing the opportunity, Litbo grabbed the Scrolls of Fizbin, along with the other two missing manuscripts, and darted back to the safety of the cavern's far wall.

In a frightening gesture of calmness, Belegur removed his hands from the folds of his cloak and spread them outwards in the direction of the charging Nezgeth warriors. An axe flew, hurtling into the air at the slightest flicker of his wrist. His hand had been empty. Belegur watched the double-edged blade make contact with Ath-gar-nel before moving his hand again.

Flapping into the air before the surprised warriors, a roc, a massive bird of prey, launched at the eyes and exposed limbs of its targets. Those nearest were barely able to wave it away before falling to the ground or retreating to the relative safety of the darkened passageway.

One warrior, the man who just minutes before had refused to go any farther into the tunnel, stepped boldly over the body of his fallen leader, blade in hand. As he moved within feet of the evil Implementor, Belegur's hands twitched again. A twisted coil of bloodworms appeared between Belegur and the advancing warrior, suddenly lashing out and punishing the trespasser with several painfully deep bites.

Still the charge continued, countless dozens of Nezgeth advancing across the vast space from the cavern's edge to the blue pillar of light. Belegur's face twisted with the strain of combating such numbers, yet still he managed to continue his successful resistance. A wall of flame leaped up, lapping painfully at the feet and legs of his opponents. The agile roc and the family of bloodworms continued their advances, spears sailing through them harmlessly, often striking the fellow warriors that stood behind the creatures. Unable to combat these mysterious beasts, one Nezgeth after another screamed out in pain and surprise when the creatures' fangs proved to be terribly real.

Behind Belegur, the column's blue light began to grow weak, flickering shakily with each further twist of Belegur's wrist. As new images of violence guided by the fallen Implementor appeared in the underground cavern, the tunnel to the Timeless Halls began to fade with the effort. The gem that gave birth to the pillar of light glowed ever more dimly, and still the Nezgeth kept coming. Distracted and his efforts divided, Belegur began to edge closer to the pile of furs on his left. Somewhere there, in his pile of possessions, lay the one object that could help him. That dagger, if he could get to it... But it was too far away.

Zilbo himself had been moving ever closer to Belegur and the flickering pillar. Under the cover of the Nezgeth horde, he crept along a circuitous route that brought him behind the Implementor to a spot along his unprotected right side. Zilbo remembered with comfort that he had armed himself, at Griffspotter's insistence, before the departure from Largoneth so long ago. The short sword at his side was unfamiliar to him, Zilbo having no skill at armed combat. But if he could find just the right angle to catch Belegur unawares.

Somewhere in the shadows on the far side of the cavern, something moved. Zilbo glanced up in time to see Endeth creep out of one of the other tunnels. Leaning over low, arms almost reaching the ground, Endeth stared at Belegur with animal rage. He had found him at last. The distracted Implementor did not notice the former royal servant, torn between his need to defend himself from the onrushing Nezgeth horde and the energy expended to keep the pillar of light intact.

In a flash of inspiration, Zilbo knew what to do. A titanic voice filled the hall, his voice, overwhelming all the sounds of violence. "Belegur!" The sound of the cry surprised even Zilbo himself, the echo resounding throughout the chamber. To the ground fell the attacking beasts, roc and bloodworm suddenly collapsing in magical disorder. Again the cry came. "Belegur!" The Nezgeth froze, eyeing Zilbo in awe.

Then slowly the little man turned away from his attackers and looked at Zilbo in quiet curiosity. Finally, "Yes?" in almost a whisper.

Eye-contact, prolonged, between a Largoneth native and a fallen god of the Timeless Halls.

And in the shadows, Endeth moved. Running from the side entrance to the center of the cavern, he made no sound. The eye-contact continued, Belegur fascinated by Zilbo's peculiar nervous stare. Endeth reached Belegur's living area amidst the animal furs and dusty scrolls. The

dagger. Gleaming beautifully in the erratic, fading blue light, the unstained sacrificial knife fit snugly in Endeth's palm. Still, Belegur did not notice. A second passed, and another, Endeth scrambling frantically towards his master, feet barely touching the ground, no noise made. The room held its breath, watching.

At the last possible moment, Zilbo broke eye-contact, looking nervously toward Endeth and the dagger. Instinct taking over, Belegur whirled around to face his enemy, hand opening outward, casting a final spell.

The dagger arrived first.

