

Mired
By David Benedict

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INCOMPLETE

Author's notes follow the main text.

PART ONE – A Sinking Feeling

*A flash of green light.
An unearthly din.
A sense of falling.*

Xephyr awoke. He looked around himself, taking in the unfamiliar terrain. The grey cobblestones beneath his feet showed the evidence of many years of use, worn smooth with a slight luster. *This appears to be a city square of some kind*, he thought. *Large buildings of wood and stone to the east and west, paths into and out of the city to the north and south. Streetlamps line the paths, strange orbs upon tall wooden poles, but are currently unlit as the sun is high in the sky.* All this was familiar to Xephyr...strangely so. Familiar in the sense that he knew the name for every object around him. Strange because he could remember nothing else about himself or his surroundings.

In situations like this, he surmised, *it's best to stick to the facts.* Ok, the facts were that he was standing in what appeared to be a city square in broad daylight. He was wearing a thin, simple tunic of cloth and some rags for pants that seemed inadequate for any purpose other than modesty. He dredged his memory, desperate for any clue as to how he might have gotten here, where he had come from previously, what he might have been doing, and whether he was doing it on purpose. Nothing seemed to come to mind immediately. He weighed his options.

He could stay here and try to figure things out. But his mind seemed totally blank. No thread of thought to follow, no clue to reason through, and night was sure to come eventually and he'd like to have some sort of shelter. He could venture into another part of the city, but what might he find there? Maybe he would be recognized! But maybe that wouldn't be such a good thing...with no idea of what he was doing here, he wasn't so sure he wanted to be recognized, just in case it turned out he was a spy or something. Xephyr pondered this for several moments and came to no other satisfying conclusions; staying here or not staying here seemed to be the only options.

As Xephyr was considering this, a hole, seeping a strange mist into the air and glowing with an odd light, suddenly opened in the air next to him and a tall, graceful woman stepped from out of nowhere. As she arrived in the square the hole snapped shut with a flash of light, blinding Xephyr for a moment. When he could see again he took in the vision that stood before him.

Since Xephyr had no idea who, what, or where he was it was difficult for him to say whether he was of average height or not, but the woman before him was at least a foot taller than he was with a flowing mane of blond hair, laced with small flowers, waving slightly in the breeze. She had blue eyes, a thin and angular face, pale skin, and wore a dress that looked as if it might have been made of gossamer. And then she spoke to him.

“Hello, Xephyr. Would you like some help?”

Xephyr paused. He certainly did want some help, but he was also afraid. He couldn't remember anything, but he felt somehow certain that tall, beautiful women did not typically appear from out of nowhere. Having exhausted most of his other options, however, he decided to take a small risk.

"Yes...I believe I would. Who are you and where am I?" Xephyr asked, timidly.

The woman laughed a small, airy laugh. "Do not be afraid, Xephyr. I am here to help you. I am called Neve, and I wander this realm giving aid to those who need it. You are in the city of Talis, a large city as cities here go, within the realm of Heimgaard."

Xephyr considered this. None of the names she had mentioned meant anything to him, and yet there was the same odd familiarity that he felt regarding nearly everything around him. It was as though he had read about them all somewhere, but had no idea where.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I still don't understand. What am I doing here?" he asked.

"I am afraid I cannot answer that for you, Xephyr. Everyone is here for a different reason and you must discover yours for yourself. I can offer assistance to help you on that path, however. Do you have a charm bracelet?" Neve held out a thin silvery band.

"I don't have anything but a few rags. I might as well be naked standing here," Xephyr said. He didn't understand why he said it, and he blushed as he did so.

"No, you have arrived here with nothing. Allow me to give you this. It is not much, but it will help," Neve said as she gave the bracelet to Xephyr.

He took it gratefully and examined it. The bracelet was indeed made of some kind of silvery metal, although he could not determine exactly what it was. He seemed sure that it was not actual silver. Dangling from the thin chain were two charms; a small shield and a book. Xephyr slipped the chain onto his wrist and found that he felt a little better than he had previously. As Neve had said, it wasn't much, but he already felt less vulnerable.

"The first thing you should do," Neve continued, "is find yourself some additional means of protection. I cannot help you with that, but I can direct you to one who can. If you travel north from here and a little west you will find the Hall of Adventurers. Illi dwells there and he can help you a little as well. After you have visited him, travel back to the south and then east and look for the inn. There are other adventurers there, but be warned...not all of them will be your friends."

"But," Xephyr interrupted, "I'm not an adventurer. And aren't you coming with me? I thought you were going to help me."

Again Neve gave forth a light, airy laugh. It was not mocking, merely an expression of amusement by one who Xephyr was beginning to realize did not have to do anything she didn't want to do. "I am afraid I have given you all the help I have available. I have knowledge beyond that of most mortals, but I am still a servant of the gods. Which reminds me. As you wander the city, you would be well advised to stay away from the Government building to the east. The post office is there for you to send messages to those you may meet in your travels, but go no farther in unless you are summoned, for the wizards who rule this realm dwell there and plot their machinations. To spy upon them is to risk banishment. Some may be your friends as you progress upon your path, but you cannot take it for granted."

"Yes," said Xephyr, "but you haven't answered my other question. I'm no adventurer. I don't even know who I am. How can I go on an adventure if I don't know what it is? And what do you mean banishment?"

"Finding the answers to your questions is the adventure, Xephyr," said Neve, ignoring Xephyr's last question. "And such is the nature of this realm that you must go on it or sit idle and learn nothing. As you were observing just before I came to greet you, you must either stay here or go forth. There are no other options." And with that, Neve waved one of her willowy arms and the hole in the air appeared again. She stepped through the misty portal and it closed behind her with another flash of light.

Xephyr stood still for a moment. He didn't feel as though he knew any more now than he did when he first woke up in this strange place. But then he stopped and thought about it and decided that he did know a few things. First, he knew that there were other people out there somewhere. And second he knew, approximately, where to find them. And Neve had been right...he really only had two choices. And so, feeling the reassuring warmth of the charm bracelet on his wrist, he set out to the north to find the Hall of Adventurers and this mysterious Illi.

Walking warily, Xephyr began to pay more attention to his surroundings. Leaving the place where he had awoken somehow made him feel as though he were taking a terrible risk, although nothing around him seemed to have changed. As he walked to the north he saw several buildings around him. To the east a tall stone, or possibly marble, tower rose majestically into the sky. Due west he could see a shorter building with grand architecture, intricate carvings on its walls and doors. And all around him he began to notice the sounds and smells of the city. People shouting, small explosions, and other noises that he could not identify.

As he turned a corner he saw two small creatures with stubby legs, one holding an enormous club, the other with a long sword. The weapons seemed much too large for the creatures, but they wielded them with precision. Xephyr stopped and looked at them and, as they were running towards him, began to look around for somewhere to hide, but saw nothing. As it happened, however, the two...whatever they were...ran right past him without a second glance and disappeared the way he had just come. A moment later he

heard a small scream and a gurgle and decided he'd better be on his way, and perhaps he should quicken his pace just slightly.

This scene repeated itself with slight variations as Xephyr continued on to the north, always bearing slightly to the west as Neve had suggested. Sometimes there was only one creature, sometimes more, they took all shapes and sizes, some short with long beards, others quite tall, some with an animalistic appearance, most wielding some sort of weapon and wearing the odd bit of armor here and there. Sometimes they appeared in front of him and ran towards him, sometimes running up from behind him, always passing him by as if he weren't there, and always in some frightful hurry to get to or from some other place. Sounds of violence could sometimes be heard after they were gone, and on more than one occasion one seemed to be pursuing the other, but they all just ignored Xephyr, which suited him quite nicely.

After getting lost twice and somehow managing to bump into a few walls, Xephyr finally reached a building with a large portico, at the top of which were the letters "Hall of Adventurers". He entered warily. Once inside he could see that he was at an intersection. To the south lay the city and to the north, east, and west he could see small rooms. A shimmering light came from the room to his east which aroused his curiosity. He turned and advanced into the eastern room. There he saw the standard floor and ceiling, each made of a coarse wood that looked like it had been stained, laquered, and (to Xephyr's worry) charred several times over the course of many long years. The door back into the room he had just come from lay behind him and to his left and right were bare walls. Directly in front of him was the source of the light. Instead of a wall there was a rippling barrier. Emanating a dim light, the barrier's surface was in constant motion and offered no clue as to its purpose. Xephyr approached it, his desire to know what it was overwhelming his sense of caution. He reached out. He touched the surface. At first nothing happened, but then Xephyr felt himself being pulled forward into the barrier. He began to fight against it, but quickly realized that he was being held tightly and in an incredibly rash moment hurled himself forward into the barrier.

There was a flash of light, but Xephyr passed through the barrier harmlessly. When he could see again, Xephyr looked around to see what had happened. He saw floor and ceiling, two walls, and the shimmering barrier still in front of him. Behind him he saw the door he had come through. Nothing seemed to have changed at all. Puzzled, Xephyr tried again, and again he passed through, and again he found himself back where he started. He tore his gaze away from the hypnotic shimmering light and forced himself to look around the room in greater detail. Finally he noticed, in a dark and ominous corner, a hole in the floor. He went over to have a look and discovered that there was a ladder leading down into darkness. He began to descend and thought he could detect the faintest of lights...an orb, rippling with a dark violet glow similar to the barrier above, but far more sinister. He paused a moment and then his fear or his common sense finally got the better of him and Xephyr climbed the ladder back into the room with the barrier. He quickly scrambled out of the hole and ran out the door back into the building itself. He decided he would try the western door this time.

“Don’t just stand there, come in! Come on in!”

Xephyr stood in the doorway looking at the small creature coaxing him into the room. He still had no reference for what was considered a standard height here, but the being gesturing for him to hurry up and enter seemed significantly shorter than himself, although it was difficult to be certain as a counter was between the two of them. The only thing Xephyr could figure was that he was standing on a ladder or something. He was wearing a cloth robe of some sort that had no remarkable features and carried a large wooden crook staff. The room itself, in addition to the counter, was quite cluttered with assorted weapons, armor, and other instruments of war. Bows, swords, axes, staves several feet long, and various shapes and sizes of items intended to protect the wearer, ranging from thick, simple leather to sturdy metals etched with runes. Xephyr started to go over and examine some of the more exotic items when the little man dropped his staff on the counter, jumped down to the floor, and ran over to him.

“No, no, no, sorry, no touching! All this stuff’s just for show anyway, just for show.”

“I’m sorry, “ said Xephyr, “but it all looks so interesting and I have no idea where I am. Who are you? I was told to look for Illi.”

“And you’ve found him. I’m Illi. Neve sent you, I don’t doubt. That nymph always seems to know when to turn up, and of course when to go away.”

“Nymph? She was a nymph?” Xephyr asked incredulously. As usual, he had no idea what a nymph was, but the word sparked an odd familiarity in his brain. If only he could remember how he knew...well, anything, for that matter.

“Of course she’s a nymph! Just as I’m a gnome! I swear, they get more stupid every day, or so it seems, “ said the gnome.

“Who?”

“Adventurers, of course! Every time I see one I think to myself ‘This one looks like he might have half a brain in him!’ and then every time they prove me wrong. It’s enough to drive you to drink!” Illi exclaimed. He looked as though he would have pounded his fist upon the counter if he could reach it. Of course Xephyr was slightly offended at these remarks, but remembering what Neve had told him about Illi being able to help, he held his tongue.

“I was told you could help me, “ Xephyr said, his eyes straying again to the piles of weapons and armor strewn around the room.

“Yes, yes, yes, but not with this stuff. You couldn’t use any of this stuff. Nobody could use any of this stuff,” said Illi with just the slightest hint of pride in his voice. It was obvious that he wanted to be asked why nobody could use it, and so Xephyr obliged him.

“Why can’t anybody use any of this stuff?”

“Because it’s too powerful!” Illi exclaimed. “I’m a collector, you see. Weapons, armor, assorted other artifacts as they come to me. But I don’t deal with any of the stuff the adventurers bring me anymore. Too common, too everyday. But ah! take this for example,” he said, holding up a leather jerkin. “Looks like ordinary leather, doesn’t it?”

Xephyr conceded that it did. “But,” continued Illi, “if you perform a simple charm like this…” and the gnome made a gesture with his left hand. At first nothing happened and Xephyr began to think that the old gnome was playing games with him, but then as he stared at the jerkin he noticed a faint glow appear around it and then the glow expanded, the light began to coalesce, and then snapped into focus, a distinct form of a horrifying creature, claws extended, grasping around the chest area of the jerkin, yearning to crush any who would be so foolish as to attempt to wear this garment.

“As you can see, it’s possessed,” Illi said. He tossed the jerkin back onto the pile as if it were of no consequence and the apparition faded from view. Xephyr was edging slowly towards the door, eager to get away, but Illi saw him and motioned for him to come back. “It’s ok,” said the gnome, “it’s ok, get back over here. But this is why none of this stuff is any good for you. Some of it’s possessed, some of it has powers you can’t control, and some of it…well, you’re scared enough, I can tell. But I know of no mortal that can wear a single thing you see here. It’s all from thousands of years ago, before the guilds even. Oh, wizards could wear it, but you show me a wizard that needed armor.” Illi sneered as he uttered the word ‘wizard’. “But let’s get back to what I CAN do for you.” Illi clapped his hands and ran back over to the counter, climbing up tiny handholds in the side that Xephyr had not previously noticed.

Xephyr was totally confused at this point. He had heard Neve mention wizards before, but he had no idea who or what they were. Illi obviously disliked them, but maybe that was just because they could use the things in his collection. Xephyr got the impression that Illi would like nothing better than to be able to say that he owned an object that was totally useless to anybody.

“Don’t just stand there, come over here so I can get you something good,” Illi said, impatiently. Xephyr walked over to the counter hesitantly. How could he be sure that he wasn’t about to be given some other cursed article? But then he looked down at the charm bracelet on his wrist, remembered Neve, and somehow got a feeling of reassurance.

“Hmmm…let’s see,” murmured Illi, taking in Xephyr in great detail. “Yes…yes…I see.”

“What do you see?” asked Xephyr.

“Never you mind,” admonished the gnome. And with that he jumped down behind the counter and began to rummage through a pile of what looked like scrap leather. Finally selecting one to his liking he then moved over to a pile of scrap metal and pulled a short

sword from the heap. Coming back over to the counter, Illi climbed a small ladder that was leaning against the side and presented Xephyr with his finds. "Now I admit that these aren't much," said Illi, apologetically, "but they're better than nothing and they're as good as you're likely to find that you're capable of using for the time being. Until you get some more experience, that is."

"Experience at what?" asked Xephyr.

Illi looked at him blankly. "What do you think? I just gave you a sword and a jerkin, there aren't many uses for things like that. I don't have time to stand here and answer all your questions, you know. That's Neve's job, and since she's not here I guess you missed your chance. At this point my advice would be to get to the pub. I suppose she told you where that was, right?"

"Um...yes, a bit." Admitted Xephyr. "She said it was to the south and east."

"Yes, that's right. The Flying Drunken Pirate Inn. There's all sorts there, so be careful, but I'm sure you'll find someone there who can help you. Now I have work to do." And with that the gnome jumped back down off the counter and began sorting through the assortment of weapons that were lying in a pile nearby, paying no further attention to Xephyr at all.

"But..." stammered Xephyr, "I can't pay you for any of this."

"No, no, no, it's all free," Illi said impatiently, "I couldn't even begin to charge you for those rags. I told you they weren't much. I'd throw them all away, but Neve asked me to save them and give them away to adventurers like you. So I do, but if I were to take gold for them I'd never forgive myself. Now, please, I have so much work to do. This place really is a shambles."

Xephyr had so many questions, but he could tell that he wasn't going to get any more answers from Illi and so, even more confused than ever, he walked back out the door into the building's intersection. There was only one more door he hadn't tried and he began walking towards it, but as he did so he saw a great ravening beast lumber through the doorway. Tall, covered in grey fur, with long claws and wearing many different kinds of armor, the creature looked directly at Xephyr. Up to this point all the other creatures Xephyr had met along the way had ignored him and he'd gotten a little used to it, so this one staring at him caught him off-guard. He looked down at the jerkin and sword that Illi had given him and realized several things immediately. First, he had forgotten to put them on. Second, he had no idea how to use them properly. Third, even if the first two had not been true, he knew they would be of little use against the creature. He began to back away into Illi's room, but the monster took three quick strides across the room, held out its hand and said "Hi! I'm Ian. What's your name?"

"X-Xephyr!" stammered Xephyr, taking the large paw in his own and shaking. He was stunned. He couldn't believe that this horrible, shaggy thing was talking to him and

shaking his hand and appearing friendly, but that was only part of it. Ian's question had brought to Xephyr's mind something that had been troubling him that he couldn't quite figure out. How did he know his own name? Neve had mentioned it, obviously, and Xephyr had taken it for granted because the name sounded familiar, just as many of the other words he had heard since waking up in this strange place had. But how did SHE know? Where had he come from? The whole situation was beginning to catch up with him. Up to this point he had been content to just let things happen and take it on faith that eventually things would be made clear, but between his conversations with Neve and Illi, all the strange things he had seen, the constant mention of mysterious wizards, and now a great hairy beast addressing him like an old friend, it all became too much for Xephyr. He sat down.

"Good idea!" said Ian, and sat down, too. "Save a bit of gold by resting for a bit instead of heading right back to the pub."

Xephyr said nothing. His head was still spinning.

"You ok? Need some help?" Ian asked, with a look of concern on his face. "Oh! You have a charm bracelet! You must be new. Should have noticed it before. You really should put that stuff you got from Illi on. Won't do you any good to just carry it around with you!"

Xephyr looked down at the sword and jerkin in his lap. He hadn't had a chance to examine them in detail until now, things had been happening so fast and he had so many questions. The jerkin was made of a thin leather, well-worn but kept in good repair. Brown with clasps up the front, the vest-like garment looked as though it would be a perfect fit for Xephyr, but far too small for someone like Ian who was probably taller than Neve, except that he walked with a bit of a stoop. The sword, only about as long as Xephyr's forearm, was dull and unadorned. The sheen had long since been corroded off the blade, although it looked like someone with a whetstone had done their best, even if that wasn't very good. It looked like it might do some damage if the target didn't have any more protection than, say, its own skin. And it began to dawn on him that that was precisely what he was going to have to do. Everyone seemed to be taking it for granted that he wanted to go on an adventure, even though he had no idea why he would want to do anything like that, and it looked as though that adventure was going to be filled with foes to fight. He looked up at Ian with a mixture of fear and despair.

"What's the matter?" Ian asked. Still confused? Xephyr nodded. "Well, that's normal at first. Neve and Illi are helpful in their way, but they really can't tell you a whole lot about what this place is all about, the wizards won't let them, but we all seem to muddle through alright eventually."

"But who are the wizards? And what are we doing here?" Xephyr asked, exasperated.

"Look, have you been to the pub yet? The Flying Drunken Pirate Inn?" Ian asked.

“No. Neve told me about where it was and Illi said I should go there next. I was going to see what was in that room first, though,” Xephyr said, pointing to the northern door.

“Oh, ok. Well, let’s have a quick look and then I’ll show you where the pub is. Neve’s directions are always a little vague. And I’ll explain what I can along the way, ok?” Ian stood up and offered a massive clawed hand, which Xephyr took and was hoisted up.

They both walked through the northern door into a large, spacious chamber with a high dome. On the floor was a large white circle and all around them were several more doors, each with a faint red glow around the frame. Hovering near the circle was a large wooden board with a brass plaque fastened to it securely.

“Welcome to the Adventurer’s Guild!” the plaque proclaimed in large letters. “Stand within the circle, concentrate on the skill you would like to learn, and we will see if you have earned the knowledge.”

“You can have a go in the circle if you want,” Ian said, “but since you just got here you won’t be able to learn anything yet.”

Xephyr went over to the circle and stood within it. The white ring around him began burning with a cold, white flame a few inches above the floor. Then Xephyr heard a voice in his head saying “You do not have sufficient experience at this time.” The flames died down and the circle returned to normal. Xephyr stepped out of the circle and walked back over to Ian.

“Once you’ve had a few adventures you’ll be able to do more here.” Ian said, enthusiastically. “But now let’s hit the pub.”

The two of them left the domed chamber, walked through the intersection, back out into the city. They began a general southeast course, just as Neve had suggested, although Ian walked with much more purpose than Xephyr had been able to when he went to the Adventurer’s Hall, as if he had made this trip hundreds of times.

“So who are the wizards?” Xephyr asked.

“Well, they kinda run the place. You don’t see them all that often. They tend to stay in their workrooms doing whatever it is wizards do. Every now and then you might see one wandering around, and sometimes afterwards a whole new city might spring up, or a path that was blocked before opens up and there’s a new section of the realm to explore. They’re always dreaming up some new adventures for us or things to do.” Ian shrugged.

“So they created this place.” Xephyr said, awed. “But where did they come from? And where did I come from, for that matter?”

“Nobody really knows.” Ian looked shifty and nervous for a moment. “Big mystery. Not even the bards know for sure, and they have most of the accumulated knowledge around here.” Ian said as they turned a corner.

To the west Xephyr could see the ornate façade of the shorter building he had passed before. As he looked he saw a wisp of vapor gliding along the outside of the building and then pass through the doors. A moment later a strange creature came out, half man and half horse. Xephyr stared at it for a moment, but then it disappeared from view. He turned to ask Ian about it, but was interrupted by a puff of black smoke which appeared directly in front of them. Standing within the smoke was a creature of about Xephyr’s size wearing a long black cape over shabby clothes. It looked at them both and hissed, baring fangs an inch long, and then lunged at Ian, who narrowly dodged to his left.

“Oh for...” Ian began, but then cut himself off as he dodged the creature’s attack again. Then Ian’s voice took on a strange resonant quality...Xephyr felt he could hear it within his bones, that he would have heard it no matter where he was. “Who let out the damn vampire?” Ian asked. Xephyr began to point out that it wasn’t him and that he had no idea who it could have been when he suddenly began hearing other voices in his head...

“Where is it?” asked one.

“I was fighting it in the pub, but it ran away,” said another.

“Urtal did, but I don’t know where he went,” pointed out a third.

“Well, we’re east of the church and need some help,” Ian said in that strange resonant voice. He tried to dodge a third attack, but the vampire managed to slash at his arm, drawing a small amount of blood. Xephyr stood by in a state of shock, unsure whether he should try to help or run away. He knew he and his feeble weapon were no match for a monster such as this, but he felt as though he couldn’t just leave Ian behind like this. As he continued this internal debate, Ian reached in and managed to scratch his opponent on the arm, but was rewarded with a long gash across his chest that his armor was only partially successful in stopping. Ian reeled backwards from the blow and the vampire lunged forward again, managing to catch Ian by the forearm. Ian was much too tall for the vampire to easily bite his neck, but with a shocking display of strength the vampire yanked on Ian’s arm and sank his fangs into the veins in the wrist. Ian howled with pain, pulled his arm back, now flowing freely with blood, and began to try to run away, but was cut off as his foe once again rematerialized in front of him with a puff of black smoke. The vampire grabbed Ian by the neck and pulled him down, baring his fangs as he did so. Ian attempted to slash back, but in his weakened condition was able to do no damage, and when the fangs met the flesh of his throat Xephyr heard Ian give a small gasp and then fall limp in the vampire’s embrace. Victorious, the bloodsucking creature dropped the corpse and turned to Xephyr. Shaken from his state of horror, in which he had stood watching the short battle numbly, Xephyr began to run away, but before he could take the first step the vampire was upon him. He felt the sharp stab of the fangs in his neck, a lightheadedness, and the world began to go black. Just before his eyes closed

he saw two small creatures, the same ones he had seen running earlier, dash in with their sword and club raised high and they began to pummel the vampire. But for Xephyr it was too late. His attacker released him and his body fell to the ground.

Xephyr died.
Xephyr had a strange feeling.
Xephyr could see his own dead body from above.

Xephyr looked around. He could see the vampire that had killed him doing battle with the two newcomers. The creatures, though small, seemed to be able to handle their weapons quite well and the vampire was staggering before their assault. He once again heard the strange voices in his head...

"I found the last coffin, he shouldn't have anywhere to run now," it said.

And then it was over. With a final, crushing blow from the club the vampire crumpled to the ground and lay still. Xephyr watched in horror as they cut the heads off of the three corpses, pulled long wooden stakes from pockets in their cloaks, and drove them into the hearts. All three dissolved into mist, the vampire giving one last shriek before succumbing. Xephyr wondered what happened next. He hadn't considered the idea that you got to stick around after you died unless you were a ghost, and if he were a ghost what was he supposed to haunt? Just as he was about to lament that he'd gone from one completely confusing situation directly into another, he heard something he hadn't expected.

"Well this is just great. Thanks, guys, but who let the damn vamp out?"

It was Ian's voice. Xephyr looked in the direction it had come from and saw a pale mist floating over the area where Ian's body had been.

"It was Urtal, but we're not sure what happened to him," said the one with the club. "And there's something else. This isn't one of the usual two bloodsuckers." He bent down and picked up a flowing red and black cape and a set of dark red needles from the ground. "This one's new."

"Just what we need, a third vampire," said Ian.

"Damn wizards," spat the one with the sword. "By the way, who's your friend?"

Ian's spectral image, which Xephyr could see more clearly now that he was focused on it, turned to look at him. "His name's Xephyr. He's new here. Xephyr, this is G'real and Ungray, they're imps, but don't hold that against them."

Xephyr couldn't contain himself anymore. "Ian, what are we going to do? We're DEAD! I hadn't even figured out how to be alive here and now I'm dead? Just like that?? And Illi and Neve said I was going to go on adventures! I knew I didn't want to

go on any adventures, and I didn't even go on one and this happens?! I mean, what do we do now?"

G'real paused. "Excitable, isn't he?" he said as he sheathed his sword. Ungray said nothing.

"I hadn't gotten a chance to tell him anything yet. He just got here, and who expects a vampire in the middle of town?" Ian grouched. He turned back to Xephyr, whose ghost was floating there in a state of disbelief. "Xephyr, we're not dead. Ok, I mean, we ARE dead, but it's not important. I mean, it IS important, but...oh, hell. Look, your body has been destroyed, but you can get it back. Come with me." and with that, Ian floated off to the west.

Xephyr wasn't sure how you were supposed to move as a ghost, but he thought really hard about following Ian and he began to float off to the west as well. Behind him he heard G'real and Ungray plodding off back to the south. Ian seemed to be heading towards the ornate building he had seen a couple of times before. As he got closer he could see that it was decorated in many places with runes, sigils, and symbols. He wondered what they all meant. Ian floated up to the front doors, which were standing wide open, and on until he came to an altar where his shade knelt down. There was a sudden sound of wind and then Ian began to solidify, starting with his feet, as if his new body were being poured from somewhere. When he was finished, he stood, looking somehow weaker, as if the process had taken a lot out of him.

"Kneel down here and pray," Ian directed. "It'll only take a second."

"Pray to whom?" asked Xephyr.

"Doesn't matter," replied Ian. "Just pray for your body back."

Xephyr knelt down before the altar. He wished with all his might for his body back, but unsettling thoughts crept into his mind. Wouldn't this make him undead? How could you come back to life? And what kind of death was this, anyway? Was everyone here effectively immortal, able to die and resurrect themselves at will? It did put the idea of going on an adventure in a new context. If death held no fears, where was the risk? Well, pain, obviously. And what about the vampire? Could it come back as well? But there had been no ghost. At least not that he could see. How could you have a ghost of a vampire?

As he knelt there, with all of this swimming through his thoughts, Xephyr became aware that he was still a ghost. He tried again. Still nothing. He began to get worried. Maybe not everyone could do it. Maybe he was going to be stuck like this. He began to wonder exactly what disadvantages (or advantages, a hopeful voice said in the back of his mind) the dead had compared to the living. He didn't like some of the answers he came up with. He became embarrassingly aware that Ian was still standing there, waiting. What was he supposed to do? He wished and he wished, but still nothing happened. What was

it Ian had said? Pray. And as that word crept into his mind he felt a strange sucking feeling, as if he were suddenly in a vacuum and was being expanded in all directions. He felt the floor beneath his bare feet, a breeze against his skin, and the warmth of the room began to creep into his newly-formed bones. And then it stopped. Xephyr opened his eyes and found that he was solid once again, wearing the same thin, ragged clothes he had woken up in. He did feel weaker, but not much. Nothing that would hinder him, he felt.

“There you go, knew you could do it,” Ian said, clapping him on the back and making him stumble. “Now let’s go get my stuff back.”

They walked together out the door, Xephyr staring at his newly-reformed hands and arms. It was only a short distance back to where the attack had happened and when they got there they found Ian’s armor still lying there where it had fallen after the corpse had dissolved. Xephyr’s things, including his charm bracelet, were nowhere to be found.

“Yeah,” Ian said, strapping his armor back onto his furry chest. “That tends to happen with Illi’s stuff. As long as you’re holding onto it, it’s passable equipment, but the moment you let go it tends to go to pieces. I think that’s why he gives the stuff away free...it would just make his place dusty if he kept it. We can go back and get you some more if you want, but I’m sure we can find you something better.” He made no mention of the charm bracelet, but Xephyr had other things on his mind and forgot about it.

