

KLASSEN

For the first Creator.

by Rev. Kenneth Molyneux

Chapter I

Chop! Chop! A mighty axe sliced down again upon a helpless log. The axe, raised towards the azure heavens above, came to a stop as the blade glinted cheerily in the bright sunlight. Then a slight whistling sound ensued as the blade hurtled through the air and into the defenseless log. The large brown log split in two and would provide great warmth when fire consumed it.

Although it was a brisk, chilly day in the beginning of spring, sweat from the day's efforts massed upon Klassen's forehead. This pool was thrust away by the powerful hand of Klassen. This woodchopper was an effervescent, salubrious man of twenty seasons who wore a crown of sandy blonde hair and whose life pulsed with vigor in dark blue orbs of sight. He had a hard, solid frame and it was evident that the hard work he practiced sculpted a muscular physique. He wore a simple but sturdy brown tunic with matching pants, befitting the woodsman that he was.

Taking a brief repose by placing a black-booted foot upon his woodcutting stump of oak, Klassen scratched his short, golden beard as he gazed about the surrounding wilderness. The joyous blossoming of life was overtaking the pleasant expanse and the buds on the trees ordained a ripeness of fertility that was sure to follow. Some trees were still bare and skeletal but they too would have the breath of flowering life imparted upon them.

A robust breeze swirled about and brought the refreshing smells of nature to Klassen's nostrils. Breathing vigorously of this sweet, delectable treat, he was greeted by the charming sounds of the squirrels gnawing away at nuts, birds greeting one another, and a far-off cry of what sounded like a prowling wolf. The soothing sounds of nature were a symphony of solace to him that calmed his aching, passionate urges to destroy that which threatened the livelihood of his people.

The era in which Klassen lived was a dank, dark time where the icy blasts of dishonor and mental pollution had spread across the land. Plagues of corruption had poisoned the citizens; they allowed wave after wave of vile beasts to inhabit the civilized lands, horribly tainting the world of Teramon. The exact source of this malignancy, Klassen could not determine, but it certainly manifested itself in myriad ways.

There were many diseases to be cured in the enervated land, but Klassen's homeland of Urtgart was mainly crumbling under the weight of despicable creatures that were passed off as "equals." At first this silly notion was rejected wholesale by the upstanding Nobilis race, which Klassen was a member of, but the myth became more and more solidified until many took it as an adamant, absolute truth. Klassen, however, was not deluded.

Although Klassen and his clan lived a ways from the town, the mere presence of the creatures was irritating. The mass immigration of these unwanted beings began when he was but a mere lad and at first it wasn't so bad. He would occasionally play with several ogres that, while hideously ugly and immensely fatuous, were certainly fit. As the numbers of foreigners swelled, though, the differences between the Nobilis people and ogres became more distinct and violence on the part of ogres was common.

Violence and criminality escalated exponentially as more ogres swarmed to the once beautiful hamlet of Urtgart. Filth and squalor accompanied not only the ogres, but also the other foreigners as well—the perfidious orcs, the thieving hobgoblins, and the wide-faced imps—to name the most prominent. So many of these undesirables had entered the town that now it was difficult to safely perambulate through the streets—lest foul immigrant hoodlums assault and perhaps even slaughter anyone who dared frequent the hamlet without protection.

Upon seeing such a disastrous policy of migration, it would seem logical to reverse the tide of woe that had befallen Urtgart. This was not to be, however, as the prevailing force throughout the four corners of Teramon—the Universal Church—would not allow it as they promoted accepting everyone, no matter how sickly, vile, or corrupt. This policy of buffoonery tolerated the lowly elements instead of systematically eradicating the contaminating weeds that had overrun the once-

prosperous garden. As a result, the proud and superior Nobilismen were being drowned in a raging flood of inferiority.

The Universal Church had powerful sway across the realm and Klassen loathed its dishonorable, weak, and suicidal doctrine. Klassen valued honor and strength as prime virtues and was also disgusted by the superstitions propagated by the church. Glancing around it was clear to him that none of nature's eternal laws had ever been broken. The myths of spirits, ghosts, gods, and devils simply cluttered the brains of his valued kinsmen.

This Universal Church had so many poisonous ideals that it was like a colossal trash heap in Klassen's mind that continually proliferated itself. One dogmatic belief that came to his mind was how these scrofulous villains promoted loving every creature, but then proceeded to torture, burn, and decapitate those who disagreed with anything the priests might utter. To top it all off, this cult of dishonor scared its adherents stupid by creating a demonic vision of a diabolical torture chamber of blazing fire that was purported to be the destination of any who didn't toe the line of the church's ideology. It mattered little that no such place had ever been reported to exist.

As a blue jay streaked across the sky creating a colorful blur, Klassen was reminded of the blue cloak his tutor had worn. Aristotle was his name and brilliantly perspicacious was he. He formed Klassen into the man he was and was sorely missed. It had been some years ago before this great man had disappeared. What exactly had become of him, Klassen knew not but he hoped he was simply on a journey somewhere. Death was a very likely possibility for Aristotle but Klassen hoped for the best and wished to resume his friendship with his mentor.

The disappearance of this splendid friend was quite an emotional experience for Klassen, especially since the values Aristotle held were the same as his own. Although Klassen's father had been there to raise him, it was Aristotle who taught him to be virtuous and honorable. So the blustery winter some two years ago had been especially brutal, as Aristotle had gone off on his usual hike—even though it was snowing—and had never come back. Day after day had gone by in bleak melancholy, yet Aristotle didn't return. The man was old, but tough, and it was hoped that someday, any day, he would return. The lugubrious winter dragged on but no sign of the scholar had presented itself. It was a difficult time for Klassen but it had hardened him and he devoted himself to living a supremely virtuous life in memory of his dear friend. This wicked time had been the chasm of Klassen's life, his nadir, but he felt confident that due to this extreme low, a magnificent zenith would follow.

This rising wave of optimism attracted to Klassen a pleasant squirrel who eagerly darting amid the grass, looking for a tasty nut to satiate its hunger. Remembrances of the good times that Klassen had with his mentor flooded his mind in a relaxing wave of nebulous nostalgia. The squirrel, the birds, the trees—nature itself—was a favorite subject of Aristotle, which he passed on to his student.

Although the Universal Church frowned upon the art of literacy to all but the priests, Klassen was taught to read at a tender age. His family knew how as well, but it wasn't until Aristotle came about that Klassen really learned. The precocious child quickly absorbed the sciences. The trips to the forest to observe nature in all her splendid beauty were unforgettable and brought a swift smile to the visage of Klassen.

Glancing down at his worn and fragile book, Klassen knew his preferred field lay in heroism and warfare. It mattered not at all whether the writing was fact or fiction so long as the virtues of honor, chivalry, and heroism were depicted in magnificent grandeur. The book that was grasped by the woodsman was his favorite collection of stories—"Adventures in Heroism." He must have read the tales a hundred times, but they always retained their magnetic pull over Klassen and once again he began to read from the pages that seemed as though they might disintegrate in a soft breeze.

Hurled mightily, Klassen once again entered his own realm as he read the inscribed words of dauntless valor. He assumed the lead role in the stories, of course, and felt the tingling vitality of power whenever a battle broke out or a doughty deed of honor was performed. The current narrative that he was engaged in was coming to a climax as the fiery maelstrom of justice—a

knight—was prepared to deal holy death unto a foul reprobate when Klassen was violently seized from his sublime revelry.

The shrieking scream of what sounded like a banshee reverberated throughout the forest in its high-pitched annoyance. The second screech was discernible and uttered, “Supper!” This dread voice was very familiar to Klassen; it was his mother. Putting his book in his pocket, he turned away from his natural paradise to see his family’s cabin that seemed to ooze with refuse despite being in immaculate condition.

Grabbing the chopped firewood and placing his sturdy axe atop the woodpile in his arms, Klassen set out towards his home. The walk itself was quite a ways, as he liked to commune with nature and be far away from his family who unfortunately had been polluted by the vitiated policies that dominated the land. As such, Klassen felt that every step he took away from his natural haven brought an icy chill. However, this freezing touch of corruption was unable to phase the titanic armor that Klassen had forged through years of tough tribulation. While the world of darkness wasn’t wanted, it had tempered Klassen into the virtuous blade that he was.

Traveling down the trail he himself had created, Klassen caught a glance of his older brother, Grausen, engaged in his favorite pastime—torture. This sibling was taller and leaner than Klassen but there was no doubt the two were brothers. The differences between the two were far greater, though, as Grausen had especially been plunged into the nether region of deleterious destitution.

Laughing hysterically, Grausen was bashing the skull of a long-since-dead dog with a solid wooden club. The brains and vital organs of the creature were strewn about in a pool of gore. Whack! Whack! went the club as blow after blow assaulted the corpse. At one thump, an eye of the canine shot away from the beast and a tittering eruption burst forth from Grausen. Nimbly leaping over the remains, he squashed the eyeball in an explosion of carnage as he said, “Suffer! Suffer! Hehehe.” These words oozed revoltingly from his maniacal lips.

Grausen glanced in Klassen’s direction and with a glint of madness twinkling in his eyes, inquired, “Wanna bash the mutt, brother?” Although the cauldron of rage was stirred by his brother’s meaningless violence, Klassen contained himself as he proceeded along the trail in disgust. His brother, on the other hand, resumed his assault.

Initially Klassen had attacked his brother for such actions but this was soon halted as Grausen had the favor of their father. Since he lived in his father’s domain, he ceased pummeling his only sibling after the first few beatings. The idea of killing game wasn’t repulsive to Klassen as he enjoyed the sport of hunting, but he did not see the point in mauling an already devastated beast; it seemed cruel and wasteful to him.

As Klassen neared his home, the family cabin seemed to gleam in majesty as pride swelled up within him at the sheer sight of it. It was far larger than the normal house of the age and had been constructed under the wise guidance of Aristotle. He had helped to design and build it, which stirred him to productive happiness whenever he thought of it. The family that lived in it was far from ideal, but the work of art that it was stood tall for all to gaze upon.

The solid oaken structure loomed impressively above the ground a full two stories, culminating in a pyramid summit. The current home was far better than the old one, which had been destroyed for the wood. The old cabin had encompassed only one room while the almost castle-like present one had two living rooms on the first floor and three bedrooms upstairs. At the time of its construction, Klassen had shared his room with Aristotle but now he alone occupied the room.

Just as Klassen was about to reach the cabin, the eerie guffawing of his brother swiftly wafted along as his brother scudded by, into the cabin. The door crashed shut and Grausen’s chortling abruptly ceased as briskly as it had begun. Klassen, used to such behavior, paid little mind to it as he placed his small mountain of wood against the side of the cabin. Grabbing his trusty axe, he pushed the door open and entered his spacious abode.

Stepping into the area where the family dined, Klassen was confronted by the irritating sea of smoke that his father emanated from his favorite pipe. As usual, Klassen squinted under the

barrage of this attack before placing his axe by the door so that it wouldn't get wet from rain. Although it took slightly longer than normal, his father uttered the typical exhortation.

“What takes you so long boy? Grausen always gets here in time but you never do. Seat yourself for supper, now!” Klassen's father, Ubelig, exclaimed his words with force and a sternness that could make a horde of hideous ogres tremble.

Despite being extremely confident in his abilities to crush his father, Klassen acquiesced and seated himself. He disagreed with his father on many topics but felt his father ruled supreme in the home, as wickedly as he might reign. Thus, he usually obeyed his father though he almost never agreed with him.

The chairs and table which the family sat at was designed and constructed by Klassen although little thanks did he get. It was a sturdy design that he had learned from Aristotle. Thanks to this learning Klassen he had even added an artistic flavor by decorating the legs with playful swirls. Never did the furniture need repairs in their history despite the brutal pounding Ubelig and Grausen exerted upon the table in fits of drunken stupor.

Klassen joined Ubelig and Grausen at the table, while his mother Schlimma was preparing dinner by the fire. The resemblance between the men situated at the table was striking with the main difference between the father and his sons being age: Ubelig had slight wrinkles while his sons did not. All the men wore similar tunics of brown, which seemed to further voice their family relationship. The cerulean eyes that the trio possessed all burned with fierce intensity, although the primary driving force in each was quite different.

The pleasant aroma of cooked meat dancifully wafted throughout the room and Klassen's mother, Schlimma, carried a large plate of deer to the table. Schlimma was a fairly lean woman with brunette hair and large brown eyes. It was evident in her children that the slightly darker shade of hair and eyes the sons of Ubelig had, were from her darker complexion. She wore a black dress that stood out among the brown tunic-wearing family members.

When Schlimma seated herself, Ubelig commenced the recital of the prayer condoned by the Universal Church. Klassen was the only person in the family that was not a member of this church and disdained the prayer, which offered thanks to an unknown, unseen god. As such, he was able to completely block the moronic ramblings which his father vocalized. The perfidious prayer had entered his brain when he was younger but he had since erected a monumental fortress to protect himself from the mendacious forces of venality.

The supplication to the heinous god of the Universal Church over, the family eagerly plunged into the food like starving hyenas. Of course Ubelig, being ruler of the domain, got first dibs on the tastiest portions of the meal while Klassen was relegated to last, due to his rejection of odious ideals of dishonor. Klassen never went hungry, though, as he was able to supplement his diet with fruits or nuts that he found while exploring the forest. He also noticed that this addition to his food regimen was more receptively received by his body as evidenced by his infrequent indigestion problems. On the other hand, the rest of the family frequently complained bitterly of this woe of the stomach.

With a hacking cough Grausen exclaimed without his usual wicked laugh, “Mother, this is horrible! It's burnt to the extreme!” This proclamation was answered by a quick backhanded slap by the cook, Schlimma. She catapulted a gaze of doom at him; and Grausen, after glancing at his father who held a similar but more imposing glare, uttered meekly, “Sorry.”

At this harsh display of discipline, Ubelig rumbled heartily as he laughed at his son's insolence and swift punishment. After his laughter flittered away, he grew stern and announced to his wife, “My boy is right though. This meat *is* horrible and it *is* burnt. It isn't his place to say it though; it's mine. So I want some different food. Now! Go to it!”

With a simple “Ok dear,” Schlimma scurried off into the other room to scavenge for some food. Klassen, unbeknownst to his father, had found quite a few tasty nuts while he had been in the forest that day. They lay nestled snugly in his pocket but Klassen, of course, made no

announcement of his find. He doubted whether his family even knew that he discovered such delightful treasures during his treks among Mother Nature's wooden soldiers.

Ubelig made another attempt at eating the good-smelling but foul-tasting meat before spitting it out in disgust. He barked at Klassen, "Make sure you get some good food at the market tomorrow. This meat has been destroyed!"

The market. The mere word was like a heavy club bashing Klassen on his temple. He abhorred the marketplace with all his might, as it was a horrendous stench-pot of filth. This filth, of course, was the lowly vermin that had been flung amidst the proud Nobilis people. It was so overrun that Klassen's kinsman were a rare site indeed. As a direct result, the market had degraded from a wholesome area for children and families, to a fetid festival of criminality.

Klassen nodded to his father as he recalled his latest hunting escapade into the forest. The game he slaughtered was the main source of trade for the market and the latest catch was a good one. He had followed a group of deer to a watering hole where he had waited for a good shot with his bow and arrow. Once he had the largest of his prey lined up, he fired off a shot that sliced through the helpless creature's heart, killing it instantly.

The herd of deer surprisingly bolted as Klassen had hastily notched another arrow, when, to his surprise, a massive deer had charged straight at him. Swiftly and adroitly, he dropped his projectile weapon while arming himself with his mighty axe. All in one motion of pure beauty, he sidestepped the attacker while slashing the throat of the beast in an artistic arch. The blood had spurted and the deer had collapsed, dead.

A rush of glee from battle overcame Klassen as he recalled this fresh remembrance but his father's icy tone interrupted him. "Hurry up woman!" he aggressively ordered. His wife Schlimma hastily returned to the dining table with an old-looking hunk of bread, which she placed on his plate.

After tearing into the bread and eating a small portion, Ubelig vituperated, "This is better, but not by much. Anyway, I have some good news, so listen up!"

Oh no, Klassen thought. Whenever his father had good news, it wasn't usually so good, at least in Klassen's eyes. He hoped to be wrong this time, but he didn't think he would be.

Ubelig spoke proudly, "As you all know, I have been inquiring into fields of advancement for our family. We all believe in the lofty principles of the Universal Church," Ubelig darted a glance at Klassen before continuing, "and we need to best serve the people of Teramon by enriching ourselves." At this statement Klassen's father emitted a light chuckle that was echoed by Schlimma and Grausen.

The maelstrom of indignant fury began to fiercely rage in Klassen's mind as the hypocritical views just presented were spoken with a straight face. He hoped his father would simply cease talking before Klassen was inflamed more, but this was not to be.

"We all know that it is important to act like we really want to help the people, but we know it is ourselves that we should help," Ubelig said. He continued with a smile, "Our best interest is the most important thing in the world. Since this is so, I have been speaking with some gentleman who have entrusted me with a very lucrative endeavor. I hope that my family can profit as well."

At this symbol of nepotism, the smiles of Schlimma and Grausen were wide indeed as they pledged their support while yearning to know the exact nature of the enterprise. Klassen remained silent and outwardly stolid except for his roaring eyes, which made the swirling tempest raging inside him plainly evident.

Ubelig noticed the enraged disposition of Klassen but continued nonetheless, "Before I describe the act itself, I would like to assure my boy Klassen," at this he turned his surly gaze upon Klassen, "that we will be taking full advantage of the so-called 'beasts'....in addition to our own so-called 'honorable' Nobilis people."

This affronting attack upon Klassen's ideals was well received by all but Klassen, and thunderous laughter exploded about him. The cruel, acidulous grins added to the insult and

infuriated him even more. The thumping of his heart intensified while the fiery fervor of righteous resentment seized him. A normal being would have fell victim to the paralyzing power of his eyes but his family merely continued to laugh as they had become accustomed to his boiling anger. It had been a long time indeed that he had actually succumbed to his brutal passion so the family merely mocked him further.

“The scam we shall undertake is known as a pyramid scam. Essentially this is a profitable venture where the money comes from the bottom and flows to us! If we complete this successfully, more doors will open for us and thus more gold!” After this outburst, the family, save for Klassen, cheered in delight at their future fortune.

Ubelig enjoyed the vitiated celebration but a thought dawned on him and he spoke, “Oh, we must of course concentrate our efforts on our Nobilis race as we tend to be better off than the other races.”

Schlimma and Grausen saw nods of the head at this astute observation. Klassen, however, leapt to his feet and opened the floodgates of passionate hatred by vociferating loudly, “NO! That is not honorable! What is life without honor!?”

The rest of the family was quite taken aback by this powerful outburst of remonstrance and a resultant pause of silence filled the room in the wake of Klassen’s truculent eruption. Like a pack of cowering hyenas in the face of a snarling lion, the family remained silent and shocked. This feeling of inferiority didn’t last long in Ubelig, though, who became enraged by what he saw as his son’s insolence.

The father bellowed mightily himself and it was clear where the source of passion came from in Klassen. “How dare you raise your voice at me!? Be gone from my sight you foul wretch! Do not forget to go to the market tomorrow and get back quickly! You have many chores to do!”

Like a fierce tyrannosaurus Rex, Klassen snarled in utter contempt for his father. Hastily grabbing the burnt deer, he flung the meat and plate against the wall in disgust. Glaring at his father with a vision of jubilant destruction, Klassen marched out of the room and out of the cabin. With a smashing slam, the door closed behind him.

Chapter II

A cool, refreshing breeze of tranquility swept over Klassen as he rushed onward in his trek. The clouds above partially barricaded the splendid sun from shining its warmth, but the day was fairly warm and pleasant. The scenery flew by him with speed and grace as he freely imbibed of the animated motion of nature's painting.

The powerful brown steed that transported Klassen on his journey was a fine beast that he had affectionately named "Braun." The family had had the horse for many years but it was still strong and healthy. As a result, it could easily handle its rider and the two large deer that were tautly tied onto the stallion, near its rump.

As the dancing air tickled his face, Klassen recalled the first time his horse Braun had been outfitted with game and the chaos it had caused. The steed had bucked the meat off and ran wild in delirious fear. It had looked like a circus act as Klassen had chased the animal around and around their cabin. This spectacle brought a smirk to his face as he remembered it had taken a few more tries before Braun had accustomed himself to the feel and smell.

Klassen always felt a rush of joy when he galloped away from his home, but this jubilation never lasted long as he inevitably would encounter a far more sordid atmosphere at the destination he would arrive at. Such was the case today as well. The countryside he was traversing seemed to become degenerated as he traveled further along and a rising stench of revolting refuse was received with disdain by Klassen's healthy nostrils. As he reached the summit of a small grassy knoll, he saw it.

Descending the hillock, Klassen gazed at the marketplace that stood before him. From a distance it didn't look very spoiled or abhorrent as a small outcropping of buildings and people streaming about were seen. In fact, the region looked the same from afar as when he was a child and only Nobilismen lived in the area. Upon entering the outskirts of the town, however, one became instantly aware of the degrading degeneration that had swarmed the area.

The homes were crumbling and falling apart while being occupied by a plethora of ghastly beasts. Trash was flung about carelessly while the cobblestone street, which Klassen labored down, was in a miserable state of disrepair. The most powerful calamity that struck one, though, was the nauseating stench that assaulted the olfactory sense and relegated those not conditioned to it to an unpleasant case of eruptive vomiting. Klassen was conditioned, and thus avoided this situation.

As Klassen cantered along, a riotous thunder of disharmonious uproar apprehended his attention. The origin of the disruption came from a particularly deteriorated shack that, by the look of it, housed a whole host of obnoxious ogres. His attention thus alerted, Klassen investigated the matter, but at a safe distance.

The grisly appearance of ogres never ceased to appall Klassen; their large, dark frames of leathery skin and brutish mien were a grotesque contrast to the fair-skinned Nobilismen. Just as they looked like brutes, they thought as such as well. They were slow, dull-witted, and impulsive—which, when combined, led to a prolificacy of criminality. This crime was difficult to stop at times due to the ogre's immense size, thick skull (which made them more resistant to clubbing), and aggressive behavior. As it was, their protruding jaw, receded forehead, and thick eyebrows came to be recognized as the face of violent crime.

This propensity for lawlessness manifested itself right before Klassen's field of vision. Two of the offensive creatures were arguing boisterously over what appeared to be a female of their species. A couple unique traits of these creatures were immediately documented: the first was that despite being only a short distance away and the ogres themselves shouting clamorously, the speech was garbled and unintelligible; and the second was that the beasts exuded a particularly sickening stench. Klassen himself wondered if they even understood themselves and contemplated the source of such a smell that no other creature on earth emanated.

Despite this nature of the ogre, Klassen was sincerely amused when the scene between the two males erupted in violence and fisticuffs broke out. Even though he wasn't involved in the miniature battle, Klassen felt the surge of wondrous warfare rush through his veins as he watched the theatrical performance begin.

It had begun when a female ogre had been thrown to the ground by one male; the other male had attacked. The two combatants were locked together as they wrestled about for position. Although it wasn't perfectly clear, it appeared to Klassen as though savage teeth had bitten one ogre as it emitted a loud howl of pain before flinging its adversary away from him. Sure enough, blood dripped from its arm and in a rage of fury, the ogre dove at the other and both tumbled to the ground in a confused entanglement of limbs.

Most organisms, be they Nobilismen or ogre, are psychologically attracted to a fight; this one was no exception. A crowd of ogres had surrounded the two combatants and when they descended to the ground, the rowdy, cheering crowd had flung them back to their feet. The two snorted their anger at each other as they circled around each other, flailing wildly in the hopes of a lucky knockout blow.

As each ogre articulated its anger in outbursts that resembled belches, the crowd around them was growing larger and larger as Klassen realized he was in a strictly ogre district of town. These ogres came a little too close to Klassen atop his magnificent mount and he blasted a loathing gaze down upon them. The swell of the miserable throng was making it difficult to see the brawl adequately, but he persevered as the sport interested him.

Cheered on by the discordant chants of the rabble, the darker of the two ogres who had been bitten, lunged fiercely at the other with a slew of heavy blows. The sudden swiftness arrested the lighter skinned ogre with paralysis and it fell in a crashing pile upon the grass. Seizing this propitious situation, the aggressor pounced on the downed ogre and proceeded to pummel it with a furious deluge of powerful punches. Like a trickling stream the blood began to flow and threatened to spawn into a raging river when a shrill shriek ceased the assault.

Although it wasn't absolutely clear from Klassen's vantage point, it seemed to him as though the very female—if that was indeed what it was—the ogres were clashing over was being molested by what appeared to be one of the ogre's own heavily intoxicated brothers. Joining together to combat this mutual enemy, the two ogres who had been crushing each other joined forces and screamed their denunciation at the theft of their female. Coming to their feet, they lunged into the innards of the mob, which had by now grown to around forty ogres.

Klassen knew not the specifics of the struggle but soon after the recently befriended ogres had sprung into the crowd, a net of chaos had descended upon the area. Once the spark had been produced, a raging inferno had broken out and a swirling, disorganized series of fights had engulfed the primitive ogres. A confused, garbled mass of limbs pounded anyone nearby, with several clobbered ogres receiving a barrage of stomps from their peers.

Klassen's steed neighed in agitation at the raucous display of violence but Klassen enjoyed watching his enemies bloodily pulverize each other. He felt safe where he was and rubbed his hands in pure satisfaction. So completely absorbed in the poetic beauty of illustrious rioting before him was he, that he almost didn't hear the footfalls behind him.

Expediently wheeling about, Klassen got sight—and smell—of a besotted ogre about to chomp down upon Klassen's deer. With tremendous fervor, Klassen clenched his fist and whirled a backhand blow that solidly connected with the criminal ogre's jaw. The smashing blow sent two of the buck-toothed ogre's teeth flying while the ogre was barely able to stop from plummeting to the ground.

Combined inebriation, stupidity, and shock, swept over the ogre as it struggled to maintain its balance. It watched in mesmerization as the horse before it danced to and then fro. A stupefying smile came to its face at the strange spectacle and it uttered a small chuckle when the steed stood on its forelegs. Uncomprehendingly, it stared on in delight as the horse's hind legs rushed skyward

and then battered into its chest with explosive force. The mighty blow crushed the life out of the ogre as it fell lifeless to the ground.

Bringing about his steed to marvel at his spectacular handiwork, Klassen enjoyed his bulging smile while reveling in the warmth of his first ogre slaughter. The motionless ogre had a severe indentation in his chest cavity and Klassen spun his stallion about in circles at this sheer sight of joy. Stopping his artful exposition of skill, he stroked his companion amicably in thanks. Klassen snapped out of his delightful revelry, however, when a rushing roar greeted his ears.

Glancing out at the tumultuous mob that was now rapidly approaching him, he felt the boiling grandiosity of war snatch his soul as he saw the bitter enmity of his own eyes mirrored back at him in the hostile crowd. Klassen assumed they saw him crushing their comrade and now wanted his own blood. Oh how he yearned to sever the life from the bodies of his enemies! Prudence, however, overcame Klassen's violent impulse as he realized the folly of warring in the face of such odds. He would have his fun though.

Just as the mob threatened to consume him, Klassen reigned in on his horse, sending the forelegs of his companion sailing into the air. These powerful legs greeted the first ogre with a terrible whack across his skull that made the other ghastly ogres hesitant to attack. The rising laughter that Klassen emitted infuriated the ignominious aberrations; but before they could close in and swarm him, Klassen galloped a short distance away before stopping and turning back to his pursuers, taunting them. This he did several more times before finally venturing away, into the center of the town.

Amid his jocular explosions of joviality, Klassen silently thanked his mentor Aristotle for the superb riding lessons he had given. Braun was a great and nimble steed who had made possible Klassen's joyous mood. In response to this it seemed that Braun laughed as well, as the horse whinnied in a jocund fashion. This rumbling train of merriment carried onwards towards the market in great glee.

Meanwhile, the foul, mephitic ogre mob had been unable to keep pace with Klassen and huddled together for some time, catching their breaths. Agitation at losing their prey inflamed the already omnipresent feeling of animosity within the ragtag rabble. Consequently, one blow became two and then a full scale donnybrook engulfed the area. The uproar escalated quickly until most, if not all, of the inhabitants of the particular district were up in arms. In addition to the fighting, pillaging and mass destruction broke out as the wooden cabins—built by the Universal Church—were assaulted and looted. Fires burst out and general chaos descended down upon the land but Klassen saw none of it as he sped onward.

As Klassen loped along atop his mighty mount, his elevated mood gradually descended as he rode past an increasing amount of his hated adversaries. The first gathering of beasts he sped past was a small community of mischievous, grayish-skinned hobgoblins. They were known for laziness, thievery, and drunkenness. True to form, small bands of them were drinking wildly while making a racket.

Next came a band of yellow-skinned, wide-faces creatures known as imps. These numerous beasts weren't anywhere near as bad as ogres or hobgoblins, but the treacherous imps did their fair amount of destruction upon the once splendid town of Urtgart. This imp community was the last obstacle to the center of town and his destination—the marketplace.

The marketplace itself rushed forward its cold greeting of bustling activity. Mainly beasts, but some Nobilismen, swarmed about the plethora of traders looking to sell or trade their wares. Most of the merchants had small, open-air stands that contained their goods, but a few had actual shops. The large path that separated the two rows of merchants was flooded with a jumbled assortment of excited traders. The sordid filth and raucous chattering annoyed Klassen but he persevered towards his favorite merchant among the squalor.

Klassen, being the only one mounted on a horse, parted the river of beasts that got in his way and eyed them fiercely with his hatred. When he had the opportunity to see one of his Nobilis kinsmen, he greeted them amicably with a gentle nod of his head. The shouting, haggling, and

general air of filth all about him heightened his sense of awareness as he checked for the large dagger sheathed at his side. It wasn't the best weapon to have he knew, but he liked the feel and power of it.

After several minutes of trotting down "Merchant's Trail" as it was called, the garbled mass of beasts thinned out as Klassen headed for a merchant's shop. He promptly arrived at the plain looking wooden shop and tied his horse to the post outside of it. Descending from his steed, he was greeted by a large brown dog that wagged its tail hastily at Klassen's arrival. After petting the dog, he unwrapped the two deer he had killed and, with his backpack, entered the shop that read "Bragon's" on the heavy oaken door.

With a heavy deer carcass slung over each of his shoulders, Klassen slowly rumbled through the door and nodded to the two brawny, Nobilis bodyguards that served as sentinels. Inside was a well-kept room that was in stark contrast to the degeneration outside. Large tables of various food, clothing, and general items of interests, were neatly arranged along the outer wall of the room. Several Nobilismen were sifting through the goods while the shopkeeper himself was haggling with a customer at the back of the hall.

As Klassen perambulated across the store and waited for the shopkeeper to tend to him, he recalled the first few horrific visits that he had made to the market by himself. He was but a teenager back then and had been robbed and cheated on numerous occasions. Of course it was the beasts that engaged in these wicked affairs and this was undoubtedly a learning experience that molded Klassen into the man he was today. His father didn't blame the beasts, though, as he reprimanded Klassen for "being a sucker," as he put it.

Again and again Klassen fell for the unjust, chicanery of the merchants, who were almost always green-faced orcs. He finally learnt his lesson with these tricky con artists after being hoodwinked while trading several raccoons for a deed of land that he later learned existed on a different planet. Klassen had been extremely embarrassed by this faux pas, and avoided the orcs and their gold-grabbing hooked noses that reminded him of a witch's.

It had taken a bit of searching to find Bragon's, but he was abundantly proud that he had. A Nobilis shop amid the unholy decadence was a grand oasis that cleansed and satiated Klassen's soul with refreshing nourishment. There was no doubt that his time among his folk was the acme of his trip to the market. The man who owned the store, Bragon, had indeed become his best friend and it was to him that Klassen now dealt with exclusively in trading affairs.

Seemingly in tune with his thoughts, Bragon wrapped up his transaction and greeted Klassen warmly, "Ah, Klassen! Hello, hello. Whoa, what are these two brutes you carry on your shoulders?"

Klassen smiled at the routine salutation of his friend as Bragon helped him place the deer on the empty table that separated the two men. Bragon was a good-sized fellow with long brown hair and solid, masculine facial features with a pronounced jaw, and cheekbones of iron. He generally assumed a friendly air and this time was no exception.

In response to Bragon's inquiry, Klassen retorted, "These two make a good story in themselves and I trust you will give me a good price for them, but I have far more exciting news."

Bragon's blue eyes lit up in curiosity but he stopped Klassen from telling his tale, "I am interested in your news, but do you want these two for store credit?"

Klassen nodded in assent before he went on to tell Bragon his recent encounter with the ghastly ogres they mutually despised. With the passion that fueled the blazing inferno inside him, Klassen recounted the brawl that had broken out in the ogre district. With such exuberance did he tell the tale that he felt as though he and Bragon were watching the scene as if they were actually there. Klassen gesticulated how he had crushed the ogre's skull and used his horse to deliver the fatal blow.

"To top it all off," Klassen enthusiastically stated, "I taunted the blasted beasts with my laugh as I dared them to run after me. When they did, I ran off a little ways and taunted them some more. After I had my fun, I rode away in great bliss!"

A great clapping of hands and general merriment erupted in the store as Klassen finished his story. So enraptured was he in relating his glorious joy that he hadn't noticed that a small gathering of Nobilismen were eagerly listening to his vivacious narrative. Affectionate pats on the back did Klassen feel and pleasant handshakes did he receive from all in the store. It was an illustrious feeling of monumental pride for Klassen to know that others in Teramon felt the same as he.

Although Klassen had come to the market to pick up goods, his mind wasn't really on that topic as the beaming smile of Bragon spoke, "What a story comrade! I have something to show you."

With intrigue Klassen watched as Bragon ruffled through a pouch on the ground. After several moments of eager anticipation, Klassen watched intently as Bragon withdrew a strange sort of parchment. Bragon exclaimed, "Here, look at this. It is for Nobilismen only. I *know* you will love it."

Before he even read the odd piece of parchment, Klassen was struck by the thinness and neatness of it. Although it was unknown to him at the time, it was a mechanically reproduced flier. It was called "paper" and it wasn't hand-written but produced by other, mysterious means. After receiving the paper, Klassen searchingly examined Bragon's visage before scrutinizing the paper.

The first thing that snatched Klassen's attention was the beautiful image at the top of the page. It held a detailed sword that was encased by the fiery flames of the sun in the background. Beneath it were the words "Honor Brigade." Glancing at Bragon in awe, Klassen resumed his reading at the silent request of his friend to continue.

Below the symbol and name were the words "The Ten Laws of Honor Brigade." Glancing swiftly at the paper without reading it, Klassen felt his heartbeat increase and a general air of excitement overwhelm him. In such a state of excitement, his hand began to throb and this prevented him from reading further. His other hand, his left, steadied his reading material before he plunged into the laws.

1. *Illuminate Teramon with the bright light of honor.*

This first law propelled Klassen into the heights of joy as he envisioned himself crusading across the realm spreading light, warmth, truth, love and all the other pleasant ingredients of honor. The world was indeed bleak as Klassen well knew, but he also felt overwhelmingly sure that honor could very well save the world. Oh what a wondrous privilege it would be to take part in a grand struggle to enlighten the world!

2. *Be strong; slaughter the weak.*

Klassen involuntarily flexed his rigid physique in expectancy of pummeling the weak; although he knew many physically frail beasts that needed killed, he believed that many more morally and intellectually weak needed to feel the bite of cold, hard steel. There was no doubt in Klassen's mind that he would enjoy culling out the weak and ushering in a new dawn of Nobilismen that would far exceed the level of the day. Indeed Klassen agreed with the ancient saying of might is right.

3. *Courageously fight for a better world.*

Klassen tightened his grip on the page as he read these words. He despised and loathed the craven poltroons that lacked the firm backbone to be true to their convictions. Such dastardly cowards needed rooted out with brave warriors replacing them. He thought it only wise that courage was a prerequisite to carving out a splendiferous new world.

4. *Live at war.*

Visions of titanic wars of slaughter rang out mightily with the sharp clinks of clashing swords. Although it appeared chaotic, Klassen thought war was surely a sublime music of awe that swirled and raged in delicate harmony. He saw the swords, axes, shields and many other instruments of war glint in the sunshine as the blood exploded from his vile enemies, ending their pitiful existence. Imagining the wondrous carnage was ecstasy to Klassen, as he understood that life was a war and should be treated as such.

5. *Life to Nobilismen; death to the beasts.*

A value system so akin to his heart was this that he felt as though he himself could have written such a mellifluous symphony. He felt at home around his kin while feeling writhing hatred for the beasts that swarmed like maggots across the land. Simply being in a store with only Nobilismen was a treat, so a world without the vile beasts would surely be fantastic. This, he knew, was a goal worth struggling for.

6. *Nobilismen are the supreme beings.*

This was so simple and so much a part of common sense, but something scoffed at and rejected by the overwhelming majority. Klassen saw with his own illuminating eyes how obvious this statement was but it had a profound effect on him due to its sheer, lucid truth. Klassen knew the comrades he saw around him were far superior to the criminal elements outside. This obvious observation sent a swell of bursting pride throughout his being that warmed him deeply.

7. *Superstition must be destroyed and replaced by the laws of nature.*

Nature! It was what he had been taught and what made sense to him despite the constant prattling of others about spiritual beings floating around whom no one had ever seen. Those who had claimed to see them would be subsequently imprisoned, Klassen laughingly thought. It was clear to him that nature was true and superstition, including the worship of supernatural gods, was a delusion created for the weak. Consequently, Klassen looked forward to eliminating the evil poison of superstition and thus restoring his kinsmen to vibrant health.

8. *Promote the best interests of our Nobilis brethren.*

This was a sturdy law that Klassen knew would encourage prosperity among his people. It was quite evident that his people had been bending over backward to cater to the needs of the criminal beasts. This altruism had been rewarded with robbery, beatings, and slaughter, to name but a few of the “thanks” thus given. By caring for only Nobilismen, Klassen knew greatness would follow and what a marvelous greatness it would be!

9. *Utilize your specific talent to further Nobilis ends.*

This sage-like law made Klassen contemplate what special skills he possessed. What could he do better than others? This deliberation would have to take place later though as he needed more time to cogitate the issue, but just thinking of using his skill to help his kith was magnificent to think of. Simply being involved in a small way sent goose bumps of thrilling excitement across his fair skin.

10. *Victory is inevitable.*

This final law was so pregnant with confidence that Klassen felt as though he could conquer the world. Such sureness of victory was a unique brand of optimism in a world being devoured by a demonic chasm of death and decay. He was absolutely positive that success was ensured after reading the mighty words of the Honor Brigade. How could they possibly lose when even their words made the world quake in fear?

So natural did the laws of the Honor Brigade feel that Klassen felt as though he were already a member of what was obviously a prestigious group. The page he held in front of him was like an extension of his being, like an arm or a leg. The riveting emotion that naturally swirled so mightily within him had been pounded out in a tremendously powerful creed of iron. He looked at the mighty symbol that adorned the flier and he realized it was a sacrosanct symbol of the highest order. It assuredly represented holiness with the refulgent rays of fire, and war with the brilliant blade of steel.

As Klassen stared entranced by the words of the Honor Brigade, he noticed he had missed the final statement made on the pamphlet. Upon reading it he realized it summed up the creed of the Honor Brigade quite tersely. The words beat with a life of their own and this life matched Klassen's so extraordinarily that the two appeared as though they were twins. The motto summarized the entire creed so elegantly and majestically that Klassen was flung unto the heights of empyreal bliss. All it took was three words.

Honor is Life.

Chapter III

A chilling hand of ice grabbed Ubelig and roused him from his slumber. The blanket that covered him and his wife wasn't effectively keeping him warm and in his groggy mind he wondered why. His gaze wandered about the room as he contemplated the annoying coldness that seized him.

His bedroom was a spacious one that, he knew, was difficult to heat, but this normally wasn't a problem. Ubelig gazed at the only furnishing besides the bed that occupied the room—his exquisite desk. This large desk is where he formulated his schemes and where he learned how to best employ them. As it was, the desk was cluttered with papers and books that Ubelig knew he needed to read.

Although he knew that getting out of bed would be like leaping into the cold hands of a wintry grasp, Ubelig realized he had to extricate himself sometime or other to solve the problem. As expected he shivered as he threw off the covers and grabbed at his clothing to the side of the bed. His agitation increased as his temperature dropped while he hastily threw on his pants and tunic. After fully bedecking himself to investigate the origin of his irritation, the simple explanation presented itself as he stood up: there was no fire in the fireplace.

Shaking his head in disgust, Ubelig swiftly crossed the room and went through the door. What in the world was Klassen thinking? Ubelig thought. It was Klassen's duty to make sure the fire didn't go out, regardless of what time it was. A good admonishing was in order and Ubelig, although he was agitated at the affair, always enjoyed crushing the passionate will that Klassen possessed. As fierce as Klassen might be, he still obeyed his father; this thought brought a nefarious grin to Ubelig's face.

Although Ubelig doubted whether Klassen was in bed like the rest of the family as it was late morning, he decided to check his room nonetheless. Rushing down the hallway, he passed by his other son's room with the clop, clopping of his boots reverberating throughout the cabin. Upon reaching Klassen's room it was as he had expected: no Klassen.

He knew the odds of Klassen being sleeping were close to nil but this realization failed to stem the tide of the rising anger simmering inside of Ubelig. With a swiftness that belied his age, he marched out of the room and out of the house while scratching his disheveled hair in disdain. The cold breeze that confronted him as he left the cabin was more potent than the younger brother he had been greeted by before, and Ubelig wished he had grabbed his cloak before he had left.

Folding his arms to retain warmth, Ubelig wrathfully scanned the area as he thought of how he might punish his delinquent son. Not seeing Klassen, Ubelig focused his truculent cruelty in an acrimonious vociferation: "KLASSEN!" The mighty roar echoed throughout the forest and birds flew away in haste. Glancing around as he waited for a response, he saw no sign of the son whom he thought needed brutalized for neglect.

Presuming Klassen had rode away, Ubelig dashed off to the small hut that served as a stable for their two horses. Just as he accelerated, however, a small rock grabbed Ubelig's foot and he went down in a tumble. Cursing foully, he snatched his boots that had been flung off in the ordeal and threw his anger at his missing son with a few crass remarks. His entire day was being ruined and someone would have to pay.

Marching off to the makeshift stable, Ubelig appeared as a pure demonic force of evil. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he awaited his chance to avenge his agitated suffering and misery. When he reached the door to the hut, he mightily flung it open and scrutinized the contents inside. The scene inside further inflamed his foul mood and Ubelig barbarically thundered out in explosive anger. Over and over he yelled until he ran out of breath.

Both horses were present.

Despite it being spring and Klassen wearing a heavy cloak, the northern wind spewed its frigid breath, chilling Klassen as his steed yet again veered off course. The path he traversed was seemingly straight but the horse he rode always seemed to prefer wandering off towards the forest that flanked the trail on both sides. Yanking with his powerful muscles, he managed to steer his furry transportation back on track; he hoped it would finally learn its lesson.

Klassen had been in a rush and Bragon had warned him of the wild nature of the creature, and he still wondered whether it was prudent of him to buy the horse. Was it really worth it? Just as he thought thus, the creature decided to simply take a rest in the middle of the trail. It took a few kicks from Klassen's boot to get the steed moving again.

After a moment's contemplation, he knew it was worth it. The Honor Brigade was meant for him, and he for it. Neither the irksome stallion nor the odd weather nor even Klassen's ignorance of the land outside his hometown could prevent him from fulfilling what he proclaimed as his destiny. All of these minor grievances were easily crushed when Klassen thought of a purpose in life, a reason for being.

Although he impulsively wished to strangle his mount, Klassen persevered, as he knew walking would take far longer to reach his yet unknown comrades in the Honor Brigade. The map that was located on the back of the flier, that had inspired him so, was sufficient to guide him on his journey. According to his good friend Bragon, the adventure shouldn't take more than a couple days on horseback. This was warming news but he wondered if his friend had taken into account the obstinate black stallion Klassen had bought.

The black stallion that he rode was but one of goods that Klassen had acquired. For his trip he had also obtained the sturdy, dark brown cloak that he now wore and was glad he had purchased it. Also he had packed a large amount of food for his journey, just to be on the safe side. Bragon had insisted on preparing a survival kit for him and wouldn't accept any payment for it, so he took it appreciatively. However, Klassen hadn't even investigated its contents so he was quite oblivious to what was in it. Other than all this, Klassen was equipped with his dagger, axe, and bow with arrows. The few gold coins he carried represented the total of his savings. He felt quite prepared.

The day before seemed like a dream to Klassen as it had rushed by in a dizzying blur. The exact details of the day were overshadowed by his jubilant discovery of honor. He did recall some, though, but things like what he had taken home for his family eluded him. After purchasing the goods for his trip, he had returned home to finish up his chores and get everything set for his departure.

Although the thought of leaving his family had entered Klassen's mind many times, he knew not where to go or what to do. All his life he had simply obeyed his austere father but this harshness divided the father and son. He knew quite well that the issue was a difference of values. Now, however, it was time to be around those who valued honor like he did; he hoped someday to enlighten his father on the virtue of honor though.

Klassen knew full well that his father would be extremely irate at the absence of his son. Klassen was responsible for the vast majority of the work that needed done in the household: firewood, hunting, trading, building, repair, and more. He had no qualms about work per se; he enjoyed most of it. His father spent his time learning, which Klassen appreciated, but he used this knowledge for evil ends. His mother and brother idly whittled away the time in unproductive endeavors. As it was, the family, he knew, was in for quite a change.

Klassen speculated whether his father had yet realized he was gone. Despite thinking perhaps to leave without warning, he felt it right to leave a note for his family. The note in itself was short as writing materials were generally expensive and reserved for his father. Klassen imagined the look on his father's face when he read the note: "Farewell family, honor awaits me."

