

The Dragon Behind the Crown

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THE DRAGON BEHIND THE CROWN



Aftermath

Crows circled in a cloudless blue sky. The summer sun shone bright and clear. A gentle breeze blew. The sounds of battle were over, but the stench remained.

The captain stared over the battlefield with exhausted eyes. He had lost many companions. But they had won.

"A glorious victory, Captain," said a female voice behind him.

He turned in the saddle, sun illuminating his bronze skin. He saw a middle-aged woman in a green hooded cape. She removed her hood to reveal long black hair and olive skin. Her eyes were brown and soft. He stared at her for a moment, softly stroking his short beard. "It doesn't feel glorious."

"Nevertheless," she said, "It was your flank attack that turned the tide when the chariots were bogged down in the mud. You will be rewarded with gold, perhaps even land and title. Men of influence will seek you out. Young women will throw themselves in your path."

He turned to look back at the carnage. "I want no reward."

"They will suspect you if you refuse it. That could be dangerous for you."

He turned to look at her again. "Who are you?"

"My name is Sarah. I live in that forest." She gestured at the dark woods far behind her.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Zebulun Koh," he said, nodding to her. "No one lives in those woods. The locals say they're full of elves, goblins, and spirits. They say those who enter never return."

"Folk superstition," she said, "but they are not entirely wrong."

"You are alone there?" he asked.

"No," she said. "There are others."

He regarded her for a moment. "What do you want of me?"

"I hope you will help us."

"How?"

"I had an arrangement with the dragon Rahabadaz, whose army you just defeated. Once I showed that I could make trouble for him, he agreed to keep his subjects out of our forest. We agreed to stay within."

"But Rahabadaz is lazy and cowardly. He was unwilling to risk himself to come root us out, so he left us alone. Aurelius Antipater is different. I doubt he will make any deals with us. I hope you will use your new influence in the capital to aid us."

"Dragons are the servants of the fair folk, not their rulers," said Zebulun.

"That is what they lead everyone to believe," said Sarah, "but it is false. Dragons rule the kingdoms,

and always have. The legends of the fair folk defeating the dragons and ending their reign of terror were spread by the dragons and the fair themselves. It is all theater and sorcery."

He looked at her for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

"Don't take my word for it," she continued. "Ask the learned men of the capital. Ask the criminals of the underworld."

He regarded her for a moment. "I will."

"Good journey, Captain," she said, as she raised her hood and turned to leave. "Come see us in the forest some time, if you wish. You are welcome."

Zebulun nodded. He watched her walk away and disappear into the trees.

Homecoming

It was as she said it would be. Marshal Benjamin led the parade through the capital. He compelled Zebulun to ride on his right side.

They wove their way through the outer city. Squat stone buildings lined streets of compacted earth. Men cheered them all the way. Some women looked at him with admiration; others, with lust. Some blew kisses. He kept his eyes forward.

They passed through the second wall to the inner city. Taller, more luxurious buildings dominated the scenery. The parade watchers dressed in finer clothes. Their cheers were more subdued.

As the parade approached the palace, the king flew circles and figure-eights overhead on his dragon Aurelius. Fire poured from the winged serpent's mouth to light the evening sky. The crowd cheered.

The victory celebration in the palace was a grand affair. Beer and wine flowed like water. Lords and princes and their ladies danced to harps and lutes as the common folk blew horns in the streets down below. The city was jubilant. The war was over.

Zebulun stood on the edge of the room. He was approached and praised by lords, princes, wealthy merchants, and minor functionaries of the kingdom. Many said to let them know if there was anything they could do for him. He wondered what they wanted him to do for them. Wealthy women introduced him to their stunning daughters of marrying age. He wondered less about that.

Later that evening, he stood alone on a balcony, looking out over the city. "There you are," said the marshal's voice behind him.

Zebulun turned and bowed. "No need for formality," said the marshal. "It's a party, and I'm full of wine."

Zebulun nodded, then turned to look again at the city. The celebrations had waned, but not everywhere.

"It's a lovely view," said Benjamin. "Do you like the city, Zeb? Or do you prefer the country? You grew up in a tiny village, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Zebulun. "The village of Koh. About 200 people, and far from the capital."

"Do you ever long to return there, or do you prefer life in the big city? Or something in between?"

"I don't know," Zebulun replied. "I've been with the army since I was fourteen. Never had much say in where I lived."

"How old are you?" asked the marshal.

"Thirty-seven."

"And you've never married? Sired children?"

"No."

"Any interest?"

"I suppose," said Zebulun, "but there hasn't been much chance. Been moved around a lot. And I have no land or money."

"I think that's all about to change, Captain. You're a celebrity now — the hero of the final battle that ended the war, whose quick thinking and tactical genius turned a defeat into a victory."

"I need no reward," said Zebulun. "I was doing my duty."

"For sure," said the marshal. "And honor is its own reward, but it won't give you the land or money to raise a family in comfort. I suspect the king will. He likes to reward exceptional competence, hoping it will inspire more. That's why I asked about your preferences — so I'll know what to tell him when he asks me."

Benjamin took a sip of his wine. "He'll be suspicious of you if you turn it down," he laughed.

Zebulun said nothing. He stared at the horizon.

Marshal Benjamin furrowed his brow. "What's bothering you, Captain?"

"Hm?"

"You're unusually quiet tonight, even for you. Something on your mind?"

Zebulun thought a moment. "Those woods," he said, "near the last battle."

"What about them?"

"They belong to the Principality of Kanaark. Do you think the kingdom will annex them?"

"Definitely," said Benjamin. "The king wants to build a huge navy. That takes lumber, and the eastern wood is the largest source nearby. I'll be amazed if we don't demand them as part of the peace terms."

"The locals say no one lives there," said Zebulun. "That it's full of elves, goblins, and spirits."

"Rural folk say a lot of things," said the marshal. "Many still pray to their ancestors instead of the gods."

"Do you pray to the gods?" asked Zebulun.

"Sure," said the marshal, "Every time I go to temple. So, not that often."

"I met someone who said otherwise," said Zebulun. "She said people do live there."

"Well," said Benjamin, "I hope they're not too attached to it. Half that forest is about to be cut down to make the largest navy in the known world. Our king has ambitions."

"She also said the local legends have some truth to them," said Zebulun.

"Of course she would say so," said the marshal, "if she wants us to stay out of her territory. Did this mysterious woman say anything else?"

"She said the fair folk serve the dragons, rather than the other way around."

"I've heard that one before."

"Do you believe it?" asked Zebulun.

The marshal grinned and gulped down the last of his wine. "I don't know, Zeb. Does it matter? Whoever or whatever is *really* in charge, we enforce their will upon the world. The things we do are the same regardless."

Zebulun sipped his wine and looked up at the stars, stroking his beard.

The marshal clapped him on the back. "I need more wine, son. Talk to you again soon."

Zebulun nodded respectfully. The marshal went inside. The captain stared up at the stars for some time.

Temple

Zebulun left the celebration. Not early, as that would have reflected badly on the marshal, but as early as possible.

He changed clothes. He traded his formal wear for garb more appropriate for common folk like himself.

He wandered the streets, looking up at the stars. It was near midnight, and he still heard shouts and horns from revelers echoing through the capital. He wondered how many cared about the war, or why they fought, versus how many took any excuse for a party.

He came upon a temple. He looked up at the imposing structure. Houses of gods needed to be impressive in their own right. This one was impressive, but also seemed neglected. He went inside.

Rows of pews led up to the pulpit. Flanking it on the left was a ten-foot statue of Ram, god of light, truth, and the sun. On the right was an equally large statue of Luva, goddess of love, motherhood, and the moon. He sat in front and took turns staring up at each of them.

A door opened on the right side of the room. An old man entered holding a candle. Though old and gray, he seemed hale. He came and sat beside Zebulun.

"It's late for temple, brother," said the old man. "I'm Brother Mark. Something on your mind?"

Zebulun looked at the statue of Ram. "Do you pray to the gods?"

"Of course," said Mark, smiling with his eyes. "It's my job."

"But do you believe?"

Mark smiled gently. "Having a crisis of faith?"

"I'm not sure I ever had any."

"Well," said Mark, "Since you seem lost, I'll tell you true. The old stories are a mix of history, mythology, and philosophy. I can't claim to know which parts happened as written and which parts were made up out of whole cloth. I wasn't there."

Zebulun looked thoughtful. "But that," continued Mark, "isn't what matters, to my mind."

Zebulun turned to look at Mark. "What does?"

"These stories have power," said Mark. "People have been telling one another these stories for at least a thousand years. Some are probably ten thousand years old. They wouldn't have lasted this long, were there no truth in them. Perhaps they tell us little about gods or the world around us, but they have much to tell us about ourselves."

Zebulun looked up at Luva. Her soft, maternal face promised comfort. "Such as?" he asked.

"Well," said Mark, "think of all the heroes and villains in the tales: Elijah, prophet of Ram, who brought fire down from heaven to consume an army; Deborah, servant of Luva, who brought forth

water from a stone in time of drought. These are exciting tales of action that make people want to listen to them — and to tell them to others."

"The moral component is more subtle. Young people tend to imitate what they see and hear growing up. The most effective stories don't preach to the listener, but simply set an example."

"Elijah is portrayed as an honest, honorable, faithful man. Boys want to be like Elijah not because of his honor, but because of his power: because he could bring the flame, and all men feared him. Girls want to emulate Luva not because she is all-compassionate, but because she saved her people from famine and everyone loved her for it."

"Teaching good lessons to the youth might be more important than absolute accuracy."

Zebulun took a deep breath. "Will you pray for my men? Many died in battle."

"Of course," said Mark. "Peace be with them. They no longer need grapple with such questions."

Quinn

Zebulun stood to leave, then turned to ask Mark one last question. "What of the old stories about the fair folk? They say they saved us from enslavement by dragons."

"In those," said Mark, "I've found little ethics or insight. All I can say about them is the old proverb: history is written by the winners."

Zebulun thought a moment, then nodded. "Thank you for taking time for me. I apologize for disturbing you."

"No trouble at all," said Mark, smiling. "I became a brother of the temple because I wanted to help others. You've given me a gift — assuming that I've been helpful at all."

"You have. Thank you."

"Goodbye. Come see me anytime." They bowed and parted.

Zebulun wandered the streets without aim. At length, he found himself in a poor neighborhood in the outer city. This quarter's revelry was louder and more vulgar than that of the fair sections of town. He saw drunks stumbling about. Party-goers lie passed out in alleys. The horns sounded long into the night.

Something caught his attention as he passed an alleyway. Maybe a sound, or maybe a flash of movement. On instinct, he turned and entered.

Halfway between two buildings, a group of five thugs menaced a young man. The kid was short and wiry. He had pale skin and fine silk clothes, like one of the fair, but the clothes looked ragged. He smiled at his captors as if they were old friends.

"Come on, Zeke! You know I'll pay you back! I always do! Just been having some off luck, lately."

"Yeah," said Zeke, "And now it's run out. You been dodging us too long, and we're very offended." The others laughed. "It's like you don't care about us anymore."

"Aw, don't say that!" said the youth. "I love you guys. I still can't believe I failed so badly at dice. That's never happened before! And nobody's tipping my street performances, anymore — it's like everyone is broke. And I was *this close* to persuading some fair maiden to let me have some of her fine jewelry when her father came home. That was awkward, let me tell you."

A couple of the goons chuckled at this, then shut up when Zeke gave them a look.

"I'm sick of your jokes, Quinn," said Zeke. "You're making me look bad. You don't pay me back, why should anyone else?"

Quinn seemed unfazed. "Oh come on, just lie! Tell everyone I paid you back. I totally will! You know, eventually."

"Nuh-uh," said Zeke. "I heard you're real good at getting in and out of trouble, but you ain't getting out of this."

Zeke looked at one of his goons. The goon slipped iron knuckles over his fingers.

Zeke said, "You need an education."

Quinn stuck out his lip and pouted. "I thought we were friends!"

Zeke sputtered. "I just said that!"

"Not that exact phrase," said Quinn.

"Shut up!"

Quinn pouted again.

Zebulun stepped into view. "Leave him," he said.

The five goons reacted like startled cats. They hadn't heard him approach. They paused, sizing him up. Quinn beamed at the newcomer.

"You want trouble?" asked Zeke.

"I have troubles enough," said Zebulun, slowly walking towards them. He seemed to grow ever taller as he got closer. "Leave him."

"My hero!" said Quinn. "Damn, you're huge! How'd you get so big?"

Zeke drew a dagger. The others followed suit.

"Hey, let's not lose our heads," said Quinn. "We're all friends here!" He looked at Zebulun. "You don't have to get stabbed on my account, you incredible, hulking man. I can handle these guys!"

Zebulun looked at Quinn, mild amusement in his dark eyes. "So can I."

Zeke approached Zebulun slowly, his weapon out in front. "You're gonna turn around and walk away, right?"

"I wouldn't turn my back on one such as you," said Zebulun.

"Now that's just impolite," said Zeke. He advanced.

When Zeke reached the perfect distance, Zebulun — quick as a cat — took hold of his knife arm with his left hand and twisted, causing Zeke to yelp, drop the dagger, and fall down to one knee.

Two of the other goons lunged at Zebulun. He caught the first with a right backhand to that place where the jaw meets the skull, knocking him cold and causing his associate to trip over him and sprawl on the ground. Zebulun took the fight out of that one with a quick kick to the guts. The two remaining goons hesitated.

He still held Zeke in the arm twist. Zeke whimpered. Sweat dripped from his brow. "Uncle!" he said.

Zebulun stared deep into Zeke's eyes for a moment, then released him. "Go. Take your friends."

Zeke and the other two helped their friends to their feet and hurried off. "This ain't over, Quinn!"

shouted Zeke as they fled.

Quinn looked at Zebulun, laughed, and threw his arms around him. He dangled from Zebulun's neck like a child, looking up at him with playful eyes. "Thank you!" he said. "Those guys were gonna pound me for sure. I should at least buy you a drink!"

Zebulun stared down at the dangling Quinn in amazement.

"Oh, wait," said Quinn, as he released Zebulun from the embrace. "Those guys wanted to pound me cause I ain't got no money." He thought hard for a minute, his brow furrowed. He stared first this way, then that, and then another. Suddenly, his eyes lit up. He looked up at Zebulun and asked, "Hey! You got any money?"

Jezebel's Dungeon

Quinn led Zebulun down an alleyway in the most crime-ridden part of the city. He opened a nondescript door in the side of one building and waltzed inside. Zebulun followed.

A man almost as large as Zebulun stood guard before a second doorway. He nodded at Quinn. "Who's this?"

"Hi, Radah!" said Quinn. "This is Zebulun. He's my new friend! He saved me from a beating by Ezekiel's dumb, ugly goons."

Radah grinned and snorted. He opened the door and nodded for them to go in.

A narrow stair led down into darkness. A haze filled the room below. Patrons sat in low light, drinking beer and wine, smoking from ornate pipes, and whispering and giggling to one another. Several stared as Quinn and Zebulun descended.

Quinn greeted numerous people on the way through the room. He waved at some, hugged others, and high-fived one. They finally reached a table in the back and sat down. Quinn hugged the waitress and asked for a mug of beer and some bread and cheese. Zebulun ordered a cup of whiskey and a mug of tea.

Zebulun looked around the room. Some patrons wore common clothes, while others wore exotic dress that seemed from a far away land. Many had painted faces. Some had piercings in unusual places. He heard multiple languages spoken. He smelled tobacco, and at least two other plants he didn't recognize.

The waitress brought their food and drink in earthenware vessels. Zebulun gave her a silver coin and told her to keep the change.

"Thanks," she said. She winked at Quinn and nodded her head towards Zebulun. "I like this one!"

Quinn grinned. Then he tore into the food like he hadn't eaten in days.

He looked up at Zebulun. "You hungry?"

Zebulun shook his head and took a sip from his cup. The whiskey tasted strong. Quinn continued devouring the food.

"What is this place?" asked Zebulun.

Quinn chewed forcefully and swallowed hard. "See that hot old lady over there?" he asked. Zebulun saw a middle-aged woman with the rarest of features: pale skin, red hair, and green eyes. She wore leather. "That's Jezebel," said Quinn. "This is her place. She calls it *The Dungeon*."

"Who are all these people?"

"Some are travelers," said Quinn. "Others are performers, or patrons of the arts. Then there's the criminal element."

"Criminals?"

"Oh sure," said Quinn, taking another bite. "This is the bad part of town, right? So why do fair folk and rich merchants and wayfarers find their way in here? Because they want something they can't find in the daytime market. Could be lotus blossoms or simple information."

Zebulun mused. "Information."

"Sure!" said Quinn. "These people are far closer to the street than people who live in the rich houses."

"Ever hear anyone talk about dragons ruling the kingdom?" asked Zebulun.

"On occasion," said Quinn. "There was an old storyteller here, in this very bar, one night who was drunk as a sailor. He went on and on about how the lords and princes and kings were servants of the dragons rather than the other way around. He said, 'they blind the whole world with their sorcery'."

"How did the people here react?" asked Zebulun.

"Most laughed. Some shrugged. Some told him to shut up. A few took his side, and a spirited debate began!" said Quinn with a smile. He cocked his head and looked up at the ceiling. "I think it ended in the fighting pit in the back." He took another bite.

"Anyone say why they thought this?" asked Zebulun.

"Well, one guy — wait, you know what? I bet he's here. Let me go check in the back."

"In the fighting pit?"

"No, the gambling room. Be right back!" Quinn leapt up and turned towards the back, took a couple of steps, then came back to grab more bread and cheese before turning back around and running off.

Zebulun scanned the room again. He felt eyes on him, but the dungeon's denizens seemed to make an effort not to be seen looking at anyone.

Except Jezebel herself. He found her staring right at him as his eyes reached her. She gave him a slight smile and nod, her eyes sparkling with cleverness. Zebulun nodded politely and turned back to his drink.

Quinn returned with a lean, middle-aged man in tow. He had a few tattoos and a few more scars. Zebulun saw something familiar in his eyes. A weariness.

"This is Mak!" said Quinn. "He defended that old drunk when everyone was telling him to can it."

Mak nodded and sat down.

"Why do you believe dragons rule over us?" asked Zebulun.

Mak lit up a pipe and puffed thoughtfully. "I grew up in the slums of Harlan, down by the coast. Kids with no prospects tend to turn to burglary or robbery, in my neighborhood. By the age of 17, I was sneaky as a cat and quick with a knife. I wound up working for the biggest gang in town."

He paused to take a few puffs before continuing.

"One of the boss's favorite sources of income was spying. He had me gather all kinds of information—in all kinds of ways—about rich merchants, the prince's courtiers, his ministers, local priests, other criminal gangs, you name it. Anybody important."

"He also used his network to spread rumors for profit. It was this business, as well as his spies, that attracted the attention of one of the princes of Harlan and 'his' dragon."

"The dragon summoned my boss to meet with him alone in his lair below the palace. He normally relayed orders through his prince, but I guess there were some things he didn't want his favorite pet to know about. He engaged my employer directly, and paid handsomely."

"How do you know the dragon wasn't acting on the prince's orders?" asked Zebulun.

Mak shrugged. "I don't, but I got to meet the snake up close and personal, once. It apparently wanted to meet the one charged with doing a particular job for him. The boss took me there, and the prince was there, and he didn't act like he was the man in charge. The dragon talked down to him."

"It could speak?" asked Zebulun.

"Not exactly," said Mak. "It's like... it looked like the dragon shape-shifted into a man, then spoke to us. The boss told me later that it's a trick. Dragons got some way of messing with our minds."

"Hm." Zebulun finished his whiskey and stared into the empty cup.

"I'll get more!" chirped Quinn. He ran off to find the waitress.

Zebulun looked up at Mak. "Know anyone else with similar experiences?"

"Not sure," he said, taking another puff. "Folks tell all kinds of stories, especially after a few drinks. I've heard rumors, over the years. It seems to be a common belief among those on the left side of the law."

Quinn returned with beer and whiskey and a glass of wine for Mak. "You know what?" he said, rhetorically. "You want to know about dragons? We should go see this friend of mine. He's super smart! He knows a lot of things about a lot of stuff. All he does is read. He's got piles of scrolls lying around."

"When?" asked Zebulun.

"Right now!" said Quinn. "Well, not right this minute—we should finish these drinks and have, like, three more, then go over there. He lives in the affluent part of town, so it's a walk."

"Sure this friend wants visitors at this hour?" asked Zebulun.

"Oh, he'll be awake," said Quinn. "He's a night owl. He stays up all night reading, then sleeps til noon. I seen him do it."

Zebulun thought for a moment. "Why not?"

"Great!" said Quinn.

They had a few more rounds.

Davion

"See?" said Quinn, "I told you he'd be up!"

They stood before an impressive home of granite and cedar. It was modest, for the affluent section of the city. Zebulun saw the flicker of a candle against a wall through a window on the ground floor.

Quinn clung desperately to Zebulun's left arm to stay vertical. "You say he's the wisest person you know?" asked Zebulun.

"Totally! He knows, like, everything. He taught me how to read!"

"Hm."

Zebulun knocked on the door.

After some shuffling within, a small metal door-within-the-door swung open at eye level. The brown eyes looked at Zebulun, then at Quinn, and then the door opened to reveal a tall, gaunt man with light brown skin and dark brown hair. He wore a fine silk robe.

"Quinn?" asked the gaunt man. "Who is your friend?"

"This is my new friend Zeb! Zebulun. He saved me from a beating! Zeb, this is Davion. He's my smart friend."

"Sorry to impose at this hour," said Zebulun. "Quinn swore you wouldn't mind."

"Oh no, it's no issue," said Davion, looking up at Zebulun with curiosity. At his height, he was ill-accustomed to looking up at others. "I was awake. I often read until sunrise. What do you need?"

"He wants to know all about dragons!" chirped Quinn.

Davion looked at Zebulun. "Dragons? I know a little. I have a couple of scrolls. Do come in."

The furniture inside was sparse, but lavish. Davion invited them to sit at a fine wooden table with lush cushions. Scrolls sat piled on top of everything.

"Uhh," said Quinn, still clinging to Zebulun's arm. "Can you just drop me on that couch over there? I think I need a quick nap." Zebulun deposited Quinn on the sofa. He began snoring within minutes.

Zebulun sat with Davion, who brought bread and cheese for them to share. "It just occurred to me," he said, "that it's been hours since I've eaten anything. Please, enjoy." Zebulun took a bite.

"So," said Davion, "Dragons. You've seen Aurelius flying over the city with the king on his back?"

"Yes."

"I estimate him to be approximately sixty feet long and three thousand pounds. His wingspan seems to be at least as long as his body. From what I've read, that's large for a dragon. Most are more like fifty feet and twenty-five hundred pounds."

"There are hundreds of them in the kingdom. Perhaps three hundred, perhaps five. It's difficult to

say. Most belong to lords of great estates or princes of cities. A few belong to the great merchant houses. Others serve the army or navy, as needed."

"I've seen them in action," said Zebulun.

"Oh?"

"I'm a captain in the army."

"Really? I wondered who you were and what you did. How on Earth did you meet Quinn?"

"Chance," said Zebulun. "I rescued him from a gang of goons."

Davion chuckled. "He probably owes them money. He's a degenerate gambler. He'll win huge sums — through amazing streaks of luck — and then be poor again in a week."

"Anyway," Davion continued, "I have a scroll around here, somewhere." He got up and rummaged through the piles.

"Aha," he said, after a few minutes. "Here we are." He brought the scroll over to the table and unrolled it. Clearing his throat, he read, "Dragons are great flying serpents. They can be up to sixty-seven feet in length, and weigh up to — well, I probably don't need to read this part. You've seen them."

Zebulun nodded.

"Let me see," said Davion, "Only one dragon hatches at a time. On birth, hatchlings are stark white. Their scales darken as they age and are exposed to sunlight. Dragons can be of any color, but their scales continue to darken with age, until the oldest dragons appear black."

"Dragons have powers beyond the understanding of men. They are known to breath fire at great distance, to shift their shape and appear as men, and to have eyes and ears as sharp as any animal."

Davion stopped. "It looks like it goes on into the legends of the dragons and the fair folk, from this point on. I'm sure you're familiar."

"I heard the stories as a child," said Zebulun. "Dragons once ruled men, subjugating and terrorizing us. Then the fair folk came from other lands and conquered the dragons, ending their reign. Now the dragons serve them, and thus the kingdom."

"That's a fine summary," said Davion.

"Do you believe it?" asked Zebulun.

"I don't know. I have read some books of ancient history that suggested there's some truth to the idea that dragons once ruled the land. I've read other, supposedly historical, accounts of the fight between the fair folk and the dragons. How much of it is true is difficult to say. History is written by the winners."

Zebulun looked thoughtful.

"If you don't mind the question," said Davion, "why the interest in the subject?"

Zebulun took a deep breath and released it. "I fought in the final battle of the war that just ended. In the aftermath, a mysterious woman approached me and told me that she lived in the woods nearby."

"In Eastwood? I thought it was uninhabited," said Davion.

"Everyone does," said Zebulun. "But she claims people live there. She claims also that the locals' tales of elves, goblins, and spirits have some truth to them. Said she feared the kingdom would come for her forest."

"She was right," said Zebulun. "The king plans to raze her forest to build his navy. Then she told me that dragons rule the fair folk, rather than the other way around."

"I have heard that before," said Davion.

"What's your take?" asked Zebulun.

Davion stroked his chin for a moment. He was beardless, but had a few days worth of stubble. "I've never known what to think. My father is one of the fair. I asked him about it, once; he just smiled and changed the subject."

"But," said Davion, "I wonder: does it matter? The kingdom is what it is, and the ever-multiplying laws are what they are, regardless of who is in charge. You either support these things or not."

"Do you?" asked Zebulun.

"I suppose I support order in general," said Davion. "It's difficult to study philosophy when there's chaos and violence in the streets. But I could live without many of the rules and decrees we live under. I would like to see the kingdom invest less in war and more in building up the kingdom: roads, bridges, that sort of thing — but I know better than to say any of this too loudly."

"No one wants to be hung for treason," said Zebulun.

"Not I," said Davion.

Zebulun stared off to his right, deep in thought.

After a moment, Davion said, "If there are people living in those woods, I'm curious to know the story behind it. I'd also like to hear about the spirits and such. I would love to have a long conversation with this mysterious woman of yours."

Zebulun thought for a moment, then looked at Davion. "So would I."

A Problem

"Sir. We may have a problem."

The king looked up at Marshal Benjamin. "Problem?"

"You remember that captain we honored for salvaging that last battle? Zebulun Koh?" asked the Marshal.

"I believe so. The dark one who rode in front of the parade with you? The giant?"

"Giant he his," said Benjamin, "and strong as an ox."

"And the problem?" asked the king.

"He tells me he met a woman after the battle. She told him she lived in the eastern wood, and that there were others there. She hinted at alliances with dark forces."

"If anyone does live there," replied the king, "they must be bandits and fugitives. We'll have to send in some men to clear them out, I suppose."

"I'll make preparations," said the Marshall.

The king frowned. "I've already ordered a team of woodcutters to start work. They had better not encounter any trouble from the natives."

Eastward Bound

Zebulun sat on a huge black stallion. He held the reins of a mule, laden with supplies, and that of a white mare.

Davion met him outside the eastern gate. He rode a brown gelding. He led a donkey, laden with his own supplies, and a brown-and-white pony.

"Hello, Zebulun," he said. "Who is the extra horse for?"

"Brother Mark," said Zebulun. "He agreed to say a prayer for the fallen at the battle site. The marshal gave me leave to take a handful of my men there to witness. We'll meet them at the crossroads."

Zebulun nodded at the pony. "What's that for?"

"Quinn," said Davion. "After he woke up and ate two breakfasts, I told him of our plan to visit Eastwood. He insisted on coming with us. He said he can't pass up the chance to meet mysterious haunted forest people." Davion paused. "And he insisted on a pony."

Amusement crept into Zebulun's eyes. "Fine," he said. "I hope he can handle roughing it with soldiers."

"I hope I can," said Davion. "I've rarely left the city."

Some time passed before Quinn arrived. "Sorry I'm late!" he chirped.

"It's unlike you," said Davion, without a hint of sarcasm. "I was beginning to grow concerned."

Quinn snorted and grinned. "Yeah... I know." He shrugged. Then he spotted the pony, and his face lit up. "For me?"

"Yes, Quinn," said Davion, handing him the reins.

"I guess I need to learn how to ride a pony real quick," said Quinn, as he vaulted into the saddle. "What's his name?"

"He's a she," said Davion. "and she doesn't have one. I just acquired her yesterday, per your previous request."

"I'm gonna call her 'Friendship'," said Quinn, hugging the pony's neck. "What about the others?"

"My horse is Ganymedes," said Davion.

"And the burro?"

"I just acquired him as well."

Quinn smirked. "Let's call him Zeke!"

Quinn turned to Zebulun. "What about your ponies?"

Zebulun patted his stallion's neck. "This is Othniel." He nodded toward the mule. "That's Samson." He nodded toward the mare. "That's Lyla."

Quinn smiled. "Those are great names!"

Brother Mark arrived in short order. Quinn made sure he knew the names of all five animals.

They met Zebulun's men at the crossroads, twenty in all. He introduced his lieutenants: William, David, Elijah, Jon, and Dan. They headed east on the long road towards the forest.

Assault of the Woodcutters

Two dozen woodcutters entered the forest to eerie silence. No rustling. No bird songs.

"It's too quiet," said Jeroboam.

"Well," said Nehemiah, "Let's find some good trees and make some noise."

He took the lead. He found a great oak that must have been two hundred years old. "Time to go to work, boys."

A wolf growled.

The men froze, then slowly looked around. Eyes peered out at them from within dark spaces under the forest canopy. Large gray forms moved swiftly through the trees around them.

A raven croaked. Then another. Then a chorus.

The woodcutters looked up. Scores of ravens sat nestled in the trees above them. They had remained silent until this moment.

Jeroboam shuddered. "They say these woods are haunted."

"They're just stupid birds," said Nehemiah.

"And the wolves?"

"Pfft! I ain't afraid of no puppy dog. Stand back."

Nehemiah raised his axe high and took a powerful swing into the oak's trunk.

The beasts sprung into action. Ravens descended on the woodcutters, batting at their faces with their wings and pecking at their eyes. Dozens of wolves leapt from their hiding places, knocking men down and savaging their arms and legs with bites.

The woodcutters fled from the forest, bruised and bleeding. The wolves chased them for one hundred yards before stopping. They stared at the men for a moment before slowly turning and loping back into the wood.

Prayer for the Fallen

The party went back to the battlefield. Zebulun rode in front with his lieutenants and Brother Mark. Davion brought up the rear, lost in thought. Quinn spent most of the trip fraternizing with the soldiers, swapping stories and jokes. He got a few belly laughs and more than a few strange looks.

One night in camp, William spoke to David in private. He had that look on his face — the one that said he was tense about something. "Who are the captain's new friends?"

"No idea," said David. "I gather that the tall, quiet one is a philosopher. The young, talkative one seems like some weird street kid. I want to say I've seen him before, dancing and juggling in one of the markets."

"He does seem familiar. Why are they traveling with us?"

"Don't know. No clue where Zebulun found them, or why they're here."

William scowled harder. "Something odd is afoot."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"Zeb's been quiet," said David. "Well, *more* quiet."

"He lost a lot of men in that last battle," said William.

"We've lost friends before."

"I don't think it was the number," said William. "I think it was the kid."

"Right," said David. "the kid. What was his name?"

"Madison," said William.

"How old was he? Nineteen?"

"Seventeen, I think."

"Damn," said David.

"Yeah," said William. "Kid died right in front of him during the final maneuver."

David nodded, but said nothing.

On the nineteenth day of travel, they crossed the Rose River and followed it east until they reached the battlefield. There was no sign there had been a battle here. The corpses were long buried. Every scrap of armor, weaponry, or broken chariot had been scavenged. Zebulun placed a small stone marker he'd had engraved for the occasion. It had the names of every man who died that day, in the most vicious battle of the war.

Brother Mark said a kind and heartfelt prayer. He spoke of Ram's truth and Luva's love. He spoke of man's duty to serve the gods and the kingdom with honor. He blessed the ground where Zebulun's men fell. The men stood silent vigil for some time, remembering absent friends. Even Quinn stayed

quiet out of respect.

The next day, the captain said to his lieutenants, "I have another task. One I can't speak about. Please escort Brother Mark safely back to Azulan."

Zebulun, Davion, and Quinn watched the priest and soldiers leave. When they were gone, the three of them turned toward the forest.

Eastwood

The party dismounted and led their equine companions into the wood. They went forward slowly, all three paying close attention to their eyes and ears.

The eastern wood seemed to contain every kind of tree. Tall, thin pines that looked like toothpicks standing on end. Oaks great and small. Cedar, elm, and holly.

Birdsongs filled the wood. Monarch butterflies danced in the air. The three of them walked through the trees, taking it all in.

After an hour or so, Quinn asked Zebulun, "How are we going to find your forest girl? This seems like a big place, and I ain't seen one person yet."

"I'm hoping she'll find us," said Zebulun. "She found me before."

"How can she know you're coming?" asked Davion.