“I think I’d rather keep on to the inn,” Xephyr said. “And I want to ask you some more questions.”

“I’m sure you do, kid, I’m sure you do.” Ian finished putting his armor back on and they started walking back to the south. “What do you want to know first?”

Xephyr didn’t know where to begin. But after a moment’s consideration he decided to start with the thing that was bothering him the most.

“Is that likely to happen again?”

“Not really,” Ian answered. “It’s pretty unusual to find anything that dangerous here in the city. Sometimes people lure something down to the Ectorian village, but that’s pretty far away.”

“But why lure anything at all? Why put yourself at that kind of risk?” Xephyr asked, confused. He couldn’t understand why weapons and armor and adventuring seemed to be so commonplace here. It seemed much more sensible to him to just stay home, safe.

“Risk?” Ian asked, surprised. “If you can fight something in an inn, you do it. Best place.”

“But why fight at all? That’s what I don’t understand.” They reached the end of the street and turned east.

Ian looked thoughtful for a moment. “Because that’s all there is here,” he said simply. “Look, I already told you that nobody really understands where it all came from. One day there was no Heimgaard and the next there was, or at least that’s what the bards have been able to piece together. There’s talk that this is the second incarnation of this place, too.”

And Ian began to tell the story of Heimgaard, as it had been told to him by some bard in a moment of drunkenness. The story was that in the old world, of which there was almost no information, and even its existence was considered a fancy by some of the older bards, the wizards had a big fight amongst themselves. It was a dark time, lightning bolts flying everywhere, people dropping dead, banishments...even rumors of wizards being banished. It was so terrible that the god ended the world and for a long time there was no world at all. And then one day it reappeared, but not exactly like it was. Some things had changed, others had stayed the same. But there was one thing that was still true. Everybody had a choice. They could find a safe place where the monsters would not come. And many did at first. But eventually there was Rodatir, and most considered him the first adventurer. He went out into the realm and found that not all the monsters were monsters, and the ones that were could be killed. And apart from the fact that this seemed like a better idea than cowering in a cave somewhere, it dawned on Rodatir that perhaps if you learned enough magic, gained enough strength, and stored enough knowledge that maybe you could challenge the wizards themselves and find out what it was all about. After Rodatir proved it could be done, many others joined him and it became a standard practice that whenever someone new was found, they would be encouraged to go out and continue the quest to find a wizard, challenge it, and defeat it.

“That lasted about long enough for the first ten people to get zapped by lightning and then banished,” Ian said with a sigh. “People wandering off into the Government building looking for one last bit of glory after completing all the quests, but most of them were never heard from again. There are rumors that some of them were seen later, wandering the realm like the wizards do, and who knows, maybe they became wizards themselves. But these days nobody really talks about challenging wizards anymore. We still go out on adventures and try to figure things out in other ways, though. We’re all just looking for our purpose. Sure, there are still some who park themselves in the back room of the inn, but what kind of life is that?”

“A death-free one?” ventured Xephyr.

“Granted, but as you just saw, death here isn’t much more than a setback. You lose some of your abilities, and I’ll have to relearn the ones that damn vampire just took from me, but when you weigh it against a life sitting around and waiting for others to go out and find the answers that we all want? It’s really no contest.” They stopped outside a building with a large sign hanging from an iron bar that was attached to the side wall. It read “Flying Drunken Pirate Inn”.

“This is it,” said Ian. “Pub, sweet pub.”

The front door was made of thick wood with iron hinges. Xephyr noticed there was no lock. Either the establishment was open all the time or else you’d have to be a fool to try to rob it. Ian grasped the handle and pushed the door open into a scene that was the strangest thing Xephyr had seen yet. In one corner sat G’real and Ungray, passing the needles that they had taken from the vampire back and forth, taking it in turns to stare at them for a few moments before shaking their heads. At the bar was a tall, burly creature with rough skin and a loud voice. It ordered a drink, quaffed it back in one gulp, placed a few golden coins on the counter, and pushed past Xephyr and Ian on his way out the door. A number of other strange creatures, some looking like Xephyr, most not, were standing around talking. There was another doorway directly in front of them where Xephyr could see a number of people sitting around. They walked across the wooden floor, Ian’s boots thumping against the planks, into this back room.

There were more people back here, most sitting and talking, others standing. Most of the ones sitting were dressed like Xephyr in the thin, useless rags, but some had full sets of various kinds of armor on. There was a large wooden board with a few bits of paper tacked to it, and a grey, stone slab next to it. In the far corner was a staircase leading to the upper floors of the inn and to the north there was a doorway blocked by a shimmering blue field, similar to the one Xephyr had encountered in the Adventurer’s Hall. Ian walked over to the stone slab and glanced at it.

“Yep, there it is. Talk about embarrassing,” he said with a note of disgust in his voice.

Xephyr walked up and looked at the slab. There were about fifty names etched into it, and down at the bottom were the names “Ian” and “Xephyr”.

“The wizards’ idea of a joke,” Ian explained. “Whenever any of us dies it gets etched into the slab here. So eeeeeeverybody will be sure to know.”

“But who does the etching?” Xephyr asked, horrified. The notion that the wizards were keeping a tally like this worried him. It meant that they were probably keeping score somewhere.

Ian shrugged. “Magic. If there’s anything wizards are good at, it’s petty magic like this.”

“Why’s everybody just sitting around here? Aren’t they afraid?”

“Of course they’re afraid. That’s why they’re here. For some reason the monsters won’t try to kill you in here,” Ian said.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Xephyr said. “Just this room?”

“Well, there are a few others, but this is one of the few, yes,” Ian said. “Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make any sense!” Xephyr cried. “It’s so arbitrary! Why here? Your wizards just happened to make a place where we’d be safe, and they discourage us from going out by putting our names on some kind of death slab, but going out is the only way we’ll ever get any answers? It’s like they’re playing with us or something.”

“Yeah,” Ian said darkly. “That’s what we think, too. You have to understand, Xephyr, there are those who think that the wizards don’t know why we’re here, either. But unlike us, they’re all-powerful. They can change reality, create things, hell, create whole expanses of terrain from out of nothing. Now imagine what you’d be like if you had that kind of power with no clue of where it came from, and meanwhile there are these other things, these little insects as it were, and you’re bored. What would you do? They’re clearly having a lot of fun at our expense.”

And then it dawned on him. A few hours ago Xephyr had no idea where he was. He barely knew who he was and the only thing stopping him from wanting to get back home was that he had no idea where or what home was. But now he had something he could focus on. Someone was playing games with him, and even though he didn’t fully understand why, the notion that he was being treated as nothing more than someone’s little dolly didn’t sit well with him. He’d play their game, alright. But he would make his own rules. And the first step to doing that was to find out which rules you were about to break. He got the feeling that all of the questions he was burning to ask had been posed a thousand times before by a thousand other “players”, as he was coming to think of them. For now he would concentrate on the simpler questions of survival. He’d come back to the others. It was like a switch had been flipped, taking him from confused to determined and he didn’t understand it, just as he didn’t understand most of what had happened to him today, but in his newfound delerium he was prepared to go with it. What did he have to lose?

Xephyr turned and walked out of the room back into the main part of the pub. He made his way over to where G’real and Ungray were sitting, still staring at the needles they had won in combat. He sat down. Ungray looked up in surprise.

“Where did you get that club?” Xephyr asked.

“Ogres,” Ungray said simply.

“Can you tell me where I might find one like it?”

Ungray sat and stared at Xephyr for a moment and then burst out in a hearty laugh. Xephyr would not have believed such a large laugh could come from the tiny frame of the imp, but it rolled out and around the pub with such presence that several other patrons turned to see the source of the amusement.

“Kid, if you can wield it you can have this one,” Ungray said, gesturing to the club which was currently leaning against the table. Xephyr looked at it, surprised. The club was

enormous. Black, stony, and studded with small shards of amethyst. The surface was uneven and tapered from a large clubhead to a narrow point where a metal handle had been grafted into the stone. The handle was bound with a reddish leather, although it was an even bet as to whether it had been dyed with ink or blood. Probably both. Around the top of the handle were engraved strange runes that connoted the power of this weapon. Xephyr knew he was being mocked and his blood, already heated at the prospect of being a wizard's plaything, began to boil over. But rather than lose his temper, he fixed Ungray with a stare that said *Not today. But I will remember you said that.*

Xephyr wasn't sure what was causing his newfound determination, but he found the immediacy of it draining away. He still chafed at the idea of being a mere toy for some powerful being, but seeing the club and the power it possessed made him realize that he had a long way to go before he could even begin to think about wielding it. And he also realized that it would take more than just a club of obsidian to defeat a wizard. He had to prepare. He became aware that Ian was standing behind him as he pondered his next move.

"Can you help me, Ian?" Xephyr wanted to get going quickly, but he knew he'd need help.

"Help you with what? I thought you were going to stay here." Ian said with a grin on his face.

"You know what I mean. I need to know about this place and how to get ahead." Xephyr said impatiently.

Ian smirked at him. "Sure, I'll help you along. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you're going to get all big and powerful and take on a wizard. I've seen new folks like you before get all hot and bothered about it. Face down a few ogres and dragons and you'll change your tune. Just remember, however tough the monster you're fighting might be, a wizard can kill it with one bolt of lightning."

"Fine, whatever," said Xephyr, annoyed. "Let's just get going."

"Dammit!" exclaimed G'real. He had been spending the entire conversation staring at the dark red needles they had gotten from the vampire, not listening to a word anyone else had said. Frustrated by whatever he was trying to do, he flung them on the table where they landed, point down, stuck in the wood.

"What are you trying to do?" Xephyr asked.

"Evaluate them. Find out what they are and whether they're any good. But some wizard," he spat the word, "has made it just about impossible. I'm going to have to find a bard or a rogue. C'mon, Ungray." And with that, the two of them got up, Ungray shouldering his war club, and walked out of the pub.

“What did he mean by that?” Xephyr asked, all confused again. The momentary rage he had felt before had now nearly all drained away. He was still eager to get going and had no further desire to stay here, but he was calmer now...ready to begin the marathon of preparation that he knew was coming.

“Come on,” Ian said, “Let’s get going and I’ll explain everything. First, take this.” Ian handed him a small leather pouch. Xephyr opened it and discovered that it had a double handful of gold coins within. He looked up at Ian, surprised, and said “I can’t take these.”

“Yes, you can,” said Ian. “You’re going to need them. Now come on, we’ve got to stop by the shop for just a minute and then we can get busy killing some things.” Ian grinned a toothy grin.

They left the pub, abandoning the raucous din and the pungent alcoholic odors behind them, and headed west along a cobbled road. Streetlamps lined the sides of the road, some beginning to show a dim light as dark clouds drifted in front of the sun, which was low in the sky in any case. Despite the fact that he had been here several hours now, been in a short battle, died, and walked over quite a bit of the city, Xephyr did not feel in the least fatigued. No desire for sleep was creeping up on him, no need to sit down and rest a moment. He followed the loping form of Ian, who was similarly showing no signs of tiring, and whose long strides were keeping him just slightly ahead. Now that Xephyr was keen to get to adventuring, Ian seemed less inclined to answer questions, at least for the moment. Shortly they reached a building on the southern side of the road with a sign hanging out front from an iron chain that read “Lefty’s Mercantile”. Ian pushed on the door, which had no lock, just as the inn had had no lock, and walked in. Xephyr followed and heard the bright jingling of a bell that had been attached to the door frame.

Once inside, Xephyr saw two doors; one to the south and one to the west. Ian made for the western door at once, Xephyr close behind.

“This place doesn’t sell much, but what it does sell you can’t get anywhere else,” Ian said, addressing a sign on the wall. The room was deserted, but there was a counter where someone might sell from. Xephyr studied the sign, which indicated that there were about eight things for sale here including wooden stakes, torches, lanterns, and a few other items that Xephyr couldn’t identify by name.

“They sell an adventurer’s kit here,” Ian said, “but you don’t need it. You just need a few items. Go up to the counter and ask for a rod of transmutation and a monster sign.”

Xephyr walked up to the counter and announced, “I’d like to buy a monster sign.” A brief moment passed and then a door opened behind the counter and an iron golem came marching out with a wooden sign attached to a metal stake. It placed it on the counter and held out its hand. Inscribed into the palm was the number ‘10’.

“Pay it ten gold coins, Xephyr,” Ian said nervously. “It’ll stand there and wait forever, but if you try to leave it’ll jump the counter, grab you, and take it from you and it won’t be gentle.”

Xephyr counted out ten gold coins into the golem’s waiting hand. The automaton then closed its fist around the payment, turned, and walked back out through the door.

“Now the rod,” Ian reminded Xephyr.

Xephyr repeated the process with the rod of transmutation, which cost him fifty of the small golden discs. He examined his purchases. The sign was a basic flat piece of wood with a metal stake attached to it. The surface felt slightly greasy to Xephyr, and wherever he touched it his fingers left a faint impression. The rod looked at first glance like a simple, wiry twig of wood, but as Xephyr gazed at it he noticed that it had a thin coppery substance coating it. It felt brittle in his hands, but it did not appear to actually be fragile.

“The alchemists sell these on consignment through the shop,” Ian explained. “You can use them to transmute the corpses of the monsters you kill into gold. They say the alchemists can turn other things into gold as well, but they don’t advertise the fact. The wizards wouldn’t approve.”

“Turn corpses into gold?” Xephyr asked, incredulously. “But why didn’t G’real and Ungray use this on the vampire after they killed it?”

“Vampires are different. They resist the process. You have to get rid of vamp corpses the old fashioned way. Stake through the heart and cut off their head. They sell stakes here, too, by the way,” Ian said, pointing at the sign on the wall.

“But what’s the monster sign for?”

“To mark your kills,” Ian said with a toothy grin. “You write your name on it and then stick it in the ground whenever you’re about to kill something. It lets other people know that you’ve marked that monster for death.”

Xephyr used his finger to trace his name into the greasy surface. As soon as he was done the grease hardened, affixing his name to it permanently.

“Now let’s go look at the rest of the shop,” said Ian.

They exited the way they came in and turned to the southern door. Passing through, they saw a similar setup as the item shop had offered. There was another door they could access to the east. Along the southern wall, behind the counter, various weapons and armors hung from the wall. An iron golem, similar to the one in the item shop, stood nearby. There was no door for it to exit through and Xephyr got the feeling that this one doubled as salesman and guard.

“You can buy and sell weapons, armor, and other items here. Buying from here can get pretty expensive, but they’ll buy stuff from you for a reasonable rate. The golems are totally immune to anything we’ve ever tried to attack them with. They don’t even fight back, they just stand there and take it and then kick you out if you try to steal anything,” Ian said. “There’s nothing here you need or can afford yet, I’m just showing it to you since we’re here. And take a look in here.” Ian headed towards the eastern door.

When Xephyr entered the next room he nearly changed his mind about wanting to be an adventurer. There was a small creature, about the size of an imp but slightly furry, standing proudly next to a glass case. On the other side of the case stood an immense creature with four arms. Muscular, standing with a slight stoop, and filling much of the room from floor to ceiling, the monster bore no weapon and little armor. Nor did it need them. Breathing heavily, the brute shifted its weight from one foot to the other and Xephyr could feel the floorboards flex. Ian walked up and looked into the case.

“Come here and take a look,” Ian said. “He won’t hurt you unless you try anything stupid. Right, Geran?”

The short creature grinned at Ian, but said nothing. Xephyr cautiously approached the glass case and looked inside. There he saw a number of strange and exotic objects. A small orb, pulsing with lights. Every so often the lights would change color and the orb would give off a charge of energy that could be felt through the glass. It didn’t look entirely solid. Next to it was a black mass of moist flesh with white spots. The mass pulsed somewhat regularly, like a heart. Further along was a fine black steel chain shirt, sturdy and with a clawed hand clutching a heart inscribed on the front with a crimson ink. Next was a crystalline longsword, shimmering with an azure light that gave the appearance of sapphire. Lastly was a large black mace, tarnished but sturdy and fearsome. Xephyr admired them all. These were obviously objects of great power, which explained the large guard, who was looking menacingly at Xephyr as he gazed into the case.

“These are some of the most powerful weapons available,” Ian said. “These aren’t for sale, they belong to other people. Geran stores them here, for a fee, so that they can go do other things without worrying about them. They’ll be back eventually, or else Geran will auction them off after a while.”

“Why’s he need the big guard?” Xephyr asked.

“Mogh’larn is a kraan,” Ian explained. “Like I said before, the golems don’t have any aggression. The most they’ll do to you is kick you out. Kraans have lots of aggression. People only use the exchange for things that are really valuable to them, so Geran hires the guard so people will feel their things are secure.”

Xephyr looked up at the towering, hulking creature and saw that he could well understand why people would feel secure with something like this guarding their possessions.

“There aren’t many kraan in Heimgaard,” Ian went on. “They come from a faraway land that we haven’t discovered yet. To be honest we’re not looking all that hard. There’s only one other kraan that I’m aware of. Anyway, we’ve taken up enough of Geran’s time, so let’s go and get you started.”

“Aren’t we going to buy a weapon?” Xephyr asked, as they headed back into the main shop.

Ian turned north and continued towards the exit. “Nah,” he said, “no point in paying for one. We’ll get you one another way,” he said with a grin that exposed his sharp front fangs.

They proceeded back towards the inn, but passed it by when they arrived and continued on to the outskirts of the city. As they walked, Xephyr could hear just a hint of ocean surf nearby. They walked a short distance and found themselves at a rocky coastline with a lighthouse. At the base of the lighthouse was a small shack. The door to the lighthouse shack stood open, but it was dark inside.

“Ok, this is the place,” said Ian. “Now before we go in, you’re going to need a bit of light.” Ian closed his eyes for a moment and gestured with his right hand. A small globe of light emanated from his palm and began hovering over Xephyr’s head. Ian smiled. “Right, let’s go.”

The walked around the side of the lighthouse, passing by some dirty cockroaches and an old man as they went. Neither of these paid them any attention. As they came around the back of the lighthouse they saw a man leaning against the base. He looked over at them, but made no other motion. Ian walked up to the man, Xephyr close behind.

“Evening, Jak,” said Ian.

The man stood silently, regarding them with a wry grin on his face. Xephyr noticed that he had a knife in his right hand, but he was making no aggressive movements with it. He showed no sign of fear, despite Ian’s fierce appearance.

Ian returned the gaze. Then, turning to Xephyr, he said “Hit him.”

Xephyr turned to Ian with a look of incredulity. “Hit him? What’s he done to us?”

“Nothing, but he’s got something we want and we’ve got a long night ahead of us. Now hit him.”

Jak continued to stare at them, seemingly oblivious to the conversation taking place in front of his eyes. Xephyr wondered if he was deaf or mute and asked “Can you hear us?” but the man just looked at him blankly. With a sideways glance at Ian, Xephyr drew back his fist and went to punch Jak in the face, but the man dodged sideways and lunged

with the knife, catching Xephyr on his upper arm with a glancing blow. Xephyr gasped at the sting and the unexpected speed of the man, but before he could object, Ian had lunged forward and hacked the man on his shoulder with his claws. Blood flowed from the wound and Xephyr, seeing an opening, stepped forward to deliver a punch to the chest. Jak made one more swing with his knife, missed, and then Ian delivered a swift slash across his throat. Jak stood for a moment more, blood bubbling out of his wounds, and then collapsed at their feet, dead.

“Not bad. That’ll heal in no time,” Ian said, indicating the scratch on Xephyr’s arm. “Now get out your rod and give it a go.”

Xephyr took the rod of transmutation from his pocket and touched it to the lifeless form of Jak. Immediately there was a golden glow around the corpse which brightened to white. When the light faded there was a pile of the gold coins that passed as the currency of the realm on the ground next to the bent knife that Jak had been using only moments before.

“Good work,” said Ian. “Now pick those up and we’ll head into the lighthouse and I’ll explain some more about how things work around here.”

Xephyr scooped up the gold coins and grabbed the knife. It was dull and the blade was bent. The wooden handle had many notches in it and was stained with the sweat and oil from Jak’s hand. Xephyr held it in his own hand. Despite its ill-used appearance, the knife did seem to fit in his hand slightly more easily than the short sword that Illi had given him earlier. The difference was slight, but Xephyr definitely thought he had achieved an upgrade of sorts.

They walked back around to the front of the lighthouse and through the front door of the shack. Inside they were greeted by a large shaggy dog who wagged his tail in a friendly manner. Ian ignored him. The inside of the lighthouse shack was very simple, marked mainly by a staircase that led down into the darkness beneath. To the north was the doorway to the lighthouse proper. Ian formed a small globe of light above his head, like the one he had made for Xephyr, and descended the staircase. At the base of the stairs was an intersection. Doors stood open at each of the four cardinal directions. Ian selected the western door first; Xephyr followed. There they found the bloated carcass of a large sewer rat. Thinking that they had been beaten to this unfortunate animal, Xephyr stepped forward to turn it into gold when Ian stopped him.

“You don’t want to do that,” he said. “The rat isn’t what’s important here. Go up and give it a kick.”

Xephyr looked at him for a moment, and then turned back to the corpse. He looked at it more closely and even in the dim light he could see something twitching beneath the skin. Fighting an urge of revulsion, Xephyr stepped forward and gave the rat’s cold body a swift kick, ejecting a large slimy maggot. The maggot, much larger than a typical fly

larva should be, began moving blindly across the floor, trying to regain entrance to its food source.

“Kill it,” said Ian. “There are a bunch more in there, and another one of those rats across the hall. We can talk while you’re at it.”

Xephyr hefted the knife they had taken from Jak. It looked like enough to take on a simple insect like this. He moved to stab the maggot, but it somehow sensed his presence and suffered only a glancing blow. Turning around, the maggot sank its sharp teeth into Xephyr’s foot. He attempted to pull it away, but succeeded only in lengthening the gash that was forming in his flesh. Instead he began stabbing with the knife repeatedly, eventually managing to kill the vile insect. Blood flowed from Xephyr’s foot as he glared at Ian, wondering why he hadn’t warned him.

Ian returned the glare. “First thing an adventurer has to learn is that nothing starts out easy. Everything fights for its life around here.” Ian held out his hands towards Xephyr. They glowed with a faint blue aura for a moment and Xephyr saw the blood stop flowing from his wound and felt the skin begin to knit back together. In a moment the injury was completely healed.

Xephyr, now armed with the knowledge that he could take nothing for granted, gave the corpse another kick and ejected another maggot. He was about to try to stab it when Ian said to wait.

“Look at it closely,” Ian said. “Try to imagine yourself fighting it before you do. Study it. Don’t think about the other one, this one might be totally different.”

Xephyr began to feel lost again. All of the certainty he had felt before was now completely gone and questions once again swam about in his mind, preying on his conviction that he was doing the right thing. Hadn’t they murdered Jak in cold blood? Wasn’t he using these maggots the same way he was accusing the wizards of using him, as a plaything, a means to an end? He stared at the maggot, trying to get rid of the questions that troubled him. He could not afford to become paralyzed by this kind of self-doubt, he knew. He pictured the people sitting in the inn, never venturing forth, always sitting and waiting. That was not his life. He thought about his time in the church, trying to get his body back. What was it Ian had said he should do now? Study. And, just as it had in the church, as the critical word passed through his mind, the desired effect began to take place.

Xephyr saw in his mind’s eye himself, knife in hand, advancing on the maggot. He saw the maggot sink its teeth into his foot again, but this time he saw himself dodging. But in the next instant he saw the same scene play out, but this time the maggot did much more damage than its relative had a moment ago. Again Xephyr saw the fight before his eyes, this time the battle was short and in his favor. Again; the maggot was able to bite through his skin and Xephyr died. Over and over, different occurrences, different

outcomes. Finally the visions subsided. Xephyr turned to Ian and said, with a pang of embarrassment “I think we’re evenly matched.”

Ian smiled and said “That’s the second thing you should learn. Always study something before you attack it to get an idea of what you’re up against. The spell isn’t always perfectly accurate, but it’s enough to get started with. Now, get to work on that maggot. I’ll help out if it starts to get the better of you.”

And so Xephyr began killing maggots on his first day of adventuring.

As he battled the troublesome insects he listened to Ian tell about the realm. It seemed that weapons and armor were only some of the tools available to the cunning adventurer. The world was awash with magic. Offensive spells to let you strike at your foes with energy drawn forth through sheer willpower. Defensive spells to protect you and add to whatever armor you might be wearing. Adventurers could also develop their mental abilities to facilitate communication, weaken the monsters they fought, or even to assault them directly with dreadful mental attacks. He told about healing spells, which Xephyr was experiencing from time to time whenever the maggots seemed to be getting the upper hand.

The art of stealth was also practiced by certain people, sneaking up behind their foes to attack from behind, the element of surprise. The most common way of transportation was walking, but for emergencies or if you were in haste there were spells to allow you to create shimmering portals in midair. Xephyr thought of Neve while Ian was talking about the portals. You could create three kinds of portals. One for a quick one-way trip, one that would linger and allow several people to enter and return, or you could summon others to your presence.

There were four main kinds of weapons. Swords, obviously, axes or maces, polearms, and ranged weapons. Skilled adventurers could learn to wield second weapons as well. Lastly was the mysterious skill with the elements that the alchemists promoted. The ability to evoke weapons from thin air and hurl them at your enemies was useful at times, as was the spell that created an elemental storm in the immediate area, good for facing multiple foes at once.

As Xephyr finished the last maggot in the corpse, they moved on to another room where there was another one. Xephyr kicked that one and ejected yet another maggot. Ian went on to talk about what it was acceptable to kill in the realm. It seemed that there were four basic kinds of creatures. Adventurers, like Xephyr and Ian, wizards, agents of wizards, and monsters.

Monsters were creations of wizards and were put there by the wizards for adventurers to kill. The best way to tell if someone was a monster was to watch for repetitive motion. The monsters had no higher purpose, no true sentience. In truth they were not much more than golems, but they did have a survival instinct. Some were aggressive and would attack you on sight, but all would defend themselves if assaulted.

Agents of wizards were also created by wizards, but were far more complex. Most were mortal and could be killed, but doing so was considered folly and only the most accomplished adventurers would even attempt it. Neve, Illi, and Geran were all agents, or servants as Ian put it, of the wizards. There were a few others scattered throughout the realm and they were virtually indistinguishable from adventurers. There were a few clues you could look for to identify them, but generally you had to use your intuition, and use it carefully because the wizards frowned on the adventurers fighting amongst themselves.

Xephyr began to feel the rage he had experienced earlier bubbling to the surface once more. His hatred for the wizards and their treatment of their creations was increasing with every word that Ian spoke. What did they know? Why would they not share the knowledge? Did they know anything at all and just took delight in the suffering of those less than themselves? Xephyr vowed to himself that he would find out.

Lastly, Ian told Xephyr about communicating with other adventurers. Telepathy was available to those who had developed the skill, otherwise a message could be sent to someone far away simply by thinking about it hard enough. Doing this tended to upset spellcasting for a while. There was also a method of ‘shouting’ that caused everyone to hear you. This also disrupted spellcasting ability slightly and was to be used sparingly, but Ian had used it to good effect when the vampire had attacked them.

“Got all that?” Ian chuckled.

Xephyr wasn’t entirely sure he had. But he figured it would be ok if all he had to do for a while was kill these stupid maggots. He gave the corpse an especially hard kick in frustration, ejecting yet another of the slimy creatures. What made it especially galling was that he seemed incapable of learning from his mistakes. Again and again he lunged forward with the knife, and again and again the maggot bit him on the foot, sometimes hard enough to draw blood, most times it did no damage at all. But the blow was still landed and it annoyed Xephyr. Why couldn’t he dodge? He was aspiring to kill monsters on the level of the shop guard and was struggling against a few lousy insects. He’d already been healed several times by Ian, who had sat down, and had rested a few times himself and there were still more maggots left to kill. Finally, when he kicked the dead rat’s mutilated body no more maggots seemed forthcoming. Ian stood up.

“That should be enough for now. Let’s go,” Ian said, climbing the staircase.

Xephyr followed him, his annoyance with the wizards beginning to leak over to Ian as well. He was grateful for the help, but he felt too independent to think of himself as anyone’s student. He wondered why Ian had not helped him with the maggots as he had with Jak, although it was quite clear that Jak would have been a much tougher opponent than the slimy creatures he had been fighting for the last couple of hours.

They made their way back to the road and headed towards the inn, passing it by and continuing onward to the main part of the city. Turning north, Xephyr began to get a

feeling that he knew where they were going. Shortly his suspicions were proved correct as they passed through the archway at the Adventurer's Hall. They moved to the northern room with the white circle etched into the floor and Xephyr stepped into it for the second time.

The circle burst into flames a few inches off the floor, the fire cold and ghostlike. Xephyr heard the voice in his head that he had heard before, only this time it said "Concentrate on the skill you would like to learn."

Xephyr considered this for a moment. He thought of the maggots and their maddening ability to bite him despite his best efforts to dodge. He thought of the frustration he felt of not being able to move out of the way of their attacks and the agile way Jak had moved out of the way of his initial attempt to hit him. If only he could move like that it would make the maggots, and presumably whatever other creatures he would face next, easier to deal with. He needed more agility.