Klassen's stomach grumbled in hunger. Notwithstanding the fact that he had only been traveling for a few hours, his body unmistakably yearned for food. Perhaps it was his zesty eagerness draining his body or the resistance of his horse to canter like a normal horse did—in a straight line. Regardless of why, he realized that he had to stop and recharge his athletic frame. Finding a suitable area off from the trail, he—with some difficulty—maneuvered the horse over to the forested spot.

The wild nature of his raven-haired steed was by now well known to him, so he securely fastened it to a small tree that was adorned with green, blossoming appendages. Unbeknownst to him before that moment was that the entire forest was brimming with the emerald leaves that had yet to manifest themselves in Urtgart. What type of tree that lived in the forest he knew not, but the bulking up of the inhabitants was a pleasure to behold as it stood in vivid contrast to the still emaciated ones of his homeland.

Klassen untied his own backpack and the survival kit—which was larger than he thought—from his horse. After finding a quaint spot not far off, he set his belongings down. As he sat down to nourish his body and examine his goods, Klassen felt a warming touch rain down upon him. Gazing skyward he beheld the charming smile of the sun radiating its brilliance down towards him; this he drank freely of and was glad that the shutter-like clouds had cleared a path for the magnificent sun.

Consequently absorbing the warmth from above, Klassen greedily attacked his bag of food. He scrounged through it while contemplating what to eat. Knowing the fruits he carried would spoil the fastest, he dove into them like a ferocious predator. The juices of the oranges and apples that tantalizingly tickled his throat made the water jug he carried superfluous at the moment. Knowing the fruits wouldn't be too filling, he found a bag of nuts that he believed would satiate his hunger for the time being.

As he enjoyed his meal, the idyllic tranquility of nature, and the steady breathing of his stallion, Klassen inspected the large bag so graciously compiled by his friend Bragon. The vast majority of the space was taken up by a sleeping bag that would surely come in handy on his journey. Food was also stuffed inside; food that wouldn't spoil for quite some time like nuts, honey, and oats. Materials were also included on fire-starting, navigational instructions, a large rope with a sharp knife, and a few items of clothing. All in all, he thought they were advantageous to his trip.

Of all the objects thus packed, it was the navigational instructions that most interested him; he took them out. In a few thick-paged pieces of parchment, the elementary basics were transcribed. During the day, as he well knew, the sun rose in the east and set in the west; while the instructions also made it clear how to navigate by the position of the stars at night. This was information was previously unknown to him and, as such, was quite enlightening.

The knowledge was swiftly grafted onto his mind although he doubted whether he would need to utilize it since he had a map of the area. Rarely, he thought, did everything turn out perfectly so he was pleased to have the knowledge. He believed the map would be sufficient for his quest and he promptly extricated it.

Although Klassen had never before been as far away from his hometown as he was now, he felt quite comfortable, as the map he gazed at was very lucid. His destination was almost due west from his home of Urtgart. The trail that he had been traversing would continue west, past the town of Lealean. It would proceed north to circumnavigate a marsh, which would take it past a town called Mythembreux. Turning south again after that would, the map proclaimed, bring you to the headquarters of the Honor Brigade. According to the directions, it couldn't be missed.

Although he was well educated, especially considering the general bias against learning, Klassen was oblivious of the geography that the map so well detailed. He had never known anyone skilled in the area although he believed his father might know the science as Ubelig often took extended trips away from home. However, he had never trained Klassen in this skill, if indeed he was cognizant of it.

As it was, he recognized not the towns on the map at all (although he thought it would be interesting to visit them sometime) and questioned whether these lands were also contaminated with the filthy beasts. His basic knowledge in this field could be summed up in a few tidbits: The Northlands consisted of mountains and was a cold area; the Southlands held deserts and were hot; the Eastlands consisted of forests; while the Westlands—where he was traveling—were supposed to have a grand stretch of water like no other on Teramon, that was called an ocean; however, he realized that the ocean was much further to the west than his destination. So, the map he possessed would be far more useful than what knowledge he had acquired in geography.

As Klassen's body beamed in satisfaction of his meal, Klassen's chewing began to slow as he realized he was becoming quite full. A delectable pecan crunched softly in his mouth and he decided it would be his last. Reaching for his water to defeat the parched condition of his throat, he drank plentifully before hearing a loud succession of neighings; then a loud snapping sound rang out forcefully.

Flinging his water container aside, Klassen sprang to his feet with amazing alacrity. In his agile demonstration of athleticism he unsheathed the large dagger from his belt as he readied for an attack. As swiftly as he had brandished his weapon, he restored it to its neutral state. Running forward, he chased after his horse that had displayed its physical prowess by ripping off the upper portion of the tree it was attached to; thus freeing itself.

The horse, now free from its bonds, bounded about in what appeared to Klassen like jolly glee. The sounds it uttered sounded extremely similar to jovial laughs. The steed was running around and jumping into the air as if it had never before been able to perform these deeds. Its playground seemed like the whole forest as it galloped through the trees, across the trail, and then into the forest on the opposite side of the trail. All the while, the top portion of the tree the horse had been tied to, was tagging along, not restricting the horse in the least.

While Klassen was a very muscular man, his large frame didn't slow him down and he was therefore quite swift. So he quickly advanced and caught up with the horse, in the blossoming forest. The horse was faster overall, that was clear, but weaving in between the trees slowed it down and gave Klassen the edge. The upper portion of the tree trunk, with its many outstretched hands, was now within reach; Klassen firmly grabbed one of these branches.

His hope of reeling in the horse with this grasp wasn't kindly received by the horse as its forelegs vaulted upward in protestation. When the steed planted itself again, it charged forward with full speed. Digging his heels into the soft forest mat was quite fruitless as the woodsman was carried along towards the trail. No obstructions barred the horse's route from the opening of the path, so it took a heroic effort by Klassen to keep hold of the branch. Nearing the clearing, Klassen saw a problem.

Almost but not quite being dragged along with the large tree fragment, Klassen saw an obstacle that loomed ominously before him. His grip on the branch was very tight but the speed of the horse was stretching his arm out more and more as he struggled to keep pace. The tree piece was quite long—about twice as long as Klassen's considerable height—and was being towed along horizontally. Directly ahead were two towering trees with only a small space between them. The horse was headed straight for them.

The horse dashed through the wooden pillars effortlessly; its baggage didn't fare so well. With a mighty smash, the branch was snapped in two and Klassen tumbled roughly to the ground. The horse itself seemed not to notice or even care about getting rid of its encumbrance, and hurdled away down the westerly path.

Klassen survived the devastation with only a few scratches but the annoyance he had been experiencing in chasing the animal had turned into a seething animosity. As he rose to his feet, he glared at the horse with a fierce scowl that shot daggers of force; the horse, however, couldn't even see Klassen but, for some reason, did come to a halt.

Seizing the opportunity, Klassen flew after his prey with blinding speed. It was a testament to his vigorous endurance that he was able maintain his stride as he closed in upon the horse.

Grinning in satisfaction, he caught up to the horse but when he was alongside it, the horse whinnied and bolted away.

It galloped quickly, but not very far before stopping again. Although Klassen's impulse was to slaughter the irritating creature and be done with the affair, he knew that he would reach his goal much faster if he rode on horseback. The mere thought of an arrow piercing its throat warmed him with gaiety but a different route of capture was necessary if he wished the horse to be of any use.

Quite aware that the jet-black steed would bolt if he attempted to go near it, Klassen was greeted with an idea that told him to head back to his gear. This he did as he went back in an easterly direction. By cleverly glancing behind him, Klassen saw the horse follow him. He slowed his gait to a virtual crawl and when he saw the horse approach him, Klassen whirled about with the agility of an acrobat while springing towards the horse. His finger grasped the reins but before he could grasp the reins fully, the horse bolted off, going east.

A violent and turbulent twister of emotion swelled within Klassen as he failed in his attempt to retrieve his horse. To think a mere horse with none of the higher faculties that he possessed could outwit him was outrageous. Rising to an explosive nature the passionate emotion came to a fore but not in the way that might of have been thought. Klassen quickly used his higher faculties. As a direct result, a detonation of uproarious laughter erupted from his lips, accompanied by a tremendous grin.

In the seemingly facetious display, Klassen realized that he might as well benefit from the silly escapade of chasing a horse, so he converted his anger to joy. His laughter was so infectious that the animals in the forest answered it as they chirped in response. Although the horse was a fair way off, it too muttered a faint nicker that sounded to Klassen much like laughing.

In his mirthful mood, Klassen made his way back to his gear while his steed kept a good distance ahead of him. When he reached his goods and swiftly packed them together, his horse gave him a queer look that appeared to say, "Come on, let's go." Klassen acknowledged the gaze but disregarded it and, after securing his backpack and carrying a bag in his right hand, set off due west, away from the stallion.

Without even a glance behind him, Klassen rapidly continued his journey. At first his steed simply stared in awe, but then promptly galloped west. It cautiously cantered behind the adventurer and then directly beside him. Getting no response, the horse finally nudged its large nose against him; Klassen stopped and after petting the short black hair of his friend, accepted the submission that the brown eyes of the horse spoke to him.

In a flash, the woodsman was making good speed atop his now cooperating mount. With his gear tied down and the path straight and easy, he let his mind wander. The contemplation that grabbed him was what skill would he employ with the Honor Brigade. He wondered whether they were in need of good carpenters as he could fulfill that need quite well. Before he could proceed with his ponderings, an obscure sound rang out and snapped him from his thoughts.

Spurring his horse onward, he galloped speedily in pursuit of the noise. He was pleased of the cooperation of his steed, as it was important to him to locate the potential distress call as soon as possible. The trees whizzed by in a blur as he scanned the landscape for anything out of the ordinary. He was about to pass right by the origin of the sound when it repeated in blaring accuracy; Klassen yanked on the reins and wheeled about to face the source of the sound.

The spectacle was to his right, a little way from the trail. The full green bushes in the area had prevented him from seeing it, but now the full hideousness of the sight before him was revealed. It was a horrible, deplorable scene that brought the full sway of his intense loathing to bear. This loathing manifested itself in a bellowing roar of "Honor!" as his steed, heeding Klassen's mental command, charged into glorious battle. The attack commenced.

Chapter IV

The sun illuminated the repulsive spectacle as the wind darted by and Klassen rode forward. Two vile miscreants—ogres—stood before him oozing beads of foul-smelling sweat. Below the beasts, lying on ground, was the source of the shrill screaming that had alerted him. Although he couldn't make out much of her appearance, it was clear that she was a fair maiden of Nobilis blood.

It was abundantly clear to Klassen what was transpiring as the two ogres were apparently arguing amongst one another. The grunting conversation between the two became physical when one pushed the other, but they both wheeled around when they heard the mighty roar that Klassen emanated. He thus joined the fray by charging right at the creatures who just barely managed to get out of the way.

Pulling ferociously on the reins, the horse stopped abruptly and Klassen leapt off to tend to the lady, axe in hand. He helped her to her feet and she incessantly muttered her gracious thanks. In a forceful tone, Klassen ordered, "Go wait by my horse." She obeyed instantly just as the startled criminals snapped out of their shock and advanced menacingly towards him.

With astounding aplomb, Klassen welcomed the battle with the forces of evil as his two enemies laughed at his jaunty demeanor. The infuriating rage that enveloped him intensified his fighting ability as he gradually entered a berserker-like frenzy. His breathing accelerated as brilliant flames of hatred shot from his eyes and doused the merry looks on the ogre's faces. They frowned and brought their large wooden clubs to bear. With a primitive, brutal howl, Klassen attacked.

With both hands on his axe, gripping it fiercely, he swung the axe at the ogre to his left. The ogre's natural reflex of raising its left arm in defense saved its life but the wicked arc the axe cut slammed home into the ogre's arm. The blade bit deeply and crimson blood leaked rapidly from the beast as it let out a painful yelp.

The loss of blood caused the creature to collapse, dropping its weapon upon the ground. Klassen, hanging onto his axe, knelt down trying to extract his weapon from the thick, bulky arm. The attempt was futile, however, as he sensed the other ogre recovering from the surprise of Klassen's attack and coming towards him. Giving up on the axe and lunging for the downed ogre's club, he grasped it just before being on the receiving end of a violent blow. This blow, an ogre's kick, sent him rolling away in scathing pain as he lost his grip on the club.

The ogre pressed its advantage by raising its heavy club and with crushing force sent it downward. Klassen nimbly scrambled away but when the club pounded on the ground, he felt the whoosh, generated by the mighty arc, distinctly on his cheek. As the beast recovered from this solid swing, Klassen sprang to his feet and whipped out his dagger. The sun glinted brightly off of his blade as he glared in utter contempt at the beast that had dared assault him.

The ogre rumbled towards the woodsman with its club raised skyward but the hideous visage scared him not as he deftly sidestepped the charge. Repositioning the dagger in his hand, he waited until the beast turned to face him before acting. With inspiring dexterity Klassen launched his dagger, which twirled fancifully in the air before sinking to the hilt into the chest of the wild-eyed ogre. This beast's arms lowered and it sank to its knees but before he could enjoy his victory, a blow slammed into his back causing him to stumble forward.

Using the momentum of the unexpected attack to propel him away from the unseen ambush, Klassen turned quickly about. The attacker was none other than the ogre whose blood was still flowing freely from the axe lodged in its arm. Lurching forward in lethargy it came after him and swung weakly and wildly. Klassen easily ducked under the club and then vaulted nimbly behind the aggressor.

From behind he wrapped his right arm around the beast's throat and with his left grabbed the frizzy black hair atop its head. With titanic force he pulled violently backwards and sent the ogre

crashing to the ground, its club bouncing harmlessly away. The dazed creature was now essentially sitting on the ground with Klassen clinging to its throat, on one knee. The obvious size difference was glaring, as the beast was at least one and a half times larger than the solid frame of Klassen; this didn't stop an air-blocking chokehold from being applied. In but a few moments, the beast sank into the dark oblivion of unconsciousness.

With a satisfying feel of power, Klassen rose to his feet before retrieving the fallen club of his foe. He swaggered confidently over to the barely conscious ogre that was still on its knees, dagger in its chest. The beast was on the precipice overlooking death as it feebly stared at him, yearning for pity. In response, he smiled broadly at the beast.

The fifth law of Honor Brigade sweetly swam into his mind as he recited it for the ogre's benefit: "Life to Nobilismen; death to the beasts." The beast's eyes flickered at this death sentence; Klassen uttered a lighthearted chuckle in retort. Squeezing the mammoth club in both hands, he raised it in the air. Then he swung with all his might.

The club rushed through the air and collided with the ogre's grotesque skull with devastating force. Upon impact, the head exploded sending a plethora of gory fragments raining down all around. Blood, strips of skin, and crushed bone, sprayed Klassen as the ogre collapsed, its life force smashed into the void of death. He spat upon the body of the now-deceased ogre before securely planting his boot on the corpse's chest and heaving with a hearty pull, disengaging his dagger.

At this wonderful spectacle of justice, the tingling thrill of exhilaration raced through his body in a splendid swirl of excitement. As he made his way over to the unconscious ogre, Klassen was a little disappointed as he realized the deathblow he would deliver wouldn't be received by the understanding eyes of his enemy. Consequently, the joy wasn't as great as he ripped the ogre's throat out with a precise slice of his blade. Although the beast might have already been dead, the flow of life that promptly drained away rang the bell of death quite loudly.

Klassen grabbed his axe and yanked it free from the grizzly cadaver. When he stood up, he saw a ruddy, rushing blur coming towards him and he promptly dropped his weapons as he embraced the maiden whose honor he had so chivalrously defended. The two kissed passionately.

Although the joy of war was delightful, the kiss from the lady whom he embraced was explodingly euphoric. The feel of her sweet, wet lips and illustrious tongue dancing with his own transported him to a wondrous realm of ecstasy. Pressing her curvaceous frame closely against his own body, Klassen felt the warmth and tenderness that only a woman could provide. Running his hand through her long flowing locks, he wondered if the sensation would last forever. It didn't.

She, vastly premature in his mind, broke away from his grasp and exclaimed, "We must hurry along, sweetie. There are probably more ogres lurking about." She tugged on his arm but he didn't move at all.

The words were barely comprehensible to Klassen as he stood in awe at the magnificent beauty before him. Her svelte, voluptuous figure was dazzling to behold and seemed to glow with a radiant aura. The beaming rays of the sun illumined the tenderness of our face and made her emerald eyes glitter brightly. The long hair that flowed down past her shoulders resembled refulgent rubies that dazzled the eye. The simple dark red dress she wore didn't detract from her striking appearance at all; in fact it seemed to show how simple yet extravagant her figure was.

She kept muttering over and over a single word, which was not sinking in as he admired her loveliness. Klassen became more amused when she almost frantically yelled, "Ogres!" Finally, the word was comprehended and his brain quickly processed the information as he looked around for more of the enemy.

Hurriedly grabbing his weapons in his right hand and her in his left, he pronounced, "Let's go." Quickly the pair ran off towards the horse and were packed, ready, and riding, in only a few moments.

Although he hadn't spotted any of the depraved beasts wandering about, Klassen didn't have a desire to wait for any considering the fact that they seemed to attack in packs. Despite their

gargantuan size, they were a rather timid lot. Not wanting to assault a whole host of them, the duo sped away rapidly as they traveled farther and further from the site of the skirmish.

After galloping swiftly until he thought they were safely removed from danger, Klassen slowed his horse to a canter. The tight grasp the lady had around his waist made him realize he had never known such a glorious damsel. Here and there he had known attractive ladies but they all seemed polluted with the sick, vitiated ideals that were prevalent across the land. Was she the same?

Before he could inquire, she sweetly chirped, “Hi sweetie, my name is Alianna. Thanks for saving me! What is your name?”

“Klassen,” he replied. “It is my pleasure to save such a wonderful Nobilis maiden. That sure was a grand battle!”

“Yes it was, honey!” came the retort. “I am sure glad you killed that ogre scum. I can’t stand them!”

The words which she spoke were harmonious music to his ears. Intrigued immensely by his companion, Klassen inquired, “You don’t like the beasts then?”

Although he wasn’t cognizant of it, Alianna’s face contorted in ugly disdain at this question. “Of course I don’t like them; I hate them. Unfortunately my town is filled with them. Who knows why, but people put up with them even though they are ruining the town. Do you know what I mean, hon?”

Such a haphazard find! thought Klassen. “Yes! I know *exactly* what you mean! Where is this town of yours? I can take you there, of course.”

Alianna grasped his waist tighter at the pleasure his answer gave her as she responded, “The town is known as Lealean. It is along the path here, not far. Yes, I would like it if you could take me home, thanks. The town itself used to be beautiful when I was child. But now it is getting worse and worse as the beasts come in. It is disgusting because most don’t even care, or at least they don’t show it if they do. Oh, the town isn’t very far away and you can see the filth yourself, hon.”

Klassen could well imagine what the town looked like if it was anything like his own hometown. He wondered whether all the towns in Teramon were experiencing similar catastrophes. It would seem that they were since he knew that the Universal Church was extremely powerful and behind the carcinogenic pollution in his town. The logic that his mentor Aristotle taught him told him that it was quite probable that the ghastly beast plague was contaminating all of Teramon, based on the evidence available.

Alianna ran one of her slender hands through his hair and she spoke enchantingly to him, “So will you be visiting me and enjoying the town with me, honey?” She giggled before continuing, “It would be an honor to have you stay with me as the champion that you are.”

The sweet offer proffered by the lady was extremely enticing but Klassen had a larger goal in mind. “I would love to accept your invitation,” he said but was interrupted by her exclamatory jubilation and hug. “But,” he continued, “I must decline.”

Before he could continue, he felt her grip around him weaken as she spoke, “It’s because I don’t like the beasts, isn’t it? Well, I don’t care what everyone thinks! I hate them and I only like Nobilismen. If you have a problem with that, just drop me off now.”

Klassen laughed and affectionately rubbed her hand with his. “I will take you home, of course. I agree with you so much that I am on a quest to join the Honor Brigade!”

The words were spoken as though they held some awesome, mysterious power; but Alianna had never heard them spoken before. Still, she sensed the power was quite immense from the way he spoke. “What is this Honor Brigade?”

A swelling feeling of enraptured bliss flooded Klassen as he thought perhaps he might recruit someone into the ranks before he had even joined. She certainly seemed to have her natural instincts in place, he thought to himself.

“I will show you,” he proudly trumpeted in response to her question. In a blazing rush, Klassen stopped the horse and nimbly leaped off. He trotted around to his bag where he extricated the fantastic flier that inspired him so incalculably. He handed it to her and felt as though he could bathe in her pleasant glow forever, but he knew he had to get moving and promptly remounted and shoved off.

Almost immediately after starting to travel once more, Klassen asked eagerly, “What do you think?”

“I don’t know, honey. It is hard to read on this horse.”

In his zealous eagerness, he hadn’t thought of such a simple obstacle. Therefore he took it upon himself to recite the laws, which he had already memorized:

1. *Illuminate Teramon with the bright light of honor.*
2. *Be strong; slaughter the weak.*
3. *Courageously fight for a better world.*
4. *Live at war.*
5. *Life to Nobilismen; death to the beasts.*
6. *Nobilismen are the supreme beings.*
7. *Superstition must be destroyed and replaced by the laws of nature.*
8. *Promote the best interests of our Nobilis brethren.*
9. *Utilize your specific talent to further Nobilis ends.*
10. *Victory is inevitable.*

At every law, Klassen felt Alianna’s hands tighten around him, her squeezes indicating her approval. He knew that the Honor Brigade would undoubtedly appeal more towards men as it had a warlike approach, but Alianna was responding extremely well. Of course, her endorsement was a silent one but a verbal agreement was sure to follow, the woodsman thought.

“Wow,” she exclaimed, “That is so great, honey! We need strong men like that in our town. Where is this place?”

Klassen was warm with satisfaction as he responded, “It is out west. I have a map with my gear, could you hand it to me?” She promptly did and he glanced at it before putting it away in his pocket. “Wouldn’t you like to accompany me on this trip of honor? I am sure they can use all the help they can get considering the situation the world is in.”

He yearned with all his might that she might say yes and make his journey that much greater. The thought of not only finding his rightful place in life combined with a beautiful gal, was staggering to his imagination, especially within such a short period of time. The muted verbal communication that pervaded the two brought the singing of the birds and galloping hooves of the horse to their ears. He waited patiently for an answer.

As a large black crow flew across their path, Alianna finally responded, “As much as I like you, you can’t expect me to leave with you so soon. I have obligations to fulfill, as you are surely aware of. I just can’t leave my family like that.” Her words were tinged with a bit of melancholy but she cheered up as she continued, “You, honey, can stay with me for a while. It won’t halt your journey too long, after all.” She giggled sweetly at the pleasant invitation.

He, of course, knew that he was being overly eager to expect her to come with him, but he knew the two were so alike! Like two glittering diamonds in a sea of murk they were. It was like Klassen to act—swiftly and assuredly—but he could understand others not keeping his furious pace. Her invitation was extremely kind and he realized the two would have an exquisite time; as such, he considered her offer.

However, he swiftly declined: "I must again decline my beautiful maiden. I wish to begin my service in the Honor Brigade as soon as I can."

She was dejected and understandably so. Tugging his arm and pointing off to the right, she declared, "There is the path to my town."

Klassen guided the horse onto the perpendicular path and could faintly see a small outcropping of buildings in the distance. Before traveling far, Alianna tugged at his arm and pointed to a dilapidated building. "See that building?" she asked.

He pulled up to the building and realized it was an ancient Universal Church building that was devastated beyond repair. The four towers that at one time climbed deliriously into the sky, were now laying upon the ground in ruin. Large gaping holes made the building look as though it had been bombarded by the devastating fusillade of a thousand catapults. Completing the desolation was a filthy ring of trash that decorated the ground surrounding the area.

Alianna chimed in, "Disgusting, isn't it, dear?" He nodded. "Although I don't agree with the nonsense the Universal Church preaches, I do admire their architecture. In my childhood, this building was wonderful and impressive. Then it was converted into a shelter for the beasts that swiftly destroyed it. Now, as you can see, it is in ruins while the beasts that lived here were built a new shelter to destroy. I think some imps occasionally hide out here but the area is a little too far away from the rest of the town for the others."

Klassen was amazed at how similar the two were as he concurred about the architecture. As they cantered down the trail, he thought of the similarities between their two respective towns as well. At first it seemed amazing but the more he thought about it, the more it became simple common sense.

Filth and foulness greeted the travelers as they rode into town. The decaying houses and accompanying beasts became thicker and thicker as they went further. Like an oppressive wave of venomous poison, the squalid cloud of turpitude surrounded them and Klassen yearned for the clean air they had so recently left.

The chaotic swarm of trade loomed before them, but thankfully for Klassen, she pointed him down a less traveled path. Going down the trail he instantly noticed the difference in cleanliness. There was no doubt that this section of town was Nobilis as he saw several Nobilis clans walk down the trail; he politely nodded in greeting. Here and there an imp or hobgoblin scurried about as if they knew they weren't in the right part of town.

The path turned to the right and ended abruptly at a tavern called *The Lion's Den*. He turned back at Alianna questioningly; she nodded and spoke, "Yes, I am going to the tavern. You are welcome to come in, of course." After shaking his head, declining, Klassen leaped down as he graciously escorted her off of the large, black horse.

By a mutual consent, the couple grasped each other lovingly and exchanged a repeat performance of their previous kiss. Klassen felt like an eternity of bliss passed before they stopped; he didn't think it lasted long enough though. As if absorbing her beauty, he gazed in awe at her radiant visage, long red hair of passionate fire, and green eyes of serenity.

"If you change your mind about the Honor Brigade, please come. Honor is Life." He handed her the flier after retrieving it from his pocket.

She took the flier before retorting, "Thanks for the pamphlet; thanks for the ride; and thanks for saving me. I know we will see each other again, honey." Stretching on the tip of her toes, she planted a goodbye kiss and hurried off with a tear slowly draining downwards, caressing her cheek.

Vaulting upon his horse and watching her withdraw, Klassen was struck by the certainty with which she spoke. As she safely made it into the pub, he started off to resume his journey. His thoughts whirled around inside his mind as he realized he had dealt death many times recently and was cleansing Teramon in his own small way. Saving the beautiful Alianna was fabulously rewarding and although she was lovely, he had the bigger picture in mind. There were thousands, maybe millions of Aliannas in the world (not quite as beautiful he knew well enough) that needed saving, not to mention the men who needed enlightenment. Much work had to be done, he knew.

Behind him and therefore unseen by Klassen, Alianna entered the merry bar where she was obviously a frequent customer. This was evidenced by many of the half-drunken patrons welcoming her; she responded in kind. Almost exclusively the customers were Nobilis and as a direct result, the place was clean and in good shape. There were a few hollers but no skirmishes; this seemed due to the potent ale that was freely imbibed.

Lithely, Alianna worked her way through the tables and stools before climbing the sturdy wooden stairs. She hardly made a sound as she distanced herself from the noisy revelry below. The landing that she came to was barely lit by a stream of candles, as the illuminating rays of the sun were nowhere to be found. She walked down the straight hall that was adorned with heavy wooden doors on either side. After coming to the fourth and last door on the right, she halted. Knocking twice, then thrice, and finally once, she waited.

After a brief pause, a murmur only slightly above a whisper spoke one word: "Come." Alianna promptly but quietly did so, shutting the door softly behind her.

The room, like the hallway, was faintly lit. The solitary candle in the room was located on a desk located opposite of the door. It cast a slew of shadows dancing mysteriously about the room as it wavered gently. Although the room also contained a bed and a few other items, it was the man seated behind the desk that attracted one's attention.

The ghostlike figure illuminated by the candle was diligently working, as his face was indiscernible in the light; it did, however, affect Alianna with a visible chill that caused her to shiver involuntarily. One could tell it was a man by the way he carried himself, but the dark robe and lack of illumination made it nigh impossible to learn much more. After finishing off a few quick strokes upon a piece of parchment, he looked up.

Alianna advanced ashamedly, with her head peering downwards. "I don't have any money for you today. I just couldn't..." Her words were cut short by the man rising swiftly from his chair with surprising alacrity after his seemingly tranquil posture.

Walking over to Alianna with his long brown robe flowing down to his feet, he lifted her chin up gently with his finger and looked into her eyes. Caressing her smooth, milky cheeks he spoke mildly, "I don't want to hear your excuses, dear. We must please those that have money."

He gazed at her beautiful figure and without warning launched a furious punch into her stomach that caused her to bend over in agony. Several more blows followed to her midsection and she almost fell, but he stopped her descent.

Just as quietly as before, he whispered, "Ah, you are so beautiful. Now go to work."

Chapter V

The sky's fiery torch was slowly being doused by the encroaching blackness of night. The forest was enveloped in a reddish-orange hue from this fading light. The declining activity of the forest dwellers signaled that they were preparing for their nocturnal rest. A chirp here or a squawk there was the only noise to be heard. The westward trail was obviously infrequently traversed as Klassen had only seen but one other occupant; it was a degenerate hobgoblin that he had scowled at in disdain before passing the beast.

The escapades that he had endured had undoubtedly put him behind schedule and, as such, he was pressing his horse at a blazing gallop. The rushing wind was a pleasant greeting as he imbibed freely of its natural freshness; its soothing nature was a treat when compared to the horrible pollution of the towns. Pushing his horse even faster, horse and rider flew down the path with great swiftness.

The difficulty in maintaining such speed soon manifested itself. First came the horse's labored breathing and slowing gait, even though it was clear to Klassen that the horse wished to maintain the rapid pace. Next was the lack of brilliance that was descending upon the area, making spotting objects in the distance quite difficult. Lastly, was the roaring voice of his dragon-like hunger that was continually bellowing louder.

Wishing to go on just a little longer, he didn't take note of the thinning forest on his left. The trees became more and more sparse until they disappeared completely. Squinting his eyes, he barely saw the sharp turn in the path, heading northwards. Forcefully, Klassen pulled the reins and diverted the horse from continuing westward, into what appeared to be a mysterious mist. The horse protested violently against this sudden change in direction with a loud irritating neigh, but obeyed. The curve was so tight that for a moment it appeared as though horse and rider might crash to the ground, but the horsemanship of the rider showed his skill by preventing a catastrophe.

Klassen knew it was time to stop; he halted his horse. Looking for a suitable place to camp, he looked at the haunting mist to his left and the dark forest on his right. Although the mist intrigued him, he knew the forest would prove to be a much more prudent site for the night. Therefore he steered the horse off the trail, a little ways into the forest; the blanket of nightfall was almost complete.

The adventurer dismounted and brought his gear with him as he scrambled to find good firewood before all light was extinguished. This was actually done quite easily as good, dry wood seemed to materialize from nowhere, on the ground. Amid the heavy, but lessening, breathing of his horse, Klassen promptly proceeded to light a fire with the kit he possessed.

The fire blazed forth its warming touch and illuminating flames. The warmth felt good to his body as he soaked greedily in it; the chilling effect of the night and rushing winds from riding had finally caught up with him. The brightness that shot forth from the fire revealed an ordinary forest about him but the caliginous area across the path was not to be penetrated. Even without the map he had given away, he knew the obscure zone was the marsh that was to be circumnavigated.

The mysterious marsh was strangely attractive but the pull of hunger snatched Klassen's attention; he promptly dug through his bags in search of food. Not having the proper cooking utensils, he dangled from a rope a piece of meat above the fire while snacking on some nuts. The cooking method he was employing—although unorthodox—would work just fine. The standing, hovering over the fire soon grew tiresome so he fetched a log to sit on while cooking his meal.

As he sat down he felt the soreness from riding more than ever. Klassen was a skilled horseman but wasn't accustomed to spending an entire day on a mount. Also making itself known was the blow he had sustained to his rib, now bruised over, although Klassen wasn't aware of its purplish face. All in all however, he enjoyed the relaxation and breathed deeply.

The flames crackled gently and the soft glow of the fire soothed his mind. Glancing casually about, Klassen noticed his cloak still contained traces of his earlier melee; this brought a smile to his face. Brushing off the chunks of skeletal fragments and crusted blood, he realized that a good deal of blood would forever reside within the cloak. The dark, stained blood spots, however, were barely discernible against the brown background of the cloak.

Then it hit him. The rushing wave of red-haired beauty filled his mind with thoughts of Alianna. He had successfully put her out of his mind until now but the sweet smell of her womanhood—a smell he hadn't even been aware of at first—now brought a feeling of joy to his weary being. A deep connection between the two existed; at least he hoped she shared his romantic sentiment. What was it that had affected him so much? Klassen was enamored by her gorgeousness, there was no doubt; but the connection upon the higher, nobler plane of honor is what made her special. He noted it might have been merely a facade of agreement to placate him, but he sincerely had faith in her being veracious and wonderful.

In his romantic revelry he noticed his meal was done and after testing it for its doneness, he ate hungrily after being contented it was fully cooked. The meat, deer he thought, wasn't exactly scrumptious but thinking of his Alianna was tasty indeed. Her gleaming green eyes came to his mind and seemed to mesmerize him. Of course his contemplation made him consider returning to the town; what town was it? Ah, Lealean he recalled after a short burst of brainpower. The thought to return to her was delicious and delightful but the image of the holy sword of honor immersed in scorching fire dominated his mind-vision. That was that.

Klassen's stomach grew full as he devoured and finally finished his meal. His attention was again drawn over to the marsh by what had seemed like a short burst of movement. Upon looking at the formless mass of the marsh, it seemed alive with a slow, swirling movement but nothing distinguishable could be seen by his sharp eye.

His imagination was stirred by trying to comprehend what might lie beyond the hazy shell that protected the innards of the bog. What might be lurking inside? What did it look like from the inside? More importantly, was the given name of the marsh an accurate description? The mystification of it all burned in his soul as a feeling of strange awe silently fell upon him. The puzzling nature was drummed home as the name repeated itself over and over again in his mind.

Doom, doom, doom. The Marsh of Doom.

The horse neighed in protestation but entered the dark and hazy marsh. The brightness of the morning was swallowed instantly upon the pair entering the marsh as the horse reluctantly obeyed its rider's orders. It was still clearly frightened but it seemed Klassen's mighty presence allayed its fears. Entering the watery bog with a swish, swish of hooves, horse and rider both scanned the area.

First to greet the eye was dungeon-like darkness that was cast like a tangling net over the damp floor. Scattered about were dark gray trees that were bent and appeared dying, but alive somehow they were. The ground was simply damp in some places but others had puddles of water whose depth seemed indeterminate in the poor lighting. The sun's brilliance was almost entirely squashed, as Klassen couldn't see far at all in the lighting that managed to break through the barrier of bleakness. Another odd feature of the light was that its color was deprived of its golden hue and came through as gray.

The moisture and humidity in the air immediately made itself known as Klassen felt the beads of sweat form on his forehead even though he wasn't tired in the least. The horse as well seemed affected, but it appeared more to be the dank atmosphere in general that plagued it. Nonetheless, Klassen saw no real obstacles to impede them and started onwards.

Splashing through the puddles of liquid, the adventurer justified his trek through the Marsh of Doom by the distance, and thus time, he would save. The northerly route along the path just

seemed to be a waste and he wondered why no path had been forged through the fen. Sure, he knew, it would have required some effort to do but it seemed worth it.

A crashing snap blasted through the air behind Klassen, making the horse mewl in misery. Twisting quickly around, the adventurer looked for the source of the disruption. Was it a beast? He saw nothing but the same scene that reminded him of death, a graveyard to be exact. After telling himself it was nothing more than perhaps a fallen branch, the rider directed the startled horse forward.

The stallion, after the disturbing distraction, was very reluctant to walk further but with great difficulty, the skilled rider calmed its nerves by stroking it gently. Still the horse was affected by the jitters of terror from the miasmatic environment. The fear was palpable and seemed to ooze out of the air, intriguing Klassen. Maybe there really was some kind of doom in the marsh. While being cognizant of, but not dismayed by, the amorphous clouds of melancholy, he did remain in a cautious state of alert.

The contorted trees that populated the area stretched oddly about, even bending over to drink of the liquid nourishment. This sight was so vastly different to Klassen's eye that he wondered whether or not this area was simply an aberration of nature. He had heard of a marsh before, but never having been to one, he could only speculate as to whether they were as haunting and mysterious as the one he traversed.

Without warning, an obsidian creature flew by with a piercing shriek that shattered the silence. Just as swiftly as it had darted by, the flying figure returned to circle about the pair as it mockingly spewed out the awful, grating call it muttered. Its flight pattern was peculiar as it never flapped its wings but instead glided up and down, riding invisible waves. Its eerie presence sent prickling tingles throughout Klassen's frame as he watched it in amazement. After leaving its mark indelibly impressed upon him, it floated away as effortlessly as it had come.

The uncanny experience had a positive consequence on Klassen but the reverse was true for his mount. In cowering trepidation it descended to the ground in stark terror. Whining softly, it hugged the ground. Stepping off the horse with a splash, Klassen grabbed the oats from his gear and hand-fed the horse. It ate a little at a time and this seemed to lift its spirits somewhat; the eyes, however, belied its unmistakable anxiety.

After feeding his transportation until it desired no more, Klassen wondered whether he might not continue forward on foot. He could travel just as fast through the soaked bog but would be at a severe disadvantage in the open. According to the map he saw in his mind, the Marsh of Doom didn't appear very wide, though, and he believed traversing it wouldn't take long. Besides, the gold he had spent on the creature would be wasted if he left it behind.

With his mind made up, Klassen coaxed his animal companion to its feet through sheer, mighty volition. Leaping upon its back, he urged it forward and wasn't going to let it disobey him in the least, despite its vexation. Guiding it forward, he kept an eye out for any more strange, but alluring, fascinations.

With the dominant hands of Klassen controlling the reins the horse could either succumb to its nebulous fears or obey the omnipresent force of its determined rider; it moved on quicker than it had before. The duo actually started making good time as the horse seemed bolstered by its rider's supreme confidence. The water from the puddles they trotted through splattered upwards and Klassen felt the spray of water, revealing their speed; he smiled.

The increased velocity made the humid fen less intimidating to the horse that soon gained the confidence that almost equaled that of its consummate rider. The trees that rushed by seemed to lose their air of malicious misery when one only caught but a transitory glimpse of them. The ease with which the two fled by made Klassen wonder how far they had to traverse.

Just as this thought seeped into his mind, he became aware of a strange, nagging sense of being followed. Klassen didn't think that he saw or heard anything, but seemed to *feel* a prowling presence behind him. Without alerting the horse that seemed oblivious to the feelings he held,

Klassen gazed behind him. Carefully scanning the landscape, he saw no movement out of the ordinary but his sixth sense was screaming wildly.

Returning to face forward, Klassen finally saw the predatory phantasm that had been stalking the pair. It was a chilling void of ethereal darkness that hauntingly hovered over them. One could only see its black, waving form by its contrast to the gray mist that dominated the area. None of the normal features of a creature were beheld in the specter, as it appeared an awful hole in reality. No arms. No legs. No eyes. It was a waving cloak of impenetrable blackness.

The horse that had regained so much confidence now had it all suddenly sucked away with horrific speed. Bewilderment at the apparition brutalized the stallion as it wriggled violently about in frantic frenzy. Its befuddled contortions culminated in a fierce surge skyward that heaved its rider into the air. As skilled as Klassen was, he was unable to prevent this skyward ride and landed heavily with a large splash that drenched him with muddy water.

With distorted paroxysms of terrible terror, the frightened horse lurched to and fro before bolting off into the unknown. With the instinct of slaughter, the phantasm rushed after its prey. With a gaping maw of icy death, it swept through the horse's hind legs. The stallion erupted in pain as it plummeted to the ground. The legs had completely disappeared as if they had been flung through a portal and ended up in a different dimension. In the throes of malicious misery, the downed creature's blood pulsed out of its bloody stumps with every beat of its heart.

Such a wicked display seemed to defy explanation but the suffering in the marsh was certainly real enough. Despite the startling scene, the enraging power born of injustice enveloped Klassen in its loathing sweetness. Ignoring the water that weighed him down, he sprang upwards, dagger in hand, to his feet and hustled after the destroyer of his property.

The alien specter's attack on the near-extinguished animal was affected before Klassen could reach the area. The cold grasp of death wrapped its coils around the horse's forelegs and started dragging it away from the adventurer. Slowly at first but rapidly gaining speed, it transported its catch away from the dagger-wielding pursuer, leaving behind a crimson stream of gore.

Running with all his ability, Klassen struggled to overtake his contemptible enemy. The horse was by now bouncing up and down on its rump as it was towed along without mercy. Faster and faster it was pulled until the adventurer watched in disbelief as his mount was slowly lofted into the air, flying. When the predator and its prey achieved mutual flight, acceleration well beyond Klassen's means was achieved; he could only look on helplessly.

Slightly panting, he stopped, as he realized nothing more could be done. Searching through the maze of tangled trees, drab mist, and watery ground seemed a fruitless endeavor in irrelevancy. Therefore, Klassen sheathed his blade and looked for the proper route to continue on. Although it was impossible to tell from the atmosphere which way west was, he recalled well enough. Redirecting his boiling irritation at the uncanny death of his mount, he set off with a rapid gait.

His pace was severely hampered by the moist, boggy ground and increasing brush that impeded his way. Klassen had to crush through the tangled, grisly vegetation while feeling the moist chill from being drenched. His hunger was flaring up as well to compound the adversity facing him, but he would have to do without food as well as his warm cloak, both of these had been lost with his gear. Fortunately for him, the burning desire and determination to reach his goal drove him forward.

The brush became so dense that the adventurer was forced to hunt for an alternative route, around this impervious obstacle. The imposing wall stretched out as far as the eye could behold, but Klassen hiked, what he hoped was north, to look for a chink in the armor. After searching in vain in that direction and encountering a scathing wall of brambles that halted his northerly progress, he did an about face. On and on he went, searching for an opening. Just as he was about to backtrack his steps in hopes of finding a different way around, he stopped. Then he smiled.

A small section of the brush had been cleared away, although it looked as though the dwarves of myth had carved it due to its nearness to the ground. Bending down and peering through it,

Klassen noted that it did look as though it had been tunneled. Without further ado, he ventured forth on his hands and knees, adding to his wetness.

The minuscule path led him right, left, right and more until he had absolutely no idea whether he was heading true to course or not. The woodsman feared not getting lost, however, due to the path not branching off whatsoever. Therefore, he felt comfortable—even though he was thoroughly wet—having faith in the trail. It wound and wound with an occasional branch smacking his face, but nothing amounting to any type of major injury.

Ever so slowly the blanketing thicket, that served like cave walls, began to dissipate in density. He was gaining more freedom of motion as he crawled through the winding path and knew exactly what that meant. Sure enough, he was soon able to stand up as a clearing presented itself; as a result, he promptly stretched out his cramped limbs. This brought a joyous feeling of delight, regardless of the simplicity of it. This feeling of joy didn't last long as the next obstacle immediately presented itself.

A humongous river that moved onward with agonizing slowness hailed Klassen. The river, like the area in general, was adorned with a gray dreariness; the billowing mist, however, was more marked and profound over the water. The slow current seemed to wail in misery as it drudged along. Even the effervescent vivacity that Klassen constantly exuded was masked by the river's mistaken reflection of him; Klassen's brio was replaced by a look of doom.

Although he was already drenched, he had no desire to make his wetness absolute. Thus, he surveyed the river and surrounding area for an alternative course. What he spotted seemed too good to be true. A massive tree, whose bark was dark red, was stretched along the entire width of the aqueous impediment. It was a wooden bridge that arched from one bank of the river to the other. Upon glancing around some more, Klassen realized this natural bridge was the best path, as suspicious as it appeared.

Making his way over to it, he carefully tested its strength by crawling upon the wood. Despite his rather large frame, the bridge held firm. Recognizing the slipperiness that prevented walking upright, Klassen skillfully clambered along the wet, wooden branch. Despite the width of the river and not-so-perfect path, he made good time. The splinter here and there that attacked his skin didn't slow him in the least.

At the apex of the arching limb, a small blurt of motion seized Klassen's eye. Down below, in the dark current, a tiny eruption here and then there, popped up from the water's surface. Tiny rings extended outward from this disruption while the adventurer wondered what manner of life could exist in such a desolate marsh. Wiping his brow of the accumulation of sweat, he took a brief rest while staring below. Without warning, a crashing snap boomed harshly.

As if levitating magically, Klassen hovered in the air before the eternal hand of nature yanked him downward. Falling down with a whooshing descent he greeted the river with a large splash. The water was cold, very cold; it sucked him beneath the surface, into its bleak, aquatic domain. Sight served no purpose in this muddy realm, as it was a useless sense. However, it was clear which way was up and using his toned muscles, Klassen hastened to the surface.

Once above the subaqueous kingdom, the gulp of air that he inhaled was refreshing despite the vapid vapors that cloaked the area. Being no stranger to the art of swimming and not wanting to encounter the fish life on such a personal level, Klassen swiftly began to stroke his way to the bank of his destination.

As chilling as the icy waters were, the adventurer was actually pleased by the difficulty of his trek; it made the fulfillment of his journey that much greater. The soggy bog was certainly difficult terrain and this presented a delightful challenge to Klassen. Consequently, the seafaring swim he was engaged in brought a smirk to his face until this was replaced by a serious visage when something slimy slithered against his stomach.

Fully realizing the difficulties he faced in river combat, the adventurer quickened his already swift pace. The far bank neared but not before a serpentine creature burst into the air with an explosive splash before crashing downward, returning to its natural abode. Accompanying this

strange snakelike fish was a fearsome, low-pitched howling that although barely audible, added dread to the cold, haunting marsh. Within moments, Klassen either directly saw, felt, or heard a plethora of the cold-blooded fish all about him. The onslaught charged his being with a superhuman strength, which he used to navigate to land with unbelievable velocity. Klassen vaulted onto the sanctuary of the shore and looked behind him.