"Spend enough time soldiering," said Zebulun, "and you develop an instinct for when you're being watched. It's a survival skill. My gut tells me we're being watched right now."

"Well, sure!" said Quinn. "There's birds and squirrels all around us!"

Zebulun's eyes showed mild amusement. "No," he said, tilting his head as if he were listening to the wind. "Something else."

"So," said Davion, "What should we do? Wait here? Move on?"

"Let's explore further," said Zebulun. "My gut tells me to go east a little longer, then turn north."

"I suppose that's as good a plan as any," said Davion.

They wandered, enjoying the sights. The quietude of the forest entranced them with feelings of calm and peace.

The day grew long. They stopped at dusk to make camp. Before they could build a fire, Quinn asked, "What is that?"

Zebulun and Davion looked in the direction Quinn stared. Through the maze of trees, they saw a faint, flickering light. Like a candle, but bluish. It seemed to dance back and forth around the trees a score of yards away from them. They watched in wonder as two more lights appeared and danced with the first.

"Whoever or whatever that is," said Davion, "I think they're trying to get our attention."

Zebulun nodded. "We should follow them."

Quinn looked at them and smirked. He waved and called out to the lights. "Hi!" he said. "We're here to meet the mysterious forest woman who disturbed Zebulun!"

The lights responded. They flashed brighter three times in rapid succession and emitted a series of

unearthly tones.

Davion looked at Quinn with astonishment. "You can make friends with anyone, can't you?" Quinn just grinned, laughter in his eyes.

The tones shaped themselves into the form of a human-like voice. "Follow the lights," it said, in a voice made of music. "They lead to something."

The three of them followed the lights through the growing darkness.

After half an hour, they saw the flickering of what appeared to be an ordinary fire some distance through the trees. The bluish lights vanished shortly thereafter. The men went towards the flame.

They emerged into a small clearing. A campfire burned in a fire pit, a metal pot suspended above it. The scent from the pot made all their stomachs rumble. Situated around the campfire were several logs acting as benches. Sarah sat on one of them, tending to the stew. She looked up at them with welcoming eyes.

"Welcome, Zebulun," she said. "I'm happy you've come."

Zebulun bowed. "Thank you for the invitation. These are my companions, Davion and Quinn."

"Welcome to you as well," she said. "Are you hungry? I've prepared a stew of rabbit and wild herbs in anticipation of your arrival."

"It smells wonderful!" chirped Quinn.

"You knew we were coming?" asked Davion.

"Not right away," she said. "I became aware the moment you entered the forest."

"How?"

Sarah looked at Davion with soft eyes. "It's not simple to explain," she said. "We should eat something." She took a ladle from the pot and sipped the stew. "It's ready."

They ate. The food was simple, but flavorful.

"Best food I've had in weeks," said Quinn. "Thank you, Sarah! Really, it's delicious." Sarah smiled at him.

"Thank you for the hospitality," said Zebulun.

"It's nothing," said Sarah. "Well... I don't often eat meat, but I thought you men might need some after your long journey."

"Thank you again," said Zebulun.

"Yes, thank you," said Davion. "I'm very curious about you and the others who live here. I hope you won't mind answering some questions." Davion paused a moment. "When you're ready."

"Of course," said Sarah. "I hope for your help against the draconic politics of your kingdom. I'll

answer you as best I can."

"My help?" asked Davion.

"All of you. Anyone willing. We are few, here. We need all the help we can get."

"Well," said Davion, his brow furrowed, "can you begin by elaborating on *draconic politics*? What does that mean?"

Sarah nodded, clasped her hands as if in prayer, and leaned in Davion's direction. "The most important thing to understand about dragons," she said, "is that their minds are as different from ours as their bodies. Human beings are pack hunters, like wolves. This means that we have a natural affinity for our own kind. We feel safety in numbers. Our animal instincts encourage us towards social behavior for our own good." She paused. "*Most* of us."

"Dragons are different," she said. "Dragons are not herd animals or pack hunters. They are solitary apex predators. They descend from creatures that felt no fear of anything in their environment. Creatures that met up solely to mate, then went their separate ways. They have no instinctive sense of empathy the way humans and canines do—not even for their own kind. They are without compassion. Ruthless."

"They developed society after obtaining intelligence, but theirs is a society based entirely on hierarchy and dominance. The only thing a dragon understands is power. They see the world as nothing more than an eternal competition for natural resources. They see us as livestock to be exploited."

"And," she said, "there is a small subset of humans who think like they do, and thus serve them."

Davion stared at Sarah for a moment. "You speak of the fair folk?"

"Not all of them," said Sarah, "but yes. And those in the lower classes who think like them. Poverty and want can lead to draconic personalities as easily as wealth and privilege."

Davion lowered his eyes, deep in thought.

Zebulun sat up and stared into the darkness behind Sarah. "There's something there."

"It's okay," she said. "It's a friend."

Quinn sat bolt upright, his eyes wide, and pointed. "Kitty!" he shouted.

A huge black panther sauntered into the clearing and sat next to Sarah. She stroked the back of its neck. It looked up at her with happy-cat eyes.

"This is Kulth-Ing," she said. "He's not tame, but he trusts me."

"Can I pet him?" begged Quinn.

Sarah smiled, amusement in her eyes. "Only if he wants you to." Quinn looked pensive. "Let him check you out," she said.

Kulth-Ing approached Zebulun first. He sniffed him, then looked up into his eyes. Zebulun

narrowed his eyes the way a cat does when it says, "I love you." Kulth-Ing responded in kind, then rubbed the side of his face against Zebulun's hand. He stroked its neck.

"You're good with animals," said Sarah.

Zebulun nodded. "I understand them."

Kulth-Ing wandered over to Davion and sniffed him. Davion leaned away from the panther, a tense look on his face. It wandered over to Quinn instead. Davion let out his breath.

Quinn stared at the beast, his eyes sparkling with joy. Kulth-Ing sniffed him, licked his hand, and went back to Sarah to sit. She gave him a bowl of stew.

"He is *so* beautiful!" said Quinn.

The group sat quietly, for a time, digesting and looking up at the stars.

"It is peaceful, here," said Davion.

"Yes," said Sarah. "We hope to keep it that way, but fear that your kingdom will make war on us to take what we have."

"They intend to," said Zebulun. "The king wants to build a great navy to go and conquer other lands."

"A sad thing," said Sarah. "Such a waste of blood and treasure."

Zebulun said nothing.

Davion leaned forward, his brow slightly furrowed. "You told Zebulun there were others here?"

"Yes," she said. "The forest folk. I'll introduce you to them."

"I would very much like to meet them," said Davion. "I'm curious about their origins and culture."

Quinn smiled at Davion. "You're curious about everything!"

Davion shrugged. "I am."

Zebulun looked Sarah in the eye. "Why do I still feel like we're being watched?"

"We have visitors," said Sarah. "Perhaps it's time they showed themselves."

Pinpoints of light appeared above them, looking like tiny stars. One moved close to Quinn's face as he stared, enraptured. The pinpoint expanded slowly into a translucent blue-white sphere. It was only light, at first, but then the sphere filled with static. The static slowly formed into a pixelated image of color — a tiny, naked woman with blue skin and wings like a butterfly.

Quinn stared in wonder for a moment. The minuscule figure waved at him and blew him a kiss. His face lit up, and he clapped twice. "What on Earth are you?"

Others expanded into spheres of blue light and formed humanoid avatars within them. Some were male, others female. Some had butterfly wings like the first; others had wings like bats or

dragonflies. Soon they were surrounded by dozens.

Davion stared in disbelief. "What *are* they?"

"Men have called them by many names," said Sarah. "Angels. Fairies. Jinn. The forest folk call them the *star folk*."

"I like 'angels'!" said Quinn.

Sarah smiled. "Angels they are, then."

"Or maybe 'fairies'," he said. "I like both!"

Davion stared in fascination. "They can turn invisible?"

"No," said Sarah. "They're simply too small for our eyes to see. This visible display they're doing for your benefit takes some effort, on their part."

"They led us here," said Zebulun.

"Yes," said Sarah. "At my request."

"You have authority over them?" asked Zebulun.

"No," said Sarah, "they help me of their own free will. They love this forest and want to protect it. They enjoy the rhythm of nature. They don't care for cities."

"Why not?" asked Davion.

"Too much metal," she said. "They don't like metal. Especially iron, for some reason. They call it 'the bottom of the well'. I don't know what they mean by that."

"Hm." Davion looked thoughtful. "Are they native to these woods?"

"No," said Sarah. "They come from the heavens."

Quinn whipped his head towards Sarah. "You mean up there?" he asked, pointing at the stars.

"Yes."

"Wow," said Quinn. "*Cool*."

"Fascinating," said Davion. "Why are they here?"

"They love to explore," said Sarah. "Our world is fascinating to them."

The star folk waved goodbye to them and faded from view.

"We should rest," said Sarah. "I'll take you to meet the forest folk tomorrow."

They slept.

A Hot Bath

Quinn woke with a start. Something had shocked his nose.

One of the star folk appeared before him. It was the first one he'd seen, the girl with blue skin and butterfly wings. She waved hello, then put her finger to her lips. Quinn did the same.

He reached up a finger to touch the tiny, glowing woman. When he was an inch away, a miniature bolt of lightning arced from her sphere of light to his finger, shocking him. He instinctively pulled his hand away, then put it over his mouth to suppress a giggle.

She beckoned to him with a tiny finger. He slowly, silently rose to his feet and followed her down a path, her soft glow lighting his way.

"Do you have a name?" Quinn whispered.

The glowing thing looked at him and shook her head, smiling.

"How about Bluebonnet?" he asked.

She smiled and nodded.

"Where are we going?"

She just beckoned, smiling.

After a few minutes treading a downward slope, she led him to a natural spring. Steam rose from the waters.

Quinn looked at Bluebonnet. "Drinkable?"

She nodded. He scooped up a handful of the water. "It's hot!" he said. He let it cool a moment before drinking. "But refreshing. A bit bitter. Bitterier than most water." He took another sip.

Other star folk slowly winked on, images of tiny men and women of all shapes, sizes, and colors, with wings like butterflies, dragonflies, doves, bats, or eagles.

Invisible forces tugged at Quinn's clothing, slowly disrobing him.

"Um. Okay? I guess you think I need a bath?" he asked.

The star folk laughed silently.

Quinn stepped gingerly into the steaming pool. It was the hottest bath he'd ever taken. After a few moments, he felt energized.

The star folk descended into the pool with him, seemingly unhindered by water. They began to shock him with little bolts of lightning. Each one seemed to hit just the right nerve, with successive ones hitting in just the right order.

Quinn arched his back. "Oh," he said. "Oh my." He closed his eyes as his head sank backward into the water.

Misplaced Quinn

Zebulun woke. Something was wrong. Someone was missing.

He sat up. Quinn was gone.

"He's fine," said Sarah. She tended to the fire. "He ran off into the woods to play with the star folk."

"Is that safe?" asked Zebulun.

Sarah smiled. "That's not the word I would use," she said, "but he'll be fine. They'll take care of him. They like him; he is like they are."

"How is that?"

"Playful and fearless."

"They really come from up there?" he asked, nodding up at the stars.

"That's what they say. I have seen them fly up into the air. They often leave before dawn to spend the day at the top of the sky. They say the sun's rays are far more intense up there. They live on sunlight."

"They speak to you?"

"They can imitate our speech," she said, "but it takes some effort on their part. They also have other, more subtle ways of communicating."

Zebulun stared up at the stars.

Sarah sat next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. She gazed at the stars with him. "The star folk tell me every star in the sky is a sun like our own. They are just impossibly far away, so they look like pinpoints of light. Their kind are born in the boundaries between stars and the void. The star's *crown*, they call it."

Davion sat up, looking bleary-eyed and confused. "What's going on?"

"Quinn ran away with the angels," said Sarah. "He should be back soon."

Just about then, Quinn wandered into the campsite. He was naked and dripping, steam rising from his body. He looked exhausted and happy.

Davion furrowed his brow. "Why are you naked?"

Quinn smiled at him with tired eyes. "A hundred fairies just made love to me."

"Oh," said Davion. "Wait. What?"

Quinn collapsed on his blanket and began to snore.

Wild Turkey

Zebulun woke before dawn. He picked up his bow.

Sarah wished him luck. "If you get anything, save the heart and liver. We'll need the strength they'll give us for the journey."

"How far?" asked Zebulun.

"Not far. Three hours walk or so. I told them we would arrive near dusk."

Zebulun went hunting. Within the hour, he encountered a flock of turkeys: one longbeard tom, several hens, and a few jakes. They stood beneath a great oak, snacking on acorns in the gray light of dawn.

Zebulun stood, back straight, feet shoulder-length apart, and drew. He watched the flock for a full minute before taking a deep breath, releasing it, and loosing his arrow. He shot the tom through the heart at thirty yards.

After field-dressing the fowl, he headed back to camp, plucking feathers as he went.

Quinn was rolling around on the ground when he arrived, wrestling with Kulth-Ing. Davion stared from the far side of the camp, his eyes wide. He looked like he thought Quinn might die at any moment.

The panther rolled on top of Quinn. Quinn fake-growled and made clawing motions at the feline's face. The cat let out a growl that sounded half like a purr and delivered a savage play-bite to Quinn's skull. He didn't even scrape the skin.

Quinn laughed with delight. Kulth-Ing held him down, grooming his face and hair for a few minutes.

Zebulun held up the bird. "Thought we might add this to the morning's stew."

"A fine catch," said Sarah. They cut it into parts and cooked it with the previous night's leftover fare.

"I've never eaten like this," said Davion, licking his lips. "I tend to eat simply — some bread, some cheese, some meat every couple of days. I've had the fanciful dishes enjoyed by the rich, on occasion."

"But never," he said, taking another bite, "have I eaten fresh game that lived but an hour ago. I'm in awe. There's something visceral about it."

Sarah smiled at Davion. "The stew also contains fresh roots and herbs, picked just this morning. They're great for health and vigor."

"Delicious," he said.

"So good," said Quinn.

"We should take the last of the stew with us," she said. "The forest folk will appreciate the

contribution." Zebulun nodded.

They broke camp and followed Sarah deeper into the wood.

A Tale of Wolves

"Wolves?"

"Yes, sir. And Ravens," said Marshal Benjamin. "And a handful of the men swear that a huge black panther fought alongside the wolves."

"A *panther*?" asked the king.

"A few have the wounds to prove it. Claw and bite marks."

The king looked at him, incredulous. "A big black cougar fought alongside wolves."

"Likely a jaguar," said the marshal. "They're larger, and I've never heard of a black cougar."

"Did they kill anyone?"

"No," said the marshal. "A few of the men might lose an arm or leg, but no one has died so far."

The king stared at him. "This is intolerable. I need that timber."

"Understood, sir," said the marshal. "I'll send a rider to Dalton. I'll tell the general to take a company from there and deal with whatever beasts of the field they encounter."

"Good," said the king. "Go on."

The marshal left. The king went out on his balcony and stared to the east. *What sorcery is this?*

The Forest Folk

They walked for hours. The terrain was hilly. The vegetation was thick.

Sarah foraged as they traveled, gathering blackberries and morels into a woven basket. Quinn ate every berry he saw first. Davion gazed at the diverse flora and fauna with curiosity. Zebulun gazed at them with reverence.

They arrived near dusk. The forest folk camp surrounded a huge fire pit in the middle of a large clearing. Logs sat around it, but at some distance. Tents made from animal skins surrounded the center.

Sarah led them in. A group of forest folk assembled to greet them. A handful were black of skin, but most had skin some shade of brown, with black hair, making them look not much different from the average citizen of the kingdom.

Except for the tattoos. And the tribal branding. Many had piercings of metal or bone through various parts of their bodies. They wore animal skins. The women went bare-breasted. Few citizens of the kingdom looked anything like this. City folk would laugh at them; farm folk would accuse them of witchcraft.

The forest folk marveled at Zebulun's towering physique, and at Quinn's pale skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair.

An elder stepped forward. "Welcome, Sarah. And to your friends." He bowed slightly to the group.

"This is Emet," said Sarah. "He is a revered elder, respected by all."

She turned to Emet. "This is Zebulun Koh. He's a captain in the army. These are his companions, Davion and Quinn."

"Again, welcome," said Emet. "We plan to feast tonight. Our hunting parties brought back a few deer and one boar."

"We brought food as well," said Sarah. "The stew includes a turkey Zebulun shot this morning. He's a hunter as well."

Emet nodded, smiling with his eyes. "We have something in common, then."

Quinn stared at one of the black women. She was tall and lean — taller than he was. She had a bow slung over her shoulder. She noticed him looking, looked him up and down, and gave him a lustful smile. He put his hand on this chest and smiled back at her with false shyness. The hulking brown warrior next to her noticed her look, looked over at Quinn, and raised an eyebrow, but he smiled as he did it. Quinn looked at him, then back at her, then back to him and winked.

"Are you flirting with the forest people?" whispered Davion.

"What? They started it," whispered Quinn. "Besides, look at them — they're cute!"

Davion gently shook his head.

They milled about as the women prepared supper. Quinn went to talk to the couple, whose names turned out to be Elu and Zoya. Zebulun noticed that Zoya didn't help the other women, but no one seemed to care. He asked Sarah about it.

"She's a huntress," said Sarah. "It's uncommon, but occasionally a woman of the forest wants no part of woman's work. She wants to go hunting with the men instead. She has to do twice as much to impress the men as a man would, but those who pass the tests are respected and treated as men."

"Of course," she said, "It depends on the tribe in question. Some are less tolerant about such things than others."

Zebulun nodded.

They feasted with the forest folk. They ate roasted boar and venison with various fruits, roots, and mushrooms. The turkey stew went quickly.

After everyone had eaten beyond their fill, the stories began. Elders stood and told legends of their tribes: legends about the creation of the world, the origin of their people, and the numerous gods and devils that helped or opposed them.

Zebulun whispered to Sarah. "They're not all from the same tribe?"

"No," she said, in a low tone. "Most of the ones here are from the same tribe, as this is one of their camps, but some are delegates from other tribes of the wood. They've come here to try and figure out what to do about the impending invasion."

Zebulun said nothing. The old tales continued for a few hours.

After the stories, a woman returned with Sarah's iron pot. It was simmering with some new stew.

"Ooh. What's in there?" asked Quinn, obviously still hungry.

"A special kind of mushroom," said Sarah. "It grants visions."

"Ooh," said Quinn. "What kind of visions?"

"It puts you in touch with the spirit of the forest."

Quinn smiled. "Sounds promising."

The forest folk consumed the brew with relish. Quinn drank as much as any of them. Davion opted for a small sip, out of curiosity. Zebulun passed.

"Not in the mood for visions?" asked Sarah.

"No," said Zebulun.

She looked at him with kindness in her eyes. "Maybe some other time."

When everyone had drunk, the natives passed around a pipe. Zebulun had tried tobacco, but this smelled different. He took a shallow puff, as did Sarah. Davion took one puff out of curiosity. Quinn inhaled a huge amount and burst into a coughing fit that left his eyes red. He took another puff

each time it went around the circle. His eyes glazed over after the third.

"I feel strangely calm," said Davion. "What's in that pipe?"

"A flower that grows wild in the forest," said Sarah.

"I feel nothing," said Zebulun.

After an hour, the forest folk brought out drums made from animal skins and began to beat them in unison. People got up in ones or twos to dance around the bonfire to the rhythmic beat. Women sang to the beat of the drum. Star folk appeared and danced in the sky above the people.

"Yes!" said Quinn. "I love dancing!" He sprang up to join the revelry. He danced with grace, prancing and twirling. He threw in the occasional cartwheel or handspring, to the delight of the forest folk.

"He can make friends with anyone," said Davion.

Zebulun looked at Davion. "How do you feel?"

"Strange," said Davion. "I feel tense and relaxed at the same time. Everything seems bright and colorful. Sometimes I think the trees around us are swaying, but there's no wind tonight."

"Hm."

Sarah appeared and whispered to Zebulun. "The elders would like to speak with you alone, if you're willing."

Zebulun nodded. He told Davion he'd be right back and followed her into the wood.

Five elders stood in a small clearing a hundred yards from the big one. Sarah stood off to the side.

"Thank you for speaking with us," said Emet. "Sarah tells us your kingdom plans to take our lands from us."

"Yes," said Zebulun. "They want to turn your forest into lumber for their ships."

Emet looked incredulous. "How many ships could they need?"

"A gigantic fleet," said Zebulun. "Enough to conquer far-off lands. You can't supply an army halfway across the world via land, because everything that can haul food over land also eats food. And you might want to conquer a few islands. To forge an empire requires ships."

The elders shook their heads.

"We have nowhere to run," said Emet. "To the east and south of the forest are unlivable swamps. This is our home. We must fight for it."

Zebulun looked Emet in the eye. "Have you known war? Have the tribes of this forest warred with one another?"

"In the past," said Emet. "It's been over a century since a major conflict. But we train. We are skilled with spear and bow."

Zebulun shook his head. "You don't know war," said Zebulun. "It's not just men killing each other on a battlefield. It fills men with hatred. They may rape your women or murder your sons. They'll take everything you have, and burn whatever they can't take with them out of spite."

"Still," said Emet, "We must fight. What choice do we have?"

Zebulun took a deep breath. "You can't beat them in a fight. They have better weapons than you have. They have steel armor. They're trained to fight as a unit. You'd be slaughtered."

"So," said Emet, his brow furrowed, "what, then? How do we defend our lands?"

Zebulun looked at the stars. "I'm reluctant to tell you anything that will help you kill my countrymen."

"But," he said, turning his gaze to Emet, "it's only fair. They are coming to kill you."

He took a deep breath. "You're not warriors — you're hunters. Don't fight them. Hunt them."

Emet narrowed his eyes and contemplated Zebulun for a moment before nodding his head in understanding.

They returned to the clearing to find Davion staring into the fire. Quinn danced with the forest folk. Sarah appeared to be meditating. The entranced drummers went on and on.

Elu approached Zebulun. His pupils covered his iris. He looked at Zebulun with a smile and said, "I want to fight you."

"Fight?" asked Zebulun.

"Wrestle," said Elu. "Brother's Rules."

"What are those?"

"Don't do anything you wouldn't do to your brother," said Elu. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want to fight someone your size!"

Zebulun thought for a moment. "Alright." He stood and faced Elu. He was taller, but Elu was broader.

The forest folk paused their dance to make room for — and watch — the action. The drummers kept going.

Elu shifted into a crouch and stepped to the left. Zebulun crouched slightly, his hands before him. The two circled. Elu's eyes shifted, watching the movements of Zebulun's hands and feet. Zebulun never took his gaze off Elu's eyes.

Elu lunged for Zebulun's waist with both arms. Zebulun spun out of the way. Elu grabbed Zebulun's right wrist with his right hand; Zebulun twisted his to Grab Elu's, rotated, and used his left hand to push against Elu's elbow, twisting his arm.

Elu twisted out of his grip and grinned. He shot in, grappled with Zebulun, then threw his leg behind him and pushed him over it. Zebulun fell prone.

Elu leapt on him, but Zebulun rolled him over and rolled to his feet. He and Elu circled again.

Elu dove at Zebulun, grabbing both legs and pulling them out from under him. He tried to twist Zebulun's leg, but his opponent rolled again and somehow got his legs around Elu's waist and squeezed.

Elu found it difficult to breathe. He struggled to his feet, Zebulun's legs still wrapped around him. Zebulun released him and rolled into a standing position.

Elu beamed at him. "You're good! That was fun!"

Zebulun bowed.

"Alright," said Elu, "I've had enough. I'm going back to dancing!"

Time passed. Zebulun looked at Davion, who had been staring into the fire for an hour. "What do you see?" he asked.

"I see faces in the fire," said Davion. "Shifting and morphing. It's... subtle."

They were quiet for a moment. "What do you make of the forest folk?" asked Zebulun.

"They seem to follow the left-hand path," said Davion, still staring into the fire.

"What do you mean?"

"Their tattoos," said Davion, "and branding and decoration. Some are obviously tribal, but others are highly stylized and distinct. And the wild, random dancing. These folks seem to value individual expression."

"What did you mean by *left-hand path*? I'm not familiar with the phrase."

"Oh," said Davion, "Sorry. It's from ancient scripture. The right-hand path is associated with order, harmony, and stability. Followers value rules, honor, and duty. It's focus is the good of the family or tribe. I suspect you fall on this side."

"A fair judgment," said Zebulun.

Davion continued. "The left-hand path is associated with liberty, creativity, and individuality. Followers don't tend to care much for rules, preferring fun and achievement. It's focus is on the elevation of the individual. Quinn is a fine example of this side."

"No doubt. Where do you fall?" asked Zebulun.

Davion stared into the fire. "I appreciate order and stability. It's difficult to study philosophy if one is afraid of being murdered in one's home, or if there's civil war, or chaos and rioting in the streets. I saw hunger riots once, as a child. It was after two poor harvests in a row."

A shadow passed over Zebulun's face. "I remember."

"It was terrifying," said Davion. "Hunger turned to fear and wrath. People acted like beasts — without reason or compassion."

"Having said that," Davion continued, "I see little use in the endless, petty laws, rules, and regulations that ministers — with nothing better to do — dream up for us to follow. Did you know that there are hundreds of rules every subject of the kingdom is expected to know and obey? Over three thousand. It's ludicrous."

"I guess," said Davion, "I'm somewhere in the middle."

Zebulun watched the forest folk dance. They demonstrated their individuality and creativity with wild abandon. "I bet they change paths when threatened," he said. "Bet they line up shoulder-to-shoulder and demand everyone fall in line."

"No bet," said Davion. "The old tales are full of examples of people trading liberty for safety when frightened. They raised up kings to defend them, only to find that the kings abused them just as they feared *The Other* would. The ultimate example has to be people selling themselves — or their children — into slavery to feed their family."

It was Zebulun's turn to stare into the fire.

Davion looked up. "What happened to Quinn?"

"He went off into the woods with Elu and Zoya," said Zebulun.

Davion furrowed his brow. "Is that safe?"

"He'll be fine," said Zebulun, amusement in his eyes. Sarah chuckled softly.

Quinn returned an hour later with Elu and Zoya, all of them glowing. They ate berries, laughed, and smoked the pipe for a while before they rejoined the dance.

Davion lay down on his side and stared into the flames until he drifted off to sleep.

Zebulun looked up at the stars. Sarah placed her hand on his shoulder, leaned towards him, and gazed up at the stars with him. "Suns like ours?" he asked.

"So they tell me," she said.

"Are there worlds like ours closer to those stars? Does our sun look like a star to them?"

"Yes."

Zebulun gazed up into the heavens for some time.

The Way Home

Davion woke after dawn, still next to the fire pit. Someone had covered him with a blanket while he slept. He sat up and looked around. Zebulun was awake.

"Where is Quinn?" asked Davion.

"He slept in Elu and Zoya's tent," said Zebulun.

Davion raised his eyebrows. "Ah."

They ate breakfast with the forest folk. They said farewell and left at midday. A few of his new friends gave Quinn big hugs.

Zebulun bowed to Emet. "Remember my words." Emet nodded.

They returned to Sarah's camp in silence. Even Quinn seemed subdued, or maybe just exhausted. Zebulun shot two quail along the way.

The party arrived at dusk. All equines left behind were alive and well, as Sarah had promised. Kulth-Ing sat lazily nearby, watching them. Quinn hugged Friendship. Sarah made a stew from Zebulun's quail and some roots she'd gathered on the way back.

"So, Sarah," said Davion. Sarah cocked her ear in his direction as she stirred the pot. "I must ask: where did you get your iron cookware? And the forest folk — they had knives and spears of steel."

"I noticed that too," said Zebulun.

"I've seen no forge in this forest," said Davion, "and it's folk don't seem like metalworkers, so...?" He looked at Sarah.

She smiled. "I sometimes visit the kingdom or the principality — small towns on the periphery. I take furs and skins from the forest folk and trade them for things they can't make. Knives are popular, as is iron cookware."

"You're not one of them, are you?" asked Davion. "Of the forest folk, I mean."

"No," she said. "I was born in the kingdom, in a village not far from these woods."

"The nearest village I know of is two days ride."

"The village of my birth no longer exists. It's been gone for longer than you've been alive."

"Really?" asked Davion. "I'm twenty-nine. You don't look that much older than me."

Sarah smiled and stirred the pot. "I am."

"You look great for whatever age you are!" said Quinn.

Sarah chuckled silently. "Food's ready."

The meal passed in silence. Everyone ate ravenously after their long trek.

Afterwards, Davion resumed his questioning. "The forest folk aren't all from the same stock?"

"No," said Sarah. "Most are the remnant of nomads driven from the plains, but a sizable number come from the other direction. They escaped slavery in the east and made it through the swamps alive. The forest folk tend to accept them."

"We also have the occasional adventurer, hermit, or fugitive enter our forest. We're more wary of them. We let the star folk watch them for a while first. If they detect any evil intent on the part of the interloper, they deal with him. Otherwise, we introduce ourselves."

"Deal with them how?" asked Davion.

"They lure him into a bog or off a cliff," said Sarah.

Davion raised an eyebrow. "The star folk are killers?"

"Only to killers."

"Hm," said Davion.

They slept. Zebulun woke before dawn to fish in the stream at the bottom of the hill. He pulled two fat trout out of the water, cleaned them, and foraged a few quail eggs on the way back up.

He returned to camp to find Davion staring up into the branches of a longleaf pine. Davion looked at him, then looked back up. "Do you see what that fool is doing?"

Zebulun looked up. Quinn sat near the top of the pine, some hundred feet in the air, on a branch that looked too thin to support a cat. He clung to it with crossed legs, leaving his hands free to juggle pine cones as he swayed back and forth in the breeze. He was up to five.

Zebulun looked at Davion with mirth in his eyes. "Juggling."

Davion shook his head. Zebulun looked back up at Quinn and asked, "How old is he?"

"Physically or mentally?" asked Davion. "He claims to be twenty-three, but he looks like he's seventeen and acts like he's eleven."

"Six!" yelled Quinn from above.

"How did you two meet?" asked Zebulun.

"Funny story," said Davion. "It was a dark and stormy night —"

"Heads up!" shouted Quinn. A pine cone bounced off Davion's shoulder. "Sorry!" he yelled down. "I guess I'm good to five!"

"Quinn," yelled Davion, "Zebulun brought breakfast!"

Quinn scampered down the tree like a squirrel.

After breakfast, they said goodbye to Sarah.

"The forest folk appreciated your visit," said Sarah. "They wanted me to let you know that you are

all welcome here. They hope to see you again. As do I."

"I hope to see you again," said Zebulun. The others murmured their assent.

"Are the star folk here?" asked Quinn. "I'd like to say goodbye to them."

"Not at the moment," said Sarah. "They sometimes leave before dawn."

"Where do they go?"

"Right up to the edge of heaven."

"Wow," whispered Quinn, looking upward. "Why?"

"They live on sunlight. They say it's more powerful up there."

"Neat," said Quinn. Davion stared up into the blue sky, a curious look on his face.

Kulth-Ing put his paws on Quinn's shoulders and licked his face. He rubbed a nervous Davion's leg before placing his paws on Zebulun's chest and looking up into his eyes with calm.

"He likes you," said Sarah.

"We understand each other," said Zebulun, looking into the jaguar's eyes. "We're both killers."

The trip back to Azulan took twenty days.

Zebulun went back to his duties.

Davion went back to his studies.

Quinn went back to his taverns.

Questions

"Where did you go?"

Zebulun stood before the Marshal. He had been training new recruits, not one over sixteen, when a messenger told him Marshal Benjamin wanted to see him.

"I went to scout those woods," said Zebulun. "And to hunt."

"That's right," said Benjamin, "I had heard you were a skilled hunter. How was the hunting?"

"One turkey, two quail, and two trout."

"Fine hunting. You manage to eat all of that yourself?"

Zebulun lowered his eyes for a split-second, then looked up and said, "No."

"Your lieutenants said you had friends along. People they didn't know. Who were they?"

"Friends."

"Friends?" asked the Marshal. "What kind of friends? I didn't think you knew anyone outside the army."

"One is a philosopher," said Zebulun. "The other is a performer."

"A soldier, a philosopher, and a performer walked into the eastern wood?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Zebulun took a breath. "I had a hunch those woods might be our next campaign. I wanted to see them for myself before risking any of my men."

"And your companions?"

"They wanted to go," said Zebulun. "They had heard the stories of Eastwood being filled with goblins and spirits. They wanted to see it for themselves."

"And you took them?" asked Benjamin. "Why them instead of army scouts?"

"I would take the willing before commanding those required to go."

"Hm," said Benjamin. "Fair enough. So, how did the scouting go?"

"I recommend against sending soldiers in there."

"Why? What did you find? Are there people there after all?"

"Yes," said Zebulun. "I met them. They are great hunters, and they know the territory."

"You think they could defeat our hundreds of soldiers *and* our dragons?" asked the marshal. "Do they have dragons of their own?"

"Not that I've seen," said Zebulun, "but I saw other things."

"What things?"

"I can't explain," said Zebulun. "All I can tell you is that the woods are filled with elves, goblins, and spirits, just like they say. I don't know what powers they have."

