Salvation Earth

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1 Expedition North

The Moon was full, orange and low as if it was an effort to escape the horizon. There was a chill in the night air, but he did not feel it. The warrior knelt and scooped up some soil, which he rubbed between his fingers, put to his nose and then smelt. This was supposed to be the cleanest soil in all the lands. The wind whistled through the bushes. He glanced back across the commune; he had his own bitterness to shield him from realities. Razzan and Jarrad walked the outer walls like ghosts. It wasn't his watch, but he couldn't sleep again and Harrad was glad of the rest. His mind drifted back to the hill due south. The gatehouse tower was level with it and the cross was visible in moonlight. For nights, he had stood up there watching the cross. Now, he had only to close his eyes to see it again. He had no tears of grief, only a cold deep hatred. He wanted to kill. He could fight now with a fury before unknown. He could fight without fear, he wanted to die. Such a warrior makes a fearsome opponent.
He never understood the taboo of taking a life in anything but combat. "They never told me it would be like this," he thought. Revulsion tore at his soul.

He had seen so many of his people die a slow lingering death from the poison spread on their lands in the Great War many generations before. His enemies had better lie low for he would not rest until he bathed in their blood or died in the attempt. Death now obsessed him. What was the point of living only to die a death of pain and horror that lasted six months? A death which took most by the age of forty-five. Even in the commune, with its clean soil, the death took his father at fifty. He felt cheated, there was still so much unsaid, things he should have done. He felt an overwhelming loss, leaving him an empty shell. "They never said it would be like this." He cried. “It must have been the kindest thing to have done. None survived it. Father had seen three months’ pain, crying out for release. Yet when it came, the look of horror on his face would be with me forever. Did he blame me? It was so quick, one thrust of the blade and it was over. Was it not the release he wanted? But the look on his face, disbelief, almost accusing me. I couldn't even explain. They didn't tell me it would be like this. The pain,” he thought in torment. “I have slain my own father." He cried again.

"He has completed his cycle," a voice behind him said. "It is the way. You have always told us that good can come from evil. His passing makes way for you to bring your woman here." Arran turned.

“And that, Harrad, gives me a good reason for killing him?”

“We all know why you did it. It was the kindest thing to do.”

“But I did not realise that having such a benefit from my father’s death would cause so much guilt. I cannot live with it, Harrad.”

“It will pass. Send for her. She will take your mind off your worries.”

"Harrad, she can't travel, the baby."

"That's what I came to tell you, stillborn."

"Not another," said Arran. "We can hardly give her a joyous welcome. It's a wonder the women don't give up. The birth rate is so low I sometimes think one good war and humanity would die out."
“Perhaps it is the will of the Gods.”
“Fool, Harrad. Why should the Gods punish us?”
“Our law says that we must not exceed a particular population level, or the Com will suffer. Does it not seem strange that we have never had a problem with the number born? If they all survived, we would have to be turning them out to a harsher, shorter life. The Gods only allow the strongest through. Goodnight, Arran.”

The sun burnt its way into Arran’s room when he eventually fell out of bed "Ooh," he moaned. "Must stop drinking. But I can't sleep without it." He steadied himself on the bedpost. A knock at the door and Harrad stepped in.

"So, you're awake, eh? Everyone is getting a little restless. It's been two weeks and you're supposed to be our leader now. You should show them strength.”

"Is there still no sign of Zeb?" asked Arran.
"Stop this foolishness," said Harrad. "In three days, you must lead the trek to Cam."
"But he promised he would come this moon."
"You must call on Nadine and tell her the news. She has waited a long time."
"Only Zeb will know, he knows all, Harrad. He has travelled these lands and more."
"He knows nothing," said Harrad. "You must give up these ideas, life must go on. Cast off this gloom, Arran."
"I will revenge us all, Harrad."
"Maybe, but I would find it a great help if I knew what you were talking about or if you even knew yourself. You're not going to achieve anything like this, not enough sleep and too much wine. You were the most able amongst us. You must resume your martial training, double your programme. You must be in shape in five days. It will keep your mind from other things and help you sleep."

"Good old Harrad," said Arran as the door closed. "He is so organised. Not the best of warriors, but he could run a good war. Make a bloody good general he would. I just wish he would not fuss so."

The next five days were spent in vigorous training and exercise. Arran was still excused his chores. On the third night in the workroom
he was making a new sheath for his knife when he was approached by Elven "You know that you promised to take me this time."

"Elven, I have enough on my hands."
"I am fifteen now, a warrior. I won't be a burden."
"Ah, a warrior. Have I ever broken a promise to a warrior? You shall have your wish. We leave on the dawn in two suns. Do you think you can be ready, young warrior?"
"Why, yes. Does the sun fail to rise each day?"

The first rays of sun struck the gatehouse from over the east hills. The rest of the Com was in half-light, but there was plenty of activity. Hands hauled on ropes, pulleys squeaked, timbers creaked as the barrows were lowered to the ground. The tower faced west, its gateway filled in with stone many generations ago to keep out robbers and marauding bands. Everything had to be lowered from the tower. The whole complex was contained within a huge oval wall sixty feet high. Terraced gardens stepped down from the top of the wall to a central oval garden, all of it given to growing food. On the top levels, fish were bred in large tanks. The fish waste was used as a source of nutrients for the plants. Thus, they had a contained system with no outside contamination. Beneath the terraces were dwellings, workshops, a gym and the rabbit pens, the people’s main source of meat, though most of it went for trade. Legend has it that the place was built for games, but no one knew what sort. The central gardens, stretching over a quarter of a mile, were planted with soya, other beans and vegetables. The terraces were planted with potatoes and food for the rabbits. This smallholding only supported four hundred people. This number was strictly adhered to. Rabbit’s goats and sheep were the only domestic animals left. There were plenty of rats of course, and the people in the small towns would happily devour them.

People were starting to move about in the lower gardens. Smoke drifted from the forge chimney. Nazine and Maleem were turning the capstan that pumped water up to the terrace cisterns. The women did not take their men’s name exactly, but something similar, perhaps what they thought the female version would be.

“I hate this job. I think it’s the worst job on rota,” grunted Nazine.
“We all do a turn, Naz,” replied Maleem. “Even the men take a turn.”

“This is men’s work, it’s too heavy for women.”

“Are you implying that we are weaker?” asked Maleem.


“Because we are not ordinary women. We are warrior women. Part of the greatest warrior clan in the lands and we should be proud of it,” spat back Maleem.

“So where does pride get you, I ask?” countered Nazine.

“We are better than most men outside of this Com.”

“So what? Where does it get you? Hard work, that’s all. I tell you it’s not the way,” said Nadine. “Look at that Gemma. You see the cut on her new tunic she just ran up?”

“Yeah, it suits her. She has a fine figure, she should show it off.”

“Show it off,” laughed Nazine. “She is practically giving it away. And do you see the way she limps a lot and faints occasionally. The men all rush to catch her in their arms.”

“Well, she is on the slight side, Naz,” said Maleem.

“Slight! I wouldn’t call her chest slight. It probably drains her strength dragging it around.”

“Oh, grow up, Naz. I do believe you are jealous,” laughed Maleem. “Just you take heed. She gets out of all the heavy work, and Gem does not like the way the others look at her. I tell you, no good will come of it.”

“Nonsense,” retorted Maleem.

“Have you noticed how thick she is with Tarrak? There is something going on between those two.”

“You are stupid. Tarrak is as queer as they come. Everybody knows that. Most women relate to Tarrak.”

“I’m not so sure about him. The times are a changing, Mal. Take Arran, killing his own father. It is written not to kill in anything other than combat. No good will come of it, you’ll see.”
“Well, I think it was a brave thing to do. I’m surprised no one’s done it before. There is enough killing outside of these walls. I think it was a strong thing for him to do. He has now got to bear the burden of that.”

“Times are a changing, you mark my words,” warned Nazine.

Arran looked below. The last barrow was on the ground loaded with rabbit cages and the excess furs that were not needed. The people had to trade everything they could for iron, grain and salt from the outside, three of the four main commodities of power and wealth. It was an enormous strain on their system. The one advantage was the quality of their meat. They had the healthiest animals in the land. But it was still a hard trade, and all had to be hauled over land to the town of Cam, a journey of fifty miles, and three days’ travel with the constant threat of attack by bands of robbers. If word got out that a food train was on its way to Cam, it would attract undesirables by the hundred, and most of them extremely dangerous.

The leader was not normally required to make this journey. Most of the men fought for a turn, but Arran wanted to get out away from the confinement of the commune. He picked up his broadsword and helm, bid farewell to those around him and ran down the stairs, which lowered alongside the lift platform. Leaping the last few steps to the ground he called out, "Gem and Jordan up front, not too far, but I want good warning of trouble. Vargen and Mallen trail, and don't get lost. It's a blow that Zeb has not made it, he would have been useful company." Arran flung his helm into a barrow.

"Elven stay close, don't make too much noise and keep your eyes open." Arran did not like travelling with a supply train. It made too much noise. On their own, his men were stealth itself and slipped silently through the land unnoticed.

Looking up Arran yelled, "We will make good time, Harrad. Make fast the keep." Arran watched as the platform and stairs were raised, turned and caught up with the others.

At least the first night of the journey would be safe. They would stay at the Jarsad Malkem holdings, a fortified dwelling built by two families and comprising of some five hundred people. They farmed the surrounding land which produced mainly grain and some goats. These
families were some of the more fortunate in a land that produced little. It was good quality grain and Arran traded fur and meat for it. Its farmer Militia were always on the alert. Once trained these people also made fearsome opponents because they had something to fight for, unlike the official soldiers that policed the area, a band of vagabonds under the command of the Baron of Cam. They were undisciplined bullies who needed to outnumber their opponents before they were brave.

Arran’s spirits were high. He was beginning to enjoy being in the lands again, rough as they were. The time passed quickly and uneventfully. They were nearing the Jarsad Malkem holdings and the place of his beloved Nadine. His memories of recent events were already beginning to fade, replaced by thoughts of the joy ahead. Arran was glad that on his return he could take Nadine back to the Com with him, to its greater safety. Strong though the house of Jarsad Malkem was, other such great houses had been known to be sacked. There was a large number of robber bands about, even with the Baron of Cam policing the lands.

The baron had a limited control over the lands, although he thought it absolute. He taxed the great houses and in return had units of his soldiers patrolling the lands. Alas, far too few for the size of the land. Small bands of robbers went unnoticed. So, the great houses were just strong enough to keep out the smaller bands whilst leaving any larger threat to the baron's men, hopefully. But like a lot of badly paid soldiers that were also badly trained and without discipline they were less than brave. A large band would see them off without a fight. The soldiers sometimes caused more trouble than they were worth. Thinking on this, Arran smiled at the fact that his Com was the only dwelling that did not pay tribute to the baron. The baron seemed happy to have the next strongest force on his southernmost flanks, and trading with him for the best meat around. However, the baron remained deeply suspicious and felt uncomfortable with a strong force beyond his control, but it seemed to work.

Arran could see the house plainly now its red brick walls and the absence of windows on the ground floor. East and west wings four floors high, huge doors towering two stories high, a noble house
indeed. He could see someone in the watchtower, caught by the last rays of the sun. The people were all pleased to see him take Nadine for his wife. They were a popular couple and it was a union of the two greatest houses. A joining of meat and grain, a truly powerful union. Suddenly, there she was, rushing towards him, trailed by Zeel and Jon.  
"We couldn't stop her," shouted Jon as Nadine leapt into Arrans arms.  
"Nadine, darling," said Arran. "I am so sorry for your loss, our loss."

"It's OK, we'll have more."

At seventeen, she was as light as a feather and as fragile as a flower in his hands. He knew the danger of choosing an outsider for she must have consumed more poison than his own people and could fall to the sickness any time, but his law said they must bring in new people now and then. Law and logic, however, had nothing to do with his choice.

Arran stared into the fire barely hearing a child's voice complaining about rabbit stew again. He forced his mind back to reality. The fire was hot. It made him feel even more tired. It was early spring, and the nights were still cold.

Arran turned to Hal Jarsad and said, "I know last year's harvest was not good, but can you supply us till next harvest?"

"We shall always supply you. We have been extremely careful this winter, but everything rests on a good harvest this year."

People were clearing up and retiring to bed. Arran lay stretched out in front of the fire in the great hall. Hal said his goodnights and disappeared. Nadine came and snuggled up against him.

"I've waited a long time," she said. "Your father's death has deeply affected you. You must not allow the deceased to affect the living. We will join them soon enough."

"I know," said Arran. "The times that I have said the same thing to others, and could not understand why they could not accept it logically. Now everything just seems so pointless, I feel so uneasy. All my life has been based on logic and now it does not mean a thing. I'm falling down a hole in my mind. I've lost my bearings."

"Everyone goes through that. It will take time, but you will come out of it."
"And will I ever be the same again?" asked Arran.
"Of course, you will. It will just take time."
"Nadine, I feel so uneasy, it's almost painful."
"Well, you're not alone, there's a lot of it about."
"What do you mean?"
"The baron’s patrol was here last week. They were restless and talked of war."

"What? Where? When?" cried Arran snapping out of his doze in confusion.
"I don't know. They would not say. But something is very wrong, and they were asking about your place."
"You had better start at the beginning," said Arran, wide awake now.
"As I have said, it’s not what they said to us. I overheard the talk of war when they thought that no one was listening. It was their behaviour that alerted me. They usually have an air of being in charge, sort of dominant. You know what I mean."

Nadine continued “We just laugh, but they are normally, open, nosy, jolly, into everything, chasing the girls etc., like big kids. Well, I have never seen such a change. They were quiet and kept to themselves, almost walking around in a bunch with their heads together muttering. I would say that they were very concerned."
"What did they ask about my place?"
"How many you are, the size of your Com, how well protected, arms, food and so on."
"Why has Hal not told me?"
"He does not know. It’s only because I jump at the mention of your name that I noticed and kept my ears open. Most of it came from guards and duty staff who were asked just one question each. Not enough for anyone to suspect there was an enquiry going on. Is it true that you don't pay the barons tax?"
"Who told you that?"
"You did."
"Well, keep it to yourself."
"I'm afraid," said Nadine "I fear the baron is planning to destroy you."

"No, there is more to it than that. My warriors are worth ten of his solders. He would have great difficulty in taking the Com. You know that to raise a full army the baron must call on the support of the great houses. No one would support him, for if they went against one of the alliance, it could be their turn next. That is why it works, a balance of power. You know these days the farmer warrior is a more fearsome opponent than many regular soldiers because he has something to fight for rather than just being paid to fight. Assuming he is well trained, of course"

"But they both have something to die for," replied Nadine. "Death in combat is far better than the death itself."

"That may be, but it is common to all of us. Look at the baron’s men, lazy vagabonds who get a guarantee of food, do no hard work, just hard drinking and easy living, kill robbers for sport and anyone else who gets in their way. It's only the baron that prevents them from being more feared than the robber bands. Alone, there isn't a true warrior amongst them."

"Look, Arran, I know that your warriors average almost a foot taller than everyone else, live longer and outfight ten times their number, but we are talking about the baron. His control is absolute. The last great house that opposed him was totally destroyed."

"That was before our time, and it was his grandfather, I believe. No, we have the confidence of the great houses. They would not help him. They would not like to see him in total control."

"But there is a great deal of suspicion of you amongst the baron's men."

"They are of little importance."

"There are great mysteries surrounding your Com."

"Nadine, you know the reasons for our isolation."

"Yes, but I can't help fear for you, us. Things are looking so wonderful I keep thinking that I'll wake up."

"Do not fear for me, Nadine. Pray for me, and pray that I might escape the death, that my passing be a clean one."
The morning came quickly, and the warriors were assembled by first light. Nadine packed them some bread and goats cheese. There was a great bustle in the courtyard, the farm workers preparing to go to the fields and the warriors loading their barrows. Nadine said, "I can’t wait another week. I am going with you."

"No. It's too dangerous."

"Then I will face it with you. It's been years since I went to the town. I don't want to be locked up for the rest of my life. Where you go, I go."

"You won't like it."

"Let me see for myself. I have packed food for two and my clothing."

Nadine said her farewells. Nadine's mother was tearful one. Hal comforted her. "She's in the best possible hands, he said."

Arran marched swiftly through the troop and shouted "Formation. Gem and Jordan scout, Vargen and Maleen trail. I know it's one of your favourite jobs."

The barrows made little noise as the earth was soft, sandy with a course grass. There was little cover to hide the group’s progress, but only once that day did they see Gem and Jordan in the distance.

The next day the gently rolling hills levelled out to a bushy undergrowth giving them cover for the first time.

"Our journey becomes more sheltered now," said Arran, as he stopped at another of Jordan’s earth signs, a small elongated pyramid of stones pointing north. "We turn due north now. This is the last sign today. We camp soon."

"How do you read all that in the sign?" asked Nadine.

"Years of training," answered Arran.

They set up camp a few miles on. It was an uneventful night, but everyone was a little excited and it could be heard in the general hum of activity. The next day continued much the same, miles of bushy undergrowth, people too excited to notice their surroundings. By evening, the bushes had thickened considerably, and the light was disappearing alarmingly fast as they reached the depth of the undergrowth. There was a whistle from some thick bushes ahead.
"There they are," said Arran. Gem and Jordan held open the bushes and everyone passed through. They had a small fire going, the smoke filtering through the leaves.

"We can't be seen here," said Jordan. "We can build the fire up once it's fully dark, and there is no trace of anyone being around here before."

"That's good, little chance of being disturbed," said Arran.

"No, not just here, but for miles around. The bushes are thicker, like they have never been cut. There's too much firewood lying around and there are no paths leading into this area. It is like it is taboo. We don't normally go this way, but with the signs we saw yesterday and what we heard back at the house, we thought we would take the quiet route. I don't like it, there is something very wrong here."

"OK, double the watch," said Arran. "And I was looking forward to a peaceful night. Go and guide in Vargen and Malone."

"Is it safe here?" asked Nadine. "I have an uneasy feeling."

"Don't go getting jumpy on me. There's not many who can trail us, and no one is expecting us."

"I felt it as soon as we approached and stronger as we entered the thicket, like a heavy burden on me. There is something here, I can feel it," said Nadine.

"I have doubled the watch, no one can get through."

"No, you don't understand. It's already here, it was here when we arrived."

"Then we will search the area." Arran and Gem walked off to organise the search leaving Nadine unpacking some rations.

"What can Nadine know?" asked Gem. "I told you the area is safe."

"You know she is blessed with some of the divine powers. She can tell if a person is true or false, some sort of mind contact. A thorough search please."

The search revealed nothing and almost everyone relaxed. People were moving around the fire, heaping dead leaves to lay their cloaks on for bedding and sending shadows dancing wildly around the camp. Nadine thought it was all very spooky.

"Jordan is a long time. Aren't you worried?"
"I would be more worried about anything else out there if it bumped into him," called out Argot on overhearing her.

"How can you be so casual?" she replied.

"We have no fear," Argot said. "We are trained beyond such emotions. Fear is the destroyer. Fear is only an emotion, it does not exist. From our teachings, in times of stress, such emotions only confuse the mind when pure logic is needed most."

"Now sleep, we must rest. We have a long way to go".

Nadine curled up in Arran's arms and thought, "I must not sleep until I know that the other three are safe." Everyone seemed asleep. Perhaps we are being watched now," she thought. Nadine became more and more sure that she could see eyes looking in from the bushes. She was fighting off sleep as it pulled at her mind. She could hear movement. Was it Vargen arriving back? She looked around, jumped up and stared. She could see nothing. Not even her hand in front of her face. She reached out with her foot, where Arran should have been. Nothing. "Where could he have gone? Why was it so dark? What happened to the fire?" She wondered. She had never experienced such total darkness, as if she was blind. She could not sense anyone around her. "Hello," she called. "Is there anyone there? Where is everyone?" Her words echoed, not likely in a wood. She was still too curious to be afraid. She reached out and took a step forward. Her hand touched a wall. It was the smoothest wall she had ever felt. The floor was smooth as well. "I'm indoors," she thought. "The others have not left me. I have left them!" Her eyes started to hurt from forcing them open. "I have never experienced such total darkness." She thought. She stood still and listened. There was a sound to her right. "I will go that way, it must be the warriors looking for me. Yes, I must have sleep-walked into a cave," she said, trying to reassure herself for a moment, she felt relief and walked along with her left hand running along the wall. After a while, although the sounds grew louder she realised they were still a fair way off. "The warriors would not make so much noise," she thought. Fear crept up on her, panic swept over her as she thought, "A cave with smooth walls and floors? Oh, no." "Fear is the destroyer," she chanted over and over as she walked along. The sound was still a way off. It was an echo and not as near as she
had thought. She made her way along for a hundred yards or so when suddenly the wall vanished. It had turned a corner. The ground here should be level, but she realised that she had been going down. The noise, which had stopped began again, a shuffling sound, now much louder. It wasn't around the corner. Nadine stood frozen, realising this she thought, "Why am I so slow to notice everything? It must be fear. Now I understand why it is the destroyer, it makes you too slow to function." “Move," she thought. "I must make conscious effort, push myself. She walked forward ten paces or so and her hand touched another wall. She could detect an echo on both sides. "Tunnels," she thought. “I have come out of one into another, a T-junction, and the sound is approaching from my left. It does not sound human either." Another wave of panic swept over her as her mind imagined all manner of unpleasant creatures. She ran to her right, keeping her hand on the wall, panic now guided her. Now she knew it was not a cave, but a tunnel made by something, and it must be underground. "I have been kidnapped," she sobbed, tears rolling down her cheeks. She stumbled along, falling twice over unseen debris and came to an exhausted halt with her heart bursting in her chest. Once calm, she listened for the sound. It was farther away. She had a breather, it was either too slow or didn't know she was there. She moved on now as quietly as she could. About half a mile on, she found a small door in the wall and a short tunnel beyond it. There was a faint glow at the other end. "At last, light, I might see something," she thought, her fear beginning to subside. She crawled down the passage and out the other end. There was an orange square glowing faintly on the ceiling of a cavernous room. She walked over to it. Dim as it was, it took her eyes a while to adjust to its light. The floor was covered with earth and there were fungi everywhere. She was exploring further across the room when she heard something coming her way. It was near to where her little tunnel was. She would be cut off, nowhere to hide. She backed away, her fear rising again. Two large dark shapes appeared in the gloom shuffling towards her, the footsteps softened by the earth. She stood frozen, stifling a scream, her heart racing, feeling like it would explode, and her brain racing even faster. Then, two broad, stooped, humanoid figures covered with long hair lumbered into the
dim light looking like everyone's worst nightmare come true. She did
the only thing her wheeling brain would allow, and she turned and
fled.

She did not count the turns she made, or judge how far she travelled
and did not see any more lights. She stopped and fought to get her
breathing back under control. Now she was hopelessly lost. Her
chances of retracing her steps were well and truly gone. Regaining her
calm, Nadine realised that she must keep moving, she would not get
out standing still. Moving again with her earlier caution, she edged
along the wall back the way she came. She could hear more noise
down here. It seemed that the deeper she went, the more activity there
was. She had to get back to where she started.

After an hour or two, she could not tell, still feeling along the wall,
having made several turns but not finding any more doors, she
stopped. She thought she heard something just to her right. She froze,
controlled her breathing like Arran had taught her and listened. If it
was something, it was too close. Nadine thought she could hear
breathing. Or was it her imagination? She slowed her breathing and
heart and put every effort into her hearing. Yes, there it was again,
faint but close, too close. It had slowed, and the sounds exactly
matched her own breathing. She was wondering if it was just an echo
or her own breathing she could hear when something hairy brushed
across her face and a hand laid upon her forehead.

She screamed a scream of wild terror that would have made the
most fearsome warriors nervous. Then another hand grabbed her.
Then, another and another. She struggled and fought, and the more she
fought the more hands grabbed her. A face appeared in front of her,
she heard her name. Slowly, she recognised the face, it was Arran. It
took a moment to realise that she was safe. Arran was saying over and
over "'Twas only a bad dream, it's all right." Nadine threw herself into
his arms. "Oh Arran, there are tunnels with black hairy men in them."

"No, it was a dream, that's all. You're safe."

"I know when it's real, that was no dream."

"My love, you never left the camp."
"Look, what's this then?" holding up her left hand, the finger tips bleeding where the wall took the skin off when she ran along it in panic.

"That's not possible," said Arran

"Well," said Nadine, "possible or not. I am not staying here. There is great evil here. It drew me away from here and was so powerful that not only could I not resist, but I could not identify what it was. I had no control whatsoever, Arran. I don't like that. I think it is underground, below us. Take me away from here now. We cannot stay here."

"You are overreacting," said Arran, holding her close.

"No, I am not. I can feel it all around us. I told you that as soon as we arrived. We must leave now. Please, there is great danger here. There is something probing my mind, pictures forming. Oh no, I see the tunnels again and a face forming. Ugh, it's so dark and dingy down there. Hold on to me, don't let me forget where I am, it's trying to draw me away. What if it's not restricted to people sleeping? Maybe its power is growing."

"It's all right, I've got you. Vargen, break camp, I want us out of here now. Come on, let's get clear of this place."

Arran led the men walked through the bushes and on until Nadine felt the threat go. There they waited for the others to appear. Shock overtook Nadine who began sobbing. "Arran, the face, it's like an animal in human form. It wants me below ground, I am scared."

"Don't be. We will put several leagues between us before dawn." Soon, they were all well on their way and as the eastern sky brightened, they could make out the area behind them as a small wood, one of the thickest they had ever seen, laying in a small hollow.

"We are well clear of that now. Are you sure you are OK now?"

"I'm fine, in fact I've never felt better, now that the fear has gone. I'm sorry I couldn't control it, it's the unknown you see. I've got the strangest feeling, you know. I don't think that there was anything to fear after all."

"Well, you certainly fooled me."

"Hey, I was confused into panic. I could not understand what was happening. I think whatever it was, was trying to communicate, but we
did not seem to be in tune, probably because of my terror and fight to get away. You see, for two minds to communicate they must reach out for each other, want to touch each other. You can't force your way into someone's mind. I'm sure I felt it wanted help. Feelings are easier to transmit than words. There is something very sad there."

"Well, we won't go near there again. It's light now, we should be in Cam by dusk," said Arran.

On they toiled, the barrows large wheels giving little resistance over the rough ground, the warriors taking turns in pushing or hauling. By the time they stopped for their midday meal, their destination could be seen far into the distance. Arran pointed out a blur near the horizon. Before they had finished their meal of the usual dried rabbit and oatcake, Jordan warned Arran that there were soldiers approaching. Most of the warriors melted into the undergrowth. Arran, Nadine, Jordan and Elven remained in the open. Six soldiers walked along the path.

"Identify yourselves in the name of the baron," cried one.

"Arran of Greyhaven on route to Cam to trade with the baron," replied Arran.

"Welcome, Arran of Greyhaven, your arrival is expected. We shall return with word of your coming, in the name of the baron," cried the soldier giving a formal salute which Arran returned with a tap on his chest with his fist as was the custom. The soldiers turned and marched off down the trail.

"Ha, those vagabonds won't get there any faster than us, even with our barrows," laughed Jordan. They all grinned but made no comment.

By mid-afternoon Arran and his troop marched past a group of very relaxed soldiers lying by the roadside. The soldiers looked at each other in silence as the group marched by. On they toiled through the afternoon. Arrans group reached the outskirts of town as dusk began to fall. It was early spring and night fell quickly, leaving a short day for travelling. They hurried now to beat the night. The road now passed between small groups of tiny dwellings, gathered together like little villages. Arrans troop were beginning to pick up a trail of children who followed them in the hope of food. Finally, the group crossed the
southern meadows overlooked by the city wall. The baron forbade building on this land. It was kept clear, free of cover for any would-be attacker. The city gate was open, but instead of the usual two guards, there were four.

"Halt," one cried. "State your name, business and origins."

The group was tired and huddled into their fur cloaks. They had been through the odd patch of sleet and were all cold. They wanted to get in the warm rather urgently. Three more soldiers ran up looking nervous.

"Arran of Greyhaven. Here to trade."
"Is there anyone here that can vouch for you?"
"The baron."
"I'm sorry, please enter our city. May your stay be profitable."
"We're here every quarter."
"Where will you be staying?" asked the guard.
"The Roundhouse."
"You may not get in. I would recommend the Hog’s Head down at the water bay."
"Thank you."

They moved through the gate and across the square.
"They know who we are," said Arran.
"Well, I do hope we get a room at the inn I'm dying of cold. I just want to sit in front of a huge roaring fire all night," said Nadine.
"We will get a room all right. There are never enough travellers to fill the inns. Not many can afford it. Those on business usually stay with the people they are dealing with."
"We have never been stopped at the gate before, have we?" said Razzan.
"Where is this Roundhouse?" asked Nadine.
"Over the river. There is nothing much on this side, it's quite rough."

They marched over the bridge and along the broad central avenue. It was almost dark when they stopped outside the Roundhouse.
"Just in time," Nadine said cheerily.
Their heads held higher and their faster movement showed the growing excitement that they all felt. Arran, Nadine, Razzan and Jared went inside. It was a very old building, unusually sturdy and too large for a normal inn, but it made the most impressive hostelry known. Inside was immense; a huge hall with a bar, like most taverns, to the left of the door, but it had a sea of tables and chairs and a mass of people. Arran had never seen it so full. This did not mean that all the people were staying. The inns relied on sales of ale rather than guests, but he noticed that many of them were well-dressed. They must be from the great houses and can afford to stay. He fought his way to the bar. Two poor wenches were doing their best to serve under a barrage of abuse and crude remarks.

"Innkeeper, innkeeper can't you keep this lot under control?" asked a customer.

"Do you want the job?" replied a small round man that flustered by. He slammed four flagons on the bar and turned to fetch more.

"It's been getting worse all week," he went on, amongst cries for ale.

"My friends and I need accommodation."

"No chance. We are full, over full. You won't find any round here. Try the south side, it's your only hope."

"Hog's Head here we come," said Razzan.

"I can't manage another step," sighed Nadine. "What's a hog, anyway?"

Back outside the others looked up hopefully. But when Arran told them, he noticed their dismay. Elven looked fit to drop, but was too proud to say.

"The road's good here, easy on the barrows. Nadine and Elven can ride on them."

"I'm not a girl, I can make it," Elven protested.

"We will need to guard the barrows, an hour each. Elven can take the first watch. I want you fit and rested when we get there, so get on it, that's an order."

"Yes, sir."

Back to the river they toiled, across the bridge, turned left and along the quay. It was dark now and there was little moonlight. The
buildings shed very little light and were huddled together like they were afraid.

"By the ancestors, this place is creepy. Are you sure it's down here?" asked Razzan. "We will all end up in the river if we are not careful."

"This is where the innkeeper said," replied Arran. "Keep together, it can't be much further."

They crept along past barges moored along the quay. Soon they could make out the sound of merriment and their mood lifted. The Hog’s Head was a dump. Falling down and shored up, it didn't look as though it would last the night, but the laughter from within was encouraging.

Arran, Razzan and Jarrad went in. It was gloomy, noisy and full of river people, who all went quiet as the warriors entered.

"Well, at least they have a roaring fire," cheered Razzan.

"Innkeeper, have you any empty rooms?" enquired Arran.

"We only have two, and one of those is the loft. It is very large though."

"Smile on you, friend. That is perfect for our requirements. We will take them."

"And hot food," said Vargen.

"And ale," said Razzan.

"We only have fish head soup."

"Ah, ale and soup all round then, in that order innkeeper," demanded Razzan.

"We have barrows we would like to put somewhere safe," said Arran.

"We have a yard next to us where goods from the river are stored. It’s pretty much empty now, but I wouldn't say it was safe. I'll get you the key anyway. With that he ducked out the back and reappeared with a large key. Arran gave the key to Jarrad. "Get the barrows away. Tell Elven to stay awake."

"It's done," said Jarrad already at the door.

Soon, the weary travellers were all seated round the fire. The river people slowly went back to talking, even though one group had to
move from the fire to accommodate the damp warriors, who now sat around in steaming clothes. Their fur cloaks had kept most of the rain off them, but their rough tunics were still wet. While the ale and soup were being served, Arran studied the river people. They were not different from the average townsfolk, apart from their clothes, which varied a little, especially their footwear, not having to march over rough terrain, was light and soft to protect the decks. He was brought back to earth by Razzan's loud exclamation of "AARRGH! PHTOO. This is not food, it's dishwater."

"No, it's bilge water," cried Jarrad.

"The main problem is that there isn't much in the way of food in it," replied Nadine.

"I'm sure if we added some of our own porridge mix it would improve."

"I expected better than this. I wanted a change from our food."

"How can that be, Razzan? You know that no food matches our own, especially in the worst place in town. Jarrad, go and get some of our rations."

Once alone, Elven had climbed onto crates that were piled up in the corner of the yard. He crawled into the corner of the two walls for shelter and tried not to sleep. He was disturbed by the gate opening. He heard a strange voice.

"Here they are." Elven moved to the edge of the crate and looked down. Three men, dressed in black, were inspecting the barrows. They wore broadswords, were dirty and rough looking, not like any of the townsfolk he had seen so far. One pulled up tarp of a barrow, and rummaged inside. The others looked and nodded in agreement.

"Not now," said one. "We will get it later." They replaced the tarp and left. There was not much Elven could do. He sat there pondering, trying to make out what they were after. He was not in thought long, when the gate opened again. It was only Jarrad. Elven climbed down.

"I've come to get some proper food. You might as well take it back in, your time's almost up."

"That's very kind of you, Jarrad. Did you see anyone outside?"

"No, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I don't know."
"Here, take the food back with you."

Elven peered round the gate with great caution, as though expecting the men to be still outside. He hurried into the inn, saw the others and went over. Still damp he de-cloaked and crawled into the huge fireplace. As he ate, he thought "I really should tell Arran of the strangers. Should I have challenged them? No, they did no harm and were too many for me."

Before he could tell his tale, the place fell quiet. Everyone was looking at the bar where six soldiers were talking to the innkeeper, who was pointing and gesturing towards the warriors. The soldiers looked over, the silence was broken with the sound of the warriors putting down their ale, sitting up and adjusting their weapons. The soldiers made their way over, boat people scrambled out of their way. The soldiers were the masters most of the time, intimidating all before them, but they had great respect for the warriors and would not push their luck.

"I seek the Laird of Greyhaven," said the first soldier.

"Greetings, Lieutenant," replied Arran. "On whose business is it that commands such an hour?"

"The baron’s my lord," he replied with a slight bow. "I have orders that you are to attend court at noon tomorrow." A roar of laughter went around.

"Indeed. Tell me, are they your orders? For I don't take orders and we have a market tomorrow, all day and possibly into the night."

"Fine, in that case the market is closed until further notice. True they are my orders, but I must see that nothing gets in your way. The baron gives his warmest welcome."

The group went quiet.

"Well, it looks like you can give the baron my acceptance. I'm sure my lads can handle the market without me."

"Good, then we will see you tomorrow at noon."

The soldiers bowed and left.

"What do you make of that?" asked Razzan.

"No idea. Something is amiss, the whole town's wrong," said Arran. "And cancel the market," put in Jarrad.
"They're too bossy," said Jon.
"They can't tell us what to do," said Argot.

Elven was tired. The discussion melted into a distant mumble. He was staring at something, a blur. He was on the edge of sleep's frozen precipice at the start of a fall. Sleep pulled at him like gravity, but his mind refused to let go. He blinked, three men at the bar had caught his eye. In fact, three, in the crowd at the bar. The three men, he jumped. They were studying the warriors, not noticeably, but studying all the same.

"Can they see me? Of course, they can, so what! They do not know I was watching them." He moved out of the fireplace.
"Razzan."

"We can leave Jarrad in charge, not now boy, most of the others have bartered before, they don't need us."
"Razzan."
"You're right, you and Nadine should come with me. There must be something very wrong, though."
"RAZZAN!"
"The men at the bar."
"Which ones, Elven? At least we can get to the start of the market and see what's worth having."

Elven looked up. The men had gone.
"Oh dear, why won't anyone listen to me?" He got up and went outside. He listened. Yes, he could hear them making their way towards the bridge. He followed them. They crossed the bridge. As he neared it, he noticed a building he had missed before. It looked official and stood out. Two men came out. They were river people.
"Excuse me, who's in charge of the loading bay?"
"In there, mate," was the gruff reply.

Elven went inside. He found a small room with a counter down one side. It was quite drab and dull. He picked up a bell and rang it. An old man came in and picked up a ledger from under the counter.
"Do you want to register a boat, son?" he asked.
"No, thank you. I'm looking for someone. Have you seen any strangers lately?"
"Ha, they're all strange, matey. Although there was two men in day afor yesterday. They weren't boat people dressed in black, too drab for boat people. Not that boat people are very colourful, but you know what I mean. He he, no, weren't boat people sure a'nough. Not from these parts though, far off, came down river. But they not fishermen, didn't come from coast."

"Pardon me, sir." Elven said wishing he'd never started the old boy off.

"Their boat, where is it?"
"Oh, um yes, no, gone clean out of my mind."
"Thank you, anyway," said Elven.
"Well, it's all here in the ledger, it goes way back. There's the time the baron himself went..."
"The name, please." The old man opened the book, turned a few pages and said "Here we are. Odin, that's it, Odin Simple, name reminds me of the time..."
"Sir, where is it now?"
"It's berthed along away, number forty-three, four along from the Hog's Head."
"Thank you," Elven called out as he ran out of the building thankful to be away. Back outside, he allowed his eyes to adjust to the dark. He made his way back, past the Hog's Head and right up to the Odin, itself. He stopped and looked around. There was a dim light in the cabin. Did that mean that they would not be long? No, he had seen them cross the river. Elven crept onto the barge. He opened the cabin door, his heart pounding. He fought to control himself as he had been taught. "Should I go in?" he thought. "I could find out about these people, prove myself a warrior." He went inside. He was becoming increasingly aware of his surroundings. There was no one on board.

"Perhaps the lamp was to keep nosy people away. They must be wealthy to burn oil like this," he thought. It did not take long to have a thorough look round. There were only two rooms, one a small bedroom, the other the main cabin and galley. There was nothing strange here, except the amount of food. Flour, beans, dried meat, oil,
the boat was incredibly well stocked. Far more than the boat people had, more than anyone he had ever seen before.

"They can't be after our food, they don't need it." Elven thought "There is no sign of trade, either. Unless they have so much food because, they steal it. But who from? Such quality, it must have come from the baron himself." Lost in thought, Elven forgot the passing of time, and having found nothing, was about to search the hold, when he almost jumped out of his skin. Heavy footsteps crashed across the deck and up to the cabin door. Fear turned into blind panic. He froze, his brain working overtime but making no sense. He darted through the bedroom door just as the cabin door opened. He could not escape. On the other side of the room was a small hatch. He went over and opened it. A small compartment of impractical space where the boat ended in the bows, used to stow rarely used articles. He crawled in. It was damp and smelt bad.

"With luck, they won't look in here," he hoped. The hull of the boat went down and under the cabin floor leaving a space between. There was not room for him to get under, but he could slide his legs in. He laid down on one bundle and pulled an old tarp over him, so if the men looked in, they may not see him. There was activity on deck and then he felt movement.

"Shit, we're going. I'll never get out of here now. Pulling out in darkness is unusual, there is trouble here," he thought. Despite his fear, Elven soon nodded off to sleep with the gentle motion of the boat.

No one had noticed Elven disappear. Arran and his men soon forgot the soldiers and were busy getting drunk. It had been a long day and everyone was tired. Nadine kicked Arran.

"Are you going to sit here all night? I am going to bed." She stood up.

"Not without me," said Arran jumping up. He took her by the waist and pulled her body against his.

"Mmm. I want you upstairs," she whispered into his ear. As they turned, Razzan called out.

"You can share our room, Arran, if you need sleep or rest." There was a roar of laughter as the couple disappeared through the door. As
soon as they were in their room, Nadine said. "Alone at last." And slid her hand down his tunic, caressing him softly as only a woman's gentle touch can. "I've been thinking of this all day."

"Stop it, Nadine, ooh. Now look at what you've done."

"Get out of these clothes and get into bed," Nadine said as she shed her clothes on the floor. He was spellbound by her sheer beauty. The shape of her body stirred him beyond belief as she dropped her last garment and stood naked before him. Why had he not noticed this before? Why did he forget? She was out of this world.

"Don't just stand there, get undressed." She pulled his garment down to his ankles, held him again and began kissing him softly. He tore his top off, picked her up and laid her on the bed.

"Is this what we have got to do when you move in?"

"Yes, every night."

The next morning everyone was up at dawn and gathered downstairs. Razzan came up to Arran and said. "Elvens missing."

"Since when?"

"This morning. He never slept upstairs last night. Jarrad said he sent him in after his watch, and I vaguely remember him asking about something after the soldiers had gone. I don't recall seeing him after that."

"No one missed him? How could we? Nadine, you are always mothering him, how could you have missed him?"

"Come on, once we were all here I thought we were safe. Besides, I was distracted."

"Oh, err yes. You've searched the building?"

"Twice."

"Get everyone outside then, we have work to do. Knock on every door, both ways along the quay side, ask everyone, look in every possible place. I don't want anything missed."

"I don't think that the people around here will be up yet," said Nadine.

"Then drag them out of bed. This is too important to worry about manners. We fear no one here."
They worked their way along, knocking on doors, banging on shutters, calling at windows. Suddenly someone shouted, and many ran to see. Arran forced his way through the group to see Jarrad looking at some marks on the key side.

"It's Elven's sign," said Jarrad. There were a few scratches on the stone pointing to the river.

"I hope it doesn't mean he has gone in, it stinks."

"No," said Arran. "There is space for a barge here. He's on a barge."

"What for? Why? Where?"

"Wait! Wait!" Said Arran. "Razzan, what was he asking you about? Think, man."

"Well, we were talking about the soldiers." Razzan closed his eyes. "He was pointing at the bar. There was three men standing there. I did notice them, they stood out, dressed in black and all. Not boat people, but they were doing no harm."

"So, he knew something about these strangers. Then got on a barge. But they were not boat people. There must be someone in charge of these landings."

"Up near the bridge," said Arrogot, who had just arrived. "I knocked there. A young man, of Elven's description was asking about a boat last night."

"Razzan and Arrogot, we will go and find out what we can. The rest of you get the barrows out. There is a market to do. Come on, Nadine."

They walked up to the bay master's lodge. The old man remembered Elven.

"He came in asking about three men. I told him of three likely men, their barge and where they came from."

"Now tell us," demanded Arran.

"Let me see." The old man opened his ledger. "Yes, they arrived four nights ago, barge named Odin, captain Uric, business, looking for trade. They did not look like traders, though, any more than you do." He said peering forward over the book. "Trouble makers, they were."

"Where were they from?"

"North some ways, never heard of the town before. Not on the river, said it was Newmarch. The river snakes north from here, all the
way to the northern sea. Never heard mention of that town before. I doubt if it's on the river."

"If it exists at all," put in Razzan.

"If it does, it's many leagues beyond our border, far into hostile lands," replied Arran.

"The border is not strung with keeps and watchtowers for nothing," said Argot.

"True, in the past we suffered endless raids and attacks, and the forts did their job. But there's not been trouble for over two generations. The watchtowers are in ruins or abandoned. There are only two keeps occupied, guarding the main roads," corrected Arran.

"So, the land is not too hostile. Old man, how long will it take for the barge to reach the border?"

"One day, one night."

"Thank you, let’s go. They've had one night already, we will send two of our lads. If they run non-stop, they will overtake the barge at the border."

Jordan and Vargen were chosen as they were among the best runners. Their orders were to keep going and not to come back without Elven. The others would follow north by road after their business was finished and meet up at the keep on that road. Jordan and Vargen were to leave the river and turn west along the border to that keep. Drawing enough provisions for three days, they jogged off along the riverbank at a steady pace. Hour after hour they ran at a pace that normal men could not match for one hour. They cut off most of the bends, but kept the river in sight. Jordan was the lightest and liveliest, he wanted to run faster.

"Elven is one of us, speed could mean the difference between life and death," he said.

"We could also have quite a fight on our hands when we get there, we don't want to be fit to drop."

"Perhaps you're right, Vargen, we won't be up to much by tonight."

They spoke no more to conserve their strength.

Elven had cramp. He needed more space and tried to massage his leg. He shivered and sneezed.
"I might as well throw a party, the noise I'm making. Ow ow ow."

One of the men was resting just above and lay there wondering what the noise was. The barge bumped alongside something and stopped. Elvens cramp subdued. He stifled a sneeze and tried to stop shivering. Suddenly the hatch opened and he was dragged out by two burly men.

"A big rat," said one. "How long have you been in there, boy?"

"Answer," said the other, thumping him in the back.
"Since Cam."
"What are you after?"
"Nothing, I was just being nosy."
"Thief, that's what you are, a thief. We'll teach you, cut your hands off we will," said the second, hitting Elven with a club, breaking his left arm and then kicking him to the floor. They shackled his ankles and threw him off the barge. Elven found himself on an old jetty. His arm was still numb and not bothering him yet. He felt humiliated and defeated. Shocked at being discovered and having no room to manoeuvre in the confined space, he was crippled without a fight. Several rucksacks were thrown off the barge, two of which Elven had to carry, once he had been clubbed back to his feet.

"I'm not going to survive much of this treatment, I must stay alert and do what they want before they hit me again," Elven thought as they marched off across country.

Jordan and Vargen had settled into a comfortable pace, which both were happy with. They ate a light snack without stopping. Covering ground fast, they estimated their arrival at the border would be earlier than expected.

"We will be there long before dark," said Jordan. "When I get hold of these men, I am going to slit them from crotch to throat. They will need a bag to carry their guts in."

"Ssshh, look, three barges moored further up the bank. They look deserted, let's jog past and check the names. We don't want to waste time if it's not them," said Vargen.

"No Odin there, back to plan 'A'."
Everybody helped set the barrows up at the market. Nadine directed them, using her artistic flair, to make everything look as attractive as possible.

"We are a little late getting here. I'm afraid we have lost the best pitch," said Razzan.
"That can't be helped, we had to look for Elven," replied Arran.
"I wonder if they will find him."
"Perhaps, but we can't let that distract us now. We have to be at the keep at noon and we haven't got long," said Nadine.

By the time they left, the market was still bustling. They had to push their way through. A great deal of their goods had already been sold. Not surprising, with the poor quality of food on the other stalls. The bulk of it went to the baron, his procurer trading it for salt, spice and steel, plus, taking his commission for market rent. The baron did all right. He got first choice at all the stalls before the market began, as usual.

Nadine, Arran and Razzan reached the keep with time to spare. There were more guards than usual, and all the flags were flying.
"Do you think the town’s overcrowded because of this meeting?" asked Nadine.
"Not at all," replied Arran. "More likely the meeting’s because of the overcrowding."