While greedily devouring the oxygen that sustained his energy, the sight before him was one of riotous anarchy. The river that had once been so placid, so moribund, was now alive with black, leaping fish that clamped their maws open and shut in anger. The wailing the denizens of the deep emitted was a chorus of seething animosity. Klassen, now safe from the serpents, watched the spectacle in awe as they now began to fight amongst themselves. Clamping down upon each other with ferocious teeth, the whole host of serpents slashed one another with malicious fervor.

Amid the bloody slaughter, the adventurer, seeking rest from his draining quest, pressed westward (at least what he hoped was westward). The landscape before him was much more open with only a few misshapen trees scattered about here and there. The mist that so heavily clogged his journey up until then seemed less dense. Finding a spot near a tree of an unknown species, Klassen seated himself on what was actually dry ground.

Drying himself as best as he could didn't assuage the involuntary shivering that encompassed Klassen's body. Nonetheless the repose was quite welcome considering the fatiguing voyage he had hitherto been engaging in. The breathing of the adventurer slowly regained its normalcy after the rapid rate it had been accelerated to during his swim. His muscles thanked him for the relaxation but Klassen knew the exercise would serve him well. Altogether, it was a relieving break from the seemingly incessant toils he was crashing through and, despite the bleakness, the adventurer felt comfortable. This comfort didn't last long.

Something was behind him. What sense registered its presence mattered little, but it was there. Turning around, he realized *it* was back. The void-like phantasm had returned and even though it had no eyes, it was clearly watching him as it hovered like a black blanket in the air. It made no hostile move but Klassen knew it meant death and promptly launched himself to his feet, dagger drawn.

At this quick motion, the foreboding phantom made no move except the wavering ripple of blackness that seemed intrinsic to it. Taking advantage of this inability to react, the adventurer plunged his dagger into the void with swift alacrity. With a slight hissing sound, the dagger was enveloped and eaten away; it disappeared all the way to the hilt. Even without a face, it was clear that the phantom smiled at this display of its enemy's impotence.

Realizing the ineffectiveness of his attack, the adventurer bolted away from the phantom and the river, in a direction that he hoped would lead him out of the Marsh of Doom. Blazing with celerity he galloped into puddles, over logs, and through the miasmatic mist. Not taking the opportunity to look behind him lest he lose speed, Klassen surged ahead with all the swiftness his sore muscles could handle.

As the adventurer rushed onward, the landscape around him became more and more open. The trees were almost entirely gone while the ground became firm and dry. So fast did he go that the rushing gale created by his swiftness pricked him like tiny needles, but slowed him not. After what seemed like hours of dashing towards his goal, Klassen was about to collapse in fatigue when he saw, with joy, that the darkness was dissipating.

Could it be true? There was no doubt that it was getting brighter but could the exit of the marsh actually be so close? Striving forward with renewed vigor, Klassen thought it so. The increased energy thus provided catapulted him like a bolt of lightning that sizzled through the air. It was only but a moment until he realized that he had successfully navigated the marsh. In a glaring burst he rushed into brightness and bathed in the warm rays of the sun.

The grass was a lush green; the trees were spruce and alive with healthful vigor; and the sky was an azure blue adorned with the brilliant sun, beaming its happiness down upon the land. Klassen engulfed the fresh air in glee as he felt the exhilaration of achievement. The bright world

he was in now was a massive change from the dank one he had emerged from; he turned around to bid farewell to the mysterious, haunting chamber of wetness.

Upon turning around he saw the black phantasm hovering directly in front of him, menacingly. Before he could react, it darted at him with astonishing swiftness. The same hissing sound that accompanied the disintegration of his dagger came with the attack as Klassen felt the burning void consume him. It devoured his skin in agonizing pain. With but a short holler of indignation, the adventurer was totally swallowed by the malicious monstrosity.

The Marsh of Doom had claimed another victim.

Chapter VI

Snapping awake with a violent start, Klassen peered about with groggy eyes. The forest was bright with the dawning of a new morn as the natural habitat made itself known with the rustic chords of life. With the slightly distorted perception associated with the morning rise, the adventurer wondered where exactly he was and why he was in a forest. His fire had long since burned out, leaving him chilled but otherwise comfortable as the warm blanket of his sleeping bag was nestled tightly against his body. The breathing of the black stallion drew his attention away as he rose to his feet while gathering his gear together.

The thought of what had exactly happened to him raced through the adventurer's mind. It seemed very unlikely that the fantastic journey through the marsh had even taken place. He was, after all, back where he had camped the night before without a single drop of water upon his person. Therefore it must simply have been a dream, he realized. Oh what a dream though!

Despite a dream that most would have admitted as a horrific nightmare, Klassen found it a most enjoyable experience. It reminded him of the grand epics which he read and, as such, brought him excitement simply recalling it. Granted the ending wasn't what he would have scripted himself, but the adventurous crusade through the Marsh of Doom was breathtakingly wondrous, real or imaginary.

Gathering together his gear and mounting his steed, the adventurer looked at the simple northern path and the unknown marsh off to the west. What mysteries did the marsh actually hold? Were they anything like the monsters that seemed so supernatural? Klassen believed not in the supernatural, as he thought it a silly notion of ignorance, but could a creature like the one that had plagued him in his dream exist in the world of reality? Considering both paths for a moment, the adventurer was easily decided on his course.

The rider smirked as the same hesitancy his horse faced in his dream was now manifesting itself in reality. The same darkness and pervading mist that clouded his unconscious trek was also spread like a heavy gray tarp across the Marsh of Doom. With dexterity and skill the rider forced the horse into the moist domain of the marsh.

It was as if he were continuing in his nocturnal escapade when Klassen entered the humid bog. It seemed a flash of eternal recurrence where he would continually, *over* and *over* again, repeat his tiring but magnificent journey into the depths of darkness. Although this incessant experience was an intriguing thought, the adventurer eagerly wanted to serve with the Honor Brigade and not be trapped in some strange quirk of distorted time.

The contemplation of such scientific theories reminded him of his discussions with his old friend Aristotle. His mentor spoke of such conceptions of space and time with their interrelations, but it was merely conjecture. Interesting it was, nonetheless, although Klassen thought very few beings discussed such esoteric topics. Realizing he was simply letting his imagination drift off with lofty ideas, he focused on his course ahead.

Feeling a faint sprinkle of wetness upon his head, Klassen became aware of something alien to his dream: rain. With a chill wind blowing, it seemed more like a spraying from the puddles that dotted the area than it did all out rain, but moist it was regardless. This unwelcome, damp guest further solidified his conclusion that he was now engaged in actual reality. As such, he was on the alert for what actual beings resided in the marsh.

It didn't require the adventurer's precise vigilance to hear the snapping crash that shattered the silence. This all-too-familiar sound originated behind him and although Klassen swiftly scanned behind him, he did so not expecting to see anything; he was right. The steed, however, was not full of the aplomb that the adventurer exuded and neighed in frightening fear at the unnerving explosion. This the rider anticipated and before it could get out of hand, he had calmed his furry friend.

Just as the adventurer began to cogitate the striking resemblance of circumstances, a caw, cawing, attracted his attention. A dark bird flew directly in front of the horse and rider with large, flapping wings. This strange sight, so like his previous encounter but not quite the same, instantly propelled Klassen to squeeze the reins extra tight, but it was too late. Flung from the saddle was he as he splashed to the moist floor in an eruption of water. As he saw his dark horse come back down on all fours, he caught a glimpse of the bird that was fleeing the area. It was simply a raven.

After contorting about in wild throes, the horse bolted off without a goal in mind, into the inner reaches of the moist marsh. Klassen was unable to react in time to prevent his mount from escaping as he pulled himself up off of the ground, squeezing what water he could from his clothing. The fall itself hadn't been so terrible as, forecasting it as he did, he had managed to do a small backward somersault and end up resting on his knees. Even this swift and adroit motion didn't allow him enough time to prevent his stallion from running off; by now it had disappeared into the haze.

The events that had so rapidly taken place were unfortunate for the adventurer, but they weren't able to dampen his magnificent spirits. The wetness that chilled him, the miserable dreariness oozed by the marsh, and the loss of his horse and gear didn't phase his armor of optimism. Simply shaking his head with a pleasant smile, Klassen pressed on.

More from involuntary instinct than any conscious decision, the adventurer continually kept vigilant of what might be behind him. As much as he might convince himself of his experience before being a dream, he reflexively reacted to what the dream had ordained. There had been differences already, but the power of an unconscious meditation seemed to have some strange advantage over reason.

After milling through the bog for quite some time, the adventurer gazed upon an inviting large rock. So attractive was the area with its trees looking almost lush in contrast to the destitute dark-wood that screamed its awful anguish, that Klassen felt obliged to rest in such an oasis. Even the water here, a small pond, was a bright blue that was quite alluring. He neither felt tired with his indefatigable endurance nor thirsty, but sat himself and drink he did.

The overwhelming feature of the oasis was the extremely sweet fragrance that was sprinkled throughout the territory. Its luscious aroma stood out in vast contrast to the dull, insipid odor that he had hitherto been subjected to. Inhaling deeply of this wonderful air, Klassen looked in vain for the origin of this exciting feature of the realm. He saw no flowers that might emit such a lovely delight and didn't know what else could possibly produce it. Consequently, he resigned himself to enjoying the fertile abode while resting.

The olfactory sense was certainly tickled joyfully but this wasn't the only effect experienced by Klassen. A soothing sensation of great relaxation pleasingly swept through his body. Accordingly, the adventurer took the liberty of fully utilizing his resting spot in order to lie down. A tickling feeling pulsed down his limbs. Such a strange occurrence propelled the adventurer to mirthfully chuckle, but he hadn't commanded such a response. Before being able to analyze the situation, he joyfully laughed again. A flood of laughter was now let loose, none of it being prompted by his conscious mind.

Amid this joyous revelry, the adventurer was soon beset by images that at first shocked him but after a few moments of viewing them, inflamed his hilarious jocularity. The dark mist that embraced the area, which Klassen stared up at, was contorting then spinning then pulsating or a combination thereof. Even the drab blackness became a swirling prismatic spectacle of bright color as he watched in astonishment at the éclat. The now-colored mist swam upwards and darted downward like a playful child being swung around by its parent.

After a while the fanciful display produced less and less jovial eruptions of jollity as a different, more profound feeling overcame the adventurer. Wonder. The images before him were exploding with a variety of colors and then sprinkling to the ground. This, combined with his other strange sensations, generated a sweeping air of awe of the world that transformed even a common object

like a tree into an interesting query of riveting contemplation. With mouth agape, Klassen goggled at the surroundings joyfully.

The hours rolled along but the adventurer felt as though only minutes went by. Klassen, as ecstatic as he felt, did realize that something, whatever it might be, was affecting him mightily. He knew that he couldn't waste time in the altered realm of revelry because he had a mission to accomplish. His body was against this endeavor, however, as it felt warm and joyous reposing where it was. The adventurer was equipped with an indomitable will and when his mind truly wanted something, the body would follow. Verily, it complied as he rose to his feet.

It was a wobbly ascension as the hours of recumbency had relaxed his body. His equilibrium was off as he tottered, but didn't fall. The mottled splotches of artistic paint that pranced playfully about altered his depth perception, but not enough to prevent him perambulating forward. As he was about to exit the oasis, Klassen caught a glimpse of the sparkling blue water of the pond and dove to its base in a sudden desire for refreshment. The water tasted sublime to his thirsty being and, oddly enough, food wasn't craved for. After satiating his thirst, the adventurer trekked westward.

The grim reality of the marsh confronted Klassen immediately upon reentering its dark domain, but what might have dismayed most, intrigued the adventurer immensely. As he felt the chilling, but pleasing, breeze while walking, he examined the trees, the branches, and even the very bark with inquisitive delight. The sensations he was experiencing felt so surreal that he wondered about reality. Was he dreaming?

Klassen cogitated this question analytically. Something certainly was amiss as a fire-burst of red fire splashed before him before fading away. Things like that didn't happen in reality and he had long since realized they were hallucinations. There was no doubt his senses were distorted, like in a dream. Upon thinking further back, he recalled that everything had been normal up until his find of the oasis. The oasis. Of course, he thought. Before he could upbraid himself for not realizing the obvious, a queer noise interrupted him.

The noise, though rather soft, reverberated all around the adventurer. Therefore it was impossible to ascertain where it had originated; Klassen searched anyway but saw not its source. As this happened, a foreign guest welled up inside him. It pained him with scathing barbs that slashed from within, in his stomach. Staring in shock at this awful, inward misery, the harsh realization of it all struck him. It was fear.

Even if an unseen foe was somewhere along his westward route, that was the direction he was going. The alien pain was disconcerting but it wasn't about to stop him from going west. Indeed, this direction he traipsed albeit with a throbbing body and unsure step. The bloody war being waged between Klassen's will and the unnerving fear, further exacerbated his difficult trek. Even this turmoil was inflamed by a bizarre occurrence that halted his progress.

Klassen's entire range of vision had gone completely black before returning to the brilliant spectacle of cascading colors, set against a backdrop of grim bleakness. His sight had essentially been robbed from him although it had only lasted a brief moment. Also hailing him was weakness and fatigue but this wasn't all. A swirling gyration also seemed to spin him about in a dizzy whirl that made the adventurer concentrate to maintain his balance.

Despite all these restrictions, the adventurer forged ahead. Immediately, he was beset with a vista of black nothingness and crushed balance; Klassen plunged downward like a besotted buffoon. The muddy water was felt on his legs, on his arms, and face; and it was so very wet. His vision returned but only for a moment as he struggled to crawl onwards while the claw of unconsciousness tugged mightily at his mind. His progress became less and less as he crawled slowly through the wet puddles.

Without sight and feeling weak, he stopped, took a deep breath and collapsed into unconscious darkness.

With a slight hammering in his temple, Klassen wearily opened his eyes. Sight was his but it was only a view of a muddy bog, a puddle to be exact. The coldness of the water he was drenched with sent vibrations of chill streaming along his nerve endings. Upon rising to his knees, the adventurer acknowledged the soreness of his muscles and the properness of his eyesight. His former feelings of euphoric awe and, later, frightening fear, were replaced by his typical sanguineness despite the grim fangs of death that drained the area of life.

When the adventurer looked in front of him a pleasant sight welcomed him, but he instantly questioned its validity. The beautiful delusions he had been privy too could easily construct such an enticing manifestation. The one loophole with this theory, however, was that his hallucinations hadn't been solidified into definite objects, only flashes of abstraction. The two items in front of him were certainly definite objects. It was his gear.

Springing to his feet, Klassen examined the backpacks. A cursory glance gave evidence that all seemed in order, including his faithful axe. The smell of sustenance was sweet indeed and this pleasant aroma sparked the flame of his appetite, which soon became a blazing holocaust. Hastily he foraged for food and upon retrieving it, turned around and sat down. Before he could consume the appetizing nuts that he held, an astonishing sight clutched his attention.

Directly behind the large puddle that the adventurer had toppled into, was a red pond of blood. Like a living entity, it trailed away from his sleeping puddle although some had slipped into this puddle. Reflexively glancing at his person, he found blood streaks that seemed quite fresh on his cloak. This, of course, prompted him to search for wounds but he found none and, despite the thundering upon his skull, was not injured in the least. What had happened? This simple question had many possibilities. Feeling his skull for lumpy bruises revealed nothing and this seemed to rule out the adventurer being attacked. Something, to be sure, had been slaughtered but what exactly had been killed was impossible to ascertain with the clues present. This was especially so since, in all probability, he had never before encountered such a creature. All the slimy gore seemed to tell him was that something had died while something else had carried its carcass off.

The banging upon Klassen's head, like a blacksmith pounding out the abnormalities of a sword, was increasing in magnitude. This unwelcome ailment directed his contemplations to solving this enigma. Yes! he knew, and how simple it was. The intoxicating effects of the unknown agent in the oasis had, like ale, left him with the pain. The adventurer briefly recalled his one and only encounter with the numbing intoxicant ale and, after feeling its stupefying and irksome aftereffects, had vowed not to consume much of the liquid, if any, ever again. He had been forced to drink it by his father but now that constraint was removed.

Using his deductive reasoning, the adventurer wondered whether the oasis itself was simply a snare for wayward travelers. It would have been an elaborate setup indeed and one that required intelligence, so Klassen thought it more plausible that some being was simply taking advantage of the mind-altering oasis. This seemed especially probable as it seemed the honeyed aroma ultimately gave way to unconsciousness.

Content with his findings, the adventurer resumed his nutritional endeavor. The hunger he had been subjected to soon fell away as tasty morsels were agreeably deposited into his empty stomach. This consumption prompted a thirst that Klassen knew had to be satisfied. Not believing he could have forgotten such a vital necessity, he dug in his bags, as he had no desire to drink of the muddy and even bloody, water from the puddles. After a thorough search, he did locate his water, much to his relief. He drank but a little, however, so as to preserve his provisions.

After finishing his meal, his mental attention focused on his gear. How had it mysteriously been retrieved and by whom? This was a pressing question, which he had no answer for, nor, with his throbbing headache, did he wish to pursue. Consequently, the adventurer gathered his belongings and resumed his journey into the unknown.

As he hiked through the mystifying misty marsh, the ache he endured and the two large packs upon his back made his journey not quite ideal, but slow him these encumbrances did not. In fact,

he was making better progress now than when he had left the oasis. The icy chill that hugged him from sleeping in a wet realm didn't even slow him and the idea of creating a fire to warm himself seemed a waste of precious time. Already he thought he had wasted too much time in his unwanted nap.

After perambulating without incident for quite some time, Klassen was faced with a decision. His westbound route split into two different paths. The first and one directly in front of him, dipped downward into what might have been a valley. It was difficult, of course, to really see what was ahead with the thick fog that obscured his vision. The alternative was a course that trailed upwards steeply but looked as though it might level off. The adventurer saw no reason to vary his course by ascending the hill to his right, so he continued forward.

Unexpectedly, a whistling hiss scorched through the stale air. Recognizing the sound immediately, Klassen dove sideways for cover just in time to see the deadly arrow flash by him. Situated behind a deformed, aged tree, he scanned the hazy bog for his foe. Before being able to locate the archer, he spied another deadly shaft blaze by him with magnificent velocity. Curiously enough, the murderous missile was extremely inaccurate, as it had sped down the path he was formerly on instead of being aimed at the tree he was positioned behind. After this second shot had been loosed, a moaning groan diverted his attention behind him.

Feeling safe enough to chance a glance, the adventurer peered to his rear. The sight he beheld was a malefic monstrosity. It was a two-headed creature that seemed to ooze with evil as it salivated a grotesque substance to the ground. It most resembled a mammoth dog; only this monster had glowing yellow eyes and a furry flesh of the deepest ebony. Its fangs were easily as long as the adventurer's fingers and would have no difficulty in chomping a limb clean off. Two foreign objects protruded from its muscular flesh. They were arrows.

Despite the deeply piercing projectiles that caused a gush of reddish-green blood, the fiend advanced towards Klassen with both sets of eyes regarding him with primitive disdain. Instantly realizing that his dagger would be ineffectual, the adventurer hastily flung his gear to the ground and grabbed his axe. Before he could engage the demon, though, a third bolt thundered into the wounded creature, causing it to collapse with a thud.

As the demonic fiend lay spitting up his life force with short coughing bursts, the adventurer raised his axe skywards as he advanced. A cry of protestation rang out from the hill above, halting Klassen's forward motion. Although what actually had been spoken was indiscernible, there was no doubt it was a shout of warning from the ally he earlier thought was a foe. Gazing at the creature he quickly learned why the caution had been uttered: The flowing blood of the monster came in contact with a tree branch and, with an acidic bite, disintegrated it instantly. The archer had now saved the adventurer's life twice and it was his honorable duty to thank him.

Stepping quite clear of the dying demon, Klassen squinted as he searched for his ally on the hill. It was an arduous toil to see what was directly in front of him and thus scanning the hill off in the distance, was far more difficult. Nevertheless, the archer was found. This figure seemed like an ethereal apparition as it was camouflaged with a gray cloak that seemed like a very part of the mist that stifled the area. What exactly the archer looked like was impossible to ascertain due to its protective coloration; only the silhouette of what might be a woodsman could be seen. The only reason this friend was even visible was due to the silent beckoning it made of the adventurer to follow him. Klassen obeyed.

Quickly he gathered his gear together and set off up the hill. The steepness of the incline made the going slow, despite the immense legs that powered the adventurer. Using the drooping arms of the trees to assist him, he scaled upward. The erosion underfoot might have been a problem were it not for the absence of liquid soil. With a final burst of strength, Klassen vaulted to the top of the hill, which was indeed a sort of plateau.

This apex of the marsh was similar than the rest of the area except that the dirt was dry and the view was certainly superior, due to the height. This view, though shrouded in haze, made it possible to behold the decline, or valley, below. The downtrodden wooden inhabitants showed more

solidarity here as they were closely compacted, hugging one another. One thing was missing, however.

The adventurer's climbing ascension had marred his vision of his ally and now that Klassen was where the archer had perched, he could not find him at all. How could one search for such a disguised figure? Setting off along the level plateau, he kept his eyes on alacritous alert. Traveling on and on, however, produced no sight of the slippery apparition.

The course the adventurer was now traversing was far superior with its firm ground and he made good speed. Unfortunately for him, this trail was abruptly blockaded by a powerful barrier. A massive pile of branches, limbs, and trunks of wood towered crudely into the air, several times higher than Klassen's head. It looked as though a gigantic beaver had pillaged a forest and constructed a fortress for its young. Verily it did, in essence, form a barricade as to the adventurer's right lay an almost impenetrably dense copse while to the left was a sharp drop. This descent became even more extreme after the fort ended; it was a sheer drop that would prove nigh impossible to ascend.

This obstacle consumed the entire trail so the adventurer was presented with two viable options: descend down into the valley or clamor over the hurdle of wood. The lower path certainly seemed more accessible but the higher route was far better for hiking. While contemplating the matter, he swiftly came to a conclusion after what transpired next.

As if dropping from the majestic heavens above, a near-translucent figure descended down onto the extreme summit of the wooden castle. Nimble and with great agility the archer—for who else could it be—balanced himself easily upon the acme while he appeared no more than a hazy form. This form was easily one of good build but its demeanor exuded child playfulness. Indeed, this was further seen as the figure beckoned him over the pile, as if daring Klassen to chase him. With sprightliness, the archer bounded away, out of sight.

Without hesitation, the adventurer flung himself upon the wooden beams. He clamored up swiftly although here and there a snapping branch would slow his ascent. Over and over an attack would confront Klassen in the form of a bludgeoning branch or the scathing prick of some undetectable thorn; none of these slowed him though. With much effort he finally reached the apex and saw, in the distance, a wavering form running fleetly to the west.

The descent down the barrier was far easier and faster. After Klassen had reached the ground, he exploded after his unknown ally. Striding along he bellowed out, "Stop!" The figure, which the adventurer could barely make out, complied; this caused Klassen to halt as well as the archer silently pointed down into the valley. As if by a strict military command a roar from the pit was loosed; the adventurer peered downward.

After plummeting into the depths of the abyss, the cliff leveled off to form the valley. Upon this valley floor bellowed the same hideous creatures that Klassen had almost been devoured by. Savagely they screamed and pounded the ground in fury as they espied Klassen. The black fiends seemed countless in number so densely packed were they. Despite any warrior's bravery, intrepidity, and battle prowess, a mere minute in the lair of such malignant beasts would have ended in a swift dismemberment.

After breaking his gaze from such a fearsome display, the adventurer barely caught a glimpse of the friend he wished to thank, bolt off again. Amid the ground-rumbling din created by the malicious monsters, the adventurer pursued. Now and again would he catch sight of movement ahead of him, spurring him on more swiftly.

As the adventurer ran like a speeding thunderbolt, the landscape about him slowly transformed itself. The dense network to his right weren't altered but the emptiness to his left changed dramatically. Trees—that weren't quite as misshapen as before—sprang up, tightly packed together, matching the right side. The course Klassen traversed was thus escorted by this procession of servants; the course itself was gradually declining. Also, the heavy mist that had been such an oppressive swarm was now dissipating, spraying the area with a slight light.

While the mist was swept aside, a towering behemoth of wood was plainly evident some distance off, in the center of the path. The darting figure Klassen chased seemed certainly to have hid behind the colossal pillar, as if playing the child's game of hide-and-seek. Assisted by the downward-sloping gradient, the adventurer reached the tree, smiling.

Relishing with glee, he hardly noticed that he had emerged from the marsh and into the refulgent radiance of the magnificent candle of the sky. However, the adjustment his blue orbs were forced to make caused him to take note of the vast change of brightness. The oaken giant with its manifold arms of thickness awed Klassen by its immensity, as he was now able to see it properly illuminated. He had more important matters at hand, though, and promptly proceeded to rush around the tree, going behind it.

The sight that he beheld produced a hearty paroxysm of uproarious laughter. Such laughter bounded like a triumphant cheer throughout the now-brilliant domain. Despite the weary trek he had undertaken, Klassen was pleased to have waded through the ominous Marsh of Doom. It was, he thought, well worth it.

With a jocular roar he yelled, "Thanks!" Turning to face the west, he set out dutifully. He had seen nothing behind the tree.

Chapter VII

The bright new world of sunshine that Klassen was now in was a vast difference from the gloomy abode he had waded through. The fiery flambeau of the heavens emitted a warmth that was invigorating as it dried his clothes and body. The adventurer quaffed the robust air of vigor eagerly as he found breathing itself a joy. The oppressive mist now removed, visibility was extended greatly and a small plain lay before him.

The plain was decorated with a lush expanse of grass that pulsed with life as a gentle breeze swept through the area. Amidst this green rug bouncing rabbits could be seen, sometimes they stopped and looked around with their ears at attention. Directly opposite of the stifling marsh, some distance off, was the winding path that snaked down from the north before turning westward. A large forest flanked this path. Dominating the area, however, was a colossal mountain that was thrust upwards like a tremendous sword of stone. Klassen set out towards it.

Although the Marsh of Doom was an intriguing domain, the adventurer now found his movement faster, less restricted. The mysteries of the boggy fen behind him had sparked his imagination and he wondered if they would ever be solved. If he didn't have more pressing matters to attend to, the exploration of the marsh could prove very rewarding. As it was, he had already reached the path he had set out for.

The firmament above him, although virtually cloudless, was now difficult to behold due to the ceiling of leaves. Consequently, the luminance was dampened in the forest although a soft, pleasant aura surrounded the realm; the towering mountain also became invisible. The trees here were quite advanced in their development of verdure, unlike most Klassen had witnessed in his springtime voyage. The tch, tch sound of squirrel conversation diverted Klassen's attention upward, off to his right.

Two of the furry little creatures were perched atop a branch, arguing over what appeared to be an acorn. One had the brown nut securely in its grasp while the other was lamenting, yearning for the nutrition. The quarrel quickly resorted to blows, with the food plummeting to the forest floor. Both scrambled after the fallen morsel in haste before another minuscule battle broke out. In a lull of the action, the squirrel that originally had the nut clamped down upon it and darted off. The adventurer smiled at the fight for food and carried on.

In the serene and relaxing atmosphere, Klassen made good speed as he enjoyed the pleasant tranquility. The natural sounds were soon disrupted, however. It was a mammoth roar that came from behind him. Although there wasn't a storm in sight, the rolling thunder pounded throughout the air with powerful intensity. The earth rumbled as if a gigantic titan were bludgeoning the ground, creating chasms with its gargantuan blows. The few animals that weren't already hidden hastily sprinted off in the face of such mighty rumblings. The adventurer knew what he had to do.

Flying off into the cover of the tall statues of the woodland he went. A little way had he gone when he tossed his heavy gear to the ground and extricated his axe. Making sure his dagger was in place at his side, he tensed for a potential battle. The adventurer's heart thumped fiercely against his chest as he waited with agog anticipation.

As the crackling tremors continued, Klassen's imagination blossomed mightily as he wondered what could possibly make such a deafening clamor. Could it be a dragon? This was reminiscent of the epic stories he read, but as far as he knew they were only mythological creatures. Furthermore, he had never seen one nor knew of anyone that had. Nonetheless, he relented that it *could* be true. What would it look like? The adventurer envisioned a mammoth behemoth that dwarfed the tall heights of the grove. It had claws longer than his entire body that could rip a person apart with ease. The scaly skin it had formed an armor of silver that glistened in the gleaming light of the sun. Its eyes were of a deep, penetrating red that matched the flaming coughs it spewed out. As the

adventurer thought thus, he wondered whether he would attack such a powerful creature or marvel at its beauty.

The deafening din had, as impossible as it might have seemed, grown louder. As this happened Klassen became cognizant of a definite pattern in the noise that had once seemed chaotic. It was a beat with what seemed like a drumming rhythm; only somehow it seemed more familiar than that. Looking east with intense concentration, a few of the falling beams of gold from the celestial realm, illuminating whatever it was that approached. The advancing figure in the distance shined with a resplendent gleam, which, of course, reminded the adventurer of a dragon; he resumed his reverie upon that subject.

Such was the concentration of the adventurer's contemplations mingled with the blaring sound, that he noticed not the lean figure behind him. The form had crept up stealthily with a natural catlike grace, even though a bear roaring with all its might wouldn't have snapped the chain that linked Klassen to his thoughts. The being, in all calmness, stood a little to the rear and to the right, of the adventurer.

The origin of the source was now visible as it boomed in a steady beat that the adventurer knew all too well. Dispelled were his dragon fancies; these were replaced with the reality of the moment. The gleaming glint of the reality was now more prodigious despite the faint sprinkling of brilliant rays. Such a radiance and such a pattern of beating clearly indicated what Klassen marveled at: a host of knights.

What a most splendid and glorious company they were! Never before had the adventurer had the grandiose pleasure of viewing such a magnificent sight. He had never before even read of such a charismatic force that surely would crush the abject scamps of dishonor. The adventurer marveled in awe at such a noble and lordly sight that, despite the galloping gusto the knights rode with, all seemed slowed to the point where the spectacle became a painting of militant might. If such a sublime sight could be captured on an easel he would have worked a lifetime to obtain it.

The lordly knights rode with fierce rapidity, five abreast, filling the path almost completely; woe to anyone who might be caught in their path! They were clad head-to-toe in what appeared as invulnerable armor. Over the silverish hue of the armor, along the chest, the horseman wore military tunics of blood red; these were tied at the waist with a leather belt. They were adorned with a shield in their left arm although Klassen couldn't make out the design upon it; and a lengthy lance of such might that the adventurer thought it could serve as a battering ram. The helmets they wore—visors down—had a wide slit for maximum range of sight with small holes at the mouth for breathing; on the sides of the helmet grew two large, curved horns of power with a golden plume running down the center.

The Nobilis riders themselves were giants upon gigantic black stallions that were also armored. The pair was a colossal combination that could easily have stampeded over an army of thieving hobgoblins or treacherous orcs. Klassen, indeed, was quite large but the impressive and mighty knights that rode so elegantly along made him feel like an ant that easily could have been crushed. This didn't deter his respect for the host at all; it heightened it.

Row upon row of the glorious knights rumbled through the forest, causing the very trees to waver in terror. The procession that would terrify the enemies of the horseman held Klassen mesmerized. The speed of the company was so swift that it only took a few moments before they rushed past the adventurer. The accompanying gale and swirling dust assaulted him but stop him from watching the host speed off in the distance, it did not.

Such was the entrancement that Klassen was locked in that he didn't hear the man beside him speak. The figure calmly repeated itself; the adventurer acknowledged the noise but not the meaning. Wheeling about quickly, the adventurer raised his axe threateningly before speaking, "Who are you!?"

The figure was Nobilis and regarded the menacing gesture with a calm disposition. "My name is Kompos. That was a majestic sight, was it not?"

“Yes! it was,” Klassen agreed. “I am Klassen.” Putting his axe down after realizing there was no threat, he extended his hand in friendship; it was warmly received. “Do you know what that wondrous spectacle was?”

Kompnos nodded while the adventurer took a good look at him. Kompnos was a lean, tall man, taller than the adventurer but not as well built. He wore a long flowing balandrana that was a dark gray; it wrapped around his entire body, surely covering some garments beneath it. Slightly muddy leather boots of black covered his feet while a cap of brown with a solitary ruby feather protruding from it. This cap wasn’t able to cover his hair—medium-brown and wavy—that flowed out from the sides. The visage of this acquaintance was slightly aged though pulsed with life as evidenced by the hearty brown eyes. A good, healthy reddish-brown beard adorned this face while an indication of a wrinkle could be spotted here or there. All told, Klassen surmised the man might have seen between thirty or forty summers.

“Yes, I know what that was. So do you.” Kompnos spoke softly and with great reserve although passion could be faintly detected in his manner. The way he spoke reminded the adventurer of a teacher or mentor who was used to being listened to. He liked the man already. As for the words he spoke, Klassen *did* know what he had seen. It was plainly evident to him as soon as he had caught sight of the knights. Could there even be any question?

With vigor and enthusiasm, Klassen beamed, “It was the Honor Brigade!” Kompnos silently agreed with a smile. “What do you know of them?”

Reaching into a fold in his traveling cloak, Kompnos pulled out a piece of parchment and held it up; it was the same Klassen had seen. “This is what I know about the Honor Brigade.” Pointing west he continued, “And that is where I’m going. It would be interesting to have a traveling companion; care to join me?”

Klassen smiled broadly. He had found a good comrade! “Of course, I will! Do you know how far away we are?”

Putting a thin finger to his lips while scratching his beard with his thumb, Kompnos calculated silently. After a moment, he spoke, “According to my figures, we are only a couple of leagues away. Since it is only a little past noon, we should reach our destination before nightfall.”

Gathering his gear together and slinging it upon his back, Klassen eagerly trumpeted, “Let’s go then. The sooner we leave the sooner we get there.”

Before the adventurer started off, Kompnos spoke, “Hang on a moment.” The new acquaintance rummaged through a bag that was on the ground beside him, previously unseen by the adventurer. Curious gadgets were procured with which he made measurements. All the while, he softly murmured, “interesting, interesting.” One measuring device simply looked like a string with numbers on it; Kompnos wrapped this around various black walnut trees. He also used an object that looked like a half-circle, although Klassen knew not what he was doing. After jotting down the results, the man packed together his gear; and the two headed westward, down the path.

The adventurer waited for his new friend to explain the strange proceedings he had just seen but Kompnos didn’t utter a peep. The inquisitive nature of Klassen wasn’t able to contain his curiosity for long, so he inquired excitedly, “What were you doing back there?”

Kompnos punctually related the mathematical calculations he took and how he adored numbers. Calmly he spoke while explaining that he liked to measure most everything: which reminded him to measure the width of the path; this he did quickly and efficiently. He spoke of having mastered the science of mathematics and told of types of this science which Klassen had never heard of.

“Numbers are the language of the universe,” Kompnos said. “They are vastly intriguing and the science of mathematics is never wrong. It is similar to honor: either right or wrong.”

Impressed was the adventurer who readily agreed with an intense nod. It was really hitting Klassen how grand it was to find such a noble traveler along his path. A million questions swam eagerly in his mind, which he wished answered from this kindred spirit of honor. The question of where Kompnos would use his skills was obvious so this inquiry wasn’t needed; so he asked the one that seemed the most pertinent.

“What attracted you to the Honor Brigade, comrade?” Klassen asked.

As the adventurer peered at his friend scratching his beard, Kompnos answered, “That’s an interesting question. For most of my life I have held honor in high regard. I, like you I expect, have seen the degradation of Teramon and the perverse ‘ideals’ being promoted. Thus, I agree with the message of the Honor Brigade. I have no doubt, however, that I would not have come on this voyage some years ago. That was before the tragedy.”

Kompnos spoke stoically but his eyes belied his emotion. Klassen looked on with interest as he listened to his ally’s story. His friend recounted the happiness of his youth when the plague of the beasts hadn’t contaminated his hometown of Attican. The proud and noble Nobilis town, although poisoned with the Universal Church’s insane doctrine, was a beautiful place to live. While still pristine, he had married a darling of a lady and proceeded to have three children: two boys and a girl. Then the beasts starting immigrating in foul droves. After telling his story up to this point without hesitation, Kompnos abruptly ceased talking and stared off into the forest as the two continued to walk at a brisk gait.

Putting his arm on his friend’s shoulder, Klassen spoke compassionately, “You needn’t continue. I can tell you my story if you wish.”

A wayward beam of light illuminated a moist eye that was quickly blinked away. Turning to face the adventurer, Kompnos waved him off and continued speaking. As the beasts had swarmed in revolting waves to pollute Attican, crime and desolation, increased. Kompnos instantly saw that it was prudent to either stop the flow or move. The Universal Church being in complete power, the latter option was far more plausible. Accordingly, his family had prepared to move.

The preparations had been completed quickly and Kompnos had resigned from employment in the Universal Church, where he ironically had worked but had to withhold his honorable views lest he lose his job and means of supporting his family. He had been shocked when he returned home.

“It was a ghastly scene,” Kompnos related with a slightly perceptible change in his voice. “A vile gang of ogres, hobgoblins, and imps had broken into my home and slaughtered my family.” At this sentence Klassen’s fist clenched and unclenched in violent rage as he listened intently to his kinsman. “I, in a frenzy, ravaged the drunken band, killing all six of them. Then I was betrayed.

“The very scamps I was forced to work for turned on me with fury. They proclaimed me an enemy of the people for avenging my family’s death. I was barely able to escape with my life as I was run out of town.”

Able to contain his fiery emotion no longer, Klassen roared out, “I hate the beasts and dishonorable wretches! There is no doubt that we shall triumph for victory *is* inevitable.”

Kompnos was touched by the awesome vivacity Klassen exuded but struggled not to show his own emotions; he mostly succeeded. “I wondered about for quite some time until I happened upon one of the Honor Brigade fliers. As soon as I saw it, I knew where my home was.”

His companion’s calm disposition gradually mollified Klassen’s anger as the adventure realized how linked the two were. Although living drastically different lives, they had both risen above the filthy midden of perverse ideas while being towers of virtue. The bond that linked them was, of course, honor.

After thanking his friend for recounting such a tragic tale, the adventurer told his own tale. Klassen did so with brilliant brio as he enthusiastically spoke briefly of his childhood, and at length about the fabulous day where he had found the honor beacon of spectacular splendor. Aggressively acting out his exploits—especially the battles—he became extremely animated. As time quickly skipped along, the adventurer retold all the appropriate events leading up to his meeting with Kompnos. Throughout the speech, Kompnos would softly speak, as if to himself, “interesting, interesting.”

Both proud Nobilismen were on the same wavelength of thought that they both instinctively shook each other’s hand. They were brothers now, in honor. As if mentally linked, they both spoke the same words at the same time: “Honor is Life.”

All the while that the comrades were telling of their lives, they were making good speed through the forest path. Now, however, they gained speed as though the tales told intensified both of their already strong wills. For their entire trek together the forest had provided a great, domed ceiling that had mostly blocked the light. This dome was now slowly being penetrated more and more by lances of light that came raining down upon the two. Not very far down the path the entire illumination of the fiery sun was thrust upon the ground as the forest abruptly ended.

The two compatriots presently walked into the opening and were immediately flooded with brilliant warmth. The clearing wasn't very large as the trees regained their dominance only a little ways off. There was the foot of the mountain, which sloped upwards at a good rate, with the path climbing along as well.

Kompnos immediately threw his gaze upwards as Klassen watched him in wonder. Kompnos waved his hands about while clearly contemplating something of importance. Faintly heard were numbers being thrown around, added and subtracted. The mathematician took off his cap while rubbing his brown, wavy hair for inspiration. He put it back on and then scratched his beard. After several moments of this and other mind-spurring actions, he stopped and looked at the adventurer.

"It is quite interesting," the mathematician related. "The peak of the mountain is approximately four thousand komps, or four kilokomps if you prefer, from sea level." Seeing a look of faint puzzlement on Klassen's face, Kompnos continued, "Ah, you don't know what a komp is. How would you? After all, I made it up and am the only one to use the measurement. I found the present system of measurement quite inadequate and ridiculous. To not waste time, let's just say the prevalent systems of measurement are not mathematically harmonious. So I created a system whereby a sequence of tens are used from one step to another. The komp is the basic unit whereas a decakomp is ten komps; a hectokomp is one hundred komps; a kilokomp is a thousand komps etc.

"Before you inquire what a komp itself is, give me a moment to best show you." Kompnos extracted a string with numbers written on it and measured Klassen with it. The adventurer was almost precisely twice the length of the string. "You, my friend, are approximately two komps tall. So one komp is approximately one half of your height."

The adventurer was now thoroughly convinced of his comrade's intelligence and respected him greatly for his abilities. He merely muttered an exclamatory "wow" while reveling in the wisdom of his grand Nobilis kinsmen. The sixth law of Honor Brigade, "Nobilismen are the supreme beings," echoed in his mind as he had no doubt that it was true. After his amazement had worn off a bit and allowed him to reclaim his senses, he wondered how the mountaintop looked. He gazed up at it.

The sight the adventurer was greeted by was one of massive power and magnificence. The mountain jutted out from the ground with rocky rapidity into a towering beacon of power. Into the very clouds it soared as if destined to leave the very planet by breaking through the upper atmosphere. What possibly could have stopped it? A plethora of trees climbed upward most of the way along the steps of the mountain, but the very acme of the mountain is what attracted the attention. It was oh so far away, but Klassen knew exactly what it was.

The adventurer lifted his mighty shoulders towards the sky and was a figure of a proud and aristocratic Nobilis warrior as he marveled at what he beheld. Klassen felt the swirling euphoria that resulted from the knowledge that such wonders that he saw were possible. They were not only possible, he knew, but probable once a united force set out to accomplish them. Unity, he knew, was vital.

Perched atop the mountain was a mighty eagle's aerie that easily ruled over the area below with a scrutinizing eye. It was an awesome aureole that radiated with an ultra-divine light. The light, the force, this lighthouse pulsated with was the vibrant quality of honor. The adventurer thought that any wicked beast being subjected to its cleansing rays would surely disintegrate instantly. All life itself seemed intertwined with the structure and would not the forest crumble and wither away if it were removed? Perhaps not in reality, but the force it exuded could surely make one feel as though it would.

There was no doubt what the construction was. It was the headquarters of the Honor Brigade:
Imperium Castle.

Chapter VIII

After recovering from his awe, the adventurer exclaimed with his usual vigor, “What a mighty castle! Don’t you think so Kompnos?”

“Without a doubt,” Kompnos agreed with exact equanimity. “Are you ready to visit Imperium Castle?”

Klassen believed his friend was juicing him to see how much enthusiasm he could bequeath but thought it all in good humor. The hunger from their journey rumbled its discontent but the adventurer couldn’t stop now, could he? Being so close to such stunning splendor was incentive to dauntlessly brave far more than mere cravings of sustenance. He expected Kompnos to feel the same and after saying, “But of course,” the pair resumed their journey after their brief abeyance.

As they strolled across the clearing that severed the trees of the plains from those of the mountain, it was abundantly clear which way the knights they had seen before had gone. A myriad of hoof prints dotted the dark brown ground and led—in perfect precision—towards the mountain path. This clear evidence of horses had been mainly shaded before, but Kompnos took full advantage of the propitious situation to measure the indentations in the ground; he did so quickly and it only took but a moment.

The two comrades’ view of the sublime castle was marred once they started upon the mountain path; it was similar in scope to their previous surroundings as it was quite shaded by manifold wooden draperies. However, there were a couple differences. The physical difference was obviously the upward incline that hampered the travelers but little. More importantly was the supreme sense that the area was protected by a cloak of puissant vigor. An air of righteous invincibility floated powerfully through the air.

The path started off very straight but soon it turned right to circumnavigate a steep cliff that sprung up almost exactly vertically. Their course thus turned sharply right, and then came back to the left ever so slightly. It continued to do this and it was entirely clear that they would slowly circle the mountain during their ascent. A tangle of trees off to their right and an almost impassable mountain face—essentially a wall—to their left, made their present course, along the beaten path, the most expedient one.

The rising wall to their left, although of fertile soil evidenced by the verdant grass, was curiously devoid of trees. The steep incline might have been reason enough to prevent this growth, but islands of tree remains—stumps—dotted the landscape. These skeletal remains were obviously not all simple coincidence. The question was really more of a “why” than a “how.”

As the pair hiked along, Klassen inquired of his ally, “Do you see those tree stumps?” After his friend nodded, he continued, “Why do you think that has been done?”

Kompnos, true to his nature, scuttled off to measure the width of a few tree stumps. After running back to the path, the two started off again but the adventurer had to wait for an answer to his questions. The mathematician had his left finger on his lip while his thumb caressed his beard; which could mean only one thing. Klassen had hoped for a quick retort but after several moments of silence from his companion, he returned to examining the sylvan scenery.

Although the sky held but a few floating pillows that lazily drifted about, the sun itself was prevented from warming the travelers directly as the mountain blocked the burning ball. This lack of heat waves combined with the rising elevation, made for a chilly hike. To top it off, a swirling wind pranced about to and fro like a playful child; this child had a glacial touch. Consequently, the two trekkers pulled tight their cloaks to fend off the wayward touch of frigidity.

After rounding another small bend in the path, an uncanny sight presented itself. It was in the center of their course and something neither of them had ever had the fortune of seeing before. Klassen’s response to it was one of jubilation as he gesticulated emotionally for his comrade.

Kompnos, on the other hand, observed the scene with reserve and silent sangfroid. Both advanced to investigate further.

When they closed in upon the spectacle, Klassen grinned widely while his friend took measurements of the scene. Before them was the gray corpse of a hideous hobgoblin. It was lying in a pool of blood that was rather stale, but not extremely aged; this was ascertained by it still retaining most of its liquid form. In many respects the beast seemed like a typical hobgoblin, but it differed in one main aspect. The beast was almost precisely flat.