"You saw these things yourself?" asked Benjamin. "Not just stories from the forest folk you met?"

"I saw them."

"Really? What did they look like?"

"Like elves, goblins, and spirits," said Zebulun. "I think they might be able to look like anything. You can't see them unless they want you to."

The marshal looked at Zebulun like he'd grown a second head. "I know you're no liar," said Benjamin, "but I have to wonder if you inhaled some swamp gas along the way."

"No, sir. I saw things I do not understand, and don't know how to fight. That's why I recommend we stay away."

"That's a lost cause," said Benjamin. "Our king wants that timber. I've already dispatched a company from Dalton to deal with the wolves."

"Wolves?" asked Zebulun.

"Wolves. A team of woodcutters we sent into the woods got attacked by wolves and ravens."

Zebulun said nothing.

"You don't seem surprised," said the marshal.

"That forest is alive," said Zebulun. "It has a mind. It has a spirit. She will defend herself."

Incursion

"The scouts have returned."

Captain Boaz turned to his lieutenant, a young man called Ehud. He had several scouts with him. They seemed pensive.

"What did you find?" asked the captain.

The lead scout stepped forward and said, "Nothing. Not a thing."

"No wolves or ravens?"

"No wolves or ravens. Also no squirrels, or rabbits, or birds of any kind. This forest should be teeming with creatures, but it's silent as the grave."

Boaz chewed his lip. "Let's move in."

"Where?"

"Did you find the place the woodcutters were attacked?"

"I think so."

"Let's go there."

The soldiers moved in. Slowly. They moved in a line, weapons ready.

"See there?" asked the lead scout, pointing to a mighty oak. "That's a whack from an axe. We found a couple of axes nearby that seem to have been dropped in haste."

"Hand me one," said the captain.

Boaz stood and listened. There was no sound. Even the wind was still.

He looked around. He saw no signs of life. His men watched him.

"They said the wolves attacked when they started on this tree?" asked Boaz.

"Right," said Ehud.

Boaz raised the axe high and took a swing, burying the head in the oak near the first gash. The sound of the impact echoed through the trees.

Boaz raised his head, looked around, and listened, holding his breath. Nothing but silence.

He let out his breath. "I guess the wolves are busy elsewhere," he said. Several of his men let out their breath as well.

"What now?" asked the lieutenant.

Boaz chewed his lip a moment before replying. "Further in."

They headed for higher ground. They moved toward the summit of the largest hill they could see, progressing in the best formation they could manage with the trees and undergrowth. Men cursed as they hacked through, menaced by thorns and nettles.

Halfway to the summit, a massive cloud of butterflies enveloped the company.

Captain Boaz heard some men chuckle. "So there's life here after all!"

Boaz tensed. Their journey through the woods had been so silent that he imagined he could hear the beating of the butterfly wings and feel their tiny breezes against his skin.

Then the half-imagined sound was replaced by a faint buzzing.

The buzzing grew in intensity. The joking and chuckling stopped.

"Ah!"

"Ow!"

"What --"

His soldiers yelped and cursed. He felt something latch on to his right arm, biting and stinging. He crushed it with his left hand and looked; it was a paper wasp.

Something stung his left arm. He killed that as well; it was a red hornet.

He heard Ehud cry out, "Yellow jackets! Thousands!"

Someone else yelled, "Ugh! Fire ants! The hornets aren't enough?"

The wasps and hornets went for the eyes. The fire ants went for the feet and genitals. The cursing turned to shouting and rolling. Only then did the wolves move in.

The captain heard growling and tearing and men screaming.

"They're eating me!"

Through the cloud, he saw a shadow in front of him, moving toward Ehud. He thrust at it with his spear and connected with flesh. The shadow roared. Some force took him off both legs and sent him sprawling down the hill.

Boaz woke to the pain of a thousand stings and a great weight upon his chest. He opened his eyes to see a seven hundred pound black bear staring him in the face. It held him down with its massive paw. It growled low.

Someone clucked their tongue behind the bear. It looked back, looked at Boaz, and shuffled backwards. He looked up at a green-cloaked woman with olive skin and long black hair. Her face seemed young and old.

The bear sat next to her. She placed her hand on its shoulder. "You're lucky to be alive," she said, "after stabbing Ursula here. She knocked you right off a cliff."

She looked at Boaz with eyes kind and sad. "Some of your men are dead," she said. "Others are lost and won't be found. Most will make it out of the woods, though none of them unscathed."

Boaz stared at the mysterious woman in disbelief.

Her eyes turned from kindness to steel. "Tell the dragons you serve," she said, "that this forest does not belong to them. This forest is alive. She will defend herself."

A Tale of Wasps

"Wasps?"

"Yes, sir," said Marshal Benjamin. "Butterflies, wasps, hornets, yellow jackets, fire ants, wolves, bears, and a mysterious woman."

"What sorcery is this?" asked the king, staring off to the right. "Wait," he said, "What woman?"

"She told Captain Boaz to tell the 'dragons he serves' that the forest is alive and will defend itself."

"There was a lone woman out in the woods with the wasps and bears?"

"So he says," said the marshal.

The king stared at him. "This is trickery."

"The solders have the wounds to prove it. Wasp and ant stings all over their bodies and vicious bites from beasts of the field."

"Sorcery can do that," said the king. "Convince a man he's being stung by a hundred wasps, and see if he doesn't grow welts. That woman is enchanting our men somehow."

The marshal lowered his eyes. "If you say so, sir." He looked up at the king. "Either way, I don't know how to fight it."

The king looked off to the east. "I do."

He turned back to Benjamin. "You said that captain of yours met a woman who claimed to live in those woods?"

"Yes, sir."

The king nodded, then looked away again. "Tell Zebulun Koh I want to see him."

Western Raiders

The midday sun shone bright and hot overhead. Soldiers of the kingdom stood in ranks, spears and shields ready, facing west.

To the west, at the crest of a gentle, sloping hill, sat the enemy on their horses: raiders from the badlands west of the kingdom. They wore wide-brimmed hats to protect them from the sun and leather boots to protect them from the snakes.

Their chieftain gave the signal. They rode towards the soldiers' line in three columns, with enough room between them for the lead horse archers to circle back after firing an arrow or three.

They were just outside effective bow range when a wall of blue-white flame rose up in front of them. The first three riders of each column were incinerated in an instant. The rest wheeled to retreat in disarray.

The wall of flame grew, stretching out in a wide arc around them twice as fast as their horses could ride. They soon found themselves surrounded by searing flames ten feet in height.

Uncomfortable moments passed.

Then the flames to the east parted, and through the gap came a dragon. It slithered slowly toward the chief, riders unable to stop their horses from bolting away from the beast. The wall of flame closed behind it.

The chief stared at the crimson serpent as it approached. All watched as the dragon began to shift in form, its wings becoming arms, its tail splitting into legs, and its size diminishing until it resembled a man. It took the form and bearing of a grizzled veteran in black armor.

"I am Nahash Aklabethel," said the dragon-man. "You've been stealing the kingdom's cattle. Couple thousand, by now."

Nahash paused. "They sent *me* to put a stop to it." He stared at the chieftain.

The chieftain steeled himself and dismounted. He looked at the man-that-was-a-dragon. "I'm Cal. I lead this little band."

"You've had success," said Nahash. "Your horse archers have given our soldiers plenty of trouble. But did you really think you could get away with stealing from *us*? We have dragons, you know."

Cal hesitated, looking at his lieutenants for a moment, before responding. "We, uh," he said, looking up at Nahash with a wince, "we got one too."

"You don't say," said Nahash, giving Cal a hard stare. "Where is he?"

Zebulun and the King

It was midnight when Marshal Benjamin escorted Zebulun into the king's hall. It was deserted save for the king, his guards, and his dragon Aurelius. It sat coiled behind the throne, its wings wrapped around its body, its serpent face staring intently. Its scales were the color of gold, but so dark they were almost black.

"Thank you, Marshal," said the king. "You may go."

The marshal turned and left. Zebulun stood still, his eyes on the king.

The king stood from his throne and walked the seven steps down to the floor. He walked towards Zebulun slowly, a slight smile on his face. The king placed a hand on Zebulun's shoulder, leaned in, and whispered into his ear, "I'll leave the two of you to speak alone."

The king signaled his guards. Zebulun watched as they followed the king out of the room, leaving him alone with the dragon. He raised his head and looked up into the serpent's eyes.

It slithered around the throne to face him. He watched as it shifted its form into that of a man; a lean, bronze-skinned man taller even than Zebulun. He wore the robes of an ancient-world emperor.

Zebulun watched as the dragon-turned-man sat down on the throne. He remembered Mak's words in the bar: *it's a trick*. He focused his mind, as one does just before letting an arrow fly. He could see that the serpent hadn't really moved — it sat coiled behind the throne as it had when he arrived. He could see through the man in front of him. It was an illusion.

Zebulun was careful to keep his eyes on the illusion.

"I am Aurelius Antipater," said the illusion. "I rule this kingdom. I intend to rule an empire. Does this surprise you?"

"No," said Zebulun.

"So you know a secret generally known only to our kind and the fair folk. How long have you known?"

"A few weeks."

The dragon and its avatar regarded him for a moment. "You haven't quit your post, or tried to lead a coup against me. I've heard no tales of you preaching the truth out in the streets. You have no objection to draconic rule?"

"It doesn't matter if I object," said Zebulun. "It's the way of the world. The strong rule the weak."

"Well said," said the serpent. "If all men understood that, there would be no need for this subterfuge. Your kind's odd feelings of *empathy* and *solidarity* make you difficult to manage, otherwise."

The dragon continued, "Your superiors say you're a master of tactics. That you were the one who won the last battle against Kanaark."

"It was my men who won the battle," said Zebulun.

"Spoken like a true leader of men!" said the dragon. "I can see why you inspire loyalty. I want to use that. I need the timber from the eastern woods to build an imperial navy. I can't invade other kingdoms with the paltry ships I have today."

The dragon paused. "I'll elevate you to the rank of general. I'll put five companies under your command. I'll even send a dragon with you, and tell it to heed your tactical guidance. I want you to secure those woods for me."

Zebulun lowered his eyes. He took a deep breath, let it out, then raised his head to look past the serpent's illusion and into its real eyes.

"No."

Dragon Warlord

Nahash sat coiled, his wings folded around his body. Before him, a few yards away, sat coiled a younger dragon with an air of disdain. His scales still showed flecks of turquoise among the blue. He wore thick steel chains across his chest and around his wings. Gold and silver jewelry dangled from them.

Nahash whispered into the other's mind. *What do you call yourself, youngster?*

The stranger opened its pupils and mouth slightly in amusement. *I am Zan, Warlord of the Badlands, Master of Cowboys, and Tormentor of Domesticated Dragons.*

Nahash gave a mild hiss, the draconic equivalent of a scoff. *Warlord, eh? Fancy titles. You call your horse archers "cowboys"?*

They wrangle cattle, said Zan, *and most of them are no more than boys.*

Nahash gave Zan a hard look. *Why have you been raiding our livestock, bluenose?*

Because I can, bloodface, said Zan. *Because its fun to steal from you civilized types, and to see my cowboys rout your trained soldiers.*

You must have known they would send someone like me to deal with you, said Nahash.

Sure, said Zan, *but that doesn't mean I cared. I don't scare easily.*

"What are they doing?" whispered Jethro. "Them snakes are just staring at each other!"

Cal shook his head slowly. "No idea. Maybe it's some dragon ritual. Or maybe they communicate without talking."

Your horse archers are impressive, said Nahash. *They have defeated our soldiers in a couple of engagements. But you can't expect them to win—you don't have the numbers. Why not become a vassal of the kingdom? We could use your archers in our next campaign.*

I've never liked taking orders, said Zan, *Especially from uptight, self-important rule-worshipers like yourself. I can make my own way in this world. I don't need a ruler.*

You won't live long with that attitude, said Nahash. *In this world, the strong rule the weak.*

We'll see who is who, said Zan.

Nahash and Zan stared at one another for a moment. Nahash broke the silence. *Shall we do this?*

I prefer to duel by moonlight, said Zan, *and I never duel below the lower clouds.*

You like the cold? asked Nahash.

No, said Zan, *but I know how much others hate it.*

Well, said Nahash, *if you're **determined** for this to be a duel to the death, I won't disappoint you.*

I hope not! said Zan.

Full moon tonight, said Nahash. *I'll see you at midnight. Above the clouds.*

Resignation

Davion opened the door. "Zebulun," he said. "Come in. We were just talking about you."

Zebulun stepped inside. Quinn sat at the table, scarfing down food. He waved and said, "Hey, Z! I was just telling Davion how you quit the army."

Zebulun looked at Quinn, then at Davion, then back to Quinn. "That was just this morning," he said.

"Well, you know," said Quinn, "I go a lot of places, talk to a lot of people. I heard some soldiers talking about it in a bar, so I ran here to tell Davion."

Davion motioned; Zebulun sat at the table. Davion brought drinks for them.

"So," said Davion, "is it true? Did you resign?"

"It's true," said Zebulun.

"Why'd you quit?" asked Quinn.

"Sarah was right. Dragons rule the kingdom. I heard it from the serpent itself. Aurelius Antipater commanded me to lead an invasion of Eastwood. I refused."

"And he didn't eat you? Did you have to run fast?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Zebulun. "He asked me why."

"No way!" said Quinn.

"What did you tell him?" asked Davion.

"The truth," said Zebulun. "I told him I was tired. That I'd done my duty for twenty-three years. That I'd seen too many friends killed on the battlefield. That I wanted to retire to a quiet life in the country."

"How did he respond to that?" asked Davion.

"He offered me land and gold. And women. Elevation to fair folk status. I told him I wanted none of those things. He seemed mystified, then expressed disdain and told me to leave his sight. And the city."

Everyone paused. "Wait," said Davion. "Back up a moment—you had a conversation with the dragon? They can talk?"

"Not with their mouths," said Zebulun. "Not that I've seen. He projected an illusion into my mind. He appeared as a man. With concentration, one can see through it."

Davion raised his eyebrows, then furrowed them, deep in thought. He stared at the ground. "I wonder if all dragons can do this."

"I've only met one," said Zebulun.

"So you have to leave the city?" asked Quinn. "Where will you go? Back to the village of Koh?"

"No," said Zebulun. "Maybe someday. I haven't seen it since I was ten. Right now I'm going to back to Eastwood."

"You're going to warn Sarah about the invasion," said Davion.

"Yes."

"Are you going to fight for the forest folk?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Zebulun. "I can't take up arms against my countrymen. The forest folk will have to defend themselves." Zebulun sighed. "But they deserve a warning."

Zebulun turned to Davion. "Want to come?"

"Of course," said Davion. "I don't love the idea of going into a potential war zone, but the place was fascinating. The people were fascinating. I would love to see more."

"Me too!" said Quinn. He looked at Zebulun with pleading eyes. "Can we go tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Veteran and Warlord

They met by moonlight, ten thousand feet above the ground. The moon shone bright; it reflected off the few clouds below them. It was cold. A moderate wind whipped around them, the only sound other than the beating of their wings.

Nahash whispered to Zan, *Ready?*

Zan opened his mouth wide in assent.

Good, said Nahash. *You go first. Show me what you got.*

Zan's eyes sparkled. Nahash found himself on fire. He felt the agony and smelled the burned flesh. He instinctively focused his will on the molecules around him, removing energy from the system to extinguish the flames. Nothing happened.

Wait. Nahash focused his will again, this time in a lateral direction. The flames disappeared.

Nice try, said Nahash. *We train for this, you know. You can't do that, can you?*

Zan's eyes glittered. *It's true*, he whispered into Nahash's mind. *I never had a tutor for magery, and math was never my thing anyway. I can't make flames or lightning. But it doesn't matter.*

Why is that? asked Nahash.

*Because I'm the **best** at sorcery!* said Zan.

Let's see you deal with the real world of physics, said Nahash.

The air shimmered between them. Zan banked and dove out of the way of a searing column of heat. He soared in a circle, coming back to face Nahash, and opened his mouth in a draconic grin. *You liked my illusion so much that you wanted to set me on fire for real?*

Your turn, said Nahash.

Nahash felt a blast of mental energy invade his mind. Blackness accelerated from the edge of his vision, becoming first tunnel-vision, and then nothing. He could neither see, nor hear, nor even feel his own wings flapping.

He didn't panic. He'd trained for this. He took his time, summoned his will, and cast off the illusion.

He could see again. He had fallen some two hundred feet. He spun around, flapped his wings, and righted himself. He glared up at Zan.

Going for the quick finish? he asked.

I often let gravity do the work for me, said Zan.

I'm surprised you know the term, said Nahash. *Anyway, two can play at that game.*

A burst of blinding light and deafening sound hit Zan square. He could see only spots and hear nothing but a high-pitched whine. He turned and dove in the general direction of a cloud he'd seen

a moment before. He felt another wave of heat miss him by a yard right before he felt the comforting embrace of water vapor around him.

He glided in circles until his hearing returned. He could see nothing through the fog. He exited the cloud via the bottom and spun around. No sign of the enemy. *He must be above.*

Nahash hovered above the cloud, waiting for Zan to appear. Without warning, he felt a legion of bugs crawling beneath his skin. He looked down at himself. He clearly saw various worms and beetles moving beneath his scales.

Ugh. Nahash focused his will. The bugs continued. Zan had gotten him good.

Nahash tried to ignore the itching and squirming. He scanned the edge of the cloud for his opponent. He spotted him on the western fringe, some hundred yards away, hovering and trying to remain unseen.

Zan's muscles twitched in agony as lightning arced from Nahash's claws into his body. He smelled burning. He dove back into the cloud.

Nahash rose and circled at a higher altitude, scanning the edge of the cloud.

Zan burst out from the center of the top and hit Nahash with a burst of mental energy. No delusions or sensory deprivation this time, just the blinding pain of telepathy turned all the way up. Nahash felt Zan screaming in his skull.

Nahash spotted Zan and dove in his direction. Zan retreated back into the cloud. Nahash used his best guess at Zan's location and focused his will to suck all the ambient energy out of the area. The cloud became cold.

Sudden, arctic temperatures surrounded Zan. The water in the cloud sucked the heat right out of him, causing him to fall. He struggled to regain equilibrium as Nahash dove after him.

Zan saw a shimmer between them and felt the chains he wore seize up around him, pulling taught and pinning his wings. He dropped like a stone. Nahash dove after him to confirm the kill. Zan caught his eye.

Almost a minute later, Nahash saw Zan crash into the Earth. His bones and organs shattered. Nahash landed and slithered over to the body. It vanished.

Nahash stared at the ground. It held no sign of a three-thousand pound reptile crashing into it from ten thousand feet. He looked up. *Clever.*

Nahash focused his will. A hole in space appeared above him. He flew through it and arrived back at ten thousand feet.

He waited, circling and scanning in all directions. Nothing. Zan was gone.

Back East

"How long do we have?"

Zebulun looked at Sarah. "Five weeks. Maybe four, if they force march."

"How many soldiers?" asked Sarah.

"Five companies. That's around seven hundred fifty fighting men. They're sending a dragon with them."

"I suspected they would, after last time," said Sarah. She told the trio about the two previous incursions.

"Can you fight a dragon with wolves and wasps?" asked Davion.

"No," said Sarah. "Wolves can't fly, and a draconic mage could vaporize an army of wasps or ravens."

"What about the star people?" asked Quinn. "They have powers!"

"Not to match those of a dragon," said Sarah, "but they may be able to help."

"I've seen military dragons in action," said Zebulun. "One could burn down this entire forest."

"But they won't, though," said Davion, his eyes on the fire. He cocked his head towards Zebulun. "Right? I mean, you said they want this timber."

"They'll sacrifice some of it to get all of it," said Zebulun.

"I can prevent that," said Sarah.

"How?" asked Davion.

"I shall summon the storm."

Army at the Border

The setting sun blazed orange through the trees. Sarah sat upright on a bench, her hands in her lap, her head tilted back as if listening to the wind.

She opened her eyes. A tiny star appeared before her, expanding to a small globe that glowed like sunlight. In the globe hovered a bronze man with long blond hair and wings like an eagle. He said, in that strange digital voice of the star folk, "The army is here."

"A dragon is with them?" asked Sarah.

"Yes. Light green scales."

"It must be young," said Sarah. "For a dragon."

"I read that dragon scales grow darker with age," said Davion.

"Yes," said Sarah. "The oldest grow so black they seem to absorb light."

"How do you know this?" asked Davion.

"The spirit of the forest whispers to me," said Sarah. "She tells me things she's seen over thousands of years."

"Hm." Davion stared at the ground, his brow furrowed.

"What other kinds of things has the ghost lady told you?" asked Quinn.

Sarah smiled. "She told me a race of one-eyed giants once populated these lands."

Quinn's face lit up. "For real?"

"Cyclopes?" asked Davion. "I thought they were myth."

"They were real," said Sarah. "They had an advanced civilization two thousand years ago. They built many of the strange ruins that dot the land deeper in the forest." She looked at Davion. "I'll take you to see some, one day, should I survive this."

"What happened to them?" asked Davion.

"I'm not sure," said Sarah. "All civilizations collapse in time. Dragons may have had something to do with their downfall."

Davion stared at the fire, looking thoughtful.

Sarah stood up. "We'll need to leave before dawn. It will take a couple of hours to reach the apex of the tallest hill in the area. There's a cave there. It can shelter us from the storm."

William and David

"Feels like rain."

David looked up. "That old wound?"

"Yes," said William. "Aches every time."

"I don't see any clouds."

"You will."

They sat in silence for a time, firelight flickering off their faces. Their camp sat a few hundred yards from the treeline, ten yards uphill from a stream that fed into the Rose River. Soldiers wandered about, preparing for tomorrow's incursion.

"Is it too late to say congratulations?" asked William.

"Oh yeah, the promotion," said David. "I made captain just in time for them to send me into certain death."

"It's not that bad, is it?"

"It's bad. Rumor round the fort is that the soldiers who went in before got attacked by the forest itself."

"I heard something about that," said William.

"Yeah."

"But we have a dragon with us. That changes things."

"Yeah," said David, staring into the fire. "We'll see."

Quiet reigned for a time.

"I still can't believe Zeb quit," said William.

"Me neither," said David. "I thought he'd be in the army forever. Probably make general."

"Any idea what happened to him?" asked William.

"No idea. I think he left the capital right afterwards."

William scowled. "I wonder why."

"No idea. He didn't say anything."

Another period of silence.

William poked at the fire, scowling. He muttered, "Why did they send chariots?"

"Ugh," said David. "I know. Totally useless in wooded hills. Cavalry too. I doubt the wolves and squirrels are going to fight in formation for us."

"Squirrels?"

"It wouldn't shock me," said David.

William grinned. "I think the new general just wanted to command horses and chariots." David nodded.

William poked the fire some more. Then he looked up at the sky and said, "Look."

David looked up. Clouds had rolled in.

Storm at Dawn

A thunderclap greeted the dawn. They stood inside the mouth of a cave twenty feet wide and ten feet high. Torrential rains poured outside. It faced west, toward the enemy, so they could see the dawn only in the illumination of the woods before them.

Sarah sat cross-legged on a blanket, just far enough inside the cave to avoid the rain, her eyes closed and her cape and hair whipping in the wind. She'd sat that way for two hours as the storm rolled in.

Quinn slept next to Kulth-Ing, his arms spooning the cat, snoring softly. Kulth-Ing kicked his feet and growled low as if chasing a deer in his sleep.

Davion sat quietly with his back against the cave wall, far from Kulth-Ing, deep in thought.

Zebulun stood near the entrance, his armor on, spear in hand, and sword strapped to his side.

Davion stood and wandered over to Zebulun. He whispered, "Are you planning to fight the soldiers?"

"No," said Zebulun. "I can't fight my brothers in arms. Not even if I disagree with what they're doing. They don't even know what they're doing."

"Then why the arms and armor?"

"In case a dragon shows up," said Zebulun. "I'd fight a dragon."

Green Dragon

"It's been three days. I grow impatient."

The general looked at the figure before him. He had watched as the serpent shifted its shape into the form of a man, a handsome young soldier in green armor.

"We can't march in during a thunderstorm, sir," said the general. "We'd have no visibility. We would be lucky to make half a mile in an hour, with all the mud... and we don't know where we're going."

"Don't you think it strange," asked the dragon, "that this torrent begins every day before dawn and ends every day after dusk?"

"It is strange," said the general. "But we still can't go in. We'd be sitting ducks for an ambush."

"So what you're telling me," said the dragon, "is that you and your men are useless right now."

The general bristled, but said nothing.

"Fine," said the serpent. "Your men can shiver in camp. Storm or no storm, tomorrow I'm going in there myself."

Shelter from the Storm

"It's been three days," said Zebulun. "How long can you keep this up?"

Sarah looked up at him with weary eyes. "It gets more exhausting each day. I've already drawn too much energy from the environment. Were I to keep this up longer than five days, the forest itself would be harmed."

"After that?" asked Zebulun.

"I would need to wait a few weeks before doing it again," said Sarah. "The forest needs time to return to equilibrium."

"So," said Davion, staring out of the cave mouth, "In three days, we're in trouble."

"Yes," said Sarah. "Unless the serpent makes a mistake."

Dragon in the Woods

The green serpent slithered through the forest, his wings held over his head like an umbrella. It was dark, muddy, and cold for the end of summer. Rain poured all around him.

The woods were silent, save for the sound of rain and the occasional thunderclap. He saw not one bird or beast, even when lightning lit the sky.

He came to the oak where the wolves attacked the woodcutters. He saw the gash from the axe on its side. The dragon looked around; he saw no one. He focused his will, summoned the energy, and lit the mighty oak with a white flame so hot that raindrops turned to steam before they could douse it.

He looked and listened. No wolves or ravens.

He proceeded to the hill where wasps assaulted the soldiers. He looked up to the apex and saw a cave. The serpent slithered up the slope towards it.

Be Ready

"Michael," whispered Sarah, as if half asleep. The bronze angel with the eagle wings appeared with a flaming sword in his hand.

"The dragon approaches," she said. "You know what to do."

Michael nodded and flew out of the cave.

She turned slightly, her eyes still closed, and clicked her tongue at Kulth-Ing five times in rapid succession. He woke, stretched, and walked over to her.

Quinn woke with a start. He looked at Davion. "What's up?"

Davion stared out of the cave. "A dragon is coming."

"Yes!" said Quinn. "I've never seen one up close before."

"Not sure I want to," said Davion.

"Zebulun," whispered Sarah.

"Yes?"

"Be ready."

Storm of Angels

A hair-thin beam of light shot from the sky and burned a tiny hole in the dragon's wing. The green serpent let out a deep bass hiss and looked up. There, one hundred feet up, hovered a translucent, pixelated bronze man with wings like an eagle and a sword of flame. The dragon stared for a moment, raised its wings, and flew up into the storm. The angel fled upward with incredible speed.

The dragon chased the angel up to twenty-seven hundred feet. The downpour made it difficult to fly, and the thunderclaps were deafening. He focused his mind and shot a beam of red-hot heat at his quarry, who dodged easily.

The angel turned to face him. The serpent suddenly found itself surrounded by dozens of similar creatures who appeared out of nowhere. One looked like a blue-skinned woman with butterfly wings. Another resembled a man with bat wings, with the legs and horns of a goat. One looked like a green frog with four eyes.

They entered battle. The frog tried to hit the dragon with a wave of pure force, which he deflected with his mind. Bat-wings hit him with a beam of heat, scorching his scales. The bronze angel tried to hit him with another ray of light. He dodged.

The dragon summoned his power and sent a spherical wave of force outward from his body. His enemies seemed unaffected.

The dragon circled, the beings swarming around him. Force had failed. He sent a wave of searing heat outward instead. Raindrops vaporized into steam, but his opponents ignored it.

Then he saw the cave at the top of the hill, just a few hundred feet away. He saw a man in armor standing there with a spear. Next to him, an enormous black panther. *What sorcery is this?*

The enemy continued pecking at him. He ignored them and flew towards the cave.

When he was within fifty yards, the light-beings suddenly stopped swarming around him and lined up below and above him. A thunderclap echoed across the land as a bolt of lightning shot straight through the enemies above him, through his heart, and on through the enemies below him to the ground.

The dragon seized and fell to earth.

Dragon Slayers

Kulth-Ing leapt from the cave and bounded down the hill. Zebulun followed.

One hundred yards down, a dragon struggled to rise up on his coils. The pine that broke his fall had shredded his left wing. Dozens of his ribs felt broken, plus a few vertebrae. His heartbeat felt weak.

The dragon heard footsteps. Zebulun walked into his field of vision.

That armor, whispered the dragon into his mind. *You are one of ours?*

"No," said Zebulun. "Not anymore." He readied his spear and shield and advanced on the serpent.

The dragon opened its mouth and pupils slightly in a draconic display of mirth. *You think you can kill me, sheep-dog?* it whispered into Zebulun's mind. *Even in my state, I am better than you.*

The air shimmered between them. Zebulun got his shield up just in time to watch it burst into flame. He winced and slung it away, gripping his spear with both hands, and advanced.

Something like a tentacle made from space itself lashed out and wrapped itself around Zebulun before he could react. He found himself pinned, his arms crushed to his sides and the shaft of his spear pressed against his body. The force lifted him a few feet into the air, and closer to the serpent.

You are nothing, whispered the dragon. *You are a dog we train to keep the sheep in line. No more.*

Zebulun felt the grip tighten. His breastplate creaked under the strain.

A shadow launched itself from behind the serpent and latched onto its back. Kulth-Ing savaged the snake with claws and teeth. Blood flew.

The dragon let out a hiss of pain and rolled, crushing the cat under it with its weight. Kulth-Ing let out a roar and continued slashing at the dragon from below.

The force gripping Zebulun vanished.

Zebulun had killed (and eaten) snakes before. The heart was usually just behind the head, where the body began to widen. Some had just one long lung running down their body; others had a second, smaller lung near the front.

The dragon rose up and lunged at Kulth-Ing, as if to devour him. Zebulun charged forward and aimed for the most hopeful place to hit an organ.

The serpent's eyes grew wide as Zebulun drove in the tip of his spear. It turned its head, stared at him for a heartbeat, then fell and died.

Spiritual Healing

Zebulun and Kulth-Ing limped back to the cave and collapsed on the cold stone floor. Sarah knelt to aid Zebulun, who waved her off. "I'm okay," he said. "Just bruised. See to the cat."

Sarah nodded and turned to Kulth-Ing. He was breathing hard. She placed her gentle hands on him. "His leg is broken. A moment."

Sarah closed her eyes. A moment passed. The three men watched as the cat's labored breathing slowed, its eyes calming and narrowing. It drifted off to sleep.

"He'll be fine after some rest," she said.

Davion looked down at the panther, his brow furrowed. "What did you just do?"

"A simple transfer of energy," she said, "from one place to another to shape a transformation."

"I don't understand," said Davion.

"You may, in time," she said with a smile.

She turned to Zebulun. "Now will you accept my help?"

Zebulun nodded. "I may have a broken rib or three."

Sarah knelt and laid hands on him. Zebulun felt a strange tingle as some alien spirit entered his flesh. He felt his bones mend, as they would have over time, but accelerated. His bruises faded away.

Zebulun looked at Sarah. "The forest gives you this power?"

"The spirit of the forest," she said.

"I feel healed."

"You are."

"Good," said Zebulun, "because there's something else I need to do. I'll meet you back in camp."

Logistics

Zebulun returned to camp just before dawn. He laid his weapons on the ground. Slowly, wearily, he removed his helmet and breastplate.

Quinn woke up. "Where did you go?"

"To send a message to the soldiers camped outside the forest."

"You talked to them?"

"Not in so many words."

Sarah sat up. "Zebulun," she said, "How long can the soldiers remain?"

"No more than a few weeks without resupply," he said. "There's no nearby river large enough to bring food or firewood by ship. Transporting food over land is expensive. Unless they can forage, they'll run out."

"The only forageable food fit for human consumption is here in our forest," said Sarah. "We can prevent that."

"Then you should be fine — until they send another dragon."

Sarah nodded, her eyes thoughtful.

Davion awoke. "You're back. Is everything alright?"

"For the moment," said Zebulun. He threw a log on the fire and stoked the fading coals until it lit.

"Well," said Sarah. "We have some time on our hands. Zebulun, you once said you were in no mood for visions. Are you in the mood now?"

Zebulun looked at the breaking dawn. "I might be."

Message at Dawn

"Sir. You need to see this."

The general turned to the captain. It was barely past dawn.

"See what?"

"A message."

Cross, the general followed the captain to the outskirts of camp. The captain pointed toward the treeline. There, mounted on a wooden pike, sat the head of the green dragon.

The general chewed his lip. "Send a rider to the capital."

Preparations

Sarah stirred the iron pot with a large wooden spoon. The brew smelled of mushrooms, herbs, and something else. Something bitter.

Davion leaned down and inhaled the steam. He wrinkled his nose. "It smells harsh."

"It is," said Sarah. "I've added molasses to soften the blow, but it will still taste foul."

"What's in it?"