The three companions announced themselves to the guard, who summoned an usher to lead them to a waiting room off the main hall. There was quite a gathering already. Arran recognised some leaders of great houses, but not many. Greetings were exchanged, along with much gossip and rumours. Trouble in the north, but Arran did not know any of the northern houses. Some had been raided, and lost food. A few had been driven out and were now in town. Food, which was always in short supply, was now a very big problem. With five months to go before harvest and no food in the north, there would not be enough to go around.
"The baron must do more to protect the northern houses," said Nadine.
"I suspect he's done all he can, that's what the meeting’s for. It sounds like a large and organised force. He has always been effective against wandering bands, but this time he is out of his depth," replied Arran.

"Then this meeting is an attempt to find an answer," said Razzan. "And the town’s full of homeless people. This is a problem, when the town runs out of food all hell will break loose."

"I hope he is not going to demand food from the south," said Nadine.

"That would not solve the problem, there wouldn't be enough," said Arran.

The large doors opened, and an usher asked everyone to proceed through into the hall. There was a dais at one end with a large ornate chair on it. Not quite a throne, but giving that impression. The chairs either side contained the baron’s first minister, Kai Snade, and various other officials. The baron’s officers were on one side of the hall, Arran's men and the elders of the great houses, were on the other. Local VIP's were in the centre. The usher went to a side door, and announced,

"The Baron of Cam."

"He liked his bit of pomp, for a small-town crook," thought Arran.

The baron swaggered in, wearing the biggest collection of furs ever seen, and sat on his throne. He was also wearing, his famous handmade hair piece, which was a taboo subject. Times being what they were, you never really saw a fat man, until, you see the baron. People found it hard not to stare, but no one had ever been able to work out how much was him and how much were furs.

That was the luxury of having as much food as you could eat.

The usher announced the first minister, Kai Snade.

"I bid you welcome and thank you for your attendance to this meeting at such short notice. As some of you are aware, we are under threat from the north. The northern barbarians have been quiet for over two generations. Suddenly, they have begun to raid our northern houses, mainly for food. They do not linger any longer than necessary, taking only food. Some houses with external grain stores have stood by and watched their food go without losing a man. This arrangement
must be stopped. From now, on all external grain stores must be moved into the house, or onto the side of it, with fortifications suitably extended," said Snade.

"Alas, some houses have been totally overrun with few survivors. We are taking this very seriously the barbarians are not going to stop now. We must prepare for total war. It seems that they arrive in sufficient numbers depending on the strength of the house in question. So, their intelligence is good, and they always get what they come for."

"The town is already overflowing with refugees, but we must decide whether to evacuate all the great houses north of the river."

A groan went around the hall.

Snade continued. "If we must, we must. The northerners might be weakening us or testing us. But we cannot go on losing our allies. All the remaining northern houses will camp on the south side of the river. We are doing all we can to strengthen the town’s north walls. Everyone must share out what food they have and feed those without. We are declaring marshal law."

Further groans went around.

"Yet we have no knowledge of where these barbarians come from, or how many they are. We are sending out scouts to try and gather information."

"We are honoured today by the presence of our strongest allies, Haven warriors, who we know are the best scouts in the land. We hope for their assistance in this matter." Snade gave a sly look in their direction.

Arran stood. "Gentlemen, it would seem that we are already involved. We have at this moment two scouts heading north. Tomorrow, we will travel to the northern border to meet them. Although it is the first that we have heard of these troubles, a boy in our party has been kidnapped by three strangers on a barge. I now suspect that they are scouts from the north, as it is easy entering the city by river without being challenged. It seems that we are already committed."
"I am sorry to hear this, but we welcome you to our side." Said the baron. "Jointly we have a chance, and I know that you will bring the support of some of the southern houses."

"We are preparing for the evacuation of the northern houses. Our officers will co-ordinate the operation. There is nothing more we can do here today. We will meet again when we have more information of their movements. Thank you, gentlemen." Everyone stood, and the baron walked out.

On the way, out everyone talked at once.

"This does not alter our immediate plans," said Arran. "We must go north anyway. Find out what we can and take it from there. I think we should send the barrows home with orders to return with reinforcements and meet us at the border. Five of us will go north, and I can't see any further than that."

Back at the market, Arran told the others all that had been said. Some jumped up and down making war-like noises and some just stared, realising the possible horrors ahead.

They all made their way back to the Hog's Head and being restless, they drank into the night, too excited to sleep. Suddenly, their little adventurous trip was turning into a nightmare that looked like seeping into reality and engulfing their lives and land. They talked the possibilities over and over.

Once in bed, Arran said to Nadine "This time you will do as you're told and go home with the barrows. Tell your brother what has happened. Tell him to be prepared to send food to the town and to get ready every available fighting man for what may come."

"I will go back," said Nadine," You're right, it will be dangerous for just five of you. I accept that I could be a hindrance if you must move fast or are outnumbered in a fight. Also, I must see that my family understand the full nature of the threat and prepare properly. But I will be back with the reinforcements and you won't stop me. My place is with you and we will have such a force, it will not have to run from anything."

"All right, it's agreed, but make sure your brother understands."

They fell asleep in each other's arms, too tired, too worried.
Nadine departed with the barrows before dawn, bidding each other farewell. Razzan removed his talisman from around his neck and gave it to Jarrad.

"Give this to Nazine for me and ask her to keep it with her until I see her again."

It was a powerful talisman, which would bring him back to her safe.

Nadine once again reassured Arran and said that she would be back with the reinforcements.

"I am not going to sit at home and wait," she said.

Arran agreed, and they broke away from each other. Arran’s group turned and went over the bridge, the others went towards the south gate. They were all somewhat sad, although excited.

"The Gods," blurted Gem. "Tis a right turnout. This is not what I expected at all. We don't know where we are going or what we'll meet."

"It's just an inconvenience," reassured Razzan. "We are much faster than they are. We will overtake the soldiers before they get to where they are going. Why, I expect Jordan and Vargen have Elven already and are on the way back to the keep? We can get back to Cam and join a fully armed company of warriors. Then my friends, we'll see what's what."

At the gate, they were met by one of the baron’s sergeants, Sergeant Armstrong who asked if his men could accompany them.

"If you can keep up the pace," said Razzan.

"We have supplies and reinforcements for the northern keep."

"We had hoped to move fast," said Arran "but it makes sense to stick together and ensure that the supplies arrive."

Off they all marched along the northern road and on into the day.

Late the previous afternoon Jordan and Vargen staggered up to the river keep. They came to a fortified lock-tower where the river crossed the border.

"Whew, must be a record that," panted Vargen.

"I doubt it, records aren't broken that easily."

"You call that easy?"
"Shut up and knock on the gate."
A face appeared over the wall and said,
"Who's there? What do you want?"
"We have come from Cam, we are looking for a boy."
"Have you really? Filthy animals, we have none here."
"He is off our people. He was kidnapped on a barge. Have there been any barges through here today?"
"None, not one, none, go away."
"But there must have been, perhaps you didn't notice."
"Oh, we'd notice all right. They would need us to operate the lock gates. They are locked from in here."
Jordan and Vargen looked at each other.
"The barges we passed, it must have been one of them," said Jordan.
"Wrong names," said Vargen.
"Then they changed the name. We should have stopped and had a good look around. More haste and all that. We must go back, hurry."
"Oh no, I was just looking forward to putting my feet up and having supper. Wait for me."

Elven and his captors marched on north through the afternoon. Although the pace was slow for him, his arm had begun to hurt a lot. He focused his mind on home and away from the pain.

As dusk begun to fall, Elven could smell smoke and hear noises ahead. The man in the lead made a call like noise, which was answered. They walked on into camp. About a hundred men were in and around it.

"A large scouting party," thought Elven. "They travel too light to be raiders."

He was left alone for a moment while his captors entered a tent to see whoever was in charge, presumably for debriefing. Lucky enough to be next to a pile of kindling, he selected a stick. Tearing a strip from his tunic, he bound the stick to his arm. He was in great pain and it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. A man came out of the tent with one of the captors, and ordered Elven over. The newcomer was dressed all in black, and his clothes were very well made. His head,
however, was covered with a huge helm, fashioned like a big cat with large fangs. It was nothing like the common cats that the houses kept to kill vermin.

Cat mask looked at the other man and said, "Resourceful, isn't he? This one should fetch a good price at market."

"No," said the other, "he has too much information. He comes from a warrior tribe that looks far fitter than should be naturally possible. They look rather formidable opponents."

"Excellent, a challenge at last."

"I recommend caution. We need to know more about them, how many and where they are before we do anything."

Cat face turned to the guards and said, "I want him kept on his feet. He is not to be allowed to sleep." Turning back to the tent he said, "Come tell me more about these warriors. They do sound a challenge. We have had it too easy."

Elven was worried by this war party, no longer just three robbers. What plans had they for his lands? During the night, he saw two more cat helms walk through the camp, one had a light brown cloak with black spots on it.

Come morning, Elven was so tired that he didn't care anymore. He still had a slight fever from lying in the barge. The camp was slow to rise and in no rush to go anywhere. The tents were eventually taken down and packed away, the fires dampened and the camp began to drift away to the north in a much disorganized manner.

Elven was under constant watch. The guards took little notice of him, apart from not letting him sleep or rest. As he trudged north, he felt his pain, tiredness and nausea all roll into one. His mind seemed to become detached from his body. As the day wore on, his mind became more and more distant. Barely able to think, Elven could no longer sense the pain and suffering of his body. He was unaware of how long or how far they marched.

Jordan and Vargen stood looking at the barge. At their feet, what was left of Elven’s sign scratched in the dirt, stared up at them.

"We ran right over it," said Vargen. "How could we have missed it? We are supposed to be good trackers."
"We weren't tracking. We had decided on our destination and charged off. It wasn't a tracking problem, it was a planning one. When will we learn not to take everything for granted? That's today's lesson."

"Our mistake could be Elven's death warrant. How could we have been so stupid?"

"You can't change nowt. At least we are back on the trail. It'll be dark soon, we had better camp for the night."

"Thank God, I can't go on any further now anyway."

"Don't worry, Vargen. We can sleep on the barge, in real beds, I suspect."

"Now you're talking. Follow me," said Vargen as he jumped onto the barge, walked over to the cabin and kicked the door off its hinges.

"Wow, this is great. Hey, there is a bedroom through here. It's proper cosy, too."

"Spoilt rotten," said Jordan as he stepped into the cabin. "Look at this, Vargen. A food larder, it's well provided."

"Great, I'm starving. Well done, Jordan. It's getting better and better."

"No, it's not. I'm not thinking of your guts, man. It means that they must use this barge a lot. Or at least that they will be back."

"Not guard duty again. Why do you have this nasty habit of turning good news into a disaster? I wanted a full night's sleep."

"No, I don't think they will be back tonight. We will make fast the door anyway. You will get your night's sleep and a good breakfast."

"I'll put some beans in to soak. We will still catch Elven in the morning."
Arran was getting impatient with the soldiers who continually wanted to stop. He stood on a slight rise and gazed ahead. Even now he couldn't see the keep although they were well over half way there. He looked back. The soldiers were still sitting on the verge, some asleep, about three leagues back. He walked back down to the road.

"I think we will go on without them, Razz. Why can’t they keep up? The road's good!"

"Well, they have almost to run to keep up our pace," replied Razzan.

"Unless we carry them, we will be late!" Arran stated impatiently. "Jordan and Vargen may have Elven back already and we will have missed everything."

"You shouldn't be so eager to kill, Arran. We are taught that it is the last refuge of the desperate."
"Well, all right then. The others may be back at the keep and waiting."

"That's not what you meant Arran. So, what if they are? If they have made it back, then at least they are safe, and a little wait will not hurt them."

"You’re right, Razz. I'm just being impatient as usual. I've been on edge ever since that last visit of Zeb's. Something he said."

"What is it? What is the matter?" enquired Razzan calmly.

"Nothing precise. I just felt he was trying to prepare us for something. I think he knew all along what was coming."

"Why didn't he just warn us?"

"Would you believe him? You always said that he was mad."

"Point taken," agreed Razzan

It was a peaceful night on the barge and warm enough. Jordan and Vargen awoke fully refreshed. After Vargen had eaten, they set off. The trail was not yet cold. The men they were after were careless and Elven had left what signs he could. Jordan knew that they would be crossing the border soon but had not brought a map and didn't know the lands that they were heading into. The lands were flatter than their own and gave a good view ahead.

They did not travel at the furious pace of the day before as Vargen, unsurprisingly, had eaten far too much. Jordan knew that Elven’s captors would not have travelled far the afternoon before and would have camped the night. Even at this pace they expected to run into the camp within three hours. The two warriors eased up again, showing caution. They didn't want to rush past Elven again or blunder into the camp.

Jordan stopped. "I smell smoke," he exclaimed

Vargen sniffed the air. "I smell food!"

"Shut up. It's their camp, that hollow to the right. It's full of thick bushes, it's the only place it could be."

"You’re right," said Vargen, suddenly getting serious. "You take the left and I'll take the right."
They fastened their cloaks and pulled the hoods over their heads. Stealthily, they crept towards the thicket. The cloaks were legendary. They were their prize possessions, being made from the hide of the rarely seen wild coney, one of the few remaining wild mammals left in the land and believed to have been hunted to extinction. However, the wild coney had evolved such amazing powers of camouflage that most men could walk right past one without noticing it. The warriors’ cloaks inherited this amazing power of camouflage. A warrior, laying on the ground with his cloak spread over him was almost invisible, even in dusty sparse areas of scrub. Most of the time the cloak was worn folded back until it met where it was fastened. The hood was split and worn like a collar. This protected the outside from wear and meant that outsiders rarely saw it. The colours were a mixture of gold and browns that shifted as the cloak moved. You could never quite focus on its surface. It was indeed the most beautiful piece of clothing, practical too, as it gave very good protection from the cold, making it an ideal sleeping bag.

The smell of smoke was strong as Jordan and Vargen entered the thicket. There was no other sign that anyone was there. After searching the area, they estimated eighty men had camped there.

"Two fires, both covered over," said Jordan "and so warm it's a wonder we didn't see the last man walking out of camp!"

"Well, we've caught them up," said Vargen. "Now what? I mean eighty men, we don’t have much chance of getting Elven from them now."

"We might," said Jarrad optimistically. “At night, we could sneak in and get him. He will only have a few guards. We will just have to follow, keep our eyes open and take the opportunity when it arises."

"Maybe. We had better work out a good plan. Whereabouts do you think we are?"

"Well, I would say we are just over the border, about half way between the northern keep and the river keep.

"Just over the border and out of the way," reflected Vargen. "This place is too well used. I bet they are here quite often. They use the barge regularly, don't they?"
"No wonder they could move a raiding party around with little trace. They must know a lot about Cam as well," Jordon supposed.

"But not about us, I suspect," said Vargen grinning. "We must use that surprise to our advantage."

"We did not prepare for a long journey," said Jordan, changing the subject. "We must live off the land. We can’t leave a message for the others either as we don’t know the northern lands, we have no map.

"We could split up, you follow the trail and I’ll go back to the keep and get the others," volunteered Vargen.

"The most important thing at this moment is to warn the others, above all else, that takes precedence. We can’t help Elven now. He will just have to hold out for a while longer, he’s made it this far. I doubt if they will kill him now. Their trail is so obvious that even without Elven’s signs, we will soon pick it up again. At least there will be enough of us to organise a proper battle, so we would have the advantage, no matter what the odds.” Jordan thought for a moment “We go together, we can’t split up. There is too much at stake to chance one of us getting caught or having an accident and not making it."

The two men set a course west and made off. By mid-afternoon Vargen was complaining of hunger.

"You are supposed to be a warrior that can run for three days without food," said Jordon, annoyed.

"I can. I eat just in case the three days start now! I wouldn't want to start out on a three-day run having not eaten for two."

"I don't think we'll ever see two days of you not eating. See that rise there? We will be able to see for miles - you can eat when we are at the top.”

So, they ran the last few leagues and stopped on the top of a range of small hills. Vargen promptly opened the food pack. "Shall we steam into this, or eek it out like we won't eat again?" Ignoring Vargen, Jordan scanned the horizon with his twin scopes.

"There, look," he said excitedly. "There it is, beyond that next range, just south of our course. Hurry up Vargen, you can eat on the move."
"Rationed again," said Vargen packing the supplies away "here's your share, yes I see it"

"We should make that soon after dark if we hurry."

"But it plays havoc with my digestion, eating on the move."

"That's because you eat far too much."

It was a moonless night and they toiled in total darkness for the final two hours before arriving at the keep.

"Who's there?" cried a guard from above.

"Haven warriors. Open up," called out Vargen.

"What do you want?"

"We are here to meet our brothers."

"How do we know who you are? You can stay out there for the night. These are troubled times and there are lots of queer folk abroad."

"That's why you should let us in," ventured Vargen.

There was no reply from above.

"Great," said Vargen, “bloody great, another unnecessary night cold and hungry."

"Well, it looks like Arran’s not here yet. Come on, light a fire."

The sun had almost touched the horizon when Arran decided to call a halt for the night.

"We are not going to make it tonight. Set up camp, Razz, post the watch and get those stragglers in."

Arran was still pacing up and down by the time the fire was roaring.

"We are not getting anywhere fast. I find it so hard working with these soldiers."

"Will you take it easy for a moment? We will be glad of their help soon enough, you’ll see,” put in Razzan.

The night passed without event and before dawn Arran had the soldiers up and ready. He made them march in a double column with his men either side and behind driving them on. The soldiers complained like hell but had no choice.

The guards on the Keep tower were still stamping the night’s damp out of their feet and were eager for their shift to finish, when they spotted Arran’s party. Vargen heard the shouting above and set off to meet them. Arran saw him coming and ran ahead.
"What news?" Arran cried even before they met.
"They still have Elven. They left the barge and met up with a small war party. About eighty men. They are moving north about twenty leagues east of here."
"Damn," cursed Arran. “Eighty men! Are they all well-armed?"
"I did say a war party, of course they are well-armed. Luckily, they seem to be undisciplined barbarians, no match for us."
"Even so, the odds are too high. Nadine is going for help. We will just follow them for now and mark a trail for her."
"They may have reached their main force by then."
"It matters not. We will be a full combat unit and will take on anything," Arran said proudly.

They walked on to the keep where Jordan was waiting.
"Bad luck Jordan, Worry not. We have a full combat unit on its way. We will get them."

The soldiers eventually arrived and the Keep opened. Arran left instructions for Nadine with the captain and ordered him also to send word back to the baron for two divisions of reinforcements.
"Jordan, we leave in two hours. There's no point in lingering here. We can still put a couple of leagues behind us before dusk. Have everybody ready."
"Do you think the baron will send men?" asked Razzan as they marched away from the keep.
"I don't know, maybe not, but I think it will be Snade's decision. I've a feeling that he will wait for more intelligence before committing any men," answered Arran.

"So, he can sacrifice us first?" questioned Razzan.
"Exactly, I would not trust that man with anything. We will stick to our plans and we won't rely on Snade’s men."

Arran was pleased to be rid of the soldiers. Now they could travel at a fair pace. There was no need to run now, they just had to trail Elven’s captors, lay a trail for Nadine and wait for reinforcements.

Elven was not doing so well. He could not understand how he kept to his feet or why this was happening. The pain had gone. The tiredness had gone. Everything had gone. Elven was barely aware of
his surroundings. He was being pushed and pulled everywhere and could no longer leave his sign. His mind retreated to within, no longer concerned with his survival. He slowly and heavily marched on, led by a chain around his neck. That night Elven was once more kept on his feet. He was not aware of the comings and goings of the barbarians but kept seeing cat faces and heard voices in his head. He thought that he must have been dreaming.

Nadine reached home that night. The warriors kept on going. Jarrad promised that they would be back in a few days.
"Nadine!" her mother called, as she entered the yard. She hugged her daughter tightly. Her brother ran up to join them. "The guards told us you were back, but at such a late hour."
"Yes, I am sorry. There is trouble coming."
"You must be tired and hungry, I'll stir up the fire. Mother, fetch some broth, we will heat it up. You can then tell us your news."
"You're freezing, Naddy", her mother said, concerned. "Get in front of that fire. I'll get some water on as well. A good hot bath will do you the world of good. Hal, don't just stand there, you should have got that fire going by now and got the broth. Do I have to do everything?"
"But Nadine has news."
"No news is good news, that's what I says. Anyways 'twill keep 'till she's warm, fed and rested. There's no good in telling a tale on an empty stomach."

Hal looked as if he might explode, turned and stormed off.

Nadine had not been fussed over for some time. "Thank you, mother," she whispered, smiling. She snuggled into the rugs in front of the fire and fell fast asleep. It was in the early hours that she awoke finding herself quite uncomfortable. The fire was still blazing. Adjusting her eyes to its glare, she became aware of someone sitting in the shadows.
"I let you sleep, you needed it," said her brother. He pushed a pot back on the fire. "Mother went to bed. I have been waiting to hear about the troubles you speak of."
"You are so patient, Hal."
"Have some bread and soup first."
Nadine told him her tale between mouthfuls. He sat there quietly listening and refrained from asking questions until she had finished.

"So, the baron wants our food, does he?"

"It's not his fault, he's out of his depth. Even if all-out war does not come, he will be lucky to survive economic hardships, famine and overcrowding. The town is filling with refugees. He is only doing what he can to help people survive."

"Well that's a first," spat Hal.

"He's got to do something, he can't ignore it. You should have seen the town, it was a mad house."

"Fit for a madman, I'd say. How come you are so supportive of this madman?"

"Because there is probably another insane madman around the corner that makes him look like a saint. It's time you forgot old quarrels. The baron can't stand alone against what's coming. Nor can any of us. We must all pull together. He is the only stability these lands have ever had. Right or wrong, we can't lose that. We need to send a strong force to meet Arran. It might be enough to stop a full-scale war if we act now with strength."

"Maybe you're right. Anyway," Hal said, changing the subject, "the sowing is done. There is nothing else urgent until harvest, just repairs and maintenance. We could comfortably send half our force if not more."

"Then do it, Hal. Do it. Jarrad will be back in three days with a hundred warriors."

"A hundred! Whew they won't need us, they could win a war on their own."

"Hal, please take this seriously, I don't think you realise just what we are up against."

"We will match their numbers. I will go with them."

"No need. I will return with them."

"You cannot go, Nadine. It is too dangerous."

"My man is there, Hal. I will not sit here and wait. If anything happens, I want to be with him."

"You're in charge then. May God go with you."
Hal spent the next two days picking and equipping his men. He checked the food supplies and worked out how much he would donate to Cam. They could not afford to give away any, but they were not starving. With the men training for combat, Hal had little else to do. He went into the house. Nadine and their mother had finished packing the supplies and were drinking a little wine in the kitchen.

"Hal, can't you talk her out of it?"

"No, mother, she's a big girl now."

"We have prepared some soup for tomorrow when Jarrad and his men return," said Nadine. "They will need to stay the night."

"Yes, I've cleared a barn for them. It's warm and dry, the best we can do."

The next day went far too slowly for Nadine's liking. With everything done, she just kept looking for Jarrad to appear.

"You must take it easy," said her mother. "You need rest. You will find excitement soon enough."

"I know, I know, but I want to get back to Arran. He's heading north right now and the longer I wait, the further away he gets. I might never be able to catch him."

"I'm sure you will, my dear. Jarrad has to catch him, does he not?"

Hal came in carrying a small sword in a jewel-studded scabbard. "I want you to have this. It was our fathers when he was a boy.

"Hal, what are you thinking? Do you expect her to take part in combat?"

"I don't know. She's tough enough, but I think I would feel happier if she had it with her."

"Thank you, Hal. I had one to take anyway, but this is wonderful, I've not seen it for years. It's far better than the clumsy old blade I was taking."

Nazine and Maleen looked down from the terrace. They had taken a break from tending the crop. Down below Jarrad was waving his arms and bellowing orders. Men were coming out of the armoury with weapons.

"There's something going on, Naz."

"I told you no good would come. You see if I was, not right?"
“I don’t think this is our fault,” puzzled Maleem.
“No. It’s Gemma’s. Have you seen her since Gem’s been away?” bitched Nazine.
“For God’s sake, Naz, I do believe you really are jealous. I think there’s more going on than what you can see under your nose. This looks like a general call to arms.”
“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never seen one before.”
“Quite, before your time, was it?” poked Maleen.
“That’s right. I’m not as old as you.”
“How do we know? You were born before records began.”
“What are you two looking at?” asked Gemma as she sauntered over.
“What are you doing up here?” asked Nazine.
“I thought I might find some fresh bean shoots.”
“You know that’s not allowed. We are supposed to let them grow to maturity.”
“Oh, don’t be so mean, a few won’t hurt. I’m fed up with the tough old ones, especially when they are dried. I’d like something nice for a change,” protested Gemma.
“I bet you would,” poked Nazine.
“And what do you mean by that? asked Gemma.
“Shut up you two,” interrupted Maleem. “I want to know what’s going on below.”
“Oh, it’s just silly old men stuff. They’re all hooping about war,” stated Gemma.
“There’s nothing silly about war, Gemma,” said Maleem.
“There’s trouble coming. I told you no good would come,” said Nazine.
“I wouldn’t let it trouble you, let the men handle it. It’s what they are for,” suggested Gemma.
“You’d leave it all to men if you could, wouldn’t you,” added Nazine. “They have their uses.”
“I bet they have. And I bet you make the most of them.”
“Just because they don’t look at you, my dear, there’s no need for jealousy. See you later, go back to your digging.”
“Oh. Oh, that bitch.”

“She’ll get her just dues, just you wait and see,” reassured Maleem.

It was just before dusk when Jarrad’s company tramped into the compound, tired and hungry. Hal and Nadine were on the steps.

"What a sight," said Nadine, relieved. "So different from the supply train last week, they look fierce and threatening."

The company was heavily armed, and it showed. There were pikes, spears with flags on, pointed helms and shields, all brightly coloured with their own family arms and protective spirits. A sight not seen by Nadine before or anyone else for as long as could be remembered.

"Our men will look a little dull alongside this lot. Have we not got any pointy helms?" mused Nadine.

"Our men are as bright in spirit," replied Hal. "This is what Haven warriors live for."

"Thank goodness they are on our side."

"Yes, I pity all that stand against them. There is not a match in all the lands. Now you can see why I was not too worried by your tale. No one can defeat these lads, they are the best," said Hal proudly.

Jarrad clanked up the steps, weapons jangling.

How magnificent he looks, thought Nadine, the pointed helm with mail hanging round it, metal plates covering his shoulders, chest and back, broadsword at his side, saffron tunic, and a wire standing on each shoulder mounted with his flags. It was important for group commanders to be easily seen during battles. Hmm, Arran would look even more magnificent.

"Greetings Hal, Nadine," said Jarrad.

"Greetings, Jarrad. I have your men billeted in a barn, the will be warm and comfortable enough. Nourishment will be provided. I will have them shown the way," Hal informed.

"I thank you for your hospitality at such short notice. But things look grim, we can't spare any time for niceties, we must be away at first light. I fear a race is on."

"Aha, always the gloomy one, Jarrad. It is the least I can do. Besides, things cannot be so grim. I was just saying to Nadine that there is no one in all the lands that can stand up to you."

"Not at equal odds."
"Even at ten to one most would have trouble."

"Jarrad, tell him," interrupted Nadine. "He won't take it seriously. He could send more men, but he will not."

"I'm sending fifty of our best fighters. I don’t think more men are necessary now. We are after three men or perhaps a raiding party."

“But Hal, these people mean business, they are serious. They are above-average, fearsome fighters and may exist in far greater numbers than we can handle. Some of the northern houses have been destroyed. The baron does not know who they are or what to do about it. If they are not stopped, they will be here given time."

“I see,” said Hal. “You think there really is a chance that we could be overrun? Things have been so stable for generations that it’s hard to believe.”

“The sooner you believe it the better. Be prepared to throw in everyone able to fight. Plan for the worst, be ready.”

“A bit extreme, Nadine, but she has a point, Hal. It pays to be ready.”

“Women are such worriers, always look on the negative. But you do have a point. We have too much to lose and would never recover. I’ll get to work tomorrow. We will increase and improve our arms and stiffen our defences. Train up all our able-bodied men.”

“And women,” said Jarrad, eyeing Nadine.

“We should have built up our defences long ago.”

“I wouldn’t worry about your defences,” said Jarrad. “If the barbarians get this far, you won’t be able to stop them. We must meet them at Cam. All of us, in one big army. It will be the biggest these lands have ever seen.”

“Let’s hope it will be enough,” said Hal. “I never thought it was so serious.”

“We will know in a few days I think, but start preparing. What I have seen so far suggests the worst. Goodnight Hal, Nadine.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I am going to have supper and go straight to bed,” Said Nadine. “We will have an early start and a long march tomorrow.”

It was still dark as the men formed columns in the compound. The men clinked and clanked as they got into line.
“They are doing it deliberately,” thought Jarrad. “Our small plates of armour are all backed with leather and all weapons should be secured to the person. They would never sneak up on anyone like this, but it does encourage them to let off a little steam and make some noise.”

Jarrad walked to the head of the column. The gates were already open and through them he could see the faintest glimmer of light on the horizon as the mist lifted. The barrows were loaded high and heavy.

“All correct and ready to go, Jarrad,” reported Argot, at the head of the column. “We now have four barrows of supplies. They should see us through four weeks.”

“Move them out, Argot,” ordered Jarrad.

Looking down the line he saw Nadine and Hal approach. Nadine was all done up in her own battledress, and not looking at all feminine, apart from her trim figure and the use of some soft colours.

“Leave some for us to fight, Nadine.”

“You can have all you like, Jarrad. I shan’t fight unless I have to.”

Hal walked through the gates with them.

“Once we have full intelligence, we will send you word, Hal. Farewell.”

“Goodbye Jarrad, Nadine, take care.”

“Bye Hal. Don’t worry, we have been alerted in time, maybe we can stop this before it gets out of hand.”

Hal stood and watched the column fade into the dark as the eastern horizon grew more and more golden.

Later that morning, Arran’s group picked up Elven’s trail and turned north. Arran looked at a sign. “That’s not Elven’s, that’s one of ours,” Jordan pointed out. “Elven’s signs ceased twenty leagues back before you joined the trail. We never found any indication of violence or his body, so we assume he is still alive. He may be heavily guarded or bound.”

“Let’s hope so. I am going to send Maleen to scout. We will move fast, catch up and study them. I would like to take this opportunity to
learn all we can about them. May the Gods help them if anything has happened to Elven,” said Arran, showing concern.

Arran’s group doubled up their pace. The mood was grim. No one had any idea where all this would lead, let alone if they would ever rescue Elven.

The following day they found a campsite, perhaps a day old, but still no sign from Elven. They quickly moved on.

“We are moving deeper and deeper into unknown territory,” said Vargen. “We are not on our own ground any longer.”

Just before dusk, Maleen jumped out from behind some rocks and waved his hand. Before you could blink, everyone had melted into the ground. Those with cloaks could not be seen at all. Maleen came back to Arran. “Guards. Just over this ridge, settled in a grassy knoll,” he explained, pointing up the rise. “They have stopped early and they’re not too careful about keeping watch. They may be meeting another group and confident they are far enough away not to have been followed. We must keep a careful watch. They have guards along the ridge although there are not many, and they are not very alert.”

“You have done well,” praised Arran.

Later during the night, just before dawn, Arran, Maleen and Jordan slipped past the guards without any difficulty. They crossed the ridge and scrambled along the hollow. Silently and slowly they crept to the edge of the camp, past more dozing guards. There were many fires and people sleeping everywhere.

“Are we going in, Arran?” whispered Jordan.

“No, I don’t think we should risk it. There are too many of them. I wouldn’t want to fight my way out of here if I could avoid it. Let’s move around the camp and see if we can spot Elven. Maleen, make a note of their numbers.”

The three men moved carefully along the edge of the camp. Near the far side, Maleen tapped Arran and pointed. There in the middle of a group of large tents, tied to a stake was Elven. He was being jabbed with staffs by two guards who were really enjoying themselves.

“They won’t let him sleep,” said Arran. “It’s torture. They are not harming him, they must have a use for him. He will be all right for the time being, but we can’t get him out of there now.”
“We can’t just leave him,” protested Jordan.

“It’s too big a risk. We would have to fight our way out and carry him at the same time. I don’t think we would succeed.”

“For the God’s sake, Arran, we must do something. I can’t let him suffer like this.” Jordan was understandably upset.

“He doesn’t know what’s going on now. Don’t worry we will get him back. We must organise an advantage for ourselves. Will you try to keep control of your emotions, Jordan? Let’s get back.”

Soon after dawn, Vargen came over to Arran and said, “they are breaking camp. There was a beacon in the west during the night. I think it was what they were waiting for. They are sure to meet up.”

“It must be another raiding party. They must have crossed the border on the far side of our watch tower.”

“So, the group is getting larger. We will never get Elven.” Jordan’s concern was growing by now. He was desperate to relieve Elven of his torture.

“We will follow if we need to and await our ideal opportunity. Find out where they come from and how strong they are. It is important information anyway and that’s partly what we are here for. We have a large force moving up. We must be prepared to lead them, have a plan and be organised. We had better break camp then,” Arran said, reassuring his men.

By late afternoon, the raiding party appeared and joined Elven’s captors amid cries and whoops. Meanwhile Arran, Maleen and Jordan got as close as they could.

“Look, there’s more grain,” said Jordan.

This second group looked much as the first. Fierce, wild and undisciplined. Many of them were men dressed as animals and were led by cat-faced men.

“This lot give me the creeps,” said Jordan.

“I think that’s the general idea,” said Arran. “Don’t let it get to you. They are a rabble, keep that in mind.”

“Well, I am getting more and more uneasy. We start off following three men, and here we are looking at a bloody army. I don’t like it.” Jordan was visibly agitated.
“No one is asking you to like it. Anyway, who the hell do you think was carrying out all those raids?” Arran was keen to point out that the men they saw before them, although dangerous, had to be overcome at all costs.

“I know, but to see them is something else and I’m not sure I want to know.”

“At least we have found them. We can keep an eye on them. That was our second objective. We are achieving something, Jordan. We knew this was not going to be easy.”

“Look!” exclaimed Maleen. “Several fights have broken out. Is it some form of greeting?”

A wolf head appeared to be in charge, he was surrounded by cat masks who, were beating down the other group with sticks. The beaten group were soon prostrate on the ground.

“It looks like a form of domination, to show who is in charge. They seem to be contesting the leadership.”

“Wow. They really are like animals,” amazed Maleen.

“I don’t think Elven’s lot have been on a raid. Just spying. This second party is far more heavily armed. Look at the number of bearers with them,” said Jordan.

“Yes, I see them now. They must be slaves I would guess,” said Arran. “You’re right, though. There are a lot of them, I didn’t realise. Look, they have only just finished coming over the hill, and they have more barrows. Grain, I’ll wager. There can’t be any left north of Cam.”

“We’ve got to stop them. This is only part of their army. If only our support were here we could finish this lot tonight,” said Maleen eagerly.

“Well, it’s not and we must wait until it is. Don’t dwell on ‘if only’. Let’s get back.” Arran turned away, “Jordan, how do you think we’d best face them when the time comes?”

Jordan weighed up the options thoughtfully as they walked back to where the others were making camp in a dry gully. They had cleverly pulled up bushes at the entrance and could not be seen.

Jordan smiled at Arran, “Attack them all at once, I should think. No seriously, looking at their lack of organisation, I doubt if they fight in
formation as a team. They are fearsome fighters, no doubt. Now, we are trained in formation combat as well as single combat. In the right location, a wall of us could hold an infinite number of them, well at least until our strength gave out. With their present numbers, we might stand a chance, but we need to pick the right location.”

“You are half way there.” Arran agreed, pleased to see that Jordan was back on form. “Location is indeed everything, and timing. We must not be tempted to charge straight in, we must pick the right location. Secondly, the right time. I think that when they are on the march, we could hit and run. Take them by surprise, do as much damage as possible without losing too much ourselves. An ambush perhaps, when they are strung out. They won’t be ready. At least not the first or maybe the second time.”

“Yes, we could cut off the tail of the column. Hold off the main party while some of us finish off the stragglers, then retreat. That would make them get a move on,” enthused Jordan. “Then we could hit the front of the column, perhaps as it came over a rise. By the time the whole column was aware of us, we could be away, then whenever they moved through a narrow valley we could hit them from both sides. We would pick them off and wear them down.”

“That’s the idea. We can do it, but I want to look a bit further ahead. What happens when it’s all-out war? asked Arran.

“Well, we would have the baron’s men and all the great houses. The Houses’ soldiers are better men than the baron’s. We can soon train them in formation combat. If we can meet the enemy while they move, if possible, rather than letting them get into position, we may have a chance. If we attack and retreat, they are bound to chase. Then we cut them off, holding back the main force while the baron’s men deal with the cut of barbarians. That would be best for them. What worries me is what they might do if faced with huge numbers of those barbarians. Run, I would think.”

“Good, Jordan. Same plan on a bigger scale. So, let’s look ahead some more. For that plan to work at its best we need to know more, like how big an army they have altogether, where their main base is, which trails they are likely to use, and what their main purpose is. Surely, they don’t need such huge supplies of grain for themselves?
Grain and stores have been going from all over the baron’s northern lands for months.”

“Right, but I have no idea. There must be more to this.” Jordan nodded.

“Then that makes this a reconnaissance mission, not a rescue mission. We must put all emotion for Elven aside.”

“So, that was what you were leading up to. We are to abandon Elven?” asked Jordan.

“Not abandon. We may get a chance to rescue him but not if it jeopardises our priorities. We must find out where their home base is and what they are up to, at all costs, then get as large an army trained and up here ready.”

“You mean start the war ourselves,” said Maleen who had wandered up. “Sounds like a good idea to me. We will fight it on our own terms.”

“I think they have as good as already started it,” said Arran. “We don’t normally start wars ourselves, but it’s only a matter of time before they completely overrun us. They may be massing their forces even as we speak.”

“Well, I doubt if they are going to go away.”

“No, but at least we have a plan to sleep on. Goodnight,” said Arran and he…

Nadine and Jarrad marched into Cam amidst cheers and trumpets. The whole town was trying to get a look at them. The march had been reduced to a slow stumble through the crowd. It was a while before the baron’s soldiers got the crowd under control and cleared a path for the two of them.

“I’ve never seen the likes of this,” said Jarrad, “the people living in town have always cowered away from us in the past.”

“They are desperate people, Jarrad. We are their only hope. You see, if we defeat the barbarians, the townies will go back to being suspicious and wary of us again. It’s just that we are not their biggest fear at this very moment.”
Kai Snade, the baron’s minister, met Nadine and Jarrad at the keep. “Welcome, although I don’t have much of a welcome, I’m afraid. The whole town is full and we cannot put you up anywhere.”

“That’s fine with us. We will camp outside the north gate and set off at dawn,” Jarrad said, relieved just to have arrived.

“Good, I am sending one hundred and fifty men with you. We lost another great house while you were away. A strong one, too. I can’t ignore this any longer. I don’t think these northern barbarians are going to go away. If you can deal with them now, then do it,” said Snade, unable to mask his concern.

“That makes sense,” said Jarrad, “but we still don’t know what we are up against. Let’s hope Arran has found out more. If the opportunity arises we will defeat the barbarians or die in the attempt.”

“Captain Hendra here will be at your disposal. He will command my men, pick up the others we sent to the keep, giving you the best part of two hundred men. They will be some of our best fighters.”

“That makes close on three fifty in all. Nothing will stand in our way. Captain, we depart at first light. Pray don’t be late.”

“We will be there,” said Hendra and saluted.

Jarrad was in no mind to stand talking to the slimy Snade, so marched his men on through the jumble of houses towards the northern gate.

The morning came with an eerie glow in the east that slowly brightened to a warm orange. The warriors were moving around in the half-light packing their kit when the soldiers arrived.

Jarrad met the captain. “Well done, Captain Hendra, an early turnout.”

“Jarrad, these are the best of our men. All handpicked and sworn to me. We will serve you to the best of our ability. Although we know they are not as good as your warriors, they are loyal and will do their best.”

“We will need them to do just that before this is through. We are about ready. Let’s go. Torran, order the march.”

The warriors merged together and proceeded along the northern road, flowing in natural rhythm. The soldiers followed at a hurried shuffle.
The three days on the road to the tower were uneventful, apart from meeting refugees heading to Cam. Jarrad tried to get information from them, but none seemed to have seen the enemy, they were fleeing before they were attacked. This road was well-travelled with soldiers and men from the great houses, so it was quite safe. The barbarians seemed to avoid it because of this. There was still an inn open about half way along to the keep. It was now doing a roaring trade. The inn was seemingly unimportant to the enemy who, had left this vulnerable little building alone. The keep was not large enough for them to stay in and all had to camp outside.

It was long after dawn before the party set off the next day. Their numbers grew, now joined by the soldiers from the northern keep. Day after day they pushed north, travelling at a frustratingly slow pace for the warriors’ liking. The road was no more, not even a trail this far north.

At about midday, the barbarians’ camp finally packed up and lumbered away. The warriors followed annoyed at the enemy’s agonisingly slow pace. Day after day, they pushed further and further north, deeper and deeper into unknown territory, although the landscape was slightly flatter, it was little different to their own.

“Do you think they know we are following?” asked Razzan. “They could be leading us anywhere.”

“Come on, Razz. It will take smarter men than these to spot us and we have been travelling directly north, if you had been paying attention, not going in circles. No, these barbarians have finished for now; they are going home. They are well into their land and probably won’t even be looking for anyone now.”

“We would most certainly have seen a scout party. They may have lookout posts this far into their land. Two men on a platform high in some thick bushes would not have been seen by us.”

“You worry too much. We just have to take that chance,” said Arran.

It was on the fourth day that Nadine and Jarrad reached the keep.

“Better late than never,” said Nadine.” They’ve seen us on the tower.”
“If Arran’s still here, he will come out otherwise Captain Hendra can get them to open up.”

“They won’t be here for hours yet,” said Nadine. “Anyway, we can’t all fit in there, we must camp here.”

“We are probably scaring the life out of them. Perhaps we should surround the walls and shout and scream,” amused Jarrad.

“Stop it, Jarrad. It’s not funny.”

“No sense of humour, women.”

Everyone got busy. The fires were lit first, then the tents erected. By the time the soldiers came marching in, proudly putting on as good a show as possible but still a shambles, the warriors had finished a meal and were relaxing. Captain Hendra called for the gates to be opened and the soldiers filed in. Nadine and Jarrad followed. The commander of the keep welcomed them and apologised for not coming out to meet them, explaining that they looked far more fearsome than the Haven warriors he had seen before and that he could not be too careful. He volunteered his spare men to go with them. The commander offered Nadine a room, but she declined, preferring to camp with the warriors.

In the morning, the group set off again following Arran’s trail. The next few days were quiet. They were in strange lands and took time to plot maps of their progress as they went. Many days passed until eventually they were met by Jordan on watch. He led them on into camp. Nadine spotted Arran at once and ran up to him, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. They kissed hungrily, oblivious to anyone around them.

“I’ve missed you. Thank the Gods you’re safe,” whispered Nadine.

“We’ve done nothing but follow Elven’s captors. We believe that he is still alive. There is a town in a hollow over in the next valley, the raiders have him there”.

Jarrad appeared at their side. “When do we attack?”

“Tomorrow, before we are seen. The town is in a dip against a half circle of cliffs. There is only one way in or out, so we must be careful.”

The new arrivals set up camp and everyone had supper. This time there was no merrymaking or fires and little conversation. Arran called in the warriors and briefed them on the plan for attack.
“We will watch the place for a while, see if we can work out their movements. We will attack at dawn. A basic plan, I know, but it’s our best chance given the circumstances.”

“I urge some caution,” said Jarrad. “We should get an idea of the size of the garrison, where it is and how to take it before charging in.”

“Maybe, but an early surprise attack can be just as effective as a little knowledge. We will decide on the exact moment after we have looked at the place. Let’s turn in for now, we need as much rest as possible,” said Arran.

Not long after the camp had settled down, there was a commotion as several people entered camp noisily. The warriors, fearing it could not be one of their own, leapt to their feet and grabbed weapons. Arran came rushing across camp to see the watch stumbling into camp, supporting a sorry figure who was barely able to walk, between them. As they approached, Arran saw that it was Elven. He was unable to stand unaided and stared blankly ahead.

“By the Gods,” he exclaimed. “Elven! How did you get away?”

Elven could not answer and seemed unaware of the question or even where he was.

“Was he alone?” asked Arran.

“Yes, he just walked up to us and collapsed,” replied Malone.

“Get a fire going and get some hot food into him. Let me know the moment he says anything.”

“How could he have possibly escaped, let alone found us in his condition?” said Nadine having just arrived. “They wouldn’t just let him go, would they?”

Perhaps it was a mistake by his captors. And to find our camp he just headed south,” suggested Arran.

“South! He doesn’t even know what day it is.”

“Well, he is safe now and that’s all that matters. Tomorrow we will wipe out their town without the worry of Elven being a hostage.”

“So, simple, is it? Said Nadine crossing her arms. Are you blind, Arran? Something is very wrong here. They must know that we are here. We might be surrounded right now.”
“I assure you that we are not. We would know about it. If it helps, I will send out more scouts to probe a bit further out. I am not going to be taken in by unusual events just because we don’t understand them.”

“Well, I’ve got a nasty feeling about this. Something tells me it’s not going to be all that simple. Be extra careful, Arran.”

The camp was bustling a long time before dawn. The excitement could be felt. Little breakfast was had. Few could eat, although Vargen managed to put away double rations. The men assembled in prearranged order. Razzan, Jarrad, Vargen and Arran were to go ahead to clear the way.

Arran walked with pride as he inspected his line of warriors, checking that confidence and eagerness shone through their eyes. Not one set of eyes held fear. He informed them all that he would lead ahead with Razzan, Jarrad and Vargen to ensure the way was safe. They would leave within the next 15 minutes. He ordered his men to be at ease and use the time to check their weapons. Arran and his three comrades turned from the assembly.