The poignant stench of the hobgoblin wafted to the travelers' noses; it was typical, but of course, unwelcome. Through this odor, the two inspected the area surrounding the cadaver: It was indented, forming a tiny coffin for the beast. The bones of this beast appeared crushed beyond compare with its guts and small brain so pounded into the ground that it seemed as though this joining was entirely natural. The hobgoblin was decorated with what appeared like chain mail and the remains of a wooden shield that had been shattered into tiny tooth-size bits. A short sword had escaped the destruction as it lay unharmed a short distance away. This weapon gave some indication as to how large the beast was; being crushed as it was made it appear far smaller than it obviously was. In effect, Klassen thought perhaps it would have been as tall as his chest.

While Klassen retrieved the short sword that seemed more like a large dagger to him, Kompnos searched around for a spell before finding what he searched for: more craters. While the adventurer tied his discovery to his gear, the mathematician found one crater before and one after the corpse. After measuring the width and length of the canyons themselves, he measured the distance between each of the indentations. Hastily he scribbled down the figures upon his notes; as if on their own volition these utensils seemed to appear and disappear rapidly whenever needed.

The two didn't let the spectacle slow them down much, as intriguing as it was to the both of them. Thus, they continued hiking. Klassen could have easily poured forth with flowing speech but he waited for Kompnos to speak; the mathematician promptly did so.

"That was an interesting sight, no doubt. As we both know, it was some type of a large object—perhaps a boulder—that crushed our little *friend* back there." Klassen laughed at this joke but his ally remained as stoic as ever. Kompnos continued, "It certainly sheds light on the question of the stumps over there. It is a simple and effective way to not only see an advancing army, but to deter its movement as well."

The adventurer was easily able to see the same as his confrere, and presumed that the size of the boulder (as Klassen believed it was), its speed, and perhaps other information he couldn't think of, could be foretold by his companion's calculations. Also he might have heard a concurring opinion that it looked as though the beast had flung his weapon aside and braced for the powerful collision by holding his shield up. However, this information was irrelevant at the moment. The more pressing matter is the one he gave speech to: "How long ago did the beast die?"

Scratching his beard, Kompnos answered, "The blood is rather fresh. I would estimate no more than a few hours. This, however, is not an exact science so I can't narrow it down any more than that."

Upon hearing these words, the adventurer hastened his pace until he was essentially jogging. His compatriot matched this pace with what might have been surprising ease given the Kompnos' older appearance. Moving along at this fairly brisk pace, the pair pounded through the winds that, while thoroughly fresh and necessary for life, were chilling to the travelers, especially the exposed visages of them both. These raging winds also brought a distinct and instantly recognizable smell upon its wings: that of the dead and dying.

As if in answer to this silent call of death a swarm of circling vultures greedily greeted the pair. Of course these birds are not warriors, they are scavengers of the dead: in effect, grave robbers. They flew past the travelers, down the path, and quickly descended upon the mashed beast. This flock of carrion-devourers warred amongst themselves, as the meal was quite skimpy considering the circumstances. Pecking and ripping apart the flesh that did remain, the vultures that did eat did

so merrily; the others protested in violent calls of agitation. Before long the flying denizens had completely picked apart all the available meat before flying off in pursuit of more.

The building excitement that was palpable between the two travelers didn't have long to wait to be further inflamed. Before hiking too far past their recent grisly discovery, they found more evidence of gore. Hurrying to behold what exactly was before them, the adrenaline pulsed through their veins and heightened their intensity.

Strewn along the path and outside of it as well, were more corpses. All were vile beasts although none seemed to die in exactly the same way. A massive ogre bedecked in leather armor was laying to their left; its hideously deformed head was planted some distance off. Off to the right was the cadaver of a stretch-faced imp whose normally yellow skin was now becoming white. The source of its destruction was clear: a large lance was shooting upward from its chest and into the heavens above; it looked as though it pinned the beast to the very ground. Directly in front of them, along the path, lay what looked like a hobgoblin; it was lying upon its stomach and not much more than its gray cape could be seen. They advanced upon it.

With a hard, swift quick, Klassen tested the beast to see if it was alive. Making only the move of a carcass as it did, he bent down and turned over the beast. There was no doubt that it was a gray hobgoblin with grotesque boils upon its body; however it was surely alive. With a dagger in hand, it lunged at the adventurer hoping to catch him off guard. Klassen leaped back to avoid the attack, dodging the beast's attack.

As the adventurer withdrew the handy blade at his belt, his friend Kompnos withdrew a quarterstaff that was somehow hidden beneath the folds of his billowing balandrana. With agility that belied his age, the wooden staff—with metal balls fastened to each end—was unleashed as the hobgoblin as it was still on its knees. With expert skill, the weapon whooshed through the air and collided with a smash with the back of the foeman's cranium. Before it could fall to the ground, another powerful blow struck it flush in the face, causing the hideous creature to whirl about and land on the ground, face-up. Although it was clearly unconscious, the strike of death came as Kompnos lifted his quarterstaff into the air and crushed the enemy's nasal area.

Amid the gore that erupted from this blow, Klassen eagerly proclaimed, "Thank you comrade! You are quite skilled with the quarterstaff, and also in concealing it! The battle must be raging somewhere and I know I want to be a part of it. Life to Nobilismen; death to the beasts!" With this enthused utterance, the pair put away their weapons: Klassen put his dagger in its sheath while Kompnos hid his weapon beneath his cloak although it simply seemed to disappear to anyone watching. They set off after this, even quicker than before.

As they rushed higher and higher upon the mountain, they beheld various corpses scattered about, although not one was of the famed Honor Brigade. The deaths appeared mainly from cold steel though a few dents in the earth housed some casualties in what looked like the footsteps of a giant. Following the pair was the host of vultures who had their feast greatly enlarged after the skimpy side dish they had at first encountered.

At first faintly but soon more audible were the sounds of battle that they had seen so many signs of. The pathetic cries of the dying mingled with roaring yells of warrior-souls. It was a raucous cacophony to the pacifist but jubilant sweetness to the lover of war. Accompanying these sounds was the music composed to spur deeds of heroism on. The quick drumming Klassen easily recognized while his heart beat quickened with its beat; but the piercing sound that was a bagpipe was unknown to him but nonetheless inspired him. This sweet sound flew like a dominating eagle upon the winds, rousing the adventurer to a frenzied fury. Without hesitation, both honorable Nobilismen bolted forward as fast as they could.

The slow curvature of the path that wound around the mountain now made itself fully known. With the speed of the runners and this aforementioned curvature, the glaring beams of the sun that had been hidden for so long now were unleashed. These rays of light instantaneously met the two but in no way hindered their progress. In fact, it hastened it. For in the distance, they saw what they sought.

Gleaming with a beaming brilliance were soldiers of what could only have been noble members of the Honor Brigade. Both on foot and horseback did these warriors fight, and with what ferocity did they fight! It was obviously apparent, among the din of warfare, that the battle was a rout with the beast force being caught between two forces of honor. Therefore this trespassing force was attempting to flee into the forest, away from the path. They were not accomplishing this well as the carnage the two comrades beheld was staggering, yet satisfying. Brandishing their weapons, the two set off to join the slaughter.

The beasts that still were able to fight were an absolutely deplorable lot, especially when compared to the resplendent warriors of virtue. These beasts were mainly outfitted with leather armor, a sword, and shield that, while respectable enough in itself, seemed like peasant's wear to the glorious coats of mail and plate that the Honor Brigade was equipped with. Furthermore, the beast soldiers, if they could be called such, were running in such terror that many had flung their weapons away in despair. In contrast, the warriors of honor held absolute discipline while they pursued their foes, looking like bloody devils of war with the fanciful red cloaks and horned helmets they wore.

Such was the discipline and battle effectiveness of the host the travelers endeavored to join, that virtually all of the remaining foes fell in one harsh attack. First came a volley of deadly arrows and bolts, which seemed to be loosed from nowhere and into the very hearts of their targets. This deadly attack, in itself, caused much havoc as the missiles tore through the leather armor with extreme ease, butchering many. However, this was immediately followed up by a swift, exact charge of the cavalry. This wall of steel death wiped out uncounted villains. After these, the infantry stormed after the few remaining invaders to complete the marvelous massacre. Verily, all was done in precise formation.

Before the two advancing travelers could join in the carnage, a small detachment of knights galloped towards them. There were three in all; Klassen got a better look at them than he had before. All of them were equipped with large shining swords; their lances undoubtedly deeply embedded in a degenerate enemy. The red tunics the knights wore were fancifully emblazoned with intricate designs while the center held the symbol of the Honor Brigade: a sword in the midst of flames; the flames were golden with a background of ruby. This same sacrosanct symbol also adorned their long, potent shields. One difference between the knights that approached was that the center one was adorned with a purple plume instead of a golden one; the double horns were the same. This lead knight was the one that hailed the travelers.

"State your allegiance!" bellowed the main horseman with a slight metallic rasp as he talked through a helmet, visor down. The powerful voice commanded respect as Klassen and Kompos immediately stopped their forward progress.

Klassen felt jubilant among his honorable kinsman. This same mood was reflected in his speech: "We come seeking the Honor Brigade! Can't we join the slaughter of the vile beasts?"

The knights sheathed their weapons after a nod from the leader; the commander lifted his visor to examine those before him. His face was rather tanned and was decorated with severe scars: one along his forehead; another from the tip of his right eye down along his cheek; and yet a third that had slashed along the tip of chin. He was clean-shaven with bright blue eyes that shined with a powerful vitality. After a stern, penetrating gaze, he hopped off the horse with surprising agility for someone bedecked in full armor.

"Attention," he barked and the two travelers quickly complied. "Put your weapons away comrades. The battle is taken care of." After investigating the features of the two before him, the knight slammed his right gauntleted fist against his chest, causing a raspy crash. His hand thus placed firmly against his heart, he rang out with force, "Honor is Life." A simultaneous retort was immediately heard by not only the two knights but Klassen and Kompos as well. The salute in itself seemed to hold a majestic air of power that was easily palpable to all present.

The man who led the knights now eased up while smiling. He slipped off his gauntlet and extended his hand first to Klassen, then Kompos. "My name is Ziplit, comrades. I hope you had a pleasant trip." After exchanging names and pleasantries, Ziplit continued, "Would you like

a ride back to Imperium Castle?" This inquiry was eagerly answered in the affirmative by Klassen, and a simple nod from Kompnos.

Ziplin called one of the knights over for Kompnos to ride with while Klassen rode with the lead knight himself. This was swiftly accomplished and the group was ready to set off. With a "go, go, go" pronounced by Ziplin, they set off at a good gallop.

They rode in silence past the battle that was now waning and almost over. A straggler here and there was mercilessly hunted down and disposed of with a quick, slicing termination of solid steel. A unit of infantry was prowling over the wounded; helping his fellow brother-in-arms. All in all it was a rather quiet scene now but the slew of corpses that dotted the landscape gave testament to the fact that a battle like that of a dragon in full fury had recently taken place.

Off in the distance, barely seen in the forest, some action was taking place. Ziplin spoke, "There is the instigator of this foolhardy assault upon our land." Just as he spoke, a band of knights launched after the tiny figure. The leader continued, "That pathetic fool our Honor Knights are about to slaughter is none other than a slimy orc. Those little twerps are our greatest enemies, even though they are usually the least intimidating with their potbellies and timid natures. They are the evil puppet-masters; both of you know that, right?"

Klassen piped out, "I can't say I know much about them other than they have ripped me off! I learned to stay away from their scams though." Kompnos related a similar stance, just as briefly.

Ziplin spoke, as if to himself, "You will learn, you will learn." Just as he spoke the knights in the distance caught the green orc and delivered justice with a swift stroke of steel.

After riding past the main site of the battle, a strange sight grabbed Klassen's attention. He instantly inquired of the meaning of it, "What is *that*, Ziplin?" The entire group looked over to where Klassen pointed as the question was spoken.

A group of prisoners had been taken and rounded up a short distance from the battle. This was peculiar simply because of the wholesale slaughter that had occurred; it simply didn't fit right with Klassen that prisoners were being taken. After all, the Honor Brigade preached a warlike attitude and destruction of one's enemies. There was something different from the prisoners from the other invaders though. In fact, all shared this one similarity. They were all Nobilis.

Ziplin spoke about the sight, "While we, of course, deplore those who are against us, we know that many do so out of ignorance and pollution of the mind. So we capture those that defy us by attacking. We send them through an intense process of enlightenment to weed out the revolting pollution they've been subjected to. Most we can reach successfully. Those we can't get through to are punished for their crimes by death."

"Can't they simply fake it?" rejoined Kompnos.

Ziplin responded quickly as if he anticipated the question, "It is possible, of course. However, it is unlikely. I can't reveal any more to you now though, especially since you aren't yet members of the Honor Brigade."

The party pressed onward away from the battlefield and the intense score of belligerent music faded slowly away. They sped along unmolested by any obstacles of merit. It seemed all the inhabitants of the mountain had been present at the battle but this wasn't altogether true as the occasional bird was seen flying along with ease.

The horses, of course, traveled much faster than the adventurers walking and so the curving around the mountain went very swiftly. Here and there conversation sprung up like a flower but about nothing too interesting. Small talk it was. As for Klassen, his thinking wasn't what it normally was as he was extremely excited to be so near his destination. When asked a question, he would speedily reply. Not much contemplation went into these utterings but there was no doubt that what he did say was from deep within the well of his heart. Further making conversation difficult, although soothing to Klassen, was the forceful winds that told of their velocity.

After riding some minutes rising ever upward, the trail finally straightened itself out. They had reached the summit of the mountain, which was in all actuality a towering plateau. To both sides

rose mammoth trees of noble fir that transformed the path into a divine hall, fit for the kings of the world. A clatter of hooves upon a stone road alerted one to the presence of this far more productive path. The sun was glimmering gracefully and in the distance was their goal.

Upon seeing this objective so long desired, Klassen ardently asserted, "There it is! Can't we ride any faster?"

Ziplin glanced at his two fellow knights with smile, which was returned. He spoke, "Both of you plan on joining the Honor Brigade, right?"

One voice was ardent while the other calm, but both replied in the same way: "Of course." They sped off like a streak of lightning.

Chapter IX

It was massive, colossal, humongous. It was, of course, Imperium Castle. It soared so mightily into the azure firmament that one standing at the base had to strain one's neck to view the awesome peaks that seemed to touch the sun. The height was not the only impressive feature. The sheer thickness and magnitude of the structure seemed impossible to even imagine, yet here it stood looking as if an entire mountain of stone had been used in its construction. Who but a fool would attempt to lay siege to such an impregnable fortress?

Of all the castles that Klassen had envisioned, he saw a moat. There wasn't one here, nor did it appear to need it. Enormously thick walls cascaded downwards before sloping at an angle to the ground, protecting the front; the sides and most likely the back (the back couldn't be seen), were protected not only by walls but by a steep cliff that was surely impossible to climb in any numbers. Thus attack only seemed plausible from the front but one thing severely hampered this: Klassen saw no gate of entrance.

As the adventurer searched for an entryway, he marveled at the circular towers at the corners and one in the center. They were no doubt adorned for war with archer's windows lined upon them and a summit which Klassen felt sure held some mighty weapon of destruction. Also decorating the fortress were monstrous flags from the peaks and large banners that hung down from the parapets; both displayed the divine sword of honor. These red and gold spectacles stood out well against the white-colored walls.

Try as he might, Klassen was at a loss to figure out a way into the massive tower of power that he stood in front of. He didn't have to wait long though. Ziplitin noticed the adventurer's curiosity and when a glance at Komptos was only greeted by "interesting, interesting," the lead knight pulled out a bugle. He piped out three short notes followed by a long final note. This sequence was repeated by a tiny dot upon the center tower, surely in answer. However, nothing immediately happened to allow them entrance.

Ziplitin put away his instrument and jumped off of his sable mount, motioning the rest to do the same; they did. He proceeded to begin a conversation as if all was going as planned. "So how do you gentleman like our impressive Imperium Castle?"

Although Klassen yearned to talk of a different topic, he responded, "It is gigantic!" Gazing at it, he continued, "It must have taken many workers many years to create such a structure."

"It didn't take as long as you might think. That, in itself, is impressive too." All the while Ziplitin spoke he had a smile on his face; it looked like it had been there forever yet only a few hours back it had been a visage of assiduous austerity. "What do you think Komptos?"

Komptos answered serenely, "Surely it is interesting. According to my calculations, Imperium Castle is five hundred komps—units of measure of my own design—wide and easily several kilokomps long; the walls are approximately two hundred komps high (the towers being two hundred and fifty komps) and thirty komps thick. Impregnable. How do we enter though?"

With a nonchalant wave upward, Ziplitin responded to the question that Klassen was silently screaming: "It is being taken care of. As for your mathematical skills, they seem quite impressive. I hope you can put them to use." Barely discernible to the naked eye was a curious contraption that had seemingly been wheeled beside the central tower. Its top hung over the wall and a small glimpse of descending movement could just barely be made out.

Ziplitin continued speaking with an air that nothing out of the ordinary were happening, "We shall be inside in a few minutes or so. Will the two of you be wanting to eat first, or take a tour of the premises?"

The travelers exchanged a swift glance; Komptos nodded his assent to Klassen's unspoken words of agreement. Klassen spoke as he beamed, "We would like to take a tour as soon as

possible. I sure am hungry and I believe Kompnos is as well, but we can change that right now.” Hastily the adventurer extricated his bag of food and shared with all whom wanted a snack of nuts or barely ripe fruit. As it turned out, the knights declined the offer while the traveling pair consumed the sustenance greedily.

As they ate, the object from above descended quickly. After only about a minute or so the object presented itself with a better view. It was a platform that looked quite like a large shack as it had a covering like that structure. Lowering it on its path were four large black chains that were securely connected to the corners of the object. Before long it descended fully to the ground with a slight whooshing noise upon impact.

The platform was now fully in view and was surrounded, about chest-high, by gray metal railings. Ziplin unfastened the front railing and led the troop, horses and all, onto the spacious platform. Clinks of hoof upon metal were heard, as the platform itself was made of the same gray metal as the railings, only thicker. The ceiling and supports were likewise made of this metal. When everyone was securely into the lift, Ziplin closed the gate and blasted away upon his bugle. They began to rise.

The ascent was swift and smooth. As they rose up in the skies, Klassen felt like a king looking down upon the world. He absent-mindedly finished up his snack and put it away as he gawked at the mammoth noble firs. They had risen above these enormous trees and as they became smaller, they resembled a host of citizens waiting to hear the eloquent words of a mighty ruler. The platform lift was a steady ride and was so sturdily built that it didn't even waver beneath the weight it held. Within a few minutes the group was dangling just outside of the top of the city walls.

The pair of newcomers both watched with interest as they were pulled over the walls, onto solid stone fortifications. The contraption itself that had transported them was a strange maze of levers, gears, and metal. It was wheeled and after the company exited the platform, was pushed off to join a whole host of such devices. Kompnos was eager to investigate the device as was evident by his intense concentration upon the vehicle, but withheld his curiosity for the time being.

Soldiers roamed about who were obviously manning the walls. They were equipped with long bows that were as large as their entire bodies and strapped to their backs; they wore red leather jerkins. When Ziplin was seen by these fellow warriors, fists were smashed against hearts and “Honor is Life” reverberated across the spacious area. With a whisper, the lead knight told them that this greeting was known as the Honor Salute.

Ziplin enjoined his two knights, “Take these two gentleman’s gear and place it in the barracks. Go, go, go.” They speedily followed these orders. “I will be back quite promptly but feel free to look around. The view of the town is quite stunning. You can see it from over there.” Ziplin pointed and then left the pair to themselves.

Although there were numerous unknown devices hidden by black tarps that spurred the imagination, the allure of the town drew their attention. They hurried over to see the sights. They were not disappointed by the majestic view.

The first sight to catch Klassen’s attention were the two long, sloping stone pathways that wound down into the town; both were on opposite ends with one being for upwards travel while the other went down. Several horses and carts were frequenting these paths. Also near these were more contraptions that had lifted them up; they were in use. Looking closer at these roads, he saw statues lining the sides. Although what exactly they were couldn't be made out, Klassen was sure they were magnificent.

The first structure at the bottom of the valley below was the actual castle the area was named after. A humongous courtyard adorned the center while large peaks of the castle jutted out along the sides. Although it was difficult to see from the angle the adventurer was at, it appeared as though the sides of the castle itself was connected by arching over the top of the courtyard. This not only formed a walkway over the courtyard but also had peaks of its own, containing something other than a mere crossing. What it held he knew not but it did seem fantastic as it seemed to float over the land below with no beams of support.

Klassen's enjoyment of the spectacular view was cut short when Ziplin promptly returned; however, the splendid feeling of honorable camaraderie remained in full blossom. Before the company started on the tour, the adventurer took a final gaze from his lofty height; the town was warm and friendly with multiple buildings flanking a stone road that sailed down the center, dividing the town in two.

"Thank you for waiting so graciously for me gentleman," Ziplin congenially said. He had taken off his armor, although his red military tunic and sword remained. "I assume we are ready, right?" After seeing the eager nod and smile of Klassen along with the aloof nod of Kompnos, the leader knew the answer to his inquiry. "Shall we walk down or take the lift?"

Before consulting one another, Klassen ardently inquired, "Which is faster?" As Ziplin pointed to the lift, the adventurer had his mind made up. When attention was focused on Kompnos to see what he thought, he silently agreed. Within but a few moments, they were headed downwards in the lift.

As they went down and enjoyed the view, Klassen noticed something about the leader's tunic that he hadn't noticed before. Along the top, above the flaming sword, were several rows of arcane-looking symbols. Simply put the symbols resembled lightning bolts but were so decorated as to give off a feeling of even more than the fury of a storm.

Ziplin saw the attention being paid to this ornamentation on his uniform and spoke before Klassen could inquire of them. Pointing to them, he spoke with pride, "These are Honor Bolts. For every slaughter of a foul beast, you get one. I currently have fifty four, but I have to add four more for today's great skirmish."

Klassen was visibly impressed while Kompnos hid his interest. Before the adventurer could think more of the honorable bolts, the group landed in the courtyard. This wide area was far cleaner than any other he had previously seen; the stone the courtyard was made of was immaculately well kept. Dotted about were statues of magnificent warriors who surely had fought valiantly for the Honor Brigade. Benches held several citizens who were shaded from the sun by luxurious green-leafed trees.

"This, of course, is the courtyard," Ziplin started with ease, as if he had given the tour many times before. "The castle is to our sides and above us. We don't have time to examine the castle thoroughly, but know that the leaders of the Honor Brigade are stationed there. Also, the barracks are situated in the castle; you two will be staying there for the time being."

Ziplin pointed to the statues and grand architecture as he continued, "As you can see, the artisans that we have are quite skilled. Thus, the Honor Brigade is not strictly a war community. We have learned men of all fields, including art and architecture. You won't see our grand style of architecture anywhere else in the world as it was created right here. Of course we know that someday our views of honor will encompass all of Teramon."

The comrades were given a moment to absorb the soaring heights, flying buttresses, and detailed arches. The structure was meant and succeeded at being, a piece of art rather than merely a place to live in or work. Artist depictions of battles adorned the walls and the lifelike nature of them was astounding to behold. These paintings seemed to breath with life and had the power to awe. It would take hours to gaze upon all the works of art displayed merely on the outside of the castle, and since the sun was falling, they cut the admiration of this area short. They moved on.

As they moved from the wide courtyard to the smaller road that ran forward, buildings came into view on either side. Each building had a life of its own with more splendid artwork, although these structures were smaller than those before. Also interesting was the fact that though each building had its own style, all on their right were connected as well as all those on the left. It seemed that they had blossomed as the need had arisen.

"These are the schooling facilities," Ziplin pronounced. He pointed to the first building on their left. "This one is where I teach the art of war. Since so many despise our beloved honor, this was the first schooling building that was built. In essence it is a small fort and could serve that purpose if need be. However, the towers it provides are usually used for simply getting some fresh

air.” Going from more of a lecture to one of pride, he continued, “Our walls, of course, have never been breached before. Also, the two statues that you see before the entrance are none other than my father and grandfather whose tradition I have carried on.”

Klassen’s appreciation of this leader’s deeds was growing as time went on. Ziplin would be a good mentor, he thought. The adventurer was enthralled by the many sights around him and walked along lost in thought as the tour continued. The faces he saw were all cheery and happy which showed the awesome power of honor. In every field he knew that honor pervaded while spurring on the other virtues, like intelligence and wisdom. The place was a paradise and Klassen contemplated the entire vision to be a fantastic dream, but it was certainly real he knew.

Poking their heads into some of the buildings, they saw learning and enlightenment; all were vividly enamored, teachers and students alike. Anticipating the question as to why Ziplin wasn’t teaching before it was asked, he jokingly noted how the battlefield had been their test for the week. As Klassen enjoyed this joke and started thinking of such glorious battles, the voice of Kompnos snapped him out of his rapturous reverie.

“What is the proper term to call you, Ziplin?” Kompnos asked this, as he appeared to be measuring all he saw, in his head.

Ziplin obviously liked the question as it came from the comrade whom rarely spoke. “In addition to teaching at the school, I am the commander of the military here in the Honor Brigade. You can call me professor, commander, or Ziplin. Whatever you prefer.”

“Thank you Professor Ziplin,” retorted Kompnos.

“This place is magnificent Commander Ziplin,” said Klassen.

A smile and small laugh came across the scarred, brutal face of Ziplin. Leading them onward they came upon a landscape full of fanciful fountains. Water sprouted upwards and outwards from a variegated assortment of creatures. There were warriors with powerful weapons, creatures with horns and odd armor, beautiful women with lovely children, and many other beautifications. All of the fountains with these adornments were composed in a ring and although splendid in themselves, were minuscule in comparison to the central delight.

The commander commented on the area with glee, “This is the central area of Imperium Castle. These fountains provide enjoyment and relaxation to many.” He pointed to many couples and inhabitants who were having a good time. Greetings here and there were exchanged as the group advanced into the center of the circle.

The monstrous fountain in the center was a massive and ferocious dragon that spewed a thick stream of water straight into the air. This pillar of wetness then somehow broke apart and sprinkled downward all around the dragon. The behemoth itself had large wings that were gloriously spread apart and fierce fangs, not to mention deadly claws. It was standing upon its hind legs, wings and claws spread outward while its mouth was aimed towards the heavens above. It had the power to terrify as well as awe a bystander; Klassen was mightily impressed.

“Do such creatures of grandeur actually exist?” inquired the adventurer.

Putting his finger to his face and rubbing the long scar that slashed across his cheek, the commander answered, “I don’t know. Our intellectuals have debated the issue at length. Some believe they are mere myth while others believe they do exist somewhere in the world. As for myself, I would have to say that it is possible. Maybe not as have been portrayed in stories though. Nonetheless, they are immense creatures that embody power.”

“I hope they exist,” said Klassen as he gazed at the wonderful piece of art. “What do you think Kompnos?”

“From the research I have done, I believe they exist,” Kompnos replied. An explanation did not follow, however, and no one presented an inquiry on the subject.

The professor drank out of the fountain while encouraging the others to follow suit; they did. “The water here is fresh and invigorating. I know it may seem amazing to have all this water here, but we do. It is one of our well-kept secrets though. The dragon that resides here is affectionately

known as Sauromoth. We have a few more things to see if you two are willing.” They both nodded in assent and the company exited the fountain area.

The company walked onward to be confronted with large open fields to the left and right. The fields were deserted save for the few structures that housed weapons and armor. Various odd-looking devices were also scattered about. Before the bubbling questions Klassen held could burst, Ziplin spoke.

“This is our battle training area. Our troops are trained to ride a horse skillfully, use a variety of weapons, and siege weapons and their defenses. Since we’ve had a full-scale battle today, our training ground is empty. We train on a regular basis and I assure you that, although not the largest force in the world, we are without a doubt the best trained.” Ziplin spoke matter-of-factly and Klassen agreed wholeheartedly; just seeing the troops was a spectacle that exuded excellence.

“Are all members of the Honor Brigade required to train?” Kompnos asked with his hand scratching his brown beard.

“No, but we do encourage everyone to know at least the basics like how to wield a weapon. We realize that each person is different and will have different abilities. We encourage our citizens to utilize their specific talent,” Ziplin said.

“Utilize your specific talent to further Nobilis ends.” Klassen recited this ninth law of the Honor Brigade with a broad smile.

“Exactly,” returned the commander.

“Next comes the last leg of our tour, at least for now anyway.” Ziplin spoke easily as they walked down the stone path. After a bit of walking, homes came into view that were well constructed. Klassen was skilled in this field and inquired what wood they were made of, as the wood seemed quite foreign to the adventurer. The answer was noble fir, like those that lined the entrance to Imperium Castle. As expected, more people streamed about in this section of town. Men and women alike were busy tending to their affairs, and like before, all were jubilant.

The professor continued his lecture, “Here we have the homes of our good people. Generally the inhabitants here have families while most of the single men tend to be in the barracks and in our army. As can be expected, we attract more males than females but we do have some available women for you two.” He laughed at this statement and continued, “We promote having large families and most of our ladies have been born here. After all, we’ve existed for many, many years.”

As the troop marched on, Klassen reveled as he beheld the wonderful families that he saw. Laughing and happy they were. Children roamed about in cheerful mirth while playing their favorite games. Two attractive ladies giggled as he walked by. This whole realm of honor was clean, healthy, and vibrant.

Before they came to the end of the homes, Ziplin halted the company. He pointed down further along the road and spoke, “There are the fields for the crops. They have but recently been planted and aren’t much to see. So we come to the end of our tour. Are there any questions?”

Immediately Klassen answered, “How do we join?”

“That will be taken care of tomorrow. For now the both of you need to think about how you wish to serve the Honor Brigade, if you haven’t already. Now, it is time to return to the castle; it is getting late. Go, go, go!” The company headed back as indeed it was starting to get dark. The return trip went quickly with Ziplin answering any questions posed to him.

Just as the group was about to enter the castle, an enormous rumble shook the ground so violently that it seemed the very walls that protected the town would be reduced to a large pile of rubble. The noise created by the unknown source was staggering and continuous. Ziplin continued to walk on as if the sound were merely the natural chirping of birds, and had to stop as the pair of newcomers looked around for the source of the disturbance. It was impossible to be heard over the racket and thus the commander attempted no explanation.

Instead, the explanation presented itself. The very walls, which guarded Imperium Castle from a frontal assault, were moving. It was a shocking sight to the adventurer but yes, the walls were indeed moving. They grinded outwards rather quickly until, after a few moments, they stopped at about a forty-five degree angle (so Kompnos quickly estimated). This left a wide opening to the outside. How in the world such motion was affected with such mammothly gargantuan walls was beyond Klassen's comprehension. Nonetheless, it had happened and what a feat it was!

Once opened, a stream of warriors entered the courtyard in strict formation, bringing the various tools of war with them. The knights, infantry, and archers glistened with confidence and joy as they returned from their easy victory. This jubilation was accentuated by the military songs they broadcasted forth with the vitality only a warrior could display. It was a splendid spectacle of morale while the opening of the very walls was a marvel of engineering.

Klassen wondered if the fabulous sights he saw would ever end or if one could possibly grow accustomed to such miracles.

Once back to the castle, they were directed to the mess hall where they ate with great haste and eagerness. The food was soothing to the stomach while the drink was pleasant to the tongue. After feeling the close camaraderie and energizing their bodies, the travelers retired to the barracks to rest their tired bodies.

The barracks were full of small beds in which Klassen and Kompnos were situated next to one another. The adventurer inquired of his friend, "What do you think comrade?"

"This place is extremely interesting. I look forward to learning and hopefully helping our people here. I want to get a fresh start though. Goodnight." Kompnos spoke and after hearing Klassen tell him to have a good rest, the mathematician climbed under the blankets and went to sleep.

The adventurer likewise lay upon the bed, which was quite comfortable, although he didn't enter the world of dreams quite yet. Because the sound in the barracks was very low with only a few comrades chatting, it was a rather ideal atmosphere to reflect. Klassen desired to meet more honorable brethren but he knew he would have time for that in the future. Thus, he relaxed and contemplated.

The first thought that he grazed upon was whether his adventure to Imperium Castle was worth it; he knew it was. The adventurer knew that he would have done much more to get to his paradise and the petty obstacles that had blocked his way, were nothing, mere trivialities. The grand dragon of the fountain, Sauromoth, could not have stopped him from achieving his goal, he thought with ultimate confidence. Could anything have stopped him? Klassen knew of nothing that could.

Remembering the filthy ordure of the towns he had seen brought a visible sign of revulsion to the adventurer's youthful visage. He thought about the proud Nobilismen being subjected to the degenerate beasts and the horrendous beliefs of dishonorable scamperies that were contaminating the world over. Some, he knew, had been swallowed whole by this black chasm of putrescence, but not all. There were some that still had the signs of radiance that could change the world into a splendid world of beauty.

Beauty. The look of disgust that had grasped him before was transformed into smile upon thinking of the beautiful bliss around him. The stunning paradise that surrounded Klassen was clear and unequivocal proof that hope for the world was not merely a dream, but a reality as solid as the mammoth walls that protected the town. Thinking more about Imperium Castle, he realized the day had been overwhelming in splendor and sublimity. He was residing in a haven of honor but it was difficult to grasp the sheer vastness of it all. All the wonders and all the attractions individually were stunning but collectively they overloaded his system; he knew it would take a while to become accustomed to it all. Where else could one see such sights? The answer, he knew, was nowhere.

Pulling the blankets atop the adventurer who yearned for rest, Klassen had an indelible smile etched across his face. He knew *exactly* what he wanted to do in the Honor Brigade.

Chapter X

The two travelers had been warmly greeted by the citizens in the ceremony to become members of the Honor Brigade: Klassen had visibly showed with passionate fervor that the day was the most momentous in his life; Kompnos had only exuded his mirth from his eyes. The festivities included the entire town and, other than one other gentleman joining, had been the focal points of attention. Feasting and gaming had been the main events to commemorate the growth of honor; these had been done with a rousing spirit of love and brotherhood. The two comrades had met a plethora of wonderful brethren but, as can be expected, they couldn't remember every name afterwards.

The king of Imperium Castle, Louis, had even presided over the affair, although Klassen later learned this was a common practice. The ruler had been clad in a magnificent purple robe, luxurious crown, and scepter of honor. He had given a rousing speech on how honor was gaining power and personally greeted the new recruits. This king had been descended from many kings all bearing the same name of Louis, although anyone of great ability could claim the throne. Louis reigned with complete and utter power, as had all rulers of Imperium Castle; the people loved him as he held the laws of Honor Brigade sacred.

The privilege of meeting the ultimate ruler of the golden paradise they resided in had been a sublime experience for Klassen. The meeting had signified the relationship between those of high rank and those of lower; there was no enmity between the differing levels as that could be disastrous for the unity of the Honor Brigade. He realized that those of differing skills might not become the closest of associates but there was no need for hostility. Once becoming aware of this policy, the adventurer knew it wise.

Upon joining, Kompnos, as expected, had become a scholar specializing in mathematics. His system of measurement had been widely acclaimed and the Honor Brigade had adopted it. The relationship between the two entities had been symbiotic, though, as Kompnos learned much from the many tomes of wisdom contained in the library. Studying with the intellectuals he had become honored and revered for his talent. Indeed, the vast majority of his time had been devoted to his studies.

Klassen on the other hand had figured out what he wanted to do in the Honor Brigade although he knew not the name. Simply put he wanted to spread the word of honor to the befuddled comrades of the land. Surely he knew such a position was vital to growth and of course such a position was available. Ziplit had told him of the paladin, a holy knight that went out into the world of darkness in order to eradicate the filth and spread holiness. Without a doubt, the adventurer knew this was the role for him.

The months had swiftly glided by as Klassen learned his trade. The training had essentially consisted of two parts: being indoctrinated even more in the role of honor and improving fighting ability. He had of course also enjoyed his comrade's company, as well as the many new friends he had met. What most would call "work" he had thought to be extremely fun and had enjoyed it immensely. Surely the atmosphere of honor had also played a role in this.

Although Klassen was more of a physical person, the mental stimulation provided in the classroom studies had been remarkably rewarding. Books that had been written by members of the Honor Brigade were read and discussed. These books talked of what to do in certain situations and, not surprisingly, the adventurer agreed; honor was in his nature. He had been taught that Nobilismen were inherently honorable but that the perverse doctrine of the Universal Church had wrecked this instinct. It was his duty to cure this malicious malady.

One of the most enlightening things that Klassen had learned was the source of the horrible affliction that poisoned Teramon: the slimy green orcs. The adventurer had seen first-hand the destruction wrought by the other beasts but didn't really conceive of one enemy being any worse

than another. While the topic of hobgoblins, imps, and ogres was briefly talked about, the nature and history of the orc had been related in far greater exactitude.

This nature was one of avarice, deception, and betrayal—in a single word they were dishonorable. The green creatures were the antithesis of the Nobilis. Throughout these adversaries' history they had brought misery and desolation to their host populations; indeed they were vicious vampires who sucked the blood of those they lived among. City upon city was documented where this foul influence had turned a thriving area into a decrepit pool of muck.

Klassen's instincts had immediately made him question what he was learning as he couldn't see how the small population of orcs could achieve such success. This answer soon was forthcoming as he learned of the orc involvement in the Universal Church. Not only did they run the show from behind the scenes, but also they had even created the filthy church and religion (Universality).

This shocking information had rattled the adventurer to the core. He grudgingly had to admit to himself that the orcs were not the fatuous dolts that the other beasts were. The religion of dishonor was controlling the masses while the despicable orcs were horrifically raping the Nobilis. There were two positive things that the adventurer learned of: one was that the orc population was quite tiny and that if exposed properly, the hideous master of puppets could be deposed. Klassen now knew the best target to choose from.

The typical cases of honor like rescuing kinsman from beasts, helping a friend in need, destroying beasts whenever feasible etc., had also been discussed. What feasible meant when slaughtering beasts was explained to mean that, since the Honor Brigade was above all other law, if one could go unscathed when ridding the world of scum to do so. However, it had been pounded home that Nobilis lives were extremely valuable and thus to be cautious about engaging in warfare. This had reminded the adventurer of his kills already and when he became a paladin he would surely mark his uniform with these trophies. No confirmation would be needed since lying was dishonorable.

The punishable offenses of lying, stealing, cheating, betrayal were of course dealt with swiftly, usually with death. Obviously the circumstances could change things but rarely could someone commit crimes against fellow honorable citizens without facing brutal consequences. The topic was clarified concerning the beasts as it was of course sanctioned to liberate the goods of these wicked creatures. The overriding principle, he knew, was to promote the best interests of Nobilismen as a whole.

In addition to reading about the philosophy of honor, novels were read that promoted the ideals as well. This had been a welcome surprise to Klassen as he already enjoyed such pieces of art. As can be expected, he not only had read the assigned novels, but also had read all that he could find in the library. The library had been quite impressive to him, as never before had he seen so many books in one place. The atmosphere of learning was refreshing as it greatly contrasted the ugly ignorance that suffocated many in the world.

The learning of honor was mandatory, especially for being a paladin, but other areas of study were accessible. So Klassen had also spent his time learning more about carpentry and design. This was something he surely would perform for the Honor Brigade if he weren't so moved to be a glorious paladin. The burning fire that fueled his being desired to be a paladin and that was what he *would* become, he knew.

Before he could fulfill this duty, however, he had been busy contributing by utilizing his carpentry skills. He had designed and built, by himself, new bookshelves. He had carved them ever so intricately and thus took great pride in them. To further adorn the shelves an artist had painted gorgeous landscapes upon them. Klassen had appreciated his help and marveled at how everyone loved their work and loved contributing to the Honor Brigade. He knew this was how it should be; it was simply natural.

The adventurer's first date with a voluptuous blonde haired lady came about by odd circumstances. Klassen's strange way of attracting the attention of the fairer sex was actually

successful. It had happened one day as he was resting at the fountain of the great Sauromoth. He enjoyed the power that the creature exuded and the environment it created was rather ideal for reading his beloved novels. So on the aforementioned day, the adventurer was absorbed in his novel when a beauty had entered the area.

He rose from the bench where he sat and went to take a drink from the luscious water, as it was a hot, humid day. His attention was attached to the lady as if by some irresistible force, however, and this ended with Klassen getting more water than he had hoped for. He had fallen in. The girl giggled at this display and helped him out, wet and soaking as he was. The two hence struck a friendship, although it was not of the romantic caliber. Her nickname that the adventurer liked to call her by was Goldie.

While the adventurer had enjoyed his studies, the camaraderie, and his carpentry, the learning of the ways of war had been his favorite way to pass the time. It was here where he felt like he belonged and where his piece of the cosmic puzzle fit in perfectly.

While training he did what he had done before to release the warlike nature within him: hunt. The mountain they were on (which he came to learn was called Honor Mountain) was full of wildlife of all shapes. The Honor Brigade promoted the sport by leading hunts but the adventurer would also hunt by himself, or on occasion with his good friend Kompos.

One particular hunting expedition came to the adventurer's mind for it was quite peculiar. He had gone off into the forest by his lonesome to contemplate although he had brought the longbow he had been provided with by the Honor Brigade. Klassen had climbed into a tree in order to commune with nature and enjoy its lofty beauty. While among the perches of fowl, he had caught a glimpse of a strange creature, which had never before greeted his vision.

It had looked like a mixture of a goat and an antelope. It had horns and only later would he learn its name: chamois. It had been a brown animal that wondered about as carefree as if it owned the entire mountain. The adventurer had waited for it to be cleared of the blockading branches before taking aim. Adroitly and without a sound he had positioned himself so that his prey noticed not the archer. Arrow released, it had whizzed with immense velocity like a flying sword of death. The chamois never even had a chance to see its destroyer as the barb had blazed entirely through the creature's throat, nearly decapitating it.

The kill itself had been easy but it had opened up an archery skill that he hadn't practiced before. Among the trees firing bolts of destruction was certainly more difficult and could undoubtedly prove effective as an assassin's tool. Inquiring about this type of tactic had brought an approving nod from Ziplit and thereafter it was practiced among the archers.

The training that the adventurer had received for archery improved his ability little as he already excelled in this area. In fact, Klassen's skill was so great that he had only one competitor of note in the archery contests. This comrade and he had taken first and second place consistently; it was a fierce, though gentlemanly, rivalry that saw Klassen winning approximately half of the time.

Other weapons had, of course, been featured; the Honor Brigade wanted its warriors to be able to fight regardless of the weapon and circumstances. Having owned a dagger previously, this weapon wasn't too hard to master. Hand-to-hand warfare as well as throwing daggers had been taught and both went well for the adventurer. The same was partially true with an axe although battle-axes were quite different, as he had well learned.

The weapon where the adventurer had been completely ignorant was the standard weapon of the time: the sword. Out of all the arms of war, this is the one that seemed most suitable for a noble paladin. As such Klassen had been very willing to learn although he didn't get off to a very auspicious start.

Cognizant of his inexperience with the sword, the adventurer had been paired with a young lad of about fifteen to practice with. As customary, they had used wooden swords. To all watching it should have been a slaughter as Klassen was far larger than the boy as well as being more agile. Indeed it even started out that way as the adventurer overpowered his opponent with brute strength. Soon, however, the momentum had changed and the adventurer had felt more and more outwitted

through pure skill. It culminated with the boy somehow (according to Klassen) getting behind him, while he had been wildly teetering from a wild thrust. Down he had tumbled when the lad gave him a swift boot to the rear.

This experience had certainly been one that was a necessary stagger upon the path to mastery, but it was extremely difficult to end the incessant teasing that it had brought. Indeed, it had been merely playful jest that even Klassen himself laughed at, but he preferred laughing at himself when he had become an expert with the honorable sword. Consequently, the more skill he had gradually obtained the more heartily was his enjoyment at being defeated (and muddy to boot).

Without a doubt this was the area where his most assiduous attention had been focused. The young comrade who had initially bested him was soon defeated but many more defeats had marred his ascent to the summit of excellence. This had driven him mightily to the point where he would challenge anyone in the hopes of improving. His endurance was so great that he had tired out his competitors even if he hadn't got the best of them in a duel. This great vitality had led him to have many matches during the day and, when candidates to challenge ran dry, he had practiced thrusting, slashing, and parrying by himself.

While other implements of glorious warfare had been introduced to the adventurer—pike, polearm, mace etc.—it had been the sword, specifically the type designed especially for the Honor Brigade, that had become his specialty. This sword, known as an ultima, was so designed that it could slash and thrust; despite the blade being a full komp in length, it was lightweight and able to be deftly swung about. This weapon was the standard issue hand-to-hand weapon of the Honor Brigade and Klassen easily saw why.

Another weapon that had intrigued the adventurer was a powerful crossbow. It was no ordinary crossbow. Normally, one of these bolt-firing weapons was great for close-range combat as its stopping power was terrific; the missile could pierce armor quite easily. This particular weapon, while retaining the explosive power, was five times as useful. Instead of one bolt being armed at a time, this one could hold five bolts at once. It was smaller than a normal crossbow, allowing it to be fired with only one hand. Also, it had a metal loop attached to the front so that the wielder could put his foot in it and arm the weapon with greater leverage. However, instead of pulling back one piece of cord, five were pulled; they were fastened together so all five were pulled at once. To make things even quicker, the five bolts were loaded onto the crossbow by way of a wooden "clip," as it was called. Thus, one could be ready to fire five shots within moments.

The longbow still maintained its advantage of being able to fire further, but for close-range this crossbow was quite deadly. Klassen had practiced with it and had become quite adept at firing it. He soon realized that the archer had to adjust for the differing heights of each bolt but a large adaptation wasn't needed, especially since it was a tool for close combat.

The practice range for the crossbow consisted of five targets positioned in a field. Then there was an obstacle course where one had to go under, over, or through. So the participant would run through the obstacle course, fire at a target and repeat until all five shots were dispelled. Time was recorded, as well as accuracy. As can be imagined, Klassen had excelled at this contest.