In and up, deeper. A growl from Endeth and a sudden exhaling moan from Belegur, eyes in a stunned look of surprise. Then he fell, bloodied, his body lifeless. It had ended.

Stooping over his dead master, Endeth let go of the blade. His lips moved as he fumbled for words. Eyes flashing with anger and guilt, he turned and fled, running back down the tunnel from which he came. Snapping out of his hypnotic daze, Zilbo turned to watch him go. One Nezgeth warrior close to Belegur's dead body began to give chase, but was blocked by Zilbo's outstretched arm.

"Let him go," he said. "He's paid his dues." The warrior nodded in silent consent. Zilbo's words were foreign, but his compassion was clear enough.

Watching Endeth scramble away into the darkness, Zilbo's reflection was interrupted by a bright eruption from the pillar of light. With Belegur's death, the focusing gem of power had grown even dimmer, the spell's life force fading away. In a final defiance of death, the tunnel flowed, still-fighting fragments of Belegur's power flowing outward from the gem upwards to the ceiling. At the last moment, the crackling pillar of light shattered, a shower of blue fireworks tumbling to the cavern floor. The gateway to the Timeless Halls had closed and vanished.

Stepping quickly over the fallen Implementor, Zilbo moved toward the motionless body of Ath-gar-nel, the Kovalli chieftain. With Belegur's first attack, the image of a bloody axe had been created from nothingness, becoming real just long enough to lodge itself in Ath-gar-nel's chest, rupturing his left lung and exploding his heart. The blade had disappeared then, leaving nothing but the empty air and Ath-gar-nel's dead body.

The Kovalli tribesmen had paid their penance.

Zylon the Aged **Book Five**

“Here lies Zylon the Aged, Lawgiver, Crowner of Kings,
Paver of Roads, Builder of Bridges, Preserver of the
Peace in the Time of the Frobbish Rebellion, A Warrior
of Zork, Bringer of Victory in the Wars of Kar’nai, and
Lord King and Protector of the Kingdom of Quendor.

32 BE - 398 AE

May he rest with the Implementors, in the bosom of the Timeless Halls.”

Several days later, Zilbo and Litbo drew within sight of Largoneth at long last. The journey had been an easy one, filled mostly with quiet conversation over the recent events.

“Well, Litbo, you finally have your Scrolls back.” Zilbo had been glancing over the ancient parchments with honest curiosity but little comprehension.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to know they’re still safe and sound. Getting the other two books back as well was a great stroke of luck.”

After Belegur’s violent death, Litbo had ventured again towards the fallen Implementor’s impressive library. In his initial, stealthy approach, he had found the missing works of Fzort and the biography of Mysterion, stashed among dozens of other great manuscripts, all having no apparent relation to Belegur’s efforts to regain entrance to the Timeless Halls.

Zilbo had been the first to ask the obvious question. “Why do you suppose he took all these other books?”

“We’ll probably never know.” Litbo shook his head, not inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth. He had managed to make his way back out of the tunnels with Belegur’s entire collection of lore, a great boon for the Galepath Library. “No doubt he managed to gain control over some other poor man like Endeth who did all his thieving for him. It could be he took the other two books just to cover his tracks in some way. In any case, we do have the Scrolls, and the city of Galepath owes you a great debt for that.”

Silence reigned for several moments, Zilbo surprised that Litbo’s gratitude had been directed solely towards him. “I don’t think we could have done it without the Nezegeth. The way they charged Belegur at the last minute. I think that really made the difference. It kept him distracted long enough for Endeth to get to him.”

“What do you suppose will happen to him?” No one on the journey back to Largoneth had mentioned Endeth yet, each man driven inward to contemplate the royal servant’s deeds. When Zilbo and Litbo returned from the darkened hole of Belegur’s lair, Heffilmurm and his men had demanded a complete retelling of the events. As a numb Zilbo described Endeth’s sudden crucial attack and his scurrying, rat-like departure into the darkened maze, the men of the royal army looked nervously at the tunnel’s hidden entrance, picturing a twisted fragment of a human being shuffling his way through the darkness, ever searching for escape and ever hoping for forgiveness.

“He seemed so bent, almost as if the strain of knowing what he’d done to Zylon was too much for him. I doubt we’ll ever see him again.”

“What about Zylon? What’s going to happen now?”