"Two of the ingredients, you've already had," said Sarah. "The mushrooms, from the brew you had with the forest folk before, and the flowers you smoked in their pipe. The third ingredient is a vine that grows only around the oldest trees in the forest. It is potent in its own right, and will magnify the potency of the other two."

"So," said Davion, "This will be a bit more intense than that was?"

"Yes. You will leave this world and go somewhere else."

"Where?"

"That depends on you."

Davion looked thoughtful.

"For how long?" asked Quinn.

"The potion lasts around twelve hours," said Sarah. "Take it in the afternoon, and it should wear off an hour or two after midnight."

"Wow!" said Quinn. "The last batch wore off after like five hours."

"This will not."

"What should we expect?" asked Zebulun.

"Expect nothing for the first hour or so," said Sarah. "Eventually, you will begin to feel vibrations. You'll become far more alert and attentive to the world around you."

She stirred the pot some more, then tasted a sip. "By hour two, you'll experience serious distortions of reality. You may see visions or hear voices. Living beings will have halos. Sounds will echo upon themselves."

She stopped to look at the three of them. "At some point, you will feel as if you are dying. When that happens, the best thing to do is die. Just lie down and let go. Try to fight it, and you will have a terrible time."

Davion shifted nervously.

"Remember," she said, "It's not your body that's dying. It's your attachment to this world. You're just shedding your second skin for a time. Your body will be here waiting for you when you return."

Kulth-Ing and I will see to that."

"You're not going out of this world with us?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Sarah. "I've been there enough times. My job tonight is to be your guide."

Vibrations

Sarah handed a bowl of her brew to each of them.

"This doesn't look like much," said Quinn. "I think I had three times as much last time."

Sarah smiled. "This is significantly more potent. You may wind up wishing you had taken less."

Davion looked green. He stared into the bowl and said, "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

"Aw, come on, dude!" said Quinn. "I know you're not gonna let your *fear* win over your *curiosity*!"

Davion chuckled, his eyes lowered. "You're right," he said. "I am *deathly* curious." He took a shy sip.

"He who would pun would pick a pocket!" said Quinn.

"You would know more about that than I," said Davion.

Quinn grinned. "Hey, I'm no thief! I pick a man's pocket while performing, then give it right back to him. It gets a laugh from the crowd, and sometimes the owner gives me a coin out of the pouch I just returned. Everybody wins!"

He took a gulp from his bowl and wrinkled his nose. "Ugh! That was not delicious."

"Best to sip slowly," said Sarah, "Over twenty minutes or so."

Zebulun took a sip. It was bitter.

The three of them sipped in silence.

One hour in, Zebulun noticed multi-colored halos around his friends. He looked around. The equines, tethered nearby, had halos as well. So did the trees. He realized he could hear the babbling of the nearby creek where they fetched water. He realized he could always hear it, but didn't notice most of the time.

Davion sat on the ground, staring into the fire. "So strange," he said. His voice echoed upon itself in Zebulun's mind. Davion slowly waved his hand before his face, staring in awe. Zebulun saw Davion's hand in seven places at once, as if time itself were echoing.

Quinn lay on his side on the ground, his eyes closed, softly singing some old folk song. Zebulun felt he could hear the playing of non-existent guitars and harps, and the beating of invisible drums, alongside it.

Zebulun laid on the ground and looked up at the stars. Every few seconds, a halo would appear around a star, followed by a beam of light shooting from that star to another nearby. It looked like star folk flying from star to star in the blink of an eye.

As things progressed, Zebulun's vision turned chaotic. Geometric shapes filled his vision wherever he looked. Quinn's song seemed to echo unto infinity. The concept of time lost all meaning.

Zebulun knew he was about to die. It was his time. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and

accepted his fate.

Mycenae

Davion found himself standing on a cliff overlooking the sea. The dawning sun sent cascades of light across the waves. The wind whipped his clothes.

He turned, slowly, taking it all in. He saw a road meandering off to the horizon along the coastline. In the other direction, it led to a hill, where it spiraled up to a great walled city. Davion stared in awe, thought for a moment, then followed the road.

The city was larger than any he'd seen, but he saw no sources of food or wood around it. Not one forest or farm. Was this a ruin?

The rusted gates were open. Wrought-iron runes spelled something atop the gate in an ancient language he didn't recognize. He walked through them with caution and pause.

Winds blew dust through empty streets. Massive stones formed the buildings of the city, too massive for a score of men to lift. The buildings seemed made for giants. Doors were fifteen feet tall.

Davion wandered the deserted city up towards the center. Water flowed through the city via aqueducts. The trickle of water was the loudest thing present, other than his heartbeat. There was no one around.

He reached the center. A massive hall stood before him, with oaken doors twenty feet high. As he stared in wonder, one of the doors opened.

Before him stood a giant. It was twelve feet tall, and must have weighed a thousand pounds or more. In the center of its brow sat one huge eye. "Welcome, Davion," it said.

Davion furrowed his brow. "You know my name?"

"I've been expecting you," said the cyclops. "My name is Acmonides. I have things to show you."

Davion crept up the stairs towards him. "What is this place?"

Acmonides gave a gentle smile. "Your use of 'this' is ambiguous," he said. "So I will give multiple answers."

"You are on the Astral Plane—the plane of experience. It's the first level up from the Physical Plane. It's where memories and experiences live. You come here when you dream and when you die."

"Am I dead?" asked Davion.

The cyclops shook its head. "Dreaming."

Davion's face showed noticeable relief. "It felt like dying."

"You had to shed your physical form," said Acmonides. "As for this city," he said, waving his arm in a grand sweeping motion, "it's called Mycenae. It's the memory of a city that once was."

"And this," he said, indicating the massive hall, "is the great library."

Davion eyes widened. "A library?"

The giant nodded. "It contains more scrolls than you could read in a hundred lifetimes."

Davion stared in amazement.

"Fortunately," said Acmonides, "I've chosen a few for you to help narrow it down. Come."

Davion hesitated, sighed, shook his head, and followed the cyclops inside.

Acmonides sat Davion at a human-sized desk and placed three scrolls before him. "Read this one first," he said, pointing to the one on the left. "It contains the basics of logic, geometry, and mathematics. Some of it will be review for you, but much will be surprising."

"You'll need to digest that one to understand the next one," he said, indicating the scroll in the middle. "This one is about physics."

"Physics?" asked Davion.

"A subset of natural philosophy focused on the fundamental forces and energies of the world. This one will be eye-opening."

"The last," said Acmonides, pointing to the scroll on the right, "is about computation. It's the border between the ideal world of mathematics and the physical world you inhabit. It's math bound by hard physical limits."

Davion furrowed his brow and looked at the scroll. "How do you mean? Limits?"

"For example," said Acmonides, "You can think of any number in an instant. You can think of two, three, five, seven, or two-thousand three hundred fifty-seven, and no number takes longer than another. They are ideas fixed in place."

"But," he continued, "if you want to count a certain number of physical objects, be they rocks or sticks or rabbits, it would take some amount of space and time. Counting one thousand rocks takes greater time and space than counting ten. Computation is the study of that."

"Hm," said Davion.

"Go on," said Acmonides. "I'll leave you alone for a while."

Davion picked up the first scroll and unrolled it. The first part defined basic arithmetic. Nothing in it was new to him except the concept of zero, which surprised him.

As he read on, he encountered much that was new. He scrolled past strange formulas with terse explanations that he committed to memory even as he struggled to grasp their meanings. Polytopes, rates of change, and vectors entered his mind.

When he reached the end, he turned to the second scroll. It described the foundation of physical reality. He read of the fundamental forces of the world. He learned the geometry of space and time. The prose was terse; most of the explanation was mathematical. Davion saw that these equations

could let one predict and control such forces. He devoured the scroll in awe.

Finally, he picked up the third scroll. It spoke of algorithms to do calculations in physical space, and the different trade-offs of space and time between them. He read of abstraction, of giving equations names so they can be referenced by other equations. He imagined the interplay of expressions and the environment they inhabit.

He put the scrolls down and stared into space. How long had he been reading?

"Finished already?" asked Acmonides.

Davion started. He'd been so engrossed in the scrolls that he had failed to notice the cyclops in the room. "Yes," he said, still staring into space. "But I'm not sure how much of it I comprehend."

"Let it sink in," said the cyclops.

"How long have I been here?" asked Davion.

"Time works differently here," said Acmonides. "Time is part of the physical world; there's but an echo of it here in the Dreamlands. Go further up the ladder of abstraction, and it ceases to have any meaning."

"How long can I stay?"

"A while longer," said Acmonides. "These scrolls are but a brief introduction. You'll need to learn more when you return."

"How?" asked Davion. "These scrolls seem to have knowledge beyond anything I've encountered."

"Ask the star folk," said Acmonides. "They know these subjects."

"Really?"

"They do," said Acmonides, smiling. "You should speak to them when you get home."

Paradise

Quinn found himself floating in clear, cool water under a warm noonday sun. He was naked, but so was everyone else. Beautiful people of all shapes, sizes, and colors frolicked in the waters around him.

The water was only chest-high. He stood up and looked around. They swam in a large man-made pool of wrought stone fed by an aqueduct. Lovely young men and women swam, splashed, and played. On the grass beyond the stone, nude lovers embraced in front of everyone, shameless.

Quinn stared, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. "I *am* dead!"

A couple of girls near him giggled. They had the smooth, brown skin of those who spent hours in the sun, but not toiling. Their hair and eyes were dark. "Dead?" one asked.

"I must be," he said. "This is paradise!"

The girls laughed. "I guess it is," they laughed. "Come and play!"

Quinn played. He joined in whatever games the revelers played, most of which seemed to be excuses for lots of splashing and touching. He made love with others in the grass. Hours passed. He didn't care if he was dead.

He returned to the water. He floated, tranquil, staring into the blue sky as the afternoon sun fell low. He spotted a shape soaring above, spiraling down and growing larger until he recognized its serpentine form.

A cheer went up from the revelers. Quinn looked around, confused. Everyone left the pool and headed down a path through a garden. Quinn followed.

The group led him to a marble palace like something from the legends of the ancient world. Servants provided clean clothes of fine silk and cotton. The revelers entered a huge banquet hall; on the tables sat the finest meats, fish, and fruits of the Earth. They all sat, but no one ate. Quinn noticed this and stopped right before popping a berry in his mouth. He waited.

The dragon slithered through a large door in the other side of the hall. It sat on a dais, coiled about itself, and wrapped its wings around its coils. Quinn watched as it slowly morphed into the shape of a man, but with dark green scales like the dragon's. It smiled and raised its hands. "Eat!"

The diners cheered and tore into the meal, devouring with reckless abandon. Servants brought cup after cup of beer and wine. Quinn felt a mild buzz when the dragon called to him.

"You!" it said. "I don't think I recognize you. Come here."

Quinn gulped down his wine and moved to stand before the dragon. A servant came and refilled his cup. He looked up at the dragon-man and said, "Cheers! I'm a visitor. Thanks for the hospitality!"

The dragon-man looked amused. "A visitor from where?"

"Um," said Quinn, "The real world? I came down from the north. That's why I'm so pale."

"Although," he said, "you seem to have every color of the rainbow here. What is this place?"

"This is my home," said the dragon-man. "I am Jehizkiah, lord of this vast estate."

"And a fine estate it is," said Quinn. "What little I've seen. That swimming hole is wonderful."

"Yes," said Jehizkiah. "I had it constructed for my pets."

"Your pets?"

"All of these new friends of yours," said Jehizkiah. "I keep them as pets. I give them the best food and drink, make the others serve their needs, and demand nothing of them. They are as happy as your kind can be."

"Huh," said Quinn. "Being your pet doesn't sound so bad!"

"It was a great privilege," said the dragon-man, "until things turned."

Quinn raised his eyebrow.

"Come and see," said the serpent.

The atmosphere changed. Time seemed to stand still. Quinn heard a distant roar like a stampede.

The roar grew. Hundreds of people howled in anger as they burst into the hall. They attacked the dragon's pets with clubs, knives, and farm implements. The pets shrieked and fled in terror, but more attackers waited on all sides.

Quinn looked at Jehizkiah in shock. "Why are you allowing this? Can't you stop them with your dragon powers? I've seen them in action!"

"I can't stop it," said Jehizkiah, "because it's already happened. It happened hundreds of years ago, when I was away. My livestock revolted and murdered my pets. They couldn't burn down my stone palace, but they did take everything they could and ran off."

"Why?" asked Quinn. "Were you cruel to them?"

"I?" asked the dragon. "I treated them no worse than any other master. I even tried to make sure they were well-fed, so they would be able workers."

"No," said Jehizkiah, "It was your people who were cruel. I gave my pets absolute dominion over my livestock, and they treated them with absolute contempt. They abused them, again and again, until some spark lit the tinder that led to the conflagration."

"Wow," said Quinn. "They seemed like such nice, fun people."

"They were, if they saw you as one of them. If not, you were beneath contempt. They knew they were special, you see. Better than others. By giving them everything they wanted for nothing, I made them like dragons."

Quinn looked out the window. He could see the pool below, the setting sun reflecting off the water and blood, with floating young bodies of all shapes, sizes, and colors.

"Crazy," said Quinn.

The blood and people vanished. He found himself alone with the dragon.

"How did you make me see all of those things?"

"We dragons have that power. The ability to manipulate the emotions and perceptions of others. Its a great skill to have, if you mean to rule."

"Sounds cool."

"Yes," said the serpent. "You should ask the next dragon you meet to teach you sorcery."

Labyrinth

Zebulun found himself in the desert, in a valley surrounded by mountains. It was sunset, the hot desert air turning cool.

Before him, near the center of the valley, stood towering walls of granite stretching far to his left and right. A narrow aperture beckoned. He went towards it. As he grew closer, he realized the aperture was ten feet across; it looked narrow due to the sheer height of the walls, which were closer to ninety.

Zebulun looked inside. A short distance in, the tunnel took a sharp turn to the right. He looked up and saw a strip of sky between the two walls. A strange moss glowed soft and blue where the walls met the earth. He went in.

The initial turn led to a long, circular path throughout the structure. Zebulun was sure he was near the entrance when he reached a horseshoe bend to the right. The tunnel seemed to circle almost back to the beginning before the next horseshoe bent right again.

And so he went, his way lit only by stars and glowing moss. The tunnel twisted and turned, often horseshoeing, but never crossed itself or offered a choice of path. The paths before turns grew shorter as he neared the center.

After an expanse of time and distance, he reached the oasis in the middle of the labyrinth. Cool water flowed from a spring surrounded by lush vegetation. He saw thousands of stars in the sky above. In the center, on a hill, sat a marble temple illuminated by soft moonlight. Massive stone columns supported the edifice. It looked like something out of old legends he'd heard; tales of a better, forgotten time.

A granite staircase set into the hill offered a way up. Zebulun ascended.

The temple was dark and quiet, but the giants within seemed to radiate an ethereal light. Zebulun recognized them as gods. Ram, Father of Truth and Reason. Luva, Mother of Love and Understanding. Zebulun knelt before them.

"Rise, child," said Luva. "You are welcome here."

Zebulun stood and looked up at them.

"The labyrinth," said Ram, "is symbolic of the circuitous path you took to arrive here."

"That path had few choices," said Zebulun.

"Untrue," said Ram. "You had two choices, every step along the way: go forward, or turn back. You went forward."

"You've always gone forward," said Luva. "That's why you've been summoned."

"You called me here?" asked Zebulun.

"Not us," said Ram. "The Creator."

"Of what?" asked Zebulun.

"The world," said Ram.

"I thought the two of you made the world," said Zebulun. "I remember that from temple."

"No," said Luva, "You created that story yourselves." She smiled kindly down at him. "You created us."

"I don't understand," said Zebulun.

"You're in the Dreamlands," said Ram, "the realm of memory and experience. These are the borderlands between the physical and the ideal. We exist here. You'll have to pass through the ideal realms to meet The Creator."

"How?" asked Zebulun.

"You have to ascend," said Ram.

Zebulun thought for a moment. He focused his will and levitated into the air.

"Not like that," said Ram, looking amused.

"It's more like moving *out* than *up*," said Luva. "Just as you had to shed your physical form to come here, you must shed your astral form to rise to the mental plane."

"You have another potion for me?"

"No," she said smiling. "It's like meditation. You have to ignore your senses and quiet your mind. Imagine the feeling you have when you sit quietly at a riverbank, listening to the water, thinking of nothing. You'll have to do something similar, for each plane you traverse, until you reach the apex."

Ram pointed to a cushion on the floor. "Go on," he said. "Try."

Zebulun sat cross-legged on the pillow. He closed his dream-eyes and ignored the outer realm around him. Quieting his mind was trivial. He knew well how to enter a state of absolute focus from years of hunting and soldiering. Within moments, he began to transcend.

He entered a realm in which there was no sensation. No light, no sound, no language. A realm of pure concept—a way of thinking prior to language or logic. Zebulun ascended the ladder of abstraction, going from concrete ideas to ones of increasingly greater generality, until he reached the concept of existence itself. He shed his mind and identity and ascended once more.

He reached the spiritual plane: a place of pure existence, filled with the simple joy of *being*. Warmth and healing filled his spirit. He remained there for an eternity, then gave up his need to exist and ascended to The Absolute.

Ur

I am Ur.

With My Will and My Word, I created The Law.

The Law gave birth to the world.

The world gave birth to life.

Life gave birth to thought.

Thought gave birth to me.

I am the beginning and the end of existence.

Welcome, My creation. I have a task for you.

You shall become my prophet.

You shall tell your people My Law: love others as yourself.

You shall free them from the dragons who rule and abuse them.

You shall forge a kingdom strong and kind.

This kingdom shall feed the people.

This kingdom shall care for the widows and orphans, and for the blind, the crippled, and the mad.

I will bless you with great power and the greatest of allies.

You will not fail.

Trip Reports

Zebulun woke in mid-morning. He hadn't slept past dawn in decades. He sat up, stretched, and looked around.

The others slept still. Quinn snored. Sarah slept peacefully across the fire pit from him, Kulth-Ing standing vigilant over her. Zebulun nodded to the cat, who chuffed and bobbed his head.

Zebulun knelt before the fire. The coals were cold. He set up tinder, kindling, and a log, then reached for his flint.

A point of light appeared before him, expanding into the form of a nude woman no larger than a thumb. She had blue skin and butterfly wings.

"Bluebonnet, right?" asked Zebulun.

The fairy nodded, smiling, her eyes squinting. She held up her hand to him, then turned it towards the fire pit. A beam of invisible light streaked from her tiny hand to the wood, causing the air to shimmer and the wood to burst into flame.

"Neat trick," said Zebulun. "Thank you."

Bluebonnet nodded, smiling, and vanished.

"It's a wonderful trick," said Sarah, stretching, "I wish I could learn it. Magery, they call it. They say it's the same thing that dragons use to set things on fire."

"They don't breathe fire?"

"Apparently not."

Seeing Sarah awake, Kulth-Ing sauntered off. Davion and Quinn woke within the hour. The four discussed their experiences over breakfast.

"Oh, me first!" said Quinn. He told them of Paradise, and its unhappy ending.

"Sounds like a cautionary tale against hubris," said Davion.

"Yeah," said Quinn. "Glad I ain't got any of that. I never understood how some people can be so nice to some and so mean to others." Quinn was quiet for a moment, then sat up and whipped his head to gaze at Davion. "What about you? What did you see?"

Davion told them of Mycenae, the cyclops, and the things he'd learned.

"Neat! Do you think your dream-knowledge is accurate?" asked Quinn.

"I don't know," said Davion. "The theories and equations seemed to make sense. I need to experiment — to test what I learned against reality."

"Sounds boring!" said Quinn. "But you have fun. I am curious to know how it works out." He turned to Zebulun. "What about you, Zeb? You meet any dragons or cyclopes?"

"No," said Zebulun. "I met gods."

Zebulun told them of the labyrinth, the temple, and his traversal of the planes.

"Wow," said Quinn. "I think that story has mine beat."

"Mine as well," said Davion. "I find it fascinating—I would love to visit this mental plane of yours—but do you believe it?"

"I do," said Zebulun. "I have no choice."

"No choice?" asked Davion. "Aren't you the least bit skeptical of the things strange potions tell you?"

"I believe what I experience," said Zebulun. "It's different at the apex: The Absolute. At the border of being and non-being, everything becomes clear."

"I would love to experience that," said Davion. "You'll understand if I remain skeptical?"

"Of course," said Zebulun. "I would be, in your place."

"Fair enough," said Davion.

Zebulun stood up and slung his bow. "I'm going hunting."

Metaphysics

Zebulun left to hunt. Sarah left to gather fruit and root vegetables. Davion and Quinn sat alone by the fire.

"What do you make of Zebulun's new religion?" asked Davion.

"I think it's neat!" said Quinn. "It's got style."

"But do you believe it?"

Quinn shrugged. "Believe? I don't know. I never know exactly what's true or real. But I can tell you that Zeb believes it. I mean, you saw the change in his eyes."

"Change?" asked Davion.

"Oh, that's right," said Quinn, "you never actually look at people when you talk to them."

Davion looked up at him. "I don't?"

Quinn grinned. "Not until someone surprises you."

"Huh," said Davion. He looked at the ground. "Do people think I'm rude?"

"Nah," said Quinn, "I think people think you're just weird."

Davion looked back at the fire, his eyebrows raised. "Oh. Okay."

"Zeb's eyes are different," said Quinn. "Before, they were... I don't know. *Hollow*. Exhausted. Haunted. I never saw emotion in them unless I did something silly enough to make him *almost* laugh. Since last night, there's a new warmth there — a kind of calm. I think Zeb feels right for the first time in a while."

"Hm," said Davion, his brow furrowed.

"You know," said Quinn, "In a way, it's like that strange brew gave each of us what we wanted."

"How so?"

"Think about it," said Quinn. "You got a city with a giant library full of knowledge about all the boring things you love to learn about. And you got to meet a cyclops."

"Whereas I," he continued, "got a huge party with lots of food and booze and a horde of beautiful naked people. I could have done without the horrific twist ending, but the lead-up to that was grand. And I got to talk to a dragon."

"So," said Davion, "what did Zeb get?"

"Task and purpose," said Quinn.

Davion frowned slightly. "Explain."

"Zeb's a soldier, right? Has been for twenty-three years. He's all about honor, and duty, and doing the right thing. But he's obviously had some doubts about whether he was really doing that by soldiering for the kingdom. Now he's offered a way out, and a greater task, by none other than the creator of the whole wide world. I imagine there ain't much rank higher than that, in his eyes."

Davion stared into the fire. "You understand people well, don't you?"

"I love people!" said Quinn. "They're my favorite subject. I try to meet at least one new person every day."

Davion looked amused. "You and Zeb are the only two people I've met in some time."

"You should get out more!" said Quinn. "Come to the bar with me some time."

Davion smiled, his eyes down. "Maybe someday."

"Speaking of meeting others," said Davion, "aren't you friends with the fairies? The star folk, I mean?"

"Sure!" said Quinn. "I often play with them in the middle of the night when the rest of you are asleep."

"Is that why you sleep so late?" asked Davion. Quinn smiled and shrugged.

Davion stared down at the earth, deep in thought. "Can you introduce me to them?"

Unicorn

Zebulun crept through the brush, bow in hand. He'd seen some quail, but he wanted a deer.

He saw something in a clearing ahead. He peered through the trees. The creature was head down, munching on grass. He drew an arrow, nocked, and slunk forward with the deliberate slowness of a stalking cat.

He slowly drew his bow as he reached the treeline. He looked out at the animal he stalked and froze. It was no deer.

It resembled a great black horse, with a mane and tail of striking silver, and one long, sharp silver horn protruding from its head. Zebulun took a breath and lowered his weapon. He stared in awe.

The unicorn calmly raised its head and looked him in the eye.

Ten thousand years passed in the space of a heartbeat.

He saw trees sprout, grow old, and wither. He saw rivers change course over ages. He marveled at the size of forest fires that ravaged the landscape, but led to renewed life. He watched cyclopes build a great city, then watched it destroyed by human rebellion hundreds of years later.

Zebulun took a deep breath. The unicorn vanished. In its place, lying wounded on the ground, lay a red wolf.

Zebulun approached the lupine. It growled at him, at first, then seemed to give up and go back to its labored breathing. The wound looked as if he'd tangled with a wild boar and got the tusks.

Zebulun knelt next to the creature. He felt something he didn't understand. He could feel the creature's pain and fear at a distance. He sensed how close it was to death.

He held his hands over the wolf, closed his eyes, and focused his mind. He felt a sudden jolt as energy flowed from the spiritual plane, through him, and into the wolf. He stared in wonder as the creature's wounds began to close up and scar over. Its breathing became softer. It went into peaceful sleep.

Zebulun sat with the wolf for two hours before it woke, looking fresh and bright as new. It licked all over his face, wagging its tail, then loped off. It paused at the treeline to look back at him, its eyes filled with gratitude, for a brief moment.

Zebulun returned to camp. Sarah was cooking.

"No luck hunting?" asked Quinn. "That's not like you."

Zebulun looked at Quinn, then at Davion, and then at Sarah. He looked up into the afternoon sky and said, "I saw a unicorn."

Communing

"Bluebonnet?" whispered Quinn. "Are you around?"

A pinpoint of light appeared and expanded to palm size. "Hi, Quinn!" said Bluebonnet, with a smile.

"Hey!" said Quinn. "You know my buddy Davion, right?" Bluebonnet nodded, smiling and squinting. "He's hoping some of you fairies can teach him what you know about space and lightning and stuff." He turned to Davion. "Right?"

"Right," said Davion. "I'm told that your kind knows much about mathematics, physics, and computation."

Bluebonnet just nodded, still smiling.

"Can you teach me?" asked Davion.

Bluebonnet held up one finger, then turned and flew away.

"Was that a 'no'?" asked Davion.

"I think that was a 'wait here'," said Quinn.

"Oh. Okay."

They waited. After a few moments, Bluebonnet reappeared alongside another of the star folk. This one looked like an ordinary man, with no butterfly wings or other odd features. He had beige skin and almond eyes, rare for someone from the kingdom. He wore the silks of a minister from some ancient empire, long ago and far away.

"I am Lao," he said. He smiled at Davion. "I will be your teacher."

"Thank you," said Davion. "I appreciate anything you can teach me."

Lao looked at Quinn. "You too?"

"Oh no," said Quinn. "Noooo. Davion taught me arithmetic. That experience taught me that it's the most math I want to know."

Lao smiled and nodded. Bluebonnet waved to Quinn and beckoned him to follow. They wandered off into the wood.

"Allow me to introduce my assistants," said Lao. Six more star folk appeared around him. One resembled a flying serpent — like a dragon, but with colorful feathered wings rather than bat-like. Another looked like a humanoid coyote. A third looked like a humanoid made out of water. A winged rabbit, an onyx woman with rainbow colors surrounding her, and a smiling cat rounded out the group.

"Hello," said a nervous Davion.

"Watch!" said Lao.

Lao's six assistants surrounded him in a hexagonal formation. Their pixelated avatars faded, replaced by rotating polyhedrons of light. The geometric figures produced spirals from their vertices, spirals which touched those of the others and interfered with them. The interference produced patterns of fractal shapes and colors unlike anything Davion had seen. Lao's center shell began to pulse without a pattern.

Davion stared at the display for a couple of minutes, fascinated at its ever-changing nature. He found himself staring at the pulsating center, but still aware of the fractals around it. He furrowed his brow, staring in fascination. "I don't understand," he said.

He paused for a moment, fixated.

"And yet... I do."

Kuchibu

"Psst. Sarah!"

Sarah opened her eyes. Quinn stood before her with an animal in each arm. They looked like overgrown cats, but with opposable thumbs on their front paws. One was colored like a raccoon; the other was white with orange patches and had huge paws.

"What kind of animal are these?" asked Quinn.

Sarah chuckled. Her face held a mixture of amusement and something Quinn hadn't seen before. Annoyance? Irritation?

"We call them *kuchibu*," she said.

"Koo chee boo?" asked Quinn.

"Kuchibu. They look like cats, but act more like raccoons. They're clumsy, but sneaky, and surprisingly fast. They get into everything with those little paws of theirs. Where did you find them?"

"I found them going through Samson's pack," said Quinn. "They were eating whatever food they found and throwing everything else on the ground."

"That's typical," said Sarah.

"Are they tame?" asked Quinn. "They didn't seem to object when I grabbed them."

"No," said Sarah. "They're wild animals. They wouldn't have come near our camp if Kulth-Ing were nearby. But they have no fear of humans, for some reason. They tend to flop and go limp when you pick one up."

"How cute!" said Quinn. He kissed the orange and white one on top of its head and said, "I'm gonna name you Bigfoot." He kissed the other and said, "And I'm gonna call you Sugar."

"Are they edible?" asked Zebulun, now awake.

Quinn's eyes opened wide with horror. "No!"

"Don't worry, Quinn," said Sarah, amusement in her eyes. She turned to Zebulun and said, "They're not poisonous, but they're not good. The meat has a foul taste."

"Good!" said Quinn, holding the creatures away from Zebulun.

Sarah's expression changed. She stared at Quinn intently, her eyes narrowed. Quinn looked over at her and asked, "What?"

She looked at Quinn and smiled, mischief in her eyes. "I think you may have just inspired me, Quinn."

"Really?"

Sarah tilted her head back, listening to the wind and thinking.

Davion returned to camp a few minutes later. He looked tired, but deep in thought.

"Well?" asked Quinn. "How did it go?"

"It was... I'm in awe," said Davion. "The star folk somehow put images, concepts, and equations directly into my mind without language—just pulsating patterns of light. I can't begin to understand it. It would take me three days to explain what I just learned in three hours."

Quinn smirked and said, "Please don't!"

Davion tilted his head towards Quinn and said, "No."

Davion sat quiet for a moment. "I can learn so much from these angels," he said. He paused, lost in thought, then turned to Zebulun and asked, "Zeb, how long do you plan on staying here in Eastwood?"

"I have no plans," said Zebulun. "Coming here to warn them was it."

"You should stay for a time," said Sarah. "I can help you master your newfound abilities."

Zebulun looked at her, thought for a moment, and nodded. "Okay."

"Yay!" said Quinn, throwing his hands in the air. "I like it here. I love the star fairies, and I want to see the forest folk again. When can we go see them?"

"No need," said Sarah. "They'll be visiting us soon enough. Our fight with the dragons is far from over."

Davion suddenly lifted his head and looked at Quinn, as if seeing him for the first time. "Are those cats?"

Apprentice Mystic

Sarah and Zebulun sat cross-legged, facing one another, on the grass in a small, quiet clearing a mile from camp. The morning sun lit tiny rainbows in the dew. A light breeze blew.

"You've already learned to heal," she said, "so no need to explain that. You can use the same spiritual energy you used to heal the wolf to bless another person, thus giving some of your power to them."

"What does that do?" he asked.

"It can provide luck to protect them from harm, or they can channel it into some action. It's foundational energy. Watch." She held her palm up near his chest and closed her eyes. He felt a tickle of energy flow between them.

"I felt that," he said.

"I gave you a small blessing," she said.

Zebulun stared at her for a moment, thinking. "What else? Can I change the weather?"

"In time," she said. "You have to learn to commune with the natural world around you."

"Close your eyes," she said, "and quiet your mind. You want to silence the inner chatter, just as when you ascended the ideal planes, but you do *not* want to divorce from your senses, as you did then. The goal is not to ascend to a higher plane of consciousness, but to *extend* your consciousness into the natural world around you."

"Focus on your breathing," she said. "Don't try to control it. Just listen to it. Breathe naturally."

They sat in silence for some time, just breathing. His breath seemed to grow louder over time.

"When you're in tune with the breath," she said, "focus on your heartbeat as well. Feel its rhythm."

More silence. Zebulun felt his heart beat powerfully in his chest. His breathing sounded like a maelstrom.

"Now feel the blood flowing through your veins," she said. "Something you've felt every instant of your life, but learned to ignore."

He felt vibrations running up and down his body. He felt the breath of life flow into his lungs, through his heart, and around his arms and legs. He sat that way for a time, marveling at the sensation.

He felt *thought itself* flowing through his body. He could sense what parts of thought came from different parts of his body; from the loins, through the guts, heart, and both sides of his brain, all combined into...what? Who is the *I* that watches?

"Now extend your heightened awareness outward," she said. "Feel beneath the ground below you. Sense the quietest sound on the wind. Attune yourself to the world."

Zebulun focused his will. His awareness expanded outward from the clearing, incorporating the sensations of the creatures of the wood as it went. Within moments, his experience of the world was a gestalt of the sensory experiences of every bird and beast within miles. He saw, heard, and felt everything and everywhere at once. He felt the roots of trees deep in the ground. He felt worms crawl through the soil. He felt the wind whistling through the branches. He saw the forest as one great organism, including himself, sharing the same air and water as a body's organs share blood. He felt a sense of balance.

Time passed. Zebulun gazed upon the world.

"Zeb," she said, shaking him gently. He opened his eyes. "That's enough for today," she said.

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"Four hours," she said. "It takes around an hour to fully enter the trance. You've been communing for three hours."

"I forgot who I was," he said. "I was just another part of all this."

"As are we all," she said.