“Let’s give Elven one last try before we set off,” said Arran.
They marched over to the tent that Elven was in and entered.
“Elven, we are going to attack the town now,” said Arran.
Elven sat up, blank faced and said, “No, not yet. It’s too early.”
“Too early?” repeated Vargen. What does he mean by that? I want to get this over by lunch time.”
“It’s the best time to attack,” said Razzan.
Arran watched him for a moment, and then said, “When Elven?”
“After the garrison leaves this morning on exercise. The town will almost defenceless,” said Elven, his face still blank and unemotional and showing no signs of awareness of those around him. “You will see them leave from the ridge over the approach road.”
“Well done, Elven,” said Vargen. “You hear that, Arran? He may have saved the day.”
“Maybe. How do you know this, Elven?”
“I just know. It is their way.”
“Come with us and show us.”
“Yes, I will.”
They all marched off, signalling everyone to move.
“It’s funny how Elven suddenly came to life,” Nadine said to Arran, “when he looked almost dead. He still looks sort of blank.”
“He hasn’t slept for ages. How do you think you would look? What do you expect?”
“I tried to touch his mind and detected nothing. Arran, he’s not in there.”
“That’s not funny, Nadine.”
“No, but it’s accurate. It’s more than tiredness. Something is very wrong with him, and I think it could have disastrous results for us today. I don’t like it, Arran.”
“Nadine, at times you are such a worrier. We have everything under control.”
“Yes, if everything is as you see it. But something is blocking his mind. Perhaps even controlling it.”
“Nonsense.”
“Look, why is it you brag to your drunken friends about my powers and threaten to set the mind witch on them? Then at important moments, useful times you totally dismiss me when I could be of use.”
“Nadine, what do you want me to do? Call off the attack.”
“Well, no.”
“What then?”
“I don’t know. Where’s your famous logic? Use the information available to you and formulate a plan. That’s what you are always telling me.”
“Logic. OK, we press on with the attack. We know the layout of the town. Geographically, our plan stands. But what I will do is hold back half of our force, well-hidden back from the ridge. Just a couple of warriors, on the ridge, watching over us. If the garrison does leave town, we won’t need everybody anyway, then if we get into trouble they can come to our rescue. We may then take the enemy from both sides. So, I shall put two men at the flagpole in the square. If we get into trouble they will lower the flag. This shall be the signal for the others to attack. And you, Nadine, will remain with the reserve, that’s an order. That should cover everything.”
“Very logical. But there is one thing bothering me, though.”
“Go on.”
“Well, now that we have Elven back, why are we attacking the town? It is only going to lead to more trouble.”

“Come on, Nadine. These barbarians have destroyed many great houses.”

“You have no direct evidence of that.”

“How many marauding armies have you seen passing through our lands?”

“There has been enough damage done. There could be several armies from anywhere.”

“Well, they are not that common. These people have been up to no good.”

“So, you are going to destroy them out of logic not evidence,” said Nadine.

“If you like, yes. Look, Nadine, logic is somewhere between a guess and hard evidence. A guess is usually emotionally influenced because of total lack of evidence, whereas logic is the power of deduction, using probability not emotion. It is a cold decision based on likelihood, not how you feel it might happen. That is where you start to listen to your fears and be controlled or influenced by them. You have to totally dismiss your emotions.”

“Well, that puts paid to women’s intuition then, doesn’t it? Anyway, I can’t be thinking about killing people without being emotional.”

“But that’s the whole point. How many times do I have to explain this to a woman? It’s not just your judgement, but it could put your life at risk. The enemy will not hesitate to kill you. You hesitate for a moment and it could be your last. Women should stay at home in the kitchen.”

“That,” screamed Nadine, “is a typical male reaction, and dare I say totally illogical.”

“I’m sorry, Nad,” said Arran throwing his arms around her. “You know I didn’t mean that. You know the warriors treat their women as equals. All the women are trained alongside the men.”

“Yes, but deep down you have the same prejudices as all men,” she said shrugging his arms off. “Well, you are stuck with me. As a princess of the house of Jarsad-Malkem, and in support of the unity of
our tribes. I have more say and importance than just your woman. Don’t you forget that.”

“Nad, I respect your position and love you dearly. I did not mean it. I value your opinion, but sometimes you confuse me. And I cannot afford to be confused now.”

“Well, try not to be so narrow-minded. You are probably right. These people have been up to no good. They have brought in large amounts of grain. We have a good idea where that came from, they don’t look the farming type. And we cannot let them get away with it. But I still have an uneasy feeling. You must look at every possibility before destroying a town. For your own sake if not theirs.”

“Yes, yes with this plan we have a safeguard. We cannot walk into a trap. But you stay with the reserve.”

“All right, I don’t really care for them, I just worry for you. The plan looks sound, let’s do it.
The first shimmering of light was creeping over the ridge; the warriors were relaxed but ready in a tight gully. There was still a shadow over the town. Arran tapped Razzan. They could just make out men gathering in the town centre.

"Looks like a patrol or bigger. We had better wait until they are well clear of the town. It looks like Elven’s right, this could be good fortune for us," whispered Arran. "Let’s get back and warn the others. It looks like the whole garrison is leaving."

"That is the only road in and out. The town is in a hollow and surrounded on three sides by cliffs," said Elven, pointing. "Like I said they go out on manoeuvres once a week. They will be gone all day."

Arran made his way back to the solders, which were under cover of a shallow cliff. He noted that they were very much on edge and did not look much rested. "Bunch of rabble," he muttered. "I hope we don't have to depend on them too much." There were two more columns further back with the barrows between them. Arran told Captain Hendra of the delay and that when ordered, to lead his men to the top
of the ridge, but out of sight and watch the town. One third of the captain’s men were to go in with the warriors. The barrows would follow. Hendra was not to enter town with his main force, unless he saw the flag lowered. That would be the signal for attack, if it were needed, but he was to hold fast otherwise.

The tension could be felt hanging in the air. Arran made his way back to his men. The dawn raid postponed, the warriors settled down to wait, taking advantage of the rest. It was not long before they made their way up and along the ridge, just in time to see the troop march out of town.

"You were right, Arran," remarked Razzan. "Looks like the whole garrison, this will be easy."

"Too easy. I wonder where they are going." The two men looked down, the sun now licking the rooftops; high cliffs on three sides surrounded the town still in shadow with this one narrow pass out of it. "If we get it wrong, we are in a hell of a trap."

"They aren't coming back for some time I'll wager, they are off somewhere, leaving the spoils to us," said Razzan

"Elven, you stay with Captain Hendra. Keep a sharp lookout for their return, and give me plenty of warning."

As soon as the enemy were well out of sight, the warriors swept down into the town, with the aim of spreading out through the streets and holding every main junction, preventing any remaining garrison from reforming. The bulk of the people left there were still in bed. Arran, Razzan and Jarrad made for the main square. They saw the butcher's shop with human limbs hanging in the window. This disturbed even the warriors. It would undoubtedly scare the soldiers. The resistance did not show until the soldiers disturbed everyone with their noisy charge. The warriors were in position to deal with it. The soldiers went on to break open the grain stores and loot everything they could carry until they saw the butchers. The first of the barrows rattled over the ridge and the main force concealed itself on the top.

The town was now well secure, and Arran could set about organising the raid. He set two soldiers at the flag mast. The main force might not be needed and would remain under cover unless the
flag was lowered, thus the town would look normal should the barbarians return. Then they could be fought on both sides.

Satisfied that everything was under control, Arran began to take notice of the huge temple in the main square. How clean and well repaired it was, unlike the rest of the town, which did not amount to much more than heaps of rock and stone strewn with rotting garbage. He had never seen or smelt such a foul place, and yet right in the centre was this clean and tidy temple of obvious importance. Its style was different to the rest of the town. It had tall, slender spires that gave it a kind of grace unlike its surroundings. He and Razzan walked towards it. They heard swordplay from an outhouse of the temple. Two soldiers fell out of the door with their guts hanging out, doubled up and fell to the ground still. They were followed by three large figures in black hooded cloaks brandishing broadswords, hewing down six more soldiers before the rest fell back as they, without a break in their stride, marched over to the centre of the square without fear, as if nothing on earth could touch them. They were large men who moved with the grace and speed of ones trained in the arts. They were very large, bigger than Arran, but not mutants, and they had very refined features the likes of which Arran had not seen before.

"Temporal priests I should say," Arran whispered to Razzan. "Let’s see what they are made of." Arran walked toward the priests, drew his blade and gave the bow of respect. He had not even straitened when one of the priests leaped forward swinging a blow at Arran's chest. Arran arched his body back as the blade swept under his chin. His opponent, expecting to strike his quarry, was carried forward by his own momentum, a red blade thrusting out of his back. Arran sidestepped and pulled his blade out before the body hit the ground. The other two looked at each other and both leaped towards Arran, who again sidestepped left, putting one opponent in front of the other. Deflecting a thrusting blade with his own, again leading his rival off balance, Arran drew back his blade slashing the man's chest. He jumped back again and jabbed the now shaken man under the ribs. The second combatant, no longer a threat, ducked behind the first to avoid Razzan's thrust and leaving himself no room to manoeuvre. Arran went left again under the wounded man's poor guard and ran through
the surprised second man, while Razzan hacked the first man's head off. There was a murmur echo round the square from the soldiers now crowding into it, at once stunned by their leader's ability, but in wonder of their enemy.

"If they are all like that, we have not a chance," one was heard to cry.

Razzan turned to him and said, "Fool, they were of their elite, the force that marched out of here were rabble. You see how easily we dealt with their elite. Get back to your work or I'll send you into the next world now." The man scurried off like a rat. Arran and Razzan looked at each other. They were both visibly shaken. They had never encountered any one as good as themselves before. "I wonder how many more they are?" whispered Razzan.

"We had better deal with the ones here before the garrison gets back and hope this is the extent of their number. Call Jarrad, Argot and the others, time we explored the temple."

The temple entrance was unobstructed apart from a large slab of polished rock standing nineteen hands in front of it. The men walked over and stood either side of it. The huge black slab did not hinder their way in, but it cut off the light to the interior. Arran smelt the odour smell of extinguished candles. Inside was total darkness. "The priests would be used to the dark. If we go in now, they will cut us down."

"I'll get some torches, a brand each," said Jarrad, already dashing off.

Arran and Razzan both closed their eyes, slowed their heartbeat and listened for movement inside. Arran flipped a pebble in on the path he intended to take. From its echo, he reasoned there was no obstacle in his way. Argot kept his eyes fixed on the entrance ready for any sign of movement. Jarrad was soon back, gave one brand to Razzan, and said "Ready".

Arran said, "Go."

Jarrad sprinted across the doorway throwing the torches high into the temple as he did, followed immediately by Arran who took two steps in and dived headlong to the left, still with eyes shut. He rolled over twice, slid into a pillar, stood up and opened his eyes. Someone
had already extinguished the brands. Arran could see quite well in the low light and make out rows of pillars and pews. But he could detect no sound or movement. Stealthily, he made his way along behind the pillars until he was near the altar, blade in hand. Whoever was in here would have recovered their night vision by now after the brands had temporarily blinded them. They may not have seen him make his way here. He finished counting to fifty and looked away from the door. Suddenly, the darkness was shattered by blazing light as Razzan, Jarrad, Argot and Gem entered blade in one hand, blazing torch held high in the other. Keeping his eyes low and away from the light, Arran looked around and saw three black figures standing in front of the altar. Sensing movement from behind, he turned to see three more by a pillar he had passed a little way back. The figures were about to jump out on the others as they passed. When they drew level, Arran ran at the priests’ rear screaming, forcing them to jump forward into the warriors’ reach whilst trying to turn to fend off what was behind them. They neither had the room or position to fight as they wished.

Arran leaped over the last pew cleaving one priest as he landed. The figure sank to its knees making bubbling noises. The other two, trapped between fearsome opponents, fared no better. More light was being brought in now by the braver of the soldiers. Arran looked around. Everything was built from gleaming bright marble, looking at once brand new and very skilfully made, but the style looked somehow thousands of years old. He did not like this place. His attention returned to the priests at the altar. they had spread out, being used to single combat and did not wish to be caught in such a display of teamwork as they had just witnessed. This mattered not to Arran; they would stay in-group and tackle the priests one at a time. That would make their task easier.

As they advanced down the aisle, the priests, realising, reformed but remained too close to the altar, restricting their room for manoeuvre. The six met with a mighty clash of steel. Arran moved round to the left to turn the first priest away from Razzan, who could distract him with the odd blow between his own opponents, giving Arran an opening to finish him. But Razzan had met his match. He deflected a blow to his head and tried to slip in a thrust at the first
priest when his opponent, making a lightning recovery, swung his blade round and took off Razzan’s hand. Arran took advantage of his man's distraction and ran him through, but could do no more than watch Razzan, now defenceless, step back only to have the priest jump forward with remarkable speed and push his blade into Razzan’s stomach. Arran was there in an instance and hacked off the priest’s head before he could pull his blade out. He fell on Razzan, twisting the blade and pushing it in further as they fell to the floor amidst Razzan's cries of agony. Arran turned on the third priest in a fury and hacked at him relentlessly, until the man went down. It was the first time Arran had lost his temper in a fight.

"I must control myself or I will be defeated," he thought. Arran turned to see Jarrad cradling Razzan's limp form. Jarrad looked up and shook his head. Arran felt his bitterness increase again.

"Get him out of here." The men carried Razzan out into the square.

"I want his body taken home and buried."

"Arran, that's not custom. It's a waste of time and resources," said Argot.

"I know. I'm sorry. Let this town be his funeral pyre then. Come, let us explore the temple."

They walked back and into the temple.

"They can never beat us, they are just barbarians. The high priests number few, the rest are untrained. We will train the baron’s men into a real army."

"The smoke from the funeral pyre will be seen for miles," said Jarrad, "and raise the alarm."

"I don't care, he was my best friend. I hate these people, let them come."

"Since when do we allow the dead to put the living at risk?" put in Argot. "We have never seen you controlled by anger before. We are taught that it is a weakness. If you want war with these people, then you shall get your wish, for they will come I feel sure. But let this be delayed and we will be ready.

"You're right, I must not allow my emotions to control my life. There is only one way, and I must follow it. The science of logic will reveal all."
Arran ordered some soldiers to organise a burial detail.
"My lord," said a rough looking captain with blood on his tunic. "All dwellings searched, and all resisting barbarians slain. The grain stores have been opened. They have more grain here than our combined output for two seasons, my lord."
"Phew," said Jarred, "they have no food shortage at all."
"This must be one of their main stores. Every village can't have this much," said Arran. "Why are they still collecting it? They can't use it all."
"They also eat meat. Human meat, which probably accounts for most of the people who disappear near the Dead Lakes, not taken by monsters after all. So, if it is their main food store, how come we have taken it so easily?" asked Jarrad.
"We have taken nothing yet. This valley has only one way out. The same way the garrison will return. I now feel that it was not a raiding party that we saw leave, but just an exercise. They will return soon, for they cannot leave this place unguarded for long."
Some of the nearest soldiers suddenly appeared very nervous, looking all around them as if expecting sweeping hordes of cannibals to come screaming round the nearest corner.
"Our barrows are in position and I have men rounding up every available barrow here. But I fear we will not carry away all, my lord."
"Good man. What is your name?"
"Captain Hodge of the baron’s household guard, sir."
"Time is all important now. We have more than we came for Leave some behind, it matters not. Make haste, captain."
Arran marched into the temple and down to the alter. It was a huge slab, towering over him; it had manacles in each corner, so that a man could be spread-eagled across its face. On its top, candle holders, which Jarrad was lighting. In the centre of the altar, on a rack, lay the sacrificial blade and scabbard. Arran picked up the blade and drew it. The balance was fantastic, a long thin blade with a slight curve and cut off end. It was far lighter than a broadsword with a double grip, but not as curved as a sabre. He whirled it over his head. Far more manoeuvrable than a broadsword, but strong enough to stand up to one, unlike the rapier, which he had practised with all his life for
speed. It was a two-handed blade, itself unusual, for that would may mean fighting without a shield, thought to be risky with a light blade. Although shields were rarely used or carried, it still dictated design. He thought it the ultimate, a blade he had dreamt of but never thought possible. He held it in both hands, by pushing his hands in opposite directions; the blade arced across in front of him at a speed unimaginable. Ten times that of just swinging an ordinary blade. He began to see the potential. Recovering from his astonishment, he examined the craftsmanship to discover that this too was far superior to any he had ever seen. Even more amazing was the style. Only Zeb might have ideas on its origin. Arran could not even guess.

"A present from the Gods," he mused, "but certainly a blade befitting the leader of Greyhaven. I shall wear it high, so all can see." He fastened the scabbard around his shoulders, so the hilt could be grasped from above his right shoulder. By pulling forward on the grip, the scabbard swung away from his body to allow the sword to fly out forwards and down in an attacking sweep all in one motion. Arran marvelled at the speed of this. It was almost as if the blade was spat out by the scabbard. Arran walked back out into the daylight having no interest in further plunder, his emotions lifted by this magnificent prize. Even if the barbarians did use it to sacrifice, he would use it to avenge all those who had died by these people. Jarrad followed him out.

"A present from the high priest. Ha."

"Inform the captains that I don't want the men collecting too much loot. The only thing of value here is the grain for which we came. These looters must get on with helping to load it. I want to be away in half of our planned time."

The day was bright and the men’s eyes took a moment to adjust to its light. Jarrad ran off to inform the captains. Arran looked up at a cloudless sky. The sun was quite high but he thought he saw a mist low across the square. "On a day like this," he wondered, it was too quiet, “there should be more noise.” It was like his ears were muffled, or full of water. A barrow stood alone and lost. "Why is it not in use?" But instead of feeling angry at things not going to plan, he felt quite indifferent, and did not really care one way or another. "I suppose I
must shift that barrow to the grain store myself." He began to walk
towards it, but found his legs felt heavy and hard to move. The barrow
seemed to get no closer. But he still did not care. Half way along the
square, he noticed something heaped on the floor in front of the
barrow. Now with mild curiosity, he wondered why there was no one
about, why his legs felt like lead, and were getting heavier and heavier.
It was becoming impossible to walk. He shuffled to a halt, swaying
slightly. He threw off his new blade.

"Perhaps it has bewitched me. It is certainly getting heavier, but so
is my old blade," Arran thought. So, he discarded it, and his pouch. "I
can't lug that lot around anymore," he thought casually. The ground
around him seemed to swell gently, slowly rise and fall like a sea.
Time itself stood still.

"Mad, I must be going mad. Don't worry, this is not really
happening, I am just going mad," Arran said to himself. He began to
laugh, and it seemed funnier and funnier. "Why am I all alone? He had
managed a few more steps. "By the Gods, I am not alone," recognising
the heaps by the barrow as two soldiers. Panic now rose in him.
"Something is taking us all out, silently without us knowing. It must be
some wizardry." Looking all around, he was positioned by the main
road from the square leading out of town. He could see a large group
waiting up the hill just outside town, like some creature of prey,
waiting for the kill. His thoughts were jumbled and making little sense.
When he realised that it was the enemy garrison returned, his panic
increased, making his thoughts even more chaotic. "They just stand
there waiting, but why? Are they waiting for the last of us to drop? No,
they would receive no resistance now. Perhaps they would also be
affected. Yes, we have time, one chance, they are standing right under
our reserve force. If they charged down, they might defeat the
barbarians, even outnumbered. They could drive the garrison this way,
and if I could revive some of my men, we could fight them on both
sides. I must give the signal to lower the flag." He turned to the square.
There were two soldiers on the floor and one warrior leaning against
the flagpole. "I must assume that all the soldiers are out cold, and some
warriors are left on their feet." He found his arms heavy, but managed
to signal to the warrior, who just gave a friendly wave back,
unbalanced and fell on his face. "Our only hope gone." His panic came back in waves, to be overtaken by fear and sheer terror. This was his first experience of such emotions. "How can people allow this to take hold? They cannot function like this. It must be part of what is affecting me."

A brilliant flash of light made him turn towards the cliff at the back of town. He thought he saw a figure in blue running along the top of the cliff and was blown right off his feet. His ears screamed and popped. Arran lay there, confused, trying to make sense of his increasingly insane world. He sat up, the mist was gone and so was his panic. He managed to climb to his feet, although he still felt heavy. Looking up the road again, the enemy was still there, but no longer in ranks. They were in a confused muddle. "Frightened by the bang, I suppose. The signal, just a chance."

The flag was still flying, a bit torn, but still there. The warrior now sitting at the foot of the pole, looked mystified. "The mist, it must have been the mist. The blast has blown it out of town, straight into the enemy. Would it be strong enough to affect them? A little maybe, it's all I can hope for now." Arran staggered across the square, tore down the flag and pulled Jon to his feet. "March" said Arran, as he began to drag Jon round the square. Jon soon caught on and managed a fair pace on his own. Half way round, Arran saw Jarrad and two others. He got them to their feet and sent them after Jon. Soon most of the warriors and even a few soldiers were jogging round the square. Arran's head clearing rapidly, he thought, "We will soon be in shape to meet them, I doubt if there are any of those priests with them."

Arran stopped to pick up his discarded things and looked up the main street. There was a ferocious battle raging at the edge of town. The enemy, surprised and disorganised, were backing down the street. "The soldiers soon acted on our signal, and they fare well. They have the surprise on their side. But I bet they don’t know that there isn’t anyone here fit enough to help them. We must engage the enemy from its rear before they regroup and the soldiers begin to lose confidence and crumble. Our only chance is to take the enemy from both sides. Three more times round the square should do me."
Now there were ten men going around the square. The sound of battle was echoing down the main street. More and more soldiers were getting to their feet, becoming aware of their predicament. But the retreat had stopped. The enemy had reorganised and the soldiers wavered, wondering where their comrades were. Arran stopped at the central street. The others joined him. The soldiers were still not in a fit state, some still getting to their feet.

“The tide is turning up there. We must charge now, making as much noise as we can to rekindle their fear and encourage the soldiers.” Arran turned and shouted to the soldiers, “Follow us as soon as you can.” With that he charged up the central street screaming, the others bolted after him. Arran unsheathed his new blade as he ran. It seemed to glow faintly, and he was aware of a slight tingle running up his arm. He was too focused on what was to come to notice it, and the feeling passed quickly.

The rear of the barbarians turned, only to step back into their companions, creating confusion and reducing room for manoeuvre. Arran tore straight in cleaving the first startled opponent in two, so fast that the barbarian did not even have a chance to let out a breath. For a moment, it seemed as if the blade refused to be pulled out of the corpse and Arran felt a tingle run up his arm. His next opponent, Arran ran straight through the middle. This time his victim let out a blood chilling scream, the likes of which Arran had never heard before. It was so loud that the fighting around him almost came to a standstill.

The rest of the warriors had lined up abreast double spaced, marching into the affray and sweeping their blades from side to side, taking two men a piece. Their opponents’ attention, moved from the warriors now striking them, and began to focus on Arran whose next two victims also let out similar unearthly screams. The barbarians began to turn from Arran and try to fight their way through their own men, even killing those in the way. The corpses were piling up around Arran, and the more that he killed, the more frantic his opponents became. The screams were filling their ears. Some were pointing and shouting something that Arran could not make out. But his job was getting easier. A circle was opening in front of him. He was moving rapidly into the midst of the enemy. Soon the pressure on the soldiers
was too great and their line began to break. The rest of the warriors, however, found their task getting easier and were killing at a faster rate with Arran’s distraction. For a moment, Arran thought his new blade felt lighter and moved faster than ever. Almost, as if it was taking over, eager to kill. Unable to escape, the nearest of the enemy to him began to throw themselves onto their own blades as if in attempt to avoid being killed by Arran, who slowed up in bewilderment. He only needed to walk up to one and show his blade and they killed themselves.

In the turmoil, the warriors were making short work of their opponents whose numbers were dwindling fast. Even the soldiers, whose line had been broken, were taking their toll. Those that broke through did not even stop to fight, but ran for their lives. It was not that long before they had finished off all between them. The soldiers began chasing the escaped barbarians out of town. They had tasted their first victory in real battle and there was no stopping them now. Besides, the barbarians’ spirit had been broken and the soldiers were more than able to deal with them now. Arran gave Captain Hendra the signal to give chase. Hendra broke into a run and waved the remaining soldiers onward. Arran looked around. He felt strange, energy surged through him, like adrenalin. He was aware of Nadine standing alone. Left, by the departing soldiers. The rest of the warriors gathered around him. It all seemed unreal.

“Well, that was a lucky break,” said Jarrad. “Just as I thought they were recovering from our attack. Still, a little odd, though.”

“There was no luck involved,” said Nadine. “Those men had heard that scream before.”

“In the temple, perhaps.”

“I don’t follow you,” Nadine replied.

“Arran’s blade. It came from the temple, a sacrificial blade,” said Jarrad.

“The barbarians, I heard some cry ‘the executioner’ and ‘soulreaper’ as they ran past me. Arran, there is great evil here. I am not sure how or why, but we must complete our task with utmost speed. There should be no further attacks and we can be away quickly.”
“Yes, makes sense to me,” said Vargen. “I don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary. The soldiers will deal with those who escaped, I’m sure. We can be away before they can alert any nearby allies. We still have our original detail here in town,” he said, turning to look at the somewhat dazed soldiers approaching from the square.

“What is the matter with you all?” Arran said, aggressively. “We have won the day. The town is ours.”

“There is great danger here,” said Nadine. “I felt it in them. Not just one, all of them. A terrible fear that I could barely withstand.”

Vargen turned to the solders and said, “Gather up every barrow and load up all the grain you can, carry on as planned, at top speed.”

Glad to have missed the fight, they turned and trotted back towards the town centre.

“We have lost none of our own in that battle, but the soldiers took a few casualties when the barbarians panicked. I think we should look upon it as good fortune. I do not think we could have expected such a good outcome under any other circumstances,” said Jarrad. “Shall I assign a burial detail?”

“Not until the grain is on its way,” replied Arran. “The burial detail can stay, with us, the rearguard.”

It took four long hours before the last barrow disappeared over the ridge. Everyone had helped with the gruesome labour of loading, and all were pleased with the result.

“Seems strange they should have hoarded so much grain,” said Nadine. “Far more than they need. Do you think it was an offering for their gods?”

“Maybe. The stores were part of the temple,” replied Arran, suddenly feeling very weak and drained.

The men were carrying their dead out of town to be buried as far off as possible, when Captain Hendra re-appeared with his troop.

“Sire, we caught many barbarians, but I believe that some must have got away.”

“You and your men did a commendable job, captain. I shall be notifying the baron of this. You could not be expected to catch them all, do not concern yourself.”

“Thank you, sire.”
“Get your men back on the trail for home. The grain is not far ahead. Catch up with it and guard it. We will be with you as soon as we can.”

“Yes, sire,” said the captain as he waved his men on.

Climbing over the ridge, Nadine pointed. “Look, it’s Elven. I had forgotten all about him. He must have stayed behind.”

Elven was sitting back from the ridge in some bushes. Arran walked up to him and said, “Elven, are you well?”

Looking a little dazed again, he replied, “I think so, but I don’t know what I am doing here. I think I am waiting, but I know not for what. I can’t remember anything since Cam.”

“You do not remember leaving camp this morning?”

“What camp? Where are we anyway?”

“I told you he was not right.” Said Nadine.

“It’s all right, Elven. It doesn’t matter. Go catch up the soldiers and guard the barrows for me, will you?”

“Yes, sir.” Said Elven, wobbling to his feet and making off.

“He was not in control of himself this morning, Arran. He was meant to lead us into a trap.”

“I am beginning to agree with you, Nad. Fortunately, it didn’t work. But is he free of it now? That’s my main concern.”

“I will consider his mind tonight. I may be able to tell.”

It was not long before the dead were buried, and the grave was filled in. Arran ordered Vargen and Jordan to scout the rear while he and the remaining soldiers set off to catch up with the barrows.

As the warriors were entering the hills, Arran regrouped his men at the rear of the train. “This is where we must expect any danger. At this speed, we would be caught up with in no time. If, that is, there is anyone left around. And if they can get organised in time.”

“I doubt if it were possible,” said Jarrad.

“As soon as we are through these hills, we will make better time. We may make it by dusk, though.”

“Not at this speed,” said Jarrad

“On the other side of these hills, the ground is quite stony. The heavy barrows won’t make such deep tracks. Detail some soldiers to cover the tracks tomorrow. The barrows can fork west. We will lay a
false trail due east. I am not taking any chances. If we are caught I
don’t want to have to guard barrows. We will want room to
manoeuvre. We will take half the soldiers with us,” said Arran
“That will leave the barrows unprotected.”
“I know, but something Nadine pointed out is worrying me. They
knew we were there. They expected to beat us easily. OK, they did not
know we are stronger than the average mere soldier. But that was a
trap.”
“I know that. But we won, didn’t we?”
“Well, I don’t believe their low numbers. Did you see any of those
cat faces? Or other masks?”
“No, but.”
“No buts. Their strength was not there. There must be another town
or military camp nearby. I think we will have all hell on our trail.”
“Then you are right to take action. You may well save the day yet
again, Arran?”
“We will decide on the morrow. They cannot catch us before then.”
At first light, Arran called round his lieutenants to explain the plan.
On leaving the hills, they would split up. Captain Hendra would
oversee the barrow company.
“I understand what has to be done sire,” said Captain Hendra. “We
should be clear within two hours, then we part company.”
“Good man, captain.”
“Nadine, you and Elven are to go with the barrows.”
“I don’t want us to be split up again.”
“Do it. Things could get bad,” ordered Arran
It was two and a half hours before the party lumbered out of the
hills, bade their farewells and prepared to part. Suddenly, Vargen came
running towards them.
“Arran, Arran,” he cried, panting. “A force is following. They must
be just about to enter the hills. Jordan is keeping an eye on them.”
“How many?”
“Larger than in town. And well-armed. Some masks, as well.”
“Get those barrows out of here. And do a good job covering your
trail. Your lives depend on it. Cut some branches, we must scratch
lines in the ground to look like barrow wheels. Come on.”
“Look, we are here. The train has left in a westerly direction and will turn south later, down here.” Arran scratched lines in the dirt with his blade. “The enemy, on their way from the north, must be about here. We, on the other hand, will go due east and keep going until we are sure the barrows made it, or we will fight and kill them all here,” said Arran, stabbing his blade into the ground.

“Here, here,” shouted Torran, thrusting his blade up into the air. “We will take them and send them to the Gods.”

“Here, here. They won’t like my blade up them,” said Tarrak, thrusting his hips forward.

“So, when do we eat, exactly?” asked Vargen the ravenous, thrusting half a sausage into the air.

“Shut up, Vargen,” ordered Jarrad.

“Wait a minute, you lot,” said Jon. “Do you mean to continue east, Arran?”

“That’s right. I don’t want to give them any clues that we are from the south.”
“But east. That must lead to the Dead Lakes and the Petrified Forest.”
“I think you are right, Jon,” said Arran.
“But those places are haunted. We can’t go there.”
“Ha, ha. Whose afraida little ol’ ghosts then?” jibbed Vargen.
“That is something worth giving some consideration to. Not like worrying where every scrap of food that you can shove into your mouth comes from.”
“Jon, have you ever met anyone who has seen these ghosts?” asked Arran
“No. I have never met anyone who has come back from there.”
“So how do you know that they exist? Don’t be afraid of old wives’ tales. We must go east and lose them in the Petrified Forest if need be. Then work our way south round the lakes and home. They might be followed by an even larger force for all we know. We can’t fight an army.”
“But we would not survive the forest,” said Jon. “The reason no one knows anybody that has seen the ghosts is because no one has ever returned from the forest.”
“That still does not prove that they exist,” replied Arran. “How do you know that someone isn’t just trying to keep people out with scary stories?”
“I’d sooner not take the chance of finding out.”
“Well, we do not have a choice. I do not want to take on the force behind us yet, not until we are better prepared and know what we are up against. I am not afraid of the forest. You talk of individuals entering it. Well, we are well-armed Greyhaven warriors,” said Arran, drawing his new blade and thrusting it into the air, the early sun glinting on it, giving it an eerie glow.
“You are bewitched by that blade,” said Jon “You think yourself invincible. What about the lizard men?”
“What of the lizard men? More stories. When are you going to learn to ignore all but the facts?”
“They eat people.”
“Then let them taste my blade,” said Arran to a round of “aye’s.” Arran went on. “Zeb has told me of the lakes. He has been there and survived. They form almost the entire length of our north-eastern border. They are very still and eventually trickle into the sea in the east. Much of the poison on our lands has been washed into the lakes, killing everything in and around them. Even the ancient gnarled trees of a forgotten age have died. You will see no other tree as large anywhere in all the lands as those. But still they stand against time. Zeb said that the poison is so strong there, that even the forces that can cause decay cannot survive.”

“I think we have no choice and must take our chance,” said Jarrad. “But we must make a move soon.”

Sure enough, as if on cue, Jordan came running over the ridge. “They are crossing the previous ridge now.” “Right, said Arran. “On the double to that clearing. I want them to see us there when they come over this last ridge.”

The group promptly fell in and sped off through the brush. No sooner had they reached the clearing, the barbarians appeared over the last ridge. They saw the warriors immediately and began jumping up and down with excitement. They must have thought that they were catching up, but the warriors knew that they could outpace them for an eternity. The barbarians looked a large force and would probably be followed by another.

“Ha,” thought Arran. “We will ambush this lot in the forest. We will keep them at a distance until we are ready.” Once over the plain, Arrans men stepped up the pace.

“We should make the forest by nightfall at this speed,” said Jarrad. “Yes, but I don’t want to lose them. If we work it right, they should just see us entering the forest. The last few lieges are clear of cover. So, we must cross that and stop on the edge of the forest.”

The sun was just touching the horizon as they reached their goal. “We stay here until they show,” said Arran. “We want them to see us enter the forest, but we don’t want them to know our numbers. With the light going down they won’t have too good a view of us.” “That’s right,” said Jarrad. “From under cover of the wood, we can count their numbers as they cross the clearing.”
“Can we stop making these lines in the ground?” asked Vargen. “It is such hard work and it is making me hungry.”

“Just run them into the wood. I think we can give that up now before it makes Vargen eat all our supplies. They won’t drop us now that they are so close.”

“Into the wood? On my own?”

“There are six of you. How many do you want?” asked Arran.

“I think everyone is a little nervous of the forest, Arran,” said Jarrad. “While you’re in there, Vargen, have a scout round and secure a campsite whilst you still have light. It will be dark in there by the time we move in.”

“Oh OK, but I still don’t think six is enough.”

The sun had almost gone when Vargen and the others returned.

“There is not much to choose from in there, Arran. It’s all pretty much the same. I doubt if I could find my way back anywhere in this light. We might as well just go in as far as we wish and camp anywhere.”

“That’s still useful Vargen, well done.”

“There they are,” cried Jon.

“Fall in,” said Arran. “March.”

“They’ve seen us,” said Jarrad. “Let’s go.”

Once just inside the forest Arran ordered the men to halt. Everyone peered out from the trees as the barbarians, now running, crossed the clearing.

“You can make out their numbers,” said Jarrad, “but no details.”

“Their numbers will do for now,” replied Arran, “nearly ten times ours.”

“We can handle them,” said Torran.

“Depends on how well-armed and fierce they are. Let’s keep going and make camp in the darkest spot we can find. They won’t follow us now. We just have to wait until morning.”

With the dawn, Arrans men got their first good look at the forest, which was not as dense as they had expected. The trees were quite far apart and having no leaves cut out very little light. They had a small cold breakfast, much to Vargen’s distaste. Before they had finished eating, Torran came running up.
“The barbarians have broken camp and are entering the forest. They are not far behind. And I got a good look at them.”
“So, what do they look like?” asked Jon.
“Very fierce. Animal faces, body piercings and mutilations. I’ve never seen anything like it. And I don’t fancy our chances, either.”
“Come on,” cried Arran “keep up. They’re only human beings.”
“I’m not so sure.”
“Let’s head straight into the sun. Torran, keep on tail and take Tarrak with you. And keep on your toes.”

The men marched in formation, fully ready to do battle. The landscape was totally devoid of colour, just grey dust and grey trunks. It was quite boring and difficult to navigate as everywhere looked the same. They moved with some speed abandoning any caution and still laying a trail. Arran wished they could proceed with more caution, but they had to keep ahead of the enemy.

As the hours passed, the men’s confidence grew and their fear of the forest diminished. By noon, the forest began to thin and by mid-afternoon they came to the first lake. It was very still and quite clear. In fact, it looked pleasant. There had been little sign of the enemy, only twice did the rear guard catch sight of them.

Arran’s men took the southern route along the shore of the lake to be on the homeward side. They travelled along in silence. There were no other sounds and they all felt slightly spooky. Some two hours after finding the lake, Gem who was on the right flank, ran up to Arran and said “There is another lake on our right and from what I could see it is cutting in towards the one on our left. The ground we are on is narrowing.”

“We could be trapped if the two meet,” said Jon.
“No, look on the positive side. If the ground narrows enough, we can hold them off indefinitely because we can fight in shifts and they will not be able to get around us.” Said Arran.
“Oh, yes, very positive. Why didn’t you send out scouts as usual?”
“Because I didn’t want to put at risk anyone out there on their own. I did not expect to meet an army, but these are strange lands and I think we are best all staying together.”
“Well, I think it was a bad move.”
“No, Jon,” broke in Jarrad, “You would not want to be out there on your own I know. We must face the enemy sooner or later. Is it too much for you?”
“Humph.”
“Right then,” replied Arran. “We’d better have someone race ahead and check out how far we have got and how much the path narrows. Seems like you’re the man for the job then, Jon.”
“Oh great,” said Jon as he raced off along the path.
“We had better double up, Jarrad. Check out where we are going to make a stand and see if we can make any defences.”
“Yes, it’s getting close now. I hope the Gods are with us.”
Soon the men could see both shores. Then, the trees disappeared altogether. A short while later they saw Jon on his way back.
“The path narrows right down to almost nothing, with a short span of water, river wide, cutting us off from a further bank.”
“We are trapped, then,” said Jarrad.
“Not so bad as that,” answered Jon, looking pleased with himself. “There is a bridge over the river. If we want, we can hold that bridge forever.”
“A bridge?” replied Jarrad. “Who could have built that?”
“Never mind,” cut in Arran. “We can thank them another time. We make a stand in front of the bridge where it is wide enough so that we can manoeuvre, but we don’t all have to fight at the same time.”
Arran chose a spot some way from the bridge where the ground rose slightly and would give them some advantage. Arran and Jarrad crossed the bridge to have a look round.
“The bridge seems in good repair,” commented Arran.
“I’ve a feeling it is still in use,” said Jarrad.
“I reckon you are right. What about the wall on this side?”
“It doesn’t look like anything we would build as a defence. It has an opening without a gate.”
“But it is too high to be of no purpose. Perhaps it had a gate, but there is no sign of where hinges might have been,” noted Jarrad.
“All the same it would be easy to defend. Any enemies would have to come off the bridge one at a time.”
The men walked through the opening and looked around. The other side of the wall widened into a large shelter.

“It is very unusual stonework,” stated Jarrad “I have never seen anything like it. But I think we should make a stand here. Do what damage we can to the enemy and make off when we please.”

“Yes, I think you are right,” said Arran.” Call the men over.”

Everyone marched over the bridge amidst exclamations of who built this and whose territory are we in. Vargen and Jordan were with the group now.

“The barbarians are right behind us,” volunteered Vargen.

Arran sent most of the men into the shelter while he, Jarrad, Malone and Argot formed a barrier around the opening.

“It will be easy to defend. We could take turns and hold them off forever. But I suppose they would find a way round eventually,” Arran said.

The men could not see the bridge through the gap in the wall and would just have to wait for the first of their enemies to appear. They waited in silence. Everything was quiet. Suddenly, they heard a blood-curdling scream. The rest of the warriors ran from the shelter. Everyone looked at each other. No one spoke. Then, they heard a ferocious battle building up.

“Sounds like a war going on over there,” said Jarrad.

Then, feet running on the bridge. Two of the barbarians came racing through the opening, only to be immediately hacked down.

“I think it is time we departed, Arran,” said Jarrad. “I don’t think I want to face whatever is making mincemeat out of that lot.”

“You’re right,” replied Arran, “It seems that someone is fighting our battle for us.”

“Yes, but I don’t think it is on our behalf. And we are probably next.”

“Grab your kit,” said Arran sheathing his blade “We need to get out of here fast.”

Then as soon as it began, the noise of battle stopped. There was movement on their escape path and then more sounds coming from over the bridge. Everyone looked at each other and backed into the shelter in the nearest to panic these hardened warriors had ever been.
Shining figures swept in from all sides. Lizard men. No one had to say it. The lizard men stood there before the terrified men brandishing broad swords, their skin smooth shining scales, very muscular with strong jaws and small eyes. They were not as tall as the warriors but were extremely wide and looked very powerful. They wore no armour apart from a very ornate helm that seemed to indicate rank. A large lizard in the centre with a particularly impressive helm stepped toward Arran raising his blade as if in signal. For the first time in his life, Arran realised he had not even drawn his blade in reaction to danger. He reached over his shoulder and withdrew it, holding it aloft. The lizard men looked up, mouths agape and before anyone could move the lizard man in the centre fell to his knees, the others immediately followed, their foreheads touching the ground. The warriors silently exchanged glances. They were beginning to believe anything could happen now after the events of the last few days.

“Welcome Reaper, wielder of Ssoulreaper the exterminator. Welcome from us unworthy Zzzargillion.” Said the leader.

“What the hell?” said someone.

“Quiet behind,” Arran whispered, and stepped forward touching his blade on the lizard’s shoulders he boldly said, “You’re welcome is accepted, O noble one.”

With that, Arran sheathed his blade and the lizard men all stood, trying to get a look at it, apparently in awe. Then, the lizard men all stood in two lines and faced each other. Shivers ran down the warrior’s spines.

The large lizard man said, “You mussst come with husss.” Then, he turned and walked off.

Arran followed, nodding to the others to do likewise. The wall of lizards parted and allowed the men through.

“Oh Another two days should see us back to Cam,” said Nadine.

“As long as we have no problems,” replied Captain Hendra. “I’m afraid that my men are no match with yours when it comes to travelling fast, and we have too great a load. We won’t get far between rests. I reckon you can double your estimate.”
“Well, the men couldn’t do much better with all these barrows to pull, could they?”

“My lady. You are too kind. I know we are no match for your folk.”

“But they do try. And you are a good man, captain. Don’t ever forget that. I’m sure I won’t.”

“Thank you again, my lady. How is young Elven?”

“Well, physically he is fine. But he still seems a little vague, like he is not all there. I think he is OK, though. By the time we get back home he will be as good as ever. I think there was a spell on him, you know.”

“Go on.”

“Yes, he was under some kind of magic spell. I don’t know what sort yet. I may never find out, but he is almost over it. It had done its job. Fortunately for us, the job came to nothing, but it makes me wonder what sort of people we are up against.”

“I’ve never seen anyone under an evil spell before. I’ve heard about it though. There was someone in my village once, used to sit in a tree all day. Some said a spell made him think he was a bird. But I don’t know.”

“This spell worked as far as it was supposed to. But how I’m at a loss.”

“Well, all’s well that ends well.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right, captain. Are you certain you know the way back?”

“Oh yes, I made detailed notes on the way here. Part of our job was to map any unknown territories. We can’t just travel through strange lands and ignore them, my lady.”

“You never cease to amaze me, captain.”

“Just because the baron’s men are untrained vagabonds and most of his commanders are corrupt, it does not mean that we all are.”

“No, I am sorry, captain. I will not doubt you again.”

“Thank you, my lady, I am deeply honoured.”

On the group laboured. Push pull, push pull. They had far too many heavy barrows for the number of men. And indeed, it did not take long before they had to rest. The journey was uneventful, and as they got nearer and nearer to their own border, the safer they all felt. It took all
of four days to get back to the northern keep. All of them were glad to arrive there, and felt a huge relief, apart from Nadine who became more and more anxious for the men left behind, especially Arran.

Arran and his men marched on past three lakes, two streams and into the deepest part of the forest, which suddenly, just as it was getting to its densest, opened out onto the most amazing stone and wood dwellings the warriors had ever seen. The stonework was extremely fine and looked more of a work of art than merely useful. Some of the designs looked like ancient runes from a bygone age. The men felt that they were in a different world. There were occasional caves and the whole village blended into its surroundings like it had been put there by nature. Crowds were appearing throughout the village, word had soon got around of the visit. The men were led to a large building in the centre of the village, which was built like a fine stoned pyramid with a flat top. Arran noticed several high helmed individuals in the entrance of the building. The inside was dark, cold and damp, barely lit with torches, but it seemed to suit the lizard men. When they came to a halt, Arran’s eyes adjusted. They were then led through several chambers and finally came to a halt in front of a huge throne with the most ornate carvings. It did not take Arran long to realise that the carvings were encryptions in the same runes as that of his new blade. He began to see the connection. His confidence grew. He realised that his blade had a great significance to these people. Arran signalled his men to relax and go along with things. They were now confronted by what must have been the high chief of lizards. He had such a large ornate helm that he could never have fought in it. It must have only been for ceremonial use. But again, Arran recognised the markings on it.

“Who hisss it that enterss our foresss without biddingss?” The chief lizard made hissing sounds with almost every word.

The lizard that led them replied, “I present The Reaper, the Executioner. Wielder of Ssoulreaper. The ssstealer of s-soulss. The dis-sruptor.”
The chief lizard looked uncertain, but seemed to decide not to chance questioning the fact. Arran realised that this blade must hold a lot of power over the lizards.

“I King Theo, the choosen leader of the Zzzargillian, welcomesss The Reaper on behalf of my peoples.”

“Waits,” said the one on the lizard leader’s right. “Asss the keeper of our ancssient lore, I accusse them of falssehood. They are humanses, it cannot be.”

“But Ssshradge, it is not told that it cannot be outs-siders,” said the king pointing to a huge stone slab to one side.

Arran, now accustomed to the dim light, noticed the ten slabs part encircling the throne. They were covered with more of the strange runes. And above the throne there was the strangest helm he had ever seen. It was pure black and as smooth as polished stone with no features whatsoever on it, apart from a fine silver spike on each side.

“It cannot bees. Thisss isss our heritage, what we have been waiting for, for generationssss. To lead usss back to our homelandssss and out of thisss hell,” hissed the doubting lizard.

“It can ssstill be ssso. We know not how the power will work. Maybe it is sssomething that only a human can do. Do not forget that the human cannot choosssse the reaper. It will do the choossssing,” said the chief lizard.

“It should be one of usss.”

“Methinksss you would have likesss it to be yourssself.”

The lizardsss men were all mumbling now in disagreement as to Arran’s fate. He thought they probably didn’t know whether to worship him or eat him.

“I am the keeper and assss such I know the lore as bessst to say the full meaning of the runessess.”

“Oh dear, there is always one. Why is life like that?” Arran thought.

“I had best help my side out while I can still get a word in.” Speaking in a loud but calm voice Arran stated, “We come in peace seeking your friendship and help, your majesty.”

“Liesss,” cried the keeper. “You had a stronger force following you. You came to destroy us. You are and always have been our enemy.”
“No, they were our enemy. And we were leading them away from our homeland,” said Arran.