Zilbo frowned at the thought, remembering the image of a sick king lying bedridden somewhere in castle ahead. In the days since the initial confrontation on the Jerrimore Plains, Zilbo had been granted little free time to ponder the king's poisonous illness. "As I recall, the whole reason I went trekking off to find your Scrolls in the first place was the fact that Dinbar seemed to think something in them would help us cure Zylon."

"The Pool of Stasis, yes. If we could be sure about it, that might be a possibility, but we're still stuck with the problem that those passages are almost meaningless. The translation seemed to work but only produced directions that were vague at best. I wouldn't want to risk Zylon's life on empty promises."

Zylon's life. The thought echoed loudly through Zilbo's head. "If Dinbar thought there was a possibility, we should at least let him see the Scrolls."

Litbo thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "So long as I know where the Scrolls are, I don't need to have them back to Galepath right away."

And so Litbo and Zilbo inched their way back to Quendor's capital by the sea. Accompanying them on the march was half of Griffspotter's original two hundred men. Heffilmurm and the core of the Lingolf Garrison stayed behind at the sight of the battle at Zilbo's request. The royal advisor had been skeptical about Belegur's death. Such beings as the Implementors have great powers indeed, even to the point of defying the grave itself. A guard must be posted to watch for and guard against the possibility of such an event. In any case, the area's wild frontier held great possibilities for expansion. The open coastline and access to a flowing river nearby held great strategic interests for the Kingdom of Quendor, and Zilbo had made a mental note to advocate the building of a fort there in the future.

Meanwhile, the Nezgeth tribe cut a quick and peaceful path back to their home in the distant west. Zilbo had expected the death of their noble and beloved leader to cast a depressed pall over the tribe, but the effect had been almost the opposite. Almost at once, some complicated tribal hierarchy had been set into motion, as if the Nezgeth had already known who would succeed their leader. A young man had stepped forward, his eyes fierce and proud. He was clearly no relative of Ath-gar-nel's, but at once he commanded the respect of his peers.

Speaking through Litbo, he had used words of joy and relief.

"The Warrior is dead. We have paid our price and now we may go." Behind him, the dozens of tribesmen echoed his words in a soft, chanting murmur.

Zilbo waited for the man to continue. "Thanks to your guidance, oh noble Eastern Fathers, we have journeyed far and lost our leader in glorious combat, vanquishing your hated foe. The gods have taken their price, and we return to the lands of the desert sun."

With those words, they departed. In a way Zilbo was almost sorry to see them go. The company of the strong, dark-skinned warriors had been an interesting twist to the whole adventure, one he would not soon forget. Of course he had no way of knowing about the fate of the tiny villages of Er and Foo. Even so, Zilbo and the Kingdom of Quendor owed the Kovalli tribe a great debt. Quite unwittingly they had managed to stop a civil war before it had even begun. Even now somewhere in the lands to the north, the citizens of Galepath and Mareilon slowly went about the business of rebuilding their lives. Repair work began on the devastated Millucis district, and someone named Ettelwhiff was offered the Firestone Mansion. Galepath had a contested mayoral election for the first time in generations.

As the Kovalli natives had arranged themselves in a long and silent single file, Zilbo looked up and down the line searching for the elder that had given him the globe of light. Finally finding him, he went up and held out the globe, nodding in thanks. Mysteriously, the elder chuckled and

refused the gift. Looking Zilbo in the eye, he shrugged and uttered something softly in the Nezgeth tongue. Zilbo turned around to find Litbo, hoping for a translation. Instead, the elder reached out his gnarled old hand and brushed it against Zilbo's forehead, words filling his mind.

"It is not mine to take back from you, my friend. Someone in this land has need of it yet."

With that, they departed into the forest, no words of farewell, only the haunting chants of praise and renewed faith in some ancient gods.

At the long-awaited sight of Largoneth Castle before them, the travelers' weary feet became stronger, quickening the pace over the last few bloits home. As the sun prepared to set, a quick walk through the nearest village and around the outlying base of Signal Mount brought them at last before the castle gates. There stood Gladius Fzort, leaning casually against a nearby tree, grinning ironically.

"What is this, our greeting committee?" Zilbo snorted in surprise.

"I heard tell you had arrived in the area early this morning, so I figured I'd come out and cheer you on."

"I guess news travels fast in this part of the country," Zilbo retorted, suspicious at Gladius' unusual cheeriness.

"I just want to know what took YOU so long," feigned impatience in his voice.

"Listen up, Gladius. While you were warm at home in Largoneth, we were out there doing battle to fallen gods, all right!"