Distraction and Invasion

Howls echoed out from the forest. It sounded like hundreds of wolves. The nearest patrol stood outside camp and watched as wolves poured forth from the forest, stopping just outside the treeline, and howled up at the crescent moon.

The general arrived at the edge of camp. "Archers!" he said. Archers lined up in front. Spearmen lined up behind them, ready to take their place if the wolves charged.

As the soldiers watched, tense, tiny points of light appeared above the wolves. Scores of them. The pinpoint lights expanded to yards across, large enough to be seen from camp. They displayed images of horror: skeletons, decaying flesh, men on fire. The largest, at the center, displayed a huge flaming skull with fire in its eyes.

The fiery skull laughed like the scraping of metal on stone. It boomed across the open field. Flames shot from its eyes, setting the makeshift stockade on fire in several places. Soldiers rushed to douse them.

A hue and cry went up from the camp behind them.

The general turned around. He gazed in wonder as horses and mules ran free, trampling tents and smashing wagons as they went. He heard men shouting.

Across camp, William ran out of his tent and saw David.

"What's going on? Who set the animals loose?" asked William.

David just shook his head, looking around in confusion while he grabbed his weapons. "Let's look around."

The two did their best to marshal their men in the midst of the confusion.

"Cats — or something — are invading our camp!" said one.

"They're chewing through ropes and leather straps, setting the animals loose," said another.

"They took my food!" said a third.

"We have to kill these things," said David. "Grab your weapons and hunt them down!"

The men collected themselves and took up arms. Right about then, a massive cloud of moths descended from the night sky, blinding everyone.

They heard the high-pitched shriek of bats three seconds before the company's terrorized equines began their stampede out of camp.

After ten minutes of chaos, the bats and moths flew off into the night sky. The mysterious images of horror vanished, and the wolves retreated into the wood.

In the aftermath, soldiers and camp followers cleaned things up and tried to recapture their beasts.

David briefed the general. "Sir. I spoke to the other captains," he said. "We've lost a few horses. Some equipment has been destroyed. But the most devastating blow is that they ate, destroyed, or stole a third of our food."

"What were those things?" asked the general. "How did they get in?"

"I'm not sure," said David. "We managed to kill a few of them. They look like big cats, but they have *hands*. They must have snuck over or through the fence between patrols, when all were distracted by the wolves and demons to the east."

"What madness is this?" asked the general.

Deep in the forest, one hundred fifty-three kuchibu had the greatest feast of their lives. Bigfoot and Sugar cuddled up and went to sleep with full bellies.

Zebulun Dreams of Ur

Zebulun found himself back in the oasis from his vision. The labyrinth was gone — the oasis sat alone in the middle of the desert valley. The marble temple stood on the hill. Ram and Luva waited at the bottom of the steps. Zebulun approached and bowed.

"Welcome, prophet," said Ram. "The Creator wishes to speak to you."

"You need not climb the ladder of consciousness again," said Luva. "Once was enough. Ur will speak to you via an avatar here in the Dreamlands." She motioned her hand toward the staircase. "Ascend," she said.

Zebulun climbed the stairs and entered the temple.

Inside the temple a black circle, eleven feet across, hovered a few feet above the floor. The edges of the circle distorted the temple behind it, as if light itself was being bent. Or space.

As Zebulun gazed into the void, a pinpoint of light appeared in the center. The light was tiny, but had the intensity of a thousand suns. He watched as it grew, slowly, to fill most of the void with its light. Light and void spiraled around one another in the space between. Each spiral gave birth to a world: one with trillions of trillions of stars, an order of magnitude more planets, and an uncountable number of living beings. The worlds numbered in the millions; they spawned, they lived, and they died.

A voice came from the center of the light. "I am Ur. You have learned to harness the blessing I gave you. It is time to put it to use. You shall go out into the world. You will stay to the edges of the kingdom, to the small villages and remote estates. You will heal the sick, injured, and crippled. You will tell them My Law."

Ur continued, "Quinn will accompany you. He shall prove helpful in your journey. Davion will stay in Eastwood. He has much to learn from the angels."

"And the forest folk?" asked Zebulun.

"They will defend themselves," said Ur. "Go forth, My prophet. Go forth and heal."

Summons

"There's a dragon on the horizon."

Nahash looked up, blinking the sleep from his eyes. He'd been napping. His pet general stood at the tent opening.

A dragon? asked Nahash.

The general nodded. "Yes, sir. It's holding position not far away."

Nahash rose and slithered out of his tent. He looked up. The stranger hovered off to the east. Nahash took flight.

As he approached, Nahash saw the new arrival had red-orange scales with blue stripes circling his body at intervals. He looked young, but not *too* young. An armored general sat in a harness on the dragon's back.

Nahash flew up to a polite distance and whispered to the newcomer. *Greetings*, he said. *I am Nahash Aklabethel.*

Reza Abdullah, replied the newcomer. *I'm here to relieve you. You have a new assignment.*

Nahash stared at him for a moment. *Right this way.*

The two of them flew down into camp. Reza's pet general climbed down and presented the current "commander" with a sealed scroll. The general broke the seal, read it, and looked up at Nahash. "Looks like we're wanted in the capital."

Nahash nodded at him and looked at Reza. *Any idea what my new assignment is?*

They didn't say, said Reza, *but I think it might have something to do with trouble out east.*

What kind of trouble? asked Nahash.

Aurelius forced Rahabadaz to give him the eastern wood as terms of the treaty, but he's apparently had a hard time getting it. Something's preventing our work crews from going in. They've killed soldiers. Rumor says they even killed one of us.

They? asked Nahash.

They, said Reza. *Whoever or whatever is in there.*

Nahash stewed for a moment.

Well, he said, *they're all yours. Turns out there's more here than just bandits rustling cattle. You're up against a self-proclaimed warlord who calls himself Zan. He's young, blue in color, and wears garish jewelry. He's no mage, but he is talented at sorcery.*

Sorcery? asked Reza, his mouth widened. *That's not likely to help him against a ray of heat to the face.*

Don't underestimate him, said Nahash. He may not be able to set you on fire, but he's sneaky and he's clever.

I'm sure I can deal with him, said Reza.

I'm sure, said Nahash. He turned to his general. Pack our things and ready the harness. We're heading east.

War Council

The forest folk arrived in force, one warm afternoon, not long after Zebulun's dream. Hunters from various tribes camped near the creek down the hill from Sarah's clearing. Emet led a delegation of tribal elders to meet with Sarah. After introductions, all sat around Sarah's fire pit.

"The seven tribes in our area have supplied two hundred twenty-three men," said Emet. "All are skilled with bow and spear."

"I'm not sure it's the best time to reveal yourselves," said Sarah. "So far, the agents of the kingdom have only seen animals, insects, star folk, and me. It might be best for your people to remain a surprise."

Emet turned to Zebulun. "They tell me you killed a dragon."

"No," said Zebulun. "Sarah summoned a storm. Angels drew a lightning bolt through the dragon, knocking him from the sky. Kulth-Ing savaged the serpent, stopping him from crushing me. I merely delivered the final blow."

"But the dragon is dead, yes?" asked Emet.

"It is," said Zebulun, "but they will send another."

"Then shouldn't we attack now, before another arrives?" asked Emet. The other elders leaned in and looked at Zebulun.

"I don't advise it," said Zebulun. "There are five companies camped two arrow flights from the woods. That's around seven hundred fifty soldiers to your two-hundred twenty-three, plus a few hundred camp followers."

"They also have horses," he said, "and chariots... for some reason. Get caught out in the open on foot, and the cavalry will make short work of you."

"What about raids?" asked one of the elders. "We could send small bands out at night to shoot a few sentries, then flee back into the forest."

"Wars of attrition only work when you have the time," said Zebulun. "Even if you kill a few every night, you won't decimate their numbers by much before another dragon arrives. And they won't just wait for you to come kill them. After a few raids, they'll try to lay traps for you."

"What should we do, then?" asked another elder.

Zebulun looked at him. "Wait. Their food and firewood won't last forever. And there's another consideration."

"What?" asked Emet.

"Most of those men have yet to trespass on your land," said Zebulun. "They will, if ordered to. They work for the kingdom. But they haven't yet."

Emet looked at Zebulun for a moment, thinking. "How long shall we wait?"

"If you can hold them off until autumn," said Zebulun, "They'll have to withdraw."

"That is weeks from now," said Emet. "Will they send a dragon before that time?"

"Likely," said Zebulun.

Emet nodded, solemn. "I think you've convinced me," he said, "but I have to confer with the others." He and the other elders excused themselves and went down to their camp.

"I hope they listen to you," said Sarah.

"Even if the elders do," said Zebulun, "not all of the youths will agree. Some of them will go raiding anyway."

Sarah frowned. "I suppose I had better be prepared for that."

"I wish I could stay," he said.

Sarah looked at him and smiled her soft smile. "You have a different road to travel. This is my responsibility. You go and handle yours."

Zebulun nodded and looked up at the darkening sky.

Reassignment

Nahash blinked. *You summoned me here to kill livestock?*

More like wild animals, whispered Aurelius.

The two sat coiled in Aurelius's deserted throne room. Braziers burned for light and warmth. Aurelius sat coiled on the dais behind the throne, his wings wrapped around him. Nahash sat at the foot of the steps, his wings open at his sides.

So far, said Aurelius, *Our forces have been attacked by ravens, wolves, wasps, hornets, ants, butterflies, and a big black jaguar. Only one soldier has reported seeing anything else: he was approached by a witchy woman who told him that the forest was alive and would defend herself. **That** is the woman I want you to kill. I think she's the source of all our trouble.*

Is she a sorceress? asked Nahash.

There's no telling, said Aurelius. *The troops' wounds were apparently real enough.*

Sorcery can do that, said Nahash.

To an extent, said Aurelius, *but there's usually at least one or two men, even among common soldiers, with the wit or will to see through it. Not one of them escaped without at least minor wounds. And something in those woods killed one of ours.*

Anyone I know?

No, said Aurelius, *It was a nameless kid looking for a chance to prove his mettle. He failed.*

This mysterious woman, said Nahash. *Could it be one of our kind, masquerading as a human woman for entertainment?*

No way of knowing, said Aurelius.

Nahash thought for a moment. *Sir. It's the timber you want, right? The woman is secondary.*

Yes, said Aurelius, *I want that timber for my navy. But I doubt you'll get it without destroying the adversary, whatever it is.*

And if it really is some ancient forest spirit? asked Nahash.

Please, said Aurelius, with a look of disdain, *you are far too old and hardened for fairy tales.*

Nahash lowered his head and spread his wings backward in a draconic bow. Aurelius nodded. Nahash turned and left.

Good Travels

Zebulun meditated in the hours before dawn. He now understood why Sarah chose this location for her campsite. Not only was it high ground, with close sources of water, but it was just close enough for him to reach the beasts and birds at the edge of the wood when he extended his consciousness outward.

He watched the soldier's camp. Two rings of torches circled the stockade. The inner ring stood an arrow-flight from the camp; the outer ring, two. Five-man patrols passed by every few minutes, most looking bored and tired.

He shifted his perception to a single animal—the red wolf he healed in the clearing. It loped through the woods, stopping to sniff the air, looking for prey. He could feel the lupine's hunger and need. He could smell its excitement when it caught wind of a rabbit.

Zebulun woke Quinn at Dawn. "It's time."

Quinn sat up and rubbed his eyes. "As much as I hate to leave my new friends to their fate," he said, "I do so love to travel! Besides," he said with a grin, "someone has to watch out for you."

Zebulun nodded.

Emet, Elu, and Zoya came up from their camp at the creek to say goodbye. Elu and Zoya both grappled Quinn in bear hugs.

Elu clasped Zebulun's hand. "You're a fine opponent."

"Thank you," said Zebulun. "I'm a better ally." Elu smiled and nodded.

"Thank you for the warning," said Emet, "and for your counsel. I know you can't stay."

"Even if I had no other task," said Zebulun, "I couldn't help you fight my own men. But you deserved to know it was coming." Emet nodded.

Davion shook Zebulun's hand. "Sorry I can't go with you."

"No," said Zebulun, "You stay and learn everything you can. Do what you can to help these people."

Davion took a deep breath, nodded, and lowered his eyes. "I'll try."

Quinn jumped at Davion and threw his arms around his neck. "Take care! Be careful with dragons!"

"Heh," said Davion, paralyzed. "You too."

Sarah embraced the both of them, in turn, as a mother would a child. "Go find your path," she said.

"Be careful," said Zebulun.

"You as well," said Sarah. "Good travels."

New Moon Raid

The patrol stopped to rest for a moment. The soldiers looked wearily at the forest to the east.

"You see any wolves, Zak?" asked Jeb.

"Sure don't," said Zak.

"No birds? Bees? Flaming skulls?"

"Nope," said Zak. The men chuckled.

Arrows tore into the group. Jeb found himself with an arrowhead sticking out of his belly. Zak took one in the leg and one in the shoulder. Another got off with a glancing shot, but the other two got hit in major organs and fell.

The men looked outward, frantic. They saw a group of savage-looking men—and one dark woman—kneeling in the space within the first ring of torches. They had crawled forward through the tall grass to avoid detection. They raised their bows again.

The soldiers shouted the alarm and readied their own bows. They exchanged a volley with the others, to no effect. At the sound of activity within the camp, the raiders turned and fled to the woods. The soldiers fired a few rounds after them, but hit no one.

Upon entering the wood, the forest folk stopped and looked back. Horsemen with torches rode out of the stockade, but seemed shy about leaving their ring of light. None came within an arrow-flight of the forest.

Elu looked at Zoya. Zoya grinned. The seven of them melted back into the wood.

Mod

Zebulun and Quinn went to Mod, a village of one hundred sixty in the far northeast of the kingdom. Squat buildings of wrought stone surrounded a square with a common well.

They found an old woman drawing water. She had the brown skin and black hair typical of the farm folk. She looked up at them with narrow eyes.

"Hello," said Zebulun. "I'm Zebulun Koh. This is my companion, Quinn."

"Hi!" said Quinn, waving his hand.

"Hello," said the woman. "I'm Rose." She looked at Zebulun, then at Quinn, then back at Zebulun. "What brings you to our village?"

"We've come to help," said Zebulun. "Do you have any sick or injured?"

Rose looked at him with suspicion. "Abe hurt his leg recently. He hasn't been able to work."

"I can help, if he is willing," said Zebulun.

"What do you want for this help?"

"Nothing," said Zebulun. "It's my duty to heal."

Rose retained her skeptical look, but took the two of them into the courtyard of one of the two-story stone houses. There, on a bench, lay a man in obvious distress. His left leg had a nasty gash. It smelled foul.

"May I have a look?" asked Zebulun.

Abe gave him a pained glance. He looked at Rose, who shrugged. "Says he's a healer," she said.

He looked at Zebulun, sighed, and said, "Sure. You can't make it any worse."

Zebulun examined the wound. "It's corrupted," he said. "A man can easily die from such a wound, but I can fix it."

Zebulun held his hands over Abe's gangrenous leg. He felt the power flow through him and into the wounded man. Rose stared, eyes wide, as Abe's wound cleansed itself of infection and sealed itself up with a jagged scar.

Abe's look of pain turned to one of amazement. He stood, gingerly, and put weight on his leg. He looked at Zebulun and said, "It's all better!"

Zebulun clasped his hands before him and bowed slightly.

Rose's eyes had grown softer. "You know," she said, "I have terrible pain in my hands."

"Let me see," said Zebulun.

He held her hands in his. Power flowed through him to her. She marveled at him. "I could feel that!"

She flexed her fingers a few times and looked at him. "No pain," she said.

Zebulun nodded. "It won't last," he said. "Abe's leg is good as new, but your hand trouble is from age. It will return, in time."

"I'm happy for any rest from it," said Rose, and hugged him.

The women of the village were already alight with chatter when the men returned from the fields and heard what Zebulun had done. He healed many minor scrapes and injuries. The people happily shared their evening meal with he and Quinn. Zebulun ate modestly, for his size. Quinn devoured everything placed in front of him.

"How do you have this power?" asked an old man.

"I am prophet of Ur," said Zebulun, "Creator of this world."

"Can't say I've ever heard of that god," said the old man.

"Neither had I," said Zebulun, "until I met him in a vision. He gave me this power and told me to go forth, heal the sick and injured, and tell people The Law."

"And what is Ur's Law?"

"Love others as yourself," said Zebulun.

The old man waited a moment, as if expecting Zebulun to continue. He blinked and said, "That's it?"

"That's it," said Zebulun.

"No rules or commandments? No prayers to say or rituals to conduct?"

"Ur didn't mention any," said Zebulun.

The old man looked thoughtful.

"But," said a younger man, "what does Ur want us to *do*? Loving people is one thing — we already tend to care for each other here, in our town — but how are we to act or not act?"

"Act as if you love everyone," said Zebulun. "If you love another, you won't lie to them, steal from them, or do violence to them. You won't covet their wives or herds or lands. You will even help them, when you can."

"Ur wants us to extend that same courtesy beyond our own small village or tribe. Even strangers deserve consideration."

"But a man can't be expected to love strangers as much as his family?" asked the younger. "Foreigners as much as his countrymen?"

"A man may not feel that way, by nature," said Zebulun, "but he can still act that way. If you were traveling in a foreign land and got into trouble, wouldn't you wish for someone to aid you?"

"I guess I would," said the younger.

"When it comes to strangers," said Zebulun, "it is best to be wary and kind."

"What about our enemies?" asked a brash youth. "We just won a war."

"Ur made no exceptions for geography," said Zebulun. "I don't think we should be making war on one another."

"But we have to defend our homeland!"

"True," said Zebulun, "but those who love war will often claim to be defending the homeland while invading another people's. I saw it for twenty-three years in the army. We must stop believing the endless lies of our rulers."

"The Kingdom of Ur," said Zebulun, "will have an army and navy strong enough to repel invaders and pirates, but not strong enough to invade other lands."

"Kingdom?" asked Rose.

"It's being forged as we speak," said Zebulun.

Crescent Moon Raid

"Don't do it," whispered a monotone voice behind them. "It's a trap."

Elu and Zoya turned. Michael hovered a few feet behind them, his bronze skin lit by his sword of flame.

"They have cavalry mounted and ready. They hide on the other side of the fort."

"How many?" asked Elu.

"Thirty," said Michael.

Elu looked at Yan, then at Zoya. "Maybe we should go back to camp."

Zoya narrowed her eyes and thought for a moment. "There are more of us this time," she said. "Maybe we could kill a few of their horses before we have to run."

Elu thought for a moment. He looked at Yan.

Yan shrugged and said, "I'm game. We can at least let a few arrows loose before we disappear into the woods. They don't seem to want to follow us there."

"Alright," said Elu. "Pass the word along to the others: new plan."

When all were told, the nineteen of them crept out of the trees towards the first line of torches. A patrol of soldiers walked the perimeter outside the stockade, looking nervous and alert. They spotted the raiders almost at once, shouted something to their comrades in camp, and drew their bows.

The forest folk crept steadily forward, as if they hadn't noticed being noticed.

Thunderous hoofbeats filled the air. Cavalry rounded the southern edge of the stockade and rode hard at the raiders.

The forest folk stopped at the outside torch ring and drew their bows. They waited until the horsemen were just in range before they let fly; they then turned and sprinted for the forest. Arrows sank into the flesh of two horses.

The horsemen let loose a volley of arrows as they closed the gap. All went wild.

The raiders were halfway to the woods when the cavalry reached the outer ring of torches. The riders didn't stop this time. Every fifth one held a torch aloft. The forest folk were almost to the treeline when the next volley came and took several of them down.

Elu, Zoya, and Yan made it to the forest and spun around. The riders were halfway there.

"Tosah got hit!" said Yan. "I have to get him!"

"Yan!" said Elu.

"No!" said Zoya.

Yan ran twenty feet outside the trees, grabbed Tosah, and helped him limp back into the wood. Arrows sank into them both. Tosah got hit in the leg again. Yan got hit in the lung. The riders kept coming.

Michael appeared between the riders and the trees, his diminutive stature expanded to twenty feet in height. He brandished his flaming sword, fire in his eyes, and waved his hand. All the riders' torches snuffed out, leaving them in blackness apart from the light given off by the terrifying being before them. He raised an open palm and called forth blinding blue-white light and a deafening boom that left the riders dazed and the horses reeling.

The cavalry turned and fled back to camp. After a time, the forest folk crept out and collected their dead.

Apprentice Mage

Davion stared into rotating fractals made of light. His mind overflowed with formulae, equations, algorithms, and data structures.

Mathematics:

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

$$\log(xy) = \log(x) + \log(y)$$

$$c^2 = a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cos(\gamma)$$

$$e^{ix} = \cos(x) + i \sin(x)$$

$$\frac{dy}{dx}f(x) = \lim_{h \rightarrow 0} \frac{f(x+h) - f(x)}{h}$$

Physics:

$$F = ma$$

$$g = \frac{GMm}{r^2}$$

$$E_k = \frac{1}{2}mv^2$$

$$pV = nRT$$

$$E = mc^2$$

Computation:

$$I = \lambda x. x$$

$$T = \lambda x. \lambda y. x$$

$$F = \lambda x. \lambda y. y$$

$$\omega = \lambda x. xx$$

$$Y = \lambda f. (\lambda x. f(xx))(\lambda x. f(xx))$$

The geometry ceased. Lao appeared, smiling. The others winked out.

"To externalize the internal model," said Lao, "is not an act of intellect. You will have to do the right computations quick, and in the proper order, but the final act of extension is one of will."

"How?" asked Davion.

"The way I can say is not the way," said Lao. "You have to figure that part out on your own."

Davion furrowed his brow. "That seems like the most difficult part of all."

Lao smiled. "You'll do fine. Don't be attached to success or failure. Just practice!"

Davion returned to camp with his mind afire. He felt almost feverish. He splashed some water on his face and sat down, eyes wide.

He looked around. Sarah was gone. He thought he heard some commotion from the forest folk camp down the hill.

The fire was naught but hot coals. He added a log to it, then sat back down and held his palm before his face. He did some computations in his head and tried to focus the way Lao had said.

A small, yellow flame appeared above his palm for a brief second before winking out.

Davion stared at his hand in disbelief. He looked at the cold log on the hot coals. He raised his hand toward it, calculated, and focused his will. The air shimmered, and a pea-sized spot on the log began to smolder, then smoke, then burst into flame.

Davion clasped his hands before his mouth. He stared into the fire for a long while.

New Commander

"Dave!"

William touched David's shoulder and pointed at the sky.

David squinted. Something flew in from the sunset. He looked at William. "There be dragons," he said. "I better tell the general."

The captain made his way to the general's tent as the serpents grew closer. He hesitated a moment, waiting to see if they flew colors, then went inside and told the general.

"Plural?" asked the general.

"Two," said David.

"Are they ours?"

"The one with a rider flies our flag."

"Alright," said the general, his brow furrowed. "Wave them down and send them in."

David went outside and waved upwards. The dragons' serpentine forms spiraled downward in wide arcs. One had scales the color of blood; the other had bands of blue alternating with red.

"Give them room," said David to the gawking soldiers around him. Everyone stepped back a few paces.

The dragons landed with grace a few yards from the tent. The rider dismounted. His insignia revealed him as a general. David bowed and stood aside as the general and his red dragon entered the tent. The other stayed outside. The soldiers gave it space.

Inside the tent, the new arrival handed the current commander a short scroll. He read it and nodded.

Nahash's avatar appeared. "I'm in charge of this mission now," he said, "but I have a few questions for you before you go."

"First," said Nahash, "how did your previous commander die?"

"Uncertain," said the general. "He flew off into a thunderstorm. We found his head on a pike outside the woods the next morning."

"And *why* did he fly into a storm?" asked Nahash.

"Impatience," said the general. "For nearly a week, the storm began each day before dawn and ended right after dusk. He grew weary of waiting for the weather to be right for my troops to move in."

"Hmf," said Nahash, "That sounds like youth."

Nahash pondered a moment, silent.

"There have been other attacks since I sent the message," said the general.

"Do tell," said Nahash.

"A few days after the dragon died, a massive pack of wolves came out of the forest to harass us. Accompanying them were creatures I don't understand. They glowed with their own light. One took the form of fiery skull and set parts of the stockade on fire."

"That sounds like sorcery," said Nahash.

"Sounds like," said the general, "but the fire was real enough. You can still see the scorch marks."

Nahash's avatar narrowed its eyes. "So they have a mage."

"Seems so. Then moths and bats flew in and blinded us. A group of raccoon-like creatures snuck in while the men were distracted and sabotaged numerous things. They stole or despoiled a lot of food. We still haven't tracked down every horse they set free."

"Go on," said Nahash.

"Days later, men with bows snuck toward our camp and attacked our men. They raided us twice within a few nights. We lost a few soldiers, but think we killed more of them."

"Think?" asked Nahash.

"They took their dead and injured," said the general.

Nahash thought for a moment. "New plan," he said. "I want you to take most of the brigade back to Dalton. I'll keep only the most experienced company and a handful of cavalry. Take the rest back — including *all* of the chariots."

"Some have been sabotaged in the raids."

"Leave those," said Nahash. "We'll use them for firewood. They'll be more useful in that capacity than for invading an old-growth forest full of hills."

"Yes, sir," said the general.

"Leave the food, water, and fodder," said Nahash. "Forage your way back."

The general let out a breath. "The men won't like that."

"The peasants whose villages they sack will like it even less," said Nahash. "Unfortunately, we need those supplies. We may be here for some time. When you reach Dalton, send us whatever else is on hand."

The general nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Get started right away," said Nahash. "I want you prepare to be gone within two days. Bring in the captain in charge of the company I'm keeping." His avatar vanished.

The general left the tent and returned with David. "This is David. He's captain of the most seasoned

company of veterans here." He turned to David and introduced the new general. "This is your new commander. I'm taking most of the force back to Dalton."

David bowed to the stranger. "At your service, commander."

Nahash whispered into his pet general's mind: *Tell him what we have in store.*

The new "commander" looked at David and said, "New plan."

Law of the Forest

Davion returned to camp late in the night. He suffered with another headache induced by the star folk cramming knowledge into his mind.

He sat on the log and put his head in his hands. Physically, he felt great — better than he had in years — from the healthful food of the forest and the rough exercise of walking up and down steep hills. It was his mind that felt exhausted and overwhelmed.

After a few minutes, he raised his head and noticed, for the first time, the hulking man sitting across from him. He jumped a bit, then said, "Elu, right?"

Elu nodded slowly, staring into the fire with a grim visage.

"Uh," said Davion, "Are you alright?"

Elu didn't look up. "The elders don't want to see me right now."

"Oh," said Davion. He paused for a moment before asking, "Why?"

"I led bold youths to raid the soldiers' fort. People died."

"Oh," said Davion. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yan was like a little brother to me," said Elu. "He was also the best archer in the tribe. Eyes like an eagle. I got him killed. Others, too."

Elu shook his head and poked at the fire's coals. "Zeb was right. I should have had patience."

Davion hesitated. Dealing with strong emotions had never been his strength. He finally spoke up: "Won't your people forgive you? You were doing it to defend the tribe, right?"

"I did," said Elu, "but my people have little tolerance for those who break our rules."

Davion furrowed his brow. "Your people have rules?"

Elu finally looked at him, in confusion. "Of course," he said. "How can you have a tribe without rules?"

"I don't know," said Davion. "It's just that you all seem highly individualistic. You don't seem constrained by the kind of rules of etiquette and decorum that exist where I'm from."

Elu looked back into the fire with a wan smile. "True," he said, "We don't have hundreds of rules like you do. Just the basics: don't lie, steal, start fights, abuse women and children, or otherwise trespass against your people. We have few rules, but we enforce them."

"Enforce how?"

"For minor things, we shame the guilty. For unforgivable things, we execute them."

"Wow," said Davion, his eyes wide. "Is there any space between shame and death?"

Elu looked mirthful. "There is a kind of person," he said, "who tries to walk the line between good and evil. They do all the things we hate, but are clever at getting away with it. They flatter others to support them not being shamed or killed."

"What do you do with such people?" asked Davion.

"When no one is looking," said Elu, "someone pushes them off a cliff. No one in the tribe ever asks what happened to them. Everyone knows. Even their own mother or woman won't ask."

Davion raised his eyebrows and stoked the fire. "Harsh."

"What do your people do with them?"

"If we can prove their guilt," said Davion, "it depends on the crime. We might make a thief pay pack ten times what he stole, or else be put into bondage. For more serious crimes, we might put the criminal in a forced labor camp — or, if they are too dangerous, lock them up in a cage."

"That sounds worse," said Elu. "You don't execute anyone?"

"The kingdom only executes for high crimes like mayhem and murder. Vigilantes have been known to execute rapists, on occasion. We don't execute for things like theft or brawling."

"We have no chains or prisons," said Elu. "If we try to exile someone, and they refuse to leave, or sneak around stealing from us, what else can we do?"

Davion took a deep breath and stoked the fire some more. "Good question."

New Plan

Michael came to Sarah in the late evening. "Dragons have returned. One blood-red, the other a mix of medium red and blue."

Sarah looked at the angel and sighed. "We knew another would come. I didn't expect two."

"There is more. Most of the soldiers have gone."

"Gone where?"

"Away. West. Two days ago."

"How many remain?"

"One hundred fifty-three soldiers. Fifty-one others. Forty horses."

Sarah furrowed her brow and stroked her ear. "What are they up to?"

Sarah slept. An hour before sunrise, she woke and went into a trance. Her experience expanded to the edge of the wood and beyond. She watched the soldiers prepare at sunrise. She saw the two dragons stretching their wings.

An hour after sunrise, half the remaining soldiers marched in formation towards the treeline. The blood dragon slithered along just behind them; the colorful one flew one hundred feet overhead.

When they breached the wood, the soldiers formed a wide ring around the red dragon, with each man seven feet apart. The banded dragon soared in slow circles overhead, thirty yards outside the ring of soldiers.

"What are they doing?" she whispered to herself.

"What is she doing?" whispered Davion to Elu.

"She's meditating," he whispered. "It gives her sight."

Davion raised an eyebrow. "Hm."

Sarah watched as a different set of men approached the wood. These men wore no breastplates or helmets, and were armed only with axes... and saws. She realized the plan with dawning horror. Her eyes shot open.

"I know what they're doing," she said.

Davion and Elu looked at her.

Davion asked, "Who?"

"The new arrivals. Older and wiser dragons. They're not rushing into ambush to take territory. They mean to take it one tree at a time."

"What can we do?" asked Elu.

Sarah looked off in the distance, her eyes mournful. "I have no choice," she said. "I have to make it rain again."

Pareno

Zebulun and Quinn went north and west of Mod and came to a city called Pareno. It was ten times the size, having almost fifteen hundred inhabitants. It had the same squat stone buildings and dirt roads, but far more of both. A twelve-foot stone wall surrounded the town.

Zebulun went straight to the market and found an armorer. He held up his helmet and breastplate and asked, "Would you buy these?"

The armorer examined them. "They look sturdy," he said, "but also real worn out. They seen action?"

"Both have saved my life numerous times," said Zebulun.

The armorer stroked his beard and stared at Zebulun, his eyes narrowed. Finally, he spoke up. "I believe you," he said. "It's good luck to wear armor that's been proven in battle. Wait here. I'll get your coin."

"You're selling your armor?" asked Quinn. "Why?"

"We need money for our travels," said Zebulun, "and I don't need it anymore. I have the blessing of Ur."

"That will stop a sword from poking you?"

Zebulun looked at Quinn with mirth in his eyes. "It might."

The armorer returned with their coin. Zebulun and Quinn found an inn and took much-needed baths. Later, after some food and a few drinks, Zebulun inquired of the barkeep whether he knew of anyone who was sick or injured.

"It's a big town," said the barkeep. "There's always someone. Maybe ask the priest over at the Temple of Luva. People go to him for help all the time. He knows what herbs and plants and such to give for various ailments."

"Thank you," said Zebulun.

Zebulun and Quinn went to the Temple of Luva. It was a small temple, with maybe thirty seats. They met a priest named Hosea.

"You can heal, you say?" asked Hosea. His expression seemed wary but curious.

"I can," said Zebulun. "I will return tomorrow morning. If any here are sick or injured, I will help them. If any are too ill to come here, you can take me to them."

Hosea looked skeptical, but said, "Alright. I know a few people who can use help."

Zebulun bowed and looked around. "You have a small following?"

"Many in the hinterlands still worship their ancestors," said Hosea, "but I've made a few converts. It helps that I know medicinal plants better than the locals."

Quinn grinned. Zebulun nodded. "I'll be back."

Back at the inn, Quinn asked, "You're going to bed already?"

"I need my strength tomorrow," said Zebulun.

"Alright," said Quinn. "Sleep well. I'm going to go wander around."

"Be careful," said Zebulun.

"Always!" said Quinn with a smile. He then turned his head to the side, gave a sly look, and whispered, "Never!"

Zebulun couldn't rouse Quinn the next morning. The hungover mess just mumbled something about meeting a lovely barmaid who wasn't really a maiden, then rolled over and went back to sleep. Zebulun went to temple.

"This is Naphtali," said Hosea. "He's blind. Can you help him?"

Zebulun looked at Naphtali. His eyes looked fine. "Have you been blind since birth?"