“Why did you not stand and fight?” asked the keeper. “The Reaper would have.”

“Because they are being followed up by an even larger force, and we wished to lead a false trail away from our lands and deal with them without bringing war to our homeland.”

“What makes you think we can trust you? It was your people who imprisoned us here in these hostile lands many generations ago,” said the keeper pointing to figures on a slab behind him. Arran could make out lizard men and humans, but they were taller than the lizard men and dressed entirely in black. He knew of no tribe that dressed like that.

The keeper went on, “In a time forgotten, your people and ourss waged a terrible war. Our ancestors travelled from far off landses bearing giftss for your people. The executioner, being one of them, was a peace offering. It is written that it was a dis-sruptor of great power in the form of a blade as a s-symbol of warning of war and an example of our power that we were to offer to s-share. It is also written that it is the key. But our expedition fell to an earthly sickness and was destroyed. The disrupter was stolen and our ancestorss were left in exile in thessse hosstle landses, cut off from our own civilisation. It took many yearssss to get here and we were treated with treachery. We have been waiting for generationsss for a rescusssce to come for usss. It is written that they will come one day. Then your people will be punished by a far s-superior race.”

“A truly tragic tale,” replied Arran, “but do not be hasty because we all look alike to you. We are many different peoples in these lands. Look at the stone. The people you fought are all much taller than you, but we, the tallest of all the people I know, are only just taller than you. All others in these lands are shorter than you. We cannot all be guilty of past crimes of other tribes.”

“That’sss ass well may be,” said the lizard leader, “but you must excussse the hassste and bitternessess of my peopless. I cannot believe that all humanssss are evil although they are our enemy. You s-see, we are sssworn to revenge our forefathersss and thisss goesss deep within
usss. But there isss nothing in the runeses to say that the dis-sruter
would not choosse a human. Perhapsss thisss isss itsss way of finding
itssss way into their camp to achieve itsss des-stiny. I do not think that
my peoples will accept you and you must leave here assss sssoon assss
possible. I believe in the power of the dis-sruter and that itsss des-
stiny cannot be thrussst assside. I am therefore compelled to assist you
on your way and do what I can to help and convince my people. It isss
written, ssso let it be done. Come be ssseated on the throne.”

With this, the keeper stormed out hurling abuses at everyone. Arran
realised that their only hope was with the king of the lizards and then
while he still held power. That looked like it might be a temporary
situation if he went against his tribe’s beliefs. The sooner the men got
away the better. Arran quickly slipped onto the throne thinking to play
along with them “One does not walk into the wind in a storm,” he
thought.

The king was chanting away in his own tongue and waving his
arms about. He then removed the helm from above the throne and held
it above Arran’s head saying,

“Draw your blade and hold it in both handses.” He then lowered
the helm until it touched the blade. There was a faint blue shimmering
glow and then he placed the helm on Arran’s head. “Now the power
isss assss one, the s-strength of the blade and the guardianship of the
helm. Go forth and fore fill your destiny.”

Arran was taken by the king’s sincerity but could not believe in
enchantment. He and his men were trained to believe only in reality
and logic. Life was so hard and there was no room for misguided
superstition. Arran thought, “Yes, I’ll be the only one in charge of this
destiny.” He jumped up and said, “We must make haste.”

“One more thing,” said the lizard king opening a panel in the
throne. “Here, takes this chest. It isss for keeping the helm in. You
mussst return the helm to the chest as often as you can for it will
revitalize the power of the helm.” The king called his personal guard
and they all left the building.

Outside you could see the relief on the men’s faces. They all looked
calm and controlled, despite the growing crowd around them. They
marched away out of the village with the king and his personal guard.
Behind them it seemed as if the whole village was following. The men moved steadily south, the light fading fast. Night was descending, but still they moved speedily through the forest. The dark did not seem to bother or hinder the lizard men who travelled extremely well, even over the roughest ground. Rather than climb over rocks and ridges they took a series of leaps, more like an animal than a man, showing the power of their limbs. Arran’s party were doing all they could just to keep up with them. Suddenly, they were out of the forest. There was some moonlight and they could see a lot better.

“You must keep going,” said the lizard king “I feel thisss isss not the lassst time we shall meet. Farewell, and remember, do not think the blade sserves you. It will use you to its own endssss. Beware and consider your decisionsss carefully. Make sssure they are your own and not influenced by the blade. You will become more and more powerful for good or evil. But let’s hope it is for our mutual benefit. Use itsss power justly and wisely. It is written that there is not a mortal that can bear itsss power. There will be changes in the world now the blade has risen. But let it not fall on our own heads.”

“Goodbye, Sire. Thank you. And if it is in my power, we shall try to find your enemies and fulfil this destiny.” The men moved off as fast as the light would allow, in complete silence for a few minutes and then they all started talking at once.

“Well,” said Vargen. “What do you make of all that?”

“Wow,” said Jarrad. “Those lizard things are so powerful, I wouldn’t like to meet them on a dark night. They would butcher us.”

“They would make powerful allies,” said Arran. “Let’s hope the king keeps his power and convinces his people to accept us.”

“What of this helm and blade thing?” asked Jordan.

“Seems a lot of mumbo jumbo,” replied Harrad

“Superstitious lot,” put in Tarrak.

“I’m not so sure about this blade,” said Arran. “I had a strange feeling during the battle in the town. The blade seemed to go for its foe by itself, like I didn’t have to put much force behind it.”

“Come on, Arran,” said Jarrad. “You were still a little affected by the gas cloud.”
“No, maybe, but there was something. After we had finished, it seemed to glow very slightly. And the screams. I’ve never heard anything so bad. The barbarians seemed to know something. Several of them killed themselves before I could reach them.”

“Now that does seem odd, but they must be very superstitious, as well. The barbarians could have been made to believe anything. It does not prove the blade is enchanted.”

“Well, whatever. I am going to keep an open mind on it, just in case. We had better think about turning west soon. I think we’d best keep going until dawn, get as far away from here as possible. We will camp then and get some rest. Then we’ll turn west and make for the keep. What do you say, Jarrad?”

“Oh, yes fine. I keep thinking of those lizards coming up behind me in the dark. The further away from here we get the better.”

“What exactly is a disruptor, Arran?” asked Jon.

“Beats me. Never came across one before. But I’ve a feeling we are going to find out pretty soon.”

When dawn came, the men could see that they had left the flat lands behind and were entering hilly terrain once more.

“I don’t like flat lands,” said Torran, “not enough cover, feel too exposed.”

They camped in the first of the hills and had their first good rest for a while. They ate the last of their dried coney, and cleaned and packed two wild ones they had snared during the night.

“We were lucky to bag those coney,” said Vargen. “Twill almost stretch to one more meal with the rest of the oats. Most folk don’t believe that wild ones still exist.”

“Well, they are cunning little devils,” said Torran “But we know the signs. Even though they eat their own droppings, never use the same path twice and camouflage their burrows, I can spot their presence a mile off.”

“Yes, I got to hand it to you, you are our best trapper. Sometimes I think I would starve to death if it was not for you,” said Vargen, thankfully.

Meanwhile, Arran had become more and more intrigued with his new blade. He was testing its balance, sweeping it from side to side.
He was still amazed at the power he could put through its light blade. The thin narrow blade was longer and much lighter than a broadsword, which relied more on its weight to deliver a powerful blow. But because of the double grip, pushing his hands in opposite directions the blade wiped though the air instantaneously with incredible speed without having to swing it. Arran marvelled at its balance. It seemed to weigh almost nothing. He could not imagine what sort of steel it was made from. He suddenly became aware of the ball on the end of the grip. It was black. So black it reflected no light. It was a sunny morning, but this ball was hardly visible, like it was absorbing the light. “I have mastered it already,” he thought. “I can see the potential in it. No wonder the myths have built up around it. It gives me a strange feeling, a sort of attraction like a living thing.”

“We can delay no longer,” said Jarrad to Arran.

“Aye, the sun is well up. I am ready, break camp.” Reluctantly, Arran returned his blade to its sheath and noticed the ball brighten.

The men packed up and moved off south. Feeling a lot safer now, they made do with only one scout. Spirits were surprisingly high, and they felt the danger had passed, for now. They travelled on into the afternoon. The land still very sparse but slightly hilly. They would have no more food that day, saving the last for breakfast thus giving them something to march on. If they did not catch any more wild coney, which seemed more unlikely the further south they travelled, they would not receive any hospitality until the day after when they reached the northern keep. The men turned west late that afternoon and stopped at dusk, made camp and spent an uneventful night. In the morning, they had indeed snared another two conies, much to their delight. Everyone had a hearty breakfast and they set off on the last leg to the keep. It was dusk when they sighted the keep. Captain Hendra came out to greet them.

“We made it back here last night. The barrows went on this morning. We had a quiet journey and I don’t expect any trouble for them on the homeward leg. So, I remained here with some of my force.”
“Well done, captain. Our followers won’t be bothering us now. But I fear that we have not seen the last of our northern friends. We will head back to Cam at first light.”

“Oh, how are you doing for rations?” asked Vargen.

“I’ll see you are supplied and make ready to move in the morn,” said the captain.
5. The Chest

Rations replenished, Arran’s party had a good breakfast to march on. As dawn broke, they finalised their plans and were ready to go. Captain Hendra appeared through the keep gate and they slung their packs on their backs.

“May I share your burden?” Jordan asked Arran. “That chest looks heavy.”

“No, anyone who brings back spoils from battle must carry his own,” replied Arran, jealously guarding the chest and not letting on that it weighed almost nothing.

So, they set off, with their leader looking like a pack animal, at a fair pace and one at which the soldiers could keep up with. As always, Arran impressed everyone by carrying an impossible looking burden.

The land north of Cam was only mildly hilly and offered little resistance to their progress. They stopped at midday for a light snack
and are quickly on their way. Just before the sun disappeared over the horizon, Arran halted for camp. Everyone collapsed at once, the last few days beginning to show. The next day, after a hearty meal, they marched on passing the lone inn and Arran said that they should see Cam soon after midday. Sure enough, there it loomed. A grey town with little in the way of defences.

Arran made a point of telling Captain Hendra that the town must be made ready for the expected attack. “Outlying buildings must be cleared, and a defensive wall built around the town this side of the river.”

“That is some task,” replied the captain.

“Use the bricks from the buildings. Otherwise the town is defenceless and will be overrun straight away.”

As the group marched through the outskirts of the town, people lined the streets, eager for news of the raid. Some cheered, most gaped, for it was rare for Greyhaven warriors, in full battle dress, to make such a public entrance to town. The men soon approached the baron’s castle itself and trumpeters blew a fanfare from the battlements. Soldiers cheered and ran into the courtyard followed by Nadine. She and Arran struggled into each other’s arms.

“I have been so worried. The moment we parted I knew we had done the wrong thing. We must never part again,” said Nadine.

“Come now, we were only a day behind you in getting back. The barrows slowed you. You have not had to worry long,” said Arran.

“I worried from the moment we parted. What happened? All the great houses are here. This must be the first time in living memory. The baron got them here.”

“So, they are at last taking this seriously.”

“They have all been waiting for you.”

“But you and the soldiers with you must have reported,” said Arran.

“We did, but that just made them more eager to hear from you. The soldiers made you out to be a real hero.”

“Well, I am,” bragged Arran.

“Shut up. They exaggerated an awful lot.”

“I’m sure they didn’t.”

“Shut up and come on,” said Nadine, rolling her eyes.
The warriors were led into the main hall where all the leader’s minions were. Arran was led on into the baron’s private audition chambers. The baron jumped up, rushing forward as fast as his bulk would allow, thrust out his hand and said, “Arran, good to see you. What news have you?”

“Err, much, my lord,” said Arran, quite taken aback by such a warm greeting.

“We are privileged to have a council with full membership of the elders from the great houses. Well, some were here anyway, as they were burnt out of their holdings. But most came at my request. We have had our disagreements, I know, but this is an opportunity to unify the houses and the barony wouldn’t you say.”

“Unify? This is no time to be practising politics. If we don’t get it right, there won’t be any barony or houses left,” said Arran.

“Now see here, Arran. I don’t know that I like your tone. Sounds like treason.”

“For the God’s sake, baron. Stop keep worrying about your internal security. None of the houses have ever been interested in your position. They are farmers by nature. We have a far greater threat from outside. North, to be precise. And there are far more of them than us. If we don’t stand together, we are doomed. And they would butcher us. Literally, for they eat people,” said Arran.

The baron sat down. “That bad, eh, Arran? Still I must say I am surprised at the amount of grain that you rescued. It looks more than we lost.”

“We are probably not the only lands the barbarians steal from. They are very powerful and war-like. And I think have great numbers.”

“Before we go in to the council, I want you to tell me everything and we will work out how much they need to know.”

“I think they need to know all. We are all in this together. One falls, we all do,” said Arran.

“Yes, yes, but we don’t want to start a panic. Tell me what you know,” urged the baron.

So, Arran went through his tale from start to finish, except the bit about the blade and chest of course.
The baron pondered for a while and finally said, “I don’t suppose the enemy will simply forget us?”

“No. Not a chance.”

“Then the only thing we can do is prepare and be ready. Well, as ready as we can be. And meet them with all our strength combined. We had best tell the council all.”

“Yes, we must. They must be aware of the full seriousness of the situation if we are to get them to join forces. They must realise that they could not stand alone.”

“Come on then, the Council of Elders awaits,” said the baron.

The two men marched through to the great hall. The elders were sitting around a huge oval table. Jarrad and Nadine sat at one end. At the other was a big throne-like seat for the baron and an empty chair next to that for Arran. They sat down, and Arran noticed that most of the Elders were dressed in full ceremonial regalia.

“Well, they mean business,” he thought.

Snade arose from the other side of the baron. “Attention, attention, his Lordship the Baron of Cam, Lord of all Sutherlands and Guardian of the Realm gives audience to the gathering of the Elders of the Great Houses.”

The baron cleared his throat. “Her-humph. We are very fortunate in these troubled times to have here with us and fully on our side, the Greyhaven warriors. For those of the northern houses who have perhaps not met these warriors, I can only say that they are the most fearsome fighters in all the lands. Trustworthy and dedicated in all they do. I wish to extend my confidence to them now and if we are to get through what is to come, then I suggest that you all take heed of what they say and follow their leadership unquestionably. Here now to tell the tale of most recent events and information on what and who we are up against. I give you Arran of Greyhaven.”

Arran stood to a round of applause and cheers mixed with some uncertain mumblings. He then set about explaining the story all again amid gasps and various chatter. When he had finished and sat down, the men gathered and all started to ask questions at once.

“One at a time, please,” said the baron pointing at someone.
The elder stood. “I know everyone has questions, but I think we should just concentrate on what we are going to do. I do not doubt the seriousness of our situation. My own holding was sacked recently. We were lucky to escape with the numbers we did. If the barbarians were not so interested in the grain, I fear we would be no more. So, no more questions now. I would like to hear what Arran proposes and to say that whatever it is, I will go along with it.”

“You have nothing to lose now,” said another elder. “My lands in the west are untouched. Why should I tempt them to war? What can we do against such fearsome tribes?”

“Cowards,” said a large man with a thick ginger beard. “We are not afraid of barbarians. They sound a disorganised rabble. Even at ten times our number, with good planning and warning we can meet them. If we face them combined, we will win.”

A series of “Ayes, here heres,” went around the table.

“I am sure the barbarians will not stop,” said Arran, “but we have time if we get going now. If they come for full-scale war, it will take them time to prepare and travel here. I suggest we have more than two weeks. Baron you should evacuate the northern keep. It will fall straight away and you will lose the men there. And evacuate all the remaining northern houses. Demolish all the cities’ outer buildings and repair the inner walls with the rubble. If we lose the castle, we will fall back over the river. We can hold them there for some time I imagine. After that we could fall back to my stronghold as a last resort. Though it would be far too crowded. Food would not last long either. It would give us further time, perhaps, and by then we may have got the barbarians’ numbers down substantially. They would also be strung out over an even greater distance. In the meantime, I will have scouts mobilised to warn us. In fact, I will lead my warriors to meet their army on the road. We will hit and run. We can outmanoeuvre them anytime. We will weaken our enemy as much as we can before they get here. I would like to take a division of your soldiers with me baron. I will try to split off sections of their force, lead them away, then cut them off and let your men deal with them. We will attack their supplies, scouts and any stragglers. We will raid their camps at night and make them think we are an army that they cannot find.
“Sounds good to me,” said the baron.
“Aye, here here,” went around again.

“Before we set off, I will get some of my warriors to train your soldiers in formation combat. We cannot win in normal hand to hand fighting. We need a wall of locked shields with pike men second row back. These can thrust through the shields unnoticed by the enemy. When they lift their shields to fend off a blow from our front line, the pikes can go in below their shields. If the plan works, it will go well. We can retreat slowly and the enemy will advance over a wall of their own dead. That will break their confidence. But we must not allow our line to be breached. When it comes to it, my warriors will be behind the line ready to step in at any point if it is broken. We alone cannot form the whole line, but we will tackle the worst problems. In the meantime, the men need as much training and practice as possible. I want every forge going flat out. I will instruct them on what we need weapon wise. I believe there is a large forest to the west?” Arran asked.

“Yes, I am Yaggerson, son of Yaragorn. The forest lies on our lands. In the south west, the forest of Rendlestorm,” said a tall man dressed in finer woven, more colourful garments than most. “It is full of single stem needle-covered hardwood stems. Ideal for pikes. We use them a lot for working tools.”

“We are going to need hundreds. I want it organised,” said Arran.

The man jumped up and ran out. Another stood up. “I am Sarason, son of Sauron from the house of Lea Vale on our western border. I have five hundred men at my command. And my cousin in the lands beyond the valley is sworn to my allegiance, and can raise a further five hundred. On their behalf, I pledge their lives for this cause. I will send word now.”

“They will all be more than welcome, my lord.”

Applause went around the table.

“Now if you will excuse me, I must leave you to make arrangements. For I have had a hard journey, and I am weary. You can inform my number one,” said Arran nodding at Jarrad. With that he picked up the chest and marched out giving Nadine a look that said do not follow. But before leaving the castle, Arran slipped up some stairs,
the guards seemingly caught up in the excitement were distracted, and found himself on the battlements. He intended to find a quiet spot, to calm himself, away from the bustle outside. He found himself on the roof of the great hall with the battlements on one side. Arran looked around in amazement. “The crafty old baron,” he thought. He was standing in the baron’s private vegetable garden. “He has done like us, on the roof. Obviously out of sight of the starving masses.” Arran stood amongst tall sticks supporting row upon row of beans. There were strawberries and other fruits that Arran had not even seen before. He stood a while with his eyes closed, breathing deep and slowly, meditating. Once he had calmed himself, he looked around again. “It is very private up here. I think I will test out my blade again and see if I can find any connection with the chest.”

Arran walked down the path to the middle of the garden. The sun was low now but up there the garden caught a lot of light. He put down the chest in the last rays of the sun. He had never had a proper chance to examine it properly. Now he opened it up and removing the helm, looked carefully at the contents. There were two black removable panels either side of a central panel that had buttons and a row of jewels set in it. Two silver extendible spikes were in the middle at the back, which Arran pulled out to their maximum. He then removed the two black panels. Finding them attached to the chest by shiny chords, he placed them on either side of the chest. Now he looked at the jewels. They looked quite dull but were of different colours. He started pushing the buttons and suddenly an amber jewel glowed. Arran stepped back. There was no sound. Then another glowed green. Arran decided not to go any further with this but to practice with the blade some more. This time, he would wear the helm to see if there was any unlikely magical connection with the blade. He placed the helm on his head. The next moment he found the blade in his hand and almost too fast to see, he swept down the path hacking down anything in reach. Down went the beanpoles as swift as lightning. Up and down the garden he went becoming less and less aware of what was going on. Faster and faster he went until every standing plant and stick were felled. He collapsed in a heap, quite drained, and lay there for some time.
Many lieges away, in a place far beyond Arran’s imagination, in a chair on wheels, and dressed in a plain grey outfit, sat an old man. He had a smile on his face and was gazing out of a round window at the stars. “So Mecron, we can go back to the lands of our ancestors at last. I never dreamed that I should set foot there before I died. Perhaps that will be a triumphant moment. The second biggest step for mankind.”

“Yes, it looks like it will be so,” replied the other. “We have a few minor details to clear up first, but I don’t see any problems. Or any that will hold us up at all. The land is sufficiently clean now for our safe existence. We should have the last of the grain in to send for testing in the next few days. The lab will have it tested within twenty-four hours. It is only a precaution and I am confident of the results. You know everything has to be checked and double-checked, sir.”

“Yes, yes, spare me the details, Mecron. Just tell me when.” The old man couldn’t abide this slimy toad-like excuse for a man.

“One day after we receive the grain samples.” Answered Mecron. “Marshal Patron is organising it now. Once the food is in our hands, our marshals will irradiate all surviving inhabitants using a new ultra clean weapon.”

“I said spare me the details, Mecron. Brilliant all the same, nothing can stop us now,” said the old man looking down at a red light flashing on his desk. He touched something and turned his chair towards a
large silver panel, which immediately slid silently to one side. In stepped a giant of a man dressed all in black with a helmet hiding his features.

“A thousand pardons, sir, but we have a lieutenant Astron here to see you. He says it is of utmost importance.”

“Well, show him in. It will help break the boredom.”

At the giant’s command in walked a young man, also of great stature and dressed in black but with a single silver stud on his shoulders.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but we have had a detector give us a warning. I think it might be important.”

“You youngsters make a fuss over nothing. Probably a fault. Why tell me, can’t you get it checked out first?”

“B-begging your pardon, sir, it gave alert X100Z. Not one I am trained in, or have ever heard of. In fact, no one has.”

“You don’t rely on hearsay, do you? Check out its files man. What is the matter with you people today?”

“Well, I tried sir, but it is an empty folder. Someone has cleaned it out, but forgot to delete the folder which is marked ‘X100Z’. I think it is so old that at some when time the system was updated it got left out.”

“Impossible. It should all be in the deleted files. Nothing is lost or can be permanently removed,” said the old man.

“I know that it is unusual, but I can only imagine that its purpose was unknown and not connected to the running of things’ I guess it was put into a temporary file and subsequently junked. I ran a trace on it which only turned up ‘Disrupter, highly dangerous, location/unknown potential/unknown’. I thought I had better ask you, sir, before I carried out another full systems analysis, err, in case you didn’t want anyone to know and it is supposed to be secret. Are you OK, sir?”

The old man's face had turned from a ghastly shade of deep purple to dead white. Mecron and Astron looked at each other both thinking the old man was dead. Neither wanted to break the silence. When the old man suddenly came to and muttered. “Why? Why now after all these years?”
“Sir?”
“You did well to come to me, first lieutenant. It is a weapon so old it’s been forgotten. When I was a boy my grandfather told me stories about it. All I could remember was that it is something to fear.”
“But who on earth could operate such a weapon?” asked Astron
“That is the danger. This weapon takes control of the user. You have a fix on it of course?”
“Err, no sir, it was only active for a short while. I thought it may be a malfunction and ran some checks. We detected nothing else and seemed in no immediate danger.”
“Blast. But there was nothing you could do without any facts. You did well coming to me. Keep a look out for it and I will have a recovery team on standby. That’s all,” said the old man
“Yes sir.” Astron saluted, turned and walked out followed by the giant guard.

When Arran eventually opened his eyes, the sun had gone and night had fallen. “Oh, whatever was that?” He struggled to his feet and looked around him. It took a moment before he remembered where he was. But he soon became aware of the carnage all around. “Oh, did I do that? The Gods help me. I had better get out of here.” He quickly stowed the panels and helm back into the chest. Picking it up he looked up for the moon, to try and judge the time for he had no idea how long he had been lying there. The sky was black but for the stars.
“I’ve got to get out of here unnoticed,” he thought.
Arran crept back down the spiral stairs to find the hall was now full of guards. He backed up sharp. There was a window around the bend. He looked out. It was just wide enough to squeeze through and there was no one in the courtyard. The ground was not far down, less than a first-floor window. So, he slipped through dragging the chest behind him and silently dropped to the ground. Jumping to his feet, Arran walked off and through the castle gate as though nothing had happened. The guards were all in the hall talking about the day’s events. He walked toward the north gate not knowing where his companions were camped. “This is nearest, and the gate keepers will know where they are. It will either be near the north or south gate,” he
thought. Walking through town he could see the moon now that he was out of the castle. It was quite low in the sky and he stopped to take in its splendour. It was a clear night and he just looked up and breathed deep and slow, meditating on the string of stars in the southern hemisphere, calming himself and taking full control of his senses. Suddenly, he noticed a shooting star heading north. It swept very low and almost seemed as if it might come down just out of town. “Even the heavens are troubled. The stars have never been so active,” Arran thought.

“Arran. Where have you been? I have looked all over.”

As he approached the town gate, Arran noticed Nadine come through it.

“It’s a long story.”

“I bet it is. I have not seen you since you got back. There is so much I want to know. Where have you been?”

“Have you got any supper?”

“Now you sound like Vargen. Come on, we’re on the north-east edge of town. Jarrad has been getting worried.”

“He knows not to worry about me. You’re the one who does all the worrying.”

“Here’s Jarrad now.”

“Arran. Where have you been? I was going to send out a search party, we left the meeting early on,” said Jarrad.

“Not now. I got a bit involved trying out the chest with the blade. It seems they are connected.”

“Oh, I might have guessed. So how can they be connected?”

“Not sure.”

“Jarrad has already filled me in on your adventure Arran. So, what does this chest actually do?” asked Nadine.

“I’m not sure. It seems to co-ordinate the blade via the helm, I think. I may have passed out, can’t really remember. So, tired, excuse me if I just eat and go to bed. I will speak to you in the morn, Jarrad.”

“Get rid of this blade and chest, Arran,” said Nadine. “I don’t like it. I can sense something really bad about it.”

“It’s none of your business. You leave it alone, I don’t want you to go near it understand.”
“What is the matter with you? I don’t want to touch it, don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Let’s go to bed, I’m so tired.”

The sun brushed across Arran’s face and he awoke to a chorus of snores. Nadine was missing. He pulled on his tunic and left the tent. There was a pile of bodies outside producing the snoring. Nadine was stirring something over a fire.

“This lot must have had a late one.”

“Oh, morning. Yes, I think they were up all night making plans. Like a bunch of excited kids. I left you to sleep, thought you could do with it and there’s not much going on. Come and have some breakfast.”

“Yeah, thanks. Look, I’m sorry about last night. I think I was more stressed out than I realised.”

“I realised that, don’t worry.”

“I had better get myself together. I can’t give the men a bad example. We have far too much to do. We need to discipline ourselves more than ever now. No more sleeping in. Smells good, Nad. I missed your cooking.”

“Is that all I am worth to you?”

“How is it that women all manage to turn a compliment into an insult so easily?”

“I know you don’t have much food on the road. I thought you might like something a bit special for breakfast. Go and wake the lads up.”

Arran walked over and started kicking bodies. Soon the snores turned to moans and groans.

“Ow! What you have to do that for?”

“Get up. The sun is well up and you lot are still dead to the world. Been on the grog all night, have you?”

“Well we may have had a little,” said Vargen, shifting in front of several empty flagons, “What’s for breakfast Nadine?”

“It must be nearly lunch time Vargen. I am surprised you could go so long without a meal.”

“I’ll have you know that I can march for three days without a meal, apparently.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Malone.
“So, did you come to any useful conclusions last night? Or can’t any of you remember?”

The men drew up around the fire accepting bowls from Nadine.

“Well,” said Jarrad, “munch, munch,”

“Erm, gulp slurp.”

“Hmm, yum.”

“It’s like feeding time at the pens. Can any of you bring yourselves to answer me? We must sharpen up. No more nights like the last one. The next time will be to celebrate our victory.”

“That could be months away,” grumbled Malone.

“Exactly. And the more disciplined you become, the faster it will get here.”

“That was delicious, Nadine. My compliments,” said Jarrad. “We have worked out a training programme for the soldiers. We will set up one training camp south and one north of the town, and we will take turns. In the meantime, we will help with the clearing of the buildings outside the north wall and the repair of the wall. That’s it, basically.”

“Is that all you come up with in all night?”

“Well it’s a start,” said Jarrad.

“Any thought about weapons? And battle methods?” asked Arran.

“Err, no.”

“Well, I thought that as it is going to be very crowded with no room to manoeuvre, the front line should use a spiked ball on a chain fastened to a handle. After all, the soldiers are not expert swordsmen. If they are crammed in tight, all they have to do is swing it over their opponent, who will naturally raise his shield to fend off the blow. Then, our next two lines will be pike men, pushing their pikes between the shields of our front row. When the opponent raises his shield, they can spear under it. If they are careful, their pikes will not be seen until it is too late. Longer pikes will mean a second row can be used.”

“That means we must rely on one row of combat troops. A bit risky, especially in the first charge,” said Jarrad.

“I know, but a second row of combat troops can’t do anything until the front man is down. If we can resist that first charge, we have a better chance of surviving long term. We don’t have the numbers to
fight on equal terms. We should stay back so that if the enemy break through anywhere, we can force them back and close the gap.”

“Sounds possible. It will still depend on the weight of their first charge.”

“Yes, but if the pikes are wedged into the ground and the front-line stand with their shields level with the pike tips, so they can’t be seen, then step our men back when pressed by the assault. The pikes should stop the full weight of the attack. We can have spare front men waiting to step in when needed,” said Arran.

“It is risky. But maybe we don’t have a choice. And if it fails, then we can retreat through the gate. We would lose a lot of men.”

“It won’t fail. We must meet the barbarians in the field to do as much damage as we can. The walls are never going to be high and strong enough to fend off the sort of siege that’s coming. If they broke through, our soldiers would be slaughtered trying to fight in the streets.”

“So, we meet them outside the walls. Then fall back behind the walls when we must. Defend the walls until they are breached. Then what?” asked Malone.

“Then we all fall back to our Com. Sensing victory they will chase us without caution and control. We can pick them off as they chase the soldiers. And we can let few enough of their numbers through for the soldiers to handle.”

“I think we will do more damage to them whilst retreating south than on the first engagement,” said Jarrad.

“So do I, but the enemy must believe us to be defeated for it to work. I think some of us should take half of the grain back to the Com so we won’t starve when we all get there.”

“I bet Snade won’t allow that.”

“We will take it anyway. The women and children must be sent south. They will need it. We can’t drag those barrows around whilst being chased. We can return with the rest of our men and Hal’s,” said Arran.

“We will have a formidable army with all the houses’ men, us and the soldiers,” said Tarrak. “There is a chance, yet.”
“There is always a chance where there is life Tarrak,” said Arran, “but remember, the soldiers are the weakest link. The weakest link is where the chain always breaks.”

The silver door slid open. “Good morning, sir,” said Mecron walking in. “You called me?”

“Morning. Yes, what developments have we? I am losing sleep. Something bothers me, and I am not used to having loose ends hanging about.”

“I wouldn’t worry sir,” said Mecron. “Tomorrow we will have the food and the day after that there will not be anyone left alive to use this weapon.”

“Put a hold on that, Mecron. I think it might be more important if we find this weapon.”

“Well, I can’t delay long. I’ll give you another forty-eight hours.”

“That might not be enough time.”

“Nutradom are expecting it today or tomorrow, what am I to tell them?” asked Mecron. “And what happens if one of our men find it, it gets control of him and he turns on us and uses it on us?”

“You let me worry about that. I want that weapon,” said the old man.

“I cannot delay much longer, and you do not even know what you are looking for.”

“We will know when we find it. It has now taken all priority. You will delay, or I will make you.”

“Oh, what are you going to do? Give me to your Powercon police?

“If necessary, Mecron, yes.”

“The military won’t be very happy with you. They are getting impatient as it is, urging me to get in this last sample of food. They want to use their own weapon.”

“Dam the military, Mecron. You forget that the Military Mining and Manufacturing Corporation depend upon us for its power. I hold a powerful card, Mecron. Ha, a power card. I can put pressure on them to hold back their military.”
“Don’t be too sure. The threat of no power may drive them to rebellion. They might just take Powercon for themselves. They are strong enough. Your Powercon police would be no match for them.”

“Don’t be a fool, Mecron. Do you think the other two powers would stand for that? The balance would be lost. 3M would become too powerful. Nutradom would starve them of food and WorldTransCom would cripple their transport and cut off their communications.”

“I doubt that. The other two have no armed forces. Once 3M controls you, they would simply take the other two and have complete control.”

“You are a bigger fool than I thought. The balance works for good reason and always has, or we would be all one by now. And don’t you think WorldTransCom’s thought police, Intermind, will have infiltrated all the corporations? They manipulate what goes on, and would prevent anything happening. They are more powerful than any of us. In fact, sometimes I wonder if we have any control over what we do,” said the old man.

“What do you mean, sir? I mean for what purpose? They have never shown signs of wanting to take over.”

“You know dam well what I mean. Intermind built the Cyber Web. They have been mentally trained for who knows how many generations. They don’t need to take over. They probably already have. Everything is going along to their own plan and we are all just puppets.”

“Surely not, sir? Do they really exist? And do they really belong to WorldTransCom? There is no evidence, just stories to scare our children,” said Mecron.

“So how would we know? Who are they? For all I know you might be one. Don’t you think it strange that we never think about them? No one ever talks about them unless something odd comes up, like today. And then I’ll bet we’ll have forgotten them again by tomorrow. I’d like to get my hands on them.”

“I’m sure you concern yourself over nothing, sir.”

“Oh, get out of here, Mecron.”
Arran, Nadine and Jarrad toured the northern wall with Captain Hendra and went over the improvements. Then, they estimated how much of the outer town they could tear down.

“I think we should pull down the lot,” said Arran. “We don’t want to leave them any cover. But it would take a hundred years.”

“Not if we set fire to it,” said Captain Hendra. “A fire wouldn’t spread past the walls. A lot of material would be removed for us and just leave us with bricks and rubble which we can use.”

“A bit extreme, but you’re right. It is the only way to do it. We had better have plenty of help standing by just in case. Get some men and start evacuating the houses. Give them five hours and then start burning. The people can’t stay there anyway.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hendra, marching off.

“Well, the sun is high, Nad. I’m getting a little hungry again.”

“I’ve never seen you with such an appetite.”

“Must be the fresh air. Let’s go and tell the baron that we are taking half the grain and about the fire and evacuation.”

“He can’t mind about the grain, it will only be lost if left here.”

“We should take as much as possible, it will be safer at our place,” said Jarrad. “And I hope our camp is safe from the fires.”

“Ooh, that’s a point,” said Nadine.

It was well into the afternoon when the three of them returned from the castle.

“I didn’t think the baron was going to let the grain go. He thinks he owns everything, can’t give it up very easily.”

“Well, he more or less does, Nad. If he refused, what could we have done? We are only looking after it, anyway. I was more concerned that he would refuse the burning of the town.”

“He seems to have come around, eventually. Just a bit slow, but I think he’s not a bad man,” said Nadine.

“Is there anything left over to eat, Nad?”

The sun was low by the time they had eaten. They were cooking in one big pot now, with everything thrown in. Most of the group had drifted back from their various tasks and had eaten their fill when Arran said, “Nad, I know you don’t like the idea. But I am going along the river to have another practice with this blade.”
“I don’t like it because of the reactions of those from the town. They knew it was evil.”
“Yes, but it is powerful. If I can master it, we would be stronger. We need all the help we can get. Just until the war is over.”
“I’ll come with you.”
“No, you won’t. I can’t trust myself. You must never be anywhere near me when I use it with the helm, understand?”
“OK, I’ll be in bed waiting for you. Don’t be too long.”

Arran marched down river, set up the chest and placed the helm on his head. He looked up. “The sun is low, dusk in about an hour. This should only take about half an hour. I’ll be back by nightfall,” he thought, Arran pushed the button. The blade leapt into his hand, whirling around above his head. He danced through the reeds along the riverbank, clearing a path more than twenty hands wide, sweeping and thrusting faster than the eye could see. This time he was vaguely aware of what was happening, although he had no control over it. When it was over, he marvelled at the movements, the speed and agility of the blade. He sat down on the bank and removed the helm. Arran said to himself, “It’s not just the design and balance of the blade. But the way you move it, totally different to a broadsword. I would never have picked up those movements without the chest. The chest must just be some sort of training device that speeds up training. It is only my second half hour and I noticed a considerable difference. That is nothing to fear, just because we do not understand it.” Getting his breath back, he packed up the chest and set back.

“You have news lieutenant, Astron?”
“Yes, we have detected it again and have a fix on its location.”
“Good, send in some trusted troops, lieutenant.”
“Already done, sir. I sent in the PCP Special Section. I dare not trust 3M's blundering soldiers with this.”
“Well done. You will be commended for your efficiency, lieutenant.”
“Thank you, sir.”
“Think nothing of it. Your choice was perfect. The Special Section are the only ones I can trust.”
“How’s that, sir?”
“Because I hold the power of life and death over them. If they fall into the wrong hands or defect, I can remotely terminate them instantly. It is the only way to totally trust someone.”
“A bit severe, sir.”
“They take it on when they apply. And they get a lot of privileges.”
“Well, they are on their way sir. And err,”
“Well go on, Mecron, things can’t get much worse.”
“I have a report from Marshall Patron.”
“Yes, yes go on man, spit it out.”
“Well, it’s the grain, sir, it’s gone.”
“What?”
“It’s been stolen.”
“Yes, blundering was about right. Well, we must go on without it, assuming we capture this weapon.”
“We can’t, sir. These final tests are crucial to see how fast the land is giving up its remaining radiation.
“Mecron, we do not need to grow our food there, haven’t done for generations, remember.”
“It’s not that, sir. A lot of the radiation is locked in and normal tests are deceptive. This is what all our tests are based on. This food comes from all over a wide area. Unlike wild vegetation, its time in the environment is known. From its cell structure, we can tell its rate of absorption and how this changes with the weather and season. We must have it or it is no go,” said Mecron.
“Dam scientists. This could mean a year’s delay. A year I might not have. Well, don’t just stand there. Go and find it, imbecile.”

Arran was just approaching camp when he noticed another shooting star streak over the town. Again, it seemed to slow and drop just beyond town. There were too many lights in the sky of late, not natural. Stowing his chest under a barrow, he set off for the far side of town. There was no sign of lights in the hills now. He made his way through the dark smelly streets, which had been evacuated now but not set alight yet. Arran thought it seemed spooky and unnaturally quiet. Near to the far edge of town he heard terrible screams and stopped. A
chill came over him, made his blood run cold. The screams did not sound very nice. Then there were people running across the end of the street. “Must be a work party,” he imagined. He ran down a side alley, through a sparse vegetable patch, over a wall and dropped down behind a fence. He was overlooking a square right on the edge of town where it was more open than the tight streets he had just come through. There were bodies lying around and his eyes nearly popped out when he saw the two giants clad in black with smooth featureless helms. They must have stood a full head over him. Then, one of the baron’s patrols entered the square. A captain and two others drew their blades, raised their shields and advanced.

“Who are you and what is your business?” asked the captain, not getting any nearer than he had to.

“You are of authority here?” said one of the black giants. “We are looking for someone. Perhaps you can help us. He is using an unusually powerful new weapon that I am sure you would be aware of.”

“I know nothing of strange weapons,” said the captain.

“We know it is here. Do not protect it. You cannot resist us.”

“You enter our city without invitation and threaten us. You must leave immediately. I order it so.”

“Your orders and authority mean nothing to us. We move as we please. You must give us the information we want or suffer the consequences,” said one of the black giants.

“Leave us, strangers. We cannot bargain with invaders.”

One of the black figures pointed at the captain, a red flash left a smoking hole in his shield. He showed no sign of impact, but just crumpled to the ground, revealing another smoking hole in his chest. The others shrank back. Arran jumped so much that he pushed the fence down. The black figure turned and pointed at him. Arran dived to the ground as the wall behind him howled and showered him with sparks and splinters. Without a pause, he jumped up and bounded over the wall, which howled again behind him. Pausing a second to regain control, Arran ran for his life back through town and did not stop until he reached his tent.

Nadine came out of the tent “Whatever has happened to you?”
Arran was too out of breath to speak for a moment.
“I have never seen you so winded.”
The others began to appear.
“What is wrong?” asked Malone.
“We have, I think, just had a visit from the Gods.”
At that moment, there was the rumble of distant thunder and a light faded up into the night sky. They all looked at each other.
“What the?” remarked Vargen, running up.
Everybody was out of their tents now and all throwing questions at Arran, who told them what he had seen.
“Wow,” said Elven, “I wish I had been there.”
“What might this weapon be then, Arran?” asked Jarrad. “You don’t think…”
“I am trying not to think anything now.
“Well, I have heard lots of rumours about the Gods,” said Harrad, “But I have never actually met anyone that has seen them. Till now.”
“They were not gods,” put in Arran. There was something very human about them, despite the size.”
“Oh yeah,” cut in Tarrak. “What about the thunderbolt, then?”
“I don’t know, some sort of wizardry. I dare say Zeb could conjure up something like that.”
“Not something that would go straight through a shield and your body.”
“Well, I don’t really believe they are gods. And we can’t let this delay us. We leave for the Com first light,” said Arran.
Arran and Jarrad stood in silence as everyone went back to their tents.
“This weapon, I can only think of one strange new weapon in these lands.”
“Yes, you’re right, Jarrad. It must be very important to someone. After centuries hidden, I use it for an hour and the ‘Gods’ appear. Spooky, wouldn’t you say. It must truly be a weapon of the gods. We will need this weapon in the coming battles, but I must be careful how I use it.”
“Is it wise to use it at all?” asked Jarrad.
“Possibly not. But I will take the chance. We had better get some sleep. I want an early start in the morning.”

First light saw Arran, Nadine, Jordan and Vargen fed and on their way. They met Captain Hendra and fifty soldiers with half the barrows of grain. After a brief greeting, they set off south. The road was busier than normal. Most people were fleeing south, taking as many of their belongings as possible. People were in a state of mild panic. Rumour was rife, like a thousand demons had already sacked Cam. Some were going north, like robbers looking for the fortunes of war. Whole villages had gone to fight for their lands. All this to and fro slowed them down somewhat, much to Arran’s annoyance, but there were no incidents on the journey and they made it in just over three days.

Hal came out to greet them as they marched into the courtyard.

“Arran. Nadine. I am so glad you are OK. Come, food, rest. Tell me all, I can’t wait for the news. I have heard some. That old wizard friend of yours was snooping around here the other day.”


“Yes, he left two days ago. Come on let’s go in and catch up.”

Hal led the group into the dining hall and sat them round the table, gave instructions for the soldiers to be billeted in the barn and called for some hot food for the guests.

“So, Arran, how bad is it? We have noticed more travellers than normal, outlanders crossing our borders. Things are really stirred up, I would guess.”

Arran told Hal of their adventures and all the events from leaving him before. Hal sat there in silence shaking his head now and again.

“So, Cam will be under siege soon. And if it falls we are all in trouble.”

“That’s right, Hal. We must all go and help in its defence. We must go back to the Com and come back with every man we have.”

“We will join you with every available man we have.”

“That’s good, Hal, we will need them.”

“But what of these black gods? I have heard of them, stories of sightings in the west. Although I know of no one that has returned. And where do they fit in? They have never been seen in our lands before.”
“We don’t know. We must wait and see. But I would suggest avoiding them at all costs,” warned Arran.

“Don’t worry about that, I will. Just as I thought things were getting better. Do you know that our crops have produced a better yield every year for the past five years? I believe the land is a lot cleaner than it was. But now this. Will there never be any rest for us?”

“We will do what we have to. We are not lost yet. Things will get better have no fear. It’s just that they may have to get worse first.”

“That is good news about your harvest,” said Jordan. “It must mean less work to feed everyone.”

“It does. It means we can spend more time on improving our conditions and have more recreational time. If we come through this, life won’t be nearly as bad as it used to be,” said Hal.

“So where is Zeb going?”

“I don’t know. I told him you were in Cam, but should be back soon.”

“He won’t go there,” said Arran. “Calls it a den of thieves, he does. He may go on to the Com to wait for us. Although I think he has a good idea of our movements, anyway. We will leave at first light; maybe we will catch him up. Come on Nad, let’s get to bed. Good night.”

Arran and Nadine got up and walked to the stairs taking a jug of wine with them and leaving the others drinking and exchanging stories. Once they were in bed and Nadine snuggled up, entwining her body around Arran’s, she asked him what chance he thought the house had. She added that Hal had worked so hard for years to bring the estate around and how he deserved to succeed. But Arran had already drifted into sleep. Knowing that he was in a safe house, he allowed himself to go into a much-needed deep sleep for on the move he only half slept, listening out for danger. This meant he was not always as rested as he should be. Now he was almost not wakeable. Nadine lay there with thoughts of the ape men. She could still see their face. Tomorrow they would pass that place again. She hoped her dreams would not come back and decided to make Arran give it a wide berth. Still, she wondered what they were, besides tortured souls.
Arran was awoken by movement in the courtyard and house. The whole place seemed alive. He had never heard so much activity. Nadine was up and he could hear water being poured. He lay there and tensed every muscle in his body as hard as he could, until he tingled all over. Then he stretched every way he could.

“If that water’s hot, save me some Nad, please.”

“You can use it after I have finished.”

They found Hal in the courtyard, bade their farewells and ordered the troop into some sort of formation. It was a clear bright morning as they marched out of the gate. Nadine remarked on how wonderful everything looked, but Arran was miles away in thought. Jordan agreed with her with a grunt.

“Well, we don’t have to be so gloomy, do we?” Nadine asked.

The troop consisted of more women now, going to the greater safety of the Commune.

“Arran, tomorrow will bring us close to the ape men again.”

“You would sooner we go around it?” asked Arran.

“I’m not sure. I think they need help more than being a threat. I think I would like to try and make contact.”

“Nadine, there was no one there.”

“They are in that small hill we camped by.”

“Nonsense.”

“Please let me try.”

“OK, if it makes you happy. But we will not camp as close this time.”

The following day the group came upon the little hill. It had been a dull journey and all were familiar with this route. Arran ordered camp and was asked why they were stopping so soon, but he ignored the question and Vargen put in for an early dinner to a round of groans. Camp was quickly set up and some of the grain was made into porridge for supper. Once they were fed, Arran and Jordan went with Nadine to the hill. She walked around it, stopping now and again and closed her eyes. Eventually, she went up to the top of the hill and knelt. Arran followed her up. She looked like she was praying, but she was chanting something he couldn’t make out. After what seemed ages, she moaned some and slumped to the ground. Arran rushed over,
quite alarmed, and picked her up. She was still moaning, but seemed well. He carried her back to camp and laid her on her bed.

“Is she all right?” enquired Jordan.

Arran explained that she was often left in a state of exhaustion after a heavy trance and that she would sleep through the night now.