Although many weapons had greeted the adventurer, these aforementioned ones were his favorites although one other also inflamed his curiosity. That is to say that he *believed* it to be a weapon although he couldn't be absolutely assured of this.

While training one fine day, Klassen and his squad had been interrupted by a powerful noise that sounded similar to an explosive volcano in a frenzied fit of anger. Where the disturbance had originated from was extremely obscure, as it seemed to resonant from all around. The vibrations of the blast had also rumbled the very ground around them, everywhere. It had boomed three times in no particular pattern, before ceasing.

What had it been? This question had run rampant throughout the slew of warriors as well as Imperium Castle. No answer had readily been given beyond it being an experiment. What kind of experiment had racked Klassen's mind. With the power that it had exuded it seemed only prudent

to use the force as a monstrous implement of grandiose war. The destructive force was unknown to the adventurer but surely it was great.

The prevailing idea had indeed been that it was an instrument of war, but there was no consensus on this opinion. Some held that it had been a captured dragon struggling to break free; this assertion aroused Klassen's imagination but didn't seem to be the correct choice. Others had claimed that perhaps it was simply an earthquake. While the adventurer thought this was very possible, the fact that it had occurred three times made him question that possibility. As no absolute answer had been forthcoming, the matter slowly drifted into the dusty annals of history, but none really forgot about it.

Hours and hours of training—both mental and physical—had molded the adventurer into what he hoped was a great hero. The long days training with weapons, with armor, without weapons or armor (Klassen greatly excelled at wrestling and boxing), with books etc., had left the adventurer tremendously sore and had drained him extensively. This soreness had begun to abate as the days had disappeared, so Klassen pushed himself ever harder to compensate.

This continual process of pressing ever higher had tempered the adventurer like a blacksmith creating a beautiful blade of honor. By his many studies, Klassen had improved his mind in the hopes that he would be able to persuade his comrades to join the holy movement known as the Honor Brigade. He had been consistently reading of two subjects that would help him in his quest: heroic novels and the art of reasoning. He had been inspired to greater heights than the clouds themselves while reading of heroes; reasoning, he knew, would assist him in convincing others of the sublimity of honor.

Physically speaking, Klassen had been a great athlete before joining the Honor Brigade but his stay had amplified his athletic prowess immensely. From all the strenuous activities he had partaken in, he had gained power and stamina. His fighting ability had been improved dramatically and his already great confidence had become swollen to mountainous dimensions.

A philosopher that Klassen had read had stated that what didn't kill an individual made him stronger; this he knew to be true.

Although the time had gone swiftly by, the adventurer had ever questioned his instructor Ziplin as to when he would become a paladin. This had been asked numerous times with the same answer being voiced every time: "When you are skilled enough." Klassen had realized the wisdom in this policy but yearned to speak the glorious gospel of honor to his clouded kinsmen. In spite of this, the student and teacher had gotten along well. Due to this, the adventurer had thought nothing of being asked to remain after class but the conversation contained therein would have a profound effect on him.

The commander beckoned the adventurer into his private study that was connected to the classroom where military tactics were taught. Resorting to his stern voice of austerity, Ziplin commanded Klassen, "Come in and have a seat. I have something important to talk to you about." The adventurer complied instantly.

The lack of the normal jocularity that the professor exuded when not involved with military affairs immediately aroused the adventurer's interest. He was well aware of the fluctuating emotions Ziplin displayed and was waiting for a burst of joviality when, instead, the commander sat down at his desk with a look of cold harshness. The professor stared intently at his pupil for quite a while without speaking as he rested his nose upon his folded hands.

The room the two were in was adorned with a good-sized mahogany desk with a chair that simply spoke of comfort as it had the ability to lean back and had wheels. The desk was adorned with tiny warriors of all sorts that were intricately designed. Across from the desk were two wooden chairs. The walls were decorated with two items of note: bookshelves full of military books (Klassen had read some of these himself) and military paintings, each representing a battle that Ziplin or his family had been engaged in.

A strange silence pervaded the room, which was quite unfamiliar to Klassen as his conversations with his mentor were usually quite loquacious. In order to burst the rather oppressive

bubble of muteness, the adventurer cheerfully chimed out, “When will I become a paladin?” This inquiry was accompanied by a broad smile as the adventurer expected an answer that didn’t come.

Ziplin stared at the adventurer as if lost in deep, meditative thought. The lack of an answer discomfited Klassen and it seemed to be extremely clear that something, whatever it might be, was amiss. The plaguing silence had returned and was only briefly broken as the adventurer adjusted his chair. This wooden sound had reverberated crisply throughout the room until it had died away, leaving the smothering silence. The bright blue eyes bored through Klassen’s body with increased intensity as time wore on. At length, the commander finally spoke in a somber, serious tone.

“What would you do if I told you that you have failed?”

Chapter XI

Failure? While Klassen knew the meaning of the word, it was not included in his personal lexicon. He knew that he had excelled within the Honor Brigade but had he not lived up to the standards in some area he was oblivious to? Thinking harder and harder he searched through the labyrinth of his mind for a clue to solve this enigma. Winding through the various passages of his memory revealed nothing that would lead to failure, so what could it be?

Ziplin's demeanor remained unchanged as he vigilantly studied his student's reaction. There was no doubt that Klassen visibly showed his surprise at his teacher's question. No answers presented themselves in the commander's countenance and since the adventurer could not ascertain how failure was possible, he decided to simply accept its possibility and face reality.

What route would Klassen travel upon if his goal of being a paladin was frustrated? The obvious solution that came to his mind was to be a carpenter. He was skilled in this area and had already contributed in this way. The adventurer felt that he could further contribute and a thousand ideas for new designs danced in his mind. It was a task that he knew would surely be met with his utter determination and tenacity. Was this the right path for him though?

No! his inner being screamed at him fiercely. Klassen knew he had the ability to be a great carpenter but that was something he felt he should do in his spare time or when he was older. He felt his youth was designed for something more physical, more adventurous. Being a warrior in the army briefly crossed his mind but he rejected that idea as well. He knew what he would do; his troth to himself would reign supreme.

He had trained; he had studied; and he had crushed all obstacles on the path to his destiny: becoming a paladin. Was he going to let anything stop him? Of course not. If the Honor Brigade wanted to withhold its support, then he would accept this, as the leaders he had come in contact with were wise and intelligent; they would have good reasons for whatever they did. Nonetheless, he would set out on his journey to enlighten, with or without the assent of the Honor Brigade. Even if it meant he was excommunicated, he would venture out.

The commander watched Klassen as if he was reading his mind; in reality the adventurer's face displayed his thoughts quite readily. From surprise to contemplation to determination had been visibly etched on Klassen's visage. Still Ziplin sat with the same harshness, waiting for an answer to his query. Instead of speaking, the pupil's face resumed an air of cogitation.

Question upon question bombarded the adventurer's intellect. When would he leave? Where would he go? Would he be able to take anything with him from the Honor Brigade? How would he travel? All these questions and more he was sure would confront him, but before he could properly come to any conclusions, his imagination—fueled by his reading of so many heroic novels—thrust him away from his body and into a grand adventure.

Bedecked in refulgent armor and equipped with a mighty sword, Klassen galloped through the passageways of his mind in great honor. Enemies of the Nobilis fell with ease beneath the stunning power of the adventurer's magnificent weapon. The beleaguered masses, whose well of probity had been so wickedly drained, would be refilled to overflowing via the hand of Klassen. A land of honorable denizens would supplant the inhabitants of despicable dishonor and filth; the adventurer, nay the *paladin*, would play a vital part in all these proceedings.

With a mirthful smile planted upon his face, Klassen composed himself and focused on the commander. Happily he finally answered the question posed to him: "If I were to fail to become a paladin, then I would leave Imperium Castle and spread the word of honor anyway."

For a minute the adamant wall of severity remained solid surrounding the commander, but within a matter of moments the walls came crumbling down in an explosive fit of joyous laughter. Within the time span of a simple snap of the fingers, the whole atmosphere was changed from

oppressiveness to happiness. The adventurer joined in the celebration as he waited for the professor to speak.

“That’s my boy!” roared Ziplin. “Your skill is great enough to be a paladin and I am pleased to report that you passed the final test.” Getting up from his chair, the commander approached Klassen who stood to receive him. Ziplin shook the hand of the newest paladin of the Honor Brigade vigorously before saying, “Congratulations Klassen. You are now a paladin!”

The realization that the whole affair had been an exam didn’t damper his lofty spirits in the least. The paladin thanked his mentor as they embraced in a hug. All the hard work he had put in was now coming to a fore and Klassen reveled in his tremendous accomplishment. The world was one huge adventure just waiting to be undertaken and the paladin was sure to fill it with honor.

Ziplin spoke earnestly, “It is a great privilege to become a paladin. I doubt you are aware of its full significance. Do you know how many paladins we have ordained since your arrival?”

After a brief period of thought, Klassen responded, “I am not aware of any but how would I know?”

“Trust me, you *would* have known,” the commander replied. “We hold a grand celebration commemorating the event. Paladins are rare gems that we greatly appreciate. They are few and far between as the vileness in this world scares many away.”

Klassen had been totally oblivious of this fact and, as a result, it came as quite a shock. “So what happens now?” he inquired.

“First, I will tell treat you to the tales of my scars and my own exploits. Then you will be outfitted for your journey and next week we shall hold a celebration in your honor. Then you will be on your own!”

The paladin listened eagerly to his mentor, as his scars were a source of inquiry for many, although Ziplin wasn’t forthcoming. Klassen was alive with wonderful expectations of the future but before his grand trek into the unknown, he would enjoy his remaining stay in Imperium Castle.

Ziplin began his story, “When I was about your age I too had the noble vision you have. I had been raised in Imperium Castle so I wasn’t really aware of how horrible things were outside of our walls. What I heard, of course, wasn’t good. I thought, as I expect you do, that if life was so great here and so bad there, then why not enlighten our comrades about Imperium Castle? So I became a paladin.” Klassen smiled at this last statement.

“My father didn’t want me to do this,” the commander continued, “because it is a solitary, dangerous occupation. He wanted to keep an eye on me within the army. Nonetheless I was driven to fulfill my dreams and set off. I had many adventures and have a few words of advice for you before I tell you of my scars.

“Keep at attention at all times. The dress of a paladin is generally glaring and stands out a lot so you will be noticed. It is usually a good idea to not stay in any one place too long. Try to recruit, kill some beasts, and be off. As much as we trust one another here, most aren’t trustworthy so be cautious. Above all, act honorably and bravely do your duty!”

Klassen listened as if Ziplin were the only sentient being in the universe, so enthralled was he. The commander continued his narrative as he pointed to his scars: “Now, I will grant you the knowledge of my scars, which only paladins are permitted to hear. Obviously this means that you must take an oath to not reveal this information to anyone except paladins—past or present—of the Honor Brigade. Do you agree?” The paladin of course agreed and the two exchanged the Honor Salute to bind the agreement.

Satisfied, Ziplin continued, “This scar along my forehead was inflicted by an annoying band of five hobgoblins. They were seeking to avenge their fellow compatriots whom I had slaughtered with joy. I didn’t know it at the time but the ones I killed had been part of a gang of the beasts. The five remaining members had ambushed me as I was leaving a town out west. Individually they would have been easy kills but they used their numbers to their advantage. The scar itself occurred when an arrow had been fired from my right flank; I had caught sight of the archer and jumped

back, the arrow grazed my forehead and cleaved my skin off, leaving this nice decoration. That had enraged me and after I had killed the archer, the rest were easily dispatched.”

Klassen was carried along in awe at every word spoken; Ziplin took a breath and resumed, “The long, curving scar along my cheek here was delivered when I was adventuring in the southern regions. It is a hot land full of the overgrown dolts we call ogres. Indeed, it was a group of ogres that I had to defeat to save a member of our great Nobilis people. Three of the dark creatures had blocked my path but soon it was two and then one. This last beast, contrary to the typical ogre, didn’t flee in cowardice. It was even quite skilled with its spiked club but it was my slipping on the wet ground that had granted him a free swing into my cheek. I recovered, of course, and my blow dealt with him permanently.

“This scar along my chin happened in an inn a little ways to the north of here. I was unaware of it, but a slimy orc had owned the inn and it had come to its knowledge that I had killed its brother. The orc had entered the room I slept in by way of a secret door and had lunged for my throat with a deadly dagger. I must admit that this could have been my end for my surprise was great indeed, but the orc’s aim was off and the blade had caught my chin instead of my throat. In fact, the unexpected resistance of hitting bone had caused the blade to fall to the ground. I was bloody but once to my feet, victory over the piece of filth was easy: I threw it out of the window to its death.”

These stories brought a sweet tingle of excitement to the paladin’s skin as he anticipated his own victories. In haste, he enthusiastically spoke, “Those were magnificent stories! Isn’t there anyway I can leave earlier?”

The professor laughed and responded warmly, “You will have your chance, don’t worry. It is important to remember that spreading the word of honor is your main objective; killing beasts, although great, is a secondary goal. Of course, remember that the best to kill are orcs!”

Ziplin, upon noticing the time by the dying of the sun, immediately resorted back to his serious tone. “We have had enough idle chatter. Go to the armory and pick out your gear. Make sure you get your weapon personalized! Go, go, go!”

The paladin literally ran out of the building and off towards the castle. The whole time his mind was engaged in active thought about the wonderful journey he was about to embark upon. The winding passageways of the castle were adorned with lovely pieces of art but Klassen’s mind was elsewhere as he swiftly flew down the halls. In but a week he would become akin to the very characters he read about! His confidence made him think of how stories would be written about him in the future; maybe, he thought, he would even write them himself. Before the adventurer could think further upon the subject, he arrived at his destination.

A veritable ocean of finely crafted weapons and armor radiated in resplendent wonder before Klassen’s enthused eyes. The armory was full of instruments of war from the simple dagger to the more complex poleax. Pieces of armor, helmets, and shields came in different sizes and styles. Varying colors adorned the equipment like brilliant blues, ravishing reds, proud purples and more, with combinations of color also splashed about. The collection was staggering and the paladin believed that any warrior would be in a divine state of bliss just gazing at them; he sure was.

The armorer was a short, stout comrade whom the paladin had met before, although he didn’t know him very well. He had straight black hair with a black mustache and was named Zerpan. His pale skin seemed to indicate that he didn’t spend much time outdoors; Klassen believed he spent most of his time forging weapons. From what the paladin had surmised, it seemed that most of the armorer’s fifty years or so had been spent in his craft. After exchanging Honor Salutes, the two began conversing.

“I have come by orders of Ziplin to choose my gear for my trek,” spoke Klassen eagerly.

“What trek, son?” asked Zerpan.

In his haste the paladin hadn’t even informed the armorer of the news. “I have become a paladin and will be leaving to spread the word of honor soon!”

Visibly fascinated, the armorer responded amiably, "Congratulations sir! I wish you luck. Take a look around and just tell me what you want. If you have any ideas for adornments of the weapons, let me know; I can do it."

Thanking the armorer for the kind words, Klassen spurred his mind into a storm of flying ideas. Glancing around at the weapons and building them up in his mind, the paladin was able to envision them distinctly in his mind. A vague idea of what he wanted was forming but it took firm root once his eyes struck upon a massive blade of enormous size.

At first it appeared like the standard sword of the Honor Brigade, the ultima sword, but it was far larger than the ones he had seen heretofore. The normal size blade was about a full komp but this blade was surely one and a half. Picking it up the paladin saw that from tip to pommel the sword was almost as tall as he! This was the sword for him, he knew.

The mammoth sword quickly became decorated in his mind. Down only the center of blade ran a caring cerulean to represent love for his comrades while the opposite side of the blade was a fiery crimson showing his hatred for his foes. In a similar vein, the crosspiece held splendid sapphires for love on one side while displaying rubies of war on the other side. In the middle of these stones his initial "K" was etched in decorative, purple writing (both sides). The hilt held the skulls of future victims. Finally, Klassen saw the red-side of the blade free to hold the kills the sword would obtain while the blue-side held the mighty name of the sword engraved downwards: *Ehredegen*.

A helmet the paladin picked up was constructed in his mind as well. The distinctive wide slots for the eyes and holes for breathing were seen but he knew something was missing. Around the summit of the helmet grew many curved horns of power which saluted the horn upon the pinnacle of the helmet; this horn was larger and straight. Upon the center of the forehead grew his purple initial.

He chose a large shield that started wide until it ran down to a point (emblazoned with the symbol of the Honor Brigade) and only added his initial; he realized he wanted to initialize everything (including the clothes he wore). The paladin picked out chain mail armor, a magnificent, multi-firing crossbow, some throwing axes, a few daggers, and other assorted materials he would need for his journey, including provisions and a mount.

Once he had all this assessed, he described it in detail to the armorer. "Can you do all this?" Klassen queried.

"It sounds magnificent and yes of course I can do it, sir!" came the resounding response. "It will all be ready for you at the ceremony. You can count on me!"

Thanking the comrade, Klassen left the armory in a sheer state of bliss.

The week had flown by with amazing speed as the paladin eagerly awaited his journey of honor. Word had quickly spread among the citizens and Klassen had instantly become a major celebrity. Congratulations had come from virtually everyone, from little lads to seniors who had seen many a moon. Throughout this ordeal, the paladin became more and more aware of the importance of his position, and its danger. The danger spurred him on even more as he relished in the well wishes of his comrades.

The Honor Brigade loved to celebrate and keep the citizens in extreme happiness by holding celebrations commemorating many events; but due to the rarity of a paladin being named, the atmosphere on the mountain was filled with an even greater fervor than normal. Many preparations were made and it was a primary topic of discussion. Klassen learned that it had been almost a year since the last paladin had been ordained.

The paladin and the mathematician Kompnos had held a long conversation discussing their different roles in the Honor Brigade. These contrasting positions had kept the friends apart most of the time so each enjoyed telling and hearing of one another's escapades. The pair exchanged

congratulations; Klassen had become a paladin while Kompos, among other advances, had had his system of measurement adopted.

Since the paladin was very cognizant of the fact that he would be gone for an unknown amount of time, he listened extremely intently to his ally. The mathematician related his discoveries in mathematics and engineering and Klassen asked questions here and there so as to fully grasp what his friend meant. Klassen waited to hear about news of the strange rumblings that had caused such a commotion but this knowledge never came to the fore; the paladin decided either he didn't know or couldn't tell. After their talk both wished each other success in their endeavors and parted ways.

Although it was more difficult to keep his normal schedule of training due to everyone wishing to speak to him, the paladin managed to do so for the most part. The excitement that pulsed throughout the town had caught Klassen in its net, but he did his best to persevere and accomplish his goals for the week.

As dusk approached on the day of the paladin celebration, the town was crackling with fervent energy that seemed to fuel the many torches that threw a mysterious light upon the surroundings. The spacious courtyard had been transformed into a festive area of eager expectation. The entire town was partaking in the commemoration of a paladin and the courtyard, which normally was rather open, was now swelling with citizens. Little children played joyfully; warriors felt the pride of knowing the paladin; women virtually swooned in anticipation of their champion.

A raised platform had rapidly been constructed for the event and the leaders of the Honor Brigade now inhabited it. This group included Ziplin as well as King Louis. This small crowd stood at rigid attention as they waited. This wait was extremely short-lived for as the sun was swallowed by the sky, the king stepped forward. Raising his elegant scepter to the heavens above, King Louis brought it down to commence the activities.

A triumphant symphony of music was unleashed. First, only the sounds of the bagpipes were audible but soon a bugle joined the fray along with the steady beating of an army of drums. Leading away from the leaders of the Honor Brigade and off into the distance was a lavishly ornate purple carpet which was adorned with etchings of beauty, and intricate designs. Flanking this pathway of opulence were the soldiers of the Honor Brigade, standing at attention with steel discipline. Behind the warriors stood the masses that eagerly scanned the area for the main attraction.

Appearing like an apparition who simply seemed to materialize from nowhere, Klassen was seen at the beginning of the carpeted pathway. Flanking and accompanying him as he began to walk towards the king were two soldiers carrying torches. The light flickered and danced while casting strange shadows about, increasing the awe surrounding the paladin.

Klassen was bedecked in a red military tunic with its golden fire of honor burning brightly around the holy sword that completed the symbol of the Honor Brigade. The chain mail that protected him from attack glinted in a thousand places, making him look as though he were a divine being of magnificence. The puissant power of the frightening helmet, whose visor was down, would have terrified many in the crowd had they not known this was their hero. The shield the paladin held in his left arm was adorned like his tunic, while his right arm was free; the huge scabbard at his waist carrying the mighty sword *Ehredegen*.

As the splendid figure and his retinue of torchbearers walked through the aisle of soldiers, the warriors would unsheathe their swords in unison right before he encountered them. These swords would fly into the air and form a semi-arch, which the paladin marched under. All of this was performed with mechanical efficiency and its effect on the crowd was to inflame their state of dazzlement.

Being engaged in such a wondrous display of sensational sights and marvelous music imparted happiness to the very depths of Klassen's being. His world swirled around in tremendous jubilation as he could feel every heart that beat around him reaching out to him to offer their love and warmth. The entire event was surely a terrific incentive to become a paladin but he hadn't even known of it, nor would it have affected his decision to fulfill his goal. Knowing that he would have

ventured out to save the world even if he were the only carrier of the burning virtue of honor in all of Teramon, made the fantastic fanfare around him even more powerful.

The crowd silently watched the paladin as he made his way through the pillars of swords and ascended the platform to greet the king. After the paladin raised his visor, Louis greeted Klassen affectionately with a firm handshake. Calling an end to the music with a simple wave of the hand, the king addressed the audience.

“This is a magnificent day for the Honor Brigade. As we all know, we have a wonderful paradise here where honor and happiness reigns supreme. We have grown mightily since our inception and while we will continue to grow by simply having large families, it is imperative that we have crusaders to go out in the world of filth and spread the word of honor. To this end, we ordain paladins. I am very pleased to give to you the newest paladin of the Honor Brigade, Klassen!”

After virtually every sentence the king uttered there was applause but the last statement brought the crowd into a furious frenzy of titillation. Amid the cheering a servant materialized and presented the king with a purple cape. King Louis took this royal cape and placed it around the paladin’s shoulders while fastening the clasp that was etched with Klassen’s initial.

Enraptured by the scene of wild gaiety, the paladin gazed at the cheering masses in amazement. His position above the crowd allowed him a vision of enthralling happiness as he looked at the smiling faces that were dimly lit by torch-fire. It was a memorable experience the likes of which he had never before encountered and would surely never forget. He stepped forward and the crowd instantly hushed as they anticipated his words.

Like the king to his side, the paladin felt the immense power the crowd bestowed upon him and reveled in its sweet nectar. His blood pumped like the ferocious current of a maelstrom, flooding Klassen with a surge of euphoria. With a swift, easy motion he withdrew his colossal sword *Ehredegen* and pointed it towards the tiny sparkling stars above. This sword itself was an awesome sight as it was bigger than some grown men. However, the words that followed the unsheathing of such a devastating weapon was what brought the crowd to its peak of loving adoration and explosive glee.

A mighty roar was heard all around the mountain as Klassen bellowed, “Honor is Life.”

Chapter XII

The paladin remembered the night before with pristine clarity as he traveled eastward along the same path he had come. After the ceremony a great feast had commenced with large quantities of various dishes. Klassen thought that everyone in the Honor Brigade had shaken his hand and he was probably correct. The festivities had lasted long into the night with merriment for all ages available. Available for the citizens had been competitions, events, and social intercourse, most had taken part in all three.

So many people wished to converse with the paladin and offer their extolment that his dinner had lasted much longer than normal. Klassen enjoyed the social interaction immensely especially considering he didn't know when he would return. He knew he could return whenever he wished but his duty would keep him outside of Imperium Castle for most of the year. Of course, those that he talked the most with were his friends Kompnos, Ziplitin, and the lady he called Goldie.

After the celebration wound down, Ziplitin requested that the paladin return to his office, which Klassen promptly did. There the commander unraveled an exquisitely detailed map. The paladin had taken enough geography courses to learn of the various areas in Teramon, but the map that was displayed in front of him was one of minute detail. It told of paths, populations, dangers to be aware of and many more useful tidbits of information. The item had been bestowed upon the adventurer for the commander knew he would need it.

Ziplitin had inquired where the paladin might venture off to. Klassen had studied the map for a few moments but once he had seen the city he was looking for, he had pointed to it. The town was one familiar to him and in the morning he had set off towards it with all his gear. It was known as Lealean.

Along the bucolic path with vibrant trees, the memory of Alianna filled his mind with pleasure. Although there had been many beauties that adored honor within the Honor Brigade, there existed a bond between Klassen and Alianna that the paladin was hard pressed to understand. He realized her wondrous looks were inspiring but there were such ladies back at Imperium Castle, like his friend Goldie.

The only reason the paladin could come up with is how he had saved the very life of his red-haired maiden. There was no doubt he enjoyed rescuing her but why this would link the two he wasn't altogether certain. Nonetheless it had bonded Klassen to the lady, but he knew not if she felt the same attraction. Either way he would win, he knew, because the town held the pub where he felt certain his message would be warmly received. So when the vast ocean of towns was spread before him on the map he saw, his choice was altogether simple.

The paladin rode through the forest where he first had the privilege of beholding knights of his sacred order. He now looked similar in garb to the formidable horseman he had seen. However, the helmet and shield weren't equipped at the moment as Klassen saw no need and riding was less hindered without them. Of course, the monstrous sword he carried was snugly tucked away in its scabbard, ready to strike death at its master's behest.

The selection of the mount he rode was quite simplistic: when he went to the royal stables, the horse he rode had chosen him by coming up to the paladin. A large sable stallion had answered his silent behest for a mount and after examining it and testing it out, the paladin knew he had the right horse. The great size of the creature allowed it to carry much weight and travel swiftly with its massive legs. Thus, Klassen had navigated down the mountain with great velocity and was now nearing the northward turning point of the path.

The paladin halted his horse as he looked into the gloomy darkness that was the Marsh of Doom. The murky depths he saw beckoned him to enter; this pull was nearly irresistible. In addition to the natural allure of the marsh for a warrior like him, were the enigmatic mysteries that

still lay enshrouded by the deep, opaque mist. There were difficulties involved in the path of despondent shadows as he well knew, but it was nonetheless attractive.

The simple northern path, on the other hand, appeared extremely easy to traverse with no signs of danger whatsoever. It seemed unimpeded by great barriers and the paladin felt as though traversing this path would be as easy for him as wielding his mighty sword was. He smiled at his superiority as he realized that most warriors wouldn't even be able to swing his sword properly, but virtually anyone could travel the northerly path, provided they had any means of transportation.

The dictates of duty sprang into the paladin's mind, as he had to decide his direction quickly for Klassen heeded the grand advice of doing things rapidly as one could achieve more in the short span of one's life. Consequently, he recognized that while the path through the bog would surely be more adventurous, in what way could he spread honor or destroy the foul enemies of the Nobilis? He saw none and therefore galloped away on the more practical course to the north.

The day was quite warm with the blistering rays of the luminary orb of flame shooting forth its intense heat. This was countered, however, by the gales of refreshing delight that cooled the rider as his steed rode with swiftness. Therefore Klassen enjoyed the ride as he viewed the panoramic scene that nature painted for him on his left. A mixture of forests, plains, and hills dotted this scene and were spread out in haphazard fashion.

The forests were quite small and might have been better termed copses; they were vibrant and full of green life with the fullness that summer brings. The plains swam around these islands of shade with a furry creature of some sort or other occasionally darting for the island havens. Climbing to the skies above and looking like titans had punched upwards from a nether world, were lush hills that were blanketed with the yellow hue of dandelions. Klassen thought the vivacious vista from atop the hills would be splendid indeed but he resigned himself to carrying on and to not waste time.

Catching the paladin's eye as it soared high in the atmosphere was a bald eagle that seemed drawn to the majestic power that Klassen emanated. After gliding around the horse and rider, it descended gracefully and easily before circling at a lower attitude. Smiling at this powerful bird's display, the paladin extended his left arm so as to allow this flying friend to perch. Indeed, the eagle descended, easily matched the speed of the horse, and landed, sinking its sharp talons into his chain mail armor.

The meeting of the master warrior of the sky with its counterpart on land seemed extremely right and natural. The eagle was aware of its dominant position and exuded a proud, noble demeanor fit for a prince. The paladin marveled at the creature as he saw so many similarities between the two. The eagle's beak was easily capable of ripping flesh apart, which reminded him of his towering sword. The supple gracefulness the bird flew with was akin to the agility Klassen exuded. The parallels were numerous but the paladin flung his friend into the air as he recognized another similarity: being one's own master.

Just as the noble eagle flew away and squawked out its farewell, another sound tugged on the reins of Klassen's hearing. This noise was a low groaning that came from his right, from the dismal marsh. It was easily seen that the marsh ran parallel alongside the path for quite a way but where exactly the noise had originated he could not discern. As the howl voiced itself again and again, it seemed to follow him however far he traveled; he heard the grim noise very plainly.

The horrific creatures that Klassen had seen before leaped into his mind as he viewed the astronomical contrast the drab marsh presented compared to the bright scene of vitality to his left. He thought that the monsters he encountered previously could easily be the originators of the sound and he felt it would be a service to the world to dispose of these vicious creatures, but his decision concerning this matter had already been decided. However, the mist itself wafted away from the marsh, extending its skeletal hand as if to draw him in. The mist increased in this attempt, as if alive, while the paladin watched in interest.

The paladin thought the fierce illumination and power of the sun would destroy the darkening effect that the mist brought with it, but it didn't. In fact, the area was becoming increasingly dark as

the vague vapors overcame the path. It was therefore difficult to see very far ahead and Klassen had to slow as a result. As the marsh cast its moist net upon the land, the sky, that was so clear mere moments ago, was quickly covered over by ebony clouds that predestined a thunderous storm. It seemed the Marsh of Doom wasn't confined to any boundaries.

A crash of thunder bellowed out its anger as the paladin trekked northward as fast as he thought prudent. The sky had been completely swarmed by the threatening clouds as rippling booms of thunder detonated more and more. Following these explosions were brilliant javelins of lightning that were tossed to and fro by the warring clouds. As portentous as this was, rain hadn't yet started to fall.

The sky was so overcast that it was nearly as dark as the black of night although the streaks of lightning provided plenty of light on occasion. It was, however, difficult to determine the exact time but Klassen thought it was perhaps afternoon. Amid the crackling from above, howling from his right, and general sense of doom, the path remained true and the paladin rode on for several hours without consequence until the path—as he knew it would—suddenly veered to the right, east.

Klassen had judiciously studied the map he had received and knew not only the general layout of the known world, but also the exact course he was to take on his trip. Therefore he knew that a small town named Mythembreux resided just a bit north of the path when it turned to the east. Consequently, he didn't stay on the path but cantered off towards the town; an especially catastrophic crash of the tempest voiced its disdain at this choice as the paladin moved away from the marsh.

Despite the ominous storm that had cooled the area off, it was still quite warm and therefore the sprinkling of water that finally greeted the paladin's face was quite welcome. It seemed rain would at last commence but Klassen saw a faint light in the distance that could only be the town and realized he wouldn't be caught in a downpour. He set off towards the light.

The paladin soon arrived at the specific light he saw and recognized the establishment as a bar and inn, which suited his needs well. He jumped off of his horse and tied it to a small wooden railing; the small overhead roof for his horse sheltered his goods although even without it his goods would have been perfectly fine. The fantastic material that housed his gear was waterproof and the horse was trained to ward off any potential thieves.

The bar itself was the first building that made up the town and was a full two stories of wooden craftsmanship. Penetrating the inner depths of Mythembreux was difficult but Klassen was able to make out a semblance of a town. A main path wound through the town with buildings of one or two stories running alongside it. No activity was seen nor were any other lights on in the town. He wondered how many and what type of people lived in such a gloomy area. As he entered the tavern, the storm finally released its rain, which pounded down in tremendous torrents.

As soon as Klassen entered the small amount of drunken laughter ceased and all eyes were glued to the majestic paladin. There were only three sets of eyes, two old patrons who were obviously inebriated and the middle-aged bartender. All were Nobilis; this brought a tranquil smile from the paladin. The lounge was simple but clean with several round wooden tables with accompanying chairs, a counter with stools, and surprisingly enough, no windows. Klassen crossed over to a barstool and sat down, his cape of nobility becoming ruffled in the process before correcting itself.

The bartender was leery of this new presence, but came over and softly asked, "What'll it be sir?"

The bartender wore a spacious brown tunic and looked aged beyond his years; wrinkles lined the man's face while the brown eyes seemed barely capable of life. It seemed the dismal breath of the marsh affected him as well as the rest of the town.

Klassen powerfully spoke with happiness despite the oppressive atmosphere, "Hello, my name is Klassen. I'll just have some water and something simple to eat. Do you have a spare room?"

The owner of the tavern was quite taken aback by the question but managed to answer, "Yes, I do and my name is Bieren. You want to stay *here*, though, sir?"

The paladin nodded as he gulped down the water that was hastily provided for him in a wooden mug. “Is there any reason why I shouldn’t want to stay here amid this thunderstorm?”

The barkeep glanced warily at the two patrons who were eagerly listening to the conversation. A bowl of slop was placed before the paladin while the question seemed to linger uncomfortably in the air. The barkeep’s eyes were kept low and before he could answer, one of the ancient drunks blurted out from across the room, “This town is haunted sir!”

The words rang out hollowly throughout the establishment. The look on all three of the citizens’ faces was one of dread that Klassen eyed carefully. Before long, the paladin erupted in laughter to the total astonishment of the others. Picking up his mug and bowl, he seated himself at the table with the two drunkards while asking the barkeep, “Won’t you join us Bieren?” He did, and the three looked curiously at the stranger.

“So who can tell me why you gentleman believe this town to be haunted?” asked the paladin.

The trio glanced at each other and the barkeep was chosen by a silent vote. Bieren spoke as if a creepy shadow from the nether world would extinguish his life if he uttered something offensive. “Well, sir, it all started many years ago when a powerful wizard came into the area. Although I don’t think anyone has ever seen him—”

The storyteller was interrupted by one of the drunks who proclaimed, “I’ve seen him! He is a terrible figure!” The accompanying drunk elbowed the interrupter harshly in the stomach while admonishing him for being a drunken fool; silence followed until the barkeeper continued.

“As I was saying, sir, no one to my knowledge has ever seen him, but we have felt his immense power. He haunts the area at night as well as during the day by this infernal fog. It is said that his spirit floats along with the fog!”

“So he lives in the marsh then?” inquired Klassen.

“Oh no, he lives up north a way, in the forest, sir. He lives in a cursed castle that no one has ever returned alive from! From there he uses his evil black magic to control the marsh. It is from the marsh that he created the horrible marsh monsters!”

The paladin, of course, didn’t believe much of anything that he heard but realized there might be some truth to what was being spoken. A logical explanation seemed easy for him to come to, but the others were deeply absorbed in Bieren’s narrative; they were grasped with a feeling of anguish. The mention of the marsh monsters cultivated Klassen’s interest and he inquired about them.

“What do these monsters from the marsh look like?”

One of the aged drinkers chimed in at this question, “They are as big as a house and have five heads! They can eat men like we eat carrots!” Another elbow ripped into this patron’s side while the other drunk spoke, “Don’t mind him, he doesn’t know what he is talking about. The monsters are as big as *two* houses and have *ten* heads!”

The paladin immediately discounted their exaggerations and listened to the barkeep give his account. “I’ve never seen one myself, sir, but I have heard accounts of them. They are reported to be black as midnight with eerie glowing eyes. It is said they look like big dogs, but I’ve never seen a dog like that. They are also supposed to have two heads.”

“So do they hunt around here then or stay in the marsh?” queried the paladin.

Murmurs were exchanged just as a clap of thunder rocked the building. The bartender responded, “Yes, sir, they hunt around here. I’ve personally seen a victim. It was a mutilated mess and one of the reasons why so few people live here anymore. The corpse was torn apart but it didn’t bother me much as it was only a beast.”

As can be expected, this caught the interest of the paladin. He delved further, “So you’ve only seen one victim and it was merely a beast? An imp or hobgoblin or what?”

“It was a hobgoblin I think, sir, but who really cares about those filthy creatures?”

“There aren’t many beasts here then?”

The trio laughed at this and it was the first time since Klassen had been there that they had shattered their doomed expressions. After their refreshing laughter had died down, Bieren spoke, "There aren't any beasts here any more, sir. There aren't many Nobilismen though either. The beasts aren't welcome here in the town, nor in my bar! They are disgusting and bring filth and crime."

Klassen's smile enlarged as he asked, "They have been here then?"

"Oh yes sir, they were here some years ago. Of course they destroyed the town, but we rebuilt as best we could. See, the beasts are even more superstitious than we are and were scared witless with the events that occur around here. Once that infernal Universal Church left, we weren't forced to accept the beasts any more so that was the end of that. The haunting by that ole wizard though, has kept the town from really becoming anything."

Although this "wizard" was intriguing, Klassen felt it was an opportune time to enlighten his comrades about the wonder of the Honor Brigade and Imperium Castle. With the eloquence he had sharpened with his learning, the paladin painted the virtues of honor and wonderful paradise of honor that he had come from. The gloomy atmosphere that pervaded the bar seemed to be ripped away as the paladin spoke. The men were entranced by the tale and happiness was plain in their features; it looked like it had been quite some time since such a feeling had visited these comrades.

One of the drunks in obvious awe spoke softly, "There is actually a place like that? I thought you could only find places like that in books."

Klassen nodded in assent as he produced an Honor Brigade flier with its laws. After they examined it, he asked, "What do you gentleman think?"

The three were unanimous in their agreement that the Honor Brigade was fantastic; there seemed little doubt that the impressive figure the paladin presented influenced this decision. Klassen noted the map on the back of the flier and was pleased that the message of honor was so well received. However, he didn't push the issue as he had learned that if these compatriots were genuinely interested they would do something about it. As such, he changed the subject.

"How do I meet this 'wizard'?"

As fast as the air of joviality had greeted the bar, it slithered away into dreadful shock. The three comrades sitting across from Klassen looked on with touching concern; the paladin appreciated their unspoken compassion but said nothing as he waited.

Breaking the silence was a drunkard who exclaimed with a voice of warning, "You can't meet him! He would destroy you like he has the others!"

The paladin calmly smiled and though he felt repulsed by the supernatural remark that a child might utter, looked at the barkeep. Finally, Bieren spoke in answer, "Sir you can simply keep following the northern path that runs throughout the town and into the woods; it will take you to that cursed place, but like the old man says, you can't! Such a noble knight like yourself can't be wasted! Maybe you'd like to live here and protect us, but go up there...?"

"Thank you for the offer comrade!" proclaimed Klassen. "However, I am on a mission to spread honor and can't stay at this time. You would of course be very safe at Imperium Castle, but that is your choice. How much did you say that room was Bieren?"

"For you, it's free sir."

"Are you sure? I have gold and can pay."

"Don't worry about it sir. You are an honored guest!"

The townsmen showed much promise and the paladin was pleased with his success so far. Thanking the gracious host, Klassen hurriedly finished his meal before rising to his feet. As soon as he ascended, the room became like a funeral of mourning. Despite the opposing and impressive figure that the armed warrior radiated, overpowering and mendacious superstition claimed the patrons and owner. The drunkards moaned and lamented with tears of anguish coursing down their cheeks. The bartender was more composed but the sense of doom was similarly reflected in his face that became even more wrinkled.

The pathetic scene was repugnant to Klassen's mind of valorous heroism and life in reality. He was hard pressed to not visibly show his hatred but he managed as he knew that it was the Universal Church's—or more accurately the perfidious orcs'—fault even though they weren't even living in the town. The paladin hoped that it wasn't too late to cure the malicious malady that had infected these older kinsmen; it would take time but surely he felt it was possible.

With extreme deftness Klassen pulled his gargantuan sword from its scabbard in one smooth motion and thrust it overhead. It seemed as though the sword was so mighty that it collided with the clouds as a crackling rip of thunder boomed in response to his action.

With a powerful roar, the paladin shouted, “What puny wizard could possibly defeat me!?”

Chapter XIII

The rain pounded down, wave upon wave, with no end to the drenching in sight. Columns of the liquid splashed downward, adding to the gloom that permeated the town of Mythembreux. The cabins and buildings that made up the town looked deserted although they persevered through the thunderous assault. The soil around and about was becoming more and more swollen with the droppings, making travel slower through the burgeoning rivers.

Amid the inclement demonstration of nature's power, Klassen rode through the town listening to the pitter-patter of raindrops that sounded of metallic origin. This was for good reason as he had donned his helmet to keep his face dry. This adornment added a vicious element of truculence to his appearance. Any bystander viewing the adventurer trotting through the town would undoubtedly be more terrified of he than any "wizard" or any other such supernatural creature. What person, what tough warrior even, would not cower in terror at the mere vision of the horned knight?

The town was quite tiny and despite the rough weather and soggy obstacles, horse and rider quickly escaped its confines. The horse pushed through without trouble nor did Klassen experience any difficulties despite being quite wet; it was still rather warm so this discomfort didn't bother the paladin whatsoever.

The path narrowed and the mist that dominated the town began to slowly dissipate. Moving away from the town and its sole source of light, however, limited Klassen's range of vision; when a burst of electrical lightning flashed, the area shined with an eerie look that made it look like a demented day; this was a fleeting illumination and one hard to be guided by. Nonetheless, the horse was sure-footed and had little difficulty cantering onward even when the forest was encountered and the path became a trail suitable for no more than a couple of travelers.

Klassen's view was slightly improved when he lifted his visor upon entering the woods, and he saw how powerfully the forest was related to the gloomy town. The thunderstorm's full force wasn't felt under this roof of leaves but the verdant customary of nature was blackened by the bleak sky of torment. It was easy to see why the town had been virtually deserted on this account alone; even the path slithered about like some poisonous snake seeking a victim.

With the lessening of rain provided by the natural covering above, Klassen contemplated what he had heard at the town. He had learned that most myths and legends had some basis of truth in them, but normally they were exaggerated into ridiculousness. Surely he believed the "wizard" could exist but he had a tough time envisioning this figure being the cause of the woes of the town. Creating monsters and haunting the town was simply ludicrous although he could see how such stories could take root in such a place, especially with the philosophy of superstition that traveled the realm. Thus, he endeavored to dig up the flowers of truth from the dunghill of falsehood.

The path he was following was actually on the map given to Klassen, although what exactly it led to wasn't mentioned. So it seemed to the paladin that something would most likely be at the end of the winding path and someone very well could live there. Who it might be he wasn't sure but he hoped to know soon enough. The detour didn't seem a large one, and he felt confident that he would be well on his way to visiting Alianna by the next day. Besides, he thought, solving the mystery of the "wizard" could very well prompt those he had met to join the Honor Brigade so he thought his actions well justified.

Whatever power this "wizard" might be capable of, the paladin saw no reason to believe he was spawning monsters. The deadly creatures of the Marsh of Doom were, however, very real to Klassen since he had encountered them personally. It didn't seem like they were really plaguing the town, though, as the bartender had only mentioned one attack and that was towards a beast. So he didn't see much danger arising from the dark depths of the marsh, outside the natural, dank gloom that emanated from its confines.

As if Mother Nature dared to prove the paladin wrong, a soft snap of unknown origin was barely heard above the pelting of rain. Klassen looked around but in vain: the darkness was so encompassing that he had no hope of seeing any creature that wished to remain hidden. In fact, gazing forward into the ebony curtain of air, he wondered how the animal he rode was making its way along the path at all. The horse seemed guided by some unseen hand that placed hoof after hoof in the proper sequence along the trail. Ready himself for an engagement despite his poor vision, he trusted his horse to guide him.

The sound didn't return, which Klassen deciphered to mean that either it was nothing or something keeping silent more adroitly. Although only occasionally did a brief splash of lightning make the forest look like a den of haunting many-limbed specters, the paladin became aware of the slow climb the slippery trail took. It was still winding this way and that but he was rising and after a few moments of ascent, he caught a glimpse of something to break the monotony of despondency: a faint glimmer up ahead.

This light, which was barely visible in the harsh conditions, didn't appear to be very far away and glowed with an odd greenish hue. The illumination didn't look like a typical fire but the paladin thought that his impaired vision might be held accountable for this. This strange sight wasn't far, but it seemed odd to Klassen that it provided him the luxury of better eyesight. As such, he increased his pace as he advanced towards it, splashing through the mud as he went.

Promptly he reached the outskirts of what he thought was surely his destination. The rain assaulted him more fiercely here for he was now bereft of the cover of trees; he swung his visor down. The clearing he had entered glowed with a strange phosphorescent life that seemed threatened to be swallowed by the tormenting maw of the depressing forest; oddly enough he felt this place actually thrived in the midst of such a threat. Greeting the entrance to this realm was a muddy route accompanied by a row of poles on either side that breathed brightness.

As Klassen approached this eerie welcoming party, he was impressed by his horse's demeanor, which remained unaffected by the despairing spectacles of forlorn misery they had seen. He was further impressed as he got a good look at the poles he came across. They climbed almost to the top of his head and were made of a strange whitish material that he recognized as neither metal nor wood. What was it? The tops of the poles were even more fascinating though. Firstly, they emitted a green light without a fire and simply seemed to glow. How this was possible, he knew not. Most alarming about the sight, however, was that the heads of the poles were exactly that: skulls of the dead.

This realization put Klassen more on alert than the sound that he had heard before. The paladin could easily see how this "wizard" might get a fearsome reputation and how some could die of shock from such a sight. He put his hand on his sword just in case the shocking sight was a portent of things to come. Despite his disbelief in superstition, he found it easy to create terrific demons in his mind that defied the immutable laws of nature; nonetheless he disregarded the validity of such creatures instantly.