"Yes."

"Close your eyes."

Zebulun held his palm an inch from Naphtali's face and let the healing power flow. After two minutes, he stepped back and said, "Open your eyes, but slowly."

Naphtali opened his eyes, looked around, and backed away warily.

"It's us," said Zebulun. "Close your eyes if its too much at once. You've been blind since birth. Getting used to seeing will take time."

Naphtali closed his eyes tight, then opened them a sliver. His eyes darted from person to person before shutting again. "It's a lot to take," said Naphtali.

Hosea stood before him. "Can you really see me?"

Naphtali opened his eyes. "Is that you?"

"It's me," said Hosea.

Naphtali sighed and closed his eyes. "I can see you. I think. I never knew what that meant before today. To me, it's new... and frightening."

"New experiences often are," said Zebulun.

Hosea looked at Zebulun with curiosity. "How do you have this power?"

"I am prophet of Ur," said Zebulun, "Creator of this world."

"I've not heard this tale," said Hosea. "I think I might like to; but first, let us go heal more people."

Zebulun nodded. "Lead the way."

Hosea took him to a number of houses across the city. Zebulun healed a child with bad fever, a man with a broken leg, and a woman with spots. He eased the pain of a handful of elderly with ailments of age.

When they returned to the temple, they found dozens of people gathered. Rumors had spread across town. Who was this mysterious stranger?

Hosea gave Zebulun a platform to address the crowd. He spoke of Ur and his Law. The questions and answers were much like those in Mod.

When the questions slowed down, a fiery old man piped up. "I have a question. Loving others sounds like a fine thing, but what about all the vice and sin in the world?"

"Such as?" asked Zebulun.

"I spent years in the capital," said the old man. "I saw vulgar things there. Children speak profanity. Prostitutes roam the streets. Decadent performers take potions and powders that give them visions. There are even men who dress like women and *lay with other men*."

"This is true," said Zebulun. "Why does it concern you?"

"Because it's wrong!" said the old man. "It goes against decency!"

"I see," said Zebulun. "Do people do those things in your city?"

"Of course not!" said the old man, his eyes widened. "We would never allow it!"

"Then why concern yourself," said Zebulun, "with what others do fifty, one hundred, or one thousand miles away? Concern yourself with your own community."

The old man said, "A kingdom that allows such things will be punished by the gods!" Others murmured their assent.

"There are people among the farm folk," said Zebulun, "who think the gods are false. They think their worship is a betrayal of our ancestors. They would love to tear down your temples and make you follow the old ways."

"They're wrong!" said the old man. Others nodded.

"There are those among the city folk," said Zebulun, "who think those who worship their ancestors — as some of your kinsmen no doubt do — are backwards heathens. They want to tear down every shrine in the countryside and force everyone to construct and attend temples to the gods."

"Well," said the old man, "I doubt many of us agree with that."

"There are also those in the city," said Zebulun, "who believe this world is all there is. They believe there are no gods or spirits — when you die, you are gone forever. Some of them want to tear down every shrine and temple in the kingdom and force everyone to believe in nothing."

"That's awful!" said a woman in the crowd.

Zebulun looked at the old man. "Love others as yourself. Don't be quick to judge the different when that difference does you no harm. Worry about your own home and family."

Sorcerous Inversion

One hundred soldiers marched through a field of tall grass. The dragon Reza Abdullah flew above them. His keen draconic eyes picked up three riders at the apex of a far-off hill.

Reza whispered to his general, *Towards that hill to the northwest. I see horsemen.*

The general ordered his men in that direction.

After half an hour of marching, they reached the base. Reza flew higher to see over the hill. In the next valley, he saw the cowboys' encampment.

I've found their camp, he said. *Take the hill.*

The general led his men up the arduous slope to the top. Spearmen lined up shoulder-to-shoulder. Archers lined up in front of them. Cavalry arrayed at both flanks.

"We're outnumbered," said the general, "but we have the high ground. Let's make them come to us."

The men watched as a blue, serpentine form slithered out from one of the tents and took flight. It flew slowly, casually, toward Reza, stopping to hover at one hundred yards.

You're new, said Zan. *What happened to Nahash? I enjoyed embarrassing him. I was hoping to enjoy it again.*

Nahash had other business, said Reza. *I am Reza Abdullah, and you're dealing with **me** now.*

I doubt you'll be as much fun as he was, said Zan. *I guess all you military types are mages, huh?*

That's right, said Reza, *and I know you are not.*

Nope! said Zan. *Never did like numbers. Performance, on the other hand — at that, I excel. Fancy a duel? Think your fire and lightning will save you?*

I'm here to kill bandits, said Reza, *not to prove anything.*

Reza fired a beam of white-hot heat in Zan's direction. Zan dodged nonchalantly, as if he had expected it. Reza tried a few more times. Zan was quick.

I have to get closer, whispered Reza to the general. *I'm going to try and bring him down close to your troops. Be ready to hit him with a volley of arrows, then send in the cavalry to finish him.*

The general looked up and nodded.

Reza focused his will and opened a hole in space between he and Zan. He flew through and came out ten yards above the enemy. He immediately singed Zan with a small bolt of lightning.

Zan hissed. *Watch this,* he said.

Reza watched as Zan disappeared before his eyes.

Reza narrowed his eyes in irritation and focused his will, trying to cast off the spell. He gasped as

three slashes opened up in his side. Zan had snuck up and clawed him, but Reza still couldn't see him. He flew upward.

The soldiers below could see Zan just fine. They wondered why their dragon looked lost.

One of the men yelled, "General!"

The general looked at the soldier, then looked where he was pointing. The cowboys had assembled on horseback at the base of the hill.

The soldiers and cowboys watched the dragons circle one another a mile up. There were bursts of fire and lightning. After a few minutes of fighting, the soldiers saw Reza hit Zan with a blast of force that sent him tumbling to the ground one third of the way down the hill.

"Archers!" shouted the general.

The archers let two volleys fly. Ninety arrows sailed toward the fallen serpent. Some seemed to veer off at the last minute, but at last half of them connected. Zan looked at the soldiers in horror and whispered to the general, *No! What are you doing?*

The cavalry thundered in and filled Zan's body with spears. His eyes and mouth got wide as life leaked from his body. He looked the general in the eye and whispered, *How? Why?* Then he collapsed and died.

The soldiers cheered, then stopped abruptly ten seconds later. Lying dead before them, full of spears and arrows, was their dragon. They looked up. The blue dragon circled above them.

Fooled you! he said to the assembly.

Zan focused his will. Two out of three soldiers suddenly found themselves falling through the endless void of space. There was no Earth, Moon, or Sun — nothing but stars and blackness.

The remaining third of the soldiers saw their comrades fall to the ground screaming about falling into the sky.

The cowboys thundered up the hill. They made short work of the company.

Night Flight

Nahash and Sirajuddin sat coiled a mile from camp, their wings held over them to shield them from the howling wind and blinding rain. Thunder boomed in the dark clouds above.

I tire of this, whispered Nahash.

It's been the same for three days, said Sirajuddin. *It begins before dawn and ends after dusk, just as the general said. It is unnatural.*

Have you ever heard of a mage powerful enough to summon a storm? asked Nahash.

No, said Sirajuddin. *I can't imagine how one could even compute such a thing. The equations would contain colossal amounts of chaos.*

Right, said Nahash. *So what in the world are we dealing with?*

Something we've never seen, said Sirajuddin.

Nahash looked eastward, into the woods. *So the general was accurate about this. What do you make of his glowing creatures?*

That could be magery, said Sirajuddin. *Projecting images is not difficult. The flaming skull would have taken some artistic talent.*

Nahash opened his mouth in mild amusement. *And the animals? Wasps and butterflies?*

Unnatural, said Sirajuddin. *Perhaps supernatural.*

Nahash looked up at the lightning flashing across the clouds. The boom of thunder followed. *If this follows the pattern*, he said, *then we go hunting after dusk. We'll look for settlements, sources of water, cook-fires... anything.*

Sirajuddin nodded.

At dusk, the storm began to fade. An hour later, when the rain turned to drizzle, Nahash and Sirajuddin took flight.

I can't see anything, said Sirajuddin.

Just fly low and look for creeks and clearings, said Nahash. *Maybe we'll get lucky.*

When they were a few miles in, they chose an arbitrary point and flew in an expanding spiral around it. After two hours, Sirajuddin whispered to Nahash: *I see something.*

Nahash followed as Sirajuddin spiraled down towards a clearing. They landed and found a fire pit surrounded by four logs.

I thought this looked too rectangular, said Sirajuddin.

Good eye, said Nahash. *I'm amazed you spotted it. I saw nothing.*

The half-moon helped, said Sirajuddin.

They searched the area below the hill and found the remains of numerous camps.

Look at the number of fire pits, said Sirajuddin. There were a few score people here, at least.

Can you track them? asked Nahash.

No, said Sirajuddin. If they left yesterday, the storm will have taken care of the tracks.

Well, then, said Nahash, maybe we'll just wait here for a while... see if anyone comes back to camp now that the storm is over.

Cave Time

Sarah opened her eyes. The storm began to lessen. She stood up, yawned, and stretched. "I must eat something," she said, "and then rest."

Sarah unrolled a cloth filled with roots and berries and dug in.

"How long can you keep this up?" asked Davion.

"I'm low on energy," she said, "but that doesn't even matter. I can't keep doing this for long. I'm throwing off the balance. I'll do more damage to the forest than their woodcutters will if I make it rain for too long."

Davion looked at the ground and rubbed his chin. He thought for a few moments as Sarah devoured her food. Kulth-Ing sauntered over. Davion scratched the cat behind its ears. Kulth-Ing gave him happy cat eyes.

"What about the star folk?" he asked. "They seem more than willing to help you defend this place."

"They are," said Sarah, "and they were happy to help us kill a dragon. They are less enthusiastic about indiscriminately killing soldiers, most of whom haven't done anything wrong except follow the leader."

"Right," said Davion. "Knowing them a little better now, I can't imagine them doing that... but aren't there other things they could do?"

"Such as?"

"Well," said Davion, "They're invisible, right? They could easily sneak into the enemy camp and sabotage some things."

"They could," said Sarah, "but it would be dangerous to them. Those dragons could hurt them, if they knew how. There's a lot of metal in that camp."

"I remember you saying they are fearless."

"True," said Sarah, "they would probably help if I asked them to. But sabotage what? I doubt all the fairies in the forest could destroy all their food and weapons."

"The goal isn't to defeat the soldiers or the dragons, right?" asked Davion. "Not really. You just want to stop them from razing the forest."

"Yes."

"So... couldn't the star folk destroy just those tools most important to the task? They could sabotage the woodcutters' axes, saws, and drills. There are far fewer of those than weapons or supplies."

Sarah looked at Davion with narrowed eyes. "That," she said, "is an idea." She stared at him for a moment, then sighed. "I hate to ask them to do something so dangerous to themselves, even if they have no fear."

Davion shifted uncomfortably and said, "I'm on friendly terms with a few of them now." He took a deep breath. "I'll ask them."

"No need," said a disembodied voice above them. A small star appeared, then expanded to reveal Michael. "We heard you. A good plan. We'll do it."

Sarah looked up at Michael. "Thank you," she said. "I know it's dangerous."

"Existence is dangerous," said Michael.

Another of the star folk appeared — the rainbow-winged serpent called Quetzal. "Dragons found your camp," he said to Sarah. "Forest folk have been warned."

"Unfortunate," said Sarah. She looked over and Elu and Davion. "Looks like we're staying here."

She summoned the storm again the next morning.

Nahash and Sirajuddin sat in the rain for an hour.

I don't think anyone's returning to camp in this storm, said Sirajuddin.

Nahash fluttered his wings to toss the rain away. He looked annoyed. *Let's head back,* he said.

Kriston

Zebulun and Quinn went to the town of Kriston in the far north of the kingdom. The walled city boasted twelve hundred inhabitants. A thin ring of trees circled the city, their source of firewood. Beyond the trees lay farms and ranches.

They went to the market to buy food. They saw a beggar seated at the edge of the market. He stared down at the handful of copper coins in his bowl with sadness.

Zebulun placed a silver coin in his bowl. The beggar's eyes lit up. He looked up at Zebulun with gratitude and said, "Thank you. This will feed me for a week."

"Why are you in such a state?" asked Zebulun.

"I can't work," said the beggar. "My legs don't work."

"Why not?" asked Quinn.

"I was a soldier," said the beggar. "Cavalry. I got thrown from a horse. I haven't walked since."

"I can heal you," said Zebulun.

The former soldier looked up with skepticism. "How?"

"Lie down."

The beggar looked wary, but laid down as asked. Zebulun knelt over him and placed his hand over his chest. The spiritual energy flowed from him into the man's heart, where it found its way to the destroyed nerves in his spine.

The beggar gasped. "It burns!"

"It will pass," said Zebulun.

After a few moments, Zebulun rose and held out his hand to the beggar. The beggar looked at him with a sidelong glance, but grasped his hand. Zebulun pulled him to his feet and let go. The beggar swayed, but remained standing. He turned, took a couple of steps, and collapsed. Zebulun caught him.

"Your legs are weak from lack of use," said Zebulun. "It will take time to strengthen them. But your injury is healed."

The beggar stared at him, wide-eyed. "Who are you?"

"Zebulun Koh," he said, "prophet of Ur. This is my companion, Quinn."

"Hi!" said Quinn. "What's your name?"

"Obadiah," he said. He looked at Zebulun. "How can I repay you?"

"Tell me who else in this city needs help."

Obadiah showed them around. Zebulun healed several cattle-related injuries, including two broken legs and one man who got gored by a bull. He cured a little boy of his chronic stomach malady, to the delight of the boy and his parents.

Toward the end of the day, they found themselves in the home of a rich man named Nicholas. His wife lie in her bed, pale and wan, dying of consumption. Zebulun held his palms above her for a full ten minutes before stopping. The woman seemed to breath easier. Some color returned to her face.

Zebulun left Quinn and Obadiah to feast on the fruit and cheese provided by the host. He asked Nicholas to join him on the balcony. The rich man's hilltop tower rose three stories, highest in the city, so they could see far.

"I've given her strength," said Zebulun, "and eased her pain, but I cannot arrest the disease. It may return."

Nicholas looked at him, then off to the setting sun. "I thank you for anything you can do. I've seen that crippled beggar in the market for years. Now I see him up and walking." Nicholas shook his head. "How do you have this power?"

"I am prophet of Ur, creator of this world. I have his blessing to go forth and heal."

"And this deity of yours asks for nothing? No rituals or sacrifices?"

"None."

"What does he want?"

"To make us better," said Zebulun, "so that the world can be better. He wants to help us."

"Should we worship him?" asked Nicholas.

"Ur neither wants nor needs your worship. Ur is complete."

"Does he hear our prayers?"

"Ur hears all prayers," said Zebulun.

"But will he answer them?" asked Nicholas.

Zebulun looked at Nicholas for a moment, then turned his face to the sunset. Orange and gold blazed across the horizon, flanked by meadows filled with violet bluebonnets on the ground and clouds lit up like fire in the sky. Zebulun took a deep breath and said, "He answered mine."

Agents of Chaos

An axe shot up silently from within the stockade. It flew in a high arc over the fields to the east before disappearing into the woods. It landed on soft earth with a quiet thud.

Bigfoot scampered out of the brush, grabbed the axe, and fled into the forest.

Next came a saw, its thin metal singing softly as it flew through the air. It clanged as it bounced off a tree. Sugar ran over, grabbed it, and took off after Bigfoot.

More tools followed: axes, saws, and adzes. As each one landed, a kuchibu appeared, grabbed it, and ran off. Some tools took two of them to carry.

"Do you hear something?" asked a guard on patrol.

"Like what?"

"Like a thumping coming out of the woods."

"I heard nothing."

Inside the camp, Sirajuddin whispered, *Do you feel that?*

What? asked Nahash.

That tingling, said Sirajuddin. *Like someone is using magery nearby.*

Nahash closed his eyes and sat still. He did feel something. *Nothing too powerful, but you're right. Let's look around.*

The two of them flew up a hundred feet and circled.

A tiny light winked below and something went flying off to the east.

What was that? asked Nahash.

It looked like an axe, said Sirajuddin. *Looks like it flew into the forest.*

Nahash ground his teeth. *You keep watch. I'll rouse the general to sound the alarm.*

Nahash descended. Sirajuddin circled slowly, his eyes scanning the fort. He saw the tiny light wink again and dove for it. A saw flew past his wing. He was thirty feet up when the star winked out.

Sirajuddin focused his will and fired a beam of heat at the spot where the light had been. It hit the ground and smoldered. He flew back up twenty feet and waited. A moment later, an adze flew over his head. He spun, mid-air, to see a little star behind him wink out.

Nahash's general sounded the alarm. Men mustered, stoked fires, and lit torches. The general had them watch for trouble in all directions.

They stared and stared. When nothing else happened for two hours, he called off the alarm.

Sirajuddin landed next to Nahash. *The stars themselves are against us*, he said.

What sorcery is this? asked Nahash.

The kuchibu took their spoils to the cave where the forest folk hid from storms and dragons.

Stars and Dragons

Nahash and Sirajuddin sat coiled in their wide tent. Wind and rain thundered against the leather. There was no storm, this time — just torrential rain.

Nahash whispered to Sirajuddin, *Stars, you said?*

Every time a tool flew through the air, said Sirajuddin, a bright, tiny light appeared where the tool had been. I detected a trace of magery each time. I tried to hit one with a heat ray, but they winked out quickly after each toss.

How many tools did we lose? asked Nahash.

Around one in twenty, said Sirajuddin.

So if they can pull this off for twenty days, said Nahash, the woodcutters will have nothing to work with.

A fair assessment, said Sirajuddin.

Nahash let out a low, slow hiss — a draconic sigh. *How do we fight something we can't see?*

Sirajuddin shrugged his wings. *A good question.*

Let's do another search tomorrow night, said Nahash. We'll start at that camp we found last time and move outward. See what we can see.

The next night, the pair waited til the gibbous moon was high in the sky before taking flight. They reached Sarah's camp and spiraled outward from there. After an hour of searching, Sirajuddin whispered to Nahash, *I see a cave.*

Sirajuddin focused his will and sent a beam of bright light down into the forest. Nahash followed it and saw a wide cave two thirds of the way up a tree-covered hill.

How on Earth did you see that? asked Nahash.

I have good night vision, said Sirajuddin.

Wait here, said Nahash. *I'm going to check it out.*

Nahash spiraled down into the trees and slithered into the cave. As he did, his nostrils widened. They had been here. Two men and a woman. And something else.

A low growl emanated from deeper in the cave.

Nahash focused and illuminated the way before him with a cone of light. Thirty feet in, he saw a huge black panther with squinting yellow eyes. It hissed and snarled at him, its eyes nearly shut.

Nice kitty, whispered Nahash, slithering towards the beast.

Kulth-Ing bared his teeth and let loose a loud roar.

Never fear, kitten, whispered Nahash. *I would never destroy such a magnificent cat.*

With that, Nahash focused his mind on Kulth-Ing's. The cat growled, struggled, stumbled, and fell over asleep.

Sweet dreams, whispered Nahash, gently pushing the jaguar aside.

Nahash went further into the cave, shining light as he went. It sloped downward and narrowed as he went deeper. He folded his wings against his body and continued.

He came to a fork. The left fork smelled of water. The right smelled of his quarry. He examined the right tunnel; it sloped sharply downward, then veered left. It was narrow enough that he would have to wriggle through. He imagined himself rounding the bend, barely able to move, and having one of the men plant an axe right in his brain. He decided against it.

Instead, he focused his will and sent flames hot as he could generate as far down the tunnel as he could see without going too far in. He heard nothing. He slithered backwards and left.

In the skies above, Sirajuddin circled the cave. He stopped short when a tiny star appeared in front of him. He watched as it expanded into a sphere of static that grew to three times his size. Then the image of a man replaced the static. He was blonde, bronze, and muscular. He wore ancient silks and carried a flaming sword.

"Dragon," said the being in a booming voice, "You are trespassing."

Sirajuddin stared at the stranger for a moment. He whispered at the thing, *What manner of creature are you?*

"A guardian," said the being.

You're wrong about trespassing, whispered Sirajuddin. *Our kingdom acquired these woods as a condition of our peace treaty with the Principality of Kanaark. If anything, it is you who are trespassing.*

"These lands are not his to give," said Michael, "or yours to take."

We'll see, said Sirajuddin. *But what **are** you?*

"Your doom," said Michael.

Michael darted ten yards up in the blink of an eye. Sirajuddin sensed the summoning of energy and waited. Michael tried to disorient Sirajuddin with a blast of light and noise, but the dragon deflected the spell with his mind.

My turn, said Sirajuddin.

He summoned energy and fired a beam of intense heat at the light-being, who dodged easily.

Michael responded in kind with a heat ray of his own. Sirajuddin deflected it. They went back and forth, circling in three dimensions and throwing spells at one another.

Sirajuddin finally landed what he thought was a direct hit, but the being didn't respond.

That could have melted steel, said Sirajuddin. What sorcery is this?

"No sorcery," said Michael.

Sirajuddin took the opposite tack, trying to channel heat away from the being. After five tries, he landed what he thought was a hit. No effect.

"I fly through the frozen void and bathe in the fires of stars," said Michael.

Sirajuddin recoiled as he failed to deflect the angel's latest spell. Stars filled his eyes. Sound disappeared. He banked and dived. Pain welled up as fire seared his wing. He serpentine in random directions until his vision and hearing started to return. He got tagged two more times.

Sirajuddin switched to lightning. After a few tries, he hit the angel square. The man in the sphere disappeared, replaced by static. It rapidly shrank to nothing and vanished.

Sirajuddin circled for a moment, watching all around him.

The angel appeared in front of him. "You'll have to do better than that, serpent."

Sirajuddin switched to sorcery. He did his best to daze, delude, or horrify the enemy. Nothing seemed to work. He took more hits. He had five tiny holes in his wings and three scorch marks on his body.

He heard Nahash in his mind. *What is that?*

You tell me, whispered Sirajuddin. *It seems immune to heat, cold, and sorcery. Lightning seemed to stun it, but not for long. It knows magery, but does not seem high-powered.*

Let's see how it reacts to pure force, said Nahash.

Nahash flew upward. He focused his will and sent a ripple of warped space at the being. Michael dodged to the side. Sirajuddin joined in. The two of them sent volley after volley at the angel until Sirajuddin landed one. The being seemed to vibrate in space, but did not seem to be harmed.

They tried the angel's own tactic, to blind and deafen it with intense light and noise. No effect.

This, said Nahash to Sirajuddin, *is frustrating.*

What now? asked Sirajuddin.

Let's try plain old physical violence, said Nahash.

The pair of serpents lunged at the angel, trying to surround and corner it, but the thing moved far too fast for them. Its sudden, darting movements seemed to defy the rules of momentum.

After a few minutes of cat-and-mouse, twelve more stars appeared around them and expanded into spheres. One resembled Michael in dress and flaming sword, but had brown skin and black hair. Another looked like a flying serpent with rainbow wings. The rest were a menagerie of exotic animal hybrids.

One looked like a regular man with beige skin and almond eyes. He wore fine silks from an ancient

land far away. He grew to be larger than all the others, dwarfing the dragons in size as a man does a mouse.

"I'm bigger than you!" said Lao with a smile.

The serpents stared at him.

"You should go back to camp," said Lao, still smiling. "There's been some trouble."

With that, the star folk darted up into the sky faster than any bird or dragon. They winked out one by one, with Lao being last. Before he vanished, he transformed into a cartoonish caricature of a dragon. It had ridiculous tiny wings and angry, human-like eyebrows. One human arm stuck out of its body. The hand made a rude gesture.

Is he mocking us? asked Nahash.

Definitely, said Sirajuddin.

This is maddening, said Nahash. *That crack about trouble in camp might be a ruse, but I don't see what more we can accomplish here. Let's head back.*

They returned to camp to find that the light-beings had been there too. While their allies distracted the dragons above the forest, they fell on the camp and wrought havoc. Most of the woodcutters' tools were lost or destroyed. Part of the stockade roared with flame. Horses ran loose. Their own extra-large tent lay in ashes.

Nahash let out a long sigh. *This is a disaster.*

His general looked uncomfortable. "Little points of light," he said. "That's all anyone saw. Some of the men tried to hit them with swords or arrows, but those things were *fast*. I... I have no idea."

I have an idea, said Nahash. He watched soldiers and camp followers throw water on the flames. He looked out at the forest to the east, then up at the stars. He turned his gaze to Sirajuddin and the general. *I'm ready to call this mission a complete failure,* he said.

Nahash ground his teeth. *We can't fight what we don't understand. General, tell the captain to take the company back to Dalton and await orders there. The three of us are going back to Azulan. I have to face the consequences for my failure.*

Nahash looked back at the woods. *Then,* he said, *we have some research to do.*

Wake in Fright

Davion woke with a start. It was pitch black.

"Sarah?" he whispered. "Elu?"

He heard a grunt in the darkness. He focused his will; a tiny sphere of blue light appeared and illuminated the cave. Sarah blinked and sat up. Elu began to snore.

"I can't even tell what time of day it is, down here," said Davion.

"It's mid-morning," said Sarah.

"How do you know?" asked Davion.

Sarah just smiled.

Davion recalled the harrowing crawl down to this cave. "Do we have to crawl our way back up?"

"No," said Sarah. "There are other ways out. We just have to wait til the coast is clear."

"How will we know?" asked Davion.

As if on cue, a small point of light appeared, then grew to a sphere that fit in a palm. The angel had brown skin, black hair, eagle's wings, and a flaming sword.

"Gabriel," said Sarah. "Thank you, again, for the warning."

Gabriel bowed, his hands clasped before him. "All is well," said Gabriel. "The dragons returned to camp. The soldiers are leaving."

"Leaving?" asked Davion. "They're packing up?"

"Seems so," said Gabriel.

Sarah stood, stretched, and winced. "Then we've won," she said. "For now. They'll be back next summer. The dragons may be back earlier than that. We have to keep our guard up."

"We'll be ready," said Gabriel.

The angel led them downward and out of the cave with his light. They emerged into a clear forest morning that smelled faintly of rain.

Killer on the Road

Quinn grabbed Zebulun by the arm. "Zeb! Is that him?"

"Yep," said Zebulun. "That's the one they warned us about."

Zebulun and Quinn rode on a lonely road in the far northwest of the kingdom. Residents of the last village they passed warned them of a powerful madman known to roam the road on occasion. Standing in the road before them, one hundred yards away, was the largest man either of them had ever seen. He rippled with muscle.

"Is he taller than *you*?" asked Quinn.

"Five inches taller," said Zebulun. "He's a full seven feet. And twice my mass."

"Twice?" asked Quinn, staring at Zebulun with wide eyes. He looked back at the madman. "Really?"

"Look at the size of his muscles," said Zebulun. "He's at least four hundred pounds."

"Wow..."

The man appeared to be having a violent argument with himself. He roared with rage and swung his fists at the air. He seemed to be grappling a foe no one else could see. Wild hair and beard fell down on a scarred bare chest.

Zebulun dismounted and handed Othniel's reins to Quinn. "Stay here," he said, and walked slowly towards the man in the road.

"You're not taking your weapons?" whispered Quinn behind him.

Zebulun turned around and shook his head. "I won't need them."

Zebulun was within ten yards of him before the madman took notice. He looked at Zebulun with wild eyes that showed white above and below the iris. At the top of his massive lungs, he screamed, "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"I come in peace," said Zebulun. "I'm Zebulun. What is your name?"

The bestial visage before him roared, a sound from the deepest wells of horror. Veins popped out from his head and neck. His face turned purple. "TOO MANY!" he shouted. "TOO MANY NAMES!"

The madman lunged at Zebulun, his meaty hands before him. Quick as a cat, Zebulun stepped out of the way, grabbed the madman's left arm, and used his own momentum to throw him to the ground, winding him. The man breathed hard for a moment before lifting himself to his hands and knees. He gave Zebulun a look of pure hatred.

"NEVER!" yelled the madman as he charged again. "YOU DON'T GET TO!"

He grabbed Zebulun by the wrist. Zebulun grabbed the madman's other wrist. Both tried to force the other down.

The madman's strength was unearthly. Zebulun's strength, substantial though it was, was no match for his. Zebulun focused his will and let the power of Ur flow from the spiritual plane and into his sinews. The madman watched in mounting horror as Zebulun forced him to his knees.

The madman let go of Zebulun's wrist and hit him square in the chest with a powerful blow. Zebulun staggered backwards and fell, breathing hard. The killer stood up and crept towards him.

"Leave him alone!" said Quinn.

The madman whipped his head towards Quinn. Zebulun looked up in confusion. Quinn sat with the horses a few yards away, sling in hand.

"I told you to stay back," said Zebulun.

"I couldn't see *anything* back there!" said Quinn. "I don't want to miss this fight. And it'd be tough to hit him with my sling from that far back, if I wound up having to save you."

Zebulun shook his head and stood up. The madman looked at him, then at Quinn, then back to Zebulun. He lunged.

Zebulun dodged.

Zebulun fought defensively, using economy of force. When he couldn't dodge in time, or throw his opponent, he wrestled his way out of the madman's grip. The power of Ur sustained him.

After twenty minutes of rage and frustration, the madman cried out and fell to his knees. Tears streamed down his massive face. His breath came in heaving sobs. "Why?" he asked. "Why?"

"I can help you," said Zebulun.

Zebulun put his hands over the madman's head, who ignored him. Energy flowed from the spiritual plane, healing the man's damaged brain and psyche. He wept harder as the healing progressed. "Why?" he kept asking. "Why me?"

After a moment, Zebulun stepped back. Quinn came over to look. The man collapsed to the ground and stared up at them. His eyes were hollow, but sane.

"I've never felt so tired," he said. "It's as if I've been having a nightmare for years and years."

"It's over," said Zebulun.

The man looked up at him with awe, gratitude, and some fear. "Daniel," he said. "My name is Daniel."

Abasement

Beings of light, you say...

Aurelius sat coiled around his throne, his wings wrapped around him. Nahash sat coiled at the foot of the dais, his wings spread wide behind him, his head bowed in submission. Aurelius looked down at Nahash with scorn.

Tell me you're not talking about forest spirits again, whispered Aurelius.

I don't know what to call them, sir, said Nahash. *They seemed immune to heat, cold, and sorcery. Lightning stunned them, but only for a moment. Nothing we tried seemed to hurt them.*

Did you try hitting them with a rock? asked Aurelius.

No, sir, said Nahash. *We tried almost everything else. These beings know magery, they can turn invisible, and they are **fast**.*

I've never heard such nonsense, said Aurelius.

I would say the same in your place, sir, said Nahash, *but I saw them with my own eyes. We fought with them. Sirajuddin can back me up.*

I'm sure, said Aurelius with contempt. *So you just gave up?*

I can't kill what I can't hurt, sir. I can't fight what I don't understand. I need to figure out what we're dealing with so we can take those woods next summer.

The dragon king stared down at his general for a long, long time. *Go,* he said. *Get out of my sight.*

Nahash slithered out of the hall.

His general stood waiting for him. "How did it go?"

About as well as you'd expect, said Nahash, *but I think I get another chance.*

"Good," said the general.

I need you to put together a team of scholars to research what we saw. Look in the histories, old folk tales, anything. Find something that sounds like these light creatures we encountered.

"Right away, sir."

Put out inquiries on the street as well, said Nahash. *Find out if anyone in the capital has ever heard of anything like this.*

"I'll talk to the spy guy."

Good, said Nahash. *Work quickly. I don't know how patient the king will be for the answer. Likely not very.*

Blasphemy

Zebulun and Quinn went to the town of Gad. Zebulun healed the sick and injured, then told the people of the Law of Ur. The townspeople questioned him, as they had in every place.

Quinn stood off to the side of the crowd, entertaining the children with juggling. Something caught his eye — a man in the back of the crowd scowled at every answer Zebulun gave to a question. He seemed to get angrier as the evening grew longer.

Without warning, he cried out, "Blasphemy!"

The crowd went silent and turned towards him. They parted as he strolled forward towards Zebulun. He smoldered with quiet wrath. Quinn now saw that he wore the garb of a priest.

"You say this god of yours — Ur — is the creator of the world. The scriptures clearly say that Ram and Luva created the world with their union. Do you deny the scriptures?"

"I have no quarrel with Ram and Luva," said Zebulun. "They are fine gods. They're just not the one I serve."

"But you claim Ur created all this?"

"He did."

"Then you commit blasphemy against our religion. You must answer for this."

The priest turned to another man. "You're the judge," he said. "Arrest him! He openly admits to blasphemy — and all his talk of the coming Kingdom of Ur? He's likely guilty of treason as well."

"I've betrayed no one," said Zebulun.

"Liar!" said the priest.

The judge sighed. He turned to Zebulun. "Will you come quietly?"

"Of course," said Zebulun. "I want no trouble."

"Good."

"Get his little buddy, too," said the priest.

"Hey!" said Quinn. "I didn't say nothing about Ur, or who created the universe."

"You're his confederate," said the priest. "You may try to free him."

"Of course I would!" said Quinn. "He's my friend."