The voice spoke again, "You are sufficiently experienced to learn agility."

On the far side of the room, the red glow around one of the doors faded. The door opened. The ring that Xephyr was standing in broke and the cold, white flames extended themselves from the arcs of the circle, across the room, and met at the base of the door frame, illuminating a path to the door. Xephyr stepped forward and went through the entrance. The door closed behind him.

A straw golem was there. It placed its reedy hands upon Xephyr's head and Xephyr had a fleeting image of all the maggots he had slain pass before his eyes. The golem paused, its eyes glowing with an eerie blue light, and then removed its hand and turned to walk across the room, away from Xephyr. It reached the far wall and slid a small panel back, revealing a square hole. Placing its arm inside the hole, the golem stood impassively as blue ripples of energy flowed through its body into the hole. This lasted for a few seconds and when it was over, the golem pulled its arm out with a closed fist. It turned around and walked back across the room with its fist stretched out in front of it. When it reached Xephyr it opened its fist, palm upwards, revealing a tiny speck, glowing with a bright blue light. Xephyr took it, wondering what to do next. The golem had no mouth, but nevertheless mimed taking something from its hand and swallowing it.

Xephyr examined the speck. It was entirely weightless and slightly warm between his fingers. He put it in his mouth, where it instantly dissolved into nothingness. He felt a warm sensation enter his muscles for just a moment, and then it stopped. The door behind him opened and the glow faded from the golem's eyes. Xephyr could tell that nothing more would happen here. He walked back out into the Adventurer's Hall, along the fiery path, back to the white circle. The flames receded from the door frame, reforming the ring, and then died altogether leaving only the white impression of the circle on the floor.

Xephyr turned to Ian. The expression on his face must have been one of disappointment and questioning whether that was the whole thing because Ian said “It’s sometimes hard to tell the difference when you only learn a little at a time. It’s better to save up and learn more at once, but I wanted you to find out what it was like.”

“Is it like that every time?” Xephyr asked.

“The guilds do it slightly differently, but more or less, yeah,” Ian replied.

“Ok, let’s go see what good it did me and you can tell me about these guilds I keep hearing about,” Xephyr said, walking towards the exit.

Xephyr spent the rest of the night, for the sun had long since set, killing maggots, spiders, bats, and cockroaches. Ian said that when the sun came up he would take Xephyr down to the tidal pools where there were seahorses, mullets, jellyfish, and other things to kill. And while Xephyr slaughtered the next generation of insects, Ian told him about the guilds.

The beginnings of the guilds were lost in the mists of time. As far as anybody knew, they had always been there. A guild consisted of a group of adventurers who were of like mind about how they wanted to proceed in the world, both philosophically and in terms of training. There were fourteen known guilds, although most were hidden and Ian confessed to not knowing the whereabouts of most of them. The five main guilds were the fighters, the mages, the priests, the rogues, and the monks, of which Ian was a member of the sixth rank, which qualified him to bear the title of ‘seeker’. Of the remainder, Ian could hazard a guess at the locations of the druids, archers, and bards, but none of the rest. The rangers relied on stealth even more than the rogues and their guild hall was said to be nearly impossible to find. Slayers and guardians were constantly at war with one another and thus held their locations in extreme confidence, disclosing them only to potential recruits that they knew could be trusted with the knowledge. Samurai were notoriously loners and felt no need to interact with anyone. They guarded their honor above all and seemed to care about nothing else in the whole world. Of the remaining two guilds there was no clue. Alchemists and psionicists practiced the more esoteric arts which were horribly difficult to learn. They didn’t advertise their locations and few seemed interested in asking, although it was said that accomplished psionicists were among the most powerful adventurers in the land.

“In the end we can all learn the same skills and spells,” Ian went on. “But the guilds are better teachers than the golems at the Adventurer’s Hall. In fact, once you join a guild they won’t teach you those skills anymore.”

“What if you don’t join a guild,” Xephyr asked, stepping on a cockroach but not quite managing to kill it.

“You have to,” Ian said. “See, your progress is measured by the Guildmasters. The golems will still teach you things, but they seem to want to know that you’re being

monitored. It's all a bit mysterious. Which makes sense, since it was all set up by wizards."

The sun began to peek over the eastern sky, reflecting majestically off the water near the lighthouse where Xephyr had been killing cockroaches. Additionally, each roach and maggot was worth a couple of coins each, courtesy of the rod of transmutation and he now had a sizable number of the small lumps of gold.

Ian looked at the rising sun and then at Xephyr. "Let's go back to the inn for a minute, and then we'll head to the tidal pools," he said, the wind from the sea ruffling his fur.

They walked back along the path. When they got to the Flying Drunken Pirate Inn it was nearly deserted. The only one there was the tall creature with rough skin that they had seen the first time they had come here. Ian walked up to the bar and turned to Xephyr. "Up to now I've been casting healing spells on you, but the most common way to get healing is here at the bar. They sell alcohol, but they have more fortifying wares as well."

Xephyr studied the menu. Griffon roast, rack of venison, minotaur flank, eel ichor, and any number of other strange items were on it. He could see no prices and wondered aloud how to tell how much to pay. Ian rapped on the bar and a clay golem appeared from under the counter. Ian ordered a minotaur flank. The golem quickly turned, reached into a hole in the wall, and pulled out a hunk of brown meat. Turning back to Ian the golem held out its hand, palm up, where the number '24' was written. Ian counted out twenty four gold coins into the hand of the golem, who then gave him the meat. Ian tore into it hungrily.

"Should I get a flank, too?" Xephyr asked.

"A flank?" roared the tall creature, who had been watching with quiet amusement for some time. "You don't need a flank! Barkeep, get my friend here something special."

The golem turned and put its hand into one of the holes again. Xephyr was a little confused. He had never seen the golems respond to such a vague order. When the golem turned back it held its palm out to the creature, who placed a small pile of coins into it. The golem then placed a glass with a grey liquid in it on the counter. Xephyr took it.

"Urtal..." Ian began, but he was cut off by the creature's large hand coming to rest heavily on his shoulder.

"C'mon, Ian," rumbled the behemoth. "Ungray told me about him. Had his eye on Skullcrusher, and a finer war club you couldn't ask for. He's itching for adventure, one little drink won't kill him. Drink up!"

Xephyr sniffed the concoction gingerly. It smelled earthy, with a hint of a minty scent that he was unfamiliar with. It seemed to be a mixture of some kind, as he could still see

small particles floating about in the water that had not fully dissolved. He looked at Ian, who shrugged. Xephyr looked at the tall creature, whose hand was still resting on Ian's shoulder. Ian was sagging slightly under the weight. Xephyr knew he was being challenged. This creature, whatever it was, was clearly playing what it thought was a very funny trick. Xephyr filed this fact away for later, and then drained the glass in one gulp.

It was like swallowing a million tiny razor blades. The tiny particles in the drink scraped his throat on the way down and the liquid, steeped in their essence, tore at his senses. He felt slightly weakened by the experience and lightheaded. He placed the glass back on the counter, where it was cleared away by the golem, and then glared at the creature. An enormous laugh suddenly filled the pub as the great hulking beast took his hand from Ian's shoulder and clapped it down on Xephyr's.

"You're ok, kid! I'm Urtal. Urtal the field marshal of the fighter's guild. Hope you're not letting this old monk talk you into joining that lame guild! Imagine, fighting without weapons! What a laugh!" Urtal's voice was huge and nearly deafening. He gave Xephyr and Ian a hearty clap on the back, nearly knocking them both over, and then grasped a long two-handed sword and, still chuckling loudly to himself, walked out the door.

Xephyr allowed himself to cough violently for a few moments. "What was that stuff?"

"Mandrake dust," Ian replied wearily. "It helps speed up sobriety."

"What was with him, anyway?" Xephyr asked hoarsely, his throat still recovering from its maltreatment.

"That was Urtal, as I'm sure he'd like you to remember. He's made it to the eighth level of advancement in the fighter's guild, but everybody knows he's angling to be elected Guildmaster soon. He's a troll, and a powerful one, so it's just as well that you got on his good side. He does, however, have a tendency to get in over his head on occasion," Ian said bitterly, remembering that it was Urtal who had released the vampire and then disappeared.

"Are all the fighters like that?"

Ian considered for a moment and then carefully said "No. But they are similar. It's what being in a guild is all about, after all. Not all monks are like me, either, but I like to think I'm a good representative. And don't listen to him about that crack about unarmed combat. A well-trained monk can be as efficient as anyone with a weapon and doesn't have to carry the extra weight."

Xephyr nodded. The problem of choosing a guild had been weighing on his mind lately. He wondered how he was supposed to make an intelligent decision when half the guilds were so secretive that you frequently didn't even know who was a member.

“Anyway, for right now I’d recommend sticking to the raw egg,” Ian said, pointing to the menu. “It’ll help you heal faster while you’re fighting stuff. We’re going to head down to the tidal pool today, but then I’m going to have to leave you for a while.”

Xephyr, who had been studying the menu again, turned suddenly. Ian was going to leave him at the tidal pools? The fear and uncertainty that had been fading as he gained more experience in the realm suddenly came rushing back. He realized that he was fluctuating wildly between knowing exactly what he wanted to do and barely knowing his own name, but he was at a loss as to why it might be happening. All he knew now was that he didn’t want to be out in the realm by himself. “Where do you have to go?” he asked.

“I’m about to advance to the seventh level within the monks, to become an eremite. To do that I have to complete a quest,” Ian said.

“Is it dangerous?”

“Many monks before me have completed it successfully,” Ian said. His careful choice of phrasing did not fool Xephyr. He knew that that meant that some had not.

“What happens if you don’t succeed?”

Ian shrugged. “I stay a seeker until I do. I’ve done just about everything I can do without further training, so if I get stuck here then I’ll probably have to start hanging out with the people back there,” he pointed to the back room.

“Can anyone else go with me? G’real or Ungray maybe?” Xephyr asked, trying to think if there was anyone else he knew that might go. He briefly wondered if Neve or Illi might be persuaded, but then remembered that they were created by the wizards and were even more under their control than he was.

“No, I believe they’re currently exploring the Isle of Cyden. Bad place if you ask me. Some good treasure there, but not worth the risks,” Ian said sympathetically. “Look, the pools are a piece of cake, you’ll be fine. Come on, and be sure to pay attention to the way so you can get back here without me.”

Ian headed out the door. Xephyr followed reluctantly. They turned east briefly, and then began heading due south. After a short walk through the outskirts of the city, including a rather dodgy area of town that Ian said was home to the rogues, they passed into the Metsallen Essora forest. The forest was moderately wooded and had a clearly defined path to follow, so Xephyr could at least feel good about that. Most of the trees appeared to be pine, their needles a deep green and their bark rough and brown. As they continued on, the ground became slightly rougher. The path was still clearly defined and the sun shone brightly through the thin canopy that the coniferous trees formed, but roots and branches became constant obstacles. Ian loped over all of them with ease. He had explained that he was of the race of werewolf; half-animal, half human, but contrary to

rumor and some forms of ignorant folklore, they were not werewolves. Only one werewolf had ever been sighted in the history of Heimgaard and nearly everyone believed he was an agent of the wizards and had had lycanthropy inflicted upon him by them. Considering the ever-growing vampire problem, everyone was fairly content with his rare appearances.

“Ouch!” Xephyr exclaimed. He had tripped over a root in the path. Ian stopped and went back to help him up.

“Be careful, Xeph,” he said. “You don’t want to trip if something is chasing you.”

He had said it with a wink and a grin, but Xephyr didn’t like the idea that something in the pools might be chasing him.

After a time they turned east and continued through the forest, the ground rising steeply as they walked. Before long the forest ended, giving way to cliffs that stared down a a great ocean. Xephyr turned around and saw an equally expansive sea of green to the west as the forest continued on to the horizon. He looked around, but could not see any trace of Talis, even from this height. They must have walked a great distance in a short time, he surmised. He turned back to the view of the sea in time to see Ian making his way down a path in a southeasterly direction, heading towards the bottom of the cliffs. As they descended, the sound of the ocean surf became louder. Xephyr stopped for a moment and looked around. They were entering a valley with the coast to the north and a small deciduous forest to the east and southeast. To the northeast he could see the thatched huts of what could be a fishing village. When they reached the bottom of the cliffs, Ian turned to the north, towards the coast. Eventually they reached the shore, the water lapping at the sand. Between two large boulders that must have fallen from the cliffs above, there was a path that led to an impression in the rocky transition between the stone cliffs and the sandy beach. The impression was quite large, but the water was only a couple of feet deep. Ian waded into it, followed by Xephyr.

“These are the tidal pools. There’s lots of things for you to kill here, and if you think you’ve run out just dig around in the sand down there and I’m sure you’ll find more,” Ian said. “Do you remember the way back?”

Xephyr didn’t think he remembered exactly, but looking at the small fish and seahorses in the pool he couldn’t imagine he’d need to get back any time soon. There was plenty of time to figure it out. He nodded at Ian.

“Great. Well, have fun. I’m off to meet the rust monster for my quest.” Ian formed another starlight above Xephyr’s head, shook his hand, and loped off and back up the cliffs.

Xephyr looked around. He was up to his knees in salt water and could see various small animals swimming around. He hefted his knife, now even more dull and bent than it had been previously, and selected a bright orange starfish. He brought the knife down, but

with a jet of water the starfish dodged out of the way and affixed itself to his ankle, administering a stinging bite. Xephyr swore and reached down to pry the starfish off of himself, cutting himself badly with the dull knife. At last he managed to pry the tentacled creature away and stabbed it with his now bloody weapon. His blood was now flowing freely into the pool and the salt water stung horribly. He couldn't believe Ian had left him alone for two minutes and he already needed a healing spell. He knew he could just sit down and rest for a while, but that would take forever. He would need to make it back to the inn. He limped his way out of the water and between the boulders.

He looked around. The terrain was slightly rocky and though he could see the cliffs that led back to the forest to the west he could not find the path that allowed easy passage. He made his way to the southwest, but found the way blocked by a large rock that he couldn't remember passing. He turned and proceeded east a little way, hoping to go around the large rock, but the path he was on was straight and offered no way to head south and then west. He was now on the outskirts of another forest. He knew he was going entirely in the wrong direction, but he could not remember how to get back. Trailing blood and feeling slightly in a panic, Xephyr stumbled on, trying to find his way back to the pool so he could start over. He turned a corner and began heading north, hoping this was back the way he had come. Instead, he soon found himself at the entrance to a large sea cave. He saw movement in the cave, a flash of something metallic, and in his weakened condition believed it to be another adventurer. *Help!* he thought. *I can ask them for help.* He waded into the shallow shoreline and the water was quickly up to his waist. Slogging through the ocean, the floor began to rise slightly so that by the time he found himself at the entrance to the cave he was standing on a wet stony surface.

The walls of the cave muted the ocean surf, but also echoed with dripping water, creating a muffled roar that made it difficult to hear individual sounds. Xephyr called out, but his voice was swallowed by the roaring of the surf. He walked cautiously on the slippery surface, deeper into the cave, his starlight illuminating his way with a dim light that cast shadows all around him. He saw nothing else, but there was a horrible stench blowing in his face as the ocean wind swirled around in the enclosed space. Above the roar of the wind and surf, Xephyr suddenly heard a splash and turned to see the source of it, but nothing was there but a few ripples. Perhaps one of the stalactites above had fallen. Looking back he saw the entrance to the cave much farther away than he would have expected and considered heading back to it and back to the path. He turned for one last look into the cave and ran face first into something from a nightmare.

Tall with rough skin the creature at first reminded Xephyr of Urtal, and he supposed it must be a troll of some kind. But in the next instant he took in the rest of the horrible visage and knew that there was almost certainly only a distant relationship. He stepped back and looked at the monstrosity. Covered with long strands of green algae, the creature had long yellow fingernails, jagged and broken and sharp. Its muscular body took a step towards Xephyr and it opened its mouth, revealing a row of stained and crooked teeth. The troll heaved a massive arm back and swung, connecting with Xephyr's left shoulder, knocking him to the ground. His side hurt immensely and he

wondered if his arm were broken. Advancing on him to finish the job, the creature raised both fists above its head and brought them down with crushing force onto the rocky floor of the cave. Xephyr had rolled out of the way just in time and he wondered if his one lesson in agility had saved him. As he came out of the roll, however, he looked past the troll and saw two more just like it wading through the shallow water. Even if he managed to escape this one, the other two would certainly catch him. In Xephyr's head, time slowed down. His thoughts moved quickly. He considered allowing the trolls to kill him rather than wasting more energy trying to fight back. He could always be resurrected, right? The indignation rose in him immediately. Let these beasts defeat him? Never! And there was another problem. He still didn't know where he was, and Ian had told him that ghosts have difficulty communicating so he would be unable to ask anyone.

Communicating. That was it. In a moment of desperation, Xephyr concentrated on making himself heard by anyone who might possibly be of any assistance. "Help me!" he said, but the words merely bounced off the cave walls. He narrowly avoided another swipe from the troll and tried again, knowing this would almost certainly be his last opportunity. He could not be this lucky forever, especially with more enemies on the way.

"Help me!" he cried, and this time his voice took on the strange resonant quality that Ian's had done back when the vampire had attacked them. A moment later the air nearby split and a hole, bright and misty, opened. Xephyr's first thought was of Neve, but the nymph did not appear. Instead, two hands reached through the portal, grabbed Xephyr, and pulled him through. The opening closed with a snap and a bright flash of light and the Sea Skraggs roared in frustration.

Xephyr found himself in a large clearing with various bushes and shrubs scattered about it, edged by tall trees. He could hear birds chirping in the distance and a slight breeze blew through the area that contained no hint of the sea. Wherever he was, he was clearly far away from where he had been a moment ago. He checked himself and saw that his wounds, while still severe, were slowly beginning to heal. His side still hurt and his arm still felt broken, but the place on his ankle where the starfish had attached itself had clotted. He wondered how exactly he had gotten here. He remembered a glowing portal and two hands grabbing him, but where...

"Ahem," said a voice from behind him. Xephyr turned and saw a young woman. She had short, straight black hair, seemed to be about his own height and wielded a wooden longbow. She wore a set of dusty leather armor, a woolen cloak, and an expression of annoyance. She had her arms crossed and was glaring at Xephyr. "A 'thank you' would be nice," she said.

"Sorry," Xephyr said, standing up gingerly. "I didn't see you. Thank you for saving me. How did you do it?"

“I heard you shout and summoned you. I saw a sea skragg through the portal before I dragged you through, what were you doing there?”

“My friend Ian left me by the tidal pools and I got bitten by a...” Xephyr paused, “...by a shark,” he finished lamely.

“A shark,” the woman said, looking skeptical. “You must be very brave to be taking on the shark in that pool by yourself with only that little knife.”

Xephyr looked at his knife. He’d always known it was pathetic, but suddenly it looked less like a weapon and more like a piece of junk, even worse than the dull sword he’d gotten from Illi. He felt awkward and unsure of himself, whereas she was standing tall and proud and confident. He tried to tell himself that it was because he was injured, but part of him realized that a lot of it was the fact that she had seen through his pathetic lie about the shark. He wasn’t even sure why he had told it. “Can you cast a healing spell on me?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t learned enough of the magic to cast it on other people yet,” she replied. “We’re not far from the inn, though. I can give you directions.”

Xephyr looked crestfallen. “Can’t you come with me? I’ve already gotten lost once. By the way, I’m Xephyr. What’s your name?”

“Etheracs,” she said, “and no, I can’t come with you. I’m practicing here,” and as if to prove her point, she drew an arrow, fitted it to her bow, and shot over Xephyr’s right shoulder, hitting a cardinal in mid-flight. It dropped to the ground. “Yes!” she exclaimed. “I caught it by surprise!” She looked extremely pleased with herself.

“Good shot,” said Xephyr, impressed.

“Thanks,” replied Etheracs. “I’m up to the third level in the archers, that’s a fletcher, but the Guildmaster says I’m doing really well. Now, to get out of here all you need to do is head up that way,” she pointed to the northwest, “and follow the path through the woods. It’ll turn south and intersect with the main road back to Talis and then you just head straight east and you’re there.”

Xephyr thanked her and turned to limp off back to town, then hesitated. “Do you think you might be by the inn later?” he asked. “I’d like to ask some questions about the archers.”

Etheracs considered him for a moment, then said “Yes, I should be by there after I’ve practiced on these animals a bit more.”

Xephyr smiled. “Good. I look forward to seeing you again,” he said, and trudged off.

By the time he made it back to the inn, his body was aching all over. He walked up to the bar and ordered a raw egg, which made him feel better, and he could feel the bones in his arm starting to knit back together. It wasn't a totally pleasant experience, but he did feel a little better. He marched into the back room and sat down. Many people were asleep, despite the fact that the sun was only just beginning its westward trek from directly overhead. He reflected on the many strange things that had happened to him. For one thing he had been up and in combat for about three days now and didn't feel the least bit tired. Or at least he hadn't felt tired a moment ago. He wanted to stay awake a little longer and think about things, and he also wanted to be sure to be awake when Etheracs came to talk to him. He was genuinely curious about the archer's guild. But despite his determination, he felt the tendrils of fatigue creeping over him and then he was asleep.

Xephyr dreamed.

He was standing in a clearing in a jungle, the rain forest canopy high above him, but broken here by a gap in the tree trunks. High above he could see an enormous black dragon wheeling around in the sky, its wings held out straight, guiding it through the wide, arcing turn. He stood alone, wielding the sapphire longsword he had seen in the Talisian Trust Exchange, wearing a dark blue splint-vest and assorted other bits of armor. The power of his sword, evident to him even when it was behind the glass case, flowed through him. Clinging to his skin was a faint greenish glow that left an oily residue as he moved. He stared upwards as the dragon completed its turn and began to dive towards him with terrifying speed, its great toothy maw open, its eyes burning with rage.

He heard its voice in his head, *You cannot run. You cannot hide. I will find you wherever you are, and I will not rest until I have your limp, lifeless body safe within my lair.*

He braced himself for the inevitable attack as the dragon bore down on him. The dragon landed with a staggering rush of air as the wings beat the area heavily, took a deep breath, and spewed a flood of a corrosive liquid, washing the entire area with its burning acidity. Xephyr's vision was obscured by the onslaught and the scene dissolved.

He found himself in a dim corridor lined with iron sconces glowing with a pale white light. Gone were the sword and vest from his previous vision, replaced by a long black robe with a hood, pulled up over his head. He walked down the corridor and found a spiral staircase leading both up and down. He chose the ascending stairs, climbing higher into what appeared to be a tower. As he reached the top he heard a leathery flutter of wings and a strange creature dropped onto him. The wings encircled him completely, blocking even the stairs, preventing his movement, and began to constrict, crushing him. He fought for breath, pounding the narrowing walls with his fists. The creature reeled from his blows, but did not abate. The darkness became oppressive and he heard someone shouting, as off in the distance, "No! This time has passed!" The wings turned to smoke and he found himself in the corridor again, but it had changed.

Gone were the sconces, replaced by bare stone walls that emanated their own glow from within. He strode down the corridor. Doorways were on either side of him, shut and barred from within. Signs were outside them all, written in a language he could not decipher. At last he reached one that was open and went inside. There he found a gathering of people of various sizes and shapes, all cloaked and hooded. Their voices stopped as he entered and they turned as one to look at him. They were gathered around a large stone circle that had been arranged on the floor. Within the circle floated a picture of a vast land seen from high above. Forest, desert, ocean, plains. The view shifted and began to zoom in, revealing first cities and towns and then further in castles and outposts. In the desert, a palace with fifteen white spires towering high into the sky.

One of the figures waved its arm and a building shimmered into existence to the west of the palace, deep in the desert. Before its shape could be identified, though, the perspective shifted again, terrain rolling past at a sickening speed. Glimpses of small buildings dotted the countryside, but still the image flowed past until at last it stopped on a familiar edifice. The Flying Drunken Pirate Inn. Through the door, into the back room, coming at last to rest on the sleeping form of Xephyr.

A murmur broke out among the assembled figures. Xephyr threw back his hood and gazed at the slumbering figure on the wooden floor. And then he smiled.

PART TWO – *Slippery Slopes*

*A flash of green light.
An unearthly din.
A sense of falling.*

Xephyr awoke. The sensation had become familiar to him by now. In the past several weeks he had become a powerful and respected adventurer, passing many of his friends and acquaintances in skill and knowledge. He was now in the eighth level of the archers, a sniper. He had discovered ways to advance more quickly than the others, concentrating on prey that held a certain moral leaning granted him better and faster learning experiences and the golems in the Adventurer's Hall and his Guildmasters in the archer's guild had taught him well. The guardians and slayers, masters of good and evil, had known this secret for some time, and it was from them that he gleaned the hint. But those guilds were constantly at war with one another, each weakening the other's members through a series of needless deaths at the hands of like-minded monsters of the realm. It was rumored that each side had allied itself with a wizard to create more and deadlier versions of themselves to entice their foes into ever more dire situations. It was also rumored that it was the same wizard helping both sides.

Xephyr had confirmed this secret of rapid advancement for himself one night when he raided a village of gnomes. He had been studying the spells for gathering information about his opponants. He had been killing gnomes for some time, but tonight he was practicing his spellcasting and found that each gnome in the village radiated an aura of goodness. He slew them all and then, rather than proceeding on to additional kills, he

had rested and waited for them to return. For just as he was able to resurrect himself, so too could the monsters and agents of wizards. He killed nothing but gnomes for several days, each attack becoming more cold and efficient, and when he finally presented himself for training he found that he could learn much more than before.

When Ian learned of what Xephyr had done he had been appalled. It wasn't as if Ian had a particular problem with killing, but he had always detested the guardians and slayers for their single-minded eradication of the other and their refusal to deviate from it. On several occasions Ian had asked one or the other for help and been refused on the grounds that the target was not good or evil enough. Or that he himself had not been. Xephyr and Ian didn't talk much these days.

Xephyr arose from his bed, which consisted of a mattress of straw and soft leaves, and went out into the archer's guild to look for Etheracs. They had become good friends over the course of the last few weeks, but it had gone no farther by a mutual silent agreement. They teamed up in battle well, which was probably the only thing that kept them from killing each other.

As he entered the guild's main practice area, which was a glen in the forest, he saw the Guildmaster, Irra, instructing a new archer in the philosophy of the guild.

"We do not limit ourselves to mere bows and arrows," she said to the pupil, who watched with a bored expression. "Any weapon which involves projectiles, that can be used from a range, is within our domain. This includes boomerangs, bolas, certain spears, and even some magical items." She withdrew an aqua-tinted ivory wand from a pocket in her robes and aimed it at a pine cone hanging from a branch. The wand rippled and a jet of energized air shot from the tip, rendering the pine cone to tiny fibers. The student gasped and no longer looked bored.

Xephyr smiled, remembering his early days in the guild. Etheracs had indeed come to meet him at the inn later, finding him asleep, his dull knife lying by his side. She had taken it and sold it to the shop, which would normally have been considered an act of thievery, but she then went out and killed a halfling with a toy bow. When Xephyr had awoken she had given him his first missile weapon and he knew he had found his calling. They spent the rest of the day picking off cardinals and blue jays in the clearing she had summoned him to. Later she had shown him how to do the quest required for entry into the guild.

Ian had been disappointed that Xephyr had not chosen the path of the monk, but Xephyr seemed so happy with his decision that he had not made a point of mentioning it. It wasn't until Xephyr began to kill only good creatures that Ian had made a fuss.

"What are you going to do if you find an evil creature that has something you need?" Ian had asked, heatedly.

“Find a good creature that has something similar,” Xephyr had replied. Both of their voices had been raised in this conversation for quite some time. Etheracs had left them to it a while ago, muttering to herself about lost time.

“Some evil creatures hoard power!” Ian had screamed. “They collect it, it’s in their nature. There’s only one Chaos Orb, Xephyr! And this being evil all the time is going to corrupt your mind.”

“Who needs the Chaos Orb? I’ve nearly unlocked the secret of the Bow of Fiery Doom! I thought monks didn’t like weapons in any case!” Xephyr was sick of this argument. They had had it before, several times. In all the previous cases they had both turned their backs on the other and stormed off, but then the next day they were invading the mountain of Alrekr and killing the four warlords within, or wiping out the giant ants south of the village of Vynd. Neutral enemies each time. And days would pass like this until Xephyr suggested going to the temple of Ix or Ian wanted to kill the slayers in Bloodfast and then it would all start again. He sensed this time would not end quite the same way.

“We don’t, but that’s not the point. You’re not a monk, you’re an archer. It’s your duty to find the weapons that will best assist you in your goals,” Ian said calmly.

“And which goals might those be?” Xephyr asked, returning to his favorite topic. “Every day we go out there and kill things, and for what? To be a plaything for a wizard. You know they’re watching us. For weeks I’ve been looking for some clue as to why we’re all here and so far I’ve found nothing. Nothing! I’m telling you, we need to be gathering our strength and our allies and go up to the Government building and have it out with them.”