As the horse and rider rode onward, both were tensed for battle. The scenes of death increased as the bone of a leg or an arm were scattered about in disarray. It looked as though an army of cannibals had resided in the area and had thrown the bones away after eating the meat from them. The way the bones were so disconnected made the paladin think that surely the victims had either been eaten or ritualistically dismembered. This chilling thought was one where he believed vengeance would be in order although the specifics would need to be known in order to cast judgment. From the look of things, that might be impossible though as the skeletal remains looked quite old as many were half buried.

The building that would presumably be the home of the potential cannibals saluted Klassen as he made his way towards it. Upon seeing it he realized it had been visible for quite some time but he hadn't noticed it in his concentration of his own security. Before he knew it the paladin was situated right at its base; it seemed to him strange how swiftly it had approached him. He halted his horse and looked around.

The structure rose threateningly into the black chasm of the storm. Towers adorned with the fangs of monstrous creatures jutted upwards in many places while pictures of demons and horrendous slaughter were flung about on the walls. Here and there perched horrific-looking gargoyles that looked like they could, at any moment, break free of the confines that held them imprisoned to the building. Again, the material was a strange white substance, but now the entire construction was bathed in the strange green glow. This obscurity that surrounded the structure that looked like it might devour him, made determining the exact dimensions nigh impossible. The paladin's curiosity drove him forward to examine things more closely.

Getting a closer view only further mystified Klassen as to what the substance was and how it might glow like it did. Here and there he saw bulges in the walls, some small and some larger. A few small ones simply looked like rocks but when he looked at a larger one, everything seemed to fall into place in this demonic mire of despair. The large bulge was no mere rock; it was a skull.

The awareness of what this discovery meant sent a tingle of eerie fascination along Klassen's body. As horrific as this discovery might be, the realization that the poles and even an entire building were somehow made of bone, related a sense of awesome power. All evidence that he had gathered led to a dastardly evil power, but nonetheless it was an immense power.

The paladin was thoroughly soaked by the storm that gave no indication of an end in sight, but Klassen moved not at all as a strange enthrallment enveloped him. His brief period of thralldom was broken by a further mystery he wished to solve. He stretched his arm out to touch the wall and perhaps learn from this action how it glowed but he was rudely interrupted.

A tremendous noise that resembled a combination of thunder and a mighty growl echoed powerfully, halting Klassen's inspection. The sound was so loud that it even bested a crash of thunder in volume. Where it had come from was extremely difficult for the paladin to figure out, as it seemed to emanate from the structure before him, the sky above him, and the forest that surrounded him.

In one swift metallic motion, the paladin ripped his sword from its case and scanned about for what he thought the howl to be: a monster of the marsh. His horse responded admirably and wasn't cowered in the least by the harrowing noise that would have probably scared the skeletons that dotted the landscape, had they been alive.

Rushing around looking for a duel to the death was the magnificent warrior that was Klassen. He sprinted off in one direction only to find nothing but cascading rain and dreariness. Other directions he pursued but they beget the same disappointment. All the way around the towering peaks of his cloistered destination did he ride but after completing the circle, he was still at a loss to explain the noise.

As he glared intently around, the booming rumble of a growl again reverberated throughout the clearing. Klassen's first instinct was to race around again but reason caught up with him and he looked ahead at the emerald structure in scrutiny. The noise died away; did it come from the tower?

As if in answer to this unspoken question, the growl was heard over and over again, proving to Klassen where it came from. The noise was irritating and omnipresent. The paladin withstood the storm of caustic racket with composure and, with some work, his horse did as well. The surrounding tempest was fierce but it was petty compared to the writhing, churning hurricane that raged inside the dark blue waters of Klassen's eyes. Anger enveloped the paladin as he realized how he had been toyed with upon his arrival, but now he wished to even the score and find out who had annoyed him so, but he saw no entrance.

After the sound finally died away and the sound of rain tapping away returned, Klassen raised his sword and screamed fiercely, "Let me in 'wizard'!"

No response was forthcoming and the paladin wondered whether the "wizard" heard him or cared to heed his proclamation if he did. Klassen had navigated completely around the glowing building and had seen absolutely no sign of how one might enter, but he looked again as he was determined to complete his goal now that he was so close to its fruition. Before he had a chance to do more inspection, however, a retort was made to his demand that wasn't verbal.

Slamming to the ground with a thud was an opening that was undoubtedly a drawbridge. The chains that supported it could be plainly seen while the glowing platform of bone was just as evident. Klassen hopped off of his mount, sword in hand, and led his horse through the opening. As he entered, he saw the eyes and nose of some horrendous fiend painted above the opening, while the drawbridge itself would have comprised the maw.

The hall that he entered was very black and only partially illuminated by the glow outside. From what Klassen could make it, it was quite spacious, as fitting for a castle. What occupied the space in front of him, Klassen found it impossible to ascertain. So where he might go wasn't clear but before he could contemplate this matter fully, a sound of metal grating against metal was heard culminating in a loud thud that doused the room's faint brightness.

The paladin, as alert as he was, was unable to prevent what had happened behind him: the drawbridge had been retracted with a swiftness he thought incredible. This action increased his execration at being toyed with as he intently wished to smash the sorry scamp that lorded over the demonic manor. The closing of the egress left the hall blanketed in silence as the sounds of the storm were completely blocked out.

The silence didn't last long, however, as it was interrupted by a metallic echoing that seemed to emanate from the very walls. "Come...Forward...Leave...Horse..."

Instinctively the paladin looked around to find the mysterious speaker but it was a fruitless gesture due to the pervasive cloak of darkness. Who was this mysterious speaker and on what authority could he order him, Klassen? The paladin endeavored to find out. Scrambling about with his gear, Klassen exchanged the helmet he wore for his mighty crossbow that he latched to his belt. Making sure his dagger was also at his belt, he started forward, still wielding the mighty blade *Ehredegen*.

Klassen used his lengthy sword to poke forward to see what lay ahead. Before going but a few koms, something grazed his right thigh. Immediately he wheeled to his right and brutally kicked in that direction. Something sturdy burst into bits and tumbled onto the floor; he realized it was a stone floor by the sound the object made upon crashing. Whatever he had crushed was surely smashed but it hadn't been a threat to him anyway; he resumed his course.

The paladin heard the heavy breathing of his steed slowly fade away and beyond the occasional dripping of rain from his body onto the floor, silence reigned supreme. Even when an unexpected action occurred directly in front of Klassen, it was without sound. A soft rush of stale air flew at the paladin, making him duck in expectation of an attack. None came, however, and while swinging his sword forward, heard a knock to the right and the left as the blade hit two hard objects. He quickly assessed that it was a doorway and that indicated where the wind had come from. He entered.

Again he felt a rush of wind, only this time it was from behind and Klassen realized this meaning as well. The metallic voice returned with the simple command of, "Right." The paladin saw no other choice, so he grudgingly complied.

The inexplicable events that were transpiring around him would most likely have greatly intrigued him, as there were many mysteries to be explained, had it not been for the "wizard." Being ordered around like a mangy mutt made the paladin's skin emanate the very anger that he felt. When he discovered what felt like a wooden chair in his path, he vented this animosity by flinging the object across the room, where it sounded like it exploded upon hitting a wall.

Just like the door before, Klassen felt a rush of wind; entered the door; and the door closed. The all-too-familiar voice returned and spoke, "Left."

Being led around like a mouse in a maze infuriated the paladin to such an extent that he was forced to pause for a moment. He felt like rushing forward but thought the better of this rash decision for a trap could be placed anywhere within the bleak labyrinth he was imprisoned in. The voice repeated its command as if goading Klassen into a further state of agitation. Beyond his desire to smash the skull of his unseen adversary, the one thought predominating his mind was this: what power did this "wizard" possess to allow him to control things like he did? However, this

inquiry spawned others. How could he see? How could he project his voice so far? How did he open and shut the doors?

Realizing he wasn't going to find the answer to his queries without venturing on, he turned left and walked forward. Although he felt impelled to run with dashing speed, the paladin restrained himself and moved cautiously along. As it turned out, there was no need for this and Klassen passed through another door in the same manner as before.

Before another command could be issued to the paladin, he felt behind him for the door that had closed, seemingly on its own accord. It was a wooden door. Grunting out his frustration and looking to flex his muscles for the benefit of his unseen foe, Klassen wheeled around and delivered a devastating blow with his foot that knocked the door off of its hinges and into a total state of disrepair.

Delighted at this display, the paladin roared out, "Where are you 'wizard'?"

The metallic voice replied instantly, "Here." Arming his crossbow with his left hand and holding his sword in the right, Klassen scanned the chamber or darkness. All around did he look until he finally spotted a light; it came from above.

Klassen's heart was thumping rapidly as he prepared—finally—for a duel. His muscles were loose and ready to be flung into action with a moment's notice. The weapons he was equipped with were devastatingly powerful and he was therefore able to deal death quite easily. All he needed was a foe and that he now had; the paladin smiled in belligerent glee.

Accompanying the faint glow from above were billowing clouds of smoke that soon encased the floor of the room. As this happened a creaking sound was heard as the figure above was slowly lowered into the room. As it came into view, Klassen saw that the figure stood upon a glowing platform of bone, which he presumed was supported by chains, although they were invisible to his eye. Before long, the "wizard" had descended all the way down to Klassen's level upon the floor where the paladin scrutinized him in wrathful fury.

The being that stood before the paladin was bedecked in a capacious red robe that was adorned with arcane symbols that glowed of jade. It was therefore hard to ascertain the exact size of the being, but Klassen thought him to be of average size and perhaps lean of build. The figure was weaponless although he did wield a staff of bone that held a glimmering skull upon its top. Most striking, however, was the contorted mask he wore of some mythical demon, possessing glowing fangs and eyes.

His adversary made no hostile action, as it seemed the horrid display of his figure was hostile enough, but Klassen hesitated in destroying the creature. "Who are you?" shouted the paladin, tensed for battle. The only response he received was the mask twisting to the side slightly as if the figure didn't understand.

Pointing his crossbow at the enemy while holding his sword aloft, Klassen voiced his building rage, "Speak or die!"

Any movement that in anyway appeared hostile would have prompted a deadly bolt to be fired, but none came. The mysterious figure calmly walked over to a table that the paladin hadn't even previously noticed. The "wizard" sat down and uttered words that completely disarmed the paladin and forced his anger back down into the depths of his soul.

The words were jubilant and they sounded very young: "Ha ha ha."

Chapter XIV

Upon removing his mask, the figure's features were recognized as obviously Nobilis but this wasn't as surprising as the age of the man. His voice had sounded so young and playful but his body was obviously aged as he had long, white hair and a wrinkle here and there sprinkled across his visage. He was clean-shaven with gray eyes that exuded the youthfulness in his heart. The figure was not imposing whatsoever and Klassen was reminded of his mentor of old, Aristotle.

"Come, sit down. My name is Mecolier," spoke the man just as the room was flooded with light, the normal light of many torches. With a suspicious glance, Klassen accepted the invitation as all the destructive impulses that he had held only but a few moments before had been completely doused. The kindness exuded by Mecolier made the paladin think that the whole charade he had experienced was simply for show. Klassen also thought perhaps it was simply a trick and kept on guard despite returning his weapons to their positions of rest.

Now that the room was properly illuminated with the smoke fading slowly away, the paladin saw an enormous library with many, many bookshelves. Books adorned these shelves from the base of the floor to the heights above. It was therefore impossible to simply grab a tome from the top shelf but a large ladder leaned against the shelf, solved this problem. Other than this, the long table Klassen now sat at was the only other item of note. The table itself had many chairs and could easily seat twenty comrades; the woodwork was admirable.

Before Klassen could utter any words, Mecolier became very animated and spoke rapidly, "Ah-ha! Impressive, isn't it? What is your name? Why have you come here? How did you get here? Who told you about me? How long shall you stay?"

Under the deluge of questions, Klassen felt as though a child living in an old man's body was questioning him. The curiosity was refreshing, however, especially when the paladin knew so many who cared not about the sacred virtue of knowledge. He promptly answered Mecolier's questions and was actually enjoying his presence even though he had wanted so badly to decapitate him only moments ago.

Before the paladin could turn the conversation, Mecolier leaped into a dialogue of his own, "I suppose you are wondering why I was toying with you, eh? Well, I get so few visitors here and most that come anywhere near my fine inhabitation are worthless dolts who need to be slaughtered. As such, I deplore them and scare them away! That is, those that even made it to my door, ha ha ha. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. I had you going for a while but you surely aren't like the others, impressive! I had to test you and you surely aren't one of those scamps that so numerously proliferate around the globe!"

Klassen was about to thank the man and show his understanding, when the robed figure took a deep breath and continued, "Oh? Yes, of course you want to know all about my 'magic,' eh? Well you already know that that is nonsense and it is really called 'science'. I have many nifty gadgets that sure scare some of the more superstitious folk! Ha ha ha. I will tell you some of my secrets but not all, no, not all. However, you must give me your word of honor to not reveal what I tell you! Do you agree?"

The paladin was overwhelmed by the speed with which his adversary-become-friend was speaking. It seemed as though Mecolier would be quite comfortable and able, to speak with five different kinsmen at once. His talk of honor was, of course, most welcome to the noble ears of Klassen and the paladin thus nodded at his question and replied with the Honor Salute: "Honor is Life."

With eager ears, the paladin listened to his friend continue talking, "Ah-ha! I like that. 'Honor is Life.' Yes, that is impressive. Philosophy is such a grand subject and honor, well honor is as you say: life. It reminds me of the words of a philosopher; which one you ask? Oh, one of them

that I like whatever his name is. Anyway, it goes something like this: 'to live alone one must be an animal, god, or philosopher.' I live alone so which am I? Perhaps all three, perhaps.

"So what were we speaking of? Was it the laws of buoyancy? Oh, no, no. Ah-ha! It was secrets, yes, yes. In order to undertake that journey we should start from the beginning. Well, not exactly the beginning, that was oh-so-many years ago. We shall start from my journey to this grandiose place, as I'm sure you'd like to hear about that first; it leads up to my secrets anyway. You'd like that, eh? Of course."

The paladin nodded but he knew his new friend would have continued on with or without his approval. Klassen was enthralled listening to this comrade, this scholar really. The storm of ideas that must have raged in Mecolier's mind was staggering to think of, so the paladin relaxed and serenely listened to the narrative, enjoying it mightily.

Continuing in his youthful, slightly high-pitched voice, Mecolier said, "It was many, many years ago and I was very disgusted with all those horrible beasts. You know the ones: imps, hobgoblins, ogres, and orcs. They really annoyed me! Yes, yes I can tell you hate them too; you have that look. Then of course there was that disgusting Universal Church. They are all backwards, they are! I can see that you disagree with that repulsive creed as well, just by the look of you. Trying to talk sense into those moronic imbeciles was nearly impossible, nearly so I know; sure it is possible but I had better things to do with my time! Living in Mythembreux I heard the tales of this 'haunted' castle; I had to check it out. Perhaps did I think, there would be some reasonable people to be found.

"It was a cold winter day, or was it a cold summer day? Hmm, maybe it was a warm winter day; whatever it was, it was a day. When I discovered all these skeletons I was frozen to almost death; yes I know it may be hard to believe, but yes I was! I managed though and came to the drawbridge, which, for me, was down so I entered.

"The place was only inhabited by the skeletons that had died many, many years ago. Oh, and yes, yes, yes! The walls *are* made of bone! Now, of course you want to know how they did this and why. Well, from the many tomes that surround us I learned much. They tell me the *how* but unless you are a mason, it will be nonsense to you. You don't look like a mason though, eh? No, you aren't."

Klassen seized the chance to join the conversation when his friend paused to take a gulp of air. "I'm not a mason, but I am skilled in carpentry."

Although the paladin was intently interested in the scholar's tale of discovery, Mecolier was led off in a different path by Klassen's words. "Ah-ha carpentry! Impressive," the robed figure said. "You can then appreciate the mechanics of this place, oh, no, no. What was it we were talking about? Oh! The fine craftsmanship of this table and many other pieces of furniture you can admire. That includes the chair and door you broke! Ha ha ha."

"What about your discovery of this castle?" questioned Klassen.

"Oh, yes that is a fine story indeed. As I was saying, it was a day, yes a day, many years ago. The bones were scattered about pretty much as you see them today. We now come to the who, what, when, and why, eh? This is interesting indeed! I have to go though, be back in a bit!"

With this statement the scholar sprang out of his seat and dashed to the back of the room and exited through a door. Klassen was stunned by this disappearance at the height of his friend's story. Where had he gone and why? The paladin wasn't sure but decided to take a look around the massive library.

There were so many tomes of knowledge neatly organized upon the shelves that Klassen's desire to learn of the mystery of the castle was increased even further. He anxiously awaited the return of the figure who would enlighten him upon this matter, but come back swiftly he did not. As such, he browsed through the books that ranged from astronomy to zoology and many, if not all, subjects in between.

So much time passed that the paladin started to grow wary of Mecolier as he recalled the hatred that had only recently been extinguished. The warm and gentle old man surfaced in his mind,

though, and absolved any thoughts of treachery. However, Klassen would remain on alert to any suspicious activity.

Every book the paladin came across reminded him of the tremendous conundrum that shrouded everything about him, including the air he breathed. Nonetheless, when he came across a novel of heroism and adventure, he was intrigued and sat down with his discovery. Figuring he had no better way to spend his time, the paladin dove into his wonderful find.

If anything could have taken the paladin's mind away from the exciting enigmas around him, it was a heroic epic. The clash of sword and promotion of honor always attracted him and this was no exception. However, before he had reached any fervent fits of war, the eccentric hermit reappeared. Dashing forward did he while carrying a plate filled with food and drink; he placed it on the table and seated himself.

"Here is some nourishment for us both," said he. "Ah-ha! I see you have a book of honorable heroism; it befits you indeed. When I saw all the beautiful books here I was astounded and overwhelmed. I was a mere lad at that time, you see. I could barely read but surrounded by so many books (and bones!) one does learn. As you surely know, I've read many hundreds, (or is it thousands?) of books. My favorite type of book you ask? Well, that is tough. I like science but is that my favorite? No, no not indeed. I, well, let's just say I like all genres!

"Philosophy is a quaint little subject. 'The uninformed person is a dark world unto himself,' so saith the graceful philosopher. Also, of course, 'Perfection requires polish,' by the same enlightened soul. The laws of mechanics, gravity, and natural selection are interesting as well. Excuse me for a moment."

Mecolier used this pause to completely devour the food and drink he had provided. Klassen, conversely, stopped eating as he contemplated what he had heard. Some of things, which the hermit spoke of, he had never before heard of and wondered whether they were even known back at Imperium Castle. What, for instance, was gravity? The paladin was intrigued by this foreign word but thought better of asking of it, as he was more interested in a topic of a different nature.

"So what shall we discuss?" questioned Mecolier, as he eyes darted about as swiftly as his speech. They clamped on a matter of fascination and he began talking, in answer to his own question. "Ah-ha! That is impressive and a good topic to discuss. May I see that fine crossbow?"

"Oh, sure comrade," replied the paladin as he handed the hermit the weapon. "Be careful with this great weapon though."

With a child-like enchantment Mecolier turned the weapon about as he admired its construction. By the look on his face, the multiple bolts that were armed were of special interest. He swung the weapon around which made Klassen duck instinctively although it was obvious that the hermit had no hostile intention; he was simply in his own world of concentration. Taking aim, a bolt was fired into a chair at the end of the table; it punched through the back of the chair and buried itself into the wall of bone.

Handing the weapon back to the paladin, the hermit pronounced, "Impressive and effective weapon! How was it constructed? Who built it? How effective is it in battle?"

The paladin was slightly amused as his friend was actually refraining from any action other than mere waiting. "I can't say how exactly it was constructed but it was built by the Honor Brigade. From my training experience this crossbow is quite effective!"

"Oh? The Honor Brigade? Where oh where have I heard that before? Or have I? It reminds me of this castle in a way, but that can wait until later, yes, yes. Does this Honor Brigade have more weapons of destruction? I hope so as they can crush the infidel dogs!"

The garbled speech of the scholar was a bit confusing to Klassen and he wondered whether Mecolier was even sure of what he spoke. Nevertheless, the old man seemed quite warlike and good-natured, good things thought the paladin.

Withdrawing his gigantic sword, Klassen held this mighty blade aloft as he answered his friend's inquiry, "Yes, we have magnificent weapons! Here, try out my blade *Ehredegen*."

The paladin extended the sword with his right hand, across the table, and into the outstretched hands of the hermit; Mecolier grasped it with both hands. As soon as Klassen's great strength was withdrawn from the colossal sword, it smashed downwards onto the table with a violent thud. Mustering up all his reservoirs of power, Mecolier barely managed to lift the sword from the table but it wavered unsteadily and collapsed back upon the table. The mighty instrument of devastation was promptly returned to its owner.

"Indeed, that is an impressive weapon! Quite heavy too! Ha ha ha. Do all the warriors from the Honor Brigade look like you? What is its goal? Where is this place? How do I get there? How do I join? Ah-ha this is an impressive day!" said Mecolier with much enthusiasm.

With mellifluous speech Klassen related to the hermit the plenary details about the Honor Brigade. The eyes of Mecolier had a natural tendency to dart about in deep thought but they were firmly rooted to the paladin as he talked. A flier materialized in the scholar's hands at the conclusion of the lesson; Mecolier examined it meticulously. It was devoured instantly and before long the confabulation continued.

"Ha ha ha. Impressive this Honor Brigade and Imperium Castle is!" exclaimed Mecolier passionately. "Ironically enough, yes, yes, ironically indeed, it reminds me of the Order of Darkness. That is jumping ahead and we don't want to do that, oh no. It sounds like oh-so-sweet sonorous sound, does this establishment of honor. Protect and promote the virtuous ideals! Oh! Did you see any of those annoying marsh creatures about? The ones with two heads I mean."

With ardor, the paladin exclaimed, "I have seen them! They are hideous and foul but I haven't seen any since I left the marsh. Why?"

"Ah-ha! You are as brave as you look to have entered that marsh, the Marsh of Doom," replied the hermit. "Yes, why do I ask? It is because of acid, or rather alkaline. Anyway, I have conveniently placed some tasty little traps, or perhaps morsels would be a better word for them. As much as most people sicken me, as they are pathetic rapscallions, I feel a kinship with the town of Mythembreux. Yes, I know 'tis odd. But what am I? Ha ha ha. As you may know, no you probably wouldn't know, but who is to say? Those foul beasts of the night were plaguing the town, not my glowing abode, mind you, as they can't stand the light. How light is it outside? Not too bright is it? Where was I?"

The paladin smiled at this display as he was beholding a mind that was led astray by the simplest things but was obviously brilliant. "The monsters of the marsh," Klassen guided.

"Ah, yes of course, how silly of me," the hermit said. "Well, I saw them lurking about some time ago, in my own forest, can you believe it!? I came to realize that they would also be contaminating the town as well. Methought perhaps they'd make a good pet but their caustic nature was a bit offensive: such bad breath! So one day, it was day, of course, since they hate the day; I took a nice little hike down to the marsh and spread some of my treats along the outskirts of that oh-so-dreary bog. How can anyone live in such a place? I live in a paradise compare to that. Now, where was I? Yes! how did I know they'd like it, you ask? Well I had tested the bait already and they liked it so much they died of delight! Ha ha ha. I haven't seen those creatures in ages although I do spread more treats for them every so often.

"How can anyone live in that marsh? It is so tenebrous and unlike my paradise here. But oh! might you know how much the citizens of Mythembreux appreciate my efforts at keeping them from harm?"

The paladin was pleasantly surprised to learn of the goodwill towards the townsfolk but unfortunately they didn't reciprocate the feeling. Mecolier raised his eyebrow in inquiry as he saw the hesitancy from the paladin. Nonetheless, Klassen spoke, "I commend you on your service to the good Nobilis people in Mythembreux. However, they believe that you are the source of the monsters and cause of ill-will in the town."

“Ha ha ha, surely you must jest. They can’t be that dull, can they? Oh it is true; I see it in your visage; you can’t lie, after all! Such ungrateful, miserable blackguards! 'Tis to be expected though, yes, yes. They’ve been poisoned and must think of me as some malefic ‘wizard’ as you called me. They are like little toddlers, they are. Hopefully this creed of honor of yours can help them see through the benighted misery! ‘Such is life.’”

Mecolier looked intently at the paladin as if reading a book, “I see what you think my friend. Oh yes! I do. You think I’d make a good addition to the Honor Brigade and methinks I would too. Perhaps I shall go, at least for a visit; it sure sounds nice. For now, though, I see that you have a world to preach to. I could talk all day, especially about my engineering gadgets like my lift here or the drawbridge improvements I made or the doors you came through or how I saw you; this is my specialty. You are an adventurer, though, and now I must, yes must, tell you the history of this place. Your desire for it burns deeply, very deeply I see. First let me take a little break. Ha ha ha. Just a joke!”

The trenchant comments by the hermit were so true of Klassen that the paladin wondered for just a second whether the man sitting across from him did possess some super-power. He realized, though, was simply swift, keen acumen that he was experiencing first-hand.

“Now,” exclaimed the scholar, “we come to the juicy part of our conversation. The history of this place is contained within some of the books located around us; yes I read a lot. It improves the mind it does, but what else should I do? Many topics are covered in this library’s innards but oh! the history of the Order of Darkness is perhaps the most fascinating. Yes, I said the Order of Darkness and yes the Honor Brigade is similar to that ancient, defunct order.

“Their tale starts hundreds of years ago and they, like the Honor Brigade, were disgusted with the prevailing attitudes of dishonor. As a response the group was formed, yes just a group, only five members. Their ways were considered ‘evil’ and ‘dark’ by the despicable masses and they decided to live up to that attitude. They *would* be evil to the masses! Holding righteous values that we would oh yes! call ‘holy,’ they accepted the label of ‘evil’. Thus, the Order of Darkness was formed.

“They were persecuted, oh my what persecution! They were thrown from the society like dogs, or was it like vermin? How did the author put it? Nevertheless, the group tended to attract outcasts but they only accepted the elite; thus they were a small group, never more than one hundred souls. They came here to this castle, the Castle of Darkness.

“Did the miserable masses leave them alone? Oh no, no! Many miniature battles were fought, yes many. The bones you see scattered about were from those skirmishes! It took many moons, many indeed, but they finally erected this castle from the bones of their dishonorable foes. As you can imagine many were slaughtered! Ha ha ha. Would have been nice to see, eh?

“Once the place was erected in all its frightening appearances, no more did the foe come. Did you see that green glow? Of course you did, what I am talking about. Wait a moment, what *am* I talking about? Hmm, the anatomy of a bat with their peculiar method of ‘sight,’ perhaps? No, no I can see it in your face; it was the glow. That was a strange substance they made from glowing rocks, yes they glowed! It is a liquid and some was left behind. I used it for my stunning robe, as you can plainly see.”

Klassen was enthralled by the odd tale he was hearing and was savoring every word that his friend spoke, even those that were completely irrelevant to the matter at hand. To think that such an order had existed so long ago and had been so different in appearance, yet so alike in content to the Honor Brigade, fascinated the excited paladin. The pause, which Mecolier was forced to take due to necessity of breathing, increased Klassen’s enthusiast anticipation to the climax of the tale he was hearing.

After digesting the vital element of air, Mecolier continued his rapid narrative, “So now you ask what became of the Order of Darkness. That, my friend, is an excellent question! I have read tome after tome but where oh where did these paragons fly to? Did they die? It doesn’t appear that they were conquered here for the place was in spectacular condition when I found it, yes spectacular.

Did they simply leave? Possible, but why? It is like a paradox! Oh wait, what is a paradox? Maybe a conundrum, perhaps. Hmm, well, I am sorry to disappoint you, but I know not what became of them: it is a mystery.”

The paladin was visibly disappointed but hope gleamed in his eye as he probingly questioned, “Are you sure you don’t know? Are you just joking?”

Surprisingly, Mecolier didn’t verbally respond but simply shook his head to reply in the negative. This startled Klassen but he knew what it signified. He could contemplate the plethora of possibilities surrounding the Castle of Darkness later; the entire idea burned passionately in his being like an internecine firestorm torching a village, but he knew it was time.

Standing up and coming to his full height, Klassen asked one final question: “What shall I say of you to the folks in Mythembreux?”

Jumping to his feet with a spring, the hermit put his demonic mask on while raising his skull scepter into the air. “Tell them how it is: I am Mecolier the Magnificent, guardian of Mythembreux!”

Chapter XV

The good but superstitious citizens that attended the bar of Mythembreux had been extraordinarily shocked to see Klassen return for the night and to hear that the being they thought was haunting them was actually helping them. The superstitious bartender Bieren and his patrons of course thought that the paladin had been bewitched by the evil “sorcerer” but after a while Klassen convinced them this was not the case. At least he hoped he had convinced them and they weren’t simply giving in due to his impressive aura of power. Regardless, he had slept well and started out to continue his adventurous escapade in the morning.

The trek eastward had gone rather swiftly for the downpour of furious showers had subsided, leaving behind a partly cloudy sky that occasionally allowed the sun to make an appearance. The path showed clear signs of the fury of the storm as swollen streams occasionally flooded the route Klassen took, slowing him down. Altogether, though, his progress went well and he arrived at his destination by mid-afternoon.

As the path had wound first east and then south, the paladin had seen only a few wayward travelers and was therefore left alone to his thoughts. More than any other contemplation, his visit with Mecolier and learning of the Order of Darkness had been the most intriguing. He had thought long and hard upon the topic, going through the history he had learned in the Honor Brigade and using his rational mind to make an attempt at an explanation.

Over and over in his mind did the paladin come to the conclusion that perhaps there was some connection between the Order of Darkness and the Honor Brigade. As the hermit had related, the two were different in appearance but similar in ideology. Couldn’t there be some connection? The answer to his question, he knew, would have to wait for as he turned east again upon the trail, the town of Lealean had promptly come into view.

The town was heavily populated by beasts, which of course meant that it was a filthy, run-down town for the most part. The disgust, which he hadn’t felt in quite some time, returned to Klassen’s being with a vengeance. The living quarters were repulsively decadent and the fusty smell that pervaded the area was full of refuse of all kinds, including urine and feces, which emanated a disgusting, poignant odor.

Swarming the streets like nauseating vermin, the beasts naturally added to the already swollen mountain of trash that they had created in the first place. In an obstreperous display of degeneracy, they continued to tear down a town that, like many others, was once one of beauty and happiness. Now, however, the Nobilis population was quite small, as the paladin saw not any of his brethren as he cantered through the town. By the look of things, the population of his kinsmen was rapidly declining and this, of course, he knew would lead to the complete transformation of the town into a horrible cesspool. Klassen firmly believed that only the Honor Brigade could save the town from destruction and he knew he was its noble messenger.

As the puissant figure of the paladin strode through the streets of the town, the groups of various beasts hastily made way for him. Even in their groups they cowered at the sight of Klassen, who had donned his shocking helmet for this very purpose. A sect of ogres quickly scattered at his sight while the same effect occurred to a throng of imps and hobgoblins. This of course pleased the powerful paladin but what attracted him was a different group that he saw in the distance; he rode off towards it.

From afar, it appeared as though a group of Nobilismen were conversing apart from the other beasts. However, when the paladin approached to hail these comrades, he was appalled to find that he wasn’t viewing his kinsman at all but some strange new beast, which he had never before seen. What were these new beasts? Klassen wasn’t sure but rode off wondering what sort of new aberration nature had bestowed upon the world.

Retracing the path he had traveled in the past, Klassen was casually cantering along when he heard a racket above the rest. It wasn't clear at first what was being said but it was readily apparent where the sound was coming from: an alley to his right. Turning down the alley, the paladin was greeted by not beasts but a plethora of trash that, although still disgusting, he was becoming conditioned to.

The clamor he had heard but a moment ago repeated itself and this time he could discern what it said: "Thief! Thief!"

Directly after Klassen heard this, a Nobilis boy of perhaps twelve came running down the alley with great and agile swiftness. Weaving about to avoid the piles of refuse and even jumping over the smaller heaps did he dash. It seemed obvious that the little lad was the thief. The paladin lifted up his visor and waited for the boy in the near-deserted alleyway.

The lad was quite engaged in hurrying along and only saw the paladin right when he was almost directly in front of Klassen. The child was momentarily stunned at the majestic sight before him, but started off anyway as if to pass the paladin; however, Klassen didn't allow this to happen as he easily bent down and lifted the lad into the air with his left arm.

The shout of "thief!" was repeated but no figure yet materialized so the paladin turned his attention to his catch. The lad squirmed with all his might but it was to no avail in the powerful grasp of the paladin. The boy had shining blonde hair that was nearly white, with sparkling blue eyes that anxiously rushed about in vain, looking for an avenue of escape. His garments were brown, torn, and dirty, although he didn't appear to Klassen to be of the scoundrel class. In fact, the vitality the boy emanated reminded him a lot of his own vibrant childhood.

With the questioning air of a parent, Klassen asked, "Are you a thief boy?"

Dangling in midair, the boy smiled widely at this question and answered with ardor, "Yes, I am and I am proud of it and I am good at it and I have never gotten caught at it! Now, let me go and I can go home and give my parents the gold I stole and we can eat!"

The dark azure eyes that Klassen possessed looked penetratingly at the lad and was content that the boy wasn't lying and that he was actually proud to be a thief. There was an intriguing tale to be heard but before the paladin could hear it from the young one, the pursuer of the thief appeared at the end of the alley. Klassen watched as this figure drew close in obvious hope of starting a conversation.

The burning flames of execration flared up within Klassen as the pursuer—a fat, grotesque-looking green orc—approached and the paladin was hard pressed to control himself; but he wanted the full tale and thus withheld his might. This orc was dressed quite well in a luxurious brown robe that was bedecked with jewels. Jewelry also adorned the wicked orc's neck and fingers with wealth Klassen knew had come by way of treachery.

Out of breath, the repulsive orc spoke in a tone that seemed to invite a warrior to silence it as it sounded like an irksome pig. "Thank you sir for stopping that little thief. I will reward you, of course, as you are obviously a warrior of merit. Now, if you'd kindly hand him over to me, I can resolve this business."

His impulse was to exterminate the filthy creature before him but Klassen persevered through his raging emotions. Vociferating harshly at the foul orc, he said, "You will sit and wait while I talk to the lad!" As he said this he lifted his right boot into the air and pummeled the orc atop the head, causing the iniquitous creature to crumble to the ground; the paladin flashed an immense smile as the orc laid among the refuse that he thought suited the beast so well.

Turning his jovial visage to the boy who giggled jubilantly at the paladin's display, Klassen asked, "Why did you steal from this foul creature?"

Immediately the boy chimed in, "Because he is an orc! They are evil and filthy and corrupt and they steal from us and they lie to us and they should die!"

As the orc lay cowering in extreme consternation, the paladin queried the precocious little lad, "Who told you all this wisdom my friend?"

“My daddy did! He has been ripped off by the orcs and my mother has and the old farmer has and my cousin has too! Can I kill him mister, can I, can I?”

Klassen was warmly pleased by these words and answered accordingly, “Sure you can. You can even take those fancy jewels too. The orcs are our enemies and it is not only honorable to crush them, but it is our duty! What is your name lad? I’m Klassen.”

As can be expected, the orc was greatly dismayed at the talk of its own demise but was quite paralyzed from the terrible shock. As such, the boy responded, “Thank you mister! I’m Aigean and I’m happy and it is great to meet you and when can we kill the orc? I’m hungry and late and have to get home.”

Setting the boy down and hopping off of his mount, Klassen answered this question by his actions. The miserable orc, now sensing its impending doom, attempted to scramble away but a swift kick to its hindquarters brought it tumbling facedown onto the ground. A violent stomp to the beast’s head followed this as the mighty paladin effectively knocked out his foe.

Dragging his thumb along his throat in demonstration, Klassen handed Aigean his dagger and watched in much satisfaction as the boy slit the orc’s throat. Before the paladin could even help his young ally, the lad had completely pilfered the body of the corpse, removing all the valuables, including the robe, in a matter of seconds. It was clear the boy was quite adroit at his profession.

As the boy handed the knife back, the paladin spoke like a father figure giving a didactic lesson: “Remember to only steal from our enemies: the beasts and traitors among our own people! Promote the best interests of our Nobilis brethren.” Thus saying the eighth law of the Honor Brigade, Klassen gave the lad a flier to show his parents.

With a mammoth smile, Aigean accepted the words of wisdom graciously but before the paladin could offer the boy a ride home, the lad was gone. As he deftly navigated the alley, he said in closing, “Thanks and thanks and bye!”

Alone in the alley, the paladin felt charged by the act of justice he had heralded as he jumped back on his horse. Retracing the path he had been taking, he resumed his journey with the thought of enlightening the youth entertaining his mind. Before long, Klassen entered the Nobilis district that he had visited before.

What was before filled with almost exclusively his kinsmen, had deteriorated in the short months since his visit. Indeed, there were still a good number of Nobilismen but the area had been infected by the beasts that swarmed so oppressively about the bustling town. Nonetheless, the habitations were, for the most part, in much better shape and the paladin felt much more at home around some of his brethren.

Slowing to a canter to take in the sights of his comrades, the paladin reflected on how the entire area was doomed to destruction if things continued on their present course. The faces that he saw portended this annihilation and the only force on the planet he thought that could avert this disaster was the Honor Brigade. An opportunity soon presented itself that allowed Klassen to spur on the toppling of degeneracy.

Since this section of the town was mainly Nobilis and was more on the outskirts near the country, it was lightly traveled. Whenever a beast was seen against the backdrop of his kin, it stood out like a despondent calamity of great catastrophe. This was even more emphasized by the sight that smacked the paladin forcefully in the face.

Off in the distance was a group of three that was traveling cabin to cabin collecting what only could be considered a dastardly tax upon the Nobilis, as the paladin observed the trio actually bypassing a few habitations that housed a group of hobgoblins. That the beast dwellings were there was an effrontery towards his loyal being, but the persecution of his comrades enraged Klassen. The paladin hurried off to help and arrived at the scene with great swiftness.

Now that the scene lay before him, the paladin was able to make out more clearly what was transpiring. The trio consisted of two hideous ogres who actually gleamed with the armor of a soldier. This was surprising in itself to the paladin but the full extent of it was even more stunning. The two beasts were each decked out in plate mail, a helmet, a shield, and a large spiked mace.

Although Klassen thought the discipline of such beasts to be quite questionable, there was no doubt they could intimidate a layman.

The third figure, which was obviously in charge, was actually a Nobilisman who wore white robes, signifying that he was a clergyman in the despicable Universal Church. This man was middle-aged with a look of contempt that seemed permanently etched upon his visage; he was haranguing a poor resident of a Nobilis dwelling for not paying what Klassen heard as the “Nobilis Tax.” The young resident, dressed in nothing more than rags, was on his knees pleading with the arrogant tax collector while what could only have been his wife and child lay huddled behind him, terrified.

“Please sir,” the resident begged, “I have no more money to give you. I can’t even feed my family. Why are you coming so often? This is the third time this week and we simply can’t afford it.”

The response from the clergymen was full of loathing, “How dare you defy the Church! We allow you to live in the town and you can’t even compensate us for your debauchery! I will give you a choice. Either you take a beating or we take your wife.”

During the proceedings, Klassen had remained a short distance away, unobserved. His fury was increasingly raging violently, like a whirling tornado of ferocity, as he listened. At the last statement of the detestable tax collector, the paladin shut his visor and made himself known, mighty sword in his right hand while his crossbow was equipped in the other. The sight of such a warrior, who guided his horse with merely his legs, daunted the disgusting trio but would have intimidated most anyone. Ever.

At the sight of a potential rescuer, the beleaguered resident pleadingly shouted, “Please help me!”

Klassen boomed out in anger to the clergyman, “I suggest that you desist from your oppressive actions and give back the tax you have stolen from these Nobilismen! Otherwise, there will be trouble, bloody trouble.”

The tax collector was visibly dismayed but ordered the ogres to guard him from attack; these beasts complied, though hesitantly. In a shaken voice trying to appear confident, the tax collector spoke out feebly, “This matter doesn’t concern you. If you wish to cause a problem, my ogre warriors will deal with you.”

With a yell of “Die vermin!” Klassen began his attack. Spurring his horse forward, he faced two enemies, one to the left and one to the right. He fired a devastating bolt from his crossbow at the one on his left; this powerful projectile hissed in anger as it met with and punched through the upraised shield of the ogre. After ripping through the shield, it blasted into the ogre’s armor and embedded itself in the beast’s left shoulder, injuring it but not dealing the blow of death.

This attack disabled a foe for a moment and the paladin concentrated on the foe to his right as he charged forward. The ogre, shockingly enough, stood firm despite the obvious fright it displayed upon its countenance. Raising its shield to brace itself for the attack left the paladin with a shiny square target. With immense strength, Klassen raised *Ehredegen* towards the cloudy firmament above and swung his blade in a vicious arc of demolition. With a stentorian clash like a bolt of lightning from the heavens, the sword greeted the shield; the shield was sundered apart into two useless sections. This blow was so shattering that the ogre’s arm, that held the now obsolete shield, was also torn to pieces.

Klassen galloped onward, past the two adversaries and scattered the noncombatants; this included the clergyman who was pathetically frightened. Wheeling his horse about to attack again, the paladin skillfully controlled the horse with only his limbs and the steed’s sense of war. The wet ground beneath its hooves, however, didn’t cooperate causing the horse to slip and fall; the paladin was thrown heavily to the ground.

The ghastly ogres took advantage of this misfortune and rushed towards the paladin with a series of indecipherable grunts. Klassen got up off the ground gripping only his trusty blade as his crossbow had been flung from his grasp. Both hands of the paladin tightly coiled about the hilt of

his gigantic sword as he waited for the ogres, both of whom were now only equipped with large maces; one of their shields had been shattered while the other was inoperable to its injured holder.

The fierce attack came as both maces, which could bash skulls to mush, swept towards the paladin. Klassen sidestepped to his left with the nimbleness of an acrobat. This action dodged one mace while the other was confronted by *Ehredegen* as the paladin swung in an arc that collided with the mace in a loud, metallic chink. Neither sword nor mace was slowed by this clash as the paladin's sword sliced the head of the mace clean off, sending it sailing into the distance.

This ogre was now equipped with an ineffective metal pole in one hand while its other was a bloody mess; it was stupefied at its predicament. The paladin took full advantage of this by raising his blade high into the air and, with a fierce roar of war, brought the weapon scathingly downward upon the beast's helmeted head. The helmet was easily torn asunder with the hard steel ripping through the skull and face of the beast until the sword's momentum was stopped when it hit the collarbone of the ogre.

As the foul beast collapsed, the paladin yanked his sword free in a shower of blood. One foe lay destroyed at his feet, but the other Klassen couldn't see and wasn't where it should have been. Had it given in to its instinctive cowardice now that its fellow beast had been slaughtered? A quick, sweeping glance around the area dotted with dwellings told him this was not the case at all.

The whinnying of his steed had caught Klassen's attention and this is where he looked. The ogre, bolt still lodged in its shoulder, had wandered off towards the horse, which by this time had managed to become upright. As soon as the paladin saw the desired item of his awful antagonist, he broke into a dashing gallop. Lying innocently in the mud was a weapon that would be difficult to defend against: his crossbow.

Pushing his bulging muscles to the limit, the paladin ran with astonishing velocity. The crossbow was right in front of his enemy and the beast was going to acquire it despite the harassment of his steed, unless Klassen stopped the ogre. Floating along like a specter unhindered by mere laws of nature, he rushed with the ferocity of a churning volcano. The beast bent down to retrieve the crossbow and the paladin leaped.

Klassen roared, then soared, into the air with the graceful elegance of a noble eagle, his metallic beak dauntingly impressive. His flight was a beautiful and magnificent trip demonstrating the deadly ways of a paladin. In midair the paladin switched the grasp on his weapon from an underhand to an overhand grip, with both hands. Just as he did this, the clouds above ripped back their curtain allowing the divine rays overhead to gleam down upon the flying figure. Glimmering with a sacrosanct glow was Klassen as if to validate the holy instrument of honor that he was. As the jewels encased in his blade twinkled blue and red, the bloody *Ehredegen* was thrust downward as the paladin landed.

So swift and unexpected was the attack that the ogre had neither time to move nor to react at all. The blade of the paladin therefore tore into the beast's back. The armor it wore, while strong, was no match for the gargantuan blade of honor that Klassen wielded. Consequently, the sword punctured the armor and pierced the very heart of the beast. Such an incredible amount of force had been exerted with the blade that it hadn't stopped there though; it continued out the front of the ogre's armor and lodged itself into the muddy ground.

In such a tremendous zone of resplendent battle-lust was the paladin that he was oblivious of his surroundings, so he deftly grabbed his crossbow as the ogre slowly crumbled to the ground, its weight pulling it downward about the sword that impaled it. Klassen looked around. Being on the outskirts of the town, the area wasn't very heavily populated but many faces could be seen eagerly watching the events that had transpired. The paladin could sense their fear and initially saw not a single being outside of their home. As such, he deemed it safe and withdrew his sword from the corpse before him with a slight grunt.

As Klassen wiped the crimson blood off of his sword that had been spilled in the virtuous cause of justice, the grateful resident came rushing towards him in tears. "Thank you, thank you, thank you kind sir! How can I repay my debt to you?"

The paladin smiled as he was in a euphoric state of bliss from the slaughter of the enemy. Finished cleaning his blade and sheathing it, he said, "Well, where is that vile priest?"

"Over here," came the resident's reply. The two comrades walked over to the front of the inhabitant's house where the clergyman lay in a billowing white mountain of cloth. "He started to run away when the battle started so I knocked him out," explained the comrade.

The paladin chuckled as he was in a fascinated half-daze. Klassen reached down and grabbed two large pouches of gold from the tax collector's belt and handed them to his kinsman. "I want you to distribute this among our Nobilis comrades, only Nobilis. How many of our brethren hate the situation this town is in and despicable policies like this 'Nobilis Tax'?"