The townspeople laughed.

Zebulun turned to a man whose daughter he had healed of a limp. "Will you tend to our animals and possessions?"

"Sure thing," said the man. He led Othniel, Samson, and Friendship away.

The town folk grumbled and booed when the judge took Zebulun and Quinn. He locked them in a small cell; the town was just big enough to have one.

"Well, this is great," said Quinn. "How are you supposed to heal people and start a new kingdom from jail?"

"We'll be fine," said Zebulun.

"Yeah," said Quinn, "I know. I'm just annoyed. I don't like being confined."

"Few do."

"So how are we gonna get outta here?"

"Just wait," said Zebulun. "Be patient."

Quinn grinned. "That's never been my paramount virtue."

Hours passed. The sun went down. The moon came up.

It was near midnight when the small star appeared in their cell. It expanded to a sphere containing a naked woman with blue skin and butterfly wings.

"Bluebonnet!" said Quinn. "So happy to see you! What are you doing here?"

Bluebonnet smiled her squinty smile and said, "Sarah asked me to watch out for you."

"Have you been following us the whole time?" asked Quinn.

Bluebonnet nodded, still smiling.

Quinn looked at Zebulun and asked, "Did you know she was following us?"

"I knew someone was watching us," said Zebulun. "Since I never saw anyone, I figured it must be one of the angels."

"Wow," said Quinn. "This sixth sense of yours: does that come from being a prophet?"

Zebulun shook his head. "From being a soldier."

"Oh, right," said Quinn. "You mentioned that." He turned to Bluebonnet. "Can you get us out of here?"

She nodded again. She turned to Zebulun and said, "I need your blessing."

Zebulun held his palm up to Bluebonnet and let the spiritual power flow. Bluebonnet got brighter and brighter. Looking at her became painful.

She turned to the lock and waved her hand. The tumblers fell into place. The door opened.

"Thank you, Bluebonnet," said Zebulun. She just smiled.

Zebulun stood and looked at Quinn. "Let's go."

Fall

Weeks passed. The brutal heat of summer gave way to pleasant warmth. The days grew shorter.

Zebulun and Quinn went from village to village. Zebulun healed the afflicted and spoke Ur's truth to the people. Quinn entertained people with song and dance, feats of acrobatics or juggling, or "magic" tricks like pulling a coin from behind a child's ear.

On occasion, Quinn would catch the eye of a young maiden or lonely widow (or, on occasion, a handsome farmhand), and Zebulun wouldn't see him for a while. But he always appeared in time for the next meal.

Davion studied at the feet of the star folk. He practiced his art while they rested. He grew in knowledge, skill, and power. He learned to do multidimensional calculations in his head at rapid pace. He learned to focus his will.

Knowing his old community would never take him back, Daniel began a lonesome journey south.

Nahash's general assembled a team of eleven scholars to read every scroll in the capital to find his master an answer. He tasked the spymaster with seeking stories from the shadier side of the public.

Nahash and Sirajuddin flew throughout the kingdom, asking other military dragons if they knew anything about the beings they'd fought.

King Aurelius waited and stewed.

Koh

Zebulun and Quinn halted their mounts on a hill overlooking a small village. It was quiet. A light breeze blew from the west.

"What village is this?" asked Quinn.

"The village of my birth," said Zebulun.

Quinn whipped his head around and looked at Zebulun with wide eyes. "Really? This is Koh?"

Zebulun nodded.

"Do you still have family here?" asked Quinn.

"I don't know," said Zebulun. "I haven't been back since my father died."

"Was that when you joined the army?" asked Quinn.

Zebulun shook his head. "Before. My father died when I was ten. No one from our village would take me in, so they sent me to an orphanage a day's ride west of the capital. Men from the army came by a few times a year to inspect the boys. They usually waited until a boy was fifteen or sixteen, but I was big for my age. They took me at fourteen."

"You're big for any age," said Quinn. "What about your mother?"

"She died in childbirth."

"Brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"Oh," said Quinn. He was quiet for a moment. "So you never knew your mother?"

"I did not."

"That's so sad," said Quinn. "I mean, mine took off when I was young, but at least I had a mom for a few years. I'm sorry, Zeb."

Zebulun nodded.

"You were in the army ever since?" asked Quinn.

"I was," said Zebulun. "I'd probably still be soldiering if not for Sarah. She gave form to the doubts I had."

Zebulun paused for a moment to look at the village, took a deep breath, and said, "Let's see who needs our help."

They rode down into the village. Zebulun dismounted and strolled, leading the mounts, taking everything in. The aroma of food filled the air as the women of the village prepared the evening meal. The men wouldn't be back from tending the ranchers' herds til sundown. Children played in

the dusty road. They stopped and stared at the strangers with big eyes.

Zebulun stopped at the well for a drink. They watered their equines and filled their waterskins.

An old woman approached. "Hello, strangers."

"Hello," said Zebulun. "I'm Zebulun. This is my companion Quinn. I was born in this place."

The old woman came closer. She stood on tiptoes and squinted up at Zebulun.

"You Asher's boy?" she asked.

"I am."

"You look like him," she said. "He was a big fella too. What have you been doing all these years?"

"Soldiering," said Zebulun. "But no more. Now I am prophet of Ur, creator of the world. I wander the land and heal the sick and injured. Does anyone here need help?"

The old woman stared at him for a moment. "You get hit in the head a lot in the army?"

Mirth entered Zebulun's eyes. "Not too often."

"He's serious!" said Quinn. "I seen him do it."

The old woman looked at Quinn with a cocked eyebrow, then turned back to Zebulun. "In that case," she said, "you came at a good time. Your mother's sister fell ill not long ago."

"Take me to her," said Zebulun.

She took them to a small house. They waited in the courtyard while the old woman spoke to Zebulun's aunt. The old woman emerged and said, "She will see you."

Zebulun went inside. His aunt lay on a bed, thin and pale. She looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Zebulun," she said.

"Aunt Keziah," said Zebulun. "Good to see you."

"I'd hug you," she said, "but I can barley move. I'm not well."

"That's why I'm here," said Zebulun.

She watched with confusion as Zebulun placed his hands above her torso and closed his eyes. After a moment, he opened them and said, "It's some kind of corruption. Wait a moment."

He let the power of Ur flow into his aunt. It destroyed the invader. Her flesh darkened; her breathing eased.

She looked up at him in wonder. "How can you do this?"

"I'm a prophet now," he said.

She looked at him, then looked away. Tears welled up and ran down her cheeks. Zebulun put a hand on her shoulder. She grabbed it.

"Oh, Zeb," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"What for?"

"For not taking you in," she said. "I should have. I was afraid the others would shun me as they did your mother. They never stopped hating her for refusing to marry that vile, disgusting toad. He had promised the village riches. When she married your father, he instead did everything he could to make our lives hard."

"One of the big ranchers?" asked Zebulun.

"Yes," she said. "Mortimer or something. He was stupid, ugly, and mean, but he was rich. Jael wanted nothing to do with him. She married your father instead. The others never forgave her. Your parents' life was hard because no one would help them."

She looked up at him through the tears. "And now you've come back and brought me back from the edge of the grave, like it never happened. I'm so sorry, Zeb. I should have cared for you."

Zebulun squeezed her shoulder. "All is forgiven. I went where I needed to go to set me on this path. It wasn't pleasant, but it was necessary."

Keziah grasped his hand and kissed it. She held his hand to her face for a time.

Her stomach growled. She chuckled with tears on her face. "I haven't been able to keep anything down," she said, wiping her eyes. "Even water would come back up. Now I feel hungrier than I ever have. Can I fix you something to eat?"

"My companion would love you for it," he said.

This was cattle country; some of the men got beef as part of their wages. She sat them down to a home-cooked meal of meat, potatoes, and black-eyed peas. Quinn ate as much as Zebulun. Keziah almost matched them.

After dinner, the people gathered in the square. They marveled at the lost son's return. Zebulun offered healing to anyone who needed it.

He spoke of the Law of Ur. The people showed skepticism.

"We cling to the old ways," said one old man. "We revere our ancestors, as our ancestors did theirs. We do not truck with gods."

"Continue to revere your ancestors," said Zebulun. "Keep praying at their shrines. Ur is unconcerned with such things."

"He doesn't want our worship and devotion?" asked a young woman.

"No," said Zebulun.

"I never heard of a god that didn't want no worshipers," said a young cowpoke with a grin.

Zebulun smiled with his eyes. "Now you have."

Journeyman Mage

Davion stood outside the treeline, thirty yards from the abandoned stockade. He focused his will. A thirty-foot section of the wall burst into flame. He focused again, and the flames extinguished, replaced by frost.

He raised his hand, palm up. It held a rock. He flicked his wrist palm-forward. The rock flew at the stockade with great speed, smashing through and sending splinters skyward.

Lao appeared, smiling. "Good!" he said. "You've been practicing!"

"Every day," said Davion. "I'm grateful for everything you've taught me, even if I don't quite understand how you did it."

"We know a few tricks with human perception," said Lao. "Now that you have this power, you must decide what to do with it. You can use it to create, or to protect, or to destroy."

Davion furrowed his brow. "I guess I'd like to use it to help people — to create or protect."

"What if you are called on to destroy something evil?" asked Lao.

"I don't know," said Davion. "I don't think I could kill anyone."

"That's good," said Lao. "We don't teach killers about physics."

Davion chuckled.

Lao smiled at him. "Our time is at an end. You know all we can teach you."

"Really?" asked Davion. "There's no more?"

"There is much more!" said Lao, "The infinite ways different elements interact with one another, the incredible complexity of life and nature, and range of human thought and existence. The world is full of mysteries to explore."

"But we know little of these things. Our instinctive knowledge of matter, energy, space, and time are all we've ever needed."

Davion looked solemn. "Then I suppose it's time for me to go. I've been away from home for months. Not that anyone's likely noticed."

"It's time for me to go too," said Lao.

"Where are you going?"

Lao pointed up. "Up there. I need to roam the heavens for a while. I'll see you again."

"I'm going to miss this," said Davion. "The forest. The forest folk. Sarah. You. It's been a life-altering experience."

"So come back!" said Lao. "I will, in time. I just need to go talk to some friends."

"In the heavens?" asked Davion.

Lao nodded and smiled. "Good journey, philosopher."

"You too," said Davion. "Thank you for everything."

Ruth

Zebulun and Quinn went to Arroyo, a small, stone town on the banks of the Great River. The river was the border between the kingdom and Axolotl to the southwest.

Zebulun healed numerous minor injuries, making him popular with the fishermen of the town. They told him of an old man who was near death. Quinn had vanished again, so Zebulun went to the house alone.

A young woman opened the gate. She had medium-brown skin, long black hair, and bright amber eyes. She looked up at him and said, "Hello."

Zebulun bowed. "Hello," he said. "I'm Zebulun Koh. The men down by the river told me there was a sick man here."

She looked at him in confusion. "Ruth," she said. "Yes, my father is ill."

"I'm a healer," said Zebulun. "I can help him, with your permission."

She looked up at him for a moment. "You're a healer?"

"I am."

She hesitated, but let him in.

Zebulun stood over the old man. He was thin. His face was pale. His breath came in ragged gasps.

Zebulun held his hands over the man and let the energy flow. The old man began to breathe better. The look of pain left his face. He slept.

Zebulun took Ruth outside. "I've given him strength and eased his pain," he said, "but that won't keep him alive for long. His body is old and frail."

Ruth pursed her lips and nodded. "Thank you for easing his pain, at least. That's the most peaceful he's slept in months."

"I wish I could do more," said Zebulun.

He looked around the courtyard. "You two live here alone?"

Ruth sniffed, wiped one eye, and said, "Yes. My mother died when I was young."

"How old are you?"

Ruth looked up at him. "Seventeen."

"And you're not married?"

"How can I marry?" asked Ruth. "I'm all he has. I can't move to another village and bear children. I have to take care of him."

Zebulun looked down into her eyes. "You're a good daughter."

"I try to be."

Zebulun bowed, turned to leave, then stopped and turned back to Ruth.

"I hope to see you again, Ruth."

She lowered her eyes, then looked up into his. "I hope to see you again as well, Zebulun."

Ruins

"There's something you should see before you go."

Davion looked up from his bowl of stew. "Hm? What's that?"

Sarah gave him a soft smile. "It's better to be shown than told."

A star appeared between them. The sphere of light expanded to reveal a serpent with rainbow-feathered wings.

"Lao is gone," said Sarah, "but Quetzal has agreed to take you. It's about a day's walk north of here, but I promise it's worth it."

"You won't tell me what it is?" asked Davion.

"I don't want to spoil the surprise," said Sarah. "Trust me."

Davion furrowed his brow and looked at the fire. "I do trust you. I'll go."

"You won't be disappointed," said Quetzal.

They left at dawn. By midday, they had to leave the trail. It was a difficult slog through brush and brambles. Davion hoped it was worth it.

They came to a ravine. A river flowed at the bottom, fifty feet down. Before them lay the remains of a massive stone bridge. Behind it lay a ruined city.

Davion stared in awe for a moment. He turned to Quetzal and asked, "What is this place?"

"The city of the cyclopes," said Quetzal.

Davion looked at him with wide eyes, then scampered up the bridge.

The middle was gone — collapsed into the ravine.

"Make a hole," said Quetzal. "Like we showed you."

Davion took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "I'll give it a shot."

He focused his mind and calculated the space before him and the space beyond the bridge. He linked the two. A glowing ellipse sprang forth. He could see the ruined city on the other side. He poked his head around the portal and saw the other end beyond the bridge. He stood and stared through it.

"Not going through?" asked Quetzal.

Davion sighed. "I've opened small ones — even put my hand through for a split second — but I've never actually gone through one before."

The portal winked out.

"You'll be fine," said Quetzal. "I've done it a million times."

Davion took a breath. "Okay," he said. "Here goes nothing."

He reopened the portal, took a deep breath, and stepped through. He found himself in the ruined city. Quetzal flew over to join him.

Davion strolled forward, his head craned in all directions. The cyclopean structures had stones so large that they must have been built by giants. They looked to have been built *for* giants, with every door at least fifteen feet tall. Even the streets were made of stone. He saw a tower—a sprawling pile of rock with stairs twenty inches long and fifteen inches high. Vines and vegetation covered every building. Wildlife roamed about. He walked on, marveling at it all.

"How old is this city?" asked Davion.

"It's been abandoned for over a thousand years," said Quetzal, "so it's at least that old."

They came to a temple. Inside the massive hall, enshrined above the pulpit, hung an ornament: a golden eye inscribed within a silver triangle.

He strolled through the ruins for an hour, taking it all in.

"Come," said Quetzal. "There is more."

Quetzal led Davion to a hill in the center of the city. On the hill stood a monolith: six great pillars of stone, twenty feet tall and five feet in diameter, arranged in a hexagonal pattern. Davion ascended the hill.

He walked past the massive pillars into the center. He felt something.

"This place feels strange," said Davion. "It's like there's too much... space?"

"This is a coterminous point in spacetime. A place where this world overlaps with that of the cyclopes."

Davion looked at the tiny flying serpent. "What does that mean?"

"It means you can open a portal to their world from here."

Davion raised his eyebrows. "Really? I could visit their world?"

"If you wish," said Quetzal.

Davion stared at the ground. "Sarah was right," he said. "It is better to be shown."

Davion looked around. He looked at the massive structures, the aqueducts, and the wildlife. He listened to the world. He looked back at the ground, then up at Quetzal. He took a breath, turned toward the center of the monolith, and opened a portal to another world.

Stories of Old

"What have you got for me?"

Nahash's avatar stood before his general. The general shifted in discomfort. "Not as much as I would like, sir," he said, "but I have something."

Nahash motioned for him to sit. The general sat in a chair and unfurled a scroll.

"I assembled a team of scholars," said the general. "They couldn't find anything in the histories. Neither the political nor the military histories contain anything like what you encountered. The spies were no help either. They found rumors and legends; nothing substantial."

"However," he said, "one bright young man thought my descriptions sounded like something from old tales he'd read. Folk tales, holy scriptures — that sort of thing. He did some digging and came up with two possibilities: angels and fairies."

Nahash stared at him for a moment. "Angels and fairies?"

The general took a breath. "Bear with me, sir."

Nahash stared at him for another moment. "Go on."

"The angel stories were useless," said the general. "They do sound much like the beings you fought, but there was nothing in there about how to counter them. Angels, in the old tales, pretty much just showed up and destroyed whoever the enemy of the day was."

"The old folk tales about fairies, on the other hand, were more interesting. They're supposed to be able to change form and turn invisible, just like the things you encountered. A consistent theme throughout was that fairies have an aversion to metal — *iron* in particular. There's stories of people putting horseshoes over their door to ward them off. There's even a tale of a fairy being trapped in a brass lamp for a thousand years."

Nahash's avatar looked off into space, then back at the general. "So," he said, "what you're telling me is that these creatures who seem immune to all our powers might be hurt by *hitting them with a rock*?"

"I suppose so, sir," said the general. "So long as the rock had enough iron."

Nahash's avatar vanished. *You're right*, whispered Nahash into the general's mind, *it's not much*.

The serpent looked off into the distance. *But it **is** something we haven't tried*.

Another World

Davion and Quetzal wandered the ruined city on the other side of the portal. It had been late afternoon, back home; here, it was morning. The architecture was identical to the ruined city on their side. The flora and fauna were alien.

"Why did they abandon the city on their side?" asked Davion.

"Unknown," said Quetzal. "Perhaps it existed only to support their colony on your world."

"Perhaps," said Davion.

They were a hundred yards from the monolith when they heard sounds. Something heavy was running in their direction. Davion gasped as a cyclops ran out from behind a nearby building. It was at least twelve feet tall, with pale skin and brown hair. It wore tailored clothes and carried an ornate bow.

The cyclops saw Davion and stopped short, his lone eyeball bulging. Davion wondered at the expression. Was that fear? The cyclopean eye then narrowed, and the stranger raised his bow and drew an arrow seven feet long.

Davion threw up his hands. "I come in peace!"

The cyclops let loose the arrow. Without thinking, Davion warped the space before him. The arrow hit the barrier, slowed, and fell at Davion's feet. Quetzal fired a ray of heat at the cyclops. His bowstring burnt up in a flash, leaving the giant gawking at the two of them. He lowered his bow and crept towards them with caution.

"You're a man, right?" he asked.

"Yes," said Davion. "My name is Davion. Nice to meet you!" Davion immediately chafed at his awkward introduction.

"You're not here to stab out our eyes?" asked the giant.

"Uh, no," said Davion. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," said the cyclops. "All the old stories say that's what men do."

"That's horrible," said Davion. He looked at Quetzal. "Why would they think that of us?"

"Probably because of the rebellion," said Quetzal.

"And you!" said the cyclops. "What are you? A jinn?"

"Some call us that," said Quetzal. "We hail from the stars."

The cyclops stared at the two of them for a good minute. "Never thought I would meet two mythological creatures in one day," he said. "I'm Apollo. You two have got to meet the historian. It will make his day. Or decade."

Davion looked at Quetzal, then back at Apollo, and shrugged. "I have time."

"Great!" said Apollo. "Follow me."

He led them down a major thoroughfare.

"You live in this ruined city?" asked Davion.

"Only for the moment," said Apollo. "My friends and I work for the historian. We hunt, gather, and fend off wild predators so he can focus on his studies."

"What's he studying?"

"He's been trying to find the definitive story of what went wrong with our colony on your world. We have old stories—which is why we think humans will poke out our eyes—but nothing concrete."

"I saw the ruined city on the other side."

"You came from there?" asked Apollo.

"Yes," said Davion.

"I was so surprised to meet you, I forgot to ask where you came from. I thought maybe men had been hiding in these ruins all these centuries. How did you get here?"

"Via the monolith," said Davion. "I'm... I'm a mage. I can open holes in space."

Apollo looked down on him with furrowed brow, but said nothing.

He led them to a large building. "This was the local academy. The historian spends his days here, reading old tablets and scrolls."

Davion's heart pounded at the thought of an entire building full of knowledge. The three of them went inside.

The historian was only eleven feet in height. He was far older than Apollo, with long white hair and beard. He stared at the newcomers in awe for some time before speaking.

"I am Sophokrates," said the historian. "I study the past. I can't believe my eyes. You're human, right?"

"I am," said Davion.

"We have only stories," said Sophokrates. "I came here to try and sort out fact from legend, and here you are. Bless the Eye of Heaven."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about what happened a thousand years ago," said Davion. "We have no records of it, and humans don't live that long. I always thought your people were myth."

"The same!" said Sophokrates. "We don't live that long either. I'm approaching my two-hundredth year, and I already feel old."

"My kind usually pass before we're seventy," said Davion.

The historian looked at him with surprise. "So short? No wonder your people are so fierce. They have so little time."

Davion looked up at Sophokrates and asked, "What are the myths about men, among cyclopes?"

"The old stories portray you as hateful, ungrateful little savages," said the historian. "So many involve one of us showing kindness to men only to be killed by them, or have our eye poked out."

"I wish I could say that described no members of my race," said Davion.

"Well," said Sophokrates, "it only takes one counterexample to disprove a generalization. You seem like a decent person. I imagine there are others."

"I wish there were more," said Davion. "Life, where I come from, is often harsh and cruel. It makes people harsh and cruel."

"Our people are beyond such things," said Sophokrates. "We take care of each other. We tried to take care of you too, but you rejected us."

"What happened back then?" asked Davion. "I can't imagine a bunch of men just decided to attack giants for no reason."

"Oh," said the historian, "they had reason. I've been reading about it for months. The aristocracy wants to know why our colony failed. I think I know why."

"Why?" asked Davion.

The historian sighed and sat down in his chair. He offered Davion a giant chair opposite him. Apollo lifted him onto it. Davion felt like a small child with his legs dangling over the side.

"From the records I've studied," said Sophokrates, "your people were little more than animals when we first came to your world. You ran around in small tribes, constantly making war on one another. Having built a noble civilization ourselves, we felt an obligation to help you do the same—to elevate and illuminate you."

"We founded a city," he went on, "in your world. We invited the more noble-seeming tribes to give up warfare and come work for us. We made sure they were well-fed and educated."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Davion. "What went wrong?"

"We pressed your kind too hard. We gave them little time for leisure. We didn't let them drink alcohol or smoke plant matter, due to the harm to their health. We worked them hard because we wanted to expand the good life to as many of your people as possible. The harder we made them work, the faster we could build infrastructure and spread knowledge. We even sterilized mental and moral defectives for the good of your race. We had grand plans."

"But," said the historian, "you came to resent us. We cared for you... but we did not *respect* you. This made it easy for the dragons to turn you against us with their sorcery."

"Dragons prompted the rebellion?" asked Davion.

"I *believe* so," said Sophokrates. "I haven't solid proof yet, but I think that's what happened. The dragons came to your world, saw us as a threat, and used the legitimate grievances you had to turn you against us. And men did, in fact, rise up and poke out many an eyeball. They murdered many of us as well. It so horrified my people that they abandoned their colony — and this city, which existed only because of it."

"That's fascinating," said Davion. He stared at the stone floor in contemplation. "Wait," he said. "Go back. Did you just say that dragons aren't native to my world either?"

"They are not," said Sophokrates. "They are invaders."

"Huh," said Davion, scratching his chin. "What legends do your people have about dragons?"

"More than legends," said Sophokrates. "They've tried to invade our world a number of times. They don't get far."

"You can fight them off?" asked Davion.

"We know of magery," said the historian. "We have men trained to fight. We know where the coterminous points are and keep an eye on them."

"You are fortunate," said Davion. "My friends are trying to figure out how to defend their forest from dragons right now."

"Friends on the other side?" asked Apollo.

"Yes," said Davion. "I suppose you would call them savages, but I find them to be noble."

"And on the other side — another ruined city?" asked Sophokrates.

"Yes," said Davion. "The remains of your colony."

The historian stared at Davion with one giant eye for a moment, lost in thought. He looked up at Apollo, then back at Davion. "Can you show us?"

A New Hope

"There's a new cult forming in the hinterlands."

Aurelius sat coiled behind his throne, his avatar seated upon it. The man who stood and spoke before him was Paul. Paul ran one of the dragon king's numerous networks of informants. He was tall and skeletal, with beige skin and flat black hair.

"What kind of cult?" asked Aurelius. "I thought all those rubes worshiped their ancestors."

"That's true, by and large," said Paul, "but I've heard from multiple sources that a giant has been wandering the fringes of the kingdom, healing the sick and preaching about his god Ur, who supposedly created the world. A couple of reliable informants even claim to have seen him heal."

Aurelius looked down from his throne. "Who is this giant?"

"His name is Zebulun."

"Zebulun! From the village of Koh?"

"Yeah," said Paul, "That sounds right. I think one of my guys mentioned that."

The dragon and his image stared off into space. "So the man who refused to be my general is starting a new religion in my kingdom. What are the tenets of this novel faith?"

"Apparently," said Paul, "it's just one rule: love others as yourself."

The dragon and his avatar laughed. "That's touching. And from an ex-soldier, no less. That's all? No prayers or fasting or rituals?"

"Apparently not."

"He won't get far with a religion like that," said Aurelius. "The rubes need ritual to keep them happy. This cult sounds harmless enough."

"There's something else," said Paul. "The giant's also been telling people that a new kingdom is coming into being. The Kingdom of Ur, he calls it. Says it's being forged as we speak."

The serpent gave him a blank stare with its unblinking eyes. "That," he said, "is less harmless."

Paul grinned. "You want one of my people to settle him?"

The dragon thought for a moment. "No," he said. "If he really does have the power to heal — which I doubt — we need to know how he does it so we can use it."

"Should I have sorcerers spread the rumor that he's a madman?"

Aurelius looked off into space. "No," he said, after a time. "Spread the rumor that he's a trickster. He fools people into thinking he's a healer and a prophet, so he can take their money — and that he takes advantage of women who convert to his faith. The rubes who have met him won't believe it, but those who hear about him second-hand will be conditioned to think he's a fraud."

Paul smiled his smug, superior smile. "Alright! I'll set the wheels in motion."

Visitors

Sarah sat meditating in her camp. Elu sat on the bench to her left, rotating two rabbits on a spit above the fire.

"They're close," said Sarah. She stood up, stretched, and yawned.

It was nearly sunset when Emet and the others arrived. Elu looked up at Emet. Emet gave him a stern look. Elu lowered his eyes to the ground and kept rotating the spit.

"Welcome," said Sarah.

"Good to see you," said Emet. "Why have you sent for us?"

"I have news," she said. "Davion is gone. He went home to the capital. But before he left, he introduced us to some new friends. I think you should meet them."

"As you wish," said Emet. "Where are they?"

Sarah turned to her right and called into the trees. "Apollo?"

The forest folk heard loud crashing in the brush. Through the trees, they could see something moving. Something massive. Something *tall*.

The ground shook as the one-eyed giant stepped into the campsite. He raised a hand in greeting. "Hello," he said. "I'm Apollo."

The forest folk stared in disbelief.

"He's from another world," said Sarah.

"And he's a friend?" asked Emet, his eyes wide.

"He is," said Sarah. "He wants to help us."

"Why?" asked Emet. He looked up at Apollo's one giant eye. "What are our troubles to you?"

"Dragons are dangerous," said Apollo. "If they take your lands, they'll have access to the coterminous point in the ruins."

"The what?" asked Emet.

"It's a place where you can travel between our worlds. We guard it from the other side, but we'd be happier if it were safe on this side as well. The historian thinks we may be able to convince the aristocracy to provide you with help."

"Giant allies?" asked Emet.

Apollo smiled and nodded.

Emet looked up at Apollo in disbelief and said, "The spirit of the forest has blessed us."

Zebulun Dreams of Ur II

Zebulun found himself back at the temple of his visions. The oasis was gone, consumed by the desert. The temple lay in ruins, its roof missing. Zebulun ascended the staircase.

In the remains of the temple he saw a glowing triangle seven feet on a side. The edge glowed first red, then green, then blue. The center was pitch black.

Zebulun stared into the void. It began to swirl before his eyes, and he found himself sucked in. Red, green, and blue triangles flew around and past him at an accelerating pace until the whole tunnel looked white from the speed.

Ahead, at the end of the tunnel, he saw an eye made from millions of other eyes. He approached it but slowly, no matter how much his speed increased, and felt that it would take forever to reach. In time, the eye spoke.

"I am Ur. You have roamed the land and healed the sick. You have laid the foundation for the Kingdom of Ur. You have done well."

"I have a new task for you. You will take Davion and Quinn and kill the dragon Herod Wrathkinder. He lives on a grand estate on the western edge of the kingdom. He is a torturer and devourer of children. You will confront him on his crimes and execute him in my name. When it is done, flee into the western wilds."

"By your will," said Zebulun, "I will see it done."

"Davion waits for you in Azulan," said Ur. "Go to him."

Return to Azulan

Davion heard a knock on the door near sunset. He opened the peephole, gasped, and threw open the door. "Zebulun!" he said. "Quinn!"

"May we enter?" asked Zebulun.

"Of course!" said Davion. "Come in! I'll get refreshments."

Zebulun nodded to Davion and walked inside. Quinn ran in, threw his arms around Davion's neck, and kissed him on the cheek.

"I missed you!" he said.

"Uh, yeah," said Davion, blushing. "You too." He disentangled himself from Quinn and brought bread and cheese to the table.

"Got any wine?" asked Quinn.

"Sure," said Davion. He brought an earthenware jug and three cups.

Zebulun ate moderately. Quinn ate with gusto.

"So," said Davion, "Where have you been?"

"We've been everywhere!" said Quinn, his mouth half-full of cheese. "Zeb's been healing people and preaching the law all over the edges of the kingdom. I've watched him heal, like, a hundred people. There was a lot of philosophical talk, too! You would have loved that part."

"Philosophical?" asked Davion.

"Folks had questions," said Zebulun. "They didn't tend to agree with everything I said right away."

"Heh," said Davion, "No surprise there. What brings you back to the capital?"

"I came here for you," said Zebulun. "I want you to help me kill a dragon."

Davion blinked. "Another one?"

"A worse one," said Zebulun. "A murderer of children."

Davion sighed and looked down. His hands played with a piece of bread. "That's horrible," he said. He looked up. "Why me?"

"I don't know," said Zebulun. "Ur said to take you and Quinn with me."

Davion furrowed his brow in thought, clasped his hands before his face, and stared at the food. "I gained an expanse of knowledge from the star folk. More than I could explain to another person in five years. The short version is that I can now do what dragons do. Watch this."

Davion held up his hands. Lightning danced between his fingers.

Quinn's eyes got wide, and he clapped once. "What other tricks do you know?"

"It's no trick," said Davion. "It's magery. Natural philosophy."

Davion held his hand over a slice of bread and warped the space between them. The bread rose to within an inch of his palm. It followed his palm as he flipped it upward, then shot up to the ceiling and fell back to the table.

"Cool!" said Quinn, as he poured himself more wine.

"This is the most unsettling," said Davion. He focused his will. A small portal appeared before him; another appeared near a pile of scrolls. Davion stuck his hand through the portal, picked up a scroll, and pulled it through.

"Impressive," said Zebulun.

"You never saw this in the army?" asked Davion.

"I saw dragons roast men and ships with fire," said Zebulun, "but I never saw them do that."

"Well," said Davion, "That's the kind of thing I can do now. That's probably why Ur wants me to go."

"Sounds likely," said Zebulun.

"But why Quinn?" asked Davion.

"He talks a lot," said Zebulun, mirth in his eyes. "He'll be a great distraction."

Quinn grinned and said, "I'm a great shot with a sling, too!"

"You think you can kill a dragon with a sling?" asked Davion.

"You can kill anything with a sling!" said Quinn. "All the old stories say so."

Davion smiled and shook his head.

"This jug is empty," said Quinn. "You have more wine?"

"Did you finish that jug already?" asked Davion.

"Well, yeah," said Quinn. "It wasn't that much."

Davion looked impressed. "No," he said. "I don't drink that much of it. That was all I had on hand."

"Well in *that* case," said Quinn, "We have *got* to go to the bar tonight. Especially if we're going off to kill a dragon in the morning."

Back to the Dungeon

Quinn led the three of them through the entrance to Jezebel's Dungeon. He hugged Radah.

"Where you been?" asked Radah.

Quinn said, "I went to Eastwood and met a bunch of fairies who made love to me, then I drank a magic potion which sent me to a dreamland where a dragon told me to ask the next dragon I saw to teach me sorcery, and then the fairies and a black panther and *this guy* killed a dragon. Just been wandering around since then."

Radah snorted and grinned at Quinn. "Alright, man. Go on in. The lady's missed you."

"She better have!" said Quinn.

Quinn led them through the door and said, "A prophet, a philosopher, and a performer walk into a bar. The prophet orders whiskey and thanks his god for drunkenness. The philosopher orders wine and contemplates the meaning of drunkenness. The performer gets drunk, entertains everyone, and goes home with all the girls."

Davion smirked. "All the girls?"

"A man can dream," said Quinn.

They sat. A waitress brought them drinks: a cup of whiskey and mug of tea for Zebulun, a goblet of wine for Davion, and a huge tankard of beer for Quinn.