“And get incinerated with a lightning bolt? Don’t you remember what I told you back in the beginning? No matter how tough the monster you’re fighting might be, a wizard can kill it with one bolt,” Ian said, exasperated.

Xephyr’s rage had been building throughout the exchange. They had reached the point where there was nothing left to be said. They had made their points and now it was time to make everything crystal clear and be done.

“I’d rather be banished than be a puppet.”

And that had been it. Ian still nodded at him when they met at the inn, but as friends they were basically finished. Xephyr regretted the loss, but he was managing just fine with Etheracs. He didn’t need Ian. His words about his mind being corrupted by his evil tendencies were just talk. Evil had brought him power. Evil would bring him more power. It was why he had advanced to the eighth level of proficiency so quickly while Ian was still languishing at seven, an eremite. And after today, Xephyr would be taking the tests for the ninth level. He would soon be an artilleryist.

Having not found Etheracs in the guild hall, and having upset himself with unpleasant memories, Xephyr stalked out of the area. He cast his thoughts around, searching for her. He had taken a few lessons in the art of using his psyche at the Adventurer's Hall and was now skilled at using telepathy for communication. He was still having trouble with projecting the disruptive energy that this skill granted, and he wasn't even close to being able to use a true mental assault, but he preferred the elemental strike spells anyway. Finding no trace of Etheracs he assumed she must be asleep. He began the walk to Talis to pick up his equipment from the exchange. He found it a nuisance to use the service, but equipment left out while the owner was asleep tended to corrode mysteriously or get stolen by rogues. Another little jest of the wizards, he felt sure, and a costly one, for he had much to do today and this detour was a nuisance.

He tried to calm himself. He had been on edge for several days now. He concentrated on the beauty of the Metsallen Essora forest, the calm, the tranquility. A soft breeze blew through the area and he heard the whisper of pine needles and leaves brushing gently against one another. As he approached a crossroads in the path he fancied he could hear the ocean surf nearby. All of these things had a calming effect on him. He would have plenty of time to get to the shop, retrieve his belongings, and keep his appointment with Llelinduur.

A short time later he reached the shop. He opened the front door, knocking the small bell and causing it to jingle merrily, and stepped into the exchange. Geran was there with his massive kraan bodyguard.

"Morning, Geran," Xephyr said brightly. "How's business?"

"Good morning, Xephyr," replied Geran. Geran was a wizard's agent, one of the links between the mortals and immortals of the realm. He was not technically a monster to be killed, but he was still a wizard's creation and as such was held in distrust by Xephyr.

"I've come to pick up my bow," Xephyr said simply, dispensing with any further small talk. The only wizard's agent he had yet met that was any good at it was Illi, who seemed to be a breed apart.

Geran studied the glass case for a moment. "Which bow would that be?"

Xephyr stepped over to the glass case and peered inside. He was looking for a mahogany bow that he had taken from Alaek, a hero of the village of Vynd. It had been a difficult battle because the coward had run back to the village where all the inhabitants had leapt to his defense. He didn't see the bow in the case. He looked up at Geran with fire in his eyes.

"Oh, yes, the mahogany bow, I remember now," said Geran with a smile. "I auctioned it off about an hour ago. I'm afraid there were no buyers, so it has gone into the general inventory." The policy was that the exchange would hold things for you, for a fee, for a

few days but not indefinitely. If you didn't come back in a timely manner to pick up your things, Geran would auction them off to the highest bidder.

"You auctioned my bow?" Xephyr screamed. All the peace and tranquility he had built up in the forest now came tumbling down. He stepped back and raised his arms, preparing to cast a blast of fire at the halfling, when Geran coughed and pointed. Xephyr looked and saw Mogh'larn, the kraan, with one of his four arms poised over Xephyr's head. Mogh'larn didn't say much, and it was said that he could not speak any language but the mysterious kraan tongue that was shared by only one other creature in the realm, but the message here was clear. Cast that spell and you will die. Xephyr could not afford the setback that a resurrection at this level would cost him. His first death had been a mere nothing, but he had died a few times since then and as his power increased, so did the cost of returning from the grave. Xephyr lowered his arms, gave a stiff bow, and retreated.

"Nice doing business with you!" Geran called after Xephyr's retreating figure.

Xephyr stormed out of the shop, slamming the door behind him. How dare he! He scanned around for Etheracs again, but found nothing. Lazy, good for nothing... he stopped. This wasn't productive, he reminded himself. Etheracs was his friend and he would need her and more if he wanted to mount an assault on the Government building.

He looked up at the sun. His appointment with Llelinduur was not for a few hours. He had time to get a new weapon and a familiar before he went to the bard's guild. Quickening his pace, he reentered the Metsallen Essora and walked due south for quite some time. His thoughts strayed, as they often did when he was forced to walk long distances by himself, to the question that had dogged him since the first day he had awoken here. What was it all for? And was there anything else? Everyone talked about banishment as if it were the worst thing that could happen to you. Those who had been banished were never seen again. There weren't even corpses or charred places on the ground. He had heard stories about the early adventurers who had challenged the wizards. Ian had told them as often as possible, thinking that they would dissuade Xephyr from his stated mission. They had had the opposite effect.

The stories stated that the brave, or foolhardy, depending on who you asked, had gone into the Government building demanding answers from the wizards, insisting on equal treatment, and an end to, or at least an explanation of, this seemingly senseless way of living. In every case the hooded wizards had stood listening to the warriors silently, as those who brought the grievances grew more and more enraged until inevitably one of them would attack. At that point one of the wizards would merely raise his arm and a bolt of lightning and a crack of thunder would come down from the skies, striking the attacker dead instantaneously. Nobody had even made it as far as landing the first blow yet. Then, when they went to the temple to regain their bodies, the wizards had followed them and once they were whole again banished them from the realm. They simply disappeared.

Only a handful of banishments had ever been witnessed. After the first few it took the edge off the zeal of those who wanted to get their answers by force. Ian had been quite clear on that point. But Xephyr had a plan.

He reached a turn in the path and redirected his footsteps to the east. He was nearly there.

Xephyr had studied all the old stories in great detail. Today's would not be his first meeting with the Master Bard. Llelinduur was not the guildmaster, he was an agent of the wizards, but he was also the final arbiter of which bards had proven themselves worthy of advancement. When a bard was prepared to move to the next level of study, he went to audition for Llelinduur, who used ancient magic to allow everyone in the realm to hear the song. When it was over, the mortals would be allowed to vote on the song's quality. But in the end, Llelinduur had the final say. He was as old as the guild and had deep knowledge, but would not give it out freely. He would answer your questions, but would not volunteer information. Xephyr had some questions he very much wanted to ask.

During his past visits to the bards, Xephyr had pored over transcripts and logs of the past assaults on the Government building and was nearly certain that those efforts had failed not because the wizards were truly immortal, but because proper preparation had not been taken. The fools had gone to have a discussion and had been goaded into an impromptu attack by the wizards' insufferable silence. After they had made an example of the first few by banishing them, there had been no more attempts. Everyone was afraid. Except Xephyr. He felt he had nothing to lose.

At last he reached his destination. The Angler's Inn, a small pub in the village of Fusa. Xephyr pushed the door open and entered.

The inside of the pub smelled of fish. It always smelled of fish. The village was situated near the southern coastline of Heimgaard and thus there were always fishing boats coming and going. Fusa was a major competitor of Vynd, the other fishing village to the north, but had the advantage of being a much older settlement. Or disadvantage, depending on how you looked at it. Many of the fishermen were quite old at this point, and many of the younger men had gone to Vynd in search of fresher waters. Xephyr found the usual assortment of bar patrons here. He ignored them and proceeded north into the inn's back room, and then up the stairs to the guest rooms.

He walked south along a lengthy corridor, open doors on either side of him, until he reached the one at the end of the hall. Not bothering to knock, Xephyr went in.

"Hello, Sonya," Xephyr said pleasantly.

A woman looked up at him. "Hello," she said. She was short, as one might expect the daughter of a dwarven king to be. Wearing a deep green tunic and furred boots, she looked as though she had just arrived from the cold, snowy mountains, but Xephyr knew

he could find her here at any time...unless she were dead. He had killed her before. It unnerved him the way the monsters could just reappear and galled him that they never seemed to suffer any ill effects from their deaths. They didn't even have ghosts. He scanned the room quickly. No monster sign. Good.

"Give me the knives, Sonya," he said. It had never worked yet on any monster in the history of Heimgaard, but he always felt like it was worth a try. Sonya stared at him blankly.

Xephyr raised his hands and cast his spell. A beam of pure light lanced from his fingertips, striking Sonya squarely in the chest. She responded by drawing a set of black throwing knives from her pocket and hurling one at Xephyr, which sliced into his arm as it went by. Once the knife hit the floor it dissolved and reappeared in Sonya's hands. Xephyr had never worked out how that happened, but it worked for anybody who used them so it must be an intrinsic property of the metal they were forged from. Xephyr sidestepped another knife and blasted Sonya with another spell of magical light. He wished he had his bow; his unarmed combat skills were lacking, despite Ian's continued insistence that he should study them more. Typical monk. Xephyr moved across the room to get a better position and let loose with another light lance, which Sonya neatly sidestepped and then let fly with another knife. This one caught Xephyr with a direct hit to his stomach, passing completely through his body, leaving a gaping hole. He reeled from the blow and his blood flowed freely onto the wooden floor. Cursing, Xephyr concentrated on his spell of healing. His hands glowed with a strong blue aura and the wound closed and the blood clotted, although there was still a nasty raw area on his skin and his guts felt like they were on fire. He fired another blast of light at Sonya, scoring a glancing blow, and ran out the door as another knife found a place in his left leg.

Xephyr limped down the corridor. When he got to the stairs he pulled the knife out of his calf, where it dissolved in his hand, no doubt to reappear back in the dwarf's possession. Weakened, he made his way back downstairs. The card players in the corner paid him no attention as he passed through the back room into the pub itself. There he ordered a flagon of pure water from the golem bartender. One of the reasons Vynd had not completely supplanted Fusa as the predominant fishing village was because of the healing properties of the water. In some ways it was more potent than the healing draughts you could get at the Flying Drunken Pirate. He cast another healing spell on himself, ordered two more flagons of the magical water, and pronounced himself fit to rejoin the battle.

The scene repeated itself two more times before Sonya finally succumbed to Xephyr's magical onslaught, falling heavily onto the floorboards. Grumbling about the amount of time the battle had taken, Xephyr touched the cooling body with the rod of transmutation and then scooped up the small pile of gold coins and the throwing knives, leaving her armor. It did not fit him and he had no time to return to the shop, so he would leave it here for someone else to find. As he was about to leave, he heard the floorboards above him creak, as if a great weight were being moved about on them. Above him, he knew, was Moth'gotra, the only other kraan in the realm of Heimgaard. It seldom moved, so someone must be in combat with it.

These suspicions were confirmed as Xephyr reached the stairs at the end of the corridor and nearly ran into an elf carrying two swords and a large sack.

“Sorry,” said the elf. “That kraan is bad news and I’m a bit unsteady.”

Xephyr thought about Mogh’larn, who was easily twice as big as Moth’gotra, and reflected that it could be worse.

“True! Very true!” said the elf. He was wielding two swords, one a hilt with a crackling electric blade, a magical weapon that Xephyr thought was very unreliable but which was in fashion amongst some of the other adventurers these days, the other a gleaming darksteel shortsword, but what caught his attention was what was on the elf’s left hand. A silver ring with many interlocking bands that Xephyr had never seen before.

Xephyr grabbed his arm. “Where did you get that ring?”

Stunned, the elf tried to pull away, but Xephyr held him tightly. “U-Urtal sold it to me. Said he got it from a city in the desert.”

“There is no city in the desert,” Xephyr said.

“Maybe there is now. Someone said they thought they saw a wizard when they were on their way to Alrekr,” trembled the elf.

Xephyr released him and the elf fled down the stairs. His armor and his wielding two swords indicated that he was probably a samurai, and as such wanted to get away from Xephyr as quickly as possible. Samurai held to a strict code of honor that stated that if they died they must avenge the death by killing their killer. Having another adventurer on your list was considered a bad omen.

So, Xephyr mused, a new city in the desert. He added a question to the list he already had for Llelinduur.

He left the inn and took the path through the forest north for a while before turning west. He pondered this new development. Up to now the desert had been pretty barren with only a few scattered items of interest including the Citadel of Torlen and the vast mountain of Alrekr. A whole new city might include any number of secrets to be discovered.

Xephyr made his way through some underbrush, moving aside a branch that was in his path as he went, and then turned north. There he saw the drawbridge that led into the Ectorian village, which was currently raised. He walked up to the moat and called to the guard in the guardhouse. The guard looked up, nodded to Xephyr, and lowered the drawbridge. Xephyr walked across the thick, sturdy wooden planks and into the farming village.

Founded by Sir Ector, who still resided here, the village was small and overlooked by a large castle. The castle gates had been barred for as long as anyone could remember and nobody knew what might be inside. Right now that wasn't on Xephyr's mind. He turned left and found himself in the castle mews. The falconer that was normally here was gone, which Xephyr had mixed feelings about. He cared little for the falconer, but needed the falconess who was supposed to be in the next room. He walked through the doorway separating the two rooms and found what he was looking for.

The room was lined with cages, each cage containing a large bird of prey. The smell of their feathers and droppings filled his nostrils and there was a soft cacophony of squawks and assorted other calls. The falconess stood there alone. She wore protective leather clothes and a heavy falconry glove, but those were useless to anyone not interested in training birds. She also had a golden necklace with a large gem.

Xephyr decided to dispense with the useless pleasantries and instead threw one of his black knives at her, while at the same time casting a lance of sonic energy at her. The falconess sidestepped the knife, but took the lance's full force. Lunging at Xephyr, she scored a punch to his jaw while making a series of high pitched sounds, calling her birds to her assistance. A large falcon and a powerful hawk swooped into the room, screeching, their talons seeking to rake across Xephyr's face. He deftly dodged both attacks and continued his assault on the falconess, hurling another knife in her direction and managing a small slice across her left leg while sending another blast of sonic energy her way, which buckled her knees.

She recovered quickly and rolled across the floor, knocking Xephyr's legs out from under him. Her avian companions saw the opening and dove for Xephyr's arms as he flailed them, trying vainly to keep his balance. Latching onto them with their talons, the birds gouged his arms deeply and the blood flowed freely. Xephyr shook them off, snarled, stepped back, and threw yet another knife at the falconess, this time embedding it deep in her chest. She cried out and her blood oozed out of the wound, covering her leather costume with a slick, shiny sheen. Xephyr took advantage of the opening to send more sonic energy her way.

Her life energy clearly ebbing away, the falconess made one last attempt at attacking Xephyr, but missed. His next knife found her gut and she fell over, dead. Xephyr took a moment to heal himself, his hands glowing with a faint blue aura, and then turned his attention back to the raptors who were still trying to peck him with their cruel beaks. He changed focus and blasted one with fire, setting its feathers on fire. The bird shrieked, but continued the attack. Xephyr took careful aim and sent a throwing knife through its body, plucking it from the sky. With only the falcon left, Xephyr made quick work of it and turned all three corpses to gold. He then turned his attention to the falconess's necklace.

Held by a gold chain, the centerpiece of this necklace was a large gem. He pried it from the chain and held it in his hand, discarding the rest. Then he turned and walked out of

the mews and across the courtyard to a small house. He entered the house quietly and saw a young woman in the room with her back to him. She was the farmer's daughter and she wore a flowery dress, but Xephyr cared about neither of those things. The room was spartan at best with a cot and a rug being the primary objects within. He crept into the room, trying not to disturb the girl who was dusting the bedframe. Taking the extra time afforded him by arriving undetected, Xephyr lined up his shot. He truly wished he had a real bow right now as the knives could sometimes be difficult to control properly, but they also had the ability to do severe damage.

The girl began to turn. Seeing his opening about to pass by Xephyr flung a knife at the girl, catching her completely by surprise. The knife had flown true and struck her high in the chest, passed through, and exited on a downward angle through the middle of her back. She gasped and fell to her knees, her dress now slowly turning crimson. She made a feeble attempt to fight back, but Xephyr, eager to have this battle over, cast a sphere of pure shadow which crushed her with its dark energy. Xephyr turned her corpse to gold, but left the dress. He was proud of himself. He had only learned to cast a sphere a few days ago and still failed the attempt more often than not.

With the girl out of the way, Xephyr rolled the carpet back to reveal an indentation in the floorboards. He had done this many times before and was beginning to find this part of the process a nuisance. He placed the gem in the indentation and the floorboard slid back to reveal a hidden compartment. Reaching in, Xephyr extracted a small corked vial with a bright red liquid within. Taking his prize, he left the house and began walking east.

The grounds within the village all belonged to and were protected by Sir Ector and stretched out to the east, beyond the official settlement. Xephyr passed by some livestock as the houses changed to fields and then the fields changed to forest. Here at the entrance to the Forest Sauvage, Xephyr took out his pouch of gold coins.

The forest was a maze, and the magic that set up the maze kept it in a constant state of change. Adventurers had gotten lost in the forest on more than one occasion and had to either portal their own way out or ask the realm for a summon, which was always an iffy prospect. Those experienced with its winding ways had learned a few tricks. Xephyr stepped into the forest and found himself at the first intersection. Here he dropped one gold coin. He then walked east for several paces and found himself at another intersection, where there was one gold coin on the ground. He had traveled in a circle.

Xephyr tried north next and found an empty intersection. He dropped two gold coins on the ground and tried north again. This time he found himself back outside the forest.

He reentered the maze and eventually found the correct directions. He was glad to be nearly through with this process. This forest unnerved him, despite the fact that the woods had always previously been a haven for himself and other archers. No breeze blew here, no forest creatures scampered about, and no birds flew. The thick growth prevented travelers from advancing in any direction but the ones dictated by the maze.

That, coupled with the unnatural stillness within the maze, gave Xephyr a sense of claustrophobia.

He found himself facing a man in full armor, crouching over an injured beast that nobody had ever really been able to identify. Neither spoke nor moved. The beast was small, only a few feet long, brown with short hair, and seemed to be suffering from some ailment, although no outward injury could be detected. Various adventurers had tried healing spells, but the only thing that seemed to work was the vial of potion in Xephyr's hand. He uncorked it and poured the contents over the beast's idle body.

The effect was nearly instantaneous. The small brown creature leapt to its feet and began racing around the small forest clearing. The man stood up and said "You have cured my beast! You must have a reward!" He reached down and lifted a small pouch that had been hanging from his armor, opened it, and removed a small spotted egg. Wordlessly he handed the egg over to Xephyr and then, calling to his now-cured pet, retreated further into the forest. Xephyr turned and navigated the maze back to where he had started.

Having performed this errand, Xephyr hurried back to the mews. Finding the area still deserted, he opened one of the cages that was lined with an insulating layer of straw and blankets and placed the egg inside. He waited a few moments and then the egg began to shake, as if something were trying to break out through the shell. And then the egg practically exploded. Growing at an alarming rate, the falcon chick burst through the sides of the eggshell and attained full adult size in a matter of moments.

Xephyr opened the cage, patted the bird on the head, and thought *Pesiel*. And that was the falcon's name and Xephyr could now communicate with it as he would any other person. Xephyr loved his familiars. A magical bond existed between them, certainly, but for Xephyr it was more than that. He always let them go when he was ready to sleep, his reward to them for their loyalty, but also his reward to himself because it meant he would get moments like this, moments of bonding and love.

Xephyr walked out of the mews, *Pesiel* taking flight and soaring high above. *Pesiel* would go where she pleased, but would always return at Xephyr's request until released. He checked the sun and realized he would have to hurry to make his appointment with *Llelinduur*.

He scanned once more for *Etheracs* and finally located her. "About time you showed up," he sent to her.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she replied.

"Where are you?" Xephyr asked, hoping she would be near *Talis*. He could save himself a lot of walking if she were.

“Outside the Flying Drunken Pirate,” she sent back. “Do you need a summon?” she asked in a mocking tone.

Xephyr frowned. She’d never let him forget the way they had first met. He waved and concentrated on forming the gate and a misty portal shimmered into existence. He stepped through and found himself back on the familiar cobblestones of Talis, just outside the inn. The gate snapped shut behind him with a flash of light.

“No, thanks,” he said to Etheracs, who was standing there with an annoyed expression. “I’m heading over to the bards guild to meet with Llelinduur. Do you want to come?”

Etheracs scowled. She was probably the only person in the realm who hated wizards as much as Xephyr, but she hated their agents more. Xephyr had tried to explain that they couldn’t help where they had come from...it wasn’t their fault that they were a wizard’s creation, but Etheracs was deaf to these arguments. They raised troubling questions for her, she had said. Xephyr remembered the argument all too well.

“Look, Xephyr,” she had said exasperatedly after an hour’s discussion of the topic, “they’re not like us. Some of them have been killed before and they have no ghost, they’re no better than the golems in the shops or the gnomes you love to kill so much.”

“We don’t know that,” Xephyr had countered. “We don’t know anything, that’s why finding the wizards and making them tell us is so important. Some of them have free will, I know they do. Look at Illi, he hates wizards.”

“It would be just like them to make one that hated them,” Etheracs had said with a sneer. “They love that kind of power. To create something and make it hate itself for where it came from? Sounds like a wizard to me. I don’t believe for a minute that they have any free will at all.”

“Then how do you know that we do?” Xephyr had countered.

“Because we’re not like them!” Etheracs had cried in frustration. This question had clearly been asked of her before and was a sore subject. “We have ghosts, we don’t have repetitive motion, we can have actual conversations that don’t have to stick to a single subject. Have you ever tried to talk to Illi about anything besides weapons or armor? He doesn’t have a clue!”

And the argument had proceeded from there, neither of them convincing the other of anything at all. Surfacing from his memory, Xephyr realized that he didn’t want to have this discussion again today.

“Llelinduur has information I need. If I have it, I can decide for myself whether to trust it. If I don’t, I have nothing. I’m going,” he said with an air of finality.

“Fine, go talk with your automaton, see what I care. I’m going to go down to the Temple of Ix and practice,” and she turned her back on him and stalked away towards the southern path through the forest.

Xephyr turned as well, but in the opposite direction, and began to head west towards the plains. She was right, of course, he admitted grudgingly. He had no way of knowing whether Llelinduur was going to tell him the truth about the questions he wanted to ask. But hadn’t he given Xephyr permission to go through the official records? And weren’t those records written primarily by bards who were not beholden to the wizards? Of course he was right as well, there was no way of knowing whether any of them truly had free will. A wizard’s creations could have any amount of ability to behave as though it had free will. Illi was a prime example of one who acted as though he was completely his own gnome, whereas it was common knowledge that Geran was only one step above any old dumb monster.

As the cobbles changed gradually to the grassy plains, Xephyr continued due west. Being able to gate to Etheracs had been a big time saver, but he could have done without the argument. Why couldn’t she realize that information was important no matter where it came from? It was up to them to interpret and judge what to trust, not to blindly ignore it because of the source.

Up ahead Xephyr saw an unwelcome sight...a scarred orc. The orc was squat and powerful and carried a flail with a bone handle. He wore a tunic with the symbol of an hourglass eye. Greknuk wasn’t aggressive, but had a mindless hatred of elves and would buttonhole people traveling in the plains to ask if they had seen any recently. Xephyr had no time for this, but couldn’t kill him because of his evil tendencies.

“Urgh!” called Greknuk, his standard greeting for anyone he wanted to talk to.

“Hello, Greknuk,” Xephyr said wearily. He glanced at the sun. He really had no time for the orc today.

“You seen elves, tasty elves?” the orc grunted. He reeked of old, stale blood and his previous meal was spattered across his barrel chest. Xephyr tried to hide his revulsion, but the orc didn’t seem to care.

“I saw one earlier today, Greknuk, down by Fusa. If you hurry you might catch him,” Xephyr said, hoping that this false lead would get Greknuk out of his hair. The elf was certainly long gone by now, so he felt no remorse for selling him out.

Greknuk grunted frustratedly. “Fusa too far and go through forest.”

“Elves live in the forest,” Xephyr pointed out. “It could be a bonanza for you.”

“Too many! Too many!” Greknuk wailed. “Tasty elves gang up on poor Greknuk!”

Xephyr stole another look at the sun. Llelinduur was notoriously picky about his appointments. If you missed one by even a short amount, he'd call it a day and get back to reading the old songs, thanking the stars for his newfound time alone. If Etheracs had been here they could have just killed him, but there was no time for that now, even if they hadn't just had another argument. Then inspiration struck. *Pesiel, return*, Xephyr thought, and almost at once the falcon came swooping into the area and landed on her master's wrist.

Greknuk looked taken aback. "What that bird doing here?"

"This is my familiar, Greknuk. Her name is Pesiel," Xephyr said, stroking the feathers. *Go west* Xephyr sent to his familiar. With a great flap of wings, Pesiel took off and headed due west. "Oh, and there she goes, I'd better get going, too."

"No!" roared Greknuk, "You stay here and help me find elves!" But it was too late. Xephyr had cast the spell and the misty portal had opened. Xephyr stepped through just as Greknuk made a grab for him and arrived next to Pesiel, who was still in flight. The gate closed with a flash of light and the falcon settled on Xephyr's shoulder and they continued on together.

Xephyr hurried through the plains, approaching the Haral Talikar mountain range. He would not be going quite that far, but the mountains served as a kind of landmark for finding the hidden guild hall of the bards. He turned south and the plains became more rocky and covered with large boulders as he approached the shadow of the mountains. At last he saw it...a small cave near a fissure. He ran in, remembering the first time he had been here. The cave only looked small from the outside.

Inside was a vast cavern lined with towering bookshelves. The accumulated knowledge of the bards, who had as their mission the gathering of all information to be had about the realm of Heimgaard and its inhabitants. Tales of great deeds, quests undertaken, and treasures seldom seen resided within the leather coverings of the tomes on these shelves. Xephyr had often considered quitting the archers to join the bards, but knew that his skills with a bow would need to be at their maximum if he were to have any hope of assaulting the Government building, and the bards were not known for their weapons skills. Still, he wished he could read every book in this vast library. Thusfar he had read three.

In the center of the large open space held a place for a small fire. Magically lit and kept burning by seemingly nothing, the fire kept the entire structure warm despite the cruel cold winds that blew down from the nearby rocky peaks. Standing next to the fire, in his accustomed place, was Llelinduur.

Llelinduur was tall and lanky with a long mane of blond hair that he traditionally kept tied back in a loose ponytail to keep it out of his eyes while he went over the songs of other bards. Clad in flowing green robes with deeper green trim he looked very regal as he bowed to receive Xephyr into the guild hall.

“Good afternoon, Xephyr,” he intoned with a voice that was slightly melodic and laced with harmonic overtones. “Have you reconsidered my request to come and audition for us?”

Xephyr grinned. Llelinduur always greeted him like that. “No, sir, I’ve come because I have an appointment to talk with you about some of the lore.”

“Ah, yes,” said the elf. “you want to know more about the wizards, I take it?”

“Don’t I always?”

“Yes,” said Llelinduur with a weary sigh, “you do. Constantly. I begin to worry about your little obsession. Is it not enough that you have easy access to food and drink? That you have adventure with little or no risk of personal injury? Yes, you are mortal, but your mortality costs you nothing more than a setback of your skills.”

Xephyr paused. This was totally unlike Llelinduur, who normally encouraged him to look over the books as much as he liked. Had the wizards exerted their influence on him? Was he that close to an answer?

“Are you not comfortable here, Xephyr?” Llelinduur asked kindly.

Xephyr’s brow furrowed. He had not come here for this, had not hurried across the plains, argued with Etheracs, nearly gotten into a battle with Greknuk to be asked such childish questions. Of course he wasn’t comfortable. He had awoken here with no knowledge of where he had come from, what he was doing made no sense, but the alternative was too boring to contemplate. He felt trapped, every minute of every day and he could not escape even in sleep because his dreams were filled with images of terrible dragons and scheming wizards.

Llelinduur sighed again. “I can see that you are not. A pity. I am sorry, Xephyr, but I cannot answer your questions today. And despite what I know you think, the wizards are not forcing me to say this. They are, however, growing restless.”

Good thought Xephyr. Let them fear me.

As if reading his thoughts, Llelinduur went on, “They do not fear you, Xephyr, but they have no desire to banish you either. Every adventurer they banish weakens their power, for what good is absolute control if there exists nothing to wield that control against? They will banish you if they must, but you must ask yourself what good you will have done the realm if you allow that to happen.”

“I’ll have let the adventurers know that there may be more to this life than what we take for granted every day,” Xephyr shot back. “I’ll become a martyr if I must, a rallying point for every race that yearns for something more than this mockery of life. Am I

comfortable here? It would be so easy to become all too comfortable, because how do you appreciate life if it's never at risk?"

Xephyr's mind was ablaze with thoughts of hatred for the old elf. He couldn't believe it. Etheracs had been right. He spun and began to stalk out of the guild hall.

"Stop," Llelinduur said. It was not a command, it was not even a suggestion, it was merely a word. But the harmonics of his voice coupled with the hope that still lingered in Xephyr's heart that he had been right, that Llelinduur could be trusted, worked their influence on him. He stopped, but did not turn.