The comrade answered quickly, "Thank you sir; I will do as you say. Many hate what is happening. We are scared though and don't know what to do. It is becoming worse and worse!"

Although the predicament the town was in was horrible, the paladin realized that this helped his cause. Handing the resident a flier, Klassen commanded, "I want you to study this and spread it around to our people. Illuminate Teramon with the bright light of honor."

As the paladin turned to leave, the comrade queried anxiously, "What are we to do with the priest?"

Klassen wretched the unconscious figure up by his white hair and asked with raging emotion, "What do you think should be the punishment for dastardly traitors to our Nobilis people? Traitors who collaborate with the disgusting beasts deserve to be slaughtered, each and every one of them. What possible crime is more heinous than betraying our people!? I ask you, comrade, what shall be his punishment!?"

Instead of one voice clamoring in an answer, the paladin heard three: husband, wife, and son. All three were unanimous and harmonious in their answer: "Death!"

Chapter XVI

The melee that Klassen had been involved in had sparked a delightful feeling of awe that remained with him as he resumed his path in the town of Mythembreux. So powerful was the violent maelstrom he had been engaged in that it brought a jubilant joy that placed him apart from his normal mood and character. The area he was just in told him that the area was ripe for enlightenment, but, in his daze, he hadn't even asked the name of the comrades that he had helped.

Plowing deeper into the Nobilis heart of the town, however, gave him an opportunity to do more. His destination lay before him and the mammoth confidence he possessed preordained his success. Weaving his way between his Nobilis comrades and the few beasts, Klassen tethered his horse to a pole, which supported the bar known as *The Lion's Den*.

Despite his exhilarated feelings and swollen self-assurance, the paladin recognized that he hadn't truly prepared for war in his last brutal encounter. Consequently, he armed himself as if he were going to attack a massive army rather than simply encountering a bar. He armed his crossbow to its maximum cartridge of five bolts; he attached three throwing axes to his belt; and strapped his shield onto his left forearm with several belt-like cords that were designed exactly for this purpose. Carrying his helmet with his left hand, Klassen entered *The Lion's Den*.

The inside of the dwelling was rife with commotion as swarms of patrons drank and spoke loudly and cheerily. Although it was light outside, torches were scattered about, giving the large, spacious room a sort of soft radiant glow; this impaired the vision somewhat and the hazy smoke that wafted lazily about further hampered one's vision. Many round tables, generally seating four, were spread out among the room and most were full. The vast majority of the bar-dwellers were Nobilis but a few beasts were in the tavern, towards the back.

As soon as the crowd caught sight of the noble paladin, pointing, gesturing, and questioning amongst friends commenced. The noisy din wasn't affected in terms of volume, but it was changed in content. Virtually the entire world would have been struck by Klassen's appearance but here especially he gleamed like a precious diamond. The crowd showed visible signs of opprobrious oppression as many were dressed in half-shredded garments. On the other hand, the paladin was adorned with protective mail, a ruby tunic of battle, and a magnificent cape of royal purple, not to mention his fierce instruments of slaughter.

The paladin walked over to a stool and rested his helmet on the counter while reveling in the fact that his comrades were still able to enjoy themselves. They were in tatters, he saw, but their will had not yet been crushed. As he was thinking thus, the young bartender who had red hair and a pale, freckled complexion, approached the paladin with respect.

"What'll it be partner?" the bartender asked politely but with a tinge of fear.

Smiling warmly and putting the kinsman at ease, Klassen responded, "I'd like to know if you know a beautiful lady by the name of Alianna? I met her some months ago while escorting her here."

The bartender raised an eyebrow in interest before retorting friendly, "Aye, I know her. She frequents here quite a bit but she's out working at the moment. I can tell her you were here though. Who are ya partner?"

"Thank you," Klassen said. "My name is Klassen; she will know who I am. Might you know when she will be around?"

"Hard to say partner. By the way, what's with all the armor partner? We don't need any trouble here."

Laughing softly, the paladin comforted his comrade, "I just like being prepared."

Returning the laugh as if it were a handshake, the man said, "Oh ok, it just looks like you are a one man army! Ho ho. The name is Caion."

Feeding off of the laughter, the paladin questioned his new friend, “How come you let beasts in here comrade? Like I said before, I was here a while back and this district seemed totally Nobilis. Now I see they’ve even gotten into your excellent bar.”

Caion’s smile vanished and was quickly replaced by a look of scorn as he peered off towards the beasts congregated in the back. “I hate that blasted scum! Aye, it was cleaner here before they started moving in. First it was just a few in the town and then they went and became the majority. Now, they have even come into our small part of town and into my bar! I kept them out for a while, but then these heavily armored ogres came in one day and caused trouble. They smashed some windows and broke some tables. I was told to let the beasts in or face the consequences. It’s that blasted Universal Church!”

The paladin could feel the anger his friend exuded and this in turn exacerbated his own inner flame of passion. Klassen joined Caion on a ride of loathing for the evils of the universe. A powerful bond connected the two as the rest of the crowd was distant as it hollered and yelled over gambling, ale, gossip or whatever else might entice their drunken imaginations. Amid the commotion, waitresses delivered refreshment that was quickly guzzled; cards and dice were flung about in intense concentration; and a festive air dominated the hazy hall.

“Do you believe most in this fine establishment also deplore the beasts and hate the Universal Church?” asked the mighty paladin.

“Aye, I do,” came the reply. “Most are scared but I think most do. There are, however, some exceptions. Some are sympathetic to the cause of the beasts while some are even against our own people! Blasted traitors!”

The paladin devoured every word the bartender spoke with glee as he realized he had come to the right place to enlighten the masses. He had been prompted to visit by the gorgeous maiden, Alianna, and was now thankful to her even though she was not around to greet him.

“If so many are fed up with these awful beasts, then why hasn’t anyone put a stop to the Universal Church?” asked the paladin with fervor.

With a heavy sigh, the bartender responded, “To tell ya the truth, we are scared. Aye, it is true. The Universal Church uses the beasts to scare us into submission. Perhaps someday a hero will come to save us.”

This plea for help in the form of a champion sang ever so sweetly with euphonious chords of charm. It was a rousing blast calling for assistance that echoed mightily in the paladin’s ears as he knew full well that he possessed the ability to help. He knew that he had to. Rising to his feet and exuding his lordly manner that was befitting a prince, Klassen said in perfect rectitude, “I am your hero.”

The bartender stood in awe at this upright proclamation and was unable to utter a response before the paladin grabbed his helmet and left his presence. Walking away Klassen looked as though he was a being possessed of some aspiration greater than the petty dealings of ordinary, everyday life. When he reached the approximate center of the room, he found an empty table. Setting his helmet down, he leaped up upon the wooden table with the ease of an agile leopard.

The movement had caught the attention of most in the room, but the paladin made sure his mighty presence was known to all. Vociferating with the fury of a smashing, spiraling, and swirling hurricane, Klassen said, “Attention comrades! The day of your enslavement is nearing an end!”

The puissant presence that the paladin commanded gripped the spectators without mercy, like that of a lion’s grasp upon its prey. The intense clamor that had enveloped the bar ceased. Klassen was now the sole center of attention. In the faint lighting and misty environment, the paladin resembled a being so incredibly stupendous that it seemed suitable for the patrons to swear fealty to this king. This was even more fitting as Klassen seemed to hover far above the crowd, above the fiery light and filmy fog; he appeared to ascend to the very heavens above. His reign was supreme as well as this king was a belligerent one and no one present would dare defy such a warrior-king.

With all eyes upon him, the paladin began his cogent oratory with enthusiasm and powerful gesticulation. “This town, like so many in Teramon, has been infected. A disease so foul that it

threatens the very existence of our Nobilis people has befallen us. It has stripped us of our dignity, our beautiful homes, and, unfortunately, some of us have succumbed to this plague. Look around comrades! What do you see? The Nobilis people being oppressed! Many barely survive and live in ruined tatters!”

As Klassen spoke, the crowd nodded their heads in agreement to his words. He continued with ardor, “Now, the question becomes: who is to blame for this disgusting curse? As we all look around and think to ourselves, we all know the answer. It is a source that the powers-to-be do not want us to speak of. But we will! The source of suffering is in this very bar!” This brought a wave of conversation from the patrons and they argued who might be to blame. With a wave of his hand, the paladin calmed them and pointed towards the back of the bar with fervor. After a short, dramatic pause, Klassen increased his volume dramatically as he shouted, “It is the vile beasts!”

An explosive cheering burst forth as the crowd heard these words and knew them to be true. The paladin smiled at the applause. The few beasts in the back—a few yellow imps and gray hobgoblins—became extremely nervous among the fray as many violent countenances gazed at them. Without further ado, they quickly scattered but not before a few large men forced them to pay their due for the food and drink they ordered.

As the paladin basked in the jubilant celebration, he heard shouts from all corners of the bar. “Kill them all!” “We shall be free!” More shouts filled the atmosphere but most were drowned out in the frothing wave of noise. The scene was invigorating and reminded Klassen of being engaged in a war; this was a war of words and they were quite potent. The bar was also like a battlefield in that festive roars of animosity dominated. As the clamor began to die down, the paladin doused the flame of passion completely with a gesture of his hand.

The fabulous thrill of his actions continued as he now spoke softly with the crowd leaning forward to hear Klassen’s every word. “There is one beast in particular that is our most deadly foe. This adversary is neither a mere brute like an ogre nor a simple thief like a hobgoblin. This creature is far more intelligent and far more heinously dishonorable. Some of you may know this being who orchestrates the entire plan to ruin our proud Nobilis culture.”

The paladin abruptly stopped talking and looked around the bar to survey their feelings. These feelings were entirely visible upon the absorbed visages of the comrades present. Such interest did some hold that they nearly fell to the ground as they leaned forward to hear what Klassen might say next. The atmosphere was reminiscent of the eye of a hurricane that was calm and serene but might spew forth violence at any moment.

The tranquility that the paladin exuded himself was broken when Klassen became violently animated. “It is the revolting orc that is poisoning us! The perverse orc is behind the Universal Church promoting the beasts to invade our towns! This same orc promotes dishonor, perversity, and treachery! What punishment do these scumbags deserve?”

“Death!” was shouted over and over again in as much unison as a group of drunken men could hope to attain. This eruption was like a powerful volcano spraying fiery chunks of rock that had the power to splatter dishonor into oblivion. Amid the roar, one shout from the crowd was heard over the shouts of vengeance: “What can we do?”

Klassen quickly answered as he had hoped for such a question. “Yes, what can we do? There is one group that can stop the spread of black dishonor and replace it with divine honor. There is one order that is situated atop a mountain in a golden paradise known as Imperium Castle. This place has no beasts and contains pure honorable bliss! This mighty order is known as the Honor Brigade!”

Conversations between the patrons ensued as they were obviously intrigued by the words they heard. The paladin took advantage of the situation by spreading out fliers among the audience who quickly devoured the magnificent creed set forth on them. The words of wisdom contained therein were passed from hand to hand and spread like a beautiful blossoming of brilliant flowers upon a once desolate area of putrescence.

The paladin felt wonderfully magnificent at the warm reception the virtuous Honor Brigade was receiving. There appeared to be no doubt that the tyranny imposed upon his brethren would soon be broken. If every town responded so effervescently, than a new order of honor would soon be ushered in amid glorious fanfare.

At first scattered but soon becoming more pronounced was a singular question that the crowd repeated. It came to the paladin's ears with impressed interest. The simple question was, "Who are you?"

"I am a messenger for the Honor Brigade," the paladin boomed. Holding himself even more nobly than before, Klassen stated powerfully, "I am Klassen, Paladin of Honor!"

A rousing burst of applause reverberated throughout the drinking establishment. Smiles were seen all about, especially beaming was the bartender Caion whose pride at having personally talked to the champion seemed evident upon his elevated stature. Amidst this scene of outstanding ovation, the doors to the bar suddenly opened and in streamed a horde of armored beasts. Responding to this threat, the crowd stood but fell silent.

So concentrated was the paladin upon delivering the message of honor to the crowd that it took him a moment to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. Once he did, however, his Prussian blue eyes surged with a look of sanguinary glee. In a military voice of command, Klassen announced, "The time for redemption is at hand comrades! Prepare for battle!"

The audience roared but they were not soldiers and a tense standoff ensued. The paladin reached down and put his horned helmet on. "Live!" he boomed. Arming himself with his crossbow in his left hand was followed by the shout, "At!" With a Herculean thrust, his blade that yearned for the blood of the vile was released and this act was followed by a vociferating detonation of, "War!"

With this proclamation the paladin leaped from his wooden throne while firing a bolt at the densely packed troop of beasts. The group of beasts—mainly hobgoblins and imps—was equipped with leather armor and most held clubs or swords; they resembled a large pack of maggots that lived amongst the trash of the world. There was one less living, however, as Klassen's bolt sliced into the chest of an imp.

The Nobilis comrades, spurred on by the paladin's actions, joined the fray and chaos erupted. Shouts rang out in fervor; blow followed blow in the terrific melee; and blood was spilled.

Klassen was soon in the thick of the brawl after firing two more bolts into the serried mass of disgusting depravity. He hadn't even watched their trajectory as he knew there was no doubt they had found their mark. An imp approached him and looked so minuscule to the paladin's mammoth frame; it was stunned by the presence before it and Klassen took full advantage of this by swinging *Ehredegen* with such force that the top of the imp's skull was cleaved right off.

In the front lines of the battle, the other Nobilismen weren't faring so well. It was obviously that they weren't prepared to fight. Most were ill equipped with a chair being their main weapon. As such, the blood was flowing and the ranks of spirited comrades were falling back and beginning to lose the confidence that the ale and Klassen's fiery speech had imbued them with. They were impressed with the paladin's battle prowess but were unable to equal his courage and skill.

The paladin was engaged in battling three hobgoblins and had not the energy to also rally the troops. These three enemies warily advanced upon Klassen but the paladin waited not to attack; a bolt hissed through the air and the hobgoblin to the right had its throat shredded to pieces as the projectile sailed straight through its throat, lodging in the wall. This foe collapsed immediately with only a faint gurgling noise being its last words. The two remaining enemies were dismayed at this loss. Klassen tried to take advantage of this dismay by marching forward but both hobgoblins responded by swinging swords at him; he blocked both with his shield, resulting in a loud clink. Following this parry and with a flowing motion that had taken many hours to perfect, came a sweeping swipe of Klassen's blade that gutted the foe in the center. As the enemy on the left raised its weapon, *Ehredegen*, as if attacking under its own volition, was thrust forward with frightening

speed. The blade found its mark in the beast's chest. With a grunt, the paladin retrieved his sword as the beast tumbled to the floor.

The three that had challenged the brutal warrior of honor now lay dead before him. Klassen was so absorbed in the battling that he had entered his own personal dimension where he knew that he was invincible. His appearance and mien exuded this aura of colossal power and the beasts consequently backed away from him in trembling fear. The paladin was in the center of the Nobilis ranks and the enemy attacked his flanks where the resistance was far less powerful.

Off to the paladin's left, one of his kinsmen was knocked to the ground from a blow by a club, and he was finished off with a quick thrust of a sword from another foe. Yet another comrade was bludgeoned to death by a flurry of blows from the enemy. On the right, the same scene was taking place: the beasts marched ahead as Nobilismen continued to fall. The morale of the supporters of honor quickly plummeted and the battle became a full rout as the patrons of the bar fled to the rear.

Realizing his comrades were retreating, the paladin, as much as it was against his aggressive nature, turned around to pursue them. Valiantly, he shouted to them, "To battle comrades!" As impressive a figure as Klassen presented, the sight of blood and the moans of the dead and dying were too much for the bar patrons. To reward him for his attempt at rallying his kinsman, the paladin was the target of some blunt weapon that smashed into his back causing him to stumble forward as pain ripped through him.

Although unseen to the enemy due to his helmet, a vicious snarl formed upon the paladin's face. His hostility grew. Gripping his sword with such a grip that it was nearly grafted to his skin, the paladin swung his blade as he whirled around to face the enemy. The backhand stroke whistled angrily through the air before coming in contact with flesh, beast flesh. The villain who had attacked Klassen was surprised by the quickness of the paladin, but only for a second. After this second, cold, hard steel sliced through its neck and decapitated it in a burst of blood. Almost at the same time, the beast and its helmeted head crashed to the ground in a rising pool of blood.

Due to the retreat on the flanks, the beasts quickly swarmed around the paladin that had dispatched so many beasts with ease. Klassen spun slowly around trying to keep them all at bay but knew that something had to change if he hoped to survive. The disreputable miscreants were in no hurry to attack him, however, and seemed content to keep him trapped.

The commotion of battle died down and it became rather quiet. An enemy emerged from the beast ranks that was Nobilis and presumably in command as he spoke to Klassen sternly, "You are surrounded, warrior; throw down your arms!"

The paladin looked around him but already knew it to be true. Standing calmly with weapons lowered, he glared at the treacherous wretch that stood amidst the ranks of the beasts. With a quick flick of his wrist and raising of his arm, Klassen adroitly fired a bolt at the traitor. Rushing with a vengeance born of seething hatred, the soaring missile flew true and slashed into the betrayer's eye. The impact ripped the side of the target's face off in a spray of blood intermingled betwixt skull fragments.

As soon as this attack had commenced, a shout from somewhere had rung out forcefully: "Fire!" Instinctively understanding this command, the paladin descended into a crouch with his shield coming up to cover his body. Klassen thus became a small target to hit when the flurry of barbed arrows came hurtling towards him. Most of the flying shafts collided against his shield and were harmlessly deflected away. Two, however, sunk into warm flesh. One caught an imp behind him in the stomach while the other painfully embedded itself into Klassen's left shin, piercing into the bone.

Letting out a groan that was transformed into a roar of indignation, the paladin swung his sword around in a complete scathing revolution just as the beasts surrounding him came in for the kill. This action encountered no tender flesh but did send all opponents leaping backwards. Klassen used this time to ascertain the best possible route of escape. Once found, he acted.

The paladin turned to his left and charged, oblivious of his injuries in his personal universe of war. A foe squared solidly to stop him raised its sword to attack, but Klassen raised his shield and

plowed into the hobgoblin with pounding force. The adversary went sprawling heavily upon the floor as the paladin whizzed past him. He ran forward unmolested but to his right the enemy loomed like a pack of rats, perplexed as to what to do. A shout of "kill him!" made them recover their senses and they scrambled after the paladin.

Klassen possessed great speed but it appeared assured that the beasts would apprehend or kill the paladin as he ran to the side of the bar, not the back. Klassen, however, had different plans. He leaped upon one of the few tables that hadn't been overturned in the bar, but didn't stop there. Instead, he flew into the air and crashed through the large window that adorned the bar. Time for the paladin slowed as his flight was spearheaded by his shield. The glass shattered with a mighty smash and his flight up until then had been majestic, regal even; his landing was not. The window was nearly two koms from the ground and the paladin thus landed upon the ground outside like a sack of potatoes being heaved about.

Glass scraped his hands and the blow from the ground sucked the wind from his lungs, but Klassen retained his steel grip upon his weapons. A crowd had gathered around the bar and shrill shrieks from the women rang out when they saw the soaring figure emerge from the window. As much as the paladin's body wished to relax and sleep after all the exertions it had been put through, he knew it couldn't. The beasts were soon to the window and the bloodied, battered body of Klassen ascended from the ground swiftly and ran towards the front of the bar.

Klassen's body ached and burned. A trail of blood formed behind him as he ran, spilling in drops here or there. Nevertheless, his will was as hard as the steel he wielded and it would drive him even if his body didn't want to cooperate.

Amid the imbroglio, the masses outside and inside the bar were stunned; the paladin managed to elude his pursuers and reach the front of the bar. The sun had recently been swallowed whole so light was only sprinkled about in the form of torches. Klassen believed this would help him but his imposing figure presented no doubt as to whom the beasts were after. Indeed, this became the case as several beasts spotted him and raised the alarm as he ran to the front of the *Lion's Den*.

The paladin, with terrific dexterity, sheathed his sword and hooked his crossbow and helmet to his belt as he ran. Coming up from behind his horse, he leaped atop of it by placing his hands on its rump for leverage. With a little squirming, he managed to get himself into the saddle properly. With a short, rough jerk, the reins were freed and Klassen galloped off.

The garbled mass of beasts swarmed in confusion as their prey rode off. The ineptitude of the beasts was evident but their inability to react was also compounded by the crowd that curiously looked on. Regardless, two gray hobgoblins obtained horses and rode off in pursuit.

The whirring wind rushed against the paladin, refreshing and cooling him. Beads of perspiration had accumulated upon his forehead from the heat of battle and his hot, stuffy helmet. Thus, his vision and temperature were both improved now that he had taken off the helmet. This was a small comfort, however, as each stride of the horse inflamed his wounds, especially the blow he had sustained to his back. The ride itself was going quite well as the streets were virtually empty and Klassen thought he would make it out without event until he heard the shouts behind him.

In a near daze from exhaustion and wounds, the paladin had unknowingly allowed his pursuers to nearly overtake him. Silently lambasting himself for such a potential death sentence, Klassen skillfully unhitched his crossbow. His targets were just behind him, to the left and to the right. Handling the crossbow with his right hand, the paladin pointed back at the hobgoblin to the right and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The beast, however, was oblivious to of the fact that the crossbow wasn't armed. As such, he veered away to avoid the bolt he perceived as ineluctable. Keeping his gaze trained on the paladin, it raised its sword into the air and hollered in anger as it spurred its horse on faster. Unfortunately for it, a wooden cart lay directly in its path. Horse, rider, and cart collided in a smashing crash that ended the hobgoblin's life. Only one pursuer remained.

Putting his empty crossbow away, Klassen quickly veered to the right, down an alley. He hoped to lose the beast in the maze of deserted, filthy streets. The beast followed behind intently

even after the paladin turned again, this time to the left. It seemed clear to the paladin that a different, more effective, measure would have to be adopted.

By now Klassen had come to a beast section of town and the particular avenue he traversed was, during the day, heavily traveled. Now, though, only a beast here and there scampered about. It was poorly lit with subsequent shadows making navigation more difficult during the speedy chase Klassen was involved in. More and more the wear and tear of his body was weighing heavily upon him and the paladin knew he needed rest soon. He accelerated.

Klassen's horse pulled away from the pursuer, but not for long. The beast soon was again right behind the paladin. Veering sharply to the right and pulling in on the reins, the paladin slammed to a stop as the beast dashed by. He nimbly pulled a throwing axe from his belt as he watched the beast slow, turn, and then come after him. As soon as this occurred, Klassen spurred his horse forward. He rapidly approached the beast, which was to his right, and when he came within range, the paladin flung his axe.

The beast charged forward with sword in hand ready to deal death to the paladin but the quick motion from Klassen surprised it. It looked on in stupid amazement as the axe twirled over and over through the air with mesmerizing grace. The sharpened blade pulsated like a heartbeat as it glinted faintly every time torchlight fell upon it. The razor-like blade embedded itself in the repugnant hobgoblin's forehead, halting the axe's heartbeat as well as the beast's.

Chapter XVII

The blackness of the night was only imposed upon by the scintillating stars and the faintly glowing moon. These orbs of illumination upon the ocean of darkness bespoke of unknown worlds across the universe. They were vast distances away but also seemed within grasp. The fiery power they exuded was mighty indeed to travel such a colossal distance.

Klassen soared among the stars and planets that existed beyond the pale of ordinary beings. The exploration of all the celestial bodies would require eons, if it were even possible, but the paladin flashed by stars with a speed unmatched in all the annals of scientific thought. The rakish figure of the paladin navigated around burning yellow stars with the ease of a veteran explorer.

Slowing down to enjoy the trip, he observed a violet netting of space that cloaked a cluster of red fireballs that were far smaller than the typical orb of fire. Klassen thought the web powerful indeed to capture such magnificent luminaries but feared not the trap as he entered it. The paladin changed color with his beautiful surroundings as he enjoyed the exhilarating ride. The magnificent garden he observed exuded a sweet smell of orchids and roses that playfully tickled the paladin's nose.

As much as he enjoyed his trek of discovery, Klassen knew he had a purpose to fulfill, away from the fetters of the masses. Leaving the sweeping panorama of brilliant color, he navigated away from the flowers of resplendence. Finding a secluded, dark spot where only chunks of rock floated about lazily, the paladin landed upon the platform of a space boulder. He comfortably sat down.

Breathing slowly and enjoying the refreshing air, Klassen concentrated on his wounds. His bruised back swirled with a bluish glow as the paladin focused his body's energy on healing himself. His body did as it was told and harnessed its restorative powers upon the wound. Slowly the pain withered away and Klassen recognized that his full range of motion was returning. This process was repeated upon his shin and finally upon his whole body as he felt his normally spry being breathed back into him.

Suddenly, the paladin's enrapturing escapade was broken when he heard a noise. His eyes flashed open and he gazed around. Quickly, he drew his blade and sprang to his feet as he searched about looking for the cause of the disruption. He didn't have to look long, however, as the being that had made the noise wasn't trying to clandestinely hide in the shadows. As quickly as the paladin had drawn his sword, he put it away.

Stepping into the dim moonlight that faintly brightened the forest, came the young boy Aigean. Distraught, he walked as if some calamity had befallen him. His pale blue eyes lacked the vibrant life that Klassen had seen before. Moping morbidly towards the paladin, he spoke softly, "What were you doing mister?"

The paladin replied sanguinely, hoping to raise his little ally's spirits: "I was meditating. I was using the body's natural power to focus upon my wounds to help heal them. It is a very effective technique, especially after being wounded by those diabolical beasts. What ails you boy?"

Casting off his dour demeanor, the lad replied vehemently, "I hate them and hate them and hate them! The beasts have taken my mommy and daddy and arrested them and trashed our home and I want to kill them!"

Klassen's relaxed state of bliss was quickly transformed into a swirling carnage of vengeance. He consoled the boy, who was near tears, while extricating as much information as he could. The details of the draconian measure were simple: the Universal Church had sent their goons to arrest the family for suspected crimes; Aigean escaped, but his parents were seized. The boy liked to play in the forest and thus had entered it as he knew not where else to go.

Despite his still fresh wounds, Klassen got his gear together in preparation to depart. "I will look for your parents Aigean. Where do you think they are?"

“I can show you,” came the response, “and help you and guide you and we can kill them!”

The paladin admired the youth’s vitality but was hesitant to bring along a child. “Just tell me where. I am trained for war, you are not.”

Whimpering, Aigean retorted, “I can show you and I don’t want to stay here by myself and please and please and please let me go with you.”

“Ok,” the paladin said, relenting. “Do you need any food or water before we go?”

The lad noiselessly shook his head and the two were quickly ready to start off. The paladin circumspectly realized that even though it was nightfall, he would be recognized instantly due to his flashy panache. Consequently, he put on a large black cloak that covered his magnificent clothing completely. It even possessed a hood that could further hide his identity.

The pair quickly mounted the paladin’s steed with the lad playing the role of navigator. Through the labyrinth of wood that made up the forest, they traveled.

Klassen had rearmed his crossbow and was fully prepared for any outbreak of hostilities, although he wished to undertake the operation as covertly and quietly as possible. He had learned that he was unable to face an entire battalion by himself, but could easily dispatch a few beasts here or there. Discontent was flourishing in Lealean and he hoped this boded well for him and the Honor Brigade.

First on his agenda was, of course, finding the boy’s parents. A nagging presence inside the paladin’s mind told him that the parents had been arrested because of the slaughter of the orc that the boy had killed, under his supervision. Whether or not this was the case, he didn’t know for sure. It didn’t really matter one way or the other, as the paladin felt bound by honor to help his young kinsman.

Before long, the pair had navigated through the forest and crept into the town swiftly, yet quietly. Even though the main thoroughways were almost entirely deserted, the paladin instructed his young friend—who knew the town well—to take the back-ways. The town was dark, only lighted by a faint system of lights from above, and a few torches scattered haphazardly about. The alleys were therefore even darker and took more skill and more time to wade through.

With soft commands of “left,” “right,” and “straight,” the duo wound through the maze of passageways that made up the town of Lealean. All went well with very few beings encountered on their course; a bum here living among the debris and a drunkard there stumbling home made up the bulk of those they did see; all were beasts.

At an order of “straight,” Klassen drove the horse forward but quickly pulled it back into the shadows. The street they were about to cross was large and noisy, combined with shadows that jumped about, caused the paladin to spring into the concealment of the alley depths. As he watched intently, a brigade of beast troops sauntered by, noisily and without much in the way of discipline. As they streamed by like ignominious rats, the paladin counted at least fifty enemies. His desire to attack was fierce, but, with his stalwart will, he abstained.

Whispering to his companion, Klassen asked, “Do brigades like those normally patrol the streets?”

“No,” came the replying whisper. “What does it mean and what do we do and when can I see my parents?”

Klassen’s compassion was aroused by these questions as well as his rapacious rancor towards his enemies. With a tone full of empathy, the paladin replied warmly, “It means we must be careful and get to the jail soon. How far are we?”

“Not far. We go straight and then turn left and then go straight and we are there.”

With extra vigilance they went as the boy had instructed. Thoughts of what was to come and what had already transpired occupied the paladin’s mind. He knew that he had to avoid the roving bands that were probably out hoping to devour his body for the destruction Klassen had caused. Hopefully he could recruit some Nobilismen to his cause, the cause of honor. However, he couldn’t count on this. Before he had time to continue his reflections, his destination greeted him.

The jail was a small, stone building with only a few circular windows that were adorned with metal bars. It was actually in good shape, but this was obviously due to it being made of stone and the paladin believed it would surely be desolate like the other structures if it had been made of wood. Indeed, the only entrance that the paladin saw held a wooden door that was open and so poorly constructed that it was about to fall off of its hinges. Klassen quickly deduced that the building itself had been made long ago, when better times greeted Lealean, while the door had come with the infection; however, he dismissed such trivial thoughts and concentrated on what he saw inside the jail.

Two repulsive hobgoblins were seated at a table playing cards, refuse in the form of old food surrounded them. Although they were arguing loudly, what exactly they were saying was impossible to discern due to their slurred, discombobulated speech. The paladin clearly recognized that the two were intoxicated and seemed easy prey. He wasn't sure whether there were other guards that he would have to dispose of though.

The jail appeared far too easy a target and this set off a string of alarms in the paladin's mind. Only two guards? Klassen surveyed the area and questioned Aigean whether this was the only jail in town; he replied it was the only one that he knew of. The words didn't comfort the paladin but he quickly formed a plan and put it into action without further delay.

Informing the lad to stay put, Klassen jumped off of his horse, crossbow in hand. He crept along inaudibly until he reached the edge of the cloak of darkness that the alley provided. From this vantage point, he had an excellent, open pathway to fire his bolts. Standing silently in dark concealment, he waited for his opportunity.

What Klassen desired soon presented itself: one of the hobgoblins left the room it was in, leaving only a single guard behind. Taking skillful aim, the paladin fired his powerful projectile. It whirred by with barely a sound and sunk deeply into the beast's back, killing it instantly and without a yell of death. Just as he hoped, the beast, despite the blow of the bolt, remained in its chair. Still sitting upright, it didn't look the part of a corpse at all.

As expected, the other guard returned carrying two large tankards that the paladin presumed to have ale in them. It set them down and just as it was in the act of sitting, Klassen fired again. The missile sank into the beast's left shoulder, wounding and surprising it. The change of elevation had affected his aim but before the beast could yell out, another bolt was fired. This one was better placed; it sliced into the heart of the beast. It collapsed onto the floor and the paladin thought surely it was removed to the land of the dead.

With a swift glance to ensure all was well, Klassen, satisfied, strolled over to the jail with a blasé demeanor. Anyone viewing the scene would have thought nothing of it, especially since the paladin hid his crossbow beneath the many folds of his cloak.

As soon as Klassen entered the jail, he pulled out his crossbow while shutting the tattered door. With a delicate gait, he joined the two corpses at the table, kicking them to make sure they were deceased. Satisfied that they were dead, he looked around for more foes.

The room Klassen was in was really a small hall that seemed to be the center of the jail. Several torches burned intently and illuminated the hall well. Due to this, he could see two hallways to his left and three to his right. One hallway on his left had no door and the paladin could plainly see that it was only a storage area. All the other hallways had doors; the one on the left had a large wooden door that was closed while the three on the right were made of stone with round windows full of bars and obviously for the prisoners.

The place was deathly quiet as the paladin prowled over to the wooden door. He noticed it was slightly ajar. Flinging it open forcefully, Klassen crouched while scanning the room for enemies. He was prepared to fire at the slightest movement but he saw none. Instead, it became clear to him that the room served as an armory as several weapons and pieces of armor adorned the walls. No other exit presented itself and he left the room and returned to the hall.

The entire operation seemed to be going far too easy to the paladin. Only two guards and a tiny jail in a town with a large population of criminals just didn't seem right to Klassen. As he watched

the blood flow onto the floor amid the debris, he also wondered why it was so utterly quiet. Where were the prisoners?

To answer this question, Klassen approached a cell, which seemed purposely-kept dark as no torches illuminated them. To rectify this he grabbed a torch and held it to the barred window of stone door. As he peered inward, he accidentally bumped the door; it slightly opened. Why would the cell be unlocked? Glancing inside the cell he saw nothing: no prisoners whatsoever. Everything felt very wrong to the paladin.

As if to confirm his suspicions, a loud noise outside echoed to the paladin's ears; he recognized it instantly as the beleaguered neighing of his horse. Every instinct within Klassen screamed that he was engaged in a trap. Hastily he dropped the torch and hurried out the jail, into the street.

Sure enough, as soon as he exited the jail he saw a band of beasts marching toward him. Upon sight of him, they rushed forward with a roaring cry that was undoubtedly inspired not only by the paladin's presence, but by potent ale as well. The large mob of abominable beasts was difficult to count, but the paladin thought perhaps there were at least forty. Deciding a battle wouldn't be a very auspicious idea, he darted off towards the alley he had emerged from.

Confronting him immediately was his flaying horse that seemed locked in battle with some unseen apparition. Calming the horse skillfully, Klassen looked around in the gloom. The boy was gone and no sign of a fight seemed readily visible. What had happened? The sounds of the soldiers pursuing him became louder and he knew it was not the time for thought; action was required. Hopping onto his horse with graceful ease, Klassen realized that none of the beasts coming after him had horses. With a questioning gaze, he rode off down a different route than the one he had come on.

Thundering away atop his mount, the paladin chanced riding down more traveled streets. Since he soon left the hubbub far behind him, he resumed the prudent path of using the alleys to his advantage. Feeling safely away from harm's cold clutches, he slowed to a canter.

A plethora of questions bombarded Klassen's mind but two stood out clearly amid the chaos: had he really been betrayed and, if so, how could such a pitiful trap hope to ensnare him? The evidence surely supported the idea that the innocent-looking lad who reminded him so much of himself, had betrayed him. What other possibility was there? Klassen saw no signs of a struggle in the alley; could the presence of a band of beasts exactly when he raided the jail be merely coincidence? The fact that the jail had been devoid of prisoners lent even more crushing weight to the logical evaluation of betrayal.

The lad Aigean could merely have used the paladin to fulfill his aim of thievery. Perhaps the boy stole from everyone, not just the beasts. The words that had come from the boy's lips concerning his hatred of the beasts could all have been fabricated by the precocious mind of a liar. With disgust oozing from his being, Klassen found it hard to believe anything but that the lad was a shameful disgrace.

The only action that led the paladin to any shred of conviction upon the part of Aigean was the pathetic attempt to ensnare him. He knew very well how inept the beasts were, but eluding them had been the epitome of easiness. It was conceivable that a patrol had happened upon the area just as Klassen was engaged in the jail but then what was the commotion before then that had alerted him? The boy was simply gone and all the paladin's gear was left untouched.

Before Klassen could begin to unravel the web of mystery, he heard several feminine voices. He had been paying little attention to his surroundings or where he was headed, so he looked around.

He had wandered into a main street with buildings fairly larger than the norm and also well maintained; this was in vast contrast to most areas in this town of destitution. Immediately Klassen recognized it as a Nobilis section, but soon realized this was only partly true: it was in fact a sort of demarcation line between the Nobilis section and the beast districts. It was a well-lighted area, allowing the paladin to view the voices he had heard quite well.

The feminine voices predominated but there were others as well. The women he saw were obviously Nobilis and just as obviously whores. They were accosting any traveler who might venture by, although this number was few. As expected, several made advances towards the paladin but the paladin ignored the disgusting harlots. He believed it a quite revolting shame that such slatterns adulterated the town though he wasn't surprised in the least.

Klassen questioned himself as to what plan of action would be best, when one of the whores' voices drew his attention, despite his efforts to ignore the sluts. Quickly he located the voice and was astonished at what his eyes beheld. It was, of course, a whore but not the typical type. This was one beatific, stunning. She stood apart from the others like a gorgeous rose among a sea of filthy weeds.

In a combination of awe at her beauty and disgust at the occupation, Klassen came towards the woman. In a further wave of amazement, the paladin recognized her. It was the maiden Alianna.

Chapter XVIII

Striding over to Alianna, Klassen bellowed out, “You, a whore! How can you engage in such perverse ways!?”

It took a moment for her to recognize him and recover from the powerful force of his tone. Barely audibly, she responded in but a whisper, “Klassen, I, I... can we talk over in the alley?”

As awful as the paladin viewed the profession of an offensive trollop, he felt a bond between the two. This bond made him relent when she pleaded with him; they went over to an alley to avoid a scene that Klassen knew was unwelcome at the moment anyway.

Once in the dark alley, the paladin awaited her response to his question with a powerful glare. Although she was nervous, her beauty was obvious, even in the dismal alley. “I, I can explain everything to you. It is a rather long story though. I know a place where we can go. I don’t want to be a whore, but... Maybe you can help me, hon?”

The question she posed was a probing one, looking for sympathy. Klassen had an instinctive urge to help those in need, but only those who truly deserved it. He thought that the way matters stood she didn’t appear to deserve anything but a mountain of shame. Nonetheless, he wished to believe her; she had seemed so pure and so in tune with his being. Helping her to join him atop the steed, he said less forcefully, “Lead on.”

The two trotted off in silence, except when Alianna directed. They didn’t travel far before the maiden brought them to a halt before a small hovel. It seemed like a forgotten part of the town as many of the dwellings around looked uninhabited. This thought struck Klassen as being exactly what a whore would want.

The two entered the shack which, although run-down looking outside, was actually clean inside. The only furniture present was a bed and a table with two chairs. Klassen wondered if anyone could actually live there but realized it was most likely a room of “convenience.”

Alianna lit a torch while motioning the paladin to seat himself at the table; he did so. When the light was burning fiercely, she sat down opposite him, looking as though she was fighting a silent war of what to say. In the bright illumination, her attractiveness became fully evident and this eased Klassen’s anger greatly. Her crimson tresses hung down elegantly and were further amplified by the red dress she wore. She appeared like a radiant chest full of exquisite rubies. This splendid sight made Klassen believe that some unseen evil was acting upon her and that it was his honorable duty to save her, like he had before.

The maiden reached beneath the table and produced a jug and a wooden mug. She made a gesture of offer and the paladin accepted with a nod. After she poured it for Klassen, he drank it greedily. A slight contortion of the paladin’s face was evidence of the acidity of the drink—cider—but he gulped it down nonetheless. The drink refreshed him and after finishing it, brought his gaze back to Alianna.

She saw his blue eyes mesmerized by her figure and grew confident as she began her tale, “I know I have a lot of explaining to do. I just hope that you can believe what I say even though I am a...you know. It isn’t my preferred occupation but one I must endure. I will start at the beginning if that doesn’t bother you sweetie.”

Klassen shook his head as he realized she was either very sincere or a very good actress. He felt no danger at the moment, especially not where he was, and thus got comfortable in preparation of her story.

“Several years ago, when the beast nuisance was here but not as powerful, a catastrophe struck my family. My parents and I were strong supporters of our Nobilismen and hated what the beasts were doing to our town. My brother, however, rebelled against the family and became good friends

with a gang of beasts. My father threatened to expel him from the family, but my dad's threats were hollow and my brother kept his beast friends.

"The group of beasts he associated with was led by an orc whose name I don't know, but have seen. They were engaged in various operations, most illegal and most directed against Nobilismen. It was on a wintry night three years ago that our family was forever changed.

"The band frequently used robbery to fund its consumption of ale and hookers. Whether it was my brother's idea or not, I don't know, but the bandits decided to rob our own house! My family was awakened early in the morning and my father tried to prevent the thieves from stealing our valuables. He did so in vain, however. It was a horrible scene, horrible..." Alianna broke off her narrative amid sobs that nearly choked the life out of her. Her eyes watered and tears rolled down her face as she unsuccessfully tried to continue talking. The sadness and misery within the room was palpable and Klassen clutched Alianna's hand tenderly, gazing into her wet, emerald orbs. The paladin gave her a look as if to say she needn't go on, but she shrugged him off and, after regaining her composure, softly continued speaking.

"They were very drunk—both my brother and the beasts—and maybe that is why they decided...to kill my father. I saw it and it was... well, it was brutal. It was a hobgoblin, not my brother who did it. My mother though...that *was* my brother. They used clubs and it was bloody... so very bloody. They looked at me next, surely to kill me. I was terrified..."

The paladin was appalled at the brutal sequence Alianna described and didn't doubt her words whatsoever. Klassen's left hand held her hand tenderly with warm comfort while his right hand clenched fiercely in glaring anger. Two struggling storms therefore fought each other but the paladin kept them at bay while he listened.

With a slight sob Alianna persisted in her story: "My brother, whose name doesn't even deserve to be spoken, would surely have killed me too. But he didn't. He recognized that I could be useful to him, make him money. As a whore of course. I was sixteen then. I had no choice really; either I become a whore or my brother would kill me. I knew this for a fact as he had killed my parents!"

Barely able to contain his hostility, Klassen spoke, "That is horrible! Where is this vermin, I want his head."

"I don't think that is a good idea at the moment, but let me explain myself more," Alianna said softly. "It was a horrendous experience for me but you must know that I haven't lied to you at all. I *do* hate the beasts. When you saved me from those disgusting ogres, I was, well...my brother had ordered me to...*be* with them. I've told my brother a million times that I'm not like that but all he is concerned with is profit; the ogres were wealthy, by robbery most likely. Then you came along and I was so happy."

The outrage Klassen felt was visible on his contorted face but he had contained his words even at the shocking things he was hearing. He wished to be polite and not interrupt, but it was difficult. Sex with an ogre would have to be a horrific ordeal, he knew. The paladin didn't even know it was possible!

Gathering himself, Klassen said, "It is fantastic that you didn't give in to such perversity! Whoever would make you do that is a foul monster! Why didn't you come with me to the Honor Brigade, though, or tell me about your life?"

"Of course I wanted to go with you...but I was scared. My brother is a powerful man in town. I didn't know how powerful this Honor Brigade is or if they could protect me. I didn't tell you because I thought you'd hate me. As it was, my brother gave me a beating after the whole ordeal and would have killed me, I'm sure, if I wasn't his most attractive whore.

"I've heard about your exploits in town. Great job!" she shouted enthusiastically, her spirits obviously raised by the paladin's presence. "Can you help me too?"

Klassen was very pleased at her change of spirit and wanted greatly to help. "Of course I can help," he said jauntily. "What have you heard around town?"

Alianna dramatically changed when she heard his pledge of assistance. Her face became radiated with the beauty that she had been blessed with as she smiled lovingly. Her lush eyes gleamed with a vibrant vitality like one who had been saved from the skeletal maw of the frigid abyss.

Animated with a breath of refreshing ardor, Alianna responded, "I have heard that you have slaughtered hundreds of the beasts! Word of your deeds has spread across the town honey! The church and the beasts are very wary and they obviously fear you. What do you plan to do?"

The paladin knew full well that stories were easily exaggerated and this was no exception. Whether the Universal Church was inflating his deeds or his Nobilis comrades were, he knew not. Both could benefit as the Church could use the situation to increase oppression while his kinsmen could be inspired to end their suffering.

What he planned to do was still a question in his own mind. "You said your brother is a powerful man. Might we be able to use this to our advantage? If we can eradicate the root of the plague known as the Universal Church, then the rest will be easy."

A brilliant flash of enlightenment swept over Alianna's face as she answered emphatically, "Yes! Not long ago, we had a new ruler for the church. He is an evil man whom we are supposed to call 'Savior'. My brother wanted to get in good with this new family so I was forced to sleep with the ruler's son. It was a horrible, vicious ordeal but my brother didn't care how abused I was as his tactic worked: he is a good friend with the ruler now. Something good has come of it though, dear. I know where he lives!"

The paladin nodded, enjoying her enthusiasm, but thought the information of where the ruler lived was commonplace; however, it wasn't so common that Klassen knew. "What can you tell me of this ruler, this 'Savior'?"

At the contemplation of this question, Alianna appeared cold, as though an icy wind had blown through the room. "His rule has been spectacular if you are a beast, but not for us. Although he is Nobilis, he appears to have a hatred for our people. I think he is mainly motivated by greed though. His house is a palace while we live mainly in ruined homes. We have been devastated by a 'Nobilis Tax' that only collects from our people. My brother escapes this draining tax though.

"Many more beasts have been shipped into our town since his arrival. I think that he is paid to accept them, but I can't be sure. Nobilismen have been thrown out of their homes to make room for these beasts! With all of these creatures, 'Savior' and the church has even promoted Nobilismen marrying beasts and having children! I'm sure this has existed for quite a while but it is really being promoted now. Who knows why they do it, but I don't like it. You have probably seen the half-ogres, half-hobgoblins, and half-imps in the streets. 'Savior' is a cruel man, sweetie."

After hearing of the foul outrages, Klassen made an oath to himself that he would obliterate such a tyrant. Going further, he vowed to remove all sources of the filth around him, like his son and whomever else might be in their ignominious entourage. He knew that such injustices needed to be punished, harshly and swiftly.