"And from what Zylon tells me, you've done a pretty good job of it too." His smile spread even wider.

"What?"

"Zilbo, the king lives."

"What?" Zilbo repeated, grabbing Gladius by his shoulders in excitement.

"It's true," Gladius laughed, Zilbo's happiness feeding his own. "Not more than a few days ago, he just woke up and got out of bed, and he seemed better than ever. I don't really understand."

"Did he say anything about it?"

"Oh, sure he did. But you know how Zylon is. He was cryptic, mysterious. He muttered something about 'release from the hands of the god' and went right about his daily business. I asked him to tell me more, and he cut me off, almost like it wouldn't be proper for him to tell me. I think he's just waiting for you."

Zilbo looked at Litbo in elation. Suddenly all the concerns about the poorly translated Scrolls and the king's illness had been washed away into the waters of the Great Sea. As the remainder of Heffilmurm's forces headed off to the Lingolf Garrison a short walk to the north, Zilbo clasped Gladius on the back and walked with the two of them back into Largoneth Castle.

Walking through the spacious courtyard within the castle walls, the trio was soon approached by the royal magician, Dinbar, still looking amazingly youthful despite his recent attempts to grow a beard. "So, my brave adventurers are home at last."

He greeted both Litbo and Zilbo with hardy hugs before Zilbo could say, "And where, might I ask, have you been?"

Gladius rolled his eyes in annoyance. He apparently had heard the tale too many times already. Nevertheless, Dinbar put on his best story-telling pose and began. "Where have I been? I'll tell you where I've been."

"Yes?" Zilbo prompted sarcastically.

"I've been in the bowels of the Galepath dungeons, pining for the light of day."

“What happened?”

Gesturing to the librarian, Dinbar explained that, “Right after you left for Largoneth, I went over to the city hall there and got an audience with mayor, what’s his name, Spildo? I told him I was on a royal mission from Zylon and I had orders to prevent the Galepath militia from marching against Mareilon. He nodded and thought about it for a few minutes, then he threw me in jail.”

“Well, it looks like you got out all right,” Zilbo pointed out. “But it seems to me that you could have teleported your way right back to Largoneth. Why the big delay?”

“I had been thinking the same thing, and even got as far as making the initial preparations to cast the spell, when some guard walked in to bring me a meal. It didn’t take much effort for him to figure out what I was trying to do, and after that they had someone on me day and night. I wasn’t able to concentrate enough to find my own magical powers. So, after wasting away for one of the darkest weeks of my life, someone opened up the cell and told me I was free to go. I asked the man what was going on. He shook his head and gave me some confused rumor that the mayor and that Zarfil character had been killed by some kind of barbarian invasion.” Dinbar shrugged, adding that he had returned to Largoneth magically with the good news that the civil war had been averted. “I still don’t know what to make about that barbarian story. There had been rumors about it earlier, but I thought it was just nonsense.”

“It was more true than you think,” Zilbo corrected. “A tribe called the Nezegeth from the western deserts had flooded over the mountains and invaded Quendor. Apparently it was some kind of holy quest to restore the favor of their gods. We got to the Jerrimore Estates just in time to watch them crush the forces of Galepath and Mareilon,”

Litbo continued the explanation. “We were able to talk to them and work things out, because I had studied a variant of their dialect many years ago. Just because I could understand them, the Nezegeth thought we were some kind of holy people. They apologized for attacking us and agreed to help in our quest.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you brought back less than half of the people you left with.” Gladius waited on the point, hoping for an explanation.

“I ordered Heffilmurm to stay behind to guard Belegur’s lair. It seems like a reasonable precaution to take.”

“And Griffspotter?” Gladius prompted.

Zilbo glanced at the librarian, hesitating. “The Nezegeth killed him. He was our only casualty.”

They passed through the archway marking the entrance to the northern hall. The cool shade of the Largoneth interior embraced them as they walked toward the council chambers. Finally Dinbar broke the silence with, “What was Belegur like?”

“I don’t know what I expected,” said Zilbo, shaking his head. “A monster or some fierce demon, or something. He was just a poor little man. To be sure, he had amazing magical abilities, but when he died it was just like what you would expect, if you or I were to die. It was...” Zilbo paused, searching for the right word, “normal.”

“Apparently when he was thrown out of the Timeless Halls, he simply became a very powerful human.” Litbo had been giving much thought to the fall of Belegur, but in the end it would remain a mystery to him. “He lost all of his godlike abilities and he didn’t want to admit it. He wanted to do battle with an entire host of Implementors, and yet he couldn’t even defeat us.”