"As I said, I cannot answer your questions today. But I will give you information you need nonetheless," Llelinduur said.

Xephyr turned to face him. Llelinduur had taken a small bone flute from a pocket in his robes. He played a short tune on it and a young bard came from the secret rooms behind the main guild hall where none but bards were allowed to go.

"Cantas," Llelinduur said, "sing for Xephyr your new song."

Cantas cleared his throat. He was obviously nervous, having just joined the bards. He was a giant, standing several feet taller than Xephyr or Llelinduur, but he stooped in an effort to make himself look smaller. He wore a brown leather vest over a thin woolen shirt and baggy pants. Having just joined, he had not yet earned the privilege of an instrument, and began to sing acapella.

*The desert, o the desert,
Barren wasteland of the north,
Has 'til now had nothing
For those who would go forth,
But a secret now has been revealed
With geometric timing,
A threat to our dear Heimgaard
Our fates all intertwining.*

*Seek you the city in the sand,
With towering spires, with palace grand,
But all you see there may not be certain.
Be sure to look behind the curtain.*

Cantas finished, bowed, and left the way he had come.

"That's it?" Xephyr asked, annoyed. "You called me back for that? I already knew there was a new city in the desert. Heard it from an elf before I came here."

“Indeed?” Llelinduur asked, unconcerned. “Did he tell you that there was a secret there? That a new threat has emerged? To explore carefully? If our advice is unappreciated, you can be certain it will not be offered in the future.”

Xephyr hated this about Llelinduur. He had the upper hand through superiority in knowledge and loved to flaunt it. “Fine. Thank you. I don’t suppose you have any more to tell me, like what the secret might be or what the threat is?”

“No,” said Llelinduur simply.

Xephyr turned and marched out of the cavern. The desert. He was going to have to explore the damn desert. Xephyr had only been to the desert once before. He’d gotten lost and died in the heat. The slab in the inn had merely said ‘severe dehydration’, which made it even worse than usual. He thought of that every time he went to the mountain of Alrekr to slay the warlords there, but he had gotten directions from Ian for that trip and so he hadn’t explored the area at all. He thought about returning to Fusa to buy a load of the water they sold there, but he realized that wouldn’t help. It would be too heavy and he would need his weapons and armor. Which reminded him, he needed something besides these throwing knives to go exploring with.

Xephyr sighed. His self-imposed quest seemed never-ending. He was tired and frustrated. Why couldn’t Etheracs and Ian see that this was the only way? Rapid advancement, gather information from as many sources as possible, and then assault the tower. Deep within Xephyr’s brain, the seed of evil began to bud. Who needed them? Who needed anybody?

Xephyr concentrated for a moment and a misty portal appeared in front of him. He stepped through the gate and arrived in a small, dark room; the attic above the Flying Drunken Pirate Inn. A small grue skulked there, but Xephyr paid it no mind. It had served its purpose as a target for his portal. The gate snapped shut with a flash of light and Xephyr descended the staircase.

“Pesiel, stay here in case I need you, ok?”

The falcon settled in the back room of the inn and looked attentive.

He left the inn and crossed the city’s main square to the bank, where he withdrew several thousand coins, and then proceeded to the shop. He looked at the available inventory and finally discovered what he was looking for: a dark copper bow. Made of a special copper alloy that allowed it to be flexible enough to serve as a missile weapon, the bow also had a string made of twisted metal and was small and light. It had a special property infused into the copper that gave the wielder periodic extra energy for spellcasting. He purchased it for the exorbitant sum of nearly eight thousand coins and looked over the rest of the wares. Nothing else seemed to fit his needs, or his body, and so he sold his throwing knives, wielded his bow, and walked out of the building.

Once outside he sent a telepathic message to Etheracs, *Meeting with Llelinduur is over. I'm heading into the desert.*

A misty portal opened beside him and Etheracs stepped out of it.

“Sounds fun,” she said. She had been busy while Xephyr had been with the bards. She now wielded a transparent crystal longbow that shot arrows of pure light. She was also dressed in a finely-wrought chainmail shirt and silver sollerets.

“Poor Gorrok,” Xephyr said, admiring her armor.

“Hey, that’s what he gets for trying to impersonate a real person,” she said with an evil grin.

They turned north and headed out of the city into the burning sands of the desert. This was the nature of their relationship; they fought well. Against the monsters of the realm or against each other, the only real difference was whether they used real arrows. And even after their most brutal arguments, they were always willing to take out that aggression on a mutual enemy.

An hour later they were still trudging through the dry desert sands. Xephyr thought he had seen a bright flash of blue light to the northwest and so they were heading for it, but it had been momentary and was gone now. The arid air whipped around them, getting sand in their eyes and chapping their lips, but they went on. Xephyr had left Pesiel waiting in the pub so that if they had to gate back they could. Neither wanted to do so until the very end of need, however, because gating back was all well and good, but if you wanted to find what you were looking for, you’d eventually find yourself right back where you were before you conjured the portal and you’d have to backtrack. Neither of them had mastered the magic sufficiently to keep the portal open for more than a few moments, but Xephyr was making a mental note to study more when he got back. At last, Xephyr got an idea.

“You wait here. I’ll gate back to Pesiel and get a drink. Then I’ll gate back to you and you can gate to Pesiel and then gate back to me,” he said, brushing sand off of his face.

Etheracs looked as though she’d rather not be left alone, but she nodded. Xephyr opened the misty portal and stepped through, the gate closing with a bright flash of light. When Etheracs could see again, she was not alone.

Standing next to her was a tall, dark elf. Lean and tough-looking, the elf was wearing light armor and carrying a small dagger. Etheracs jumped back.

“Hello,” said the elf. “Are you lost?” She smirked.

“No,” lied Etheracs. “It’s just that it’s a long trip and my friend went back to freshen up. He’ll be back in a moment. Who are you?”

“Are you looking for Taba? I can show you where it is,” the elf said smoothly, fingering the hilt of her dagger. Etheracs quietly weighed her chances. She felt that she could probably take the elf if she were in good health, but right now she wasn’t in good health and it would be an iffy prospect. She would have to stall until Xephyr got back. So far the dark elf hadn’t made any aggressive movements, despite her threatening manner.

“What’s Taba?” asked Etheracs. “And what are you doing here? Dark elves normally prefer the underground, don’t they?”

“Normally,” the elf said, “but these are not normal times. Taba is a city. It’s over there,” she pointed, “and it has many fabulous treasures.”

Etheracs considered this new information. The elf was clearly a rogue. The lean, sinewy build, the dark, light armor, and the conniving attitude. She was also clearly a wizard’s creation, although it was difficult to tell if she worked for them or was merely their slave.

“What sorts of treasures?” she asked, innocently.

“That would be telling,” the elf said with a small laugh. “But I will tell you this. In the city there is an old, blind orc. He has something I need, but he won’t give it to me. Bring it to me and I will tell you about the pyramid, and perhaps give you the key.”

It was still unclear whether the elf was an agent of the wizards or not, but Etheracs distrusted her immediately. These little quests were always trouble. She had to get rid of her before Xephyr got back because he would blindly follow her into whatever trap she had in store.

“Sounds like a fair deal,” Etheracs said carefully. “My friend probably won’t like company, though. He likes to be alone with me.” Etheracs suppressed her real feelings for the idea of being alone with Xephyr. “Tell me your name and we’ll find you when we have the object you want.”

The elf looked at Etheracs suspiciously, but said “Very well. My name is Nim.” And with those words, the misty portal signifying Xephyr’s return opened and he stepped through. The portal closed with a snap and when they could see again, Nim was gone.

“Ah, much better,” Xephyr said, clearly refreshed. “Now your turn.”

Etheracs conjured her own portal back to Pesiel and stepped through. Xephyr sat down on the hot sand and waited for her to come back. Ian had been in the pub when Xephyr had gotten there. He had tried to get Ian to come along with them, but he said he was busy showing a new monk what it meant to be a student of the guild. They had glared at each other for a few moments, but they hadn’t argued. Xephyr supposed that was progress. A misty portal opened and Etheracs stepped through.

“Feel better?” Xephyr asked.

“Much. Let’s try this way,” Etheracs said, indicating the direction in which Nim had pointed. Xephyr stood up and they began walking.

After a short time, they began to see cliffs on the horizon. As they got closer, Xephyr recognized them as the cliffs that marked the transition between the plains and the desert. He had been here before, but a long time ago. They kept on.

At last the cliffs neared and they could make out a small figure on the horizon. As they approached, they could see that it was a human, like them, and wielding a large axe. They hoped it would be another adventurer, but their hopes were dashed as they realized it was just a mindless creation. But, having not seen this particular one before, they supposed they were on the right track to the new city.

They passed many more as they continued on. Etheracs ground her teeth. If there was anything she hated more than an agent of the wizards, it was these abominations that were nothing more than fodder but tried to pass themselves off as adventurers. She wanted to kill them all as they went forth, but their desire to get to the city overrode that impulse. All the creatures they passed were babbling about wanting to get away from a pyramid. Etheracs still hadn’t said anything to Xephyr about what had happened while he was away, and didn’t plan to. Especially after hearing these monsters talk about the pyramid. If Xephyr knew there might be a key, he’d be sure to want to go straight to it, and it was just as sure that it would be a trap.

They reached the end of the line of travelers. There was, as Etheracs liked to think of them, a hunk of meat dressed as a samurai there. It was another dark elf, Etheracs noticed, and she wondered how many of the usually underground creatures they would encounter ahead. He carried two swords, one long and curved, the other short and dull. Xephyr stopped and stared at him for a moment.

“Let’s kill this one,” Xephyr said.

“Why? What’s so special about him?” Etheracs had never studied much of the art of lore, but Xephyr’s time with the bards had taught him its value. The ability to learn secrets about your enemies seemed wise to him.

“He’s hiding something. I don’t know what yet, but I think it has to do with those swords.”

“Fine,” said Etheracs, glad to finally be able to get out some of her aggression. She drew back on the string of her bow and an arrow of light appeared. She let it fly and the arrow pierced the samurai through his chest, just right of where his heart would be. The arrow dissolved and the samurai sprang at Etheracs, defending himself with his two swords. She dodged out of the way and Xephyr fitted his copper bow with an arrow of his own and shot him in the left leg while at the same time sending a lance of acidic energy at his

significantly weaker foe. The dark elf cried out, but Etheracs sent another arrow straight into his gut, bringing him to his knees. Blood gushed from the wound, as the arrow dissolved into pure light once again. Their enemy made one last slash with his sword, nicking Etheracs on the shins, but another blast of acid from Xephyr finished him. The elf fell to the ground and lay still. Xephyr transmuted his corpse into gold, scooped it up, and grabbed the two swords.

He studied the longer one first. Curved steel and finely crafted, the weapon showed signs of being forged using an ancient craft. It was decorated with many fine sigils, indicating great honor of the wielder, and had a wooden handle, stained red and wrapped with a single green cord.

“This is nothing,” said Xephyr. “Although if he was the original owner, I’d be very surprised.” He tossed it away and turned his attention to the other sword.

Finely made and showing signs of a beautiful and noble past, the blade was now covered with scratches, as if someone had tried unsuccessfully to sharpen it.

“This sword was cursed,” Xephyr said at last. “It’s dull, but not because it was used a lot. Some samurai did something very dishonorable with this sword and now it will never be sharp again.”

“Then what good is it?” Etheracs asked.

“Possibly none. But a wizard made this and it’s not just your standard weapon. There may be more to it. I’m holding onto it,” Xephyr said, putting the sword in a large sack he had been carrying.

They looked ahead and saw another vast expanse of desert before them, but to the north northwest they saw the glitter of sunlight reflecting off of something. They knew they were still heading in the right direction. They went on into the wastes of sand, spying the occasional sidewinder or black scorpion, but paying no mind to either. Just as they thought they might have to gate back to Talis again, they saw the front gates of the city.

Tall and white and invitingly open, the gates of Taba rose from the desert floor majestically. Xephyr and Etheracs walked up to them, glad to finally be somewhere they could possibly find shelter from the scorching desert. As they passed through the gates, they could see that everything in sight seemed to be made of some kind of glass, tinted purest white, making the city difficult to look at in the bright sunlight. Their eyes soon adjusted and they began to make a more detailed survey of their surroundings.

They saw a large reflecting pool to the west, just inside the gates, which was odd considering the city’s placement in the desert. Beyond the pool rose a grand palace with fifteen spires, and Xephyr gasped, remembering his dream. There were many side streets off from the main courtyard, and to their north they could see a small tent in amongst the

other merchant stalls. They looked at each other for a moment, then headed for and entered the tent.

Inside they found a counter with a sign indicating that there were refreshments that could be purchased here. There was also an old woman sitting on the ground. The sign said that they could buy Camel Spit, Scorpion Legs, Apricot Juice, Sidewinder Steak, or Gila Monster Fillet. They were more thirsty than hungry, but thought the Camel Spit sounded disgusting, so they both ordered an Apricot Juice. Then they turned to the old woman.

Her dry, aged skin and her dusty attire spoke of long years living in the desert. She did not look at them, nor did she speak. She just sat there, and would have appeared dead were it not for her breathing.

“Hello, I’m Xephyr and this is Etheracs. Who are you?” Xephyr tried, by way of introduction. The woman did nothing to acknowledge their presence. The golem behind the counter who had served them was also characteristically mute.

“Must be just a regular old monster,” Etheracs said. “Come on, let’s go.”

They walked out of the tent and turned west, with the reflecting pool on their left side. After a short time they found another side street that led to the north and followed it as it curved back to the east. The path led to a merchant’s stall, but it was unoccupied. Among the wares was a large wicker basket. The lid was closed, but the basket seemed to move slightly as they stared at it.

“I’m going to have a look,” Xephyr said, approaching the basket. He gingerly poked the basket with his bow and it let out a slight hissing noise.

“I think we should go now,” Etheracs said. The whole city was making her uncomfortable, especially with the spires of the palace looming over them both. Xephyr had told her about his dream and she was nervous about it. She wanted to overthrow the wizards as much as he did, but she also smelled a trap. The wizards must know what they were up to; they were everywhere and could be invisible, watching your every move.

“Almost done,” Xephyr said. His curiosity got the better of him and he reached out to the basket. There was a sharp hissing noise that startled him and he accidentally knocked the basket over, revealing sixteen large, hissing cobras and a small silver flute. Xephyr jumped back, but one of the snakes was faster than he was and lunged for him, planting its long fangs into his leg. Howling with pain, Xephyr tried to move out of the way, but two more of the serpents struck, their bite and their poison hitting him like a brick, and he fell down. He lashed out with his bow, but was rewarded only with three more bites on his forearm. The venom flowed through his system, weakening his body and mind, confusing him, and tightening his throat, constricting his breathing.

All this happened almost instantaneously. Etheracs only hesitated a moment, but in that moment Xephyr had sustained six bites from the large snakes. She took aim with her bow and loosed an arrow, picking one of the reptiles off, but the others were slithering towards her. She had not studied her offensive magic enough to strike multiple targets, so she fired another arrow, skewering yet another of the snakes, but in that time three of the snakes had bitten her on her legs. She fell to her knees from the burning pain the toxin sent through her bloodstream. Xephyr lay on the ground, unmoving, but his ghost had not yet appeared so he was not yet dead. Etheracs tried to conjure a gate to Pesiel, but the venom had fogged her mind and she was unable to complete the magic.

Sensing that their only escape would be on foot, back to the tent with its healing foods and drinks, she staggered to her feet. The cobras were all around her, hoods flared, hissing. They had stopped biting Xephyr because he had stopped moving, but Etheracs knew she couldn't leave him there. She lunged toward where Xephyr lay, taking another four bites for her trouble, and used what remained of her strength to help him to his feet. Once moving, Xephyr seemed to have enough energy to walk with assistance, and together they hobbled back down the path that led to the reflecting pool. The cobras followed them only a short distance before giving up and began slithering around aimlessly.

They both knew if they died here they would have to walk back to the city to resurrect themselves; ghosts could not cast portals or any other spell. They had to make it back to the tent. They stumbled along, their breathing short and ragged, nothing keeping them going besides the pure force of will that is the survival instinct. They passed an old, blind beggar who rattled his tin cup in their faces, but they pushed by him and on down the street. At last, the fire in their veins nearly unbearable, they reached the tent and hastily ordered more Apricot Juice. This restored some of their energy, but they could feel the toxin stealing it away again almost immediately.

Xephyr concentrated on the healing magic that removed poisons, but his clouded mind was having trouble recalling the spell. His hands glowed with a faint red aura, but the poisons remained, working their harm on both their bodies. Etheracs began to gasp for air.

"Looks like you need some help," croaked the old woman, sitting nearly forgotten on the floor.

Xephyr looked at her through the haze of oxygen deprivation.

"Two hundred coins and I'll clear that right up for you," she said.

Xephyr, nearly unconscious, reached slowly for his coin pouch. He did not know what was controlling his actions at that time; it seemed to be an automatic response. He fumbled the pouch, spilling gold all over the tent floor.

“I suppose that’s sufficient,” the woman said, trying to hide her amusement at the situation. She counted out two hundred of the small discs and then her hands glowed with a strong red aura and Xephyr found himself fully awake and aware on the floor of the tent. He immediately grabbed some of the remaining coins, bought another serving of Apricot Juice, and turned to Etheracs. Xephyr’s hands glowed with a strong red aura of their own and he magically removed the remaining venom from her body. Etheracs collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

“Thanks...” Xephyr began, but the woman was no longer looking at him. She was exactly as they had found her when they were in the tent the first time.

“She won’t hear you,” said a voice near the entrance to the tent.

Xephyr looked up and saw the old, blind beggar that they had pushed past before.

“Sorry we were so rough with you a minute ago,” Xephyr said, but the old man waved him off.

“Happens all the time. I keep telling the guy who runs that stall to keep a tighter lid on those snakes, but he’s immune and won’t listen to me. Says they’re good security.”

“What’s up with her?” asked Xephyr. He didn’t bother to point since the old man was blind.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the old man, rattling his tin cup a little. Xephyr took the hint and put a couple of coins in the cup. The old man brightened up at the sound of the clink of gold. “She’s lived here as long as anybody can remember. Nobody knows her right name, but she knows the dangers of the desert backwards and forwards. Sidewinders, scorpions, even those cobras, she knows all about poison, so we just call her Auntie Venin. She mostly just keeps to herself these days and doesn’t do much unless someone comes in like you just did, dying from snakebite.”

Xephyr considered this. It was unlike wizards to put beneficial things in the paths of adventurers. Just then Etheracs awoke.

“Oh, my head,” she groaned, rolling into a sitting position. “What happened?”

“We got saved by her,” Xephyr said cautiously. He knew Etheracs wouldn’t take this news well. But as it happened, he was surprised.

“Oh,” was all she said. “Who’s this?” she asked, indicating the beggar.

“Nobody in particular, miss,” said the beggar, rattling his tin cup. Etheracs looked at Xephyr, who shrugged. She put a few more coins in. The beggar brightened up once more.

"I'm just a simple beggar, but I know a few things about this city and its surroundings."

"What can you tell us about the pyramid?" Xephyr asked, eagerly.

"The pyramid?" the beggar said, with a twinkle in his milky white eyes. "I can tell you it should be left alone, but I know that'll just make you want to go there more. No, it's a terrible place with a terrible guardian, but that's about all I can say. You could ask Ovin."

"Who is Ovin?" Etheracs asked, a sinking feeling developing in her stomach.

"Well, he's blind like me, but unlike me he's a psionicist. He knows lots about the pyramid, if you ask nicely," said the beggar, rattling his cup again.

"Where is he?" asked Xephyr, putting in a few more coins.

"Round about the southwestern side of the city square you can find a street that leads to where he is normally to be found," said the old man.

"And how will we recognize him?"

"Oh, he'll recognize you, no doubt," said the old man, cryptically, "but if it helps, he's an orc."

And Etheracs found she knew exactly who he was and had a suspicion she knew why he knew so much about the pyramid. She cursed to herself and hoped that Xephyr wasn't about to get them both killed.

They thanked the beggar kindly and set out across the city square, walking around the reflecting pool. Xephyr stopped for a moment and considered taking a free drink, but when he stooped to scoop the water into his mouth, he saw a pair of beady eyes staring back at him from beneath the water's surface. Not wishing to get distracted from talking to Ovin, Xephyr chose to leave the water alone.

Continuing on, Xephyr began to take in more of the sights of the city. Merchant stalls seemed prevalent, and there was even one merchant who had taken his wares with him and was selling from a tray strapped to his body, although the food seemed questionable at best.

"There's something funny about this place," Etheracs mused.

"Like what?" asked Xephyr, staring up at the spires of the palace.

"Like the fact that there are no seams anywhere. In Talis there are cobblestones, but there are also sections with slabs of stone, but they're all fitted together from smaller pieces. Here everything is all one."

Xephyr looked around him and discovered she was right. One fixture in the city flowed directly into the next, almost as if the city had been carved rather than built, but it was hard to imagine anyone carving glass like this, not to mention the scale of such a project. They walked past the stairs that led up to the entrance to the great palace. Even the door was made of the glass-like substance, although the hinges did show evidence of being separate pieces.

They continued south past the palace and onto a short street. There were fewer merchants here, but there were a few small stalls. At the end of the street, shrouded in rough, light brown robes, was a squat figure with a hood. As they walked towards it, the figure threw back its hood revealing an old orc, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“Hello, Xephyr and...Etheracs,” said the orc. “You are looking for me.”

They stopped. They had both had dealings with psionics before to some extent, but it was always disconcerting when they greeted you like that. At least this one had remembered to speak aloud.

“Hello, Ovin,” said Xephyr. “We’d like to ask you...”

“Yes, yes, you want to ask me about the pyramid. Everybody does,” said the orc, irritably. “But I have a question for you first. Which pyramid?”

“There’s more than one?” Etheracs cried.

The old orc grinned. “Oh, yes. There’s the Greater Pyramid, which is fairly easy to find, and there’s the Lesser Pyramid, which is...not so easy.”

“Which do you recommend?” asked Xephyr.

Ovin paused for a moment. “For you?” he asked. “Neither. However, since you have the sword and seem determined, you might want to visit the Lesser Pyramid.”

“Figures he wants us to visit the one that’s more difficult to find,” scoffed Etheracs, with her usual contempt for wizard creations.

“If you recall, I advised that you visit neither one. I doubt you will find the Lesser one at any rate. Nim has been trying for quite some time with no success.” The orc paused and turned his sightless eyes on Etheracs. “How much did she offer you to kill me?”

Xephyr turned to Etheracs. “What’s he talking about?”

“Nothing,” said Etheracs, but she was just slightly too quick in her denial. Xephyr gave her a harsh stare. “Ok, ok,” she said, “when you gated back to Talis she just popped up

from out of nowhere. She says he has something she needs and if we give it to her she'll give us the key to the pyramid."

Ovin laughed a throaty, choking laugh. "She'll give you the key? The only thing Nim ever gave anybody was a dagger in the back. I have something she wants, yes, but anything she might give you in return is only going to be to further her own ends. Perhaps she'll try to trick you into killing the Guardian."

"What Guardian?" Xephyr asked, his anger growing. He couldn't believe that Etheracs had held out on him.

"Don't be too angry with your friend, Xephyr, she had your best interests at heart," said Ovin. "And as for the Guardian, I wouldn't worry about that. It's beyond your skills, I assure you."

"Tell us about this artifact. Why does Nim want it so much?" Etheracs asked.

"She wants it because she is a rogue," the orc said, implying with his tone of voice that Etheracs had asked a very simplistic question. "Rogues desire power and profit and little else. This item would provide her with both. It can detect that which is unseen and provides a channel for mental powers."

"And what's to prevent us from taking it from you, whether we give it to Nim or not?" asked Xephyr. He was growing tired of being mocked by the old orc.

"I do warn you," Ovin growled, "that in my prime I was a powerful psionicist. I am not unprotected. I have gazed into the minds of others, I have projected my mind to distant lands, and I have even attempted to foretell the future, which is how I lost my eyesight."

Xephyr had heard enough. He drew back his bowstring and let an arrow fly directly at Ovin's chest. But, in a surprising turn of speed, the orc reached into his vestments and drew forth a small crystal. It glowed for a moment and the arrow's path was altered slightly, causing it to pass through Ovin's loose robes, but missing his flesh. And then Xephyr felt a crippling pain enter through his mind. His knees buckled, he felt slow and lethargic, and he felt weak. He drew back the bowstring again and fired, but the arrow had little momentum behind it and merely glanced off the orc's thick hide. Etheracs let loose with an arrow from her crystalline bow and managed to score a direct hit in Ovin's chest. The orc reeled and then cast a focused beam of disruptive energy at Xephyr.

Xephyr's hands glowed with a strong blue aura as he cast the healing spell upon himself. He still felt weak and pain coursed through his limbs, but he managed to stand up straight and fire another arrow, this time embedding it in Ovin's left arm. He felt a tingle as the copper alloy granted him energy and he put it to good use, casting a freezing lance at the orc. Etheracs followed up with a blast of pure fire and another arrow of light for good measure. Ovin sagged, but rallied quickly with another blast of disruptive energy from the crystal.

Xephyr and Etheracs let fly with new arrows simultaneously, both finding their mark in Ovin's stomach, causing the old orc to collapse to the ground, where he lay unmoving.

Xephyr went over and transmuted the corpse to gold, but left it for Etheracs to pick up. Instead, he grabbed the crystal the orc had been holding. It was the only item he had had on him. Xephyr examined it closely; it was rough and translucent with an unfinished texture. A skilled jeweler would no doubt have been able to make it into a fine example of crystalline beauty, but to do so might have diminished the arcane powers that clearly were within.

"Ok," Xephyr said, "I know what to do. Now we just need to figure out where to do it." He winced. Despite the orc's defeat, the pain had not abated. Xephyr knew that there were prayers he could say that would make it go away, just as there were prayers that would shield him from harm and make him a more fierce fighter, but he had always shunned that training. It disconcerted him that he didn't know who he was praying to. Priests had told him that it didn't matter, that it was protective magic provided by the gods, but Xephyr couldn't shake the idea that he might be praying to wizards. So he would wait for the psychically induced pain to go away on its own.

"What now?" asked Etheracs.

"Cantas, the bard, sang a song about looking behind a curtain. Let's try to find that," replied Xephyr.

They walked all over the city. They saw a swarthy merchant with a large turban, another selling apricots, but no curtains. Everywhere they went, someone tried to sell them something. Xephyr asked one or two about where curtains might be found, but they merely looked at him blankly. At last they felt they had covered the entire city.

"Why don't we try the palace?" Etheracs suggested.

"Why? Is there something else you haven't told me?" Xephyr said, disparagingly.

"I apologized for that, there's no need to keep bringing it up. And no, there's nothing else," Etheracs snapped back. She was getting tired of Xephyr's constant carping. He didn't used to be like this. She wondered if maybe Ian had a point about his evil alignment affecting him.

"Fine," said Xephyr, frustrated, "let's try the palace."

They reached the western end of the reflecting pool and ascended the few stairs up to the palace gates. The doors stood open and Xephyr wondered idly if you slammed them if the glass would shatter. The interior of the palace was magnificent. The ceiling towered above them and tapestries covered the walls from top to bottom, several stories high. Immense columns stood at four points in the room, supporting the entire weight of the

rest of the palace above them. Various statues were scattered about the floor, each depicting noble heroes and valiant acts. The tapestries must have had some magical quality to keep them from stretching as they hung from the high ceiling, and the artwork depicted on them was dominated thematically by blood and fire, ancient evils and powerful good.

In the center of the room was an enormous spiral staircase that rose high above them and disappeared into a hole in the ceiling, presumably leading to the vast spires that towered up from the palace's base. Amongst the statues, Xephyr and Etheracs saw two guards on opposite ends of the room; a dwarf and a golem. Vast riches must have been spent to create a golem just for the purpose of being a guard. The guards made no motion to hinder the two of them as they walked through the chamber. Past the staircase they could see a magnificent golden throne, currently unoccupied, atop a platform that could be reached by a small number of stairs. In the southwest corner, they saw sunlight seeping in from outdoors and detected the unmistakable aroma of camels.

"Do you suppose these tapestries are what they meant by curtains," wondered Etheracs.

"Who knows? They're bards, they love to make things harder than they have to be," grouched Xephyr. "I don't know if searching through them is such a good idea with those guards here. They're not doing anything so far, but they could if we start touching things."

"We could kill them," suggested Etheracs.

Xephyr shook his head. "We don't know enough about the place yet. I don't want to go attacking things and have twelve more guards come assist them. But I do want to have a look at that throne."

They cautiously went up the steps, keeping an eye on the guards just in case. Xephyr wondered if he could open a portal to Auntie Venin just in case they needed to make their getaway without having to go all the way back to Talis. But the guards made no motion to stop them at all and they soon found themselves before the throne of Taba.

The throne itself was a fine example of craftsmanship. At its base it was wood, but it had been inlaid with so much gold that the wood was barely in evidence at this point. Patterns of gold within gold gave the seat a strange shimmer and gleam. But what occupied most of their attention was the tapestry behind the chair.