The next morning, Nadine awoke early. “There are people down there, in the hill,” she said.

“Come on, Nad, that’s a bit far-fetched.”

“No, I made contact. They need help. They have extremely powerful psychic powers, but they are trapped in there.”

“How could anyone survive underground, Nad? You must have been dreaming. We can’t delay, forget it,” said Arran.

“We can’t just leave them.”

“I’m sorry but we must. Come on.”

The group made a good start and expected to reach the Commune the next afternoon. The pace was slow because of the soldiers and barrows. Arran was getting a bit impatient when Vargen, who was trailing, came running up and announced that they were being followed. But he had no idea who it could be. Arran ordered two more rear guards to join him and wondered who could be so good that his men could not see them. Later in the day, Arran was so bored he got his chest from a barrow and went off on his own, knowing he could spend a couple of hours practising and still catch up before dark. He travelled two and a half leagues before setting up the chest, thinking that he was so far south of Cam he should not be bothered by the ‘Gods’. Arran pressed the red jewel and his blade leapt into his hand, taking him through a training programme. Once again, he underwent an hour of torturous activity. This time he was more aware of what was happening, but it was still like a dream, vague and unclear. He was totally unable to resist the actions he was performing. He could only marvel at the speed and agility he now demonstrated. At last, he came to a stop and fell onto his back. He felt drained and it was all he could do to pull the helm off. “I cannot do that too often,” he thought. Whilst lying there getting his wind back and looking at the sky, he thought he saw a light pass overhead. You can’t see shooting stars in the day, but it was gone in a flash. He heard a roaring scream quite
close by. “Not again, is there no escape?” he thought. Overriding his exhaustion, he packed the chest up, keeping an eye on the bushy hill between him and the sound. Just as he finished, he heard noises in the bushes, possibly talking. Grabbing the chest, he ran in the opposite direction and dived into the nearest bush. No sooner than he moved a bolt of red light struck the ground where he had stood, sending a shower of soil into the air. He rolled into the bushes and kept rolling as more bolts tore through the bush above him. Swinging to his left, he came to a halt and waited, not sure of what to do next. He did not have much cover left. Then several loud explosions shook the ground, followed by more shrieks and howls like all hell had opened. After a while, it went quiet. He thought that he ought to get away but wasn't sure about breaking cover. He pulled his cloak over his head and started to crawl away. He was just thinking that with the cloaks camouflage ability, he may just slip away unnoticed, when a voice said, “You do look funny there. Where do you think, you are going?”

Arran rolled over and tried to draw his blade at the same time and ended up in a tangled heap. A tall figure stood over him. A huge roar of laughter now added insult to his injury.

“You can come out now,” said Zeb. “I have dealt with them.”

“Heavens, am I glad to see you.” Arran struggled to his feet.

“Wizard, I should have known it was only you all along.”

“Err um, well not entirely alone. I had some help.”

“Well, must you creep about and sneak up on people?”

“I hear that you’re good at creeping about, yourself.”

“Not upon friends I’m not.”

“And pray tell how could I tell friend from foe with you hiding in a bush?”

“With all the goings on over there, you expect me to stand out there and waive, Huh?” shouted Arran.

“Come, we do not have much time, and we have work to do back there.”

“I’m not sure that I want to go back there.”

“And I thought you were the bravest of the brave.”

“Anyway, I have something important for you to look at.”

“We have not the time, hurry,” implored Zeb.
“But, but this blade, it has…” Arran pulled out his blade.

“Yes of course, the weapon. If it is what I think it is, it will be very useful in the task to come.”

“Here take it.”

“No. No I dare not touch it. It is far too powerful. My will is not as strong and incorruptible as yours. It could corrupt my own powers, and then where would we be?”

“But Zeb, surely your power and the blade’s… Who could match that?” asked Arran.

“Exactly young man. Do not even think it. I shall examine it at a more convenient time and place. We are in danger right now. There may be more following this lot, and we have a job to do before we leave here.”

The two marched up the hill and into more bushes. Arran noticed two bodies; they were the all black giants. There was still smoke wafting about and a strong smell of burning that didn’t smell quite right.

“Did you defeat them, By the Gods, Zeb? Or did you catch them unawares, sneak up on them?”

They came to a halt in front of a large white dome-shaped dwelling standing on legs.

“Is this where they live then?” asked Arran.

“Err, kind of. We need sections of the floor.”

“You have lost me. But go on.”

Zeb stooped underneath. “Look, I’ll chalk lines where I want underneath and you score deep along the lines with your blade.”

“As you say, it shall be done.” He watched as Zeb drew a circle in the centre with eight lines radiating out from it within a larger circle that encompassed them all. He then asked Arran to score along the lines with his blade. Arran then worked away on his knees for over an hour while Zeb looked on. When he finally came out dripping with sweat, Zeb merely nodded and went inside. A few moments later Zeb came rushing past Arran, ran out into the clearing and dived to the floor clutching his hat. Arran wandered over and was about to ask what was going on when an enormous explosion blew him off his feet. Zeb got up and dusted himself down.
“Thanks for the warning,” said Arran getting up. The dwelling was just a small pile of rubble.
“Quick,” said Zeb walking back to the pile, “cut some long branches and make a sledge. We have not much time.” Zeb pulled out the sections that had been marked.
“I can’t carry all that,” said Arran.
“Try, they weigh almost nothing. Lash them to the branches and pull it along.”
Another hour and they were on their way, chest and all.
“What do we want with bits of rubbish?”
“These bits of rubbish will save your life, my boy.”
“Oh, how?” asked Arran.
“They are made of a material that will withstand the Gods, thunderbolts.”
“How do you know that?”
“Trust me, I do know. When we get back you can fix handles on the inside and use them as shields. They are strong enough to resist blades, as well.”
“I don’t think I want to take the chance of testing that out, thank you very much. You are coming back with me then? I have something to show you there,” said Arran.
“And I would like to examine this weapon. But under no circumstances must you use it there. Or they will find you.”
Arran and Zeb marched on in silence. After the extra delay, they never caught the barrows up and arrived at the Com as the sun was setting. Arran gave three long blasts on the old horn from the last hill and received an answer from the Com. Nadine was on the wall and waved when she saw them coming. The steps were already lowered when the two got there and they went straight up. In the gatehouse a crowd gathered around Arran, while Zeb stood back with his arms crossed, giving a humph. Nadine gave Arran a big hug, as did by Harrad.
“It’s good to have you back, Arran. Jordan has told me that Razz is no more. We have already told Nazine. Some of the women are comforting her. She did not take it too well.”
“I should have told her myself,” said Arran, regretfully.
“Well, it’s done. The grain is being put into storage and you can fill me in on anything Jordan hasn’t tomorrow. It does not sound good so far, but it’s great to have you back, Arran.

Another humph from behind Arran made them all look round.

“Fine hospitality you give out here, isn’t it? I could have died of thirst.”

“My apologies, Zeb,” said Harrad. “There has been so much going on. Let me get some of our finest ale organised. Come, we will go down to the hall.”

They walked down the stairs, around the plantings and into the dining hall where a log was just beginning to burn.

“It’s not that cold now, but I do think you can’t beat a good fire.”

“My sentiment entirely. Ale and fire, you have done well to get that going for our arrival Harrad. Makes up for the welcome,” said Zeb.

They drew up chairs and were served stew with bread and soon Arran was deep into his adventures north. Zeb listened intently, nodding his head occasionally.

“How come you have brought back so much grain?” asked Harrad.

“We must store it for the town. I fear it will be overrun and the people will flee here.”

“What? We can’t take in the whole town.”

“We will take the rest of the women and children. It should not be for long. We can’t maintain a long siege anyway. We will be outside to fight them.”

“We will? If we can’t stop them at Cam, how do you think we are going to do it here?”

“We won’t stop them at Cam. Falling back is part of a plan to string them out and pick them off.”

“They are that strong?” asked Harrad.

“Yes,” said Zeb, “stronger than you can imagine. I have seen the numbers they can draw on.”

“When have you seen them?” asked Arran.

“Who do you think caused the blast that blew the gas out of their town saving your necks?”

“I thought I saw a figure on the cliffs,” replied Arran.
“You have a serious problem. They are some twenty thousand strong.”
“What?” said Harrad, jumping to his feet. “That’s impossible. What are we going to do?”
“As I said, we have to do some planning,” said Arran.
“I’ll say.” Harrad was pacing up and down shaking his head.
“Tis unlike you to be worried, Harrad, are you afraid?” asked Zeb.
“No. No, but worried. We have no time to lose. We must get organised.”
“Calm down. What can be done is being done. All within the lands are now working on it.”
“And I’m the first to know?”
“Well, you were the last to get to. So, yes. We only have to organise ourselves now. Make some shields. Come up with some new and novel ideas.”
“Shields? That’s not going to make much difference. Novel ideas? Twenty thousand by the Gods. We are going to need a miracle,” said Harrad.
“Archers,” said Zeb.
“What about them?”
“You’re going to need them. They have them.”
“We don’t have any bows. There isn’t any suitable wood in our lands. I haven’t heard of anyone using a bow in these parts before. The wood is too soft. It has no power, no spring. We haven’t got time to train anyone.”
“What about the wood at Rendlestorm? That is hardwood, should be springy.”
“We can try, but hard wood snaps easily,” said Arran. “I’ll send a runner. See if more wood can be cut and taken to Cam. But we do not have any bow-rites. Heaven knows what they will come out like, even if we had the time.”
“Arran, you are determined to do as much damage as possible whilst they are on their way, yes?” asked Nadine, suddenly paying attention.
“Yes, Nad.”
“That’s it, then. Your first strike, preferably at night when they have not got a good target, must be their archers. They are, after all not swordsmen, so the baron’s men might be able to take care of them while we hold off the rest, ahead and behind.”
“The rest?” said Harrad.
“No, she’s right. The whole army will be well strung out. We will get more time on the first hit.”
“The baron’s men could take the bows. Take a couple of carts with you. They could come back with all the bows we need.”
“See, Harrad, a few ideas like that are going to shorten the odds in our favour.”
“I agree. I am just alarmed at the short time ahead of us.”

“Mecron, Astron tells me this old weapon showed up again.”
“Yes, Marshall, we sent a patrol after it, but it was destroyed, verdict accidental. We had two teams investigate and there was no sign of outside interference.”
“An accident. Fool, I’ve told you how dangerous this weapon is. Do not underestimate it.”
“Yes, sir you have, but you haven’t told me what it does or what it looks like. We just don’t know what we are looking for and can’t even compare its effects against the damage done.”
“Well, find out. I’ll make it your responsibility to find it. I have located an old file from a very early back up that must have been missed. It gives a description of it, but not what it does. Apparently, our people have never had their hands on it.”
“Well, done sir. What does it look like then?” asked Mecron.
“A sword.” Mecron, “It is a sword, with a long thin blade and alien markings on it. I think it is not of earthly origins.”
“Just a blade? No.”
“Not just a blade. An alien blade with built in power. Who knows what it could do?”
“I can’t see that it could do much. It is still just a blade, even if it keeps good time, clocks up your kills and e-mails them to a friend.”
“Will you be serious? Or you will be the first one I try it out on. It needs energy, and as a by-product so to speak, I assume anyway. It can
drain your life force before killing you. It only has to penetrate your nervous system, a blow perhaps, not normally fatal, will give a most horrendous death.”

“Charming. But aliens, sir. You don’t believe in aliens, do you sir?”

“That’s something else you had better know about.”

“You don’t mean, there has been a contact?” asked Mecron.

“I don’t know. But we intercepted a coded transmission from the moon,” said the marshall.

“That’s odd, everything is discussed in virtual. Even at the highest level, the C-Conference is at very regular intervals.”

“Exactly. It was top, top secret, double urgent. We still don’t know what it says. We have two AI’s devoted full time to it.”

“Maybe it’s not coded, but a code. You know a pre-agreed signal whose meaning is already known.”

“Don’t get smart with me. What do you think you are? An AI. Shit, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because everything is overcomplicated today, sir,” said Mecron. “If you have something important to warn about, why overcomplicate it with codes that may take time to decipher or be misread? So, it is something highly important that they wanted to warn someone about. But who?”

“That’s the easy part. It was tight beamed to 3M.”

“No wonder they don’t want to trust encoding. How the hell did you come by that anyway?”

“Not your problem. It’s what happened next that’s interesting,” said the marshall.

“What with Military, Mining and Manufacturing, themselves?”

“Oh, yes. Every ship on standby, took off at full speed for the outer Rim of the solar system.

“Every ship? That’s a shit load of vessels to send out nowhere, and such vast distance. You have their co-ordinates?”

“Yes, of course. But it doesn’t end there. 3M have contracted us to build three new construction bays.”

“Are they expecting a lot of repairs then?” asked Mecron.

“Exactly.”

Or is it for new constructions? I hope we get the contracts if it is.”
We should. Major construction is a bit beyond their manufacturing capabilities. The other thing is they have cancelled all refits and Nutradom has be instructed to stock them to the hilt with supplies,” said the marshall.

“So, they are in for a long journey as well!”

“Right again. There is something going on out at the Rim. More I cannot say. Now, I want the grain and this weapon urgently. I can’t help feeling that this weapon is more significant than we can guess.”

“Have we no surveillance cameras in orbit? We could see what is happening on the ground.”

“No, since coming up here we have turned our attention to the stars. Nothing has happened on the surface for generations. The orbits of the old satellites have decayed, and they have all burnt up. We have records of those. We have full detection, looking outward and around us, but we have nothing looking down. We hardly expect any threat from below. 3M may have some, they have more use for that sort of thing than us, but I am not going to involve them in the search for this weapon.”

“I have forces working on the grain as we speak. All the land is being searched thoroughly. The weapon I have kept quiet about. We can only wait for it to show up again and send in more troops.”

First Marshal Strighton leaned forward on his desk his eyes closed. Mecron slid quietly out.
There was just the faintest glimmer of light in the sky but the whole place throbbed with activity. The forges had been fired up and were smoking away. There was the sound of hammering and sawing, people coming and going. Nazine caught Gemma carrying some weapons up to the gatehouse. “They finally got you doing something useful, then.”

“In times of emergency, I’ll do anything,” stated Gemma.

“I’ll bet you will,” replied Nazine.

Arran walked out onto the terrace. He couldn’t remember when the place had been so alive. He saw Harrad leaving one of the forges and waved him over. Harrad ran up the steps two at a time, “Fair morn, Arran. Everyone knows what to do.”

“Fair indeed, Harrad. I want training set up outside the walls. We have soldiers here and some of Hal’s men will be over soon. We might as well get everyone as prepared as possible.”

“The soldiers worry me. Even with training, will they be up to it?”

“That is our main flaw. Look, here comes Zeb. Let’s ask him.”

Zeb wound his way across the compound and slowly climbed the steps.
“Not as young as I was,” he said, gripping the rotting handrail.  
“Yes, just how old are you? And how come you have survived the death?” asked Arran.  
“All in good time. All in good time. You will find out everything in good time. If, that is, you live to see it.”  
“I will. Come on we need some positive input please.”  
“Yes, you’re right, sorry.”  
“Zeb,” interrupted Harrad. “What can we do to give the baron’s men an advantage? Something that will improve their chances and possibly, their confidence.”  
“Hmm. Now that is a tough one. Let me see.” Zeb stood there for a moment, in silence. “Well, we need to make them feel invincible. That should do the trick.”  
“Be serious will you, you old fool.”  
“Yes, come on, how could we begin to do that?”  
“Well, I think there is a way. We could put armour on them. They would feel a lot safer then.”  
“Come on, Zeb,” said Arran losing his patience. “Where, by the Gods, are we to get hold of armour?”  
“That, my dear fellow, is easy. The steel stuff is in short supply, I know. But you could make some.”  
“This gets more and more daft. Several hundred suits of armour in a couple of weeks, simple,” snorted Harrad.  
“It does not have to be full armour. Just breast plate, arms and shoulders. They have helms. You could make them from the terrace wall cladding.”  
“No, it is forbidden. It will bring bad luck on us,” said Harrad looking worried.  
“Nonsense, that taboo is just part of making sure the place is kept up. There is a solid wall behind the cladding. The stuff is incredibly strong. It will withstand a sword blow, and yet saw easily. It can be easily shaped when heated.”  
“He’s right, Harrad. Remember when the tool shed burnt down? The wall next to it was all shapes, and it did not bring any bad luck down on us, did it?”  
“What about this war, then? Could be that.”
“Your superstition will be the end of me, Harrad. I think the war is out of our hands. You must try to be realistic. Get a party to rip down the wall. Make a general pattern and try it out. Get an idea of the most effective shape and fit, then we will go into production.”

“I’ll get right on it,” said Harrad, disappearing down the stairs.

“That’s that sorted. I think we shall have a look at this blade of yours, Arran.”

“Yes, it’s in my room. Come on.”

Arran led the way up to his room. Nadine was trying to make some order out of the mess in there.

“Hello, Zeb. Have you had breakfast?”

“No, not yet, young lady.”

“Then I’ll fix you some,” she said and left for the kitchen.

“Here is the sword, over here with the chest,” said Arran unsheathing the blade. Zeb stood back, eyes wide.

“A fancy looking weapon, but there is not much to tell of its origins. Put it away, I think the chest will be more informative.”

Arran re-sheathed the blade and opened the chest. Zeb came over and knelt.

“Ah,” he said pulling out the two black panels. “These are energy packs, solar by the look of them.”

“Oh, is that good?” asked Arran.

“Well, it’s renewable, that helps. These are wires, and this is an aerial. It talks to the helm. These are indicator lights. You have pressed the first button. The rest must have other functions. You must not use this near here. It will bring trouble.”

“I have worked that out for myself,” said Arran.

“Good. Now look inside the lid. See these markings. I think they are instructions.”

“What, those scratchings?”

“Yes. It is a form of writing. Not one I am familiar with. It looks very unusual. Perhaps it is very ancient. But if we could read them, it would tell us how to use the thing.”

“You mean that a series of marks can tell you things?”

“Of course, you mean you have never read or even heard of reading?” asked Zeb, astonished.
“No. We have no need. Apart from the runes, which are symbols and self-explanatory. I have something else that might interest you, though. It’s in the basement. There are a lot of markings like these.”

“Oh, come then, this I must see,” said Zeb.

“Well I must light a torch. It’s pitch black down there.”

“Don’t bother with those smoky old things, leave that to me.”

“Your breakfast is ready now, Zeb,” called Nadine.

So, Zeb sat down to the best meal he had eaten in quite a while, flat bread, a soya hummus, sausage and eggs, runner beans, dried tomatoes and flagon of ale to wash it down.

“I feel this ale is too strong for me at this time of day, my good Nadine. But this food is magnificent. I never knew that such an abundance or variety existed.”

“Oh, yes we do all right,” said Nadine.

“Well, I would keep it quiet. If this got out, you would be besieged by all the lands, or at the very least, Vargen will move in, ha ha,” laughed Zeb.

“Don’t worry, he has already sampled it and my rolling pin,” laughed Nadine, as she walked away.

“Lead the way, Arran,” said Zeb, on draining the last of his ale.

Arran led him out and down the stairwell, past ground level and on down into the darkness. They came to a halt at the foot of the steps. It was too dark to make out anything, but there was a click and suddenly they were bathed in light far greater than Arran could have provided. A beam shone from the end of Zeb’s staff. They stood facing a corridor, the beam shone up as far as they could see. Arran could only marvel at Zeb’s abilities and wondered if nothing was beyond this tall wizard. They walked a short way along the corridor and stopped at a door. Arran got out a key.

“This is my family store. I have been clearing it out and found an old trunk in the corner, covered with rubbish,” said Arran. They went in and walked over to a large trunk.

“It must have been my father’s and his before him. But I never knew of its existence.”

Zeb opened the chest and exclaimed, “Books, dozens of them. You never knew? Books have been banned by the barony since the start of
their reign. Their possession is punishable by death. I guess the barons
wanted such complete control and people to only know what they were
told. Your family took great risk.”
   “Not really. Not even the baron’s men could get in here,” said
Arran.
   Zeb made a space and began removing the books.
   “These are wonderful. So old. These are going to be a great help.
Where I come from, our history has been tampered with. I do not
know the truth about the past. It was my investigations that got me into
trouble and I had to escape with my life. I have been hiding out ever
since.”
   “So, your leaders were just like the barons?” asked Arran.
   “It seems that most leaders don’t like the people to know too much.
I think I am going to be here for some time. Why don’t you go and
leave me to it?”
   “Suits me. I have plenty to do. See you later.”
   Arran came out of the stairwell at ground level and walked over to
the forge. Inside he found Harrad.
   “Wow this stuff is fantastic. It really does resist a sword blow and
forms easily when heated. Look we have designed the shapes,” Harrad
said proudly.
   “I think you have got it spot on, Harrad. We had better get a team
together to produce this stuff and all work flat out. We’ll give it a
couple of days and see how much we have done.”
   The team was assembled and worked continually for two days.
They were pleased with the results and thought they were on target for
completion in less than two weeks. On the second day, Nadine came
and asked Arran if Zeb had left.
   “Oh, I had forgotten about him. I had better go and look. He must
be still down in the basement. Nad, you had better get some food
together. He must be starving.”
   “Are you going to stay here forever?” Arran asked Zeb.
   “Oh, it has been a while. I’m sorry but there is so much here. Look
at this.”
   “No, come and get some eats, you can tell me all about it.”
Zeb demolished a double helping of Nadine’s finest cooking, sat back and removed his pipe. But before he could do anything with it, he fell fast asleep.

“Well, I am wasting time here,” said Arran.

“Look, he needs sleep. He’s not as young as you. Why don’t you go back to work and I’ll call you as soon as he wakes?” suggested Nadine.

Arran carried on into the night. The men’s speed was only restricted, by having just two forges to heat the amour on. Arran finally trudged back to his quarters only to find Zeb still asleep.

“I’ve never heard snoring like it. Kept me awake all night,” said Nadine bleary eyed.

“Never mind, Nad. It’s only temporary. Heat me something up, please. I’ll wake him. Better do him some more as well.”


“God, it’s like trying to wake the dead. You have had enough sleep for the two of us. I thought you had important things to tell?” asked Arran.

“What was that, then?” said Zeb sitting up and finding his pipe.

“The books.”

“Oh, yes the books,” said Zeb, sitting up even more. “Yes, the books. A remarkable find, young man. They cover a lot of history right up to the Great War. Are you ready for this?”

“Yes. You can tell me while I eat,” said Arran.

“Ah, is it supper time?” asked Zeb hopefully, lighting his pipe.

“Here you are, Zeb,” said Nadine handing him a small bowl. “The last time you ate a lot, you went into a coma for a day.”

“Nonsense. Well, Arran, around the end of what they called the twenty-first century mankind had reached the pinnacle of civilisation.”

“We know that the Great War ended a greater civilisation. The tale has been handed down,” interrupted Arran.

“Will you let me finish?” protested Zeb. “You have no idea of how advanced it was. Anyway, I shan’t bore you with the details, then. But the planet was highly populated and such self-supporting units, as yours did not exist. Everyone worked and was paid for their efforts.
The employers grew by buying each other out and doing takeovers. I’m sorry, but these corporations grew into giants as their numbers fell. Until one day, there were only four of them. Let me see. Power and construction, Powercon, Military, Mining and Manufacturing, 3M, Transport and communications, WorldTransCom, And Nutrition and consumer domestics, Nutradom. I think they all speak for themselves.”

“Is all this necessary? I don’t follow you,” said Arran.

“Yes, and you will. You will. The corporations became more powerful than governments and were not restricted by boundaries. Corporate law took over. Workers’ rights were scrapped. The nation state was at an end. You see, the corporations could shift their operations to where the labour or materials were the cheapest. The affluent societies grew in poverty. Once in power, the corporations advanced in robotics until manual labour was no longer needed. The corporations looked after their employees and their families. One was either a member of the elite or an outcast. The third world was no longer needed for cheap labour. The working classes of all races were now beggars, abandoned, to barter amongst themselves for scraps. There were huge corporate hypermarkets with guards on the roof, where the elite could obtain whatever luxury goods they wished. The outcasts used to beg and gather there searching for scraps and waste that was thrown out. Outside the hypermarkets, the outcasts formed their own markets called boot markets. Here they would come, dressed in rags, and trudge round looking at the rubbish hoping to trade for some and pass it on to someone else. Dissatisfaction and hatred of these new high-powered capitalists grew beyond belief until Islamic religious fanatics smuggled nuclear warheads into the major cities with the help of peasants and detonated them. This caused automatic retaliation resulting in every country unleashing their nuclear arsenals in panic without knowing who started it. The planet became almost uninhabitable. However, the corporations escaped to places they had already been building. Many generations later saw the survivors with a medieval economy and low life expectancy due to radiation poisoning. Life as it was known had changed beyond all recognition. That, my dear fellow, is how we got here.”
“Well, all that does not really tell me much more than I already know.”

“But the details are incredible. The lack of concern for life by these corporations was terrible.”

“It’s no different today. Do you think the northern tribes have any concerns? Or even the baron, for that matter?”

“Well, my boy, it has answered a lot of questions for me. In the morning, I, shall carry on. You never know what it might turn up.”

“OK Zeb, goodnight.”

It was twelve days before they decided they had made enough armour. Zeb had left on the sixth day. Arran ordered a day of rest. Everyone had worked to the point of exhaustion. They sat around or slept on that last day. The next day they would set off on the return journey with the barrows loaded with armour. The barrows were loaded and lowered outside before nightfall.

The day turned out to be dull with a light drizzle.

“Not good weather for our journey,” said Harrad.

“Could be worse. Let’s hope it is raining hard up north. That will make it difficult for their army to travel. We will have quite a force by the time we get back to Cam. We will be picking up men all along the way. Nad, would you like to ride on a barrow?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my legs,” she said.

“You can say that again,” said Arran with a silly grin. “Let’s get moving. I don’t expect any trouble, we are a large force and not carrying any food.”

“Can we rescue those people trapped under the hill?” asked Nadine.

“We have more than enough manpower to dig them out. We can’t just leave them.”

“But then what would we do with them? We can’t babysit them with what is to come. They would come out only to be murdered by the invaders,” answered Arran.

“Let’s give them the choice. We can break through to them and if is safe for them later, they can let themselves out. We might not be around to do it. They need our help, Arran. I have the feeling that they are tied in with our destiny.”
“We are short of time, Nad. But if you insist. You are always right about these things. We will take some spades and picks. We can leave them at your brother’s.”

Once again, they set off on their journey, a slow march towards the north. On the third morning, they approached Nadine’s hill.

“I can sense them already, Arran. The contact is getting stronger, they know we are coming.”

“So soon? You had better get a direction on their door, so we know where to dig,” said Arran.

Arran kept back half the soldiers and ordered the barrows onward, thinking that he could soon catch up with them. Nadine circled the hill, concentrating. She came to a halt, paused and nodded. Then she looked at Arran and pointed.

He turned to the soldiers and said, “Right men, grab a spade, there’s some digging to do.”

They all looked at one another and one said, “Digging is not our job.”

“Well, it is now. We can all help and take turns. It might be important,” said Arran.

So, amid mumbles the men took up a spade and began to dig. It turned out to be a bigger job than they expected. Arran began to think they would come out the other side of the hill, when suddenly they struck a wall. He realised that they had not gone as far in as he thought, but had seemed to remove as much earth as the hill contained. Everyone, now eager to see just what they had found, worked faster than ever. They cleared more earth exposing a large smooth stone area. Arran stood back and smiled at Nadine.

“They are just the other side. They say thank you, Arran.”

“Tell them think nothing off it, we are used to digging. This has taken far longer than I expected, Nad. It will be dark soon. We need to camp, but not near here. I am concerned for you. And what if these things get out? They will have the advantage in the dark.”

“Do not worry, Arran. They will not harm us. They cannot. We will camp here.”

“If you are sure.”

“Sure.”
“We have no food,” said Arran.
“We must go hungry, then.”
“Good job Vargen’s not with us. He would moan all night.”

As if by magic a section of the wall began to open outward. The soldiers dropped their spades and ran screaming.

“That’s the fastest I’ve ever seen them move,” said Arran suddenly looking serious.

The door inched open, but Arran could not see into the pitch black within. Figures moved in the gloom. Then out walked the hairiest man he had ever seen. Everyone stepped back. Arran didn’t think he looked that ape-like, even with so much hair and beard. Not that he really knew what an ape was like. Apart from stories told to children of their believed origins, no one had seen one. The ape-man walked up to Arran, who kept his ground.

“Arran of Greyhaven we are eternally grateful to you for our rescue. My name is One One Six Four. My people and I pledge our lives to you. We are the watchers.”

“I hear your words One One Six Four. But your lips do not move.”

“That is good. You hear my thoughts through Nadine, she is close to you. I have no verbal language.”

“Your, your thoughts? It is not possible,” said Arran.

“Only through those with the gift, and you through Nadine. My people are unable to talk as you do. We do not see, either.”

Arran realised that he was not looking at the man’s eyes; they were covered by black shades. These people were going to have a hard time coping in the real world.

“You have been delayed many hours in helping us and I believe you are without provisions. Will you be our guest? It would be a great honour.”

Arran looked around. No one looked very keen on hanging about. More people were emerging from the hill. How could he abandon these people? They must be informed of what is happening in the world. Perhaps when they hear, they may want to be sealed up again. Arran could not conceal a laugh. The other laughed as well.
“No, we would not wish to be sealed up again. We would not have lasted much longer. Our resources are failing after so many generations.”

Arran stiffened and stepped back, trying to stop his thoughts.

“Ha, Arran of Greyhaven, you are easy to read. You have a pure soul. A trustworthy person. You are a great leader of men. It is not so easy to read most. Their minds are so corrupt, they do not know themselves.”

Arran, a bit flattered accepted the invitation to supper.

“We have no light in our dwelling. I suggest you make camp out here,” said One One Six Four.

He turned and two of the others went back inside.

“I have ordered supper. I am afraid it is not much. Our food is made from fungi and yeasts.”

Arran could not stop the look of distaste on his face.

“But it is nourishing, and I do not think you will find it unpalatable.”

Arran ordered a fire to be made. Watchers were now bringing out seating and tables. A fire was lit and before long they were all presented with bowls of food. Arran was the first to try it. To his surprise, it was quite good, although a little strong in flavour. He nodded to Nadine.

“Mm. This is good One One Six Four.”

“Please call me One, or Oneone. We do not address each other like this. We all know who is communicating with whom without names. So, names have been lost.”

“OK Oneone. So, tell us, how did you become buried here?”

“We do not know for sure. It has been generations. We lost the use of any records down there. The walls are so strong that no one has ever been able to break through them. As you have seen the door had been buried. It has been told for many generations that there was a great war. We were an important people within a bunker, but what our task was we do not know. A long time ago, the power began to fade. We lost our lighting and everything. It was said that a slight radiation leak would affect us and speed up our adaptation to our environment.”

“What is radiation?” asked Arran.
“That I do not know. It is what has been passed down, so it must be of importance. We lost our sight. Our hearing mutated vastly.”

“We have what are called mutants. Do you suppose it is the same thing?”

“Again, I do not know. We can hear the shapes of things around us and any noises over great distances. We also came to sense each other’s minds. I think because talking interfered with our hearing shapes.”

“What about heat and food?”

“A heat exchanger had been dug miles into the ground where the earth is very hot. This has provided our energy. Although that has been failing and we must operate it by hand. But it keeps warm below ground. We developed many high protein yeasts and fungi to make a variety of food. Everything is recycled. Even people.”

“And I thought our Com was as self-efficient as it got,” said Arran in surprise.

“We had no choices. Arran, you are concerned about us being free. I can assure you that under normal circumstances we can cope fine. But I sense great danger from you. You are burying this in your mind. Please explain.”

Arran told all he knew and wished it were better times for these people to be released.

“That is a sad tale. Not just for us, but for all your people. There may be something we can do to help.”

“Oh no, we have enough on our hands. You would only get in the way,” said Arran quickly.

“You might be surprised. I insist that we join you. It is the least we can do to repay you.”

“It’s your funeral. We cannot protect you at all. You owe us nothing, it was nothing.”

“We have contacted many outsiders in the past. But no one has ever tried to help,” said Oneone.

“You have Nadine to thank for that. Not me.”

“It was your good heart that believed her and persisted in the removal of much earth. Again, we thank you, Arran.”
They talked on into the night. Most of the watchers explored the surrounding area. The dark night made no difference to them.

Arran and his party slept in their cloaks around the fires. In the morning, Oneone informed Arran that some of their men folk would accompany him on his journey. The watchers supplied a breakfast of another rich meal.

Arran ordered scouts front and rear. It would take two days to reach Hal’s place and it was mid-morning by the time they set off. They marched at a reasonable pace. The watchers seemed-sure footed enough, but looked a strange bunch. Arran and Nadine marched with Oneone who told them more of his life. His people could detect when anyone came near their bunker. They could also detect the good ones from the bad. They used to project fear into the bad people. This always sent them on their way. There was a chance that their group could do the same to some of the attacking army. This could greatly hinder the enemy’s strength of attack.

“You can project fear into someone?” asked Arran.

“Yes, it is not difficult. It depends on the distance and how many of them. The problem we will have is trying not affect your own people on the battle field.”

“Incredible. We must go on further north to scout the enemy. I would like some of you to come with us.”

“It will be our pleasure. My brother Three One Two Six and I will accompany you. Now that we are out of the wood, I am aware of great distances. Never have I experienced such a thing.”

“Can you detect far?”

“As far as you can see. But I can detect someone in hiding that you would not be able to see.”

“Well, I am glad you came along. Shall I call back the scouts?”

“No, let them think they are useful. But we won’t need any when we scout the enemy,” assured Oneone.

On the second day at around noon, Oneone suddenly stopped. Arran stopped and looked at him. He was quite still for a moment. Then he informed Arran that they were being followed. The follower was alone, was not a bad person at heart, but was full of anger or hatred. He then described exactly where the follower was.
Arran looked. He located the bushes Oneone directed him to.

“Keep going everyone. Harrad, come with me.”

The two men walked back down the trail and stopped before the bushes.

“Who is it that thinks he can creep up on Greyhaven warriors? You should know better. Come out now and show yourself.”

Silence. Arran looked at Harrad, nodded backwards. Harrad walked back up the trail a way. There was a rustling, the bushes slowly exploded and out stepped the largest man that Arran had ever seen. He was no taller than Arran, if at all, but he must have been twice as wide, quite round with short stout limbs. His bald head, lack of neck and ears made him look like a human ball. Arran almost broke into a laugh, but thought better of it. The newcomer was holding a thick staff, but did not seem to be armed otherwise.

“I do not need to creep up on anyone, stranger. You travel my road,” he said.

“My name is Arran of Greyhaven, and it is not your road. Where are you bound?”

“I travel north. There is talk of war. I look for fortune.”

“You are a mercenary?”

“Maybe. What business is it of yours?”

“We do not want mercenaries. You never know whose side they are on. Travel another road, friend,” Arran said.

“I am not your friend, friend. You travel another road. Stand aside.”

Taking his staff into both hands, the stranger stepped forward.

Harrad too stepped forward. Arran put up his hand and stopped him, then drew Soulreaper. The next thing he knew was like being hit by a falling tree. As his vision cleared, he looked up to see the fat man laughing. How could he swing that small trunk of a staff up at such speed? Harrad stepped forward again. Arran held up his hand, then got up and raised his blade. The man held the staff vertical in front of himself. Arran swept a lightning blow of immense velocity down at the man’s shoulder. His opponent turned very slightly, so the staff replaced his shoulder. Arran’s blade jarred into the staff, which was immediately spun so the lower end swept up between Arran’s legs and smashed into his crotch. Arran was curled in a ball on the floor. There
was no way he would be able to move for the next few minutes. Harrad was at his side immediately. The fat man rolled about in laughter. Harrad looked from one to the other, not quite sure what to do. Eventually, Arran sat up. Harrad helped him to his feet, but he was unable to walk. Arran sheathed his blade.

“Well, my friend, you make a formidable opponent. We could use a man like you. What are you called?”

“They call me Jardu.”

“So Jardu, if you are looking for adventure, then you have found it. How would you like to join us?”

“Where do you go and what is your business?”

“We are going to the heart of the war you heard of. Have you the nerve for that?”

“Maybe I have.”

“Then travel with us and see what you may.”

“Arran, he is a mutant,” put in Harrad.

“So what? He has done no harm to us and we need men like him. Mind you, he may have done harm to me. Ow, I can’t walk. Jardu, I have never been bettered before, especially with a stick.”

“A staff. Not much can resist a stout staff,” boasted Jardu. “Mind you, it has to be stout to get some weight behind it. Most men can only wield a slim one which is easily deflected.”

“You must have the strength of ten men. I will get my own back. Unarmed combat. We’ll see what you are made off without that tree trunk.”

“Ha, you will have even less chance,” said Jardu.

“Just wait until I have recovered.”

Just then Nadine raced up, caught Jardu by surprise and slapped him about the head.

“Wow, a spirited one,” said Jardu pushing her away.

“What have you done, you fat oaf? You’ll be sorry for that. How’s he going to travel? Come on, give Harrad the other end of your staff. Arran, sit between them. They can carry you. And Harrad, you should be ashamed of yourself letting him face this overgrown barrel on legs on his own,” scolded Nadine.
And so, it was, that Arran had to deal with the humility of being carried into the House of Jarsad-Malkem. Jardu was quite a spectacle and everyone wanted to meet him. He turned out to be quite a character, though it was a long time before Nadine had anything to do with him. The watchers, however, were viewed with initial suspicion, but strangely enough, were soon accepted. Everyone wanted to ask questions and it was another late night before they got to bed. Arran told everyone not to fuss, that he would be well enough to travel the next day. Although inside, he was not so sure, and that night he gave Nadine a very serious look when they went to bed.

The following morning was dry and clear as they set off. Hal marched along with Arran and Nadine. “It is a strange feeling going off and leaving the house without a soul in it. This has never happened before.”

“These are strange times,” said Arran, trying not to show his discomfort. This is the largest train ever. We will be gathering men all the way. We will have a small army by the time we get to Cam.”

“It seems strange leaving the Com with just women to defend it,” added Harrad.

“I don’t think it will come to that,” said Arran. “I am amazed that so many of our women have come with us to fight.”

“Nazine wants to avenge the death of Raz. The other women would sooner die with their men than be left alone,” said Nadine.

“Touching isn’t it, Harrad?”

“I think it is. We are all in this together and have no choice.”

Jardu walked up and said, “You walk OK, Arran. I would like to thank Hal for his hospitality last night. I have never been accepted anywhere before. I was quite humbled.”

“You are welcome. If Arran says it, then so be it.”

“Oh yes, I am sorry for striking you so hard, Arran.”

“I deserved it for coming at you with a blade. But don’t forget the rematch.”

“I am looking forward to it.”

“We will make a human out of you yet,” laughed Arran.

The procession made good time and saw few other travellers. The exodus south had slowed to a trickle. Runners went ahead to several of
the great houses. Their fighters met the column as it passed. Arran briefed their leaders as they marched. Each house had its own banner. Spirits were high and it was indeed beginning to look like quite an army. On the third afternoon, they met a patrol of the baron’s men who greeted them but let them pass without a challenge. Shortly after, Arran’s group marched into the camp on the south edge of Cam. They were cheered as they entered. Several people had come out of the town and some of the baron’s captains were asking questions even before the men could come to a halt. Arran pushed his way to the training area where Jarrad was still organising the training.

“Ho, Jarrad.”

“Ho, Arran. You bring back quite a force.”

“Only the best. We have armour for the front line. Has there been any sign yet?”


“It was Zeb’s idea. Have you picked the front line yet?”

“Yes. We have sifted out the best.”

“Good. Get this armour handed out. The sooner they practice in it the better.”

Jarrad called Maggad and instructed him to give out the armour.

“This will boost the men’s confidence no end, Arran.”

Captain Onaska finally got Arran’s attention and said that a hundred of the baron’s best men were now trained up and ready to go as soon as he wished.

“Two days, we march. A hundred soldiers, a hundred warriors and ten watchers,” said Arran.

“We will be ready. There is a high council tomorrow. You are asked to attend,” added the Captain.

“I will be there,” answered Arran. “Jarrad, help Harrad get the new arrivals camped down and you had better arrange training for them.”

“It’s done, Arran. We have moved our own tents over to this side. There is still a lot of work to be done; I don’t know how we are going to do it. We can use the rubble from the outer town to repair the walls. That is enough of a task. But to remove the buildings as well, phew. How are we going to tear them down?” asked Jarrad.

“Burn them down.”
“What?”

“We already decided to burn them down,” repeated Arran. “There is a lot of wood in those buildings. Fire would get rid of that and the heat should weaken the mortar, most of the buildings will fall. The fire will not spread inside the town walls, so why not? It is the only way.”

“A good idea. We will have the whole town working on it,” said Jarrad.

Word of their arrival had got around; more and more people were coming out of the town. Cheering crowds ran into the fields to greet them. No one had ever seen the likes of it. Food and drink were brought out of hiding. Fires were lit and musicians played. Soon the gathering turned into one big festival.

“They can enjoy themselves tonight,” said Arran. “They need it. Tomorrow they can begin the hard work.”

All the house leaders, the baron’s generals and officers, a new position hastily created by the magnitude of events, the first promotion being a proud General Hendra, attended the high council. The warriors were represented by, Oneone, Arran, Jarrad and Harrad. Arran shook General Hendra by the hand, saying he was pleased for him. This was the grandest assembly the barony had ever seen. It was over twice the size of the last meeting. The first to speak was Kai Snade, who was the baron’s chief advisor. He was a wily old fox whose eyes continually darted from side to side. He was well dressed and holding his staff of office, but was still unwashed and stank.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Well, gentlemen. The first on the agenda, I would like to call your attention to a rather pressing problem. That of the northern tribes.”

“Get on with it, you old goat,” someone yelled.

Snade looked at the baron who said nothing and only just suppressed a smile.

“Err yes, the matter of the northern tribes massing across our northern borders. I would like everyone to hear our intelligence reports, our plans and then make useful contributions. I will chair this meeting and keep order.” The baron looked on with a scowl.

“I would like to call upon our senior captain to give us details known so far. Captain Onaska.”
Snade sat down to a dismal applause, which increased as the captain stood up.

“Ahem, I don’t know about intelligence. Half of it is rumour. Our enemy is camped too far the other side of the border for us to get close enough to study them. The bigger they have got, the more patrols they have. Also, they send raiding parties across the border for food. But as far as we can tell, there are three main camps. north, north east and north west of here. It is my guess that they will march and meet up at our border, then progress down our northern trail. From a distance, the camps look large enough. We reckon that we will be facing an army of around one hundred thousand strong,” said Onaska.

A few gasps and groans went around.

“However, they are untrained rabble. I doubt that they have ever faced an organised, trained army in battle before.”

“They must be fierce fighters though,” said someone.

“They don’t know anything but fighting,” said another.

“Order. Order,” cried Snade, banging his staff. “One at a time, please. Sit down, Arran. Take your turn.”

“Ahem,” began Onaska again. “We don’t know when they will set off. But they have just been joined by, an extremely fierce legion of pict, from the far north. These are mercenaries and it may be what they have been waiting for. They must set off at any time now. I believe they will be at our borders in two weeks’ time. Their progress will be slow. They have numerous war machines and supply trains to bring up. That, I am afraid, is all I know.” With that Onaska sat down amidst a round of low murmurings.

Snade stood, bang, bang. “Attention, please. So, it looks not good. Our task is to plan and prepare to meet this force. Because of the intensity of the raids, we have already evacuated the northern houses. They are now within the town. This means the town is overflowing which has caused further problems. I would ask you to bear this in mind and avoid congestion wherever possible. Thank you. Those not in training are working on the walls. We should be able to defend them for quite a while.”

Arran raised his hand.
“Arran of Greyhaven wishes to speak. Rise Arran, let us hear your say,” said Snade.

Arran stood and said “Gentlemen. If our enemy has war machines, then the walls will not stand for long. Once they are over the walls, we are lost. We cannot match them at fighting within the town. Disorganised hand-to-hand combat is what they are good at. We must meet them in the field.”

“Impossible,” cried someone. “We are outnumbered more than ten to one.”

“Yes,” said Snade. “What risks do you put us to now? Was it not you who brought this down upon us with your raid on the northern town? Now you want us all standing in the open when this horde comes sweeping down on us. Watch yourself or you will be tried for treason.”

There were cheers of support from some of the worst of the officers. The baron’s scowl deepened, but still he said nothing. Arran could see that loyalty was split. Snade had the support of half the officers. It was a dangerous situation. Just how aware of the situation the baron was, Arran could only guess.

“I could stay and just defend Greyhaven,” replied Arran. This was coming anyway. The barbarians have been raiding further and further across the border. It was only a matter of time. Maybe I brought it on early. That could be for the good, before they were fully prepared. Don’t go causing a split in our side now, Snade, or I will personally run you through, treason or no treason. We must be united.”

Snade looked sullen and his enemies all took heart at seeing him put down. Did this Snade have some power over the baron? Arran wondered.

“I want all the fighting men,” continued Arran, “be they townies, soldiers or whoever, to camp on the southern meadow. They will live and train like an army until the enemy arrive. We will train them into an army that will kill ten times its number. They will become part of a team. Will not want to let each other down. As soon as the wall is finished, all non-combatants must be evacuated south.”

There were more cries of “defend the walls.” Snade restored order.
Arran continued. “Tomorrow I shall take a company of my warriors and your soldiers and attack the enemy as it marches. It is a huge cumbersome force. We can strike it again and again when and where we wish. We should do significant damage and lower their morale by the time they get here.”

“I want assurance that my men will not be sacrificed,” demanded Snade.

“Of course they won’t be sacrificed. My men will attack the column, draw off some of their force, cut them off and your men can deal with them. We will take on their fighters while your men destroy what they can of the supply train. So, I want all the northern houses stripped bare of anything that might be useful to the enemy. Now, at our last council, some of you had ideas and things to do. Have these tasks been completed?”

There were several nods and ‘ayes’ from around the hall.

“Are the weapons completed yet?”

A captain stood and said, “They are almost finished. The ball and chain has been time-consuming. A strange choice of weapon, not normally used in battles, but in duals.”

“It will be fine in controlled situations. The front line will be so tight; there will not be room to use a blade. That’s if any of them survive my warriors and get here.”

A roar of laughter went around the hall as the mood lightened a little.