As the walk through the castle continued, Zilbo explained Endeth's final role in Belegur's death and his own recent plans for territorial expansion into the southern wilderness. Several minutes later, they arrived at the Largoneth council chamber, the large wooden doors thrown open before them. The air in the chamber seemed clear and fresh, the window at the far end thrown open to the dwindling daylight. Colorful reds and blues rushed in from the sunset, creating a magnificent aura around the form in the window.

A tall man, lean arms and agile fingers gripping the base of the window pane. Long hair for a man, down to the shoulders, a dark brown, almost black. Rimming his head, a thin silver band studded with a single gleaming jewel centered above his smiling, twinkling eyes. This was Zylon the Aged, king of Quendor. Turning to greet the new arrivals, he held out his arms and grinned in what many would have thought a most unroyal fashion. Only those close to him knew that Zylon had always been a quite friendly man, even to those of vastly lesser status. Seeing the smile, Zilbo was reassured. Finally, all had returned to normal.

"Zilbo, at last you have returned," he welcomed, clasping him firmly on the shoulders.

"My lord," Zilbo muttered, lowering his head in deference.

"And you," the king turned to Litbo, "you must be the librarian!"

Litbo blinked in surprise, uncertain how to reply to his king's joviality. Finally, he settled for a vague imitation of Zilbo's bow and, "Yes, my lord."

"I understand I owe you a great deal, Litbo. Gladius and Dinbar here tell me that all of my precious royal advisors were helpless until you discovered Belegur's role in this whole affair."

Mumblehum stuttered and stammered, barely able to reply, "It was nothing, really."

Soon, Zylon gestured for everyone to take a seat around the council table, and the group was joined by a remarkably clear-headed Hargood of Mareilon. With Zylon's recovery, the king's senile old friend had managed to regain his chief link to reality, making the council of royal advisors as whole as possible without the dead general Griffspotter.

After several minutes of casual conversation, Zilbo could contain his curiosity no longer. "My lord, please tell me. How is it that you have recovered? Our best magicians and doctors could do nothing, and yet here you are."

"Indeed, Zilbo, here I am," Zylon admitted with a chuckle. "Long before this whole affair began I could feel Belegur's presence. His mind had reached to mine many times, probing, searching for an entrance. I fought him off and forgot about it. There didn't seem to be any need to mention it to anybody; it was a curiosity, I thought, and nothing more. Apparently Endeth wasn't able to fight him off, and one day he poisoned me. I rang the bell and Endeth came. I called to him to help me and he just stood there. Finally I lost consciousness, but something inside of me kept fighting."

Zylon broke off for a moment, seemingly troubled by his own inner thoughts. "The poison did not kill me. Endeth no doubt miscalculated the amount he was to use, and in any case this body of mine is no normal one. It has fought off many such sicknesses, far worse than that."

"Then why did you stay unconscious for so long?" Zilbo asked.

"The poison did weaken me significantly," the king admitted. "In my sleep I could feel my body fighting the illness, but something was preventing me from finishing the job. Night after night, Belegur would visit me, tormenting my thoughts. Again and again I fought him off, but the struggle grew to be too much. Fighting him on two fronts like that, I wasn't able to recover, and I think that's what he intended from the start. However it was you killed him, that was definitely the turning point for me. I could feel his presence leave my mind and I was able to concentrate on healing myself."

Gladius continued the tale. “He woke up one morning smiling, just as if nothing had ever happened.”

“So I must say that I owe you two my life, for killing Belegur.”

Zilbo shifted uncomfortably as he explained Endeth’s role in the attack and his subsequent disappearance.

“Well, I suppose it worked out in the end,” Zylon mused. “It must have been terribly painful for him, to be forced to act against his will like that. He must have been willing to do anything to make up for it.”

“So I suppose this means that Belegur has been kept out of the Timeless Halls for good,” Dinbar pointed out with relief.

Zilbo took a few minutes to describe to Dinbar the magnificent blue pillar of light that snapped into existence above the cavern and disappeared just as promptly at Belegur’s death.

A confused King Zylon interjected with, “I’m afraid I don’t understand what all of this is about.”