Like the others around the room, the tapestry bore designs of vivid colors and unpleasant imagery. But in amongst the usual patterns there was one clear image; a vast pyramid, depicted behind the palace, and on top of the pyramid an immense firebird, its wings stretched forth, embracing the city itself protectively. The detail was impressive to say the least; Etheracs found that she could nearly see the flames of the phoenix moving, licking the city's walls, and then it dawned on her.

“Xephyr...this city...it was created from the sand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at this picture. See how the phoenix is shown with its wings out around the city? The whole city is glass, melted sand. Someone used this phoenix to melt the sand of the desert and molded it into the entire city. That’s why there are no seams! It’s all one piece!”

Xephyr looked at the picture. He tried to imagine the kind of power it would take to not only control a creature as free-spirited as a phoenix, but also to mold and craft an entire city from melted sand. He thought of the spires, rising high into the desert sky, the reflecting pool, and the simplistic layout of everything around him. The city had been preplanned and designed to accommodate merchants who would bring their own shelter, their own stores.

They stood in awe for a few moments and then Xephyr broke the silence.

“Do you feel a breeze?” he asked. Before she could answer, Xephyr had looked over his shoulder at the guards and then twitched aside the tapestry behind the throne. There was a short tunnel, at the end of which was open desert. They looked at each other, then at the guards again, and ducked into the opening.

When they emerged, they saw a flat expanse of sand that looked as though it went off a short distance and then plunged out of sight. They walked forward cautiously and then they saw it. Just the tip at first, but as they continued on it grew until at last they were standing at the top of a large dune, at the bottom of which was an enormous black pyramid.

A four-sided construction, its walls tapering to a single point, the pyramid dominated the landscape. Its black sides absorbed all the surrounding sunlight with little reflection, making it seem like a hole in the world. The sand around it was hard packed, not loose; not quite glass, but the heat from the dark-colored material was fusing the sand grains together slowly over time so that they did not shift under their feet. They proceeded slowly down the slope and soon found themselves at the base of the structure.

“Now what?” asked Etheracs.

“Now we look for the Lesser Pyramid,” said Xephyr, looking around.

“But there are so many.”

And it was true. The heat reflecting from the sun off the sides of the pyramid and the sand was causing the air to ripple, casting illusions and mirages, confusing the eye. There was not just one Lesser Pyramid, there were hundreds of them, shimmering and waving all around them.

Xephyr looked at the crystal they had taken from Ovin. He held it out, but it did nothing. Then he began walking along the northeast wall, still holding the crystal aloft. Etheracs couldn't tell what he was doing, but he seemed purposeful and so she said nothing. The walls of the Greater Pyramid on their left radiated a scorching heat that forced them to walk several paces distant from it. It seemed to be made of the same glass-like substance as the city, but tinted black instead of white, the pigment just below the surface. The walls were sheer, with no seams, and sloped upwards at an angle that would have been impossible to climb even if they had dared to touch the hot surface. They reached the northern point with no result and turned to travel along the northwest wall, the mirages moving and shifting around them. And then the crystal began to glow.

"Here," said Xephyr. And he stepped into one of the mirages and disappeared. Etheracs went to follow him, but without the eye of detection, she could not discern which was real and which was an illusion. *I can't get in*, she sent telepathically to Xephyr.

It's ok. There's nothing here, he replied.

Inside the small pyramid there was a small altar, a mat for sleeping, and a nightstand with an oil lamp and a small notebook. There was no other evidence of anyone who might use any of these items. Xephyr turned to the altar first. It showed no sign of being used for any kind of blood sacrifice, and so he supposed that it must be for some other purpose. He stopped to think for a moment, and then drew the short, dull sword from his bag. The sword contained a secret, and here he was in a secret pyramid. He knew how wizards thought. He also knew their penchant for traps. He cautiously advanced towards the altar and began to place the sword on it when, with an ear-splitting hiss, a massive cobra materialized before him, blocking his way.

Xephyr jumped back and raised his bow, but the great snake showed no signs of aggression. It merely sat there, coiled, its hood flared, swaying slightly. Xephyr weighed his chances. The cobras in the market stall were a fraction of this size and their venom had nearly killed him and Etheracs as well. The scales of this one looked rigid and tough, difficult to break through. And he would have no help, as it appeared that this pyramid was designed to admit one at a time. Fighting was not an option. He went to examine the notebook, but the serpent hissed at him threateningly. Cursing himself for not looking at the fixtures first, Xephyr exited the pyramid.

"What happened?" Etheracs said. She was annoyed at being left out in the heat for so long.

"There's a giant cobra in there protecting everything," Xephyr said, irritable himself. "We have to think of a way to get rid of it. It's too big to fight."

To pass the time and allow themselves to think, they continued their trek around the pyramid, Xephyr holding the crystal up to check for any further hidden secrets, but the

crystal remained dim and revealed nothing more. Frustrated, they ascended the slope back to the city, as much to get out of the oppressive heat as anything else.

“Maybe there’s a clue over by those smaller cobras,” Xephyr suggested.

“Maybe,” Etheracs replied, although she was clearly in no hurry to meet them again.

“Come on. We’ll be better prepared this time.”

They walked out of the palace back into the city. Turning north they soon found themselves back on the street where they had found the snake basket and the cobras. When they got close, they stopped for a moment.

“Ok, here’s how we’ll do this. We’ll rush in and start picking them off. If one of us gets bitten we’ll run for it, antidote, and then try again. Hit and run.”

Etheracs nodded.

They rushed in. Xephyr fired an arrow at a cobra, impaling it with an accurate shot. He then unleashed a lance of magical force on another. Etheracs did the same, her arrows dissolving after striking their targets. They were bitten only twice and Xephyr was able to successfully cast the antidote both times. It was over surprisingly quickly. They began to search the area, but it wasn’t long before they found the thin silver flute they had overlooked before. Etheracs examined it.

“A snake charmer’s flute,” she said. She tried to play a little tune, but her fingers fumbled over the holes.

“Let me try,” Xephyr said with a grin. He put the flute to his lips and played a stirring ballad of noble deeds and brave acts. It only lasted a few moments, but it left Etheracs stunned.

“I had no idea you could do that,” she said.

“I’ve never touched an instrument in my life,” Xephyr replied, equally stunned at his own proficiency. “It must be magic.”

With what they hoped was the answer to their snake problem in hand, they made their way back through the palace and to the pyramid. Xephyr again clutched the crystal and entered the Lesser Pyramid, finding the massive cobra exactly where he had left it. In fact, nothing in the room had changed at all in their absence. Nervously he raised the flute and began to play.

Xephyr didn’t understand what made him play the tune that was coming out of the flute, the notes floating through the air, reflected off the walls of the small pyramid, but it had the desired effect as the cobra quickly faded from view. Remembering his mistake from

before, Xephyr went to the notebook on the nightstand first. He opened it and began to read.

The notebook contained a chronicle of the city of Taba. Xephyr read about how an ancient ruler, who went unnamed in the text, had built a grand city in the desert. So proud of his achievement was this ruler that he decided to preserve it forever, and so studied harsh magics to summon and harness the power of a phoenix. He succeeded in the attempt, but was driven mad by the possession of such immense power. Once the phoenix was under his control, he evacuated the city and used the firebird's immense heat to fuse the sand into glass, melting and molding it into city walls and a grand palace with tall spires. As if that task was not enough, when it was complete the ruler had the phoenix build the pyramid to watch over the city. And then, in his madness and his desire to preserve all that he had built, he invited the population back into the city and slaughtered them, interring their bodies within the Great Pyramid where they might live forever due to the magic of the structure.

He left only one caretaker to watch over all that he had built, and that was the purpose of the Lesser Pyramid; to act as shelter to that individual. The pages in the notebook looked ancient and Xephyr felt that the only reason it had not disintegrated long ago was because of the dry desert air. It looked as though the caretaker was long since dead. Xephyr was about to close the notebook when a single sheet of paper fell out of the back. He picked it up. On it was a crude drawing of a figure with four arms. A kraan. What could this mean? He stopped himself. It meant a wizard was playing games. He reminded himself that the place only *looked* ancient. A wizard could make it look like whatever it needed to look like at the moment of creation. *Still*, he thought, *might be worth looking into*.

He turned his attention back to the altar. Once more he took the short, dull sword from his bag and went to place it on the altar, watchful for more traps. But none were forthcoming. He placed the sword on the altar without incident and watched as a blue glow formed around it. Faint at first, the glow grew brighter and brighter until Xephyr could no longer stand to look at it, and then it faded. Xephyr approached the altar again and found that he had been right. The sword's curse had been undone and he now held, instead of a dull sword with a grim history, an exquisite wakizashi with a keen edge. He studied it carefully and was surprised to find a wealth of information within the alloys of the blade.

He had been right about the blade's general history in regards to it being used for a dishonorable purpose by its original owner, but he could not discern the details. This was one half of a powerful pair of samurai swords, or daisho, that had once been held by a mighty Shogun. The shoto, or short sword, combined with the katana, would have been a formidable combination in the hands of a skilled swordmaster. It was little more than a foot long with a sweeping curved blade that earthed itself in a blood red handle that had been wrapped in a complex pattern with a length of black cord. The nakago, the metal piece that connected the blade to the handle, was etched with the evidence of rigorous testing.

Xephyr made one more search of the room, but found nothing else of any interest. He exited the pyramid where he found Etheracs being held at knifepoint by a lean, tough looking dark elf.

“You must be Nim,” he said calmly.

“That’s right,” said Nim. If she was nervous she didn’t show it. “I believe I made you a generous offer and you seem to have ignored it.”

“I wasn’t there when this deal was made, why should I have to honor it?” Xephyr returned.

“My dagger in her back says you do. It’s a long walk from here back to Talis. Do you remember the way?” the elf sneered. “You adventurers depend on gate too much.”

Xephyr knew she had a point. They might remember the way, but only might, and Xephyr would be carrying all of Etheracs’ equipment, an unpleasant prospect in the hot desert sun.

“I’ve already been in the pyramid, there’s nothing there,” Xephyr tried.

“The pyramid has more powers than merely what is inside it. Now give me the crystal,” Nim said impatiently.

Xephyr weighed his options. The elf held Etheracs firmly, and he suspected that her dagger had magical properties. She clearly possessed the upper hand. He had done everything he could in the pyramid, why not just give her the crystal? Because that would be helping a wizard’s construct and he’d be damned if he’d do that. So what were his choices? He could let Nim kill her. He could still gate back and summon her ghost, but the loss of skills that Etheracs would endure would be incredibly inconvenient, especially since it looked as if they were going to have to go talk to the two kraans. And then he had an idea. A risky idea, but it might work.

“Fine,” said Xephyr, taking the crystal out of his pocket. Nim looked at it eagerly. Xephyr tossed the crystal towards her and she reached to catch it, but then he opened a gate in the stone’s flight path and dove through it. He emerged back at the Flying Drunken Pirate Inn, where the misty portal snapped shut, and quickly performed a series of elaborate gestures. Another portal opened and Xephyr reached through and grabbed Etheracs. He didn’t know if this was going to work, but his hands closed on her warm body and he had hope. He dragged her through the portal, which closed with a flash of light. The crystal was lying on the floor, where it had landed after passing through his gate. He reached down to retrieve it and felt a horrible pain in his back as Nim’s dagger bored into him.

“I said Give Me The Crystal!” she exclaimed, twisting the knife into his back, the jewels on its hilt flashing with a malevolent light. Xephyr screamed in pain.

Etheracs drew back with her bow and aimed an arrow at Nim's side, but the elf moved at the last moment and the arrow earthed itself harmlessly into the wooden floor of the inn. This momentary respite was enough for Xephyr, however, as he quickly cast two spells of healing on himself, his hands glowing with a strong blue aura. He kicked out with his legs, missed, but was able to use the momentum to regain his feet. Nim stabbed at Xephyr, brutally gouging him in his left arm. Xephyr repaid her with a lance of electrical energy that scored a direct hit, followed by an arrow from his dark copper bow. As he fired, the copper alloy once again gave him a surge of energy, which he used to cast another spell of healing on himself. He then slammed a pile of gold coins on the bar and ordered a healing draught, drinking it down in one gulp.

Nim leapt towards him again, the jewels on her dagger glowing fiercely, and stabbed Xephyr roughly. Etheracs cast a sonic blast at the rogue and fired another arrow of light at the same time, both finding their mark as Nim concentrated on Xephyr. Reeling from these two hits, Nim looked around and saw the bar full of patrons. None of them seemed to be about to join in the fight, but she knew they all might at any time.

"Very well. But I shall have the power that resides within that pyramid. I am patient," she snarled, and then disappeared.

Xephyr sat down heavily in a nearby chair. "I've never seen one that could follow you through a portal before," he said.

"Me neither," said Etheracs, annoyed. Xephyr's plan had worked, so she didn't feel like she could be too mad at him, but it had been too risky, even if Nim hadn't been able to follow them. "Now what? What was in the pyramid?"

Xephyr told her quickly about all that had happened inside the pyramid and showed her the drawing.

"Yes, it does look like a kraan, but what does it mean?" asked Etheracs.

"Let's go ask one of them," Xephyr replied, heading for the door.

"But Xephyr, they don't speak our language," Etheracs protested, following him anyway.

They headed out of the inn and turned west, towards the shop. Xephyr had never known Mogh'larn to say a word, but he hoped that he could be persuaded. They made their way down the street and entered the shop, the little bell over the door tinkling as they did so, and proceeded to the Talisian Trust Exchange. Geran and Mogh'larn were both there, as always.

"Afternoon, Geran," Xephyr said. "Got anything new in the case?"

He glanced at the glass case and saw an onyx longsword that he knew had come from the Citadel of Torlen. There was also a mother of pearl ring, a pair of diamond cufflinks, and a rune-studded black glaive, but none of those things concerned Xephyr. He just wanted to distract the shopkeeper for a few moments.

“Oh, nothing much, nothing much,” replied Geran. Adventurers were always coming in here to admire the things in the exchange, although none of them were for sale unless the owners didn’t come back for them.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to have anything stored in the back, would you?” asked Xephyr, looking up at the towering kraan.

“All our inventory is out there,” said Geran, patiently.

Xephyr sighed and gave up. He took out the drawing and held it up for Mogh’larn to see. “We found this in a pyramid in the desert. Does it mean anything to you?”

Mogh’larn looked stupidly at the drawing, and appeared to be about to say something when Geran cut in.

“No fraternizing with my guard!” he shouted. “You think you can be his friend and then sneak in here one day and kill me and steal these things, don’t you? Well you can’t. I won’t let you! I pay too much for his services to let him be taken in by a couple of archers! Now get out!”

The little merchant began to shoo them out, and they backed out slowly, but Mogh’larn looked at Xephyr and said one word, “Moth’gotra,” and then they were out of the Exchange, back in the main part of the shop. Geran turned his back on them and stalked back the way he had come.

“Moth’gotra,” Xephyr said. “I forgot about him. We should have gone there first.”

Etheracs looked skeptical. “I still think you’re wasting your time. The kraan don’t speak our language and we’ve never figured theirs out. How are we going to get information if we can’t talk to them? And even if they want to help us, you know how angry they get. If he gets frustrated from not being able to communicate he could attack us, and we’re not strong enough yet to kill him.”

“We might be. Besides, I don’t think it will come to that.”

Etheracs grumbled. She hated when Xephyr got like this. She still remembered the time he thought they could kill Brihaspati, the High Priest of Sa’Lun. That had been when they were both at the sixth level in the archers guild and everybody had told them they were nuts, but they’d tried it anyway. They both died twice that day, but eventually brought him down. She had no desire to repeat that experience, and the kraan was not to be trifled with.

They made their way back through the city and headed south through the Metsallen Essora on their way to Fusa. Xephyr remembered that Moth'gotra had been killed by an elf earlier in the day, but perhaps he was back by now. Wizard-born monsters seemed to pop back up every few hours or so. It was maddening. *But then again*, he thought, *maybe they feel the same way about us coming to kill them all the time. We kill them, they kill us, and everybody always comes back. It's a strange kind of immortality.* Yes, no matter which way you look at it, the wizards had to be brought to account for themselves.

After a while they finally made the turn east into Fusa and entered the Angler's Inn. They ignored the usual crowd and made their way to the third floor. At the end of the hallway was a door that led to the kraan's usual room. They entered cautiously.

Moth'gotra was massive, although not quite so large as Mogh'larn. His four arms bulged with solid muscle, accented with green blood veins. He had golden pearls woven into his black and grey hair, their origin unknown. The kraan were the most mysterious creatures in the realm and nobody really understood them. Moth'gotra was considered a rite of passage by some adventurers because of his ability to fight with all four arms at once, making him an extremely difficult opponent.

"Hello, Moth'gotra," said Etheracs. Xephyr merely bowed.

"Yaom eck not n'om fehdaa," replied the kraan. His voice was deep and guttural. He would have been difficult to understand even if he had not been speaking another language.

"Mogh'larn sent us to talk with you. Geran wouldn't let him talk with us," said Xephyr, getting right to the point.

Moth'gotra sneered, his eyes burning with the suppressed rage that was the kraan trademark. "Demm vera nahl comithor da'se menn." He shifted his weight, causing the floorboards beneath him to creak ominously.

"I don't think he likes Geran much," said Etheracs, nervously. Her usual hatred for everything created by wizards was currently taking second place to her desire to keep the kraan in a subdued mood.

"Of course he doesn't," Xephyr said. "I don't know how he's done it, but Geran has somehow subjugated Mogh'larn. I'm sure it's a wizard's doing." He took out the drawing he had gotten from the pyramid and held it up. Moth'gotra snatched it with one of his right arms.

"Man'thoro de ferr-all!" he cried. He tossed the paper aside and punched the wall. The outer walls of the inn were made of stone, and this room being at the end enjoyed

additional privacy for having no rooms on either side of it. Still, the stone showed a small crack where the creature's blow had landed.

"You recognize that, Moth'gotra?" Xephyr said hopefully. "We got it from a small pyramid near a city in the desert called Taba."

Moth'gotra seethed. His eyes burned and he flexed his awesome arms. Etheracs could tell that just what she feared was taking place; the kraan wanted to communicate and couldn't and was becoming enraged. Once it lost control they would have no choice but to run very fast or try to kill him.

"Man'thoro famm de'ramee Xephyr sid-ha."

Xephyr looked up. He had been wondering if he might have to go back to the bards. Perhaps one of them knew something about the kraan language, but now that he had heard his name he was encouraged. He stared at the monster before him. Despite his childish behavior and tendency to rage, Xephyr had never considered Moth'gotra or Mogh'larn stupid. He had seen powerful but stupid creatures often in his adventures in Heimgaard. In this very inn was a huge troll named Gromm that could crush you instantly with his club, and yet he was extremely easy to kill. People respected Gromm's power, but not Gromm himself. Moth'gotra was feared. You didn't earn fear without intelligence.

"I think Man'thoro is the name of another kraan," Xephyr ventured. "Possibly one who went to that city and never came back."

"Xephyr, that city is brand new. The wizards just conjured it a few days ago. Moth'gotra has been here forever," Etheracs protested. She wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"Yes..." Xephyr said slowly. The ancient paper, and now Moth'gotra acting as though he had seen it before. What could it mean?

"Namm v'rah me omm-te ge n'om. Cohm taa de Si'len'til. Cohm taa moh'd," growled Moth'gotra.

Xephyr was at a loss. He needed time to think about this and he also needed to get away from Moth'gotra before he lost his temper. Xephyr was not ignorant of the kraan's tendency to fly into an uncontrollable rage, he just wanted to get as much out of him before it happened. "I think we'd better go," he began.

"Tamm fer'a Alrekr ve som-tah."

Xephyr stopped, half turned to the door. He turned back. "Alrekr?" he said.

"Temm platt dam v'oha ne nahl Alrekr! Temh fahra nemm ra Si'en'til. Namm v'rah me omm-te ge n'om. Kanan." Moth'gotra was beside himself with rage.

Etheracs looked afraid, but Xephyr felt that he finally understood. He said, “Moth’gotra, I see,” and turned to go. Etheracs followed quickly. There was no sound of pursuit.

“Well that was a waste,” Etheracs said.

“Hardly. I know where we have to go now.”

“Really?” Etheracs was shocked. How had Xephyr gotten anything at all out of that meeting?

“There are other kraan in Heimgaard. I’m not convinced anymore that they were created by the wizards,” Xephyr said as they descended the staircase back to the lower levels of the inn.

“What? Everything was created by the wizards, you know that.”

Xephyr stopped. “Were you?” he asked. “Was I?” He kept walking. “Man’thoro is dead, or banished, or whatever. But there’s another kraan, and I suspect he can tell us something. Moth’gotra wants us to find him.”

Etheracs was lost at sea. Xephyr seemed hyperactive, driven, even moreso than she’d ever seen him before. And what was more, he was talking nonsense. Of course everything was created by the wizards. Wasn’t that what everyone knew? But...wasn’t Xephyr’s whole life dedicated to finding out where he had come from? Were they all created by wizards? If it were that simple, would Xephyr, or anybody for that matter, go to this much effort? All of these questions swirled through her mind, but she finally settle on saying “So where are we going?”

“Alrekr,” Xephyr said as they finally emerged from the inn and plunged into the forest.

The mountain of Alrekr was tall, black, rocky, hollowed out into a gigantic cave, and right in the middle of the desert. It stood out from the surrounding landscape as the only solid formation in a sea of loose sand. Xephyr and Etheracs had been there many times to kill the four Warlords of the Deep that lived there, and Ian had gone with them until his falling out with Xephyr. There was a rumor that a great beast lived there as well, and adventurers who had spent any time at all in the mountain swore that they could hear a reptilian slithering sound and chains rattling in the darkness above them. As yet these were the only signs of such a beast, although there were some who shunned the mountain, claiming that the creature would one day escape and kill any who happened to be in its way at the time.

Xephyr walked hastily through the forest, lost in thought, but his feet guided him to where he needed to go. He had to stop by the shop first. When they reached Lefty’s Mercantile, Xephyr walked right up to the counter and looked over the inventory.

Etheracs had been afraid that he was going to try to talk to Mogh'larn again, but he seemed to show no desire to do so. He finally selected a battered wooden harp.

“What do you need that for? We always kill the water draug,” Etheracs said.

“I don't think we should take the time for that now. It wouldn't surprise me if the wizards were keeping an eye on us these days and I want to find something out as quickly as we can. We'll have to kill the warlords anyway,” Xephyr said as they exited the shop and began the northern journey into the desert.

The path to Alrekr was much shorter than the one to Taba, and had the added advantage of being a route very familiar to both of them.

A short time later, they reached the mountain. The entrance to the cave within the mountain was blocked by a sizable water draug. It was a miserable creature, bound there by the Warlords of the Deep to keep adventurers out. They approached it cautiously...talking to the draug could be a depressing experience.

“Hello,” said Xephyr.

The draug moaned. “A curse has been cast upon me!” it wailed.

“Yeah, about that,” said Xephyr, bringing the harp out of his bag. At the sight of it, the draug's eyes lit up.

“Give it to me!” it cried.

Xephyr did so. The draug was elated. It played an eerie tune and the enchantment was broken. The draug dissolved into a shimmering mist.

“Music is really soothing the savage beast today,” said Etheracs, as much to allay her own nervousness as anything else. Killing the warlords was one thing, but trying to find some mythical beast in the darkness? That was something else.

There were four warlords, each with his own specialty. There was Ivar, the Archer of the Deep who lived in the Core of the Wind. His silvery bow was erratic, but powerful. Xephyr had used it quite a bit, but finally decided it was too unreliable.

Next was Stu, who was merely a warlord with no specialty. He carried a hammer of demolition that could send electrical sparks shooting through the floor at his enemies.

Rian o'thi, a powerful sorcerer who controlled the ice and cold carried a long white ice staff. Many adventurers had been lost and died in his blizzard. Neither Xephyr nor Etheracs were among them, however.

Finally, Haakon, the most powerful of the Lords of the Deep. He wielded a glowing black broadsword, carried a grim spiked shield, and used a cunning mind to ward off his foes.

All four of the warlords fell with little or no problem. Xephyr and Etheracs had done it many times before, and it was frankly a bit of a relief for both of them to settle down and do something straightforward for a change. When they were finished they looked at the results. They had made a trip to the shop to sell the weapons and armor, but they were left with four small stones. One black, one white, one grey, and one transparent. They had no idea what they were supposed to do with them.

They split up and began a thorough search of the cave. The darkness under the mountain was oppressive, and even their starlights only served to heighten the contrast, lengthening the shadows and making the area even more murky and eerie than it had been before.

Eventually Etheracs made the first discovery.

“Hey, check this out,” she called, her voice echoing across the cavern. As she called out to Xephyr she thought she could hear a quiet hissing sound and the clink of a chain above her. She looked up, but the darkness over her head was absolute. Shortly Xephyr came over to where she was.

“What is it?” he asked. He thought she looked nervous.

“Look here,” she said. Xephyr looked. In the darkness he could just make out a small fissure in the otherwise solid rock that made up the western wall of the cave. It was tight, but he thought he could just squeeze through. He dropped through the fissure and found himself in a small nook. Etheracs followed close behind.

“Well, this is cozy,” she said. The nook was very small, although there might have been room for one or two other people their size, but no more. The walls within were featureless, black, and dark. There seemed to be nothing there at all.

“Huh,” said Xephyr, puzzled. They climbed back out into the main part of the cave and resumed their search.

Eventually Xephyr found what he was looking for on the northern wall. A marking on the wall, a pictogram in a similar style to the drawing he had found in the pyramid. Painted on the wall in muted colors, making it very difficult to find in the oppressive darkness, it showed a grim reptile being captured and bound with heavy chains. The marking looked as though it were inlaid into the wall, painted on a circle that was then inserted into the cave side.

“What do you think?” asked Xephyr.

"I think you're crazy," Etheracs replied. She picture was crudely drawn, but still evoked a response in her. She didn't like it at all.

"Maybe," said Xephyr, considering. "But I think we have to try."

"Let's get some more people first. G'real, Ungray, Urtal, somebody." There was a hint of pleading in her voice.

"No."

Stubborn, arrogant...this isn't like Xephyr, she thought. But he's going to do it anyway, and he'll tell me I can leave at any time, but if I do and he dies he'll be furious with me.
"Fine," she said. "Whatever."

Xephyr held the four stones in his left hand and put his right on the marking. He waited for just a moment and then pushed. A white ray of light passed over him, blinding them both with its brilliance in the dark confines of the cave. A deafening crack echoed throughout the cave followed by a rustling of chains from above and then the floor shook as something of immense weight landed nearby. The light went out and there was a fearsome roar, the sound filling the cave so that they could not tell which direction it had come from.

"I think we should go..." began Xephyr, when he was knocked to the ground.

Etheracs looked up. Towering over both of them was an enormous black reptile, its eyes glowing yellow. Slime dripped from its mouth and its body was covered with black watery scales that glimmered slightly in the feeble starlight. The beast roared again and swiped at Etheracs with a great clawed hand, which she was just able to dodge. She pulled back on her bow and fired an arrow of light, which found its mark. The creature howled in pain and fury, lunging towards her as it did. Again Etheracs dodged the blow, but the reptile swung its great tail around and caught her with its sharp scales. Blood spurted from her arm, but she did not cry out. She glanced at Xephyr, who was struggling to his feet. His hands glowed with a strong blue aura and then he fired an arrow of his own at the monster. It spun around, swinging its tail again, and struck Xephyr across his chest. He was knocked backwards into the northern wall of the cave and slid to the floor.

"Run," rasped Xephyr.

Etheracs fired another arrow into the great beast. It turned and made a cricketsing noise deep within its throat, sniffing the air and finding warm blood. The reptile leapt towards her, but she dove and rolled behind it, near Xephyr. Her hands glowed with a strong blue aura and Xephyr's wounds closed a little. She hoisted him up and began to stagger south. *I'm always bailing him out of these messes, she thought. Just a little further and we can get out of the mountain.* She heard the monster thundering behind her, tracking them. *How far will it follow us? Can I make it back to Talis? I can only create a portal for*

one...Xephyr would have to make his own. At last she reached the southern end of the cave where the entrance was, but as she attempted to leap outside she bounced off an invisible barrier. The way was sealed against their escape.

Damn wizard's trap! she thought. She spun around, still supporting Xephyr who was beginning to come around. His hands glowed with a strong blue aura and she felt his weight come off her shoulders as he stood on his own. The hungry, glowing yellow eyes of the beast were approaching them fast. Xephyr looked around.

"This way!" he cried, and dashed off to the west, Etheracs close behind. They dashed over to the southwestern corner, the lumbering footsteps close behind them, and turned north. At last they reached what Xephyr was heading for; the fissure into the nook.

"You first," said Xephyr. Etheracs squeezed through the small opening into the room and heard the twang of Xephyr's bowstring and his cry of pain. A moment later a trickle of blood came oozing through the fissure and there was a tremendous roar. Etheracs stared at the opening numbly. She knew Xephyr would be upset, and also that their questing would be over until he could recover from the death. If he recovered from the death. If he had been right about wizards watching them, then this was clearly a trap and they would not hesitate to set another one. She saw a string of incidents like this one stretching out into her future, one death after another, until they were both so weakened that there would be no hope of recovery. She cursed the wizards and everything they stood for. She would not rest until...until...