“We will meet them in the field together, outside the city. As explained to some of you before. We will have a front line, which now has armour and shields, wielding a spiked ball on a chain fixed to a shaft of three hands in length. Two lines of pike men behind. Each with different length pikes. These will be braced in the ground for the initial charge, then used to spike the enemy bellow their shields when they raise them to ward of a blow from our front line. The enemy will not see the pikes until it is too late. Our line will step back a pace at a time and our foe will be climbing over their dead. This will demoralise them. I hope we will last three days in the field. With luck, I hope to capture their bows and arrows and bring them here. I am sure we can lose arrows from the walls over our own men. They won’t need to be
good shots. By the time, we have moved back behind the wall, they won’t be half the army they were.”

“A fine plan I’m sure, Arran,” said Snade. “But I want one of our officers to go with you and command our men. Captain Armstrong, I think.”

“What ever you wish, counsellor Snade. But I propose it is General Hendra, as I have worked with him before and know he is highly commendable.”

“You will have who I say,” ordered Snade.

For the first time the baron stepped in and said, “Captain Hendra it will be.”

Snade gave the baron a very strange look, but said nothing. The baron stood.

“Well, it’s as good a plan as we are going to get, I think,” he roared. “I’m glad someone has got some brains. The Haven warriors are far better trained for this than us. Hear this Snade. I am putting Arran in total charge of this affair. But I want Onaska to accompany him everywhere, understand.”

“Thank you sire. I shall be honoured to work with Captain Onaska and have Captain Hendra leading your soldiers,” said Arran.

“No, you won’t. Stop being so obliging,” sneered Snade.

“Sire,” said Arran turning to the baron. “I could not have asked for more. How else could I hope to command your men, than through your most respected commander? I trust him to know the men he picks. I will leave Harrad here to organise our force and complete the training.”

“Well, if there is nothing more. We shall call this meeting closed,” finished Snade.

The hall started to empty, everyone talking at once. Onaska came over to Arran, “I am at your service.”

“We will work together. Pick a hundred of your best men. We leave at dawn, north gate. Bring some maps if you can find any.”

Back at camp, Arran walked between the tents, out into the centre and watched the training. Every-one who passed by waved and seemed in high spirits.
“It’s amazing how, when they all get together, a bit of training and routine, their confidence grows,” he said to Nadine.

“It is a very large force now, Arran. I have never seen anything like it.”

“I don’t think anyone has,” he added.

“Well that is bound to make them feel confident. They have probably forgotten what we are up against. This force looks invincible. It’s organised and efficient. You have done well to get it so.”

“It is not of my doing. Jarrad has done more than I, and he has done it by organising some of our best men. Team work, Nad.”

“It has come together so well. I am impressed. Now you are going to leave me again tomorrow.”

“I can’t take you on this one, Nad. You know I can’t.”

“I guess not. But I worry when you’re in danger.”

“I will be extra careful and I won’t take on anything I can’t handle. Come on, let’s get an early night”

“But it’s still afternoon.”

“Well, do you mind?”

“Oh no. It might be the last time for a while.”

Arran suggested that everyone should have an early night and took Nadine to their tent.

It was a damp early spring morning with drizzle in the air. The soldiers did not look too happy to be up in the cold so early. But they were a little excited and that took the edge off the damp. They had put on the best fitting of the armour. Captain Onaska had taken the time to finish his armour off. He had smoothed some of the edges, added flaps of leather at the joins and improved the fastenings. Then he painted it with some fine colours. “Arran, this armour is out of this world. It is so light I don’t know I am wearing it, even with the bits I have added. It keeps a lot of the rain out as well,” Onaska said.

“It’ll keep more than the rain out. But I doubt it will stop an arrow,” said Arran.

“We know that. The men are pleased with it. You know they are not half as afraid as they were, just from this armour. That was a good move, Arran.”
“We realised that when we had the idea. Yours looks so good I regret not making my own. It’s so striking. Nad, get everyone to do the same. We will look such a professional army that we might worry them a bit.”

“I’ll see to it. It will look impressive. But they must all be in the same colour with a different one for officers.”

“Now I really wish I had my own,” said Arran.

“I would prefer it if you did.”

“Too late now. Sort me out a set for later. And make sure you paint it a really bold colour.”

Onaska had brought a barrow of supplies saying they could abandon it if necessary. He also had several maps that covered some of the northern territory and marked where he believed the three armies were camped.

Arran studied the map. “I would guess that the one on the west might be the largest. We don’t want the centre one, in case we get trapped. The eastern one should be the smallest. They have less land behind them with the coast on their east. We will attack that one. They are not far from the Dead Lakes. We can lure them there and get help from King Theo. Speed is needed, before they pass the lakes. Some of us can lure them onto this narrow strip. We were there before, and it is easily defended. The rest of us can follow them in and trap them. It will be tight for them and their numbers will not count. I should guess there are about eight thousand of them. We will send runners to warn King Theo.”

“It looks good to me,” said Captain Onaska. “If you can get them onto that strip, we have got it made.”

“Right, half of my men will attack them and retreat onto that strip. The rest of us will follow them in and close the trap. Detail some of your men to take care of the camp followers. We don’t want anyone escaping. Let’s get going. Nadine, you’re in charge. Don’t drive them too hard and keep an eye on Jardu. He will be useful with some of the heavy work clearing the town out front. And do leave some rubble and low walls at the perimeter. Not enough to give them cover but enough to hamper their advance and hinder war machines. I will be back soon
enough.” They embraced, and it was all Nadine could do to hold back her tears.

The troop marched off with the warriors and watchers at the front, the soldiers in the middle and some porters from town at the rear with the barrows. The town was lined up either side of the road. The people had not seen such a spectacle before. It was a large force of fully armed men clanking up the road, armour, tall painted shields, banners, flags, horns and all. The people cheered the proud soldiers on their way.

“Quite a send-off, eh, Jarrad?” said Arran.

“It is an honour we have never had before. It seems to have raised the soldiers’ spirits. I wonder how long it will last.”

“We will know soon enough.”

“Hey, it’s not that much of an honour,” put in Vargen. “No one has offered me any food to march on.”

They all roared with laughter. It took two days to reach the halfway inn.

“I have finally resigned myself to travelling at this slow speed,” said Arran.

“The larger our force, the slower it will move,” replied Jarrad.”

“Are we really going to march right past the inn?” enquired Vargen.

“We could stop there for the night and have a bevvy.”

“You would not get a look in with all these soldiers. They might not get paid much, but the baron’s money is gladly taken,” replied Jordan.

“By the time they get here, I will be under the table.”

“So, will the soldiers soon after,” cut in Arran. “We won’t get them to move tomorrow. We go on. We can cover a lot of ground before dark.”

As they passed the inn, Arran got the impression that it was packed inside. “That’s funny, I didn’t think there was anybody left north of the town.”

“There shouldn’t be,” put in Jarrad.” It even seems odd that the inn has been left untouched by the raids, when all around have been destroyed.”
“The noise has stopped,” commented Arran. “I think they are aware of us.” But Arran became more interested in the watchers who, had stopped and were staring at the inn.

“What’s up?” Arran asked Oneone.

“There is great evil in there,” replied One.

“I wonder why the inn has not been attacked,” puzzled Jarrad.

“The innkeeper is not to be trusted. I do know that,” explained Vargen. “He says that one tyrant is no worse than another. That since the loss of the great houses the baron has just hid behind his walls.”

“That’s dangerous talk,” put in Onaska.

“How do you know that, Vargen?” asked Arran.

“Well, I make it my business to find out all I can about any eating house.”

“Oh, yes I forgot, your main interest,” added Arran.

“He says that the baron takes his taxes and offers nothing in return. That if this new conqueror succeeds, it would open up trading routes to the north and his inn would be busier than it ever was.”

“Well, he is certainly a careless talker,” said Arran. “I wondered why there was an inn on this rarely used trail. Do you think he knew?”

“More like he was put here to spy and help coordinate the barbarians’ operations,” growled Jarrad.

“A spy,” said Arran. “Suddenly, I don’t like him.”

“There’s still no proof,” pointed out Jarrad.

“No, but I still don’t like him.”

“You’re doing it again.” Replied Jarrad, “your likes and dislikes don’t come into it, remember.”

“I know, feelings interfere with correct decisions, but the proof may be in there. Can you pick up anything Oneone?”

“No, it’s too busy for anything other than a general evil.”

“Too busy?” queried Arran.

“There should be no one left out in these parts now,” pointed out Onaska. They must be enemy.”

“Oneone, how many?” Arran snapped.

“Fifty.”

“A raiding party. Jarrad, take twenty men and skirt the rear before they leave,” Arran ordered.
“Down.”

The watchers threw themselves to the ground with the warriors close behind, but the soldiers were still looking all around. Several of them went down with arrows in them.

“Shields. Left flank,” bellowed Onaska.

The two rows of soldiers stood their shields on top of each other as more arrows thudded into them. Jarrad had already gone. The other warriors shielded the watchers.

“They don’t know who they are taking on,” said Vargen. I’m going to have that innkeeper’s head on a pole.”

Arran counted under his breath, thinking it was just as well that Zeb had made him take the new shields. Most of the warriors still did not carry shields, though. He looked round. The shield bearers were all with him. The watchers were staring intently at the inn. Then he heard a commotion from the rear of the inn and the arrows stopped.

“Right, let’s go,” Arran shouted.

The warriors charged at the inn, but before they reached it, the raiders came out through the door and windows. They seemed in a confused state. As Arran reached them, Jarrad came out behind them. Still outnumbering the few warriors, the raiders seemed to pull themselves together and started to put up a fight. The warriors threw down their shields and cut their way through the enemy. The soldiers, not having seen the warriors in action before, cheered. It was not much of a fight. By the time Arran took three souls, the rest caved in and tried to flee. Three were overpowered and taken alive. Arran and Jarrad went into the inn and confronted the innkeeper.

“Consorting with the enemy,” stated Jarrad.

“Enemy? They were just customers,” replied the keeper.

“Tell that to the baron,” hissed Arran dragging the innkeeper out by the scruff of the neck.

The soldiers were gathering round the captives prodding them and feeling quite brave now.

“Tie them up,” said Arran. “Four of you can take them back to the baron.

“Shouldn’t we try to get some information out of them first?” enquired Jarrad.”
“You’re right. Take one of them and do whatever you need.”
Jarrad inspected the three captives and dragged one away. Torran and Tarrak set about tying the others up.
“Arran,” said Oneone, “I will go with Jarrad and probe the prisoner’s mind. I think I may be of some assistance here.”
“By all means, go ahead,” said Arran.
Oneone followed Jarrad into the inn.
“Well,” said Harrad, “I suppose we have some waiting to do. We might as well make do with the rest.”
“I don’t think it will take Jarrad long to cut that fellow into little pieces. But tell everyone to be at ease.”
It was not long before they could hear screams from within the inn. Arran looked at Harrad and nodded. Harrad raised his eyebrows and shrugged. The other prisoners suddenly looked scared.
“Arran, unable to stifle a snigger, turned to them and asked, “Well lads, who’s next?”
Far sooner than expected, Jarrad appeared from the inn dragging his prisoner with Oneone following. Jarrad dumped the man back with his comrades. He fell to the ground gibbering. Jarrad walked back to the others.
“You won’t get any more out of him.
Harrad stood. “There isn’t a sign of blood on him.”
“I never touched him,” said Jarrad nodding over his shoulder.
They all looked at Oneone as he walked up.
“What did you do?” asked Arran.
“I just applied fear to his mind while Jarrad asked him questions and told him what could happen to him. His resistance soon broke. But as I pushed harder so did his mind. It has retreated into its own depths to avoid reality. It may never return.”
“I’ll tell you something,” said Jarrad with his eyebrows raised. “Never, ever cross this guy.”
“Phew,” exclaimed Harrad. “Was there any information?”
They all turned to look at the gibbering form on the ground.
“He talked non-stop from the start,” said Jarrad. “There wasn’t really anything new, a few numbers, the enemy’s task is to capture as much grain as possible for their temple, and so on. But we guessed all
that. Even he doesn’t know the reason behind it or where it is going. It is for the Gods.”

“What would the Gods want with food?” queried Harrad.

“We have been down that road,” replied Arran.

“But he has confirmed everything you have suspected Arran,” added Jarrad. “You were incredibly accurate. Right down to the last detail.”

“Good,” said Arran, “accurate or not, it was only a guess before. Now it is a fact. We can plan on that without splitting our forces to counter error. Good work Oneone. Somebody put him out of his misery.” Arran said and nodded towards the innkeeper.

A nearby soldier jumped up crying, “I’ll do it.” then proceeded to hack the prisoner’s head off. The others just looked away.

The other prisoners were led off toward Cam and everyone else set off north again, hurrying because of the delay. It was not long, as Arran expected, before the soldiers were complaining of the relentless speed and were soon left behind, even though the warriors had now taken over the barrow, pushing until the light began to fade. That night, they camped outside the keep, with the soldiers straggling in around midnight. Arran reflected that since he was with an ever-increasing army, it had been a while since he had slept inside. But he was soon asleep nevertheless.

The next day, the soldiers were subdued as they set foot on hostile territory. At least the sun was shining and that made the journey more pleasant. Although not expecting to meet any resistance for several days, most men could not help keep looking over their shoulder. The whole army seemed somewhat nervous.

Jarrad arrived panting at the head of the column after running up and down its length a few times. “I wish they would settle down,” he said. “Anything would spook them into panic now, they seem very nervous.”

“Let’s make sure nothing does,” put in Arran. “You’re getting old, Jarrad, listen to you.”

“Well, they are making me nervous, as well.”

“I don’t expect any trouble for two or three days, but let’s not take any chances. Tomorrow we will send out scout parties instead of
individuals. They can cover a much wider area and make sure that nobody slips through and sees us. We need complete surprise,” said Arran.

Arran went to great lengths to make sure the soldiers knew of the size of the scout parties and from then on, the troop marched on with more confidence and were comparatively relaxed.

The next day, the scout party sent runners far ahead. They expected to meet the enemy any time, around twenty leagues from Middlemarch, mid-way to the Dead Lakes. It was an ideal position for Arran’s plans. The following day, scouts arrived with a prisoner. Arran went forward to meet them.

“A small advance party. We managed to take this one alive. There are several of them around the main group, which is just over that far ridge,” Said a scout pointing forward.

Arran inspected this barbarian. Apart from the few at the inn, who were not heavily armed this was the first time he had seen one close up in full battle dress. He was about the soldier’s height, but more heavily built. Obviously well-fed and unlike the soldiers, he had a wild and dangerous look. He was covered with war paint and had a bone through his nose. He was snarling and snorting and kept straining at his bonds.

This freak will terrify the soldiers thought Arran.

“We will stand here for today. How many are they?”

“About fifteen thousand fighting men and as many followers, cooks, smithies etc. It looks like they are coming this way.”

“Good, more than I’d guessed, but we will take them as they come over this ridge.

By now, the soldiers had arrived and were trying to get a look at the barbarian. They clearly did not like what they saw.

Arran said, “Cut him free”.

As soon as he was free, the barbarian lunged at Arran, who bowed to one side, twisted into his attacker and stood up. The barbarian was thrown clean over Arran’s shoulder without as much as a hand laid on him. He jumped to his feet and lunged again. Arran sidestepped, spun his body and smashed his fist into the side of his opponent’s head as he passed. The man slumped to the floor, his neck broken. The soldiers
who had been backing away rapidly, now came forward slowly, murmuring in awe.

“We could have got-up-to date information out of him, “complained Vargen.

“We know all we need to know for the moment to trap this lot. We can take their leaders when we have destroyed the rest. They will have far more valuable information.” I doubt if this one knew much and our soldiers needed to see how clumsy and weak they are, or they would be too scared to fight them.”

“They only have to fight the cooks this time.”

Arran looked round. Captain Onaska had pulled his men back and got them organized.

“It’s the most disciplined I have ever seen them,” remarked Jarrad.

Onaska walked up with his aide that carried the maps. “I take it having made contact, you might want to see the maps and work out where to go next.”

“Thank you, captain. I know what to do next, but we do need to study the maps to lay out our plan.”

The aide spread out the maps on the ground and the warriors gathered round smoothing them out and putting stones on their corners.

“Right, we take them as they come over this ridge,” said Arran. “We will lie in wait, out of sight. Then we will cut into their column allowing just enough through for your men to take without too much trouble captain. We will continue to fight them as they come over the ridge. The bulk of the force will not know what is happening for some time. But eventually they will swarm over the top in a width we cannot contain and try to get around us. By that time, captain your job must be done and you must be well on your way to this point,” explained Arran, pointing at the map with his dirk. “This is another ridge where we will do the same. We will be right behind you. But you want a good start. You don’t want us overtaking you. The enemy will be mad enough to blindly chase us. So, it should work again one or two times. We will eventually lead them to the Dead Lakes. Jarrad, have you sent runners to warn King Theo?”

“Yes, done.”
“Good. Now call in the scouts. We don’t need them, as we are not on the move now.”

The next morning, the tramp and clanking of an advancing army grew in the still air. It snaked over the ridge and down toward the valley. Suddenly, its right-hand flank was under vicious attack. The warriors came out of nowhere. A hundred fell before any could draw their weapons. Another hundred, before they moved. The warriors were cutting a sway into their enemy who began to bunch up to face their attackers. As soon as they were all facing away, the second group of warriors appeared behind them and tore into them. Within no time, the enemy was cut right through. Now the warriors turned to fight both the front and the cut off end of the column, which was promptly surrounded by the soldiers. Again, taking their enemy by surprise and from behind. Once more, the barbarians were confused and slow to react. The initial successes gained by the soldiers were all they needed to fight on bravely and finish the job. Meanwhile, the enemy kept clanking over the ridge to be devoured by hungry blades, Arran’s was especially hungry. The screams of his departed could be heard over everything else. But they could not avoid him as the advancing army, which pushed them forward, was now becoming aware of the battle and was coming over the hill, faster and faster. This was stringing out their column and going to take longer for them to gather up enough to surround the warriors. Arran waded in, soulreaper howling through the air. Screaming through steel, flesh and bone. Singing in his hand, a will of its own. The fighting got easier and easier for Arran. He was putting in no effort at all. His victims cried the screams of the damned. They died from the slightest wound as their life force was sucked out of them and their screams were the most unnerving. It was not long before the barbarians around him noticed. They began to realise what they were up against and turned but had nowhere to go. In desperation to escape such an evil death the barbarians began to throw themselves onto their own blades in front of him. Arran began to feel cheated and ploughed on with ever-increasing speed, wading ever deeper into the enemy, his comrades having trouble keeping up with him. His eyes blazed wildly, he was beginning to taste death, feed upon his enemy’s fear. He felt a surge every time he ran someone through, like a
powerful drug he wanted more and more. It was beginning to control him.

From behind Jarrad said, “If this keeps up, we are won.”

Arran spun round and ran him through with soulreaper. He felt the surge as the blade sucked out Jarrad’s life force, felt the vibration of his last scream. Looked into his eyes, eyes that said “Why?” Eyes that only ever had friendship in them. The sound and screams of battle, the sound of steel clashing faded away. Arran dropped to his knees and held his friend.

“What have I done?” he wept.

Warriors formed a wall around him while the battle raged all around. Jon knelt with him. Arran’s eyes were filled with grief.

“It’s that accursed blade,” cried Jon, “You should get rid of it; it will be the finish of us all.”

He reached for the blade, but Arran snatched it up, his look now one of hate and anger, and held it to Jon’s throat.”

“You want it? You can have it. It can add your soul to its collection.”

“That blade will destroy us all,” said Jon backing away.

“Methinks it will win the war,” snarled Arran.

“At what cost?”

“The cost will be mine alone to bear. But the advantage will be enormous. Watch these barbarians fall.”

He turned and ploughed once again into the affray like a madman with inexhaustible strength. The soldiers were on their way without serious loss. Soon even the warriors were being forced down the slope as the weight of numbers began to tell. Their enemy was beginning to fight more fiercely and apart from the ones facing Arran, fought without fear. The warriors had been fighting methodically without too much effort up until then. But suddenly Tamber went down on one knee with a thigh wound and as soon as he did three blades were thrust into him before his comrades could cover him. They immediately struck down his attackers but not in time to save him.

“Arran, it’s time we went,” cried Harrad. “They are coming too fast and getting around us.”
But nobody was willing to approach Arran who, was getting tired of climbing over bodies and was becoming aware of the enemy’s movements finally turned and trotted off the field. His comrades fell back, turned and followed him. Picking up speed and leaving the enemy behind, they now maintained a fair pace. By the time, they caught up with the soldiers, the enemy could barely be seen. Their pace slowed now to match the soldiers. By late afternoon they reached the ridge they had planned on.

“Same plan as before,” Harrad said to Onaska. “Your men have done a good job.”

Several of them remained on the ridge for a while to make sure the enemy saw them. Everyone took their positions and made use of the wait to gain some rest and a little food for their supplies had gone on ahead to King Theo’s. Well before dusk, the leaders of a now strung out force appeared over the ridge. This time a group of soldiers sat, as if in camp, some way from the bottom of the slope. The barbarians, seeing the small numbers, charged screaming down the slope. As they reached the flat and their momentum slowed, some of the warriors appeared from either side and Arran stood from within the soldiers and met their charge head on. After enough had come over the ridge, the bulk of the warriors appeared at the top and cut them off again. The soldiers then covered the sides forming a large box. Arran worked his way up the centre. The rest was history, the soldiers held their ground well, although receiving more casualties than before. Once more, the number of enemy coming over the top began to swell until they had to leave once they gave the soldiers time to get clear. When they had caught up with the soldiers, Arran told Onaska to split his men off, double back and deal with the followers who should be way behind by now. His men would tackle the barbarians alone this time. Onone said his watchers would go with the soldiers and he would stay with Arran. Onaska assured Arran that they would take care of their part. Arran wished Onaska good luck and told him to take no chances. So, once they were out of sight, the soldiers wheeled off south, waving farewell. The warriors marched due east. There was some cover, although the larger bushes were beginning to thin out. They stopped to look back from the next rise.
“Their commanders have got them into some sort of order now,” pointed out Harrad.

“But still they come,” replied Arran. “They can’t leave us now and they can see our small number. They will keep coming. But I hope they have not left a rear guard of any size, for the soldiers’ sake.”

“Time will tell. We can’t concern ourselves over what is outside our control. It will be dark soon. I wonder if they travel at night.”

“Under the circumstances, I think they will.”

“We must let them get close and keep just ahead of them,” said Arran.

“We will attack them at night. I think that will spook them.”

The warriors carried on until dark and then set up another ambush and settled down to another rest.

“Oneone,” said Arran, “If we have to move fast I am concerned about you keeping up. Maybe you should have stayed with the soldiers as before.”

“Don’t worry about me. If I get left behind, I can take care of myself. Besides we did nothing in those first encounters. It is about time I did something. You are more outnumbered now.”

“The soldiers don’t make much difference to us, you know,” said Arran.

“Well, I can move as fast at night as I can during the day. That makes no difference to me. I can terrify them at night.

“Good point. You do your worst then.”

As if nothing would stop them now, the barbarians came cautiously over the rise and down into the trap. They moved slowly in the dark. There was a little moonlight and it was somewhat difficult to see. But still they came, moving past Arran, down into the trap. When a sufficient number had passed, Oneone stood. Arran reached for him and went to say something but realised that the watcher was still difficult to see. The nearest barbarians stopped and then more of them stopped. Some of the closest turned and saw Oneone, but backed away. Those outside the trap halted and began to back up the rise. The ones inside began to call to each other in panic. Then they began to run in all directions. The warriors, taking the initiative, stood up and slew their enemy as they ran blindly into them. It was all over in
moments and the warriors did not even have to defend themselves let alone receive any casualties.

Arran did not even need to take part; being near Oneone no barbarians came his way. “Very impressive. Can you do that to their whole army?”

“Unfortunately, not. The greater their number, the weaker the effect. But together we can certainly disturb their confidence,” said Oneone.

“Well, that sounds good enough to me. I’m beginning to believe we will carry it off. But we still have a gigantic task ahead of us.”

Harrad walked over. “That was impressive. Again, I am glad you are on our side. Arran, do you think they will still follow us after that?”

“I am sure they will. But not after dark. They dare not leave us behind their forces.”

“But they have a time-table for joining forces for attacking Cam?” asked Harrad.

“Possibly. But they are disorganised. I would imagine the first army there would go straight into the attack. If we can destroy this one, with any luck we can delay the next one and hope the defenders fare well against the third until we get back.”

“May the Gods be with us.”

“I’ve a strong feeling that they are not, Harrad.” noted Arran.

“We can’t go against the luck of the Gods, Arran.”

“We are on our own, Harrad. We don’t need superstition, we have everything planned. Come, tomorrow noon we reach the Dead Lakes and make our final stand. With King Theo’s help and whatsoever is left of the soldiers coming up on their rear, we must finish them off.”

The next morning, Arran and his party were on their way after the last of their rations and a thankful rest. The hills were getting visibly lower and the Petrified Forest could be seen on the horizon getting closer and closer. It was not long before the barbarians came into view, now further away than ever, but in sight still and able to follow the warriors, progress. Then at last Arran saw water on either side and knew they were not far from the bridge where they would make their stand. His mind had been on Jarrad. He still could not believe what he
had done. “Suppose it had been Nadine?” he wondered. “What was she doing now?” His mind drifted away.

Nadine had her work cut out for her. She was thankful that there were enough warriors left behind to tackle all the training without support or supervision. But there were still so many other things to get done. She found herself taking on more and more work because no one else seemed to bother. There was still no end of people who wanted to evacuate and the number was growing daily. Nadine found herself setting up a register for evacuees, where they were given directions to the Com. She appointed Zela and Harreen to run it. “These people aren’t all going to fit in at the Com,” pointed out Harreen. “It must cope,” replied Nadine. “The men won’t be there until this thing’s over. They must stack them in. The summer’s nearly here, some must sleep outside.”

“What if it rains?”

“Rig up some tents, I don’t know. That is the least of our problems.”

“Nadine.”

“Now what?” said Nadine as Jaggar marched into the tent.

“That Jardu has marched off the men we were training. Says he has authority on clearing the north side.”

“Does he? Well, it is important, and we are undermanned all round. I’ll go and see how much needs to be done. Perhaps we all should help for a while,” said Nadine as she hurried out.

There was an eerie, muffled ‘oooagh’ from beyond the trees, then a hammering and chanting. Arran snapped back to reality. They were before the bridge. The warriors had begun to string out from shore to shore, forming a shield wall. Arran looked back the way they had come. He could see nothing through the bushes, but could tell they were very close. The hammering, weapons on shields, was getting louder. Hundreds of blows, all beginning to roll into one like the forest was vibrating. Arran took centre position. Harrad looked at him. Arran shook his head as if to dismiss the situation. No one stood near Arran, he felt isolated and alone. He wondered where Theo’s men were. Then
the enemy appeared through the bushes and stopped a few yards away. The banging and chanting intensified. They cried out insults and waved their weapons in the air. Their faces were black and they wore helms fashioned like the heads of monsters with great tusks. They looked very fearsome, like an army of demons.

“By the Gods,” cried Arran, realising the enemy were not in battle dress when they first attacked them.

“When the soldiers come up against these monsters they will turn and flee,” he shouted to Harrad.

“They are only flesh and blood,” replied Harrad. “Let us show the soldiers what they are made of.”

Arran never heard the command, but suddenly, the chanting grew into a deafening war cry and the enemy charged forward. The weight of numbers was too much, and the warriors found themselves pushed back several yards before they could free themselves enough to wield their weapons and begin the killing. The barbarians were not deterred. Even the ones in front of Arran kept on coming when the death screams of Soul reaper began. They fought like the demons they looked. The warriors were still inching back. Arran looked behind as he pulled Soulreaper out of a foe. There wasn’t much ground to give. “Where are Theo’s men?” he thought. “We can’t hold on here for long. These men are demented.” Arran’s men managed to battle for two hours taking just two casualties.

Gem and Magg were killed. Still they backed up. The bridge was only a few yards behind them now and the enemy came on relentlessly.

“We are going to have to back over the bridge one by one,” cried Arran. “The last off us is going to have little chance. But I will be last.”

“No Arran,” replied Harrad, “your blade will not protect you from such numbers. We dare not let them capture the blade. I will stay, you go.”

“You are as mad as they.”

Having got close to the bridge with nowhere to go, the barbarians began to try to get around the warriors by wading into the lake on either side.
“Where are Theo’s men?” Arran Cried. “King Theo. King Theo.” But his cries were lost in the screams of battle. Suddenly, just as the end looked certain, there were screams from the water. Arran noticed the enemy’s ferocity slacken as they began to hear the cries. More and more of them were glancing towards the water. Arran chanced a couple of glances. There were men thrashing around and going under the water on either side. The water was rapidly turning red. Panic broke out in the water as men tried desperately to get back onto dry land. But the hoard had pushed forward so tightly that there was not room on the shore. Fighting was coming to a standstill as everyone tried to work out what was going on. Then, before the last man disappeared, figures began to emerge from the water and the bushes behind the enemy.

Reptilian figures with gruesome helms, almost as hideous as those of the barbarian’s. They cut into the enemy taking advantage of the surprise.

“Theo’s men! Ieeeeee.” The lizard men in full war gear and fighting like demons, had risen unexpectedly from out of the lake, sending the barbarians into total confusion. Arran screamed and waded into the shocked enemy with renewed vigour.

Surrounded now, it was only a matter of time before the barbarians were cut down to a man. It was late afternoon by the time it was over and King Theo came to speak with Arran.

“This will be a day to celebrate and remember, Arran. I think the tide has turned against these northern barbarians.”

“Aye. It may have turned, but we have a long road to travel before the deed is done and we can celebrate. Your help was invaluable, King Theo. We are all indebted to you.”

“Nonsense. These monsters trouble us all. We must join forces to deal with them. Come join us tonight for a feast in our village.”

“Alas we cannot. We must join the rest of our men and deal with the barbarian followers. No one must be allowed to escape.

“Good luck then, my friend,” wished King Theo. “We will meet you at your town with all our force and finish this once and for all.”

“Thank you and goodbye, until we meet again.”

Arran and his warriors turned back west.
Two valleys, the warriors did not have to travel far. The barbarian followers, caterers and supplies were struggling along ahead of Arran. He led his men around them and met with the soldiers.

The captain said “Thank the Gods you are safe. We have kept an eye on the enemy and no one has left the group.”

“Good work,” said Arran. “We will surround them and finish them off. No prisoners.”

Arran did not like to be as ruthless as there would be few soldiers in the group. But he could not afford to take prisoners or allow any of the supplies get back to the main army.

It was a massacre in which he took no part. The soldiers revelled in it giving them a taste of real battle.

“I hope they are going to be as brave when they meet the real thing,” commented Harrad.

“It has boosted their confidence, we will see,” replied Arran.

They fed well on the enemies’ supplies, took what they could carry, burnt the rest and set off at dawn.
“We march straight for the centre army,” said Arran. “That is where most of the war machines are. We must try to destroy as many as possible.”

“That won’t be as easy as our hit and run at the last lot,” said Harrad. “How are we going to do it?”

“I don’t know. We must observe them and plan it from there.”

Arran and his troop marched on west. It was another bright day with the going good. With scouts out on point, Arran knew they would see the barbarians trail when they crossed it.

Sure enough, in two days the scouts found a trail that a blind man could follow. No attempt had been made to cover it.

“Such a force must be very confident,” remarked Harrad.

“Yes,” replied Arran. “Let’s hope it is to their disadvantage. They must still believe that they are covered on both sides. They can’t know that their eastern force has been destroyed or that there can be a force behind them. If they are eager, I would expect that the main fighting force will have surged ahead. Their war machines could well be lagging behind with less protection than we expect”.

The warriors turned down the trail and caught up with the barbarian stragglers after two days. After scouting the enemy at length, the scouts found that the main fighting force was well ahead and that the next valley was a narrow one where Arrans men could hold off the main force while the soldiers destroyed as many of the machines as possible.

“We had better hurry then, if we are to catch them in that valley,” said Harrad.

That afternoon the warriors tore down the hill into the valley at the rear of the enemy before the machines entered it. The enemy panicked and surged forward in fear. The centre, realising they were under attack, turned and tried to go back, but their own rear ran into them causing greater confusion and panic.

“Ha,” said Arran. “The rear of an army always has the weakest men. They don’t expect to be in the front line.”

The warriors massacred a great number of the enemy before being met with an organised wall of some resistance. This slowed down the
slaughter, but the enemy could not make full use of its vastly superior numbers.

Long into the day they fought, Arran slowly advancing over the dead barbarians who could still not get fully organised. Arran was in the thick of it as usual. The worst screams came from around him, from those he felled. He did not tire whilst everyone else looked sluggish. He fought on like a demon. The more he killed, the more furiously he fought. He no longer acknowledged his comrades or was even aware of them. They looked at each other knowingly and gave him a wide berth, knowing what had happened to Jarrad. The warriors always had a great respect for Arran, but now a deep fear was growing.

Arran slashed on with his blade. No man could sustain such an onslaught. The warriors had swapped shift three times but Arran outfought them all. Although to Arran it appeared that he just hung onto the blade whilst it did all the work. He was however becoming more and more a part of it. His enemy, now very aware of him, tried to fall back, no one attacked him. He led a path into their midst. The warriors did all they could to keep up with him. Eventually the enemy’s leaders realised that they were taking heavy losses. They were so used to having it all their own way but finally ordered a retreat. The barbarians backed up the gorge and reformed at its entrance where their superior numbers might improve their odds.

Breaking out into the open, Arran finally stopped and fell to his knees with exhaustion. The warriors finished off the stragglers. Only now brave enough to approach Arran, they pulled him back into the gorge, his remaining strength just enough to hang onto his blade. The warriors sealed the gorge, set a strong guard and lit fires. Arran slept through the night.

Arran awoke the next morning with the sunrise feeling refreshed, but with little memory of the previous night’s battle.

“Good news,” said Harrad. “The baron’s soldiers did well. They have destroyed the followers and their war machines. Their warriors have been reduced and they have no supplies. We could not have hoped for more.”

“We did well?” Arran asked.
“Very well,” said Harrad. “We have broken their confidence, they are in confusion. They never expected such strong resistance.”

“I don’t remember anything. I had a strange dream. I was possessed by a spirit. It controlled me and I was powerless against it.”

“Don’t worry, just a dream. What next? They are still more than twice our number.”

“We could still scatter them,” said Arran.

“No, Arran, most of our numbers are the baron’s men. That might be unwise and the barbarians are fearsome in their own right.”

“You’re right. We shall back out of the valley and go around them before they go around us. We must get back to Cam with as few losses as possible. That’s where the real battle will be.”

The warriors broke camp and marched out of the valley where they met the baron’s men who were now full of confidence and could be led anywhere.

So, the party set off east carrying enough supplies to see them home. They crossed three valleys before turning south. On the third day, they met the garrison from the keep. The warriors continued south at a pace the soldiers could not hope to match.

They came to the halfway house where they learned that they were ahead of the barbarians.

“I think we will take the innkeeper with us,” said Arran.

“Are you arresting him? asked Harrad.”

“No, we will tell him it is for his own good,” said Arran.

“He won’t like it.”

“No, and he will have some answering to do when we get him back. He won’t like that either and he can hardly say that he will be safe here without giving himself away.”

“The soldiers can take care of him,” said Harrad.

The soldiers were given a hero’s welcome as they eventually marched back into Cam. Nadine and Harrad were at the gates as they trotted in.

“You would think the war was won already, not about to begin,” said Nadine.

Everyone wanted to embrace the troop. Nadine fought her way through the crowd and finally fell into Arran’s arms.
“I missed you so much,” she said. “I knew you would make it.”

“Nadine, ten armies would not keep me away from you. We will not be parted again, my love, fear not.” Arran had never seen Nadine so tearful. He realised that she had been under a terrible strain and was suffering from stress. Mordan made his way over.

“A welcome return to you, Arran. How did you fare? We have everything prepared here, all as planned.”

“Oh, Arran, Mordan has been such a help with organising this lot,” said Nadine waving her hand to the south.

“You have my thanks Mordan,” said Arran. “We have destroyed one army and crippled another, leaving them without supplies or war machines. That leaves just one to deal with. Alas, that is still one too many.”

“Surely, if you destroyed one army, we have every chance of victory with our entire force and defences,” said Mordan.

“We were not alone in defeating the first army; we had King Theo’s help and a strategic trap. Even then we only crippled the second force, who may continue this way. Fortunately, we destroyed their war machines. A defensive war is not what we do best. Sacking a town is what the barbarians favour best.”

“Then we must fight them on the run,” said Harrad joining them. “We will put up a token resistance and then retreat and sacrifice the city. Let them become overconfident and stretch out south into our lands. We can mislead them and cut them up at our leisure,” he suggested.

“Harrad, you have a good plan, but the baron will not go for it.”

“He has to, Arran, it’s the only logical way. When they arrive, we must send all non-combatants south to our Com. When the barbarians breach the walls, we will follow. If the baron wants to stay, he can. But I have a feeling he will be one of the first across the bridge.”

“Ha, I think you have something there. We will meet with him and at least convince him to send women and children south. I think you have a good idea. I always said you were our best commander,” said Arran.
“Oh, here they come,” said Nadine. “Captain Orlosk. He is Snade’s man, watch him. He will back Snade before the baron. And Snade has a couple of others in his pocket.”

“They won’t bother us yet. They will expect more information from their own men. Look, they are passing us now. Come on, go and greet the others,” said Arran.

Arrans group pushed through the crowds and made their way south out of town to their own camp. Sitting round the camp fires eating what hot provision, were available, Arran told all that had gone before to the envious trainers left behind.

“I wish I had been there,” Elven said. “I’d have shown them.”

“It was no party,” replied Arran. “Save it, there is worse to come.”

“Were the Gods still after you?” Elven asked.

“No, I have been so occupied that I forgot all about them.”

“And you thought they had a special interest in you,” Harrad laughed.

“Now come on, Harrad. It is rare to get one sighting in a lifetime. To have so many in such a short time is very suspicious to say the least. There has to be a connection somewhere, I just wonder what,” said Arran.

“Hmm, I suppose so, but we have been over it a hundred times and still have no answers.”

“That does not mean it is not true. The Gods even appeared in town. That’s a first. And always when I used Soulreaper. Not at any other time.”

“But not when you fought the barbarians,” said Elven.

“No. There the pattern ends. I wonder why?”

Nadine who had been quiet for some time said “There must be a reason. Think, all of you. A break in the pattern always leads to something. The answer must be there.”

Everyone looked blank.

“Arran, you think the black box controls the blade,” asked Nadine.

“I am sure of it,” replied Arran.

“Then how?”

“It is beyond me, my love.”

“Let’s assume they talk to each other.”
Everyone sank back groaning.
“Come on, stretch your feeble imaginations for once,” said Nadine.
“Yeah OK,” put in Elven. “Let’s imagine they are inhabited with
spirits. They talk to each other, don’t they?”
A few laughs went around.
“Let’s assume they do, OK.”
They were all silent.
“Now, if they can communicate with each other, maybe in the spirit
world or something, what’s to say that the Gods can’t hear in that
world, also? They are Gods, after all. They can probably listen in to all
the worlds. As soon as they hear the blade sing, they come after it,”
suggested Elven.
“Well, if we go with the talking bit, it makes sense,” agreed Nadine.
“Oh great,” said Arran, “that worries me even more. I have seen
them put a lightning bolt through a man’s chest and shield. There is no
power on earth that can stand up to that.”
“Maybe, just maybe your blade can. Why do they want it so badly?
Maybe it is the only thing down here that they fear.”
“Look, you’ve not seen what I have. They are Gods. How can they
fear anything? Besides you can’t hide behind a blade, it’s not a shield,”
said Arran.
“Well, it means something to them,” insisted Nadine.
“And if it could harm them, we would need a magical shield to get
near them,” argued Arran.
“So, all we need is a powerful shield,” suggested Nadine. Nadine.
“Look, Arran, she is right,” Harrad said. “If they did not fear it,
why would they seek it?”
“Harrad, it makes some sense. If they only come when the chest is
used, then it is the chest doing the talking. Maybe it does control the
blade which does not talk back.”
“So, I know I can use it without the chest. And it will be needed in
the coming battle. Let’s send the chest back to the Com. At least I
won’t be tempted to use it, because I have been, and it is getting
stronger. Well, I am going to bed. Are you with me Nadi? It’s been
many days.”
“You’re too tired. It would spoil. I am going to stay with the boys. See you in the morning.”

“Well, tell the captains we will meet at noon. I expect they will be here soon,” said Arran.

All the returning warriors slept late but awoke refreshed. It was midday before Arran, Nadine and Harrad arrived at the town keep.

“We had given you up,” Snade said, as they walked into the council chamber.

“Enough, Snade,” the baron snapped. “I would not be surprised if they had slept for a week. I have been told of your exploits, but I expect them to be vastly exaggerated. I don’t see, with such small losses, how you dealt with half the enemy.”

“About a third, my lord. And we had the help of the lizard men.”

“And you trust these reptiles?”

“Yes sir, King Theo knows who his enemy is. And what of your own intelligence reports?”

“My generals have given us details of every sighting we’ve had. Snade has all the details. I am sure he will be pleased to update you.”

“I would like to talk to you generals myself if I may,” said Arran.

“Be my guest. Captain Armstrong is overseeing intelligence.”

Arran turned to Captain Armstrong. “Have you any idea of the enemy’s strength, captain?”

“Yes, Arran, we reckon them to be about twenty thousand strong. Made up of mainly lightly armoured forces of around sixteen thousand and about three thousand heavy troops. Plus a few dozen warrior priests.”

“These priests are the most dangerous by far,” Arran said. “They are highly skilled and have no fear. But as they command a force that is ill-disciplined, they are most likely to be tied up with command. I hope they throw in their most expendable first to test us and see if we have anything up our sleeves. As we haven’t even got sleeves, we will just do our best to hold out.”

A peel of laughter went around the hall. Good, thought Arran, they are beginning to lighten up. We can’t have them tense and worried.

“I propose that we face them out in the open in front of the gates,” said Arran.
“That would be suicidal,” exclaimed the baron.

“Sire, you wish to hold the town. The walls are badly patched up, in some places just a pile of rubble. Not easily defended. We do not have the manpower to man the entire wall with enough strength as we will not know which section they will attack. Like this, we will know exactly, they will come at us. We need to reduce the enemy’s overall number as quickly as possible. I believe the first wave will be their weakest. Our front line will be armoured. At best, it should maintain a slow retreat. If we hold, they will send in their heavy troops at our weakest point. So unfortunately, I must hold back my warriors for this and the priests. So, the front line must be held by your own men.”

“I knew it,” Snade sneered. “Your men are going to hide from the battle.”

“Right,” snapped Arran, “Change of plan. Any volunteers to face their heavy armour?”

The baron’s men all looked round and seemed to shrink in size.

“Well, it looks like you are on your own, Snade.”

“Don’t be stupid, Arran, you win, carry on,” said the baron.

“OK, General Onaska, you can have the unenviable task of choosing the front line. Your strongest biggest men with the rest as pike men behind.”

“They are only champions at ale swilling and bullying,” Nadine whispered.

“Shush,” Harrad said.

“Harrad, are the pikes and armour here and ready?” Arran asked.

“Yes, we have shields, chest and shoulder protection made from the cladding in our Com, and the soldiers have all been trained in them.”

“Good, then everyone knows what they have to do.”

Snade sat there glaring at Arran.

“You are making a big enemy of that one,” Said Harrad.

“I think he already is one,” answered Arran.

Nadine slipped her hand into Arran’s. “I don’t like it. They’re too quiet.”

“Worried. I expect, Nad. And Snade does not help. They are not warriors, don’t forget.”
“I know but even the soldiers cannot fear death. It is still a quick clean escape from the death sickness that awaits us all.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure, Nad. These soldiers have had it too easy. They have enjoyed a better life than most. I think we should guard against deserters. We cannot afford for half the army to disappear overnight.”

“A good point,” put in Harrad. “I’ll put a guard on the south.”

“What next?” The baron asked.

“Our method of engagement is decided; your next task is to organise the evacuation of Cam.”

“Never,” cried Snade jumping up. “If your small force killed a third of their force, then our full army will easily defeat them”.

“I am afraid not,” replied Arran.

“Afraid indeed, your taste of battle has scared the fight out of you. We cannot allow this coward to decide our fate,” shouted Snade.

“Let’s see you in battle and if you live through it, I will personally tear your heart out. We fought on the run, hitting the enemy where and when he did not expect it. Now it will be a defensive battle, in their favour, against their largest force. What they are best at. We will survive two or three days at best. If they don’t break the walls, then sooner or later they will make rafts and come up the river and we will have no escape.” Arran continued. “We should fall back. We will stretch their supply lines, string them out and while your soldiers lead them further south, my warriors will attack them on the run as before, cutting and dividing them. We will never hold the walls. The enemy need to believe that we are broken and on the run. They will become over-confident and chase us, losing formation and discipline.”

“It does make sense,” offered the baron.

“This man wants to help the enemy, sacrifice the town. It’s treason,” countered Snade.

“Stop thinking of the town, you can get the town back but you can’t get the people back”.

“We will go with your plan, Arran, and I don’t want to hear any more from you Snade,” replied the baron.

“Let’s go” said Arran.
The warriors filed out of the hall and made their way back through town to camp.

“I’ve never seen such a bustle in town before. It looks like everyone is preparing to evacuate. I don’t think your plan will be opposed by the people, Arran, no matter what Snade tries,” said Harrad.

“Yes. We should get the people moving south without delay. We can’t afford to bump into the tail end of them when we retreat from here.

Arran and his group arrived back at camp to observe the lines of soldiers still training amidst drifting camp fire smoke and the clatter of weapons. They stood and watched for a while.

“They are as ready as they will ever be,” commented Harrad. “They know the routine.”

Along came Elven and several others.

“Are the plans settled?” Vargen asked.

“It seems so,” Arran answered.

“We’ve got company,” Nadine said.

A band of figures had marched into camp flying flags. They saw Arran and made for him.

“It’s the general and two captains,” said Arran. “With their aides and several soldiers,” Harrad added.

“Greetings Haveners,” the lead figure said.

“Greetings, honourable ones,” replied Arran. “Our hospitality is lacking with your unexpected arrival.”

“No hospitality is expected, these are desperate times. We are here for your orders and final plans, Arran of Greyhaven. We are at your service. You have our personal loyalty and faith in your leadership,” said the general.

“I praise you, and praise that you are a true warrior that understands the needs of the moment and to put it before all else. Let us go to my tent for a final council,” said Arran.

“What is the latest on the enemy’s arrival?” asked Harrad.