“My lord, it all began when one of Belegur’s servants stole the Scrolls of Fizbin from the Galepath Library.” Zilbo gestured at Litbo to indicate his role in the affair. “The only reason we found out about it was because Dinbar thought that if we could look at the Scrolls, we might be able to find a way to cure you. It turned out that the Scrolls were missing, and that Belegur had ordered them stolen to cast a spell written within those pages, a spell to regain access to the Timeless Halls. Apparently it would enable him to do battle with the Implementors and their One Creator, making up for his earlier defeat at their hands. He was never able to finish the spell, though. Endeth killed him before he had a chance.”

“The Scrolls of Fizbin. Yes,” Zylon nodded pensively, “I’ve heard of them before. But why did Belegur feel he needed to target me?”

“I’ve been giving a lot of thought to that one,” Dinbar answered, “and I think I understand it. All of these recent events, Zarfil, the Nezegeth invasion, your illness, they all seem calculated to divert our attention from the heart of the matter. Perhaps Belegur felt that, had you been awake, you could have stopped him dead in his tracks.”

“I guess he hadn’t counted on my crack team of advisors,” Zylon grinned.

“And we’re also lucky that Belegur’s spell took so long to cast. Zilbo and Litbo were able to get to him in time.”

“Yes, that is interesting,” Zylon nodded slowly. “A spell of that length and magnitude must be a powerful one indeed.” Looking at the librarian, he added, “I’d be curious to look at the words of that spell.”

Litbo, who had long since fallen silent, awed by the presence of the legendary aged king, sat up in surprise. “Yes. I have the Scrolls of Fizbin right here, actually.” Litbo had tucked the seven rolled parchment pieces into his traveling pack, keeping them safe over the long journey back to Largoneth. Opening the pack, he handed the Scrolls to Zylon, who took them in careful silence.

As the king poured curiously over the manuscript, Hargood spoke for the first time. “Zylon, the words of Fizbin hold nothing but danger for mere mortals.”

Zylon looked up, his familiar chuckle filling the room once again. “Ah my friend, you yourself have pointed out many times that I am no mere mortal.”

A distant look filling his sunken eyes, Hargood’s reply was full of foreboding. “Do not let your pride carry you where you dare not go.”

The room froze, Litbo and the royal advisors looking on in shock as the two old friends argued. No one had ever spoken so forcefully to the king before, and yet Zylon himself was

being oddly persistent in the matter. Finally ignoring his old friend Hargood completely, the king drew himself into a complex conversation with Litbo Mumblehum, discussing the finer points of the recent translation efforts. Litbo of course, ever eager to absorb himself and others in his life's work, took kindly to the king's enthusiasm and the two soon shut the others out entirely.

Shaking his head in surprised amusement, Zilbo got up to leave. Somewhere in Largoneth, a warm bed awaited him.

Just over a week later, Zilbo, Litbo and Dinbar left the castle some time after the evening meal and headed out for a brief stroll along the base of Signal Mount. Conversation lagged as the trio walked off the vast Largoneth feast. The evening had been a celebration of sorts, a banquet ordered by Zylon and prepared by a virtual army of local chefs. In some ways, it was a welcome-back from Zylon to Zilbo and his fellow adventurers, and yet it also had overtones of celebration, a giving thanks for the long life of King Zylon.

Present at Largoneth were several dozen diplomats and officials from all the outlying areas of Quendor, and even representatives from the pair of formerly warring city-states, Galepath and Mareilon. One, an amazingly little man as thin as former mayor Spildo was large, stood to give toast. Raising his goblet from the white Largoneth table linen, he bowed slightly to the king and addressed the guests at the table: "I have been sent on behalf of the beautiful city of Galepath to extend formal apologies not only to the king of Quendor, our beloved Zylon the Infinitely Wise, but also to our brothers in Mareilon, whom we have wronged. A toast to eternal peace in our lands and lasting life to our guide and protector, Lord Zylon."

The lean ambassador from Galepath remained standing for a few moments, beaming enthusiastically and accepting the whole-hearted applause of the assembled crowd. When at last he returned to his chair, Zylon spoke in response. Remaining seated, he leaned around the assorted overflowing platters of food and tall candlesticks and said, "Your words do me a great kindness, my friend, much more than I deserve. We must learn after all that each man has his day, and that day soon passes."

The king grew silent. Each of the assembled crowd, waiting for more, looked at each other uncomfortably. Normally, the king spoke in words of optimism and joy, and this last comment had been quite unexpected.

Later that night, as the three walked over the nearby slopes in search of brisk night air, Zilbo remembered the remark and turned to Dinbar. "What do you think of the way Zylon has been acting lately?"