A feeling of hopelessness stole over her. She and Xephyr, ever since they had met, had had one goal: bringing the wizards to account. And now, she felt, she was learning the true power that they were up against. This was worse than banishment, she felt. She sat down on the rocky floor of the nook heavily and stared at nothing. Then she heard noises. The sounds of someone running, and of heavier footsteps. And then Xephyr slid into the nook with her.

His hands glowed with a strong blue aura as he healed himself and closed the gaping wound that had appeared on his shoulder. Etheracs stared at him.

"Close one," he said. "You ok?"

She was burning with anger. At him, at the wizards, at herself, at the world. But this wasn't the time. It was never the time. She got up and suppressed the rage, redirecting it towards the lizard roaming around in the cave of Alrekr. "What is that thing?" she said, ignoring Xephyr's question.

"Based on something Moth'gotra said, I think it's called Kaanan. Big and ugly, whatever he is," said Xephyr. "I think we can take him, but it'll take more than one or two trips. We need to figure out how we can get to the inn from here."

“Call Pesiel here. We can gate out to the grue in the attic and then gate back to here,” Etheracs said. Familiars had a magic all their own. It was similar to gate, but instead of a misty portal they just appeared whenever their masters called them.

“Good idea,” Xephyr said. Moments later, Pesiel appeared, swooping down an air shaft above them that they had not previously noticed. Xephyr looked at it. “I think we could climb out that way, but I don’t know if we’d be able to climb back down here. Best to do what you suggested, Eth.”

They discussed their plan of attack. They would not try to fight the giant lizard anywhere in the cave except right outside the nook. When they were both ready, Etheracs would climb out of the nook and look for the creature, which was roaming restlessly about the cave, and lure it back. When it was outside, Xephyr would climb out and join the fight. If danger presented itself to either party, they would both climb back through the hole and recover before trying again. Etheracs’s immediate opinion was that this was going to take all day.

“You’re probably right,” replied Xephyr when she had made that known to him. “But I don’t have a better idea.” She didn’t either. They both opened portals to the grue in the inn’s attic and stepped through.

After they had gated back to Pesiel and had recovered their energy, they put the plan into action. Etheracs slipped through the hole and into the cave. She heard a reptilian slithering off to the north and decided to try there first. She crept as quietly as she could, but the creature could evidently see very well in the dark and nearly caught her by surprise with a slash from one of its claws. The roar that followed was unmistakable – it was looking forward to killing her. She fired an arrow to get its attention, missed, and ran for it, the beast right on her heels. She reached the fissure and screamed, “Xephyr, now!”

Xephyr emerged from the nook and cast a light lance. Kaanan howled with pain as the magic spell impacted solidly with his scales and slashed out with his tail, catching Xephyr on his left arm, tearing into his flesh. Xephyr cast a healing spell and fired an arrow, hoping for an energy boost from his copper bow, but none was forthcoming. Etheracs fired another arrow, this time hitting her target, and rolled to one side as the reptiles claws slashed through the air. All the same, they still caught her a glancing blow, knocking her down and causing her shoulder to bleed freely. She quickly regained her feet and saw Xephyr cast another light lance at the creature. The spell only grazed the beast, but it still roared its fury. They had discovered a weakness.

Kaanan stalked off to the east, making its strange cricketing sounds as it went. Xephyr went to follow, but Etheracs said, “Wait, it’s just trying to lure you into the cave. Remember the plan. Let’s fall back and try it again.”

Xephyr conceded her point and they both slipped through the fissure back into the nook. Xephyr greeted Pesiel with a pat on the head. “You’re doing great,” he said. Pesiel

pecked him affectionately, and then they both opened their portals. A moment later they were both back, fully refreshed from the food and drink at the inn.

Etheracs reentered the cave and started off to the east. There was no sign of Kaanan for a long while, and then she saw him. She fired an arrow at the reptile's back and took off the way she had come, listening for the thundering footsteps behind her. She was not disappointed. She made it back to the fissure and found Xephyr already waiting for her. He cast a light lance at Kaanan and fired an arrow from his copper bow nearly at the same time. Kaanan swayed to the side to avoid the magic, but took the arrow full force. There was a deafening roar and Kaanan jumped a short distance off the ground, shaking the entire floor, knocking the two adventurers off their feet. He then swung his tail in a wide arc, connecting with first Xephyr and then Etheracs. Their blood mingled in an indentation in the rocks. Xephyr was on his feet first, casting a light blast at the monster's head, hoping to blind it even for a moment. The blast missed, but the moment it took for Kaanan to dodge was enough for Etheracs to scramble up and both of them to squeeze back into the nook.

"Some adventure," Etheracs said, although she was grinning as she said it. Her earlier fears about this being an inescapable trap were fading.

For the next several hours they kept this up, and there was more than one close call as the great beast of the dark was a formidable foe. The two adventurers adapted and learned and perfected their technique against the creature until at last it was oozing yellow blood out of its many wounds.

"One or two more trips at the most," said Xephyr, hopefully.

Etheracs once more went out into the cave to draw the creature over to their hiding place. She found Kaanan in the northwest corner, staggering, trying to regain his bearings. She fired a sparkling arrow at it and the beast's instincts took over. It chased her with faltering steps over to the fissure where Xephyr cast a lance of light, hitting it squarely. The great reptile roared in agony, fell over with a thundering crash, and lay still.

Xephyr and Etheracs couldn't believe their eyes. After such a long battle, the massive lizard now lay dead at their feet. Not stopping to celebrate, they both hurried over to the corpse to see what could be made of it. As they searched, the watery black scales that had covered the behemoth's body proved to be loose. Xephyr stripped them off and put them in his bag. Etheracs discovered a massive black chain around the creature's neck, no doubt left over from whatever had held it prisoner before. The chain was thick and heavy and they were about to leave it when Etheracs noticed something else about it.

"Xephyr, this link is gold," she said.

"Good, we can take it back and sell it," Xephyr said. He was frustrated. He had hoped something more would have come from such a long battle. Had he been in a better frame of mind he might have examined the chain more closely and realized the power of the

artifact, but as it was he merely detached the golden link from the rest and examined it alone. After a moment he looked up, thoughtful.

“What?” asked Etheracs.

“This link,” Xephyr said, beginning to walk around, looking closely at the ground, “it has a close connection to the mountain. I can sense bits of the rock in it.” He was wandering closer to the center of the cave. Etheracs was nervous. They were tired and the adrenaline from the battle was wearing off. If they were to be ambushed now they might not even make it back to the nook. Eventually Xephyr stopped and knelt down. He cast a second starlight above his head to try to increase the light, and then placed the link in a small impression he had discovered on the ground.

The link dissolved and became a golden mist, spreading out over the entire base level of the cave. The mist swirled and flowed out, and then began flowing in a great torrent back in and down the newly revealed stone staircase leading down beneath the mountain. Xephyr began to descend the staircase.

“Xephyr, wait,” said Etheracs. He turned.

“You can wait here, if you like,” he said.

“No way, you remember what happened the last time. It’s just...don’t you think we should wait a bit?”

“Why?” He stared at her, waiting for an answer, although they both knew that none she could give could possibly satisfy him. “We’re close, Eth, we can’t stop now. If we wait we might have to kill the thing again.”

“If we don’t wait we might get ambushed and die,” she said, trying one last time.

“That could happen between here and the inn and you know it. Just because a wizard’s never tampered with our portals doesn’t mean they can’t. They could redirect us to anywhere in the realm, or just dispense with the whole thing and zap us right here. I’m not waiting.” He turned back and took another step down the stairs. A moment later Etheracs was with him. Neither of them said anything.

The stairs were cut roughly, but were stable and offered no hazard to walking on them; they were not slick and had no loose gravel or anything that might have tripped them up. On and on the descent went, reminding them of the vastness of the mountain and making them wonder how much more lay below the surface than what was above it. And then their way was blocked.

“What is it?” Xephyr asked, disgusted.

“Looks like a big grey worm to me,” responded Etheracs.

They had reached a small chamber, a kind of landing at the bottom of the stairs. Slimy, grey, and immense enough to block the entire passage, the worm's skin glistened in their starlights. It looked as though it might have tunneled in at one point, but it showed no signs of moving now, although it expanded and contracted every so often as if breathing. Xephyr tried poking it with the end of his bow. The worm expanded a bit, then returned to normal size, but showed no signs of moving. Xephyr studied it for a moment.

"I'll have to kill it. Wait for me just up the stairs," he said.

"Wait for you? You've got to be kidding,"

"I don't know what it might do. I need you up there to be able to summon me out, just in case."

Etheracs paused, determined not to be sent back like...like a girl.

"Eth, it's my fight."

"*Our* fight and you know it!"

"This isn't the time to argue. This is probably a trap. What if we start fighting it and suddenly we can't gate out? I need to at least have a chance of you being able to summon me." Xephyr's eyes took on a dark, menacing appearance. "Go," he said, with an air of finality.

Etheracs was taken aback. He was determined. For the first time since she had met him, she was more afraid of him than afraid for him. She turned and stalked wordlessly out of the passage. *When we get back, you're killing some evil things*, she thought. *Ian was right*.

Xephyr watched her go. He wasn't sure what was making him be like this lately. He'd snap at people and then wonder why he'd done it after it was too late to take it back. But he just had a feeling that he should fight the worm alone and didn't have time to explain it. He turned back to the hulking mass in his way and prodded it gently. The worm expanded slightly at his touch, but settled back down quickly.

Xephyr drew back on his bow and fired an arrow into the beast's side. It embedded itself in the soft flesh, a yellow liquid oozing out where it had struck. The worm made no sound but immediately expanded to fill the entire chamber. Xephyr was pinned to the side of the cave wall. He cast a blast of earth energy at the worm, and the creature's wounds widened, but it showed no sign of stopping its expansion. Xephyr was beginning to have trouble breathing and heard a rib crack. He cast a spell of healing on himself and tried to fire another arrow, but there was no room. The thought of asking Etheracs for a summon crossed his mind, but then it occurred to him that there was no room for the portal. He cast another blast, wounding the worm still further. He was running out of

energy, but he could tell that the worm was gravely wounded...if he could just hold out a little longer. His bow was useless and he had no more energy for spellcasting. His mind raced furiously, and then he remembered.

He struggled against the soft flesh that held him against the cavern's sides and managed to pull the wakizashi that he had taken from the pyramid out of his bag. Wielding it in his left hand, he plunged it into the worm's side, creating a long gash that spilled the yellow blood freely. He pulled the blade free and stabbed again, making another long and horrible wound in the monster's side. And then he felt the pressure against him lessen somewhat. The worm was shrinking. He pulled back on the bowstring and launched another arrow, but it was needless. The worm was dead and shrinking enough to allow passage below. At last the corpse lay still, smeared in a pool of yellow blood.

"Etheracs!" Xephyr called. "It's dead, let's go," he said as she arrived. She had an annoyed look on her face, but he ignored it.

They proceeded further down the stairs, taking each step one at a time, exercising the utmost caution. At last they reached the bottom. To the north there was a large stone arch leading further into the mountain. They halted for a moment and stared at it. The stones were black, just like the rock of the mountain, but they had been formed into a magnificent arch that seemed to shimmer slightly in their light. There were no gems in Alrekr, but what stones that had any luster at all had been gathered for this entrance.

"Come in," said a voice. It was not deep, but it carried through the cavern quite well. What was odd was that it did not seem to echo so much as to emanate from the rocks themselves. Cautiously they entered.

The chamber was large and spacious with a high ceiling. There were no supports except that the walls were a part of the mountain itself. There was an enormous stone throne in the center of the room, and upon it was an impossibly tall humanoid. Having no physical traits of a giant, Xephyr had no idea what race the creature might be because it was much too tall to be a human, a troll, or one of the werewolf, the three largest races that Xephyr knew of. On his right was an enormous kraan, larger even than Mogh'larn, his four arms flexing with impatience. Coiled at the feet of the creature on the throne was a massive white snake which lay motionless, but stared at them with cold reptilian eyes.

"You have come a long way to meet me, Xephyr," said the tall creature. "And you have slain my pet." There was no menace in the voice, despite the hint of a threat that the words carried. "I am Alrekr."

"I thought Alrekr was the name of the mountain," said Xephyr.

"And so it is," said Alrekr, rising from his throne with an air of boredom. "And it is my name as well, for I created the mountain and it is named after me." Standing up, Alrekr was even taller than Xephyr had guessed. He strode easily around the room and wore large armors engraved with complex and powerful runes. Leaning against the throne was

a long bow, enormous in its proportions, inlaid with crystals and precious ores, and strung with a thick cord. Xephyr eyed the weapon nervously.

“Mi nith de serr comithad t’rothm,” rumbled the kraan. Although they could not understand his words, his tone indicated that he did not agree with Alrekr’s decision to allow them entrance.

“Patience, my friend,” replied Alrekr.

“What do you mean *you* created the mountain,” said Etheracs. “I thought everything was created by the wizards. Are you a wizard?”

“You thought wrong,” said Alrekr with a hint of impatience. “I am no wizard, I am an elder being from before the time of Heimgaard. Your wizards,” and he spoke the word with clear contempt, “can create very little.”

Xephyr looked at the kraan carefully. “You’re Tamm Fer’a, aren’t you?” he said, finally.

Tamm Fer’a merely nodded and folded his arms across his vast chest.

“Moth’gotra mentioned you. And Alrekr. That’s how we knew to look here,” Xephyr said.

“Yes, we know,” said Alrekr, staring into the stone walls as if they were a window. “He was foolish to do so, but I suppose he used his best judgment on whom to tell this secret. Why would you seek us out?”

“We’re looking for a way to defeat the wizards,” Etheracs said, seizing on his clear dislike for them. “We were hoping you could tell us something.”

“I could tell you a great many things. But I will begin by telling you that the wizards do not need to be defeated.”

Xephyr startled. “What do you mean?”

“There is a much graver threat to this realm than the wizards, as petty and incompetent as they are,” said Alrekr. “It arises from the desert. I can see from your weaponry that you have been to the desert.”

Xephyr looked at his left hand. He was still holding the wakizashi, which was wet with the worm’s blood. “Llelinduur mentioned a threat. So it comes from Taba? The phoenix?”

Alrekr turned and looked at them both with contempt. “You are a mortal. I cannot expect you to understand.”

“Mih'ta se fern-ou dem vara Talis!”

"Do not be so hasty in your judgement, Tamm Fer'a," said Alrekr, calming somewhat. "They cannot help it. They are mortal and must be taught." He returned to his throne and sat down. "Come, Xephyr, Etheracs, and sit. I will tell you what you must know."

The two adventurers hesitated.

Alrekr idly fingered the bow by his side. "Know that the moment I wish you dead, you shall be. At this time I do not wish this. Now sit." The tone was neutral, but the hint was clear. They sat.

Alrekr was silent for a time. "I shall not tell you everything, although I do have the answers you have long sought. You are not ready for them, which I know is an unsatisfying response from me, but you shall learn in due time. For now I will say only this. The wizards that you despise so much have the merest fraction of the power you think they do. They cannot create, save for a few trinkets. Their power lies in their ability to open vast portals, such as the ones you use, but on a grander scale."

Xephyr and Etheracs looked at each other.

"The realm was defined by an ancient god many thousands of years ago. Even I do not remember its name, and it is not important now anyway. But even the god created nothing. Try as it might, it could not make the first solid thing of its own, and so the realm sat empty, a void, a mere list of rules and definitions, but there was nothing to follow those rules. And then the god realized something very important: its powers were limited. It could define how things would behave, but those definitions were mere concepts. It could not make things to follow those rules."

Alrekr paused. He seemed to be considering how much more to tell them. At length he continued.

"The god used what power it had to create a portal, a hole in the newly-formed realm, and reached through into another realm, one more established, and it stole three things. First it stole water to fill up the void, and then it stole an island to give structure to the water, and then it stole an inhabitant. This inhabitant was to be the first wizard."

"Wait," said Xephyr. "Does this still go on? Were we stolen from somewhere else?"

There was a pause. "Of course," said Alrekr.

"Where?" they both cried at once.

Alrekr paused again, and then chose to ignore their question. "This stealing goes on all the time. Any time you think a wizard has created something, the reality is that they stole it from somewhere else. I, and this mountain, were stolen."

“So everything we’ve ever known is the result of theft?” asked Xephyr. He could feel his world collapsing...everything he’d taken for granted was now thrown into question. Etheracs was having similar thoughts. She thought of all the creatures that she had hated for no other reason than the fact that she thought a wizard had created them, and now to find out that none of them had been.

“Nearly everything,” said Alrekr.

“Aiem n'om fehda ve nahl comithor?”

Alrekr nodded solemnly. “The kraan were not stolen. They have come here to warn us that the world we know is in danger. We may not like the fact that we have been plucked here, but this is now our home and we must either defend it or die in the attempt. To do less would be to suffer in subjugation.”

“But we haven’t heard any warnings. Moth’gotra and Mogh’larn never said anything!” Etheracs protested.

“You did not listen to them properly. And the threat was not imminent. They bided their time, and Tamm Fer’a came to me. I am the only one in this realm who speaks the kraan language, and the only one who will ever learn. It is a harsh tongue, full of anger and rage and violence. Your mortal minds would rebel at the true, literal meanings of the words they speak,” said Alrekr. “But now, now that the city in the desert has arisen, now that the phoenix sits atop its pyramid, now that Moth’gotra has interpreted the sign that you brought him. Now the threat is upon us.”

“So what is the threat?” Xephyr asked. He was getting tired of being talked down to by this supposedly superior being, but the massive kraan and the powerful white snake kept him from saying so.

“The wizards are not the only ones who can open portals,” said Alrekr. “There is another dimension where there is a powerful demon lord. Its name is Ashtrez’a and it desires only conquest and domination. Some time ago this demon attempted to gain entry to this realm, but the incantation to open the portal was incomplete and it was not able to enter itself. It could only send a handful of its minions to gather information and prepare for its eventual coming. The presence of the city of Taba can only mean that they are about to succeed, and that the situation is more serious than previously thought.”

“So there’s a secret in Taba that can defeat the demons?” asked Xephyr.

“Not yet,” said Alrekr. “The process of bringing an entire city through the ether is complicated and time consuming. The wizards have brought through the most important parts first, but the true defeat of the demons will require the completion of the palace. If the demons were to attack now, the Guardian Phoenix of Taba would drive them off from that city, but the rest of Heimgaard would quickly fall to them and would not be

recoverable, even when the secret is finally revealed. Taba would be the only safe refuge in the land.”

“What can we do?” asked Etheracs, nervously.

“Delay them until the palace has been completed. You must work the dimensional magic and kill Ashtrez’a.”

“Wait,” said Xephyr, as angrily as he dared in the face of Tamm Fer’a’s glare, “If we kill it, won’t the threat be over?”

“Of course not,” said Alrekr, condescendingly. “The demon lord’s minions are within this realm, and they must conform to its physical laws. When you gather the ingredients for the summoning ceremony, you will not summon the demon lord here. That would be folly itself. You will create a dimensional rift into its domain and go there to kill, but the connection will still be established. Our physical laws will apply there. It will be back, just as everything else here will be. Undying. This, of course, is Ashtrez’a’s motivation to attack here in the first place. True immortality.”

Xephyr couldn’t believe it. He had just found out the smallest hint of his true origins, that he did not belong here nor did he come here willingly. He had been snatched by the wizards from his true home, but now he was going to be forced to aid them to defend a home that was not his.

“Why can’t the wizards do this?” he seethed.

“The wizards are busy bringing the rest of Taba into this plane,” explained Alrekr, patiently.

“I thought they could kill anything. One zap and it’s finished, isn’t that right?” asked Etheracs. She, too, was beginning to be annoyed by the story the ruler of the mountain was telling her.

Alrekr seemed to stare at nothing for a moment, and then said, “The demons have identified the wizards as their primary threat in this realm. As such, they have taken certain...precautions. You mortals are the only hope for Heimgaard.”

“The only hope for you, you mean,” said Xephyr, accusingly.

“Hardly,” said Alrekr. Tamm Fer’a flexed his four arms, the veins bulging out impressively. The elder being did not elaborate. “And now you must go, for time is growing short. To aid you on your way, and in recognition of your brave battle against Kaanan, I give you this.”

Alrekr reached down behind the throne, pulled out a black and golden crossbow, and laid it at Xephyr’s feet. The weapon was metallic, but Xephyr could not identify the alloy. A

golden arrow lay in the firing chamber, and a golden string held the crossbow taut and ready to fire. Xephyr picked it up.

“Thank you,” Xephyr said. He was truly awed by the gift. It occurred to him that Alrekr must have known that he was growing in contempt of him and of the quest he was being given. And yet he had still seen fit to give him this powerful gift. Xephyr began to feel a strange sensation...shame.

“Now go,” intoned Alrekr, his voice reverberating from the walls as he issued the command. “And beware the power of Ashtrez’a. His minions are powerful, but the demon lord is more powerful still. I am sorry that I had but one gift to give, but somehow I don’t think another will be necessary.” And for the first time in this meeting, Alrekr allowed himself a small smile.

Xephyr and Etheracs stood up. They had clearly been dismissed. Together they trooped up the stairs, back to the main level of the mountain.

“What do you think?” Etheracs asked.

“I think he didn’t tell us everything. There’s so much still unexplained,” replied Xephyr. “But...” he gazed at the fine weapon he had been presented with. “I think we can trust him to a point,” he said at last. “We need to find these demons.”

They began by scouring the desert. Xephyr called Pesiel from her hiding place in the mountain and sent her to scout as well. For several hours they sifted through sand dunes and dodged scorpions while looking under rocks. They were working their way through the expanse from Alrekr back to Talis and found nothing for quite some time, until at last Xephyr, seeing through the eyes of his familiar, found some sand that looked different from all the rest.

“What do you think?” asked Xephyr as the three of them stood over the black, dirty sand.

“Looks volcanic. Except that there aren’t any volcanoes around here,” said Etheracs.

“True.” Xephyr poked at the sand with his toe. It seemed solid enough, but why should there be black sand in the middle of the white and golden grains that made up the rest of the desert? Then again, why should there be anything at all?

The entire time they had been searching, Xephyr had been turning over in his mind everything Alrekr had told him, and speculating about what he hadn’t. If everything was being stolen from other realms and made to conform to the rules here, why did some people have visible ghosts and others didn’t? Why did the things they had always thought of as wizard’s creations have such repetitive movements, as if they were mere automata? And why could he not return to his own home?

He paused. Why would he want to go home? He had no memory of it. Perhaps he had been rescued from certain death and destruction, brought to this place where he might never die. Or perhaps he was already dead.

He shook himself back to the present. Now was not the time for this speculation. He knelt in the sand and began to dig through the black grains of silicon, their heat blistering his fingers. Etheracs did the same, and eventually they found a deep hole that had been covered over with a few thin slats of wood.

“If I were a demon, this is certainly where I’d live,” Etheracs said sarcastically.

They left Pesiel to stand watch above and lowered themselves into the hole where they found an oppressive darkness. The air seemed to eat at their lights with a gloom so profound that they frequently felt the lights may have gone out. What they could see was that the walls were a deep violet color, which almost certainly contributed to the intense darkness. The stone showed deep scratches, indicating ritualistic activity may have taken place here. Xephyr began examining the room very carefully.

“Look at this,” he said suddenly. He was kneeling down, running his hands over the floor. Etheracs went to look. She saw a square slab of stone laid in amongst the other stones that made up the floor that did not match the pattern of the rest of the room.

“Trapdoor?”

“Possibly. Look, there’s a tiny hole in it. Might be a keyhole, but I’m not sure what kind of key would fit that,” Xephyr replied, tracing the edge of the tiny hole. “Let’s take a look at the rest of this place.”

The chamber they were in continued to the north or south as well as back up the way they had come. They chose to try the southern direction, their footsteps echoing down the stony passage. Not far from where they had begun, they began to hear a raspy breathing coming from somewhere in front of them. The sound reflected off the stone walls, preventing them from being able to pinpoint their exact distance from its origin, but they crouched and waited in the darkness for a few moments before proceeding.

“It’s a good bet that they can see in the dark, if this is the demon temple,” Etheracs said.

Xephyr concurred. “We might as well keep our lights going so we can see at least a little.”

A little further on they found a short, squat humanoid standing in the middle of the passage. He was breathing loudly and laboriously and his skin was a pale lavender color. He glanced in the direction of the two adventurers, but made no aggressive movements. Xephyr and Etheracs glanced at each other and nodded. They each took a different side of the passage and began to walk past the strange creature, but as they approached it

jumped back and snarled at them. It would not permit them passage. They both backed off slightly.

“This one doesn’t look too tough. Must be a low guard or something,” Xephyr said.

“Shouldn’t be too tough to kill him,” Etheracs agreed, “but what if he raises the alarm?”

“We’ll have to risk it. The exit isn’t too far away, we should be able to make a break for it if necessary.”

Etheracs nodded. She raised her longbow while Xephyr prepared the crossbow he had gotten from Alrekr. The demons were clearly evil; Etheracs would attack first and try for the killing blow, preserving Xephyr’s own evil tendencies. She pulled back on the bowstring of her weapon and held it. The demon watched them impassively.

With a loud twang that reverberated off the walls, Etheracs loosed her arrow. At the same time Xephyr fired the crossbow and cast a magical lance at the creature. The light arrow from Etheracs struck the demon flush in the chest, but dissipated harmlessly. Xephyr’s spell also struck true, but the demon merely grunted and leapt forward to engage them both in combat. His claws raked across Etheracs’s face, leaving angry red welts and an ooze of blood. Only the arrow from the crossbow seemed to have any effect, grazing the demon’s left arm as it moved forward.

Etheracs fired another arrow of pure light at the demon, again her aim was on target, but again the shaft merely evaporated upon contact with the dark being. Xephyr’s crossbow showed a portion of its power and efficacy by condensing a new arrow out of thin air, but it was small and could not possibly do much damage. Xephyr fired it anyway and scored a hit, but the demon was not impeded much by the smaller dart.

Frustrated, Xephyr ran forward and kicked the demon hard in the stomach. He was rewarded with four sharp claws in his own midsection, raking upwards as the demon attempted to gut him. Xephyr’s hands glowed with a faint blue aura as he cast the healing spell upon himself. He motioned to Etheracs and they both retreated further back the way they had come.

“This is...interesting,” Xephyr said, panting.

“They’re immune to light damage and resist our strike spells. I’d call that a little more than ‘interesting’,” Etheracs said hotly. “And what’s up with that fabulous bow Alrekr gave you?”

Xephyr studied the bow more closely. A new arrow had formed and was ready to fire, but again it was small and stunted. “It’s drawing moisture from the air to reload itself,” he said at last. “And here in the desert, there’s not much moisture to go around.”

“Great. What a fabulous gift. Now what?”

Xephyr thought for a moment. “We need help. These demons are adapting to our way of fighting. We need someone who fights differently than we do.”

They scrambled back up the hole where Pesiel was still waiting for them and began the long walk back to Talis. They considered gating back, but Xephyr said he needed time to think and the walk would do him good. They trudged through the burning desert, irritated at this setback. Everything had been going very well up to this point, and now they were going to have to get new weapons and wouldn't be able to use offensive spells against these foes. Every weapon Xephyr could think of that might work against these new enemies was going to require time and effort to get. Time they didn't have and effort he didn't want to expend.

At last the desert gave way to the cobbles of the streets of Talis. They walked through town with no inkling of how to proceed until they reached the inn. As he opened the door, Xephyr knew the answer, and he didn't like it.

Ian was sitting at the bar looking at a set of rings that Xephyr had not seen before. They fit over the knuckles like any other ring, but instead of a gem they had short talons that protruded from the wearer's knuckles. It would help Ian with his martial arts style of fighting.

Etheracs looked at Xephyr. She realized the same thing he did and she wondered what he would do about it. She had always found their arguments to be petty on both sides, but had stayed out of it for the most part. She saw no reason to break that tradition now and went over to a table in the corner to watch the potential fireworks from a safe distance.

Xephyr sat down next to Ian. The werewolf looked up for a moment, and then back down at the rings he was wearing, studying them intently. Their time apart had not diminished Ian's fearsome appearance. If anything, he was more formidable now; muscular and agile. He had achieved the eighth level in the monk's guild, making him a lesser master. Xephyr looked at him and remembered the first time he had seen his former friend coming out of the Adventurer's Hall and how afraid he had been at the time. He was more afraid now.

“Ian...” Xephyr began, but he was cut off.

“Whatever you're about to say to me, Xephyr, save it,” said Ian, not looking up. “We've said it all. I have nothing more to do with you, no matter what you have to say.”

“I need your help.”