Klassen realized that he knew how heinously the Nobilis Tax was effecting the population and thought of the joy it would bring when he halted it. The other foul measure flittered into his mind as he now recognized that the odd creatures he had seen before were, in all likelihood, half-imps. A sneer of revulsion swept over him but he relished in his tenacity to end the nefarious tyranny.

"What shall we do, dear?" Alianna asked sweetly. "You could stay the night here if you want," she said with a sly smile.

The paladin looked at her gorgeous body of magnificence and found this a most appealing proposition. However, before he could answer, a strange noise entered the room from somewhere outside. Like a cat after a mouse, Klassen sprang to the window and gazed outward intently. His eyes were greeted by darkness and filth. The paladin could barely make out his steed, but it was there, unmolested and looking peaceful.

"Are you expecting company?" the paladin asked quickly, his hand resting on his sword.

“No, honey,” she responded swiftly. “I, I wouldn’t worry about it. It was probably a cat or something.”

“I don’t want to take any foolish chances. It is time for action!” The paladin spoke forcefully at first, but then realized his potentially precarious position. “How do I get to the palace of the evil tyrant?”

“We are safe here, dear. But you just go—” Alianna’s words were cut short by a motion from Klassen’s hand. He listened intently and, sure enough, another unknown sound greeted the pair.

“Come on, let’s go. Leave the torch lit,” the paladin whispered authoritatively.

Alianna obeyed and the two quickly and quietly scudded out of the room, into the shadowy realm of the alley. Klassen glanced stealthily about as the two remained crouched in darkness. The smell of putridness dominated the area, which, while discomfoting, wasn’t of concern to Klassen at the moment. Silence, a strange silence, hung ominously over the alley. An eerie feel enveloped the area like that of a gloomy graveyard during a moon-less night. Despite all this, the paladin’s keen eyesight detected no danger but he was prepared for it should it bear its fangs.

Grasping Alianna’s wrist with the firmness of a loved one, Klassen silently directed her to mount his steed. With his help, she was soon astride the horse; the paladin followed by leaping quickly into the saddle. With a quick gaze about the alley the paladin saw nothing extraordinary and set off.

An earsplitting crash resonated powerfully down the alley, behind them, as soon as the pair began their trek. It sounded as though a massive boulder had fallen from the starry heavens above and crushed the dilapidated homes. Klassen peered back expecting an army to be following him but was instead astonished at what he beheld. Consequently, the paladin urged his horse onward quickly.

The rushing winds from their rapid progression left no room for conversation as Alianna and Klassen weaved through the streets of Lealean. The wind howled in their ears and followed them assiduously. The maiden had attempted to direct the paladin but he heeded her not. His sole intent at the moment was leaving the town behind him; whatever path appeared to achieve this end, he took advantage of.

Down both well-lit paths and subterranean-like ones, they rode. Fortunately for them, very few individuals crossed their path. As such, danger was averted and exiting Lealean proved quite easy. In what seemed like only minutes, Klassen guided his horse out into the forest that lay around the town before coming to a halt.

The forest was dark and only hummed with the occasional song of the crickets. It provided excellent cover for those wishing to remain hidden from the inspecting gaze of a pursuer. The trees above the pair formed a large, fluffy mask that hindered even the moon’s glare, so Klassen felt quite comfortable. The paladin and maiden both jumped off of the horse to continue their discussion.

Running her hand through her hair with a slight tremble, Alianna queried, “What did you see back there that scared you so much, hon?”

The paladin’s chuckle broke the stifling cloud of anxiety that hung over the two. “I didn’t see anything to scare me. In fact, I didn’t see *anything* and that intrigues me. Something made that powerful sound, but I don’t know what it was. All I saw was blackness. We have more important matters to discuss now though. Where is that palace?”

“Like I said before honey,” Alianna said with slight desperation in her voice, “I don’t think that is such a good idea. It seems something...something unknown is after us. It might be...my brother. You might be running right into his arms. Are we even safe here? I just don’t want to lose you...”

“That is all the more reason to attack now!” the paladin confidently said. “We are safe here for a bit, but soon I must assault this palace. As for your brother, he will get his deserved

punishment. You won't lose me, but there are more important matters at hand: the population of Nobilismen within the town."

The bond that the paladin had formed with the woman was intense but he knew what he had to do. Klassen had made an oath to himself and was therefore honor-bound to fulfill it. Looking into Alianna's beautiful eyes he recognized that she was one of the reasons he had to cleanse Lealean, but not the only reason.

Alianna could read the paladin's thoughts through his passionate eyes and relented. "I know dear; I am just being selfish. My life hasn't been the greatest and I just don't want my soul mate to be torn from me. Actually, we aren't far from the palace, so why don't we go now?"

The paladin saw how it pained her to say the words she spoke but respected her for saying them. Klassen nodded and the two remounted the steed. Their brief hiatus over, Alianna pointed the way and they rode off towards the east.

As the two traveled, the paladin's swirling emotions confronted him as both love and hate boiled within him. The maiden that sat behind him was very attractive and he enjoyed helping her; he knew he would have helped a less attractive woman but her being so beautiful was quite a bonus to the paladin. The paladin loved her certainly as a kinsman, but was it more? He decided to examine this question more after the whole ordeal was over, when he hoped they would both be back at Imperium Castle. Klassen knew that there she could adopt a much more honorable profession than the one she held now.

On the flip side, but also connected, was the paladin's hatred. He abhorred the enemies that he so joyously wished to destroy. Especially repugnant were the traitors, like the dastardly tyrant he looked forward to dispatching. What awakened such treachery in people? As he asked himself this question, Klassen already knew the answer: greed.

"Have you seen any orcs around this tyrant?" Klassen asked. "It wouldn't surprise me if they are in control and the tyrant is merely a puppet."

Alianna had been locked in her own thoughts and if the look upon her face was any indication, they weren't as optimistic as the paladin's. "Yes, I have seen some. One in particular seems to be in charge as my brother even works for it. I'm sorry though, honey, I don't have any names for you."

Klassen wasn't too concerned over names anyway as he enjoyed removing any orc pestilence that infested Teramon. Once he killed the tyrant, he hoped the puppet master would stick around as well and get its reward for spreading a plague of dishonor. Before the paladin could revel further in his thoughts, Alianna pointed and he saw their destination.

A circle of trees surrounded a large palace that, in contrast to the darkness that pervaded the area, shined brightly with a plethora of torches. It was made of stone and was obviously many, many years old but wasn't in disrepair whatsoever. Upon looking at it further, Klassen realized that it wasn't exactly tall, but it was very wide and looked like it could house a good portion of the entire Nobilis population in Lealean. Here and there a tower would jut into the black sky, glowing with fire. There were many balconies dotting along the palace, although Klassen knew not which might lead to his prey's room.

In the front of the palace was a courtyard where luxurious bushes had been trimmed in symmetrical patterns. Statues that appeared made of gold also stood proudly amidst the display; the paladin noted their craftsmanship was rather good although it didn't even compare with those at Imperium Castle. All in all, Klassen thought the palace quite impressive but in no way did its occupant deserve such fine splendor.

Like the fearless hero that he was, Klassen scanned the premises for a weakness as he hopped down from his mount. Quite a few guards were congregating within the courtyard and all appeared to the paladin's eye as ogres. Even such dolts as these would most likely spot the paladin if he made a frontal assault simply due to the omnipresent illumination that even penetrated into the forest. Though these beasts might not stop him, they could sound an alarm and who knew how many reinforcements they could call.

Klassen quickly found an alternate route that looked much more inviting. The balconies that were all about seemed very accessible, but this immediately aroused the paladin's suspicion. It seemed simply too easy but worth investigating.

"Which balcony is the tyrant's?" the paladin asked.

"I'm not sure, honey," Alianna responded. "I went in through the front entrance, sorry."

After gathering a long strand of rope from his gear and slinging it over his shoulder, Klassen whispered, "If any commotion breaks out or I'm not back in an hour, ride away. I'll probably be dead in that case, but you can ride on to Imperium Castle."

Before Alianna could respond, the paladin stealthily edged away, towards the side of the palace. Tears welled up in her eyes and the word "dead" echoed again and again to her frightened ears.

Quickly and quietly did the paladin scurry through the forest, his mind totally focused on the mission at hand. As powerful as Alianna's charms were, they were now pushed deep into his mind as he knew that any kind of distraction could usher in the demon of death. Although the courtyard was teeming with filthy life, the area Klassen navigated was only filled with the bodies of wood that he knew as friends. It was with ease, therefore, that he came to be within a stone's throw of a suitable balcony.

Although the paladin's first instinct was to rush up the balcony and enter the abode of his foe, he looked around for some type of trap. He could see that the door to the balcony was closed and what lay inside was shrouded by a blue, billowing curtain, but that didn't appear to be much of a defense against intrusion. To Klassen's wary mind the balcony seemed to scream "enter" so that a noose might strangle those who accepted the invitation.

As Klassen crouched contemplating the situation, a ripping pain stabbed him in the back of his skull, near the neck. The paladin swung around looking for an attacker, but saw none. Questions flooded his mind as he struggled to deal with the pain. What had caused it? Was it simply his wounds flaring up? Or was it something else?

The paladin's vision became clouded and his muscles became sluggish, barely responding to his command to withdraw into the depths of the forest where Klassen believed he would have sanctuary. He hadn't gone far when his muscles stopped obeying him and a vision of tangled spider webs glazed across his field of vision. Looking like an uncoordinated sot, the paladin tumbled to the ground.

In a flash of illumination, Klassen saw the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. He was virtually paralyzed but his mind wasn't affected quite as much and it rang out in alarm. Poison! The cider he drank had tasted rotten; couldn't it have been poisoned? The paladin's mind fought with this idea of vicious betrayal but it was the only one that made sense to him. A tiny resistance to this questioned whether she had drank any; the haze in his vision was creeping more and more into his mind but he recalled that she had not.

The paladin's rage soared to the surface of his being and propelled him to his feet. With fierce determination he struggled to flee the area before he was consumed by blackness. He staggered away slowly, a sneer of cold loathing upon his visage.

Klassen's journey was cut short, however, when another volley of explosive pain crashed into his skull.

Chapter XIX

The fiery sun cast down its hot rays upon the town of Lealean, unmolested by any pillow-like clouds. On this particular day, the fireball above reigned supremely over the land as the clouds had lost the battle of the sky. To commemorate the magnificent victory, the town was bathed in golden streams of warmth that caused waves of heat to waver like a snake in the air. It was a bit of an ostentatious display as the boiling temperature oppressed the town, but the magnificent star dictated its own laws, as it was, after all, the victor.

Like the sunlight that pervaded the town, word of the valorous deeds of Klassen spread like a rampaging fire. Every household—beast or Nobilis—spoke of the actions of the single paladin. The Universal Church had quickly denounced his actions and therefore smeared him with all their means possible. The sermons of dishonor had vilified the paladin with ferocious fury; fliers with Klassen's picture behind bars and gold coins going to a beast were spread throughout the town to the illiterate beasts; and an official decree from the evil "Savior" was issued calling for an end to Nobilis insurrections or there would be harsh repercussions.

The beasts, of course, swallowed the propaganda very easily especially considering that they hated Nobilismen anyway. A paladin that killed many of their fellow beasts stirred up feeling not only of vengeance, but also, and probably more motivating, greed at the prospect of gold. Despite these motivations, the beast population was terrified of one that openly defied and slaughtered them. As such, many were uneasy, talking of Klassen as a devil that they hated, but also feared.

The dominating presence of the Universal Church and subsequent smear campaign against the paladin brought mixed sentiments among the Nobilis people. Some saw him, as the propaganda suggested, as the reason for all the ills that had befallen the Nobilis community. Most, however, felt that Klassen was a hero to be respected although they kept these thoughts to themselves or only spoke them amongst trusted comrades. A very few spoke openly in support of the paladin's actions but since this was against the church's views, were either suppressed harshly or in hiding.

The evil tyrant had acted quickly with his measures to remove the paladin and his influence as he saw discontent could be a problem. However, he thought it wasn't enough and his brutal nature was made more evident by the plot he hatched. He claimed that someone within the town was harboring Klassen and thus endeavored to find out whom.

Acting swiftly—it was but afternoon—the wicked despot had sent his troops into the Nobilis district. Warnings rang out that whoever didn't cooperate would be executed on the spot; this compelled compliance, for the most part. Several fights did break out, however, but the bulk of beast warriors and lack of Nobilis leadership halted any type of organized resistance. Those that did resist were rapidly punished for their disobedience with the ripping slash of steel or the powerful thump of hard wood.

Savagely they rounded up the populace, regardless of what the Nobilismen were doing. When the mass was formed together, it was herded towards the town square, being prodded from behind by many tips of steel. No explanation had been given for their uprootment and sweating trek through the city. However, it soon became apparent.

The soldiers and Nobilismen entered a town center that already held a mass of beasts. The stench from the filth and the gallons of sweat issued forth by these vermin transformed the area into a poisonous marsh. The reason for the gathering stood at the end of the town center; it was a gruesome sight that stole the hearts from many of the Nobilismen. This was obviously intended, for the kinsmen of Klassen were brought right before it so they could view it in all its viciousness.

The Nobilismen were packed tightly in the center, visibly horrified but silent. Those who protested in outrage were given a thrashing and thus silence prevailed. The citizen beasts that surrounded them on the flanks were quite the opposite in demeanor as they cheered and shouted obscenities at the Nobilismen. The raucous display greatly annoyed more than one Nobilismen but

the large presence of soldiers that separated the two factions prevented active hostilities from erupting.

Standing upon a high, hastily constructed platform, a Nobilis traitor, with the mark of the Universal Church, called for attention with a swift motion of his hand to the soldiers, silence ensued. Shouting, he roared out, "Our great Savior wants the head of the criminal Klassen." The beasts erupted with wild cheering which the soldiers soon halted. "He knows that someone in the town is harboring this criminal." Hisses and pointing fingers were evident among the beast ranks but soon were quelled. "Either Klassen is presented before me now or," the traitor pointed at a row of Nobilismen on the platform with him, "these people will face the consequences!"

The Nobilismen upon the platform were bound hand and foot by thick cords and were visibly shaken by the pronouncement and subsequent hurrah that pounded forth from the revolting mob of beasts. Some of the crowd recognized friends or family on the stage; some were from the altercation at the *Lion's Den* bar while others had been randomly selected. For each prisoner, a swinging death sentence blew in the slight breeze. A noose.

Amidst the Nobilis crowd, whispers broke out as people voiced their consternation. The soldiers had been ordered not to disrupt this murmuring as it might lead to the execution of anyone that might be Klassen's cohort. Consequently, the speech increased in tempo and volume as arguments over who was housing the paladin erupted. Anxiety and anger blanketed the area.

Amid a small group of Nobilismen, the bartender and owner of the *Lion's Den*, Caion, whispered to one of his comrades, "Where can he be? This blasted tyrant needs dealt with and he is the only one that can do it. Our kinsman are to be hung and they need saved!"

One of his brethren whispered back, "I agree Caion but what can we do? No one has seen Klassen since yesterday. It's like he's just disappeared."

"Aye it is," came the hushed reply from the bartender. "We have to do something but all these soldiers would rip us to pieces. We don't even have weapons more than simple knives."

Before the small group could continue, a shout from atop the platform rang out. "Silence!" the traitor commanded harshly, wiping the sweat from his brow. "The magnificent Savior *knows* that there is a criminal among us. He *knows*! Who is harboring the murderer Klassen? Blood will be spilled today. Will it be you!?" the clergyman roared pointing into the Nobilis crowd. "Or you!?" he screamed hysterically as he pointed to someone else.

The crowd of Nobilismen quailed in fear at the horrific sermon the priest spoke. The intended affect had obviously been terror and it succeeded greatly, much to the clergyman's delight. One of those that the traitor had pointed to had been a woman that had fainted from the sheer shock of it all. The degree of panic was steadily increasing but the priest was far from done exacerbating the crowd.

The clergyman glared across the Nobilis ranks and, after seeing no indication of the paladin, motioned to the soldiers. They promptly climbed onto the gallows and placed the nooses around the prisoner's naked necks. As they did this, shrieks of horror arose from the women and frustrated curses rang out from the men. The beasts, on the other hand, joyously hooted and hollered at the display. All that sustained the prisoners' life was a small platform below their feet that could easily be withdrawn.

The priest wore a mask of jubilation and loathing as he chastised, "This is your final chance sinners! Death is at hand!"

The brouhaha now became deafening as the hearts of the Nobilismen thumped wildly with concern. What could they do? None of them seemed to know anything about Klassen's whereabouts and could they possibly stop the horrible proceedings? The mighty frustration within the Nobilismen was kept in check by the soldiers, and this further cast a blanketing shadow of gloom over them.

A distraught Caion voiced out his despair: "Will we never break these bonds brothers? If only our hero was here. Why has he forsaken us?" In a final whisper of morbidity, he asked his comrades, "Is the church right, and Klassen the source of our suffering?"

After these depressing words were uttered, a quick figure jostled its way through the thick, sweating crowd. Immediately questions were asked and hope, ever so small but hope indeed, blossomed forth among the Nobilis people. Who was this figure? What was his mission? Could he know the paladin's whereabouts?

The crowd—beast and Nobilismen—all calmed to a silent hush upon seeing this figure. The being had no identifying marks, so the mystery was heightened. In eager anticipation, the masses watched the figure wind its way up to the gallows, fierce determination upon his face. Once there he handed a note to the fanatical priest.

The clergyman again wiped the sweat away that was swelling like a river upon his visage, but his face was an impassive mask, betraying no emotion as he read. All eyes in the town center were upon this reader but the priest seemed not to notice, in such concentration was he. After a few moments he looked up and around his audience before speaking.

“Our Savior sends his well wishes to all present,” he said, face contorted in a wicked grin. “Justice is very important to him and he hopes everyone shall obey the laws so that we may all prosper. He declares that it is the duty and privilege for all to take justice into their own hands when it comes to Nobilis criminals. So there is no need to wait for the soldiers anymore and our Savior declares it just to kill any Klassen supporters on the spot!”

Wild cheers of vulgar bliss erupted from the beasts while the Nobilismen cried out in agony. Many of these Nobilismen looked as though the grim hand of death had already claimed them. Lamentations of woe rang out and abject misery suffocated the area. The cruel suffering inflicted upon the Nobilis people shattered many wills, and they seemed destined to live a shallow, empty life.

Bringing his arms high into the sky, the clergyman fervently continued, “There is one final statement from our sublime Savior.” With a nod of suffocating death, the priest shouted, “Justice is served!”

Something slimy oozed across the paladin's arm, waking him from his slumber. Instinctively he attempted to brush it off but failed. A few shrugs of his shoulder successfully removed the creature, whatever it was. Feeling his wrists with his fingers, he realized his hands were bound and more importantly, he had no idea where he was.

With a heavy effort Klassen came to a sitting position, but he experienced another difficulty: he couldn't see. With a dexterous effort, he maneuvered his hands from behind his back to in front of him by slipping his hands under his legs. The paladin discovered it was a hood that blinded him, but several attempts to remove it failed as it too was bound securely with a thick rope.

Without access to either sight or much movement, the paladin endeavored to examine his situation. He was quite damp from the floor where he sat and this led him to believe he was locked in a dungeon, especially since he was tied up; the pervasive musty stench also lent credence to this. His muscles felt as though they had been punished with a whip as they burned intensely. The paladin's head throbbed with a continual drumming and he wasn't too keen on the beat. When a slight breeze blew through his cell, he realized that all he wore now was a loincloth and boots. An intriguing situation, he thought, but one he wanted out of.

Focusing his mind was quite a task in itself, but Klassen forced himself to. Where was he and how had he gotten into such a predicament? These questions probed his mind but he found it difficult to answer them. The paladin wondered why he felt like a drunkard when it hit him.

Poison! Yes, he remembered it all now. He wondered what reward the whore had received for betraying him. How crafty she had been, he thought. Klassen felt angrier with himself for all that happened than he did with the whore. He vowed to learn from his mistakes as soon as he escaped. The contemplation of escape was interrupted, though, by a voice not far from him.

“Why hello there partner!” the voice cackled, barely distinguishable as masculine. “Have a nice nap there? Ha! What’s your name and why are you here? You look important.”

Klassen heard the shrill laugh and wondered about the man’s sanity. “I am Klassen. Where exactly is ‘here’?”

“Why this is the dark world, underworld, world of pain or whatever name you like. It’s pretty cozy once you get used to it! Ha! Of course that takes some days, or months, or like me, years. The pain and starvation are easy to get used to, but the stench of those ogres! Now I tell you, *that* is hard. Ha!”

The paladin couldn’t help but to chuckle, but wondered how much he could learn from someone who appeared to have lost his mind. “What is your name, comrade, and how long have you been imprisoned here?” Klassen asked with a serious tone.

“I am doomed, and laying next to you is death! Ha!” Sure enough, the paladin felt a corpse beside him. “I’ve been here since I was a wee youngin, or so it seems. Somehow I feel you won’t be sticking around as long as I though.”

The paladin wasn’t offended by the prisoner in the least, as he recognized who was to blame for his condition. The man was coping with laughter and Klassen joined him in the ironic joviality. The paladin was determined to solve past errors and cleanse the town. Before he could question his incarcerated companion further, however, a faint clicking of boots was heard in the distance, reverberating against the walls.

“Here they come Klassen!” screeched out the prisoner. “My body is old and frail but you are strong! Give them a couple of blows for me, will ya? What I wouldn’t give to be young again and pummel these brutes! Ha!”

The paladin prepared himself for an attack and longed to reward his companion for his miserable suffering.

With barely a breath taken in between, the prisoner yelled, “Wow, you ogres smell bad! How in all of Teramon does your kind reproduce? How can you even survive at all? I’d commit suicide if I emitted such a stench. Oh, oh, oh all that ale you drink numbs your senses. If they were numbed anymore, you’d be brain-dead! Ha! You are so stup—” started the captive, but he finished with a soft groan.

A deep, guttural voice replaced the prisoner’s. “Who be tha dub one eh?” The paladin recognized the voice instantly as that of an ogre. Klassen realized what was happening without seeing it.

The paladin heard a rustle of keys and what he presumed was the door to his cell open. From the sound of footfalls, Klassen realized that two of the large beasts had entered his damp abode.

“Lat’s go,” one of the brutes said in a low rumbling.

The paladin rose to his feet slowly. As soon as he felt the leathery hand grab his arm, Klassen reacted swiftly, ignoring the pain that shot through his sore muscles. The paladin’s bound hands erupted toward his unseen assailant’s face with rapid velocity. His hard knuckles blasted into the nose of the ogre; it buckled instantly beneath the fury of the blow.

Klassen swung his elbow towards the enemy to his right but it only whistled through empty space. An attack from above him was detected too late and the paladin felt the full impact of the blow; it staggered him but he didn’t fall. Another blunt blow came ripping into his midsection and this time he did fall. Once on the ground, the ogres shot a fusillade of boot stomps, further injuring the paladin.

The attack stopped as one ogre spoke gruffly, “No die, no die. Savior want alive. Lat’s go Kassen.”

Unobserved to the paladin, the other prisoner had reveled in delight when Klassen had punched the filthy ogre. He spoke hoarsely as he struggled for air, “Way to go kid! That punch surely broke his nos—” The sentence went unfinished as a blow ripped into the old man. He didn’t have oxygen to spare to speak further, nor even groan.

The paladin laid on the grimy floor trying to crush the pain that bludgeoned him all over. He knew he could rise, but felt in no mood for obeisance to a pair of foul-smelling ogres. The question that burned in his mind was: Why am I kept alive? More importantly, he knew, was taking advantage of this situation, the only advantage he seemed to have at the time.

“Lat’s go Kassen,” the ogre said, the irritation in its voice plainly evident. “Savior,” it said, speaking the word so crisply and correctly that the paladin wondered how much training it had taken, “sez that you wold be ah coward if we was furced to carrie you.”

Klassen immediately recognized the attack upon his pride but, even being aware of it, knew it was an effective ploy; the paladin, amid pain that hammered and sliced his skin, straightened to his feet as though he were in perfect health. As much as the paladin wished to eradicate the miserable beasts that stood before him, he realized this must wait until circumstances were more favorable.

The two beasts firmly grasped Klassen’s large biceps and led him forward. The mere touch of these hated beasts unleashed the paladin’s rancor and compelled him to unleash his fury, but he waited. It was extremely difficult for him to contain his furious wrath but he did as he knew he must. The words of an ancient philosopher came to his mind: “A triumph of the will.”

The paladin, still masked, was led from his cell and up a seemingly endless number of stairs. After this, the path he was led on twisted and turned as though he were trapped in a maze. Here and there an “ohh” or “ahh” was heard by people Klassen assumed worked at the palace. The ogres paid no attention to these words. After what seemed like a complete adventure in itself to the paladin, the trio stopped.

“You listen,” an ogre grunted. “You bout be see Savior. Must bowh befer him. Unstand?”

Klassen nodded while loathing to hear the very speech (if it could be called such, he thought) of the beasts. Who was this “Savior” and how dare he exude such disgraceful impudence?

A door creaked open and the trio made their way inside. The lair of the beast the paladin couldn’t see, but he did feel the softness under his boots, indicating carpet. If the lavish adornments he had seen before were any indicator, it would be exquisite carpet amidst an opulent throne room. Klassen heard but silence, telling him that either few were in the room or those within were respectfully silent in “Savior’s” presence; he thought the latter more probable.

After a short walk, the ogres brought the paladin to an abrupt halt. “Bowh,” an ogre ordered. When the paladin didn’t comply, a painful blow to Klassen’s back dropped him to his knees, making him involuntarily bow.

A crisp, stern voice greeted Klassen: “Good to see you, son.”

Chapter XX

Klassen's mind swirled as he struggled with what seemed an almost certainty. The voice was very familiar to the paladin and he really understood whom it was that spoke to him, but wasn't going to fully accept it until he saw it for himself. All he saw was black but the cords that held the mask firm, were becoming loose as someone was cutting through the rope. In a flash, it was removed.

The paladin's eyes took a moment to adjust to the light after being so blanketed in darkness. Once they did, shock was painted upon his face. The voice was, as he thought, his father Ubelig's.

Ubelig chuckled softly as he spoke, "You are still easy to read, my son. You don't seem to have changed at all, really. Sure, you are in some silly 'Honor Brigade' and have some skill with weapons, but have you really changed? No. If you would have only stayed with the family, just look at what you could be a part of!" As he spoke, he swung his arm around directing Klassen to look around.

The paladin's fervent vehemence rushed through his mind like a crashing wave upon a jagged cliff of rocks. He was befuddled that his own father, his own flesh and blood, was the source of so much misery! The rest of his family also was involved, but his father was the source of evil that had corrupted them. He, in turn, had been corrupted by the slinking orcs, Klassen knew. Nonetheless, he knew that all involved had participated willingly and thus deserved swift justice.

As Ubelig beamed about his elegant surroundings, the paladin looked around. His father wore an elaborate crown of jewels and purple robes with white streaks, befitting a king. Ubelig sat upon a golden throne, with Klassen's mother Schlimma sitting in a similar throne. She was dressed in a similar garb of regal bearing. If one weren't aware of their vile deeds, it would prove to be a most impressive sight.

Flanking the thrones were a pair of guards, both Nobilis, who were bedecked in stunning plate mail and gleaming swords. The ogres, now visible to Klassen, were equipped similarly but also wielded large, wooden clubs. Further guards were also posted at the entrance, now closed.

Surrounding those in the throne room were many tapestries displaying the variegated colors of the rainbow. The carpet was a blood red, with a checkered design of black interspersed upon it. Several balconies were situated to the paladin's right with the forest beyond clearly visible. The glass in the balcony was stained blue and green so in addition to the golden rays of the sun entering the room, blue and green strands did as well. It was a colorful display that the paladin found quite remarkable.

"No family reunion would be complete without the full family," Ubelig said. "Your brother is here, don't worry. First, though, I want you to tell us what you've been up to. And where is the warm greeting for your parents? Speak now!"

"Greetings parents," Klassen spoke harshly, using the words as weapons of war. "You are a disgrace and you *will* die!"

Ubelig waived off the ogre that advanced to club Klassen. "No one can argue that you aren't passionate, my son. Too bad it is a misguided passion." Turning to Schlimma, he asked, "What do you think of our boy, dear?"

"*He* is the disgrace," she said. "And *he* is the one who will die."

A smile of devious mirth washed over Ubelig's face. "Yes, that is quite true. We could have eliminated our son who betrayed us already, but where is the amusement in that? I can have you killed when I want to. I will soon, publicly of course. Justice, of course, must be administered."

Turning to Klassen, he continued, "If you don't have the decency to talk about your endeavors, then it doesn't matter much as I know already. I still have one good son, after all. So good in fact

that I deferred the wonderful pleasure of tormenting you to him. Do you have nothing to say for yourself at all, Klassen?"

Oh how Klassen desperately wished to strangle his father and fulfill his vow to end the tyranny of this "Savior." He was outraged by the oppression of such a cruel monster and the fact that it was his own father, sent Klassen into a bubbling sea of wrath that visibly showed upon his face. His own father!

"I do have a question for you father." Klassen spat out the words with disdain, while the word "father" was especially filled with violent contempt. "Why have you chosen this path of dishonor? Is there no hope for you?"

A vicious frown was evident on the bloody tyrant's face as he said bluntly, "Were we back at home, I'd beat you myself. You will get your justice, however. It will be a pleasure."

Calming himself, he continued, "I am on the path of hope; it is you who has no hope. Why do I choose my path? Look around you! Look at the wealth, the riches, the power! Such is the way you could have chosen if you'd only listened to me, your father."

"As it is, you are doomed." Motioning to a guard, he said, "Send in my son Grausen. Now!"

Klassen's brother, Grausen, promptly came in dressed in a brown military uniform, acting as though he commanded all the armies of the world. Following him were several more guards—Nobilisman—and two prisoners who were bound and gagged. These two the paladin recognized instantly as the woman Alianna and boy Aigean.

"Thank you for this honor," Grausen said to his father. Turning to Klassen, he said, "We are going to have some fun brother. You are going to suffer, suffer then die! Hehehe. Unless, of course, you wish to pledge allegiance to father, the Savior. What do you say?"

"Never," Klassen roared. "You disgust me!"

"Thank you brother. I get to take part in my favorite occupation then: pain."

At Grausen's command, the two prisoners were brought forward and hurtled down onto their knees. "Now, I know you are simply dying to kill these traitors. Who doesn't enjoy killing traitors? If you are a really good boy, I might let you slit their throats. Would you like that brother?"

Traitors were all around, Klassen thought. The disgrace of his family was like a knife plunged into his heart, and the presence of the two prisoners twisted that knife. The thought of obliterating a traitor brought a sense of joy to the paladin. He simply nodded at his brother's question.

"Hehehe. Like we'd allow you such a privilege," Grausen said, laughing. "What I would like to know, is how could you trust a whore and a thief? Father always told us not to trust anyone, yet you placed your faith in two characters with dubious pasts. Tsk tsk. Well, you paid for such idiocy. You are here, after all."

Grausen glanced at Alianna and said, "As a whore, you are quite spectacular. As a traitor, you must be eliminated. What joy it is to kill you myself and deprive my brother of the thrill! Hehehe. Do you have any last words?"

A nod and a muffled garble sounded from Alianna. "Oh," Grausen exclaimed, "silly me, you have a gag in your mouth. Hehehe."

The gag was removed. Alianna screamed out at Klassen, "He is lying, they are all lying! I didn't betray you, I was captured. I want to help you, be with you. Please believe me...honey."

Stuffing the gag back into her mouth, Grausen uttered, "I think whores are much better when they don't speak; squeals are great, but that incessant talk is irksome. Don't you think, brother? Anyway, who is lying, Klassen? Is it me or the whore? Who should suffer?"

Silence ensued as the paladin struggled with the question. Klassen already knew his brother was an evil being deserving to dwell among the refuse of the world. Alianna, he was torn over. Was she lying? he thought. Finally, he decided upon the subject.

“Both of you should die,” Klassen hissed like a serpent.

Grausen looked at his father, who nodded. “So be it,” Klassen’s brother said.

Grabbing Alianna’s hair and pulling back fiercely, Grausen looked into the woman’s emerald eyes. A dagger materialized in his hand and he sliced the whore’s throat in a swift, fluid motion. The blood flowed in streams as Grausen greedily sucked it from the woman’s throat. After getting his fill, the vampire let Alianna slump to the ground.

Wiping the crimson fluid from his face, Grausen spoke joyfully, “*That* was fun but it gets better. This wench here, now dead, wasn’t lying my dear brother. She didn’t betray you at all. Suffer, suffer! Hehehe.”

The words bit into Klassen’s flesh like the blade of the dagger his brother held. Could it be true? No, he thought, his brother was simply trying to irritate him. He thought that she had to have betrayed him, but a lingering doubt loomed within him, annoying him. Klassen thought it more likely Alianna had been telling the truth than his brother but...

“Brother,” Grausen began, “will you always display your emotions upon your face? I can see your nagging doubts, which is a pleasure in itself, but it gets better, like I said. Our great Savior knew you’d have doubts so we have an explanation and demonstration for you.

“See, we have spies. We can’t feel the pulse of the town without them, as father says. We saw you leave with the whore. We followed you to the palace as well. We subdued you there and I will show you how.”

He drew out a long tube from his pocket. “This is a dart gun like the one that disabled you. We knew how adept you were with that sword, so we didn’t let you use it. The darts this fires can be laced with many poisons. The ones used on you contained a very strong sedative. Cozy, wasn’t it? Hehehe. Watch this.”

Grausen armed the weapon with a dart, placed the dart gun against his lips, and blew. The poisoned barb flew silently until it embedded itself in a guard’s neck. Smiling, Grausen watched as the guard, a Nobilisman, struggled to maintain his balance. Before long, the guard collapsed with a barely audible thud.

The paladin watched the display and then looked at the bloody corpse of Alianna. Klassen knew what his brother had said happened was true. This realization ripped through the paladin’s flesh like the scathing blade of an axe. He blamed himself for her death and his hatred for his brother, nay his entire family, became even more inflamed. If glares had the power to kill, then Grausen would have been bludgeoned to death in an instant as Klassen vented his raging anger with a stare.

“Ah, now there it is!” shouted Grausen excitedly. “Show your anger, your hatred. Who needs words when you have a stare like that? Hehehe. Do you think I should have pity on you now brother?” he queried, tauntingly. “I think we can actually agree on something here: pity is for the weak.”

Klassen did agree with his brother but had no desire to voice this agreement, nor show it. The paladin waited for his brother to bring forth more displays to humiliate him; he didn’t have to wait long.

Seeing the paladin’s demeanor, Grausen inquired mockingly, “Where is this ‘Honor Brigade’ that you represent? They must not be very powerful to send you here. Alone. Do they, like I, like to see suffering? What compelled you to join such a pathetic force when such power surrounds us? I mean, of course, the Universal Church.”

“Honor compelled me, you filthy rat!” the paladin spat out. “It is something you know nothing of.” Beaming, Klassen proudly continued, “The Honor Brigade is the only salvation for Teramon.”

Klassen saw that the words affected Grausen, regardless of how well his brother could control his emotions. “You are deluded, brother. This does interest me though. Perhaps this pitiful ‘Honor Brigade’ would like to feel the might of the Universal Church! Hehehe.”

The paladin laughed as well as he knew an attack upon Imperium Castle was suicide. He had seen this first hand and thus voiced, "Yes! That would be a delightful slaughter. Please attack."

Grausen was unnerved by this outburst and motioned to an ogre to halt it; a crushing blow to Klassen's back followed. The paladin barely felt the blow amid all his pains and the smile stayed upon his lips.

"How do you like your ogre guards, Klassen?" Grausen asked wickedly. "I know how much you enjoy their company, and it seems so fitting for you to be among your beloved. Hehehe."

Turning to Ubelig, Grausen asked, "Don't you think we should crush these 'honor' warriors father?"

Ubelig enjoined, "We can speak about that another time. Proceed with the humiliation. Go to it!"

Grausen nodded swiftly and brought his attention to bear on the lad Aigean. The boy had a look as if he would whimper, if only his gag were removed. He looked at the body of Alianna, and the blood surrounding her, with moist eyes. The look he shot at Klassen seemed to scream for help; the paladin's mind questioned it. With a kick from behind, Aigean groaned.

"As you can see," Grausen began, "the boy isn't a traitor. No need for pretense here. Our spies captured him and most surely it must have looked like a trap to you! But it wasn't. Don't worry, there is still fun to be had in the boy's innocence. You know what will happen to him. Hehehe. Before I kill him, I have some gleeful news for you.

"Yesterday, a most delightful scene of death and suffering occurred in town. I, most fortunately, was there to witness it. Not among the rabble, mind you, but I was there. Those 'comrades' of yours that fought in that paltry barroom brawl were among those put to death, hanged to be exact. There is admirable suffering in that, not a swift death you see. They were killed because someone in town was harboring you. Never mind the fact that we had you the whole time! Hehehe.

"Before you have any outbursts, let me finish. It gets better. Some that died were from that bar and some were selected efficiently, by random. Anyone we didn't like the look of, really. Hehehe. Two were not chosen at random though. They were the parents of this little thief here!"

Amid the sadistic smile of Grausen, the boy cried and Klassen became further enraged. Black heap upon black heap had created a mountain of filthy oppression that the paladin knew had to end. All the unjust death and suffering that surrounded Klassen sickened him and he acted in the hopes to alleviate it.

He shot to his feet with the little energy left in him. Roaring out, he vociferated, "You devil dogs! Why don't you simply take me, burn me, hang me, whatever, and end these people's, *our* people's, suffering! Blame it all on me or whatever you wish, just stop destroying the Nobilismen!"

Grausen took a step back in shock at this terrific outburst, visibly dismayed. "Noble words," he squeaked out, "but what use have we of nobility? How pathetic it is to think you value honor over riches. That 'Honor Brigade' has so polluted your mind that you can't even think clearly." Glancing down at Klassen's feet, he continued, "Even your boots show the sign of that perversion called honor."

The paladin looked at his boots and, sure enough, they were from the Honor Brigade. He didn't have time to marvel at them, however, as a barrage of blunt strikes pounded against his back; Klassen slumped back down on the carpeted floor. While there, a sense of liberating joy swept over him like a comforting breeze amid the torturing fire of dishonor that surrounded him. In order to mask his wondrous feelings of bliss, he stayed slumped upon the floor, not even looking up. His grin was huge. The overriding thought that engaged him was: the boots!

Grausen laughed at Klassen as he spoke, "That is a better sign of respect: grovel. You don't even deserve to be in the presence of our family but that will end, don't you worry. When you

cease to amuse us, we shall get rid of you. Anyway, to the matter at hand.” Looking at Aigean, he continued, “Boy, do you have any final words?”

The gag was removed from the lad’s mouth and he spoke to Grausen with a whimper. “You are evil and bad and horrible.” Turning to Klassen, he pleaded, “Don’t give up and help me kill this guy and kill them all!”

“Enough of your babbling,” Grausen said roughly as he put the gag back. “It is time for you to suffer, then die! Hehehe.”

As Grausen grabbed for the boy, a loud chain of yelling and hollering erupted from beyond the entranceway door, which was closed. A scream of miserable pain accentuated the rising racket. Startled looks between the guards and the rulers were exchanged before someone spoke.

“Grausen,” Ubelig roared, “take the guards and go investigate. Be quick about it.”

“All the guards, father? What about Klassen?” Grausen asked, a hint of fear in his voice.

“Yes, take them all,” came the reply. “My disgrace for a son is barely alive. Go to it! Now!”

Grausen nodded and hastily gathered the guardsmen together before exiting the throne room. Meanwhile, Klassen turned on his side so that his back faced his father. All that Ubelig saw to realize that his son was alive was a faint squirming here and there.

“Don’t worry, my son,” Ubelig said with composure. “Your demise will come as soon as you are no longer useful to me. Your brother would have me cut you into tiny pieces and spread throughout town as a warning. A vicious one he is. A good son though, unlike you.”

Ubelig stopped talking as the racket outside the throne room became louder and louder. The shouts became almost decipherable through the large door that separated silence and noisy disorder. The look on the tyrant’s face became agitated and uneasy at the boisterous disturbance that sounded like a full-fledged war.

Suddenly, the door was flung open and Grausen ran into the room with great speed. Terrifying fear was painted upon his face and a faint sob was heard as he rushed in. Accompanying him into the hall were amplified sounds of the hollering, but now audible were death cries and the clash of steel upon steel. It was as if the entire army of the Honor Brigade had burst into the palace with the coward fleeing in immense terror.

Aghast, Ubelig screamed at his fleeing son, “What in all of Teramon is going on? Son! Come back here!”

Before these last words were even uttered, however, Grausen scudded over to the balcony, ignoring his father, and leaped over the edge. Klassen chided himself as he watched his brother escape but knew he still had two disreputable scamps to deal with. With a final squirming, he slashed the cords that bound him with the knife that had been oh-so-cleverly hidden in his boot. He was free!

The paladin was imbued with a crackling energy of enthusiasm as he rose to his feet. Flames seemed to lash out all about him as he appeared to rise from the fire, like the rebirth of the phoenix. Ascending to his full height, the rays of light cascaded upon his powerful frame, illuminating Klassen’s physique that rippled with rigid muscles. The refulgent glow was one of holiness, deeming that Klassen was, indeed, a paladin of honor.

The sight of their son now free hit Ubelig and Schlimma like a scathing bolt of lightning. They tumbled to the ground, the look of stark terror being emitted from their entire being. A few incoherent words fell from their lips as their paralyzation of fear was virtually complete.

The paladin rushed over to free the boy that had suffered so much. Aigean was ecstatic at the events that were unfolding around them. He thanked the paladin incessantly until Klassen had to stop him and concentrate on the matter at hand. After granting the boy a huge smile, the paladin glanced out into the hall that adjoined the room.

Erupting beautifully before the paladin’s eyes was a battle of clubs, swords, and shields where the advocates of filth and degeneracy were falling back. The bloody orchestra of violence was ever sweet to Klassen’s ears but who exactly was doing the attacking, he knew not. Whoever they were,

they were succeeding and appeared to have no need of a paladin wielding but a knife. Consequently, Klassen turned his attention to his parents.

The paladin slowly walked towards those who had raised him, confident of glorious victory despite the stinging pain that raked his body. With a piercing scowl upon his visage, Klassen struggled to remember any good times that his parents had bestowed upon, but only recalled viciousness. For most of his life, he had endured the hardships from them and had remained with them in homage to a tradition of family, but no more. The paladin had found an ideal worth fighting and dying for that transcended all other ideals. It was a sublime value that, once embraced universally, he knew would usher in a golden paradise upon Teramon. Klassen was fanatically loyal to this value. It was known as honor.

Trying to take advantage of being Klassen's father, Ubelig weakly shouted, "Klassen, stop!" as the paladin came to stand before the prone "Savior."

Klassen stood, gazing down upon the pathetic figure for a moment before speaking vengefully, "I took an oath to kill the evil tyrant of Lealean that had oppressed so many Nobilismen. Imagine my shame when it turned out to be my own father! Nevertheless, I am a man of my word and I always fulfill my oaths." Thus speaking, Klassen yanked his father to his feet and plunged the dagger into Ubelig's stomach, twisting it harshly with a look of bristling hatred. "My oath is now fulfilled."

Just as the paladin pulled his blade free, a wave of townsman, led by Caion, rushed into the room, pursuing a few retreating guards. These remaining guards were ignored for the moment as the Nobilis mob erupted into a crescendo of jubilant cheering. Weapons were raised into the air and the air of fanaticism increased exponentially. The few guards that hadn't already been slaughtered were flung to the floor amid the outburst of hurrahs. Townsfolk hovered over them menacingly and after receiving a nod from their champion, executed the scoundrels.

The crowd easily filled the entire throne room and gathered around their hero, eagerly anticipating his words. With an enormous smile of mirth upon his visage, Klassen spoke loudly, "I made an oath to myself to end this tyrant's cruel reign and now it is so!" The crowd cheered at these words. "Of course, this wouldn't have been possible if the good townspeople of Lealean hadn't said enough! and stormed the palace." An even greater cheer exploded forth.

"There are still matters to be attended to. First off, is a wicked man by the name of Grausen who needs to be executed on the spot, should anyone find him. I doubt he will stay in town, but he will meet with justice! Next, comes the fate of Schlimma, wife of the foul 'Savior'."

Boos and hisses were heard as the crowd voiced its contempt for the woman. Klassen forcefully trumpeted, "I know this vile witch very well. She is a horrible cohort of the now-dead tyrant and accomplice in the oppression, theft, and murder of many Nobilismen! Yes, she is not a leader, but she, like the tyrant, is a willing follower of perversity! Did she stop the hanging of our kinsmen that were brutally murdered yesterday? No! I leave it to you, my good comrades, to decide her punishment. What shall be her fate!?"

The crowd responded in an overwhelming unanimous decision. "Kill her!" was the most common utterance heard. As the jury thus decided, the paladin executed the punishment of death with a simple flick of his wrist. Schlimma tumbled to the ground, blood flowing freely from her throat. The crowd exploded in celebration. Hugs were exchanged between the merry revelers, including Klassen, Aigeon, and Caion. The festive air encased the palace in an honorable celebration that befit the luxurious surroundings.

With bloody dagger still in hand, the paladin raised his powerful arms into the air, towards the heavens above. Klassen roared, "Victory is inevitable!"

Ten Laws of Honor Brigade

1. *Illuminate Teramon with the bright light of honor.*
2. *Be strong; slaughter the weak.*
3. *Courageously fight for a better world.*
4. *Live at war.*
5. *Life to Nobilismen; death to the beasts.*
6. *Nobilismen are the supreme beings.*
7. *Superstition must be destroyed and replaced by the laws of nature.*
8. *Promote the best interests of our Nobilis brethren.*
9. *Utilize your specific talent to further Nobilis ends.*
10. *Victory is inevitable.*