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, doesn't he seem a little... well, distracted? Preoccupied?"

"Zilbo, keep in mind that he IS, after all, the king," Dinbar replied with a chuckle.

"Maybe, but I still don't think he's ever seemed like this before. After all, he's been king since long before you or I were born."

Litbo joined the conversation, replying with, "Maybe it's this whole civil war thing. I can imagine that having people openly challenge his authority like that must have shaken him considerably."

"And I don't suppose that having Belegur try to poison him helped matters much," Zilbo agreed.

The three continued on in silence, strolling over the slopes. The path up from Largoneth was a long, gradual one, perfect for a little late night walk. Sun-warmed summer air still filled the late evening sky, giving comfort to the well-fed hikers. The peculiar rock formations scattered across

Signal Mount grabbed the light of the full moon and threw it into the coastal valley below, clearly illuminating the impressive, soaring castle and the nearby stretch of beach. Even the water of the Great Sea beyond seemed to dance excitedly in the beautifully pure light, filling the air with a compelling tingle.

Farther up the hill the three walked, coming across a wonderful clearing where they stopped to rest, enjoying the scenery. The castle lay below them, four lofty towers forming Largoneth's sharply defined angles. Somewhere there, in the southwestern keep, were the royal chambers. Zylon had no doubt long departed from the festivities, his needs now being seen to by a new royal servant. Zilbo thought for a moment and fancied he could see the king within those walls, behind the curtains that blocked the windows within the royal apartments.

At that moment, something shimmered in the foundation of the keep, a visible glow that grabbed Zilbo's attention. There was a noticeable pause, followed by a hum audible even to the onlookers on the Mount. Suddenly, a blue beam of light snapped up into the night sky, a pillar of magic stemming from somewhere in the southwestern tower and soaring up to the distant stars.

"Look!" Zilbo cried out in surprise, pointing to Largoneth unnecessarily. The others had already seen the sight, and Litbo quickly came to his own conclusions.

"He's casting the spell to the Timeless Halls."

"I knew there was a reason he was so interested in those Scrolls," Dinbar commented wryly.

"But why?" Zilbo exclaimed. "Why?"

"Zilbo, remember his words. Each man's day soon passes into night."

Zilbo glanced at the royal magician and back to the blue tunnel pulsing in the sky, pausing slightly before muttering, "We've got to stop him."

Without waiting for an answer from the others, he broke into a run, heading back down the slope. Looking at each other, the remaining pair shrugged and ran after him. Catching up with Zilbo, the three continued down the mountain at a breakneck pace. Heading around the last bend to Largoneth, they eyed the tower apprehensively. Minutes had past since the tunnel first appeared in the sky, with no visible change.

A thousand thoughts began to fly through Zilbo's head. What does Zylon think he's doing? And why? Is he just testing the spell out of curiosity, or does he actually plan to step into the tunnel? Frustrated, Zilbo realized that if the spell failed and Zylon died, all their struggles would have been for naught. Pushing himself to greater speeds, Zilbo ran unhindered past the guards at the castle gate. Taking the sharp southerly bend into the tower, he began climbing the stairs two at a time, the others close behind.

Finally, nearly half an hour after his abrupt departure from the mount, he stormed passed the anteroom and into the royal quarters beyond. As Dinbar and Litbo crowded in the doorway behind him, images bombarded their eyes, telling a magnificent tale. On the far side of the wall, the windows had been closed and covered, the same curtains that had caught Zilbo's eye so effectively keeping any light from reaching the outside.

The center of the room seemed to contain a countless myriad of fascinating details, each object bearing a striking parallel to another object, somewhere in Belegur's lost cavern. On the bedside table lay the Scrolls of Fizbin, the seal broken on one parchment in particular, the scroll left open to the text of a powerful spell. Crowding the Scrolls and nearly covering the table rested several other manuscripts and open books, all unfamiliar to the observers. Near the table, underneath the window sill, a strong wooden chest had been opened, its contents emptied. A silver key sat alone on the cold stone floor, a few feet from the chest. Perhaps the mysterious

books had been taken out of that chest earlier in the day, dusted off and opened for the first time in many years.

They were diaries, the collected writings of a life spanning four centuries. On the table, a stack of such diaries was topped off with one lying open, the ink from a feathered pen barely dry. Near that diary, a single scrap of parchment held a few other words, visible even from the doorway.