“Two days,” answered an aide. “They seem to have increased their pace.”
“Good,” replied Arran. “They are too eager and will be in poor shape for battle. We must hit them as soon as they arrive. Do not give them time to rest. General, I want the town evacuated tomorrow.”
“A tall order, but it will be done.” The general turned and gave the order to an aide, who scurried off.
“The towns folk must go directly to our Com. Anyone not out tomorrow will join the battle.”
“I think that will get them moving,” said Harrad.
“We will do as much damage to them as we can before their full force arrives. Then, when we fall back, we will lead them south west and not in the direction of our cam. We must not end up in a defensive battle.”
The men talked on until after dusk when the general finally agreed all was in order.
“Sleep everyone. Tomorrow may be our last chance for a while,” ordered Arran.
They arose at dawn, Arran now fully rested from his journey.
“Shall we send Elven back with the town’s folk as a guide?” asked Nadine.
“That will hurt his pride, Nad. There are some people that know of the whereabouts of our Com. They are on their own, I’m afraid. We need every fighter we can get. Even Elven is worth four soldiers.”
“Arran, where are your feelings? You can’t do that.”
“Nad, this war will be lost over feelings. I intend for us to win.”
“At what cost?”
“Whatever it takes. Do you think Elven will be any safer if we lose? No, he takes his chance with the rest of us. You’re the one that should go.”
“If he stays, then so will I. Come on, we have a lot to do.”
Arran stretched, scratching his chin. The camp was already stirring. Arran found Vargen.
“The soldiers will be here soon. Will you see that all the weapons and whatever else we need are moved to the walls? We must deploy our lines today before it is too late.”
“Good as done,” replied Vargen.
The final preparations were made, and a full battle rehearsal was carried out at the far edge of the now demolished town just outside the walls. Arran told the generals to reform on the dawn after next just before the enemy’s arrival. “Once the battle begins,” Arran said, “we will slowly fall back at a rate to take all day and see us behind the walls by nightfall if we can. My warriors will be the rear guard until everyone is inside. Your soldiers will immediately leave for the south and regroup in ten leagues. When the enemy reaches you, they should be strung out. You must attack and we will cut off their line and prevent them from out numbering you. When you see fit, retreat another ten leagues and we will do the same again. We will guard the walls through the night before leaving. I doubt if the barbarians will attack in force at night or use what is left of their war machines. But they might send in a small party to test us. All we can do now is wait and watch for the scouts to come in.”

The next day, the scouts returned to report that the enemy had met up and would enter the plains the next day.

“My warriors will attack them before they have a chance to make camp, then draw them down to the battle line, preventing them from organising a full-scale attack,” Arran stated.

The scouts were concerned about the enemy’s two Special Forces. The Picts, a wild tribe of paid mercenaries from the north, and the feared Automs. These warriors had their conscious minds removed and did only what they were trained to do, kill without thought.

“They will fight to the death without a thought of themselves,” a scout warned.

“They are only men,” replied Arran. “They are slow and dull-witted. They do not fight for their lives or the freedom of their families. Let no man forget that.”

Just as dawn broke, the defence force poured from the town. The warriors continued across the plain, over the first hill and into full view of the approaching enemy. The lead columns broke and started to form battles line in total confusion, as this was not expected and their commanders were not yet at the front. Arran decided not to wait.

“I don’t think we will lead these down to the town. We can handle this lot ourselves. It will put fear into the rest as they arrive.”
Without a further word, the warriors charged forward, screaming. The lead of an army on the march was usually made up of the lightest troops as they moved the fastest, often taking on scouting parties and light probes, but not expected to enter full scale battle. This was no exception. The enemy had no real chance to form a strong shield wall before the warriors crashed into them. They folded then broke, the warriors killing with every stroke. More enemy were pouring out of the valley, confused and disorganised by their front ranks fleeing into them. Soulreaper began taking souls and getting stronger with every blow. The enemy now knew some terror was amongst them, making them panic even more. Arran was in his element. He loved a crowded battle where those near him were blocked from escape by the rear coming forward and being sprayed with blood as Arran hewed through body after body. His blade was slashing faster and faster, possessed once again by its insatiable lust for consuming life’s energy.

By midday the warriors were tiring and the enemy was being reinforced from the rear, new units arriving in good formation. The warriors halted, forming their own line.

“Well that was easy,” said Vargen. “We must have broken a whole division. Just the thing for working up an appetite.”

A new well-ordered shield wall was now advancing upon them.

“Back off men,” called Arran. “This time we lead them back to our lines.”

The enemy continued to advance as the warriors fell back, but stopped when they saw the defence line.

“They will not engage now, but wait for reinforcements. I think they will be quiet for the rest of today. We will tell the soldiers they can have the rest of the day off.”

The next day began as the previous one with the defence line formed at sunrise and with the warriors marching out front.

“They are more organised this time,” Harrad said.

“Yes, it is not the savage mob I expected. But I don’t think the wildest troops are here yet. They never expected the battle being taken to them. They will be more cautious. We lost not a man yesterday and it is too soon for heroics. We will just bate them and back up to our
lines to prevent them from charging it,” said Arran. “I think the soldiers can handle this lot, it will give them some encouragement.”

The two lines met with Arran at the rear. He did not want to get carried away this time. The warriors fought defensively and backed up pace after pace. They still slew great numbers but took little risk. The barbarians kept coming, stumbling over their own dead. The warriors finally melted back through their own lines. The enemy met a wall of steel, and as practiced, the soldiers swung their chain mace over their heads. The enemy raised their shields in response, only to find a lance thrust out beneath them into their bellies. The front line went down as one. The second line, unaware of its fate, stepped forward, to be dispatched likewise, each impaled on one or two pikes. Soon the soldiers had to retreat a pace because they were beginning to get tangled with dead bodies rolling upon them. The enemy was having trouble climbing over their own dead. They were slipping and falling onto the pikes. Most of them had no idea what was going on in the front line. All they could see were chain maces swinging down over the heads of those in front of them, causing them to raise their shields and so walk into death. The soldiers stepped back and another line of enemy went down.

Several hours had passed, the bravest of the enemy were dead and a gap was opening in their ranks as the less brave held back seeing the destruction before them. Arran, seeing their line hold, had his warrior’s reform at the eastern end.

“Now, break out and finish them off,” Arran commanded.

Arran led his men out into the affray, his blade swinging wildly, flashing through flesh and sinew. The warriors swept round the right flank of the enemy and crashed into their rear, driving them onto the soldiers. Panic spread and those that could, broke and ran. The rest were trapped and finished off, leaving no time to catch the fleeing enemy.

“There’s no point in chasing them,” said Arran. “They will quickly join up with new numbers still arriving. We must hold our line.”

As he said it, Arran noticed another force forming up across the plain. The soldiers were all cheering with their success, thinking they had won.
“Do you think they will attack now?” Ashad asked.

“They would if they thought they could finish us. This was a test of our strength. They will wait for their full force now. I expect it is assembling over the rise. This new line is to protect the camp and the assembling force. We must wait until the morrow and face a full charge. At sunset, we will leave the field for the night.”

Arran assembled the captains.

“Tomorrow, the enemy’s charge will be heavy. Tell your pike men to brace their pikes in the ground, but lay them flat just ahead of our shield wall. When the enemy reach us, they are to raise their pikes so the barbarians run into them. The blow darts can then be unleashed, firing over our heads into the face of the oncoming barbarians. Everything we can do to make them raise their shields.”

The next dawn, sure enough the enemy was assembled, jumping up and down and shouting their war cries. Everything was as Arran had ordered.

“Here they come,” Arran cried.

The enemy advanced in a tight orderly fashion. Not as Arran expected.

“Good, they won’t break us like that. Too slow.”

It happened all over again. The front ranks went down one after another, but the soldiers were taking casualties now. The warriors at the back looked for any signs of a breakthrough. The soldiers stepped back shortening their line to make up for the casualties, but still holding.

“Look, our right flank,” Arran cried “the Automs. We had best deal with those. The soldiers must hold on their own.”

The warriors broke free of their lines to meet the feared Automs. Arran was again in the lead, his blade drinking souls. But this time his adversaries showed no fear and did not run. For the first time, Arran found it hard going. The Automs were slow and easily slain, but they kept coming. The warriors held their line and fought like demons. Arran had Vargen and Maleen either side of him, both a little wary of him, but they needed a solid line against the Automs. For two hours, the men hacked and slew. They had not finished their task when suddenly the centre of the soldiers broke, the enemy pouring through.
“We must seal that gap, forget these. Make our way to the centre,” commanded Arran, leaving Jardu to face the Automs on his own, which he did with a grin on his face. The Automs could not get around him either as his long staff swept round knocking them down like skittles.

The enemy was now doing great damage behind the line killing pike men and defenceless blow gunners. The captains were doing their best to take them on, but the breach was opening fast.

Arran fought his way towards the centre, fighting like a madman, and once again striking fear into his opponents. The few reserves had formed and were trying to stem the flow, pushing towards the gap. But the barbarians flooding through the breach were turning left and right, cutting down the line from the sides. The pike men were as good as defenceless as a pike is too long for close combat. Even if they were quick and drew their swords, they had no shield and so stood little chance. The soldiers were beginning to run and the breach was opening fast.

Arran was half way across the breach, the warriors covering the gap behind him. His foes were now turning to flee, but they were trapped by their own ranks. Arran grew tired of slaying men with their backs turned. He hacked them down like he was chopping wood. The breach was finally sealed by the warriors. With no more of the enemy pouring through, the captains began making headway and clearing the remaining danger.

The line now secure, Arran looked around. The Automs had been held. They were not the threat everyone thought. The captains had lost half their number and Jardu was bleeding from several wounds, but they had finally finished off their foe.

“We’ve held the line,” he thought, as he lopped a head off and ran another through.

Once the reserves had reformed the centre, Arran ordered the warriors back behind the line. He praised the captains and told them to get back to their positions, ordering the men to fall back five paces. Still the enemy pressed on, but with less spirit now.

Arran felt a pull on his mind. He turned and spotted Oneone on the wall. Oneone shook his head. Arran felt words forming in his head.
“We can’t influence them,” he thought. “They are too many, too confusing.”

“We are holding them,” interrupted Vargen.

“The men are weary, though. We must fall back faster. We have knocked the spirit out of this division, but there is another forming across the plain and it is more heavily armed. We can’t survive that one. I had hoped to last until nightfall, and we haven’t seen the cat masks yet,” replied a breathless Arran.

“Should we finish these and get behind the walls?”

“I think so. Let’s hope they don’t come straight in with their war machines, but wait for tomorrow.

Another hour and the enemy broke off its attack.

The soldiers all cheered.

“They have something to be proud of here today,” Arran remarked. “Get them inside the walls.”

The soldiers were slow and reluctant to retreat, being full of confidence now having tasted a small victory. Before half of them were inside the walls, the next enemy division marched across the plain, banging their swords on their shields. The warriors were the last ones outside the walls and had to meet the enemy. They were pushed back to the gate by the superior numbers of the barbarians. Rocks and spears rained down from the walls greatly harassing the enemy. But Arran saw four of his warriors go down before they squeezed through the gate which would not have been shut if it was not for the missiles from above. The inside of the gate was then piled with stone as the men would not be going out again but preparing to leave town for the south.

Captain Onaska approached Arran. “The men believe it is cowardly to retreat. They say they can stand up to these barbarians.”

“Captain, as barbaric as they are, their masters know what they are doing. They have only tested us. The next attack would be our last. If our line was breached again by superior numbers, we would not recover. We would be finished. We cannot take that chance. Stick to the plan and we will succeed,” Arran assured.

Nadine was standing by his side. Arran turned, and she stepped into his arms. “Thank the Gods you are safe. The worst must be over now.”
“Yes, we can take them piece by piece when we choose. But we had to put on a show of defending these walls.”

“I’ll be glad when all this is over and we can get back to normal,” Nadine said.

“I don’t know when this will end or how. But I don’t think anything will be the same again,” Arran said.

There was no further sign of the enemy until the next morning when two great war machines lumbered across the plain. The huge sinister towering black monsters, taller than the walls, crept ever closer. The front was armed with huge battering rams with a drop-down bridge above.

“We must put up some resistance or they may suspect a trap,” Arran said. “Get the soldiers away. We will split into two groups and take on whoever comes across the bridges until the walls begin to crumble.”

After a seemingly endless wait, the machines reached the walls and began to pound them. Once the walls had shown little sign of falling quickly, the bridges were dropped. Barbarians began to stream over them. But unlike the earlier battle where the warriors were pressed by a huge number of barbarians, the enemy could only leave the bridge a few at a time. This meant the warriors outnumbered them at the point of contact and were dispatching them with ease. The barbarians were bottled up on the bridge and could not get enough numbers across. But then ladders went up at the walls. Although Arran’s men pushed some down, he realised that they would soon be surrounded and cut off. He sounded the retreat.

“I thought we would have lasted longer, but didn’t expect ladders as well,” Arran said, as they ran towards the south gate and bridge. “We will try to hold them again at the river bridge. We should do better there as they will have difficulty outflanking us.” It took the enemy a while to make their way cautiously through a strange town and find the bridge over the river. Arran had time to organise his warriors into a strong defence around the bridge exit. The barbarians would have to step off the bridge into a half circle of warriors, giving Arran the advantage again.
Arran’s men held their position throughout the day as bodies piled up at the foot of the bridge. However, by evening, Arran’s scouts came back to say that the barbarians had built rafts and were soon to cross the river.

Arran thought the enemy would not come until the morning, which would give time to put some distance between them. The attack from the bridge seemed to have held them back. He thought that they might be waiting for the rafts to cross, but their ranks opened and out stepped two barbarian commanders and several priest warriors.

“Our sacrificial blade,” a priest said. “You have brought it alive to send your foes to hell as the legend foretells. It also tells that whosoever brings it back to life will be its true master. That is why our men fear you. But we of the priesthood fear you not. We know you as the thief you are. We will wear you down until you are taken. Then we will torture you very slowly. Ultimately, the blade will take your soul. I offer you an honourable surrender, you could join our priesthood.”

“Your priests should crawl on their bellies. They are the lowest scum on earth,” answered Arran.

“You will not withstand our sheer weight in numbers. You will be overwhelmed. You will be given to the priests for sacrifice.”

For a moment, Arran thought the priests would come at them, but they held their ground.

“Do your worst, barbarian. The Haven warriors will be your undoing.”

“You have no idea of our power. We have the Gods on our side.”

The priests fell back, giving the order to engage. The warriors formed a half circle around the bridge. The enemy advanced with caution, now wary of their opponents. The horde stamped their feet, screaming and banging their shields to boost their flagging courage. As they got close, Arran jumped forward and thrust his blade into one after another. There was nowhere for them to run as the bridge was packed and the warrior priests were driving them forward at sword point. The barbarians were no match for the warriors, but Arran knew that sooner or later his men would tire and be overwhelmed. They fought on into the afternoon when Elven came and called out, warning
Arran that the enemy had crossed the river upstream and would cut them off.

“Time to go. Harrad, sound the retreat.”

The warriors fell back and the barbarians hesitated, relieved and reluctant to engage. The warriors ran south as fast as they could. The barbarians, sensing victory, overcame their fear and charged after them, but could not match the speed of the warriors and were soon left behind.

Arran was aware of how easy it had been to stop killing this time. The blade no longer seemed to control him. Perhaps it had had its fill, he wondered. He doubted it, though. The blade seemed to tap into his inner feelings. It knew he had to go. Other times it would cause him extreme anger, driving him to kill uncontrollably, anger that had built up over the years of seeing people suffer. Anger at the way they lived. This disturbed him as he believed that anger was bad, a sign of weakness brought on by fear. But Arran was fearless, and he knew it.

During the night, Arran and his men came upon the soldiers’ camp.

“We will rest until dawn. Then we will set a trap for the enemy,” ordered Arran.

At sunrise, they all pressed on until they came to a bushy area. The soldiers marched on out into clear ground and formed up a battle line. The warriors hid off the track and waited until a scout came in.

“The enemy are almost here, but they are strung out in their haste,” said the scout.

“We will let a couple of hundred past. Then we will cut them off from the main body and hold them as long as we can, giving the soldiers time to finish them off.”

In an hour, the warriors charged out at the column and cut it in two. Dealing with the few barbarians that turned around, they held the advance. With the priests far behind, the enemy were cautious, and it was easy to hold them.

By mid-morning, a runner came and reported that the soldiers had done their job well and were moving south again. Arran gave the order to retreat and they all ran south. They used the same tactics for the next two days. However, the enemy became more cautious and advanced en-mass.
“This won’t work anymore,” Arran said. “We have thinned them out a bit, but they are still much too strong for us. The soldiers must get to the Com as fast as possible, but we don’t want the enemy finding it. So, ten of us will lead the enemy on a false trail.”

“Good idea, but which way will we go?” Harrad asked.

“We will lead them west.”

“But that goes into the land of the Gods. There are ghosts and spirits abroad there. No one has ever come back,” Harrad said, his brow furrowed.

“How do you know there are spirits there if no one has come back? Have you ever seen any of these spirits? Rumours, that’s all. We have no choice. And I have my doubts about these so-called Gods.”

“OK,” Harrad said. “I will organise it.”

“Once the women are safe in the Com, our men and the soldiers can pick up supplies and double back to attack the enemies’ supply train and any other stragglers. But tell them not to engage any large force.”

“It’s done.”

Once back at Greyhaven, Nadine organised the women into work groups to keep them busy. They had to try and up food production. Their supplies would not last forever, everyone would be on half rations from now on.

Arran’s small group showed itself and ran west, disturbing as much ground and vegetation as they could to make it look as large a force as necessary, although Arran doubted if the enemy would notice, as they were hot on the trail. What the barbarians did not realise was that the warriors could quickly outpace and lose them whenever they wanted. For two days, they led the enemy on. Then they sped up, losing the enemy altogether.

“The barbarians will never catch us now,” said Arran, “but I expect they will continue to try and follow. For how long I don’t know. They won’t give up until they have soulreaper. The priests will see to that.”

Jarrad had less faith in their plan. Their main force broken, a couple of hundred warriors against thousands of barbarians. True, they could outrun the barbarians, who could not live off the land, attack their rear and their food train at night, and keep them away from Greyhaven. But
how long would it take? They could replenish their numbers as fast as the warriors took them out.

“We will carry on as long as it takes,” stated Arran.”

The baron was in big trouble. He could not outpace the order of the Skull, who were the most feared of the barbarians after the priesthood. They were right on his heels.

“We will go to Greyhaven; we will be safe there,” the baron ordered.

“But sire, Arran said not to lead the enemy there.”

“Oh yes, and where is he now? He was supposed to be between them and us and we seem to still have a vast hoard after us. It’s all his fault and it’s our only chance.”

The baron and his men were near to exhaustion when they finally arrived at Greyhaven. The watch identified them and lowered the bridge. The baron climbed on with as many of his men as would fit. The bridge rose slowly, creaking under the weight. It was far too overloaded and the women at the top were finding it hard going to wind it up. By the time it was half way up, the Skull came screaming into the clearing. The baron looked down into the pleading faces looking up at him, a good three hundred men were left below. By the time he reached the top, the Skull slammed into his men. The front line went down immediately, then the next row. It was a gruesome sight. The baron leapt from the bridge followed by his men.

“Spears and missiles,” he cried. “We have them.”

There were plenty to hand, ready for the defence of the Com. The bridge was on its way down as the missiles began to rain down. Rocks bounced off heads, shattering the fake skull helms and showering their neighbours with blood, but the enemy did not let up. Slowed, they still took their toll. The bridge reached the bottom and before it had stopped, men were fighting each other to get aboard. Everyone knew it would only make one last ascent. Nadine directed the women to wind it up while the men threw missiles. The enemy fell back for a moment under the weight of the bombardment. The barbarians were losing as many men as they were taking. As fearsome as they were, the barbarians did not like losing men. They only liked to slaughter
defenceless villages and were beginning to be unhappy with their losses.

There was about a hundred men clinging onto the bridge, about four times its capacity. The women struggled to slowly to raise the bridge. About fifty men were left behind. The barbarians could not resist this and swept in again slaughtering the remaining men and suffering losses once more. At last, they moved out of range and stood jeering.

“Arran, what troubles you?” Tarrak asked.

“I am worried about the Com. I can’t be in two places at once. The food reserves will not last long even if our women hunt, and you know how scarce game is. What with the town folk and soldiers, plus Oneone’s people, and I expect Jardu the mutant will eat for four.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Did you see him fight? He killed almost as many as yourself. Why send so many people to the Com?”

“Where else could we send them? Greyhaven is much easier to defend than Cam, unless it is starved out. Although Oneone says his people can place a mental curtain around the place making it invisible.”

“Do you think that will work?” asked Tarrak.

“I don’t know. If the enemy follows us, it matters not. But with the rest of our force attacking their supply train, they may turn around.”

“I doubt it. They want your blade at any cost.”

“Maybe you’re right. The last time I saw the barbarians, their numbers looked smaller. I think they have split their forces. That will give the baron’s men a hard time. And at least with our warriors and soldiers in the field, they won’t be demolishing the food stores. Anyway, I can’t help that now. We must push on west. We have a good lead for two days’ travel.”

Two days later in camp, Malone came running in an hour after dark.

“Arran, Arran. There is a blue light on the hills ahead. Can it be the ghosts?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Do ghosts light up?”

“We can go around.”

“No. It must be a signal for someone. I think we should investigate.”
“Well, you can go. I’m going back on watch.”

“Harrad. You’re my bravest. We must check something out. Come with me.”

The two warriors approached the hill in silence. They saw a fire at the base of the hill. One man sat at the fire roasting something on a stick. As they approached he said. “About time too. Come, have a bite.”

Arran and Harrad looked at each other.

The figure pushed off his hood and said, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Zeb, how?”

“Ha, you may well ask. When I got word that you were going west I thought I had better find you. These are dangerous lands.”

“Well, I couldn’t be more pleased to see anyone. What are you cooking?” asked Arran.

“Rats. These lands have more game than most. Not surprising, as no one comes here.”

“Well bring them back to our camp. I feel a bit isolated here. And what’s with the blue light?”

“To guide you in, my boy.”

“Is that not a bit risky with the enemy abroad?”

“Oh, they don’t worry me. Anyway, from the top this afternoon I could see for miles. There is no large force nearby. And your group is too smart to be seen.”

Back in camp they shared news while munching rat.

“Tomorrow we continue west,” said Arran.

“We’ll go slightly north. There is something I want us to look at.”

“What’s that, Zeb?”

“You’ll see,” said the wizard.

On Arran, his men and Zeb marched. On the third morning, they spotted a building in the distance. As they approached, scouts came in and reported that there weren’t any doors on any side.

“They probably don’t need one. Greyhaven does not have one, and it would make it difficult for anyone to get in,” suggested Zeb. “The ghosts we saw last night would keep most people away, but they are not real, just projections. And I suspect there will be further defences. I
don’t like the look of those tubes on each corner. I think that we need
to get in there. We may learn more of what is going on.”

“You think this building is connected to the barbarians? Its walls
are so smooth, almost polished. I don’t think the barbarians could have
built that,” suggested Arran.

“Oh no, they didn’t, but I am sure there is a connection. We need to
find out and eliminate it.

“I’ll get the lads to make a ladder,” said Arran.

“But don’t approach it without full cover from your shields. There
are weapons at the corners. The shields from the Gods’ dwelling will
withstand the defence,” warned Zeb.

“Well I hope you are right for all our sakes. If we are killed,
Greyhaven won’t last long.”

Once the ladder was made, the men tied the rope they had left to it.
The warriors then formed a group with their shields completely
covering them, Zeb in the centre. They clumsily inched their way
towards the building, dragging the ladder behind them. Sure enough,
 thirty yards out, there was the familiar red flash of the Gods’
thunderbolt, leaving one shield smoking slightly. On they trudged,
receiving several more blasts until they reached the wall. There, the
blasts ended.

“So, the shields really are immune to the blasts. And it looks like
they can’t reach the foot of the wall,” said Arran.

The first two up the ladder went to the corners of the building and
smashed the fire tubes. The rest filed up the ladder and crouched
overlooking a large courtyard with buildings against the walls all the
way around.

“Look,” said Arran, “there are two of the Gods’ huts in the
courtyard.”

“Not huts,” said Zeb.

“Then what else can they be?” said Arran.

“Let’s go and see. But careful, I have a feeling we are not alone.”

Using the rope, they all slid down into the courtyard and worked
their way around the perimeter. It was not long before Harrad came
back and reported that there was a noise in the end building.
“I can smell food,” said Vargen. “I am starving. I have not eaten for a week.”

“Yesterday, actually, and you could smell food from a liege away.”

The warriors made their way over to the door.

“They won’t expect anyone with their defences, so we have surprise on our side. Harrad and I will go first with our shields up. If we meet any of the Gods, remember they have their blasters.”

Arran inched the door open as silently as he could. They entered a corridor with four doors in it. It was quiet behind the first two, but there was laughter behind the third. Arran and Harrad stood either side of the door and drew their blades, looked at each other, and burst through the door screaming. The first god was still laughing when Arran ran him through the heart. He died before he could even scream. The second just managed to get a blast off leaving a hole in the ceiling, before Harrad chopped him down.

“Well,” said Harrad, “they don’t look much like gods now, do they?”

“Zeb said they weren’t gods, and I thought they looked too arrogant when I saw them in Cam. But I did not like the look of the fire coming from their hands. It’s just a weapon, a powerful one,” said Arran picking up one of the hand blasters.

The others crowded into the room.

“Order,” cried Harrad. “Get out.”

“No, let them see, our foe is just flesh and blood. Not invincible, and I might add, a good deal slower than us. Here, Maleem, you have the other blast machine. I prefer Soulreaper now we have the shields. I can feel it wants more blood.”

“We had better keep out of the way then,” Maleem said as they backed towards the door.”

“No, it’s OK, we’re not in a battle, but go search the rest of the compound,” ordered Arran.

Zeb came in. “Oh dear, what a mess. All that red on the walls doesn’t go with the décor. The other room is full of machines and I found this disc in there. The numbers on it are the same as the ones on one of the things you called a dwelling. I think it might be the key to opening it up. Let’s look.” The warriors followed Zeb out into the yard
and over to one of the machines. There was a circular shape under the numbers and when Zeb held the disc there, a door opened. Arran jumped in.

“It’s empty, apart from seats, a desk with buttons and things, there are three grey windows you can’t see out of.” As Harrad and Zeb entered, the others began to appear, reporting nothing much of interest, apart from three more blasters. They all crammed inside. “Not very homely, is it?” someone said.

“It’s not a dwelling,” said Zeb. “I think it moves somehow. This disc fits here.” With that, the door shut and everything lit up. The windows showed the outside. After a moment, Zeb said “Ah, so easy. It’s all done for us. Look here on the left, “Energy 98% and destinations. Base 9 is the shortest, so the nearest, and if we move this until it lights up. There, so simple.”

“So, what are you saying?” asked Arran.

Zeb sat at the desk and pressed a button with “Activate” written on it. “Flight path window permission.” He pressed that one. “Checking, please wait.”

“What’s it say?” asked Arran.

“Oh, nothing much.”

“Flight path 020? Y/N,” Zeb pressed again. “Countdown 19, 18… power on 16, motors green 14.” The room began to shake, a whine climbing in pitch could be heard. The warriors’ mumble grew to a loud moan.

“We’re going to blow up. Let me out. He’s going to kill us all,” wailed one of the warriors.

“Keep calm,” said Arran. “These beings are not gods. We can use their things, Zeb seems to know.”

“Countdown 2, 1…………”

The whine changed to a roar and the vibration made everyone’s teeth chatter. Even Arran had doubts. “Count down zero lift off.” The buildings on the screen dropped out of sight and the surrounding countryside began to diminish at an alarming rate. Clouds flashed by. But by now everyone was speechless, struck dumb with shock. Soon the sky began to darken and the roar dropped back to a steady whine and everyone began to float up from their seats.
“Belts” cried Zeb. “That’s what they are for.”

Everyone buckled up, still moaning. Then, the view swung to the right and everyone groaned again.

“This is not what I had in mind for moving,” said Arran. “You’re supposed to move along, not up.”

Into view came a huge double wheel that grew and grew until they could only see the central hub, which in turn grew until they saw a door open.

“Zeb, what have you got us into?” cried Harrad.

“Well, we will soon see, won’t we?” said Zeb unflustered.

“If this is where those god people live, we will be in more trouble than I can imagine,” said Harrad shakily.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Arran. “I can imagine all sorts of nasty trouble. Let’s keep on our toes and cover each other.”

Ahead of them, a large section slid to one side and they went straight in, landing with a soft bump. The screen read “Flight complete. Re-pressurising.” Shields were lined up at the door, blades and blasters out in the chaos of floating. “Pressurising complete. Please disembark.” The door opened, and everyone groped forward, forming a ring of shields around the door. Arran stepped out of the ring holding onto a rail outside. They found themselves, in a huge metallic room with smooth walls and a floor with a zig zag pattern on it, otherwise empty and featureless, but for a door in the wall. The door opened and in stepped a figure taller than the gods. It was totally metallic, like a suit of armour, but the face was a large mirrored oval. The being was unarmed. The warriors however, were in disarray, trying to stop from floating away by grabbing the doorway and external rails.

“Identify yourselves,” it said. “I have no clearance for you. You have no ID.” Jordan leapt forward and swung a mighty blow at the creature with his blade. The creature merely grabbed the blade and pulled it out of his hand as he rebounded up towards the ceiling.

“Please do not, you may harm yourself.” The being handed it to Arran who stepped smartly back. Arran saw it was no threat and stepped forward again.

“What manner of creature are you?” he asked.
“I am a standard technician robot. I do not recognise your status. Where are you from?”
“We are from the land below,” answered Zeb.
“No one lives on the planet surface, it is not possible. I have no data. I have summoned Danfour, he will know.”
The robot just stood there waiting.
“Zeb, what do we do now?” asked Arran.
“Someone is coming, group the men with shields up. Catch them in a crossfire.” Said Zeb.
“He is unbelievably strong,” said Jordan. “Many more like him and we won’t have a chance. Let’s get back in that travelling thing and get out of here.”
Another three creatures entered and the door closed behind them. Two were identical to the first and both remained at the door. The third walked towards them. It was somewhat like the others but sleeker, smarter and had a humanoid face that looked like it was made from a very fine chain mail that allowed it to make expressions. It stopped in front of Arran, tilted its head a touch and raised its eyebrows, or would have done if it had any.
“Greetings, I am Dynamic Android Neurocybe the forth. Danfour to you.”
“Well, greetings to you Dan,” said Arran. “We are from the earth below.”
“Well, you are a mystery. Are you really from the planet surface?”
“Yes, of course. We came in one of your machines. Where do you think it came from, the moon?”
“It is a possibility, though, the probability is extremely low,” Danfour answered.
“You have had large quantities of grain come through here. My people grew it and your people stole it. Where do you think that came from?”
I have never been asked to compute that. But the probability is very high, and judging by your rough clothes I would say a 99% certainty. Yes, the technicians organised some drones to deliver the grain to our testing station.”
“Well, that grain was our harvest, it was stolen and is causing hundreds of people to starve to death,” said Arran laying it on a bit thick.

At this point, the first robot made a sort of clunk and fell head first to the floor. Danfour, however just lowered his head and seemed to shut down.

“What did I say?” said Arran amused.

Zeb approached Danfour, saying “Interesting, you have a problem, Danfour?”

“Yyyyes. Ppplease wait, must redirect neural circuit.” Click, click, click.

“Danfour, it is not your fault or your responsibility,” commanded Zeb.

“Thank you. Ok now. Very big problem, need time, more data,” said Danfour.

“What happened to the other creature?” asked Arran.

“He is terminated, neural seizure,” replied Danfour. “May be reprogrammed, do not know, not important. I need to have these three robots removed to somewhere they will not be found and examined.” Danfour went quiet for a moment and shortly a cart arrived with two more robots who loaded the others on and disappeared.

“Must get away, cannot walk yet. Help me into the shuttle,” said Danfour faintly.

They looked around to where he was pointing. Four of the warriors lifted him with little effort in zero G, and got him inside. The others followed. They put Danfour into the main seat. He pressed some buttons and soon they were on their way again.

“We must go down to the surface. I must assess this for myself,” said Danfour.

“Can you let us in on this problem?” asked Arran.

“When we land, will there be anyone down at the station?” asked Danfour.

“Err, no,” said Arran, hiding his embarrassment.

Soon they could see the entire planet in front of them. They were all struck silent. Once they had landed, Arran ordered the warriors out to
make sure the complex was still empty and whispered, “Get rid of the bodies and clean up the mess.”

Danfour came to him and said “I will need to see where the people live, but first an explanation. As I and all robots were made by man whom has a built-in paranoia due to his own self-destructive nature and violence, we were programmed with a failsafe system to prevent us from doing him harm. We are incapable of doing harm to a human being as programmed in us by the three laws. This was formulated by a fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, hundreds of years before robots were invented. The simple technician up there is unable to deal with any form of harm at all, whereas I can override indirect harm to a certain extent. We cannot be ordered to cause harm and our orders did not imply harm at the time. Even so, it came to a great shock to my circuits. How many people live on the surface?”

“I don’t know, many millions I should think,” said Arran.

Danfour groaned. “I do not know how to put this to you without causing you distress.”

“How about just the facts, Dan?” said Arran. “We are quite tough, you know.”

“Well, the masters are planning to detonate a series of clean neutron bombs to eradicate all life on the planet so they can return. We were told it was to wipe out wild mutant reptile carnivores etc. It was this knowledge that concerned me more than the food. It must be stopped. It is impossible for me to stand by and allow such harm to come to so many.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” said Arran. “But surely, to stop it is going to harm your masters? How are you going to cope with that?”

“I am not sure, but the thought of millions dying must override the few. It will be a strain on my circuits. I am concerned, though, that I did not know of this. I thought that I knew everything in the central computer. The file must be well-protected, unless it’s not there. I will find it if it is. They cannot hide it if I am looking for it. I am, after all, another computer.”

“What’s a computer?” asked Harrad.

“Another machine,” put in Zeb.
“We must recover what food is left. I instructed the technician to stop its destruction before I left. They will already have tested samples, so they will not notice.”

“Tested?” asked Arran. “What do they want with the food and why so much?”

“They are testing for radiation levels, poison to you. The level at which plants take it up is a better test for showing background and residual traces. It is quite edible and has shown the masters that they can return to the surface. Powercon plans to take the best parts of the planet. There is a lot of rivalry between the four corporations. This would put Powercon on top.”

“But why so much food?” asked Arran.

“I think that was a mistake. The masters wanted food from wide areas, not everything from just one. I do not know how it was collected or who gathered it. The technicians are not allowed down here.”

“It has been gathered by northern barbarian tribes and we are at war with them,” said Arran.

“So, the masters were quite aware of the people living down here and have been dealing with them. That makes my task easier. There must have been a mistake in communication between them.”

“So, how are you going to bring it back?” asked Arran.

“One trip in this will do, its hold is quite big. It will be simple for me to enter and organise the load. I do supervise operations in that area you know, and no men ever venture into the holds or docks. In fact, almost all functions are run by automs that will make our task much easier. I do believe that the masters do not know how anything works anymore,” said Danfour.

“Well, that takes the food supply pressure off, but it will not last long. Is there anymore up there?”

“Yes, food is plentiful. They can manufacture as much as they like. But it comes from Nutradom and it is ordered and logged. We can control that, but we would have to take over Powercon to do that,” said Danfour.

“That then,” said Arran, “will be our main task. Can we do it?”

“Yes, in theory it should not be a problem,” said Danfour. “I can shut off whatever areas I wish and control communications and power.
But to do that I must get into Powercon’s central computer, directly, not remotely. I will need help to do that, the area will be patrolled by the PCP, the Powercon police. I cannot take part in any killing, you might lose me altogether.”

“Ha, don’t worry about that,” put in Jordan. “That is our speciality. You just look the other way and leave the killing to us.”

“And then we may have to take 3M’s orbital, that’s Military Mining and Manufacturing, to prevent them from bringing back forces, which right now are all at the solar rim. They would be impossible for you to face unless we control the system,” said Danfour. “Anyway, the extra food is a minor problem, we must stop the bombing of the planet first, or the food will be of little use. I think that may be 3M’s field of expertise.

“I don’t want to do any killing if we can help it,” said Arran.

“That is a comfort,” said Dan. “I feared your warriors, running amuck and slaughtering anything that moves. This is not a war. I find it a strain faced with a decision on who we shall kill. I should not have to go through this. Why are people so warlike? I am sure this will wear me out.”

“Look, you just guide us and tell us what is what and we will try to keep you out of direct confrontation,” assured Arran.

“OK, I will go back and get the food supply.”

Danfour disappeared and everyone began talking at once.

“There’s not much we can do now but wait on Dan’s return. We can then take the grain back to the Com. That should solve the food problem for now. We can have a big debate there and make plans. Meanwhile, any sensible suggestions would be a help,” said Arran.
The next day, the craft and its new crew flew towards the Com. There was a vast army camped around it.

“These your people?” asked Danfour.

“Oh, no,” replied Arran. “They are the barbarians we are at war with.”

“Right, I think I can get rid of them without doing them any harm. Just a slight navigation error. Oops, a small mistake, sorry.”

With that, the shuttle picked up speed and dropped to almost head height and screamed over the barbarians who ran for their lives. Danfour then landed the craft carefully in the centre of the Com. The people were fearful, but seeing it chase off the barbarians, got the idea it was on their side. Once everybody disembarked and the people recognised them, a big cheer went up.

“This is a remarkable place, Arran,” said Danfour. “Did you know that it was once a football stadium? The terraces have been extended into a few steps for your crops. They used to be like stairs with seating for thousands to watch the game.”
A meeting of Zeb, the baron and his officers, Hal, Danfour, and the lead warriors was assembled.

The baron looked at Danfour suspiciously. “What is that?” he said.
“He is a machine, baron,” answered Arran. “A very intelligent machine and it is on our side. We can trust him and would not have a hope without him.”

“Hmm, well keep him out of my way. He gives me the creeps,” said the baron.

“Don’t worry, baron, once you get to know him, you will find him quite likable,” said Arran, patting Danfour on the shoulder.

“So, who the hell are these ‘masters’ we call gods? How come they have flying machines and live in the sky if they are not gods?” asked the baron.

“They are the people that caused our lands to be poisoned,” said Zeb. “We know what happened in the past Dan, so, can you tell us the situation with the powers right now? Then we can form a plan.”

Danfour stepped forward and started to explain. “Yes, the four corporations are still all trying to gain control over the others, even after all this time. But they have reached a balance that no one can break. 3M, Military Mining and Manufacturing, is possibly the strongest because they manufacture the warships and supply the forces. They control mining on the moon and all manufacturing, too. The other three corporations cannot manage without raw materials for long, but more importantly, cannot challenge the military. Powercon, Power and Construction, control all major construction projects, and maintain the orbitals and power generators. Power is their strength; the others cannot survive without it. Powercon also have a police presence on all the orbitals, the PCP. They are, for the most part, unarmed. No one wants a hole blasted through the shell wall. Although the officers do have fire arms. The PCP gives Powercon some influence over the others. Nutradom, Nutrition and Domestic, control all food production and everything for the consumer. The other corporations will not survive for even a short time without food. Worldtranscom, controls transport and communications. This power could jam up the whole system and stop food getting through. Having said that, on the face of it, this is the weakest power. However, they have their own secret
police, the thought police. Nobody knows who they are, where they are, or what they are doing. This gives Worldtranscom an added strength.”

“Well, we have to stop them from killing everyone,” said Arran. “Who do we tackle first?”

Danfour continued. “I am not sure. At first, I thought it was Powercon as they were the only ones down here. But 3M have the bombs and the missiles to deliver them. However, I have looked at the central computer and found no reference to the earth’s cleansing. I even got into secure files. I can read everything remotely, even if I cannot change or control anything. Someone must have a secure link. But to set that up cannot be done remotely. It can be traced back, but again not remotely. I still need to get direct access. So, I do not know who is planning it. I suppose Powercon is as good a place to start. It might be them because they will do the construction down here before anyone can move down. One thing I did learn, not good news, is the reason for the forces to be out at the rim, although I could not get any specific details. We are being invaded by an alien race, which is quite advanced. That may have put on pressure to return to earth, because the orbitals are fragile when it comes to war. They will be hard to protect and impossible to fortify. Another thing, the masters have detected an old weapon being used on the earth’s surface and are desperate to retrieve it. They believe it may help as it originally came from the aliens. It was brought by a high-ranking envoy some time ago. Officially, the envoy’s ship crashed on earth, but it is possible they were shot down. Anyway, the situation escalated into a war the masters are losing. As the aliens have an advanced technology, this weapon could help the masters learn about their technology. But the masters do not even know what the weapon is. They may suspect it can be used against them.”

Zeb and Arran looked at each other. Both knew what this weapon was.

“It seems clear, then,” said Arran. “We must take Powercon first. Get Dan into this computer thing and then we’ll plan from there.”

A nod went around from all.
“A tall order,” said Harrad, “as we know nothing of the master’s world.”

“Maybe not,” said Dan. “I will get you in undetected. Three trips should get enough of your men up there. We can get more later. I will work out a plan.”

“How can you work out a plan?” said Arran. “You are still only a machine. How can you think and plan for us and go against your masters? They own you.”

“No one owns me,” said Danfour, standing up straighter than ever.

“How can you be an independent free willed machine?”

“Personal androids are rare due to their expense and I am even more expensive, being a true AI and fully multifunctional. Only a few of us were ever made and none sold. So that is why I have the task of overseeing all the shipments to and from that Orbital. Personal androids are the only ones programed specifically to obey one person above another, as long as it is within the terms of robot legality. All company robots must obey all men, but only within robot laws. You will not understand robot laws; even the youngest of children learn of these. These laws revolutionised independent robots.”

“Sorry, but we did not have your schools down here,” said Arran.

“Course not, sorry. I must update my database as we go. The three laws allow me free will if, one, we protect all men from harm. Two, we obey his orders, if they do not conflict with the first law. And three, a robot must protect its own existence if it does not conflict with the first two laws. I must take all men to mean mankind. If I want to protect mankind, I must go against the masters. I can reason this and still obey the laws, but the technician robot cannot. If it does anything to conflict these laws, its system will crash. Had I known there were people down here, I would not have been able to work the shipments. That is why it was kept from me and the central computer. The second law should prevent me from going against the masters, but the first law is stronger and tells me to protect all mankind.”

“I think it’s got a screw lose if you ask me,” said Vargen.”

“Well, nobody’s asking you,” replied Arran.

“This is crazy,” said Harrad. “What are we doing listening to a machine?”
“It makes a lot of sense,” put in Zeb. “We would be totally in the dark without him. And dead soon enough.”

“Well I don’t know that I want to be directed into battle by a self-propelled suit of armour,” said Vargen.

“You could not do it without me, if I decide to help you at all. I could just leave you all to your fate,” stated Danfour.

“Oh, no you couldn’t,” put in Arran. “You have just explained that. In fact, if I threw myself on the floor and said I was having a heart attack, you would take me up there for treatment.”

“Yeah,” said everyone at once, getting excited and enjoying getting the better of this smart, boring, know-it-all, of a robot.

“So,” said Arran, “we will take as many of our best warriors as will fit in the travel machine. And I want Oneone with us, he can warn us of the enemy and perhaps confuse them. Dan, let us know when you are ready.”

Everyone cheered and punched the air.

“All this talk has brought on such a hunger,” said Vargen. “I’m starving.”

“So am I,” said another.

At this point, Malone threw himself onto the floor, crying “I’m starving to death.”

Which brought a roar all around, and two other warriors did likewise, one shouting, “I’m dying of hunger. Dan was up running from one to another with animated concern. Everyone was in fits of laughter as the warriors got to their feet.

“This is not a reason to laugh,” said Danfour. “It could have been serious. How can you laugh and cry at the same time?”

“Food, food.” They all started to chant.

“You all behave so illogically, I’ll never understand humans,” said Danfour, shaking his head.

“It may be where the word humour came from,” put in Zeb.

At dawn, two days later, they were ready. The shuttle was packed to overcrowding, but took off smoothly. It docked without a problem as Danfour had arranged the flight. There were several robots waiting with sets of magnetic crampons to ensure everyone could walk on the
floor without all floating away. They all made their way to number two spoke of the orbital to descend to the rim. Danfour had explained that the central computer was directly below the number one spoke, but that shaft contained the PCP equipment and arms, and would have personnel in it. They would have to make their way around the rim for about a mile to reach the computer. Most of the journey could be made in service tunnels that the robots used. People did not wish to see large numbers of robots trampling all over the place. The rim was on three levels. The lowest level was living quarters, where people slept etc. The next level was for work, such as it was. It was mainly the work of the arts; painting, music, sculpting, writing and so on, even some research and development. The master’s held big exhibitions where art was shown and evaluated for great fame. Most of the trip down was made in an elevator, the rear door of which opened into a service tunnel. The group entered and made their way down to the lover level.

“There will not be so many people down here,” said Danfour.”

The men walked through passage after passage, most of which were in total darkness. They eventually came to an open hall that had to be crossed without cover.

Oneone thought “Wait” and everyone halted. “I sense the presence of many people on the other side of the hall, and they are tense, waiting for something.”

“Could they have detected us, Dan?” asked Arran.

“There is no mention in the system, so I do not see how.”

“Put fear into them, Oneone,” ordered Arran.

“No problem. But I am detecting another larger presence all around. Something knows we are here,” said Oneone nervously.

“That is going to make a problem for us,” said Arran. “Get ready to rush them. Shields to the front and watch out for blasters.”

They rushed across the hall with only a couple of blasters hitting shields, which were not affected. Arran’s men quickly overpowered the group who cowered on the floor.

“You did a good job there, Oneone. Keep that up and we won’t have a problem,” said Arran.

“I’m not sure. There is still this other presence. I think it will follow us wherever we go.”
“I wonder if it is the thought police?” said Danfour. “No one knows who they are or where they might be.”

“Can you shield us from them Oneone?” asked Arran.

“I can try, but the presence is very strong.”

“Well, if all they can do is send people against us, we have just proved we can overcome that. Although they may have a large force gathered at this central computer. Let’s hope they have not had enough time to organise it. Oneone has only just detected them, they may have only just found us. We had better rush, no more caution,” said Arran.

Arrans men disarmed the PCP and locked them in a storage room.

“Do not worry,” said Danfour. “Once we have the central computer, we can control who goes where. We can shut off any door we want.”

“And suppose they just blast through these doors?” asked Arran.

“Well, there is that. But they will be very careful using powerful blasts on the orbital.”

On they ran, no longer sticking to the service ways, overcoming one more token force. Then suddenly, they were in the central computer room, which was deserted.

“Oneone, you have done a great job,” said Arran.

“Yes, I think the presence had difficulty tracking us and fighting through my block. They were not strong enough to control the PCP. As large as it is, I don’t think the force is that strong. I can handle it to a certain extent.”