“Do you?” Ian looked up, fire flashing in his eyes. “Xephyr, you needed my help a long time ago, and if you will recall I offered it and you threw it back in my face. I taught you how to make your way in this realm and how was I repaid? And now you have the gall, the unmitigated nerve to come to me now and tell me you need my help? I *cared* about

you, Xephyr. I wanted to see you do well here and go on to defeat the greatest threats the wizards could throw at us. I wanted to see you become guildmaster of the archers. Yes, I accepted that the monk's life was not for you. I could get over that. But to put your own advancement over your own health, your own ability to fend for yourself in a world that isn't always so cut and dried...over my friendship. You felt that sticking to the evil path was the fastest way to advance? Then you should have been a slayer or a guardian so I would have known not to waste my time on you."

Xephyr let him rant at him. He pushed down the urge to yell back. So much had changed just in the last day. A lot of what they all took for granted wasn't true. The quest had changed, and yet the goal remained the same. The old arguments about how Ian shouldn't tell Xephyr how to practice his skills by dictating what he could and couldn't kill and when were all moot now. But how to convince his old friend that they had to reunite for their own good as well as the good of Heimgaard itself? He wasn't even sure how he knew that Alrekr had been telling the truth. There were so many unanswered questions and yet...it had struck a chord with him that he could not ignore.

Finally he spoke, "You were right."

Ian seemed to relax for a moment and closed his eyes.

"You were right, Ian," Xephyr repeated. "There is more than my own advancement. I'm nearly at the end of the quest, but it doesn't end at the Government building. It ends in a hole in the sand in the middle of the desert, or else it ends with the entire realm being overrun by a demon lord."

Ian's curiosity, and Xephyr's wild statement, got the better of him. He looked up and said, "What?" and Etheracs came over and it was as if the old enmity between them had never been.

Xephyr quickly explained the situation, promising to go into more details about what Alrekr had told them as soon as he could. They needed Ian's weaponless fighting skills to defeat the new enemy, and they needed him to help them get new weapons of their own quickly.

After the explanation, Ian was thoughtful. At length he said, "I think I know something that may help. But it's pretty far away from here, we'll only have time to get this one thing before we'll have to head back."

"What is it?" asked Etheracs.

"There's an area to the southwest of the city where few go. It's a dead place, and the dead live there. Dark rituals are performed there. I've never heard of a vampire there, but zombies are supposedly common and there's supposed to even be a demon of night, but it's different from the demons you just told me about," Ian explained.

“How is that going to help?” Xephyr asked, a trace of anger creeping into his voice.

Ian glanced at him briefly. “There is an initiate of Dacheo there who stole an ivory wand that contained yet another kind of demon called Pentac. The legend goes that Pentac was bound by the priests of Dacheo into the wand because his jealousy caused him to attack other demons and destroy them.”

“Where are all the damn demons coming from?” remarked Etheracs.

“We’ve always had demons,” Ian said. “But they were created by wizards, or summoned by wizards if Alrekr is to be believed. Invited guests, if you will.”

“Will Heimgaard’s demons work against Ashtrez’a’s demons?” asked Xephyr.

“Possibly. Possibly not. But if they do, Pentac will be a powerful ally against them. The question we have to ask ourselves is, is it worth the time to go there and retrieve it?” Ian sat back, leaning against the bar. There was a lull in the conversation as they all considered the alternatives.

“I say we go get it,” said Etheracs. “It can’t be any worse than the bow I’m using now.”

Xephyr was quiet for another moment and then asked, “Ian, how do you know about all of this stuff?”

“Because I was killing everything in sight, good and evil, and learned everything I could. That’s what advancement is about.”

Xephyr looked abashed, but let the comment go. Instead he said, “Then let’s get moving.”

The three of them got up and left the inn, turning west out the door. They made their way out of the paved streets of Talis and into the plains briefly before turning south. The sun shone brightly and the air was cool with a slight breeze. Xephyr, who had been tense and nervous ever since the meeting with Alrekr, began to relax. As they continued south, however, clouds began to form. They passed into the western arm of the Metsallen Essora, skirting around the craggy Haral Talikar mountain range to the west, and walked among the trees for a while. A light rain began to fall.

At length they reached an overgrown path between two hillocks. The plants here were not the friendly and inviting green trees of the forest, but instead had a preponderance of vines, thorns, and other tangled underbrush. The colors were muted into greys, dull and lifeless, and the cloud cover overhead seemed thicker as they walked along the path. After several minutes on this grim route they found themselves at the head of a valley.

Trees, stripped bare of their leaves, their skeletal branches reaching up to the heavens, greeted them, along with an even more intense sense of foreboding than they had gotten

on the path leading here. Large black birds circled over the area calling with lonely, plaintive cries. They descended into the valley and found themselves at the entrance to a wood. None of them wanted to enter this grim, dead place.

“We don’t have to go into the forest,” Ian said. “And that’s good, because I’ve been in once and don’t care to repeat the experience. We turn east here.”

On the eastern trail, they began to see signs of habitation. Broken and fragmented cobblestones could be seen here and there along the path, evidence of a bygone age of glory before death and decay took the area. The three of them trod along dark, rich loam as they approached an altar and a hunched, robed figure.

“Amitul, Initiate of Dacheo,” Ian said.

Amitul was tall, but hunched over as if bearing a great weight. She had clearly once been quite beautiful, but her service to Dacheo and her possession of the wand housing Pentac, had changed her once handsome features into a mask of hunger and fear, suffering and pain. She glared at them with a dark hatred.

“Be you gone unless you have come to be sacrifice to the demon lord, Pentac,” she rasped.

“Do we have to talk to her?” asked Xephyr.

“No, she always does that,” said Ian. He leapt forward with animalistic ferocity and dug his talon rings into Amitul’s throat, ripping out a large chunk of flesh. Etheracs fired an arrow of light, and Xephyr brought his black and golden crossbow to bear on the priest. In the more humid environment of the forest, the arrow from the weapon was larger and embedded itself deeply in her side.

Amitul, despite the gaping wounds she had received already, showed no signs of giving up easily. She raked her sharp claws across Ian’s face and lashed out with her ivory wand. A black, scaled arm broke free from the wand and reached out, slashing Ian. Etheracs fired again, adding a blast of magic to her attack. Ian, ignoring the pain from the demon’s attack, kicked out and narrowly missed connecting with Amitul’s head. Xephyr fired another watery arrow which found its mark in the initiate’s left leg. She hobbled for a moment, then stopped.

Her eyes glazed over as she surrendered to the power of Pentac, her body limp, her wounds unimportant to her now. A moment later, she raised her arms and cast a terrifying globe of shadow at Xephyr.

Xephyr was consumed by the darkness. He saw a thousand bloodthirsty demons, hungry, eager to feast upon him. All other light and sound was blotted out by the shadowy projection, a manifestation of Pentac’s will, and Xephyr began to feel himself succumbing to the crushing darkness.

Outside the globe, Etheracs had fired three more arrows, each finding its mark in Amitul's body. After coming out of the trance, she had slashed at Ian again, but he had responded with a blow to her midsection, his talon rings gouging her flesh. As the initiate fell, the globe of darkness around Xephyr dissipated and he fell to his knees. He knelt there a moment before his hands glowed with the strong blue aura of a healing spell, and then he stood and walked over to the corpse of Amitul which was lying before the altar that she used to make sacrifices to Pentac.

He touched her body with a rod of transmutation, turning it into a pile of gold coins, and scooped it up. Left on the ground was an ivory wand and an obsidian ankh. They all stared at the objects for a few moments.

"Who wants it?" asked Etheracs.

"I think you should have it, Eth," said Ian. "Your current weapon is completely useless. Xephyr's at least has some effect."

Etheracs stared at the wand. She knew, logically, that Ian was right, but the wand frightened her. It was about two feet long, which nearly made it a polearm weapon, but not quite, especially in light of the brittle substance of which it had been constructed. Strange carvings, traced in crimson, adorned it on all sides and at the base was a small spike right where the wielder might be expected to grip it. Indeed, there were small indentations around the spike where previous users had held the weapon, eroding the ivory in that area with a firm and lengthy grips.

She slung her crystalline bow over her shoulder and nervously bent over to pick up the strange artifact. At her touch, the red markings seemed to flow, hidden power bubbling to the surface. She held it in two hands for a moment, and then wielded it properly. The spike sank deep into her hand, and her blood flowed into the grooves that defined the runes. She closed her eyes and felt the demon creeping up her arm, seeking to take control, but as it was confined to the wand it was weakened from its full power and she was able to exert her will and force it back. Opening her eyes, she found her hand pale from loss of blood, but the demon was placid for the moment.

"Good," Ian said, stooping over to pick up the ankh. "I'll take this and we'll be all set." He put the ankh on, wearing it like an amulet, and they marched out of the area, back to the dead forest, and then back to the living, and more comfortable, Metsallen Essora. After stopping briefly at the inn to tend to the wounds that Amitul had given them, they headed into the scorching desert. Xephyr had left Pesiel outside the demons' temple, so finding it again was relatively easy.

Once back down the hole, they headed south again. The demon that had greeted them before leapt out at them as they approached, remembering them from before.

"Guess he held a grudge," Xephyr said, taking aim with his crossbow.

“Many demons do,” said Ian, stepping into the battle and slashing at the demon with his claws. The claws did their work, ripping into the pale, purplish flesh. Etheracs held her new wand uncertainly. She wasn’t entirely sure what to do. She stepped forward, holding the ivory in front of her. The markings began to glow with a scarlet aura and she heard the voice of Pentac in her head, a harsh, guttural language that she could not understand. A bolt of magical force erupted from the tip of the wand and struck the demon, who wailed in agony. With three of them attacking with weapons that actually had some effect, the guard was quickly dispatched. As it fell, the corpse turned to vapor leaving behind a thick leather belt. Xephyr picked it up and put it on.

“Not a bad fit,” he said quietly. They continued south down the corridor and eventually came to an intersection where the hallway went to the east, west, or back north the way they had come. There were also two doors.

“A black, barbed arrow and a sprig of...something,” said Xephyr grimly.

“Mistletoe,” said Etheracs. “But with black berries instead of white.”

“Alrekr did say they were mimicking our guilds. These must be the archers and the druids. Do we want to try the doors or keep to the hallway?”

“Let’s stick to the hall for now,” said Ian. “I want to know the layout of this place before we get into major combat with anything tougher than that guard.”

The others agreed and they turned east. The wind from the desert had found its way into the hole they had come through, but by now it was a mere whisper. Xephyr fancied he could hear faint voices begging him to go back, but he dismissed them. They reached a turn in the corridor and began walking south. There they found a rough looking demon carrying a sturdy guisarme. Behind him was another door, at the top of which was a complicated rune.

“Let’s not kill him just yet,” said Ian. “We got lucky with that last one, he didn’t raise an alarm. It’s unlikely this one would either, but the deeper we get into the temple the more likely it is that we’ll run into something tougher. I want to know more first.”

Xephyr nodded and they all turned around and soon found their way back to the intersection and continued west. Again they came to a turn and began heading south, and again they came across a demon, this one tall and thin and carrying a blackened creese. Beyond it, another door, this one with a picture of a flask filled with a dark liquid.

Ian pondered a moment. “Alchemists? And what about the other one on the other side?”

“Priests, I thought,” replied Etheracs.

“Yes...I think I’m beginning to understand. Let’s go back. If I’m right, we’ll have to kill another guard in a moment, but it should be ok.”

They wound their way back through the temple to the point where they had started and then continued north. There they encountered a burly demon, flexing its muscles. They quickly dispatched it, its corpse evaporating just like the first one, and proceeded to explore the northern half of the temple, which turned out to be a mirror image of the southern portion. In this half they found symbols atop the doors depicting a lock, a wand, and a gloved fist. The fourth sigil was a simple black plate with no adornment at all. They retreated back to their starting position to discuss strategy.

“If what Alrekr told us was true, they should fight in a manner similar to what we’re used to,” began Xephyr. “We need to kill them quickly, though, because they have shown an ability to adapt. Their immunity to light-based attacks and a resistance to our strike spells, for example.”

“I agree,” said Ian. “I also believe they are gathering ingredients for a ceremony that will open a portal to their home dimension. Alrekr seemed to think that we should do that ceremony ourselves, but on a smaller scale to prevent the portal from being big enough for Ashtrez’a to get through so we could fight him in his own home.”

“Risky,” added Etheracs. “Fighting a demon on its home ground isn’t something I’m really looking forward to. But I think you’re right. They’re adapting to our realm fairly quickly. If those sigils really do represent the different guilds, they’ve already got imitators for eight out of the fourteen. Imagine if one of them manages to mimic a wizard.”

They all considered this. Alrekr’s assertion that they didn’t have the kind of power they had always thought they did was cold comfort in the face of the idea of a demonic wizard.

“So we’re agreed, then?” asked Xephyr, looking at the two of them. They nodded and turned to go back down the southern passage, turning east when they got to the intersection. They made short work of the guard and went through the door it had been guarding.

The room was from out of their worst nightmares. Sacrificial implements were strewn about and there was a thin layer of dried blood on nearly every surface. Xephyr’s stomach knotted at the sight and he had a strong desire to leave, but held firm. Standing near the back of the room was the demonic priest, his pale lavender skin almost completely obscured by the dried, flaking blood that he wore like a coat of honor. Grinning, and flexing his talons, the priest clearly took great delight in his work and made use of his natural abilities as well as the tools that were available to him.

“Greetings,” he rasped. His voice was clearly unused to speaking in their language. “Welcome to the Chamber of the Sacristan. We are aware of your desire to speak with our master. My name is Z’pak, and I can help you.”

They stopped, wary of what might happen next.

“I see you are doubtful. But I assure you, I can help you meet my master.” The demon glided across the room and picked up the entrails of his most recent victim, glancing at them casually before tossing them away.

Ian was the first to speak. “I suppose you’ll help us by sacrificing us to him?”

Z’pak glanced up. “Of course. But you will go directly to him, I promise you.”

“Just as I thought,” said Ian, running forward and driving his talon rings into the demon’s stomach.

Z’pak laughed and glared at Ian. The demon’s presence seemed to grow, filling the room with his unholy influence. Ian suddenly looked more vulnerable and less energetic, and all their lights went out, plunging the room into an impenetrable darkness. Ian slashed out again, but missed and felt the hot pain of talons ripping into his chest.

Etheracs rushed forward, holding the wand aloft, and heard again the voice of Pentac in her head. The magical energy that leapt from the wand came at an angle, seeking its target in the darkened room and finding it. It seemed Pentac could see in the dark. Z’pak let out a piercing wail and swiped at Ian again, opening a large and bloody gash across his face. The magical bolt from Pentac had, however, illuminated the room just for a moment, and Xephyr fired an arrow where he knew the demon had been just a moment before. He was rewarded with a sickening thud as the bolt found its home in the demon’s side.

Ian also took advantage of the brief illumination and began a series of rapid punches and kicks, several of which connected. A final bolt of magical energy from Etheracs finished the job. As he was cut down, Z’pak gave forth the tortured wail of one who knows he had failed and must answer to his master. The corpse evaporated, leaving nothing but darkness. Xephyr was the first to recast his starlight.

“What happened there?” he asked.

“I’ve never felt such evil,” Ian said, his voice shaking slightly. “His unholy presence disrupted my defensive spells. I can recast them, but we’ll need to make a run back to the inn.”

Etheracs went over and picked up a small bit of tattered parchment from the floor. There was also a bloody spatterdash, which the demon had worn to keep some of the blood off of his skin, but which they hadn’t noticed before because it was caked with the dried

remains of past victims and had blended in. She left it lying there and concentrated on the parchment. "I think we have the first piece of the puzzle," she said. "Looks like a ritualistic rune."

"Probably a guide," said Ian. "You two wait here, I'll be right back." He opened a misty portal and stepped through.

Waiting here hadn't been something Xephyr was planning on. The carnage in this room was preying on his nerves, making him uneasy. Luckily it wasn't too much longer before Ian came back through the door.

"I gated back to Pesiel and walked in," he explained. They went back into the hallway and headed back to the intersection. They chose the southeast door and went through.

Abundant plantlife greeted them, and the room would have almost been cheerful compared to the stony walls of the temple had it not been for the fact that the plants were all a lifeless shade of grey. Withered and dry, but not wilted, the plants looked as though they had had their life force taken from them suddenly. In amongst the plants was a demon holding a withered quarterstaff and a small bundle of berries. It looked at them.

"Welcome," it said, "to the Chamber of the Suffragan. I am Charmosk."

"Let's not have a whole conversation this time," said Ian, rushing forward and slashing at Charmosk with several rapid swipes from his claws. The demon's black blood flowed from its wounds, but it merely laughed and breathed on Ian. The werewolf coughed and staggered backwards. A flash of light indicated that Pentac had struck the demon with his magical onslaught, but rather than firing an arrow, Xephyr was attending to Ian.

Ian's fur was beginning to come off, and bits of his skin were flaking away. He twitched and fell to the ground, shaking spasmodically. Xephyr tried tending the disease away, his hands glowing with a yellow healing aura, but the spell failed. Ian began to gasp for breath. Xephyr tried again and this time the spell took hold and cured the disease, but the damage was already done. Ian lay there, too weak to move but not yet dead. Xephyr cast a healing spell and Ian began to come around.

Etheracs had nearly defeated Charmosk with Pentac's help, but she was growing uneasy. The demon lord's voice was becoming louder and more prominent in her head, and the strange words it uttered disturbed her. Another bolt of magic erupted from the wand, Pentac's fury against the lesser demon quite obvious, and the druid howled in pain. Glaring at Etheracs, it muttered an incantation and Etheracs felt her life force drain from her somewhat. The demon smiled and looked refreshed, but the smile was replaced by a look of panic as Ian leapt forward, once again slashing his foe with his talon rings.

The demon gave forth a horrifying scream and fell, its body evaporating as it hit the floor. Xephyr bent over and picked up the bundle of berries, leaving the withered quarterstaff behind.

On and on through the temple they went, each battle giving them greater cause for concern. The demons had mastered afflictions and magic spells and were showing more signs of adapting to the challenges they might face in battling the denizens of Heimgaard. In the Chamber of the Archer they defeated Bel, despite her use of a tranquilizer in her black arrows. They collected one that looked as though it might be made of glass.

Next they came to the Chamber of the Savant, where a demonic alchemist calling itself Mithsec challenged them with his knowledge of the elements. From this chamber they took a black flask filled with a clear liquid. In the northern half of the temple they came to the Chamber of the Armigerent and claimed a grim idol from Gnelba, the demonic fighter who surprised them with his strength and knowledge of weapons. In the Chamber of the Rosicrucian their strike spells were completely useless, but the demonic mage, Drylicul, showed them how their enemy had mastered the offensive magic themselves. A thin black wand was their reward for the battle there.

In the next chamber, however, they could not find their foe.

“You don’t think there’s one out there in the realm already, do you?” asked Etheracs nervously.

“I’m not sure,” replied Ian. Xephyr was looking around. The room had a long workbench littered with small tools and various bits of metal, many of which were unidentifiable. Other than that, the room was bare. Xephyr approached the bench and began sifting through the items on it when a gust of wind breezed by, knocking his hands away.

“It’s here,” said Xephyr quietly.

“Welcome to the Chamber of the Dacoit,” whispered a breathy voice. Each of them felt as though the words had been whispered directly into their own ears. “I am Yar’celn.”

Etheracs held the ivory wand aloft, but no bolt of magical energy was forthcoming. The demon’s mastery of the art of stealth was so complete that even Pentac could not discover it. Etheracs felt the demon lord gnawing at her mind, frustrated at not being able to strike down its foe.

A strong breeze whipped around the room and they all whirled to find its source, but no new sights greeted them. They heard a sinister laughing. “We know you have defeated the rest of us,” the voice went on. “And you may defeat me as well with your caged demon, but it is no matter. You still have my master and his greatest lieutenant left to face, and they shall make you kneel.”

The whispering was driving Xephyr mad. *This is worse than fighting Nim*, he thought. *Nim*. He reached into his bag and brought out the small crystal he had gotten from Ovin. “Recognize this?” he said defiantly.

The effect was instantaneous. A strong breeze blew through the room and Xephyr felt a sharp, agonizing pain as the demon's claws embedded themselves in his back. Xephyr fell to his knees as Yar'celn continued to stab him in the back. His hands glowed with a strong blue aura, but the demon's attack was relentless. A loud crack indicated that Pentac had struck the demon and Xephyr felt a sense of relief as the claws were removed. Now that they could see their foe, they dispatched him with relative ease, but when he fell the only remaining item was a transparent helmet. There was no item that might be used in a ceremony.

Xephyr was still bleeding on the floor. He had run out of energy for casting healing spells. Etheracs ran over and cast one for him, closing many of the wounds.

"We need to head back to the inn," said Ian. "We can find the item later."

"No," said Xephyr, standing up. "We need to find it now, then we can go heal ourselves." He staggered over to the workbench. "It has to be here somewhere. Yar'celn didn't want me searching here."

He sifted through the strange items for a few moments. The metals were an unknown alloy, shaped into tools and artifacts that he could not even begin to guess the origin or use of. At last he found what he was looking for and held it up.

"A key carved from a demon's tooth," he said triumphantly. It was long, thin, and pure white. "I'd say it fits that hole in the slab back down the hallway."

"You're probably right. Now we need to get back to the inn. We have one more demon left and Yar'celn seemed to think it would be a tough one," said Ian.

"And we still have Ashtrez'a," said Etheracs. As she said it, she felt Pentac bore a little further into her mind. *We have to finish this soon or we'll have two demon lords to worry about*, she thought.

They all gated back to the inn, using the grue in the attic as their target. The pathetic little thing waved ineffectually at them with its claws, but they paid it no mind. It had become so familiar that many adventurers almost regarded it as a pet and killing it was considered extremely rude. They descended the staircase, each ordered a healing draught, and gated back to Pesiel.

The sun was beginning to set in the desert and a warm breeze ruffled the falcon's feathers. Xephyr patted her on the head and gave her a morsel of minotaur flank.

"Nothing much going on up here, eh?" he said. The falcon squawked and gave the avian equivalent of a shrug. "Good," said Xephyr. "Just the way we like it."

“Can we go now?” asked Etheracs. The spike from the wand was digging into her hand and was becoming extremely uncomfortable.

“Yes, I think we’ve had enough rest,” said Ian. He looked at Etheracs worriedly.

The trio jumped back into the hole, plunging into the darkness of the temple. They made their way north, taking the western fork at the intersection, and then curving back to the north again where they met a lithe demon with a glassy black sword. The demon hissed at them, but Ian quickly leapt forward and dug his claws into the creature’s side. Etheracs pointed her wand at her enemy and a bolt of magical energy struck the demon directly. A small arrow from Xephyr was all that was required to finish it off, the corpse evaporating before it hit the ground.

They gazed up at the sigil above the doorway their now deceased foe had been guarding. It was nothing but a small square black plate, no adornment or design whatsoever. A sense of forboding stole over all of them.

“It’s a fair bet,” Ian said slowly, “that the demon behind that door is imitating a slayer.”

The seriousness of the words sank in quickly with the other two. The slayers in Heimgaard were notoriously evil and vicious, sacrificing hundreds of innocents in ritual whenever a new member joined their ranks. Zealous and ever-eager to find new ways to serve their wicked god, Shakan, it was always difficult to trust them and some had arcane powers that exacted a terrible price upon those who bore them. The thought of a demonic slayer, a being that would have to almost be the very embodiment of evil, gave them pause.

“I think we should try to kill it as quickly as possible,” said Xephyr. “I’m going to try some strike spells.”

“But they’re immune,” said Etheracs.

“They’re immune to *light* damage, but I think they were just resistant to the rest. I’m going to give it a try at least.”

“Fine,” said Ian. He had never been a big fan of offensive spellcasting, but he didn’t want to have the argument in this situation. “Let’s go.”

They went through the doorway, Etheracs first, then Xephyr, and lastly Ian, and found themselves in a completely bare room. Nothing on the floor, nothing on the walls, just a lingering stench of blood, although there was none in sight. It was as if there had been so much blood spilled that it had soaked into the stone. The demon was not readily apparent, but there was a pool of darkness in the far corner.

The darkness stood up. There was a movement, and the darkness moved aside, revealing the demon as it became obvious that the creature was holding a shield so black that it ate

the light around it like a black hole. It strode quickly to the center of the room and leapt upon Ian without a word, tearing into him with long serrated claws. Ian fought back, digging his talon rings into the slayer's pale lavender flesh, but he was bleeding heavily from the attack. Pentac spewed forth a bolt of magical force, driving the demon back temporarily, but it recovered quickly and slashed at Ian again. Ian's hands glowed with a strong blue aura, and some of his wounds closed, but the blood still flowed steadily. Xephyr fired his crossbow and cast a magic lance at his foe.

The demon moved with unnatural speed, dodging out of the spell's path and catching the magic in its hand as it sped past. Whirling around, it hurled the spell back at Xephyr where it caught him in the chest, staggering him for a moment. Xephyr was stunned...no creature in Heimgaard had ever done that before.

Ian cast another healing spell and rolled out of the way of another vicious attack by the demon. Etheracs winced as another bolt of magic flew from the wand, Pentac using extra force to exert its dominance over the foreign demon and send additional tendrils into her mind in the process.

"Well, strike isn't going to work," grumbled Xephyr, firing another small bolt from his crossbow, which struck accurately, but did little damage. He cursed the dry desert air. This was going to be harder than he had expected. The room lit up with a brilliant flash as Pentac again unleashed its fury against the demon. Etheracs dropped to one knee as the demon's influence drilled further into her mind. Ian slashed at his foe with his talon rings, but the slayer deftly dodged and then stopped. It began to blur around the edges, as if a piece of frosted glass had been dropped in front of it, and then it reached towards Ian, through his body, and then pulled back, gripping a small piece of glowing light. The demon released it and it began hovering, circling around its head. Ian fell backwards, just managing to roll out of the way again as the demon lunged for him once again. Ian scrambled to his feet, cried "Get out!" and ran back through the door.

Xephyr glanced at Etheracs, who was still fighting off the effects of Pentac's last barrage, and then was knocked down as the demon turned its attention to him. Xephyr felt the claws enter him as white hot knives, the serrations cutting easily into his flesh. He pushed his opponent off of him, rolled out of the way, and grabbed Etheracs by the arm. Helping her up quickly, they both rushed for the door. Back in the corridor, Ian was nowhere in sight. Xephyr cast a healing spell on himself. Etheracs collapsed against the wall of the corridor. Her hand was bleeding heavily from the spike in the wand she wielded, but no blood was dripping to the floor. All of it was being soaked greedily into the wand, satiating the desires of the demon trapped within.

"Unwield the wand," Xephyr commanded. "Let go of it now!"

"Can't," whispered Etheracs. "Too weak. Lost control." She stood up shakily and began heading back towards the door. Xephyr stood up and blocked her way.

"You can't go back in there."

"Don't want to," she replied. "But Pentac does." The demon had grown powerful enough within her to animate her movements. Xephyr grabbed the wand and tried to wrench it from her grasp, but the spike dug deeper and tore her hand. Etheracs cried out in pain and Xephyr released her.

Where's Ian? Xephyr thought. *He's got more experience with these evil monsters than I do. Who knew they had become so powerful?* In his panic, Xephyr was forgetting that these creatures were invading from another dimension.

Etheracs began heading for the door again, her wand glowing faintly in the darkness with Pentac's fury. Xephyr went to stop her, but she turned. Her eyes were black pits, ringed with a flickering white glow.

"Hinder me not, mortal," Etheracs rasped in an unfamiliar voice. "The foe you face is not beyond your abilities, but you will only defeat it at great cost. It is mine." She turned and stalked back through the door. Xephyr stood in shock, watching flashes of green and purple light emanate from the doorway, hearing unearthly sounds; unholy howls, loud cracks, and a strange, whistling wind.

Finally, Etheracs emerged. Her armor torn and singed in places, limping, and with a broken arm...but an evil, triumphant smile graced her face. Xephyr looked at her, raised his hands, concentrated a moment, and hit her in the face with a blast of earth energy. Etheracs' body crumpled to the floor, lifeless. After a moment a pale mist rose from the corpse and looked around.

"Thanks," she said. "I never thought I'd be glad to die, but thanks."

"No problem," said Xephyr. "Now let's get you back among the living and get on with it."

"Grab my corpse so we don't have to leave my stuff here," said Etheracs.

Xephyr did so and began to walk back towards the trapdoor that led back into the desert.

Author's notes:

This was my first year of doing NaNoWriMo, and to be frank the idea isn't terribly original. Even moreso than you might imagine. The entire world is based around a MUD called Asgard's Honor (asgard.aardmud.org port 5454). The protagonist characters are my own creation, but any NPCs they encounter are the creation of other wizards. I eventually registered the name Xephyr on the game with the intention of playing him up to a certain level just to give the novel some context. But when I made the word goal for NaNo, my interest waned and I never actually completed the story. It's probably going to take another 10k words to really bring it to completion, and I'm not sure where I want it to go with the whole meta-game of the wizards. Ultimately Xephyr was to find out that everyone was being controlled by the Users in the Real World, but I'm not sure what he would do with that knowledge.

Special thanks go to Broderdue (aka Ivar Lund Frølich) for help with the Kraan language, which he tells me is mostly made up, but is based loosely on old Norwegian verbs and such.