Candles filled the room, perhaps a dozen in a circle around the bed, casting a flickering and eerie light across the walls, making twisted and ghoulish shadows. On the bed itself lay Zylon the Aged, motionless, his back resting comfortably on the soft blankets. His eyes were closed and his arms rested easily at his side, but from his forehead sprang the beginnings of the magical blue tunnel that now pulsed out from Largoneth Castle.

“Zylon?” Zilbo called out, taking a few hesitant steps into the room.

The king’s body shimmered at the words, but still remained motionless. As the three looked on in amazement, a subtle image, a ghost, rose from Zylon and hovered above his body. The shaky body of light mirrored the real king in every way, down to identical clothing and the smallest insignificant facial features. Zylon’s life force lifted from the bed, drawing closer to the ceiling and the blossoming blue tunnel. Suddenly coming alive, the hazy royal ghost sat up abruptly, floating quietly in the air. A moment passed as the ghost-image of Zylon looked around the room in fond remembrance.

Finally, the shifting image of light turned its head and looked directly at Zilbo and the others, flashing a familiar hearty grin. Floating ever upwards, the ghost-Zylon cocked its head in casual farewell and moved into the stream of blue light. At the point of contact, Zylon’s image stretched and elongated, pulled irresistibly into the vacuum of the gateway to another place.

Soon, the image was gone, leaving only Zylon’s motionless body. As the trio pulled closer to the bedside of their king, the flickering blue tunnel cracked and disappeared. It’s purpose had been served.

Dinbar leaned over the bed, examining Zylon’s empty and abandoned body. His breath, his heartbeat, stopped, his eyes closed forever. The royal magician turned to Zilbo, silently confirming what the three already knew. Zylon had died.

Averting his glance, a feeling of failure swept over Zilbo.

If he had paid more attention to Zylon and his growing obsession with the Scrolls, if he had asked him what was wrong, perhaps he could have persuaded him, begged him to chose another course of action. But no, he told himself. Zylon is... was a stubborn man. Nothing could ever change his mind.

Drawing himself together, the royal advisor moved toward the far wall, pulling back the curtains and throwing open the window. A new light from the moon filled the darkening room, bringing a quiet confidence to the three who stood watch over Zylon the Aged.

So he rests at last, Zilbo thought, looking with admiration at the tired old body. And his head began to fill with new thoughts, of the future, of a Quendor without Zylon. What a wonderful new land it could be, he realized with a smile.

Dinbar rested his hand silently on his shoulder, hesitant to interrupt Zilbo’s thoughts. When at last the royal advisor shook himself from his contemplation, he looked up at Dinbar and his outstretched hand. In it lay a single scrap of parchment, taken from Zylon’s bedside table.

Zilbo reached out and took the parchment, looking it over. It was a will of sorts, a final settling of the succession. In the shining Largoneth moonlight, the bold strokes of handwriting were clear. “At last I am gone from this world, the weight of countless years lifted. Thank you

for that. And as for that one last order of unfinished business, all hail King Zilbo the First, Lord and Protector of Quendor.”

Epilogue

Three months later, Litbo Mumblehum resigned his post at the Galepath University to accept at Zilbo's request the position of royal advisor of Quendor. Before moving to Largoneth, the librarian passed on his estimable store of knowledge to an up-and-coming scholar of the mystic arts known to history as Bizboz of Galepath.

During the summer of 407 AE, in an ironic exchange of roles, the former royal advisor Dinbar left the royal court of Zilbo the First to return to Galepath, his childhood home, to pursue, among other projects, the successful efforts to translate the Scrolls of Fizbin. An ever-deepening respect for Bizboz would lead to an intense collaboration producing works that are still hailed by historians today as the ultimate advances in the study of the magical arts.

Gladius Fzort would remain a royal advisor at Largoneth, inadvertently becoming the father of one of Quendor's most famous political families. When Zilbo the Second failed to produce a male heir, Gladius' grandson Harmonious would rise to the throne of Quendor in 451 AE, followed in turn by Harmonious' own grandson some thirty years later.

Zilbo of course became king. Thanks to a certain amount of instinct, good luck, and his own personal librarian, Zilbo was able to continue the work of the departed king Zylon, ensuring the long life of the Entharion dynasty and of Quendor itself.

Hargood of Mareilon passed away mere days after Zilbo's coronation. Some say he went to the land beyond the skies, where he walks still with Zylon the Aged.