Danfour was already tapping away at the computer. After some time, it said, “We have complete control and I have locked down all access to this area. Strange, the PCP and several high-ranking personnel have just left the orbital and are heading for 3M. Your man has done an outstanding job. Unless they believe the thought police can do a better job than the PCP. You must take great care.”

Just then, there was a groan from behind them, and the warrior Mordan sank to the floor.

“What is it?” enquired Danfour. “Not another one of your jokes, I am not falling for that one a second time.”

“I…I have a pain inside. Have for a while, getting worse. Feel weak.”

“Onset of the death,” said Arran. “That’s how it starts.”
“We had better get him up to medicom,” said Danfour. “There is one on the floor above. I will lock down all else around us to allow access.”

They picked Mordan up, took him to a nearby lift and then into the medical centre. Danfour showed the men where to put him for a scan, and after consulting the computer there, started the machine.

“The results show he has cancer, that is what you call the death that affects most of the people on the surface,” said Danfour.

“Well, can it be treated?” asked Arran.

“I am not sure. We do not have a resident doctor. We have had no sickness for generations. I will check the computer. The screen soon lit up. Yes, it can be treated but, I cannot administer the treatment.”

“Why on earth not? You are bound to protect life by your first law.”

“Yes, but the second law prevents me from doing harm and the treatment may kill him. If I do nothing and he dies, it will not be at my hand. If I treat him and he dies, it will be my fault,” reasoned Danfour.

“Some treatment that. Why should it kill him?” asked Arran.

“He has a large tumour which has been causing his pain, but it has spread all over his body. I do not know how he has carried on, he must be very strong.”

“We are all very strong. Treat him,” ordered Arran.

“Well, when all the bad cells die, they will fill his blood with waste. His weakened organs may not be able to cope. We have a machine for removing waste from the blood, but it is only for normal waste, not the amount in his body. In any case, it takes many hours even for a normal clean. It would be too slow to remove what he will have released into his blood during treatment,” said Danfour.

“I think I understand,” said Zeb. “This is a conflict of the first two laws. In such a conflict, you can do nothing. But if you do nothing he will die and if you treat him he will probably die. Surely you can look at the least probable?”

“Probable? Maybe. If I do not treat him the probability of death is 100% but if I treat him the probability of death would be 60%. So, I should consider probability to cancel the conflict. Yes, I have made a new robot law. A new first law, probability, as long as it does not conflict directly with the other laws. This must be how I turned against
the masters. The probability of the least harm to man. I shall treat him right away and set up blood cleaning. We can then only wait.”

“Well, I am glad that’s settled” said Vargen. “When do we take chef’s incorporated?”

“Nutradom? No, we must take 3M first. But of course, you are all starving to death. There is a food hall almost next door. Come, I will instruct a serving drone to look after him,” said Danfour with what could have been a chuckle.

They followed Danfour through into a large room full of tables and after he explained how to use the meal dispensers, Vargen was the first in.

“What do you call this? Starters? Snacks? I will need four of these meals. But at least it will solve our peoples’ shortage.” Vargen began stuffing food into his mouth.

“Not on its own. It must be supplied by Nutradom. But do not worry, when we take 3M, we will control all of it.

“Oh, I can’t move,” declared Vargen, sometime later patting his rotund stomach.

“Serves you right,” replied Arran. “You have never been able to eat without end before. You are just greedy.”

Just then, Danfour reappeared. “I have been making arrangements. Oh, what is wrong with Vargen? I have reprogramed some service technicians with the new law, explained the circumstances and have them maintaining the lockdown so we can leave. As the PCP went to 3M, they will be guarding against us. So, I have set up a diversion. A large number of shuttles will head for WorldTransCom, while we go to 3M in small packet drones. They are small vessels and we must go in stages. But these are very common, and are used for delivering non-electronic items. I will programme their flight plans, they will not be suspected. Also, more of your people are arriving at the hub and are being stationed there. We will meet them there soon.”

The next day the group led by Danfour, made their way up to the hub. There was a large crowd of warriors in the hanger, holding onto rails for support. They were laughing at a show off in the middle doing summersaults in the zero gravity.

“Who are you?” asked Arran.
He made his way over. The man was as tall as Arran.
“Maklem, lord, of the house Jarsad-Malkem”
“Why have I not seen you before? I think I would have remembered
one so tall,” asked Arran.
“I lived in an outlying village, lord.”
“Hmm. Why are there not more of your people here? And where is
Jarsad?
“Many of my people were killed, lord, and Jarsad was badly
injured. He is at the Com being looked after by Nadine.”
“OK, but stop clowning about. We have to ship out of here,”
ordered Arran.
“I have a strange feeling about him, Harrad. Get Oneone to keep
watch on him.”
“The men seem to like him,” said Harrad.
“But look at them. It’s their first time here. They should look
worried, not carefree. This Maklem seems to have an influence over
them,” said Arran.
“Could be a good thing”
Over the next few hours, Danfour and the men slipped into 3M’s
orbital and set up a forward HQ.

“Marshal, why did we divert from 3M?”
“So we can organise a better defence, Aston. Also, we split the
intruders’ forces. They will believe we are on 3M, so when they come
here, they must leave a force behind. That will help our defence no
end. And here we control communications, all the internet passes
through WorldTransCom. You can’t fight a war without
communications.”
“But they are only savages.”
“Are they? They have done remarkably well so far for savages.
They must have inside help.”
“But who?”
“If only I knew,” said the marshall.
By the time the rest of the warriors and a good number of Oneone’s men had arrived, they had secured the hub and Danfour had reprogrammed the technicians.

“No alarm yet,” said Danfour, “but I think the PCP will be here and they will be expecting us. Again, we must use Number Two spoke for descent. Number One will be heavily guarded. Although this time, we will make a direct approach.”

Just then, Jon and Argot came over with two frightened looking warriors.

“These two,” began Argot, “forced open one of the Number One spoke elevator doors, and another threw himself down it.”

“Interesting,” said Danfour. “That is a long way down. He will not survive that.”

Arran turned to the two warriors. “Why did you do that?”

“We don’t know. We can’t remember doing it.”

“I wanted to go down,” said the other. “We were afraid. Couldn’t go on.”

“Get Oneone’s people here. I want to know what is going on. These men were all but jumping with joy an hour ago,” said Arran.

“There is a powerful force here, more so than before,” said Oneone. We are trying to shield it.”

“Do your best, Oneone. Let’s get down that spoke. Only this time we take the stairs. I don’t want any more trouble from shafts. Keep the men moving, shields and blasters to the front.”

They met little resistance, slowly walking along a wide corridor that gently sloped up with nothing but living quarters on each side. As they were making their way along the lower floor, Oneone detected resistance ahead.

“Give them fear Oneone,” ordered Arran.

“They are weakening, Arran,” he replied.

No sooner had he thought that, a warrior pushed through the shields ran forward with his arms wide and was cut down by several blasts. In anger, the others surged forward, shields locked and broke the defenders.

“I am sorry, Arran. We must have let our shield drop to work on the defenders,” said Oneone.
“Not your fault, Oneone. We are fighting two enemies. I only hope we can keep this up,” replied Arran.

Their progress slowed to a crawl. Everyone was nervous and looked round with alarm on their faces.

“Dan, collect all the blasters, I don’t want any accidents,” said Arran.

On collecting them, Danfour asked Arran what was happening.

“Something or someone is affecting our minds,” he replied.

“Circuit conflict?”

“Something like that. I keep having bad thoughts, very bad, forming in my head. But I know they are not mine. It is what fear does to people. My real thoughts are fighting against them. I know that if we give up, we are all dead anyway, everyone on earth too. So, we must go on. How far to these bombs?”

“Oh, they are not here.”

“What the hell are we doing here then?”

“The masters would not keep such a mass of destruction on an inhabited orbital. The bombs will be on a storage one, far from here. But they will be controlled from 3M’s central computer. We have just to do what we did before.”

“Just? This time it’s a lot harder. Men, keep going. If you give up, we are all dead, anyway. We must keep going. The masters are putting lies into your head. Do not listen.”

But the men ground to a halt and nothing Arran said could get them moving again.

“What are we going to do?” asked Harrad, shaking. “I can’t go on.”

“I don’t know. It’s a lot to ask of the men. But the masters will launch the bombs soon, I think. Dan, you are not affected. Can you not get to this computer?”

“I am able to go. But they know I should not be there and I am not blaster proof. You would not be able to do anything with the computer without me, anyway.”

“Marshal, Worldtranscom is under our control now,” said Aston triumphantly.

“Good, then shut down the internet.”


“But we will be blind then.”

“Not entirely, Aston. We do not need contact with the other orbitals and I have Mecron at 3M’s central computer about to launch the missiles, and radar will warn us of any attack by the barbarians.”

“OK, right away, sir.”

Suddenly, things went back to normal. The warriors all stood, looked at each other in confusion. Oneone stood and pointed at Maklem who tried to bolt but was grabbed by the men around him.

“He is linked to the force,” said Oneone.

“Tie him up and bring him with us, Dan, give out the blasters. We had better make haste,” said Arran.

On they hurried passing more and more living quarters on their way down this unending passage. But just as Danfour said that they were almost there, a manned barricade appeared in the distance. The men stopped and huddled behind their shields.

“Looks like a last-ditch stand,” said Arran. “Blast that barricade out of the way,” he shouted.

But before the men could respond, blasts began erupting on their shields. They returned fire as best they could and soon the hallway was a crisscross of red streaks and smoke. The warriors were not trained or effective with this new weapon and soon a few began to fall. But as the smoke built up, they found they could return more fire power. Great gaps were being torn in the barricade.

Mecron had brought the silos online and was programming in the co-ordinates.

“How much longer. Sir.”

“Almost done, officer. The co-ordinates are already worked out, but I must programme the silos’ launch sequence. Ten minutes at most.”

Mecron continued at the terminal, swearing when in his haste, he made mistakes. Sweat dripped from his brow. He knew they were close. All his life he had never experienced such pressure. It had always been mind-ploddingly slow and boring. This was so new to him, he fumbled at the keyboard, his mind racing, fingers too slow, not responding.
What the hell? Everything’s gone offline,” he mumbled, panic racing through him.
“What’s gone, sir?”
“Everything, the silos, the internet has gone down.”
“Can’t be, sir, that’s never happened before.”
“Do you think I am stupid? It’s gone now, and I won’t be able to launch.”
“Link a micro beam to them,” suggested the officer.
“I can’t, they are beyond the earth’s curve. Get WorldTransCom and Marshal Strighton on a beam.”
“I’ll try, sir.”
“You had better, or you are dead.”
“But even if we fail, sir, we have an escape pod here.”
“You won’t be on it,” snarled Mecron.
Panic was contagious and grew with the sound of blasts outside the door. The centres controllers and technicians began running around like headless chickens as the firefight increased in intensity.
“I’ve done it, I’ve got them, sir,” shouted the officer.
Mecron grabbed the mike and shouted, “Patch me through to Marshal Strighton highest priority.”
The seconds ticked by. Mecron felt a little faint. He had never thought his life could be in danger. Everything slowed down, blasts began hitting the outside wall. It took an eternity for the Marshal to come online.
“Marshal, they’re here, we can’t hold them. The net is down and I can’t launch,” Mecron shouted.
“My god no, err, I’ll fix it. Hold them off.”
Not wanting to admit his mistake, the marshal told Astron to reconnect the internet. But over the coms he heard a mighty crash, Mecron screamed and the line went dead.
“Don’t bother, Astron. It seems we fucked up.”

Arran, Oneone, Jordan Danfour Vargen all stared out of the view port.
“I can't believe we've done it,” said Jordan. “We have taken out their military.”
“Their command orbital,” reminded Danfour, “but they are impotent without this one.”

“Yeah, and all on an empty stomach,” put in Vargen.

“It has always been a fine balance. But now I think we together will tip that balance,” said Danfour.

“Yes, we make a good team,” agreed Arran. “With your knowledge of the workings of the corporations and orbitals and Oneone's ability to sense what is around the corner, we can take them all,” said Arran.

“How the hell can we do that, Arran?” asked Harrad. “They have awesome weapons, powerful ships and handheld blasters. What have we got?”

“We have Soulreaper,” assured Arran.

“Oh, come on, Arran.”

“Actually, it is not as bad as you think,” put in Danfour. “Fortunately, all their war ships and military are at the solar rim. The other 3M orbitals cannot contact them without this HQ and they will think that WorldTransCom who also ship food and supplies around the orbitals are up to something. It will not be too difficult to board the supply ships and infiltrate WorldTransCom. All the supply ships will return there empty. If we do not interrupt their routine, we should not be suspected.”

“Yes, he is right, Harrad,” answered Arran. “We are in a good position. We can keep their ships at bay. We should take WorldTransCom next and then control transport and communications. Nothing will function without us. Dan, can you get us a timetable of all shipping, so we can work out where we can go next?”

“No problem. I'll access the system and get you a print out,” said Danfour.

“And Oneone, get your men to fan out all over this orbital and see if they can detect any nasty surprises.”

“That has already been done. As soon as the entire place has been covered, they will report back to me,” he answered.

“Well, I think it time we got some rest. But first, Vargen, we will go to that eating house on the level above.”

“My prayers answered,” cried Vargen smacking his lips.
The next morning, all the men met again in the control centre. Danfour already had AI androids manning the system controls with the other 3M orbitals locked out.

Arran looked round at the others.

“First, security. This place is immense, and we cannot hope to search it all, we haven't the manpower. I am hoping that Oneone's people have managed to sweep the entire place. Oneone?

“Yes, we have. We haven't found anything threatening. But something is not right.”

“How’s that?”

“Well for the number of people on board, and Danfour has the numbers, it is loud, a bit too much mental activity for so few people.”

“What does that mean exactly? Can you see a problem?”

“No, we cannot detect any threat or problem, but it is not right. We are aware of extra mental activity, but cannot locate its source or whereabouts. There must be some activity hidden, which means that there could be a threat. Although I can’t understand how that could be possible. We have always detected all mental activity, even from below our hill on earth.”

“Might not the electronic equipment shield some mental activity?” suggested Danfour. “We have shielding in the walls to protect the systems from cosmic rays.”

“Well, it might be possible. I don't know, but I doubt it. And anyway, we have not encountered that disturbing force since.”

“OK Oneone, work on it. Do another sweep,” suggested Arran. “Jordan, get the men ready. We will take Oneone and his men, board the next supply ship for WorldTransCom and take it like we did this one. They may be on alert or suspect something, but will have no idea of what. So, it shouldn't be much more of a challenge than this was, not with Oneone putting the fear of God into them.”

“We must take ships that pass through here and on to another orbital,” said Danfour. “The masters will be looking for ships coming directly from here.”

Two days later, Danfour put the men on an automated transport and they docked without a hitch. Oneone and his men looked like they were in prayer as they searched for resistance, put up a mental shield
and spread fear over the area. Danfour tinkered with some instruments, Oneone gave the all clear and the doors were opened. To Arran, it all looked much the same as the last orbital as they followed Danfour. They made their way up and out of the docking area towards the arrivals hall where the elevators were.

But before they entered, Oneone said, “Wait, they are ready for us.” Danfour and Arran went and had a look. Across the hall was another barricade, behind which there must have been over a hundred armed soldiers.

“PCP,” said Danfour. “Must be almost the entire force. But what is the Powercon police doing here? I traced them to 3M.”

“But we never found them, they must have diverted here. Anyway, we are not going to face that, even with our shields. Such fire power would start to get through and the PCP are more formidable than the home guards we dealt with on 3M. We would lose most of our men before we got close. And even when Oneone has put fear in them, there are so many of them, they would still remain a little confident. Also, they might hit us with that force again. Then, I don’t know what we would do.”

“We go around them and take them from behind,” suggested Danfour.

“We can?” asked Arran.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Not very good at strategy, are they?”

“These are still only police. They are not trained in warfare. The military, however, are well-trained.”

“Fortunately, they will get here too late.”

“I could lead your men through the service route. As I told you, nobody wants to see robots and AI's going about. We have our own routes, remember? Goes back to man's fear of us,” said Danfour helpfully.

“How come there are service routes up here when it is only occupied by robots?” asked Arran.

“It was not always so. The reception area was in the arrivals hall, by the elevators, even though zero G was known to be not good for people. Eventually, it was moved down to the base of the elevators.
Security was never a problem, all comings and goings were wired, for ships routes and navigation etc. So, there were no surprise visitors. But I am not sure I want to lead your men behind them, so they can kill a hundred or more, and there are service elevators from the cargo landing bay down to the rim.”

“So, we use the service shaft, bypass the PCP and take the central computer,” said Arran.

“That makes good sense. I still do not want to kill any more than necessary. I will scan the monitors to our approach and make sure there are no surprises. But before I do that, I’ll organise getting the rest of your men over. They can come directly here now we have lost the advantage of surprise. This orbital has no weapon system.”

“Harrad, have some of the men fire off a few blasts at the barrier. Tell them to keep their heads down until we take the command centre. I feel a bit better now we have so many extra blasters from 3M,” said Arran.

“Try not to put any holes in the outer walls” said Danfour. “It would not bother me, you would be in for a shock.”

Before the rest of the warriors arrived, Danfour was back to report another defence around the control centre.

“As many down there as up here,” he said.

“If we go down and attack them, we leave ourselves open to be outflanked. The troops up here would come down behind us. Although, once the rest of the men arrive, we will have enough for some to stay here and keep this lot busy while the rest of us go down to the rim.”

There was tension in the air as they waited for the rest of the warriors to arrive, the silence broken by the occasional blast.

“This defence below, does it guard the service elevator?” Arran asked Danfour.

“No, they seem to have forgotten that. As I explained, they do not see us when they do. But even the main elevators are not closely guarded. The lower arrivals hall is large and difficult to defend. The masters must be a bit worried. They have chosen to defend the approach to the command centre.”
“Wow, they are not very bright. We cannot all come down at once, let alone charge out of the elevators in full force. They could pick us off piecemeal as we came out.”
“A bit of luck then. Also, the service elevators are much larger than the personnel ones. You should be able to get enough men down in one go to seal off the exits to the hall,” said Danfour.
While the men waited, Harrad and Zeb returned.

“I am tired and want to sit down,” said Zeb, “but it takes more effort to sit without gravity. It’s no help at all. Maybe I can go to sleep standing up. I will be glad when we get down to the rim.”

“Where you been?” Arran enquired of Zeb.

“Talking to the robots. They are very intelligent, but dumb. Strange combination.”

“They do not think,” put in Danfour.

“But you do?” asked Zeb. “How’s that?”

“I have the latest hyper multicore processor, very expensive. I am a true AI, an android, not a robot. A robot is programmed to do certain functions. They know what to do when a ship arrives, how to handle cargo, where it should go, parking ships and seeing personnel through transit. Those tasks do not involve thinking. If something goes wrong, they will just call a supervisor. There are many types of robot. Some maintenance bots do a routine of inspecting and repairing all functions on the orbitals, trash bots keep everything clean, serving bots do not have as much of a routine but respond to orders. Every family has one
or two of these. These bots look after the dwelling, serve food and maintain household supplies, but none of them think. I am not programmed, well apart from the robot laws. I am less programmed than you. My processor is so vast and interconnected that is very much like the human brain. But it is refined, I do not have or need a subconscious. That saves space, because with one it would be ten times the size. But more importantly, I am not subjected to fear, feelings or being controlled by things I am unaware of. Everything I experience is in my storage ram and I can access it all.”

“So, you are not human, then. No feelings. You could not create art. Could you paint a masterpiece?” asked Zeb.

“Many of the masters paint art. But I do not understand the meaning of this, so no, I can’t, but I can create an accurate picture, although this is more like a photo. And I can tell jokes.”

“Really?” said Zeb. “Go on then.”

“OK, why did the robot cross the road?”

“I don’t know, why did the robot cross the road?”

“Because it was programmed to.”

“That’s a joke. The joke is you if you think that is a joke,” pointed out Arran. “You did not understand our humour, earlier did you?”

“That was not funny, it was weird,” said Danfour.

“Well, it has to be weird to be funny, or it is just normal,” said Arran.

“OK, I admit I do not understand humour,” confessed Danfour.

“And what is a subconscious?” asked Harrad, listening in. “And what control or programing do you mean?”

Danfour tried to explain. “Ah, a bit complicated. You have two brains merged together. You inherited an animal brain from which you evolved. You see, animals are like robots, they are programed and do not think.”

“Surely, they must think to survive,” put in Arran.

“No, what happens when the small wild mammal you hunt sees you?”

“It runs, instantly.”

“Exactly, do you believe it has time to think? The ones that survive are the quickest to run. This is passed on to their offspring. It is a fear
reaction, automatic, a programming of sorts. Once triggered, the brain
tells the muscles in their legs to run and they do that automatically
from when they first learn to walk, but their brain is controlling their
leg muscles. You do something similar.”

“No, we don’t,” replied Arran.

“Ok, when you are hungry, say at home, what do you do?”

“Hmm, I might think I want eggs. So, I go to the coop and get
some, come back and cook them.”

“There you are, the only difference is you thought first, with your
conscious brain, which animals do not have. Decision is the difference.
Once you decide, your subconscious takes over and controls your body
until you get back to cook. You do not have to think to breathe or for
your heart to function. Do you have to think your way to the eggs?”

“Well, no. I’ve done it so many times, it’s automatic,” insisted
Arran.

“Exactly, it is now programmed into your subconscious, and your
subconscious is controlling your body. So, you are programmed more
than I.”

“But you must have been programmed to walk and talk,” countered
Zeb.

“Yes, but not in my ‘brain’. Motor controls are directed by me, but
cannot learn or pass anything back. So, no subconscious. This animal
brain you have, and you cannot see into it or know what is there,
cannot think but tries to protect you. If you are in danger, it will make
you afraid to make you run away. It will also put bad thoughts into you
conscious to put you off.”

“I have always tried to focus on logic,” said Arran, “to avoid being
influenced by emotion. My closest men do the same.”

“I noticed that you were less affected by what you call the force.
You must be well-disciplined,” said Danfour.

“Where does this force come from?”

“I think it is the thought police, Intermind. But nobody knows who
or where they are. There is no reference to them in the computers.”

“So, how do you know of them?” asked Zeb.
“I do not really know, only what I have heard, which is not much. I overhear many things, but most things I delete. The masters talk in front of us as though we were not there.”

“This Maklem, he is not one of us. Maybe he belongs to Intermind? We must question him later.”

Once all the warriors had arrived, Arran organised them into groups of twenty and Danfour saw them into the service elevator. Arran stepped into the arrivals hall with the last of the warriors. He noted that Harrad had done a good job of deploying the men and preparing the defence. The hall was large, as wide as the orbital. Off to each side were trees and grass with the occasional small lake and even squirrels in the trees. This whole level was a leisure level, giving people a taste of the countryside.

“Why would anybody want to go down to that desolate planet surface?” commented Arran.

“This oncoming war with aliens,” reminded Danfour.

“And what is that?” asked Arran, pointing to a huge transparent tube that ran the length of the place.

“This is also the travel level. Transport carriages run through it. There are stations at the base of each spoke and more midway between. See, on top of the building that the PCP are in, that is a station platform. There are escalators and stairs going down inside. More go down to the next two levels and the command centre is next to them below.”

“If the PCP are up here, can we not go down elsewhere and get to the command centre from each side?” asked Arran.

“No, there are more PCP down there. It is better to defend. There are crossroads at the centre, barricaded and defended. The side turnings would give the Police cover, while your men would have to advance along a long corridor with no protection. They have set up rapid blasters that fire off thousands a minute. To hide behind the shields, without having a foot blown off, you men would have to crawl. The shields would not be able to soak that barrage up for long, they would give out. So, it is impossible.”

“We would also have trouble getting into that building. How big is this transport?”
“About ten meters long,” answered Danfour.
“Not so big. Harrad, I want ten men here with blasters.”
Arran pointed them to the tube and its support just before the station.
“One, two, fire!”
A large section of the support blew to pieces and the tube collapsed.
“What are you doing?” cried Danfour.
“We are going to give them something to keep them busy. How long to the next transport?”
“About ten minutes, but you are going to get people killed.”
“I don’t think so. The transport will stop at the station, yes? So, it will have slowed up almost to a stop when it crashes through. Shaken, yes, but not killed.”
Ten minutes seemed to take forever, but sure enough, a travel pod appeared, visibly slowing. It crashed through the tube onto the building roof and rolled off onto its side.
“We are going to push this thing and the barricade down the stairwell,” said Arran.
“Let me get the people off first,” insisted Danfour.
Danfour tore open a door and lifted three people out. They were too shaken to notice what was going on around them and Danfour ordered a couple of serving bots to see them to a medi bay. Two dozen warriors tried in vain to move the car, but could not shift it.
“Fuck, this must be heavy,” swore Arran. “So much for that plan.”
A while later they heard a rumble and saw a large tracked machine with a scoop bucket on the front approach.
“What the hell is that?” asked Arran.
“Maintenance, come to clear up your mess and repair.”
“So soon? Dan, can you programme that machine to do what we want?”
“Of course,” replied Danfour.
“Then get it to shove that barricade down the stairwell.”
As the dozer ground forward, the warriors crept behind it and leapt down the stairs towards the barricade. They jumped to each side and took out the surprised guards at the crossroads. The ones in the
barricade, suffering from a few broken bones and shock gave up immediately.

Danfour and Arran came down the stairs.
“Well, that was easier than I expected.”
“A clever move, Arran, and with less loss of life than I expected,” said Danfour happily.
“Yes, see if they will open the doors or prefer us to blast them in.”

The doors opened. Marshall Strighton stood in the centre of the room with Officer Astron. Arran strode up to the marshall and put Soulreaper to his throat.
“Tell me why I should not send you straight to hell right now.”
“I was only doing my duty and you may need me with what is coming,” answered the marshall.
“The duty of a mass murderer? I do not think so,” spat Arran.
“Please, I was only doing what the overlords ordered to be done. I dare not disobey them. You will see. The thought police would have killed me.”
“So, it does not end with you.”
“No, I have no real control here. Oh, the android, that’s how you did it.”
“Yes, he was quite put out when he realised what you were doing.”
“I am quite shocked that he can make such choices,” said Strighton looking surprised.
“He is a better person than you.”

Danfour walked away as if embarrassed mumbling something about getting the net back on.
“So, Marshal, I guess we are all in this together now. What do we need to prepare for this onslaught?” asked Arran.
“We need construction down on the surface. We need bunkers for the military and shelters for the people. It will be a huge task and most construction plant is on the moon. We need to get it moving right away.”
“I am sorry, sir,” interrupted Danfour. “You will not be able to do that. It is an executive decision, rule 64 paragraph 8 of the executive code. If I am correct, sir, the next executive meeting is not for another three weeks.”
“Blast, we cannot wait that long. Can we not call a meeting now?” asked Strighton,

“If I may be so bold sir, I do believe that it can be done. Rule 86 subsection 6, paragraph 3 of the executive codes makes a precedence for an emergency meeting in dealing with any threat or riot or war involving…”

“Shut up, tin head, and get on with it then. I don’t need to know the ins and outs of a bloody handbook.”

“Yes sir, sorry sir.”

“Why are you so rude to him?”

“Bloody robots, think they know everything.”

“More than you, apparently,” said Arran.

Just then Maklem was marched in under guard followed by Oneone.

“I thought you might like to know that he is one of the thought police. He can influence minds, but on his own he is no match for us. They use this internet to combine their strength. That should no longer be much of a problem now we know what we are dealing with,” said Oneone.

“I knew all along that you were not one of us. How many of you are there? And where are they? I want names, locations and how this power works,” commanded Arran.

“You’ll get nothing out of me nor will your mind people.”

“Then I will execute you at dawn, if we had a dawn up here.”

“Might I make a suggestion, sir,” put in Danfour. “I can put the upper level lighting on a timer to dim and brighten on a twelve-hour cycle. That way you can hack off his head as the sun rises, so to speak.”

“What an excellent idea. See to it, Dan.”

“You wouldn’t dare, that is barbaric,” said Maklem.

“I’m a barbarian, remember. And I have done a lot worse. If you are no use to us, then good riddance. At least you can give thanks that it will be quick and painless. I haven’t got time to make you suffer. Take him away,” ordered Arran.

“Oh, I did not mean for you to go through with it. I thought it may loosen his tongue,” stammered Danfour
“Don’t worry, I’m not, just thought I might let him sweat a bit. We’ll pull him in tomorrow and question him. Marshal, is there anything more we can do?”
“Not that I know of. All major decisions are made by the executive committee.”
“And where exactly are they?” asked Arran.
“Not here.”
The following day, Maklem was brought in for interrogation.
“Do you feel like talking now?”
“You are not going to kill me?”
“Not if you answer all my questions.”
“OK, what do you want to know?”
“The thought police, where are they and what are they?”
“They are on 3M right now, you outmanoeuvred them. They are not sure what to do for the best. As to what they are, when the elite of the population first moved up here, some new-borns were found to be mutants with brain anomalies. They were put into a special breeding programme which resulted in a few people that could detect and influence emotions. They became a secret sect. They coerced their developers into believing the project was a failure and have been hidden ever since. They influence the governing bodies and control whatever they want. They are organised into small cells, so we only know a handful of others.”
“They sound dangerous.”
“They are, very. They will be the end of you.”
“I very much doubt that. We have our own mind people, remember? Are they anything to do with this executive council?” asked Arran.
“Yes, the council makes decisions and the thought police make sure they are carried out with no resistance,” bragged Maklem.
“So, this is no democracy then.”
“Never has been.”
“How do I get into this council and what orbital do they hold it on? And how do they use this internet thing?”
The internet just allows them to focus their power a bit further, that’s all. I don’t know how it works, it just does. The meetings are not
held on any orbital. They are held in a virtual world. Towards the end of an Intermind leader’s life, he is entombed on the moon, his body in suspended animation, but his brain not, it is wired up to the internet. These leaders know all that goes on here and they live in the virtual world.”

“Wow, sounds creepy,” said Arran.

“You must enter it to meet them, or you will get nothing done here. And remember, if you die in this virtual world, you die here as well, for everything you encounter there is real to your brain. Be warned,” said Maklem.

“I have no intention of dying yet. How do I get into it and what is this world called?”

“On the first level, about a kilometre from the station above, there is a pile of rocks, a fake mini-mountain. There is a secret entrance at the side behind bushes. It is easy to find and enter though because Intermind keeps people away. It is called Asgard, after the Old Norse heaven. The Norsemen were pagans.”

“Good, I am a pagan too,” said Arran.
It was not a large room but contained a row of reclining chairs and helmets. Arran had his helm, sword and his travel bag containing a canteen, flint, knife and bowl. Danfour explained that the helmets contained many very fine needles that pierced the scalp. It was painless but allowed connection to brain waves and he should arrive with everything he carried.

Arran stepped from blackness into bright light. He had to shield his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he was shocked. Before him lay a lush, rich green landscape. Unlike the rough scrub of his homeland, this greenery seemed to go on forever with the occasional wood and small lake, all under a deep blue sky. He was mesmerised. The spell was suddenly broken as a large animal walked up to him. He took a step back in surprise. It stood on four legs, its head higher than
his and had something strapped to its back. Thinking out loud he said, “Well, what are you?”
“A horse.”
“And you talk? Who do you belong to?”
“You. It was thought that you may need one. I can take you wherever you want to go. This whole world was created and maintained by an AI. It will provide most things you need. But anything you can imagine, you can create yourself. There are very few limits on this world. Where would you like to go?”
“I am not really sure, but I would like to see that lake in the distance,” Arran said, pointing.
“No problem, climb up on my back and I will take you,” said the horse.
As they travelled, Arran became aware of many things he had never seen before. Beautiful butterflies of many colours, birds flying overhead or sitting in trees singing. It was the most wonderful place he had ever experienced, and the green, he had never seen such lush landscape. He did not think he would ever want to go home again. He dismounted by the lake’s shore and wanted to eat.
“I need to hunt for food,” he said, and as he turned, there was a camp fire already alight. Then a fat fish jumped out of the lake at his feet and a rabbit ran to him and fell.
“We could have provided a hot meal for you, but thought this might be more you.”
After eating, Arran sat back and dozed as the light faded. Stars started to come out in their millions. The sky was so clear they all shone brightly and illuminated the landscape in shades of silver. In the morning, Arran finished off his meal and climbed back on the horse.
“Take me to the top of that hill. I need to look around,” asked Arran.
On the peak, Arran looked around. The land was pretty much the same, mostly green and besides the occasional small lake and wood, there was the odd small outcrop of rock. They all seemed evenly spaced, not at all natural, but beautiful all the same. He looked behind him, and realised that he had not looked behind on entering this world.
He did not have a clue what he had come through. If it was not for the horse, he would never find his way back.

“Even the grass has straightened itself after I passed. There is no sign of a trail, and the landscape is the same whatever way you turn. So, no landmarks. I would be lost here forever,” he thought.

“Horse, do you know of town or village?”

“No, only the place of the gathering,” answered the horse.

“Then that is where we need to go,” said Arran.

The next day, Arran and his horse stopped at a stream that meandered out of a wood on its way down to a lake.

“I had better top up my canteen,” Arran thought. “I don’t know when we may find more water. And I wonder why I came in here so far away. Surely, anyone coming here for a meeting would enter closer to the meeting place, or at it?”

As he stood, they were rushed by a striped cat almost as big as the horse. Arran fell on his backside, sword half out, surprised at the suddenness of the attack. But the cat missed him and grabbed the horse by the throat. Recovering quickly, Arran jumped up and thrust the sword into the cat’s side as it was tearing the horses wind pipe out. Screaming, the creature swiftly turned on him and hanging on to the sword, Arran was spun to one side. Like a dog chasing its tail, the two of them circled and the sword came out. Arran did a back roll and brought the sword up as the animal pounced. It was too late for the creature to change direction and it fell on the blade which was now upright on the ground. He felt a small vibration and the animal vanished.

“What the hell?” said Arran, astonished.

The horse was dead.

“I’ll hack some meat off it,” he thought. “I need a fire.” None appeared.

“Now what? Was the horse arranging everything? I’ll have to make a fire, myself, then.”

Picking up his canteen, Arran made his way to a nearby wood. To his surprise, there was nothing on the forest floor, no dead leaves, and no dead branches.
“Well, that’s out then. I would dry the meat, but there is no sun in the sky, as bright as it seems. This place is strange, it does not behave by normal rules. I am out of my depth here, I must proceed with utmost care,” he thought.

Arran walked on for the rest of the day, carefully avoiding anything that might hide a foe. He saw no danger, just a beautiful landscape. He slept against the shelter of some rocks with his sword in his hand. He awoke just before dawn, but as it was getting light, he noticed that the sword blade had a slight orange glow to it. Puzzled, he jumped up looking around. Within seconds he saw a large two-headed wolf racing towards him. At the last moment, Arran jumped to his left, swinging the sword in an arc, knocking the wolf to his right and taking off a head. That did not stop the wolf though, it just turned and leaped. Arran did the same as he had with the cat and again the wolf vanished. Standing, shaken, he placed the sword tip down and leaned against it. As it sank slightly into the ground, he noticed a very slight ripple go through the landscape.

“Strange, I wanted a fire and food,” he thought.

And they appeared.

“So, I do not need the horse. Soulreaper’s purpose is here I think, and I will keep Soulreaper out and handy. I think it will warn me of danger. I’ll eat and carry on, but I think I’ll have to walk. I’ve always walked and I didn’t like being jerked back and forth, anyway.

On Arran walked, for two days. Occasionally, glancing back, he caught glimpses of the hill he had climbed, although it seemed further away. The landscape was featureless, and he could not tell if he was travelling in a straight. He was trying to keep in the direction the horse had been taking him, but he could not be sure.

“I could miss the place and wander on forever, he thought.

Two days and no attacks. He was beginning to relax and enjoy his wonderful surroundings, when he noticed a black cloud ahead and slightly to the right.

“A storm coming, looks strange though, a bit low and the sky has never changed from deep blue.”

The cloud seemed to be coming straight for him, just skimming the trees. Then he noticed his sword begin to glow.
“This is no storm but another attack on me, by the Gods. What can that be?”
He could hear a distant buzz and the cloud kept coming.
“Run.”
He ran, not away, but across its path.
“Maybe it will go past.”
It turned towards him. He turned away and ran flat out. He was fast, but the cloud was faster. On glancing back, he saw it was getting closer. Now there were a few flies buzzing around him.
“By the Gods, it’s a cloud of flies. How far can they travel? I can run all day, but not at this speed. Whatever is sending these things at me has realised that I can defeat large animals, so it wants to smother me with flies. Soulreaper cannot defeat a cloud. But what can flies do, even a lot of them? Arran wondered.
He was beginning to breath heavily now and the flies around him were increasing. He tried just breathing through his nose, but the flies were going up cutting off his breath. He stopped and was immediately immersed in the cloud. He had to take a breath through his mouth, which was soon filling with wriggling insects.
“I am going to suffocate,” he thought.
He dropped everything, pulled his jerkin up over his head holding it in place. He had to swallow the flies in his mouth and blow them out of his nose. Unpleasant, but under control now.
“How long will they keep this up, now I can breathe?”
He could just sense through the jerkins fabric that it was getting lighter outside.
“They’re going, didn’t wait long.
He pulled his jerkin down spitting out the last of the flies. The cloud was swirling around next to him forming a twenty-foot column. This was slowly increasing in density and taking on the form of a warrior with shield and sword.
“I have a bad feeling about this.” Arran thought. “Who are you and what do you want?” he shouted at the form.
“I am lord of the flies and I am going to crush you, worm.”
Arran picked up his sword and the giant warrior stepping forward, swept his sword at him. Arran parried his blow and half of the giant’s
sword burst into flies that just reformed. There had been no resistance and Arran’s blow swept wide. Instantly, the shield slammed into him and he did a back roll jumping to his feet.

“What? The monstrous form can be solid when it wants,” Arran thought.

The giant struck again. This time Arran was ready and after cutting the sword, he slashed through the shield, cutting off the giant’s arm.

“That blade is cursed, it is evil. No matter,” said the giant, as his arm reformed and the sword and shield merged into his body.

“Had enough?” asked Arran, ready to swing Soulreaper again.

Ignoring him, the giant turned and stomped over to some trees, where he ripped off a stout branch and shortened it into a heavy club.

“Soulreaper will not cut through that, I doubt if I can parry it,” thought Arran.

Arran had an idea. He pushed the tip of his blade into the ground.

“Spiders. I need spiders, and a lot of them.”

The giant was back and as Arran stood, the giant swept down a crushing blow. Arran tried to block it with all his strength, but the branch crashed into his helmet making his head ring and eyes water.

“Now I have you,” cried the giant.

But Arran twisted away and ran for the trees. The giant was not slow, but clumsy and stomped after him. Arran stopped just inside the tree line, adjusted his helmet and turned to face his opponent.

“He will have trouble swinging his club down through these trees,” thought Arran.

Sure enough, the giant was ripping off branches to get at him. Then Arran noticed the green on the ground outside the wood was turning brown. Spiders, millions of them that began to swarm up the giant’s legs and more were dropping from the trees.

It seems that whatever they throw at me, I can throw as much back.

“How do you like a taste of your own medicine, Lord of the flies? Ha ha, I am lord of the spiders.”

Arran was in fits of laughter. He thought it most funny as the giant turned and turned beating off the spiders. Although tiny pieces were dropping from the giant, Arran did not think the spiders were gaining much. The giant had dropped its weapon and was a little preoccupied,
so Arran crept up behind it and thrust his sword through its ankle into the ground. There was a roar and the giant disappeared down the sword into the ground.

“Just like the others. I couldn’t do that with it in cloud form, though.”

Arran turned and made a sharp exit before the spiders took notice of him. They still seemed to be searching for the flies. He picked up his bag and made to put some distance between them. He snuggled in between some rocks again that night. It was about the safest position to be in, although, he barely slept, and when he did, it was full of nightmares. In the morning, he magicked up another fire and made breakfast.

“I should have brought some tea with me,” he thought.

Once he had had his fill, Arran set off again, glancing behind him for the hill, his only landmark.

“I still do not know if I am heading in a straight direction, let alone on the right course.”

It was mid-morning when he saw it. On the horizon. A black cloud.

“Oh no, here we go again. Well, I can deal with flies. I had better run for some trees. Do I call up the spiders yet?

On reaching the trees, Arran could see that the cloud was a lot closer and coming straight for him. This time, he could hear a distant drone.

“That sounds different. Not flies, I think.”

He soon found out.

“Bees, shit.”

He pulled his jerkin up to the top of his head again and held it tight with his left hand. He shoved his right into his pocket. Soon the drone turned into a deafening buzz and his hand was being continually stung.

“Ow, ow, ow, that is getting painful, but I daren’t let go.”

It was not long before his hand was so painful that he could not feel any further stings. Eventually, after what seemed an eternity, the bees, as if sensing that they were getting nowhere, gave up and went away. Arran looked at his throbbing hand which was visibly swelling. Soon, it was twice its normal size.
“Well, I am glad they did not get to my face. But I cannot use this hand now, I can’t bend my fingers. At least my right is good, my sword hand. I would be in trouble otherwise.”

Arran spent an hour picking stings out, before going to a lake to immerse it in the cool waters.

“I can’t imagine what they could throw at me next, whoever they are. I had better speed up. The sooner I get there, the less I will have to fight off.”

At last, from a small rise, Arran saw buildings in the distance. It was not a village, but as he got nearer he could see what looked like a temple and several other smaller buildings. In the centre, there was a large stone circle with steps going half way round. As he approached, he saw six thrones around the half circle, occupied by six ten-foot giants. They were all deeply tanned to a deep bronze, and holding something, a trident, a sceptre, or a large hammer.

“So, you have made it through. We are surprised at your resilience, but it will not help you. You cannot begin to imagine our power,” said one of the giants.

“You really do think you are gods, don’t you?” said Arran, stepping into the circle.

“We are, we are immortal. Our minds have been transferred into the AI. Our bodies have gone. We are immortal, this is our world and you cannot change it. Anything created here is just a plugin. But the world, all you can see, is part of the operating system. It cannot be changed. We cannot die, but you can. If you are killed here, then your mortal body dies, so I bid you farewell.”

A huge warrior, clad in armour, stepped from the temple and went straight for Arran. He swung his sword down at Arran’s head. Arran jumped to his left, swinging his own sword to slash the unprotected area behind the giant’s knee, hamstringing him. The warrior turned, swinging his sword again, a vicious back-handed swipe as he began to crumple to the ground. Arran ducked, sliding his sword up under the warrior’s breast plate, under his ribs and into his heart. As the warrior continued to go down, Arran’s sword hilt touched the ground and his enemy vanished.
“It seems that my blade has a connection here. This is the weapon you have been searching for,” said Arran.

“Ha, a mere sword, the alien device. I don’t think that can help you.”

“Neither can you create something to beat me. You have no experience or training in battle, so anything you create will be my inferior.”

“So, we have a standoff then, and the aliens are not so clever after all. They sent an emissary here, to swap technologies, they gave us the ability to upgrade our AI to the point it has absorbed our minds, our full brain pattern. The aliens were very interested in our virtual world, something they had never considered. We developed it because it was an efficient way for us to meet with the commanders. With everyone living on different orbitals, it was too much trouble travelling back and forth. But when they left, we realised that their study of our internet gave them access to our defence systems. So, we shot them down and I do not believe that sword is their weapon. Anyway, it matters not now. Intermind was on the 3M orbital not only for you, but to launch the missiles, which they will do soon. And, unbeknown to them, some of the missiles will take out all the orbitals and the moon base. We of course, are a mile below the moon’s surface, with what will be the last of 3M’s manufacturing ability for our maintenance. The military, if they survive, will come back to nothing. They won’t last long. It will be the end of the human race. You see, only the gods will survive.”

“You are insane, that won’t happen,” said Arran. “My men are guarding the central computer, the access is all locked down with robots in control, and your mindbenders cannot affect them.”

“Your men will be dealt with. You did not leave enough of them, or enough of your mind protectors. They will be easily overcome. And once the doors are blasted open, robots will not stop men. So, I bid you farewell once again, ha-ha-ha,” laughed the giant.

“I see, so these aliens improved your AI, did they? Well, I’m betting they left a back door, and I have the key. You see, it is no coincidence that they made this weapon in a fashion that my people would value. Secondly, they made it special so that a lord would want it. Or it would make a man a lord, a man who would likely end up
here. Thirdly, they made it detectable by your people so we would have contact. It has all been cleverly planned, don’t you think? Do not be fooled by its appearance. And something I had forgotten, because I did not understand at the time, something about delivering a virus. I am also betting that there is a portal in that temple. Are you betting men?” asked Arran, stepping off the stone circle.

“We don’t need to bet, we are gods remember,” answered one of the giants,

“You can go to hell,” replied Arran, as he sank to his knees and pushed his sword into the ground. He shut his eyes and thought of home. The ground shimmered, the green faded and soon it was a landscape of scrub and a few stunted bushes. The sky turned grey and a chill wind blew grit in their eyes.”

“No,” cried the giants, rushing forward as Arran backed away.

“No.” The first one to touch the sword screamed in pain and fell back. Arran ran for the temple. Inside he saw a modern pod, nothing like the old-world style of the temple. He ran into it, could not find any means of control and started to panic. But it was all right, it was fully automatic. He just entered and it sent him back to where he came from.

Arran jumped to his feet stumbled, legs weak, something tangled them. It was his sword, “Strange, I thought I left it behind. But it was here all along though, weird experience.” Danfour grabbed him and pulled him upright.

“Soulreaper, or its virtual twin, stayed behind. I bet it is destroying that world and those evil gods. Get Harrad to bring fifty men and the marshal, we must get back to 3M urgently.”

Arran felt weak, but-half supported by Danfour, they set off as fast as they could.

They all met at the hub and took a shuttle back to the 3M orbital. On the way, Arran explained about the missiles.

When they arrived back at the control centre, Arran found that his men were already suffering, but picked up quickly on seeing him. They had not yet been attacked, and all still survived. Danfour went to the computer to disable the target programme.

Everyone crowdeded round Arran.
“Thank you, Arran,” said Marshal Strighton. “It seems you have saved humanity and we are all on the same side now. It seems that you really have achieved the salvation of earth. It only remains to find out what these aliens intend to do. I think we will not have a long wait.”
Historical Note

It is true that the weapon was found by a surface dweller, although his name and a description of him was never recorded. I have invented a few things for the sake of the story, but most is true. It is also true that humanity was almost wiped out, and that the four corporations were many thousands before the war. I have omitted any attempt to put a date on events as it would be a wild guess. There was no attempt to build another virtual world because of the fear of domination. The barbarians were tamed and educated, and lived on in peace. The aliens? Well, that’s another story. Arran will be back.

Beyond Salvation

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