Jezebel wandered over to their table, her red hair pulled back, her bright green eyes twinkling. She placed a hand on Quinn's shoulder. "Where have you been hiding, rogue?"

Quinn looked up at her, smiled, and placed a hand on hers. "I've been off having adventures with these two."

"I remember this one," she said, indicating Zebulun. "You going to introduce me?"

"Sorry!" said Quinn. "These are Zebulun and Davion. Zebulun is a warrior-prophet. Davion is a philosopher."

"Nice to meet you," said Jezebel. "Welcome to my domain."

"Thank you," said Zebulun.

"You should watch out," said Jezebel to Quinn. "Ezekiel's been complaining about you."

"I'll be fine," said Quinn. "Zeb here already gave Zeke and his goons a beatdown once, and now we have a philosopher on our side!"

Jezebel smirked and squeezed his shoulder. "Y'all have fun. Oh, Mak was looking for you too."

"If you see him, send him my way!" said Quinn. "If you see Zeke, send him the other way."

"Will do," said Jezebel. She left them alone.

Quinn gulped his beer. "I wonder what Mak wants?"

They ordered another round of drinks, plus more food because Quinn was still hungry.

"So, Zeb," said Quinn, in between mouthfuls, "We know everything about you. We know where you were born, how long you've been in the army, and all that."

"That's because you ask a lot of questions," said Zebulun.

"You never do!" said Quinn. "Don't you want to know anything about us?"

"I know what I need to," said Zebulun. "I know I can trust you. I figured you'd tell me more if you felt like it. You've never been quiet."

Quinn grinned and said, "I *do* feel like it!"

"Go ahead," said Zebulun.

"I was born way up north," said Quinn, "way north of the Rose River. Across the mountains, even."

"That's a long way off," said Davion. "It gets cold up there, doesn't it?"

"Oh, man," said Quinn, "You have no idea. The summer heat is as brutal there as it is here, but the winters are twice as cold, and the wind never stops blowing. It's like a knife right through your clothes." He took a large bite of bread.

"So, anyway," said Quinn, "I came from a tiny village called Noble. A farm town. I never quite fit in. My own family didn't understand me. They were simple, humble farmers, and couldn't grasp why I wasn't happy at the thought of spending my whole life digging in the dirt for my food. Or why I liked to sing and dance, and dreamed of the big cities I'd heard about. I guess I had too much of my mother in me."

"I got bullied a lot. I could never understand it...being mean to someone just because they're different. I decided I never wanted to be that way. I try to be nice to everybody."

"Not that the bullies cared. I got really good at dodging and running away. By the time I was thirteen, I'd had enough. I took off. I had a series of adventures and random encounters, but managed to make my way here to the capital when I was seventeen. Been performing here ever since!"

"You've never been back?" asked Zebulun.

"No," said Quinn. "I miss some people, sometimes. I did have some good friends, back home. Misfits like me." Quinn placed his chin on his fist and looked off to the right, uncharacteristically thoughtful.

Zebulun turned to Davion. "What about yourself?"

"Heh," said Davion with a shy smile, "Not much to tell. I'm the, ahem, *unofficial* son of a minor-ranking member of the fair folk."

"Bastard!" said Quinn with a devious smile.

Davion smiled and shook his head. "It doesn't bother me. Despite being unofficial, I think he was fond of my mother and I. Before he died, he bought us that house and gave us a modest amount of farmland outside the city. I rent it to tenant farmers. That's how I'm able to spend my life studying rather than working."

"Lucky!" said Quinn.

"I suppose," said Davion. "Though I wonder what it's like to grow up with a father in the house, rather than one you see once every week or two."

They ordered more drinks.

After a time, Mak showed up at their table. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sit!" said Quinn. "Great to see you!"

Mak smiled and clapped him on the back. "I'm afraid this isn't a social call. I have information you need to know. People are looking for you."

"I know all about Zeke," said Quinn. "I ain't worried. I am totally gonna pay him back, I swear. With interest! Someday."

"I'm not talking about you and Zeke," said Mak. "Normally, I would charge for information like this... but I like you guys, so I'll tell you for free." He looked at Zebulun. "They're looking for you. And they're not some petty thug moneylender. They're *official*."

"The dragons know of me," said Zebulun.

"That they do," said Mak, "and they are none too happy about your talk of a new kingdom."

"I didn't do it to make them happy," said Zebulun.

"Nonetheless," said Mak, "I think you should get out of town."

"We leave tomorrow," said Zebulun.

"I'd leave tonight," said Mak.

Attack of the Goons

It was on a narrow street, not far from The Dungeon, that Ezekiel caught up with the three of them.

Zebulun, Davion, and Quinn found themselves surrounded on both sides by goons brandishing billy clubs. At least ten on each side. There was nowhere to go. Ezekiel stepped forward.

"Zeke! Buddy!" said Quinn.

"Don't *buddy* me, Quinn," said Ezekiel, raising his fist. "I still owe you some justice. But we're not here for you." He pointed his club at Zebulun. "We're here for him."

"What, you want revenge for that beating he gave y'all?" asked Quinn. Some of the goons chuckled.

"No," said Ezekiel. "Shut up!" He looked at Zebulun. "People are looking for you."

"So I'm told," said Zebulun.

"You can't have him!" said Quinn.

"Yeah?" asked Ezekiel with a grin. "Who's gonna stop me? You?"

Quinn shook his head and hooked a thumb at Davion. "Him."

"Him?" asked Ezekiel, with obvious amusement.

"Me?" asked Davion.

"Don't mess with him, man," said Quinn. "He's a *philosopher*."

More chuckles from the goons.

"Is he gonna think me to death?" asked Ezekiel. He motioned to his goons. "Get them!"

The goons closed in. Zebulun looked at Davion and gave him a nod. Davion, taken aback, took a breath and focused his will. The space behind them warped and twisted. The goons behind it first recoiled, then tried poking their clubs through the vortex. They pressed, but could not penetrate the barrier.

The goons in front of them stared, mouths agape. Ezekiel looked at Quinn, his mouth open, and shook his head slowly side to side. Then he looked at his stationary men and grew impatient. "Go on! What am I paying you for!"

The goons looked at him, shrugged, and advanced on the trio. Davion focused his will again. A portal appeared before them. It covered most of the street. Through it, Zebulun and Quinn could see the next cross street behind Ezekiel and his goons.

On the other side of the portal, Ezekiel asked of his men, "What am I looking at?"

"It looks like we're looking at our own backsides, boss."

"It sure does," said Ezekiel.

Before them, through the portal, they could see themselves. Behind them, they could see the portal again, with another image of themselves, and so on to infinity. One of his goons crept towards the portal and poked it with his club. Seeing no harm, he gingerly stepped through it. Ezekiel turned around and looked at him.

"Where did you just go?" he asked.

The goon shrugged. "Here."

After a moment, the barrier and portal vanished. The goons on both sides stared at one another. Their quarry was gone.

Chess

The trio made it back to Davion's home.

"Are you sure we should stay here?" asked Davion.

"I'm easy to spot," said Zebulun, "and they know Quinn, but they don't know you. I doubt they know where to find us."

Zebulun sat in a chair and said, "I'll make sure."

He meditated. Once in the trance, he could see through the eyes of every stray dog, cat, and rat in the city. Thousands of them. He saw Ezekiel and his goons drinking in a bar, having given up. He didn't see any other large groups wandering around.

He opened his eyes. "I think we're okay."

Davion breathed a sigh of relief. Quinn lay snoring on a sofa.

"I don't think I can sleep after all the excitement," said Davion. "Do you play Chess?"

"I do," said Zebulun. "An old veteran taught me years ago. Soldiering involves a lot of sitting around and waiting for orders. Men will do anything to pass the time."

"Care for a game?" asked Davion.

"Sure," said Zebulun.

Davion pushed the pile of scrolls off the table and brought out an exquisite nine-by-nine board of marble and onyx. The center and corner squares were black. The pieces and pawns were carved from oak and mahogany.

"Nice set," said Zebulun.

"Thanks," said Davion. "I had it specially crafted. It cost me quite a bit of coin."

"No doubt."

They arranged the board.

First rank: Chariot, Horseman, Lord, Prince, King, Prince, Lord, Horseman, Chariot.

Second rank: a single Dragon in front of the king.

Third rank: nine infantrymen, one for each file.

Davion played white.

1. Hf2 Hf8
2. Hd2 Kd8
3. Hg4 a6

4. Lc2 Kc8
5. e4 Dg6
6. b4 Kb8
7. Cb1 Lc8

Davion looked over the board with interest. "You prioritize king safety over attack," he said.

"Lose the king, lose the game," said Zebulun.

"True," said Davion.

8. b5 He6
9. e5 Hg5
10. Hc4 e6
11. exe6 Pfe8
12. b6 bxb6
13. Hxb6 Lb7
14. Hd5 Hxe6
15. Kf2 Lf8

"Now you show concern for your sovereign," said Zebulun.

Davion grinned. "That dragon on g6 makes me nervous."

16. Kg2 Hbd8
17. Cb5 Kc9
18. Cxb7 Pxb7

"Not many would trade a chariot for a lord," said Zebulun. "You may regret that later in the game."

"Lords are more powerful during the middle-game," said Davion. "I hope to trap you with a tactical flourish before the board is too empty."

Zebulun nodded and looked at the board with narrowed eyes.

19. De3 Dh5
20. Le2 Lg6
21. Hf4 Hxf4+
22. Lxf4 Di6
23. He5 Lxf4+
24. fxf4 Ce9

"Fair trade," said Zebulun.

"Almost," said Davion. "I did get to advance a pawn."

25. Df3 Pe7

26.	Ld4	He6
27.	Ld5	Pe8
28.	Pf2	Cb9
29.	Pdd2	g6
30.	Df5	Pbd9
31.	Kh2	Cb5
32.	Lc4	f6
33.	Dxf6	Cb9
34.	Hf3	Hg5
35.	Hxg5	Dxg5
36.	Dxg5	gxg5

"I hate to trade dragons," said Davion, "but he was just too close to my king. They can force checkmate unassisted, you know."

"They can," said Zebulun. "That was a late trade. I've often seen dragons traded within ten moves."

"Why? Seems sad to throw away the most powerful piece so early."

"Because of its power. It threatens too easily."

"I guess you've had a number of Chess opponents over the years?" asked Davion.

"Yes."

"That's been rare, for me. I don't know many people who enjoy it. Or many people at all, for that matter. I've mostly played with myself."

A giggle interrupted Quinn's snoring. Davion looked over at him with a confused expression, then turned back to the board.

37.	d4	Pg6
38.	a4	Pgf7
39.	a5	Pb7
40.	axa6	Pa8
41.	Ca1	Kd8
42.	Ca5	Pg7
43.	Cf5	Ce7
44.	Ld5	Ph6
45.	Cf6	Pg7
46.	Cf5	Ph6
47.	g4	gxg4
48.	Lf6	Cbe9
49.	Lg8	Pc6
50.	Lxh6	hxxh6

"Hate to lose my last lord," said Davion, "but that prince looked like trouble."

"Could have been," said Zebulun.

51. d5 Pc5
52. h4 C9e8
53. Kh3 Ce3+
54. Ki4 C3e4
55. Pd3 Ce3
56. Pc4 Pxc4
57. cxc4 C8e5
58. Cf8+ Ce8
59. Cf7 C8e7
60. Cf8+ Ce8
61. Pxe3 Cxf8

"Oof," said Davion. He furrowed his brow and looked at the board for some time. "I think I'm about to regret trading my chariot for your lord."

Zebulun said nothing.

62. Kh3 Ce8
63. Pd4 Cg8
64. a7 Kc8
65. Pf6 Kb7
66. Pf7 Cg5
67. Pxd7 g3

Davion stared at the board for a while. "I think that's it," he said. "I think you got me. Whether you promote to lord or prince, I think I'm done for."

Davion studied the board and shook his head. "I should have pushed my pawn to rank eight on move sixty-five instead of moving my prince. I could have promoted to a chariot and had yours."

"I thought you might," said Zebulun, mirth in his eyes. "I also thought you might want to hold out for a dragon on rank nine."

Davion chuckled and shook his head. "I do love that piece. Then I got excited at the chance for a free pawn by threatening your chariot." Davion stared at the board some more, a look of satisfaction on his face. "Thank you, Zebulun. Great game."

"Good game."

On the Road Again

The trio left the city before dawn and rode west into the hill country. They rode in silence for hours. Even Quinn seemed enraptured by the beauty of the wooded hillsides as the sun rose behind them.

Zebulun spoke Davion's name without warning, startling him out of his reverie.

"Hm? What?" asked Davion.

"You read a lot," said Zebulun. "You must know many things."

"I like to think so," said Davion. "I would hate to think I spent years studying and learned nothing."

"What makes people poor?" asked Zebulun.

"Well," said Davion, "it's complicated."

"Simplify it for me."

"Hm," said Davion. "Let me think."

He paused for so long Zebulun wondered if he would answer, but he finally spoke. "Basically," he said, "it's the same for people as it is for any animal. One's wealth is based on what resources one has available to them and how much energy one expends to obtain wealth from said resources. For example: a panther in the eastern wood eats well with little effort, but one stuck in a desert would be poor even with great effort."

"It's the same with men?" said Zebulun.

"It is," said Davion, "but men have another limitation: the part of their labor that is taken by other men. One can have ample resources and expend great energy, yet still be poor because others have taken your wealth by force. This is the case in the kingdom today. Probably all kingdoms."

"You're not talking about common thieves," said Zebulun.

"No," said Davion. "They do plenty of harm, but less so than the institutional ones."

"Who are they?"

"There's a number of them," said Davion. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Give me the top three."

Davion took another long pause, then spoke. "If I had to narrow it down, I would say...monopoly, taxes, and usury."

"Monopoly?"

"Yes — one person or class of persons having complete control over something. The most obvious one is land: more for one person means less for everyone else. If all the land of a kingdom is claimed, and you're born without any, then you can't work for yourself. You have to work for someone else. If nothing else, you have to pay rent to whatever lord or prince owns the land you

live and work on."

"What about freeholders?" asked Zebulun. "They seem to do okay."

"They do better than the peasants, true," said Davion. "They could do even better if they weren't heavily taxed by the kingdom on what they produce."

"What other kind of monopoly is there?"

"Anything that can't be produced," said Davion. "In nature, this is nothing more than the land, the sea, and the sky. But men have created all manner of artificial monopolies. There's the official charters from the king that says only a handful of people may produce certain goods, which leads to high prices for those who need them. Then there's the guilds, which prevent people from competing with their craftsmen to keep wages high. Not being blessed by the kingdom, they have to use entrepreneurial violence. But it amounts to the same."

Zebulun thought for a moment. "What about taxes?"

"Ugh, taxes," said Davion. "As if it wasn't bad enough that the common folk pay around a third of their wages in rent to a lord or a prince, they have to pay another third or so in taxes to the kingdom the privilege of working, buying, and selling. The kingdom taxes tools, livestock, commerce... the list goes on. The combination of rent and taxes means the average person has to live on one third of what they produce."

They rode in silence for a time as Zebulun pondered Davion's words.

"And usury?" asked Zebulun.

"Given the above," said Davion, "the poor often don't have enough money to buy food. In lean times, they must borrow money or starve. Knowing their desperation, the moneylenders are able to charge extortionate rates of interest, locking them in a cycle of perpetual debt. If they miss payments, the debt compounds and grows greater by the day. They wind up giving much of the last third of their income to the moneylenders."

"So the people are left with nothing," said Zebulun.

"At the brink of starvation," said Davion. "This makes them easy to control. They have few options, and no escape."

"There's another, more subtle kind of usury as well," said Davion, "this one done by the kingdom itself. Have you noticed that the coins of the realm have gotten lighter over the years?"

"I thought they felt different over time," said Zebulun, "but it was subtle enough I couldn't be sure."

"Our coins used to be ninety-nine percent copper, silver, or gold," said Davion. "Over the years, when the kingdom needed funds, the treasury would take old coins it had collected in taxes, melt them down, mix them with base metals, and reissue them as if they were the same coin. They did it slowly enough that most people didn't notice, but those who did would hoard the old coins and spend the new. With more coins in circulation, prices went up, making life more expensive for everyone. Our coins today are only *one* percent precious metal. Ninety-nine percent of their value has been stolen over time."

Zebulun thought for a moment. "What else?"

"I'll have to think on it some more," said Davion. "I'm sure there's far more things I haven't comprehended yet, but I'm fairly sure those are the big three."

"Just fairly sure?" asked Zebulun. "How confident are you?"

"On this subject, I'd say ninety-nine percent. I've read a lot of ancient writings on this, and they seem to come to similar conclusions no matter the time or place."

"Not one hundred percent?" asked Zebulun.

"I never give myself a one hundred percent chance of being right about anything," said Davion. "There's always a chance I could be wrong. There could be a flaw in my reasoning, or I could have mistaken premises somewhere."

"Sounds humble," said Zebulun.

"It's just self-honesty," said Davion. "As much as I know, I know I'll never know everything. There is always more to learn."

Zebulun nodded and looked off to the horizon. "Thanks," he said. "You've given me a lot to think about."

Davion smiled, nodded, and went back into his thoughts.

A Jinn's Life

"I think we're ready."

The cyclopes stood outside the monolith. Quetzal flew inside, focused his mind, and summoned a portal to their world.

"Thank you," said Sophokrates. "For everything. I'll do everything I can to send you help. It will likely take time. The aristocracy moves slowly."

He led the hunters through the portal.

Quetzal looked at Apollo. "You're not going?"

"The historian gave me leave to stay," said Apollo. "I want to help the forest folk, now that I know not all humans want to stab out my eye. And I'd like to learn more about your kind."

Quetzal nodded his serpentine head and dismissed the portal. They headed back toward Sarah's camp.

"You really come from up there?" asked Apollo.

"Yes. From heaven."

"What's it like up there?"

"Empty. No air."

"No air? How do you breath?"

"No need. We have no lungs. We live on light."

Apollo pondered for a moment, stepping over a large rock.

"So, no air...what else?"

"You know stars are suns like yours."

"Right. My people know this."

"Near a star, it is hot and violent. Millions of times hotter than here. Far from a star, it is colder than any place on any world."

"Your kind can tolerate such heat and cold?"

"Yes"

"Incredible." Apollo paused to move a fallen tree out of the way. It would have taken ten men.

They walked in silence for a time.

"What about family?" asked Apollo. "Do you have parents? Brothers and sisters?"

"No," said Quetzal.

"No parents? How are you born?"

"We are born spontaneously, at random, in the most violent places in the heavens."

"Violent? All the old stories say the heavens are wondrous and beautiful. A realm of peace and tranquility."

"Not the real heavens. They are violent and unwelcoming to your kind. Your worlds are more pleasant and interesting."

"What kind of violent places? Is there war?"

"Not as such. The violence is found in the coronas of stars, in lightning-filled nebulae, and in the chaos surrounding holes in the universe."

"You just pop into existence?"

"Yes."

Apollo furrowed his unibrow. "How... how do you learn anything? How do you learn language? Or magery?"

"We are born with a sense of wonder. We don't know who or what we are, only that we exist, and that existence is glorious. We use our natural abilities to explore our environment, and over time—a few thousand years or so—we learn to master the fundamental forces of nature. Then we can use coterminous points to travel to other stars and explore further."

"So," said Apollo, with a look of confusion, "You spend the first few thousand years *alone*? No contact with your own kind?"

"Yes."

"How do you find each other? How do you communicate when you do? How did so many of you come to be here in these woods?"

"The heavens are vast, but we live long. I lived one hundred thousand years before I met another of my kind. It took us years to learn how to communicate with light."

"Light?"

"No air. We can't use compression waves in air the way we are right now. We have to use light. Took years to agree on a common protocol, then he taught me those of others. Lucky for me, he had already met others and knew where some gatherings were."

"How old *are* you?"

"A few million years or so. One loses track, after so long."

Apollo stared up at the sky in wonder. "Millions?" he asked. "You must have seen everything."

"There is always more to see. That's why my kind like places like these woods: the endless variety of life; the constant drama of predator and prey; watching trees take one thousand years to grow and men thinking them old. We take joy in it. That's why we fight to protect it."

"So the animals, the forest folk, this whole planet—it's your entertainment?"

"It's one way to pass eternity."

They reached Sarah's camp at dusk. Apollo carried a buck he'd shot on the way home.

"Welcome back," said Sarah. "Go ahead and roast that deer. You're going to need your strength."

"What for?" asked Apollo.

Sarah looked him in the eye and said, "The dragons are back."

Scouting

They followed the River Azulan northwest for eleven days. The rugged hills gave way to rolling plains.

"We're a day or so from the western edge of the kingdom," said Zebulun. "The ranch we're looking for is somewhere north of here."

"How will we find it?" asked Davion.

"It's two hundred thousand acres," said Zebulun. "I'd be amazed if we missed it."

They turned away from the river and headed north. They camped early, a few hours before sunset.

"We're close," said Zebulun. "I want to look around while there's still daylight."

Zebulun went into a trance. He saw through the eyes of wild donkeys and groundhogs. The eyes of hawks gave him an aerial view of their surroundings.

After two hours, Zebulun opened his eyes. "I see a road leading to it."

"How far?" asked Davion.

"A few miles," said Zebulun. "Not sure how far the ranch is up the road."

The sun set. They ate dinner: bricks of beef and chili peppers, brought from Azulan, mixed with water from the river.

After dinner, Zebulun saddled his horse.

"Where are you going?" asked Quinn. "You're not going to fight the dragon without us? Because I do *not* want to miss that!"

"No," said Zebulun. "Just scouting. I need to take a closer look."

"Aren't you worried about running into the lord's soldiers?" asked Davion.

"Not likely, at this hour. The dragon king may want to wage war on all the world, but right now we're at peace. Most of them will be on the west side of the ranch, watching for bandits from the wilds."

"Okay," said Davion. "If you're sure."

Zebulun looked at him with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm never one hundred percent sure of anything."

Davion smiled and lowered his eyes. Zebulun mounted Othniel and rode off.

He stayed near the road, following its meandering way from afar. After an hour, he saw what looked like firelight in the distance. He dismounted, tied Othniel to one of the few nearby trees, and sat down to meditate.

He saw through the eyes of thousands of cattle and chickens, hundreds of dogs and horses, a few

owls, and the occasional barn cat.

He saw the palatial home of the dragon and the nearby stables. He saw nearby copses of trees used for firewood. Through the eyes of mice, he saw inside the massive mansion. He noted the layout.

Then he saw something else, something that made him grin inside.

He left his trance, mounted Othniel, and returned to camp.

Dragon's Lair

"There's a secret entrance."

Zebulun sat before the hot coals, warming his hands. "It leads right into the dragon's private chambers beneath the mansion. We can take it right to the dragon, avoiding all guards and servants."

"I was wondering how we were going to sneak into a lord's home," said Davion.

"We don't have to," said Zebulun. "The entrance is in a copse of trees in the dragon's private hunting grounds. No one is allowed to go there. We can sneak in under cover of night and take the tunnel straight to our target."

"Aren't you afraid of running into guards on the way?" asked Davion. "Patrols?"

"It's peacetime," said Zebulun. "Most of the guards will be watching the west for bandits. They won't expect an attack from the east. But I'll take precautions."

Zebulun stood up and stretched. "Stay up as late as you can. We'll sleep through the day and go in towards midnight."

"I haven't been able to sleep since you left," said Davion. "I doubt I can sleep now."

"Exhaustion will take care of that," said Zebulun.

The trio sat up through the night, saying little. They slept at dawn and rose at dusk.

Later in the evening, Zebulun went into a trance. After two hours, a light fog rolled in. After three hours, it was thick as porridge.

"Time to go," said Zebulun.

"How can we navigate in this fog?" asked Davion.

"I know the way," said Zebulun. He took out a length of rope and handed it to Davion and Quinn. "Hold on to this."

They broke camp and went into the fog. Cows lowed in the distance.

"Davion!" whispered Quinn.

"What?"

"I can't see anything! I can't see my hand in front of my face!"

"I think Zeb might have overdone it with the fog," said Davion.

Zebulun tugged on the rope. Their animals followed.

They reached the copse of trees an hour later. The fog was lighter. They could see a few feet away.

"How long will your fog last?" asked Davion.

"I can only maintain it while in a trance," said Zebulun, "so it fades in time. Maybe another hour or two."

"I hope we're away by then," said Davion.

"I hope we're not dead!" said Quinn, with a big smile.

Zebulun secured the equines and led them to a small hill. He tore off a fake section of the hill, a separate layer of moss and dirt. Behind it lay a cellar door. Zebulun opened it to reveal stone stairs leading down into darkness.

Zebulun turned to them. "Ready?"

He looked at Quinn. Quinn looked excited.

He looked at Davion. Davion looked ill.

"You okay, dude?" asked Quinn. "You look like you want to hurl."

Davion took a deep breath. "I guess it's a bad time to mention this," he said, "but I'm a bit of a coward. I'm terrified of going in there. Look at me. I'm actually shaking."

"Come on, man," said Quinn. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Davion looked at Quinn in disbelief and let out a nervous laugh. "Really," he said, "what could go wrong?" He laughed again.

Zebulun towered over Davion and put his strong hands on his shoulders. "You're not a coward."

Davion looked up into his eyes. "I'm not?"

"Courage is not lack of fear," said Zebulun.

"It's not?" asked Davion.

"It's not?" asked Quinn.

"Courage is feeling fear and going forward anyway," said Zebulun. "The more terrified you feel, the more courage it takes."

Davion lowered his eyes. He took a deep breath, and then another, then looked up at Zebulun and said, "Okay. Let's do this. Let's kill a dragon."

Quinn pouted. Davion asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"I always thought I was brave," said Quinn.

"No," said Zebulun with mirth in his eyes, "you're just fearless."

Quinn smiled. "Okay, let's go kill a dragon."

"Let me bless you before we go," said Zebulun. "I will give you each a portion of the power Ur granted to me. It will protect you."

He placed his right hand on Davion's shoulder, his left on Quinn's. He let energy flow from the spiritual plane, through him, and into his friends.

Davion let out a light gasp of surprise. "I can *feel* that!"

"It tingles!" said Quinn.

"I feel like," said Davion, trailing off. "I feel like I could convert this into *physical* energy."

"You can," said Zebulun. "The spiritual becomes physical through an act of will."

Davion nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed.

Zebulun gave both their shoulders a squeeze and let go. "Can you provide us with light?"

Davion seemed lost in thought, then started and said, "Oh, right. Sure." He lifted his palm. A soft white glowing sphere appeared above it. "Lead on."

Zebulun led them down the steps, his spear at the ready. The staircase led to a tunnel forty feet below the surface. It looked to have been hand-carved out of solid rock.

After a few hundred yards, they came to a door. It was locked.

"I might be able to pick the lock," whispered Davion.

It was Quinn's turn to look at Davion in disbelief. "You can pick locks?"

Davion shrugged, barely visible in the soft white light. "Picking a lock is like a puzzle. I like puzzles."

"I wish I'd known," said Quinn. "I have some friends in Azulan you would love to meet." He smirked. "They're lockpicking enthusiasts too."

"No time," said Zebulun, "and no need. We're not trying to sneak up on the serpent."

Davion looked at Zebulun in surprise. "We're not?"

"No," said Zebulun. "I aim to tell him why he's about to die."

Zebulun rested his spear against the wall and said, "Stand back."

He stood up straight, his hands pressed before him, and summoned a small portion of the power of Ur. He stretched out his arm, pivoted, and drove his palm into the door. It flew off its hinges with a loud, metallic groan and hit the ground with a deep boom that echoed through the chambers beyond.

"Wow," said Quinn, no longer whispering. "Didn't know you could do that."

Zebulun retrieved his spear. He stepped through the doorway and over the broken door. Down the hall, on the right, torchlight flickered from a tall, wide archway.

"This is it," said Zebulun. "Come."

He strode forward and stood before the arch. The others followed. There, beyond the arch, sat a dragon with scales the color of blood. It sat coiled atop a mountain of gold and silver coins, its wings wrapped around itself. It stared down at them with black eyes and flicked its tongue.

Zebulun spoke in his command voice. "Herod Wrathkinder," he said, "I am Zebulun Koh. You are a torturer and murderer of children. We have come to execute you in the name of Ur."

The dragon looked into Zebulun's eyes for a moment, flicking its tongue in and out. Before their eyes, he transformed into a man: a tall, thin man with brown skin, black hair, half-closed eyes, and an eternal sneer. He looked down his nose at them and said, "Who is this Ur? Some new warlord in the west?"

"The creator of the world," said Zebulun.

The sneer on the dragon's avatar deepened. "So this is some new cult I haven't heard of? Do tell. Does Ur command his followers to save children from mean old dragons? Do you have hymns? Sing me one."

Quinn piped up, "I'm a singer!"

The avatar looked at him with narrowed eyes and wrinkled his nose. He looked back at Zebulun.

"No hymns," said Zebulun. "Just love."

The avatar burst out laughing. "How beautiful!"

"Hey," said Quinn, looking at the man before them, "before we fight, can you teach me some sorcery?"

The avatar looked at him in disbelief and demanded, "What?"

"I drank a magic potion in a haunted forest," said Quinn, "and met a ghost dragon who told me I should ask the next dragon I met to teach me sorcery."

The avatar gave him a blank look. "I'll show you some sorcery, fool!"

Zebulun saw the serpent's real head turn to look at Quinn. Quinn froze for a second, then looked around slowly. He looked at the ceiling, at the ground, and all around. "Ugh!" he said. "Horrible!" He wandered slowly down the hall, looking around in confusion.

Zebulun looked up into the dragon's real eyes and said, "Get ready to die." He lowered his spear and advanced on the creature.

The dragon's avatar vanished. It looked into Zebulun's eyes and focused its mind on him. The dragon hit him with a blast of sorcery powerful enough to put a dragon to sleep. Zebulun shrugged it off.

The dragon's lidless eyes stared at Zebulun. *You must be strong-willed for livestock*, he whispered into Zebulun's mind.

"I overcome by the grace of Ur," said Zebulun.

He lunged at the dragon. It loosened its coils and raised its head thirty feet to look down on him. It swerved out of the way of his spear thrust.

A shimmer filled the air between Davion and the dragon. The mountain of coins rose up in a vortex, surrounding the serpent, then encasing him. The beast flexed its wings, sending a shower of gold and silver in all directions.

A ray of heat scorched the dragon's underside. The dragon looked at Davion and whispered, *Who taught **you** magery, little lamb? You like fire? Try this.*

Flames engulfed Davion's body. He felt his flesh sear. He could see nothing through the flames and haze of pain.

"Focus, Davion!" said Zebulun. "It's a trick! Fight it!"

Davion focused his will. He summoned some of Zebulun's blessing to aid him. In a snap, he saw through the illusion. The flames disappeared.

He looked down at himself. His skin was blistered like a bad sunburn, but his clothes were unburnt. He looked up at the dragon. "It's all fake."

Zebulun slashed at the dragon's wing with his spear, tearing a small chunk out of it. The serpent hissed, slapped the spear out of Zebulun's hand with its other wing, and shredded it to splinters with its claws.

Zebulun drew his sword: two feet of steel with cross-guards and an oval grip.

You can't be serious, said the dragon. *The spear was unrealistic enough, but this?*

Ball lightning hit the dragon in its wing, setting it ablaze. The dragon let out a loud hiss and knocked Zebulun back two yards. It beat its wing on the ground to dampen the flames, then fixed its eyes on Davion with a look of reptilian hatred.

Davion's expression changed from a mix of stress and determination to one of pure horror. "No," he said. "No! It can't be!" He backed away from all of them, looking around in terror. He hit the wall and slumped down to a sitting position. He held his knees and rocked back and forth. Tears welled in his eyes. "It can't be."

The dragon let out another hiss as Zebulun slashed its underside with his sword.

Quinn shouted, "Stop! How can you be so cruel?"

The dragon hit Zebulun with the full force of his mind. Zebulun felt his consciousness fading, his vision shrinking first to a tunnel, and then to a point of light. He channeled the spirit and fought off the spell. He looked up at the dragon.

Fine, said the serpent, *we'll do this the old fashioned way.*

With blinding speed, the dragon folded its wings and shot past Zebulun, then back around, wrapping him in his coils twice. Zebulun pushed back against incredible pressure. Ur had made him stronger, but nowhere near as strong as a dragon. He felt his spiritual energy fading fast as he

used it to stop the serpent from crushing him.

The dragon lowered its head and put its eye right up to Zebulun's face. *How are you so strong?* it asked. *You should be dead by now, and I should be eating.*

Zebulun struggled against the snake. "The power," he said, between breaths, "of Ur."

"What kind of a monster are you?" asked Quinn, looking in a different direction from the fracas.

Zebulun struggled, but he could feel the power leaving him. The dragon was too strong. He felt his first ribs crack as he heard Quinn say, "Waaaaait. Wait just a minute. This can't be real."

Mind of a Sadist

Quinn found himself in an underground hell. A vast cavern surrounded him. Scattered throughout were the bones of children. Piles of them.

"Ugh!" he said. "Horrible!"

One tunnel led up and out. He took it.

He came out of the natural tunnel into a hallway of masoned stone. All along the way were wooden doors banded with iron. A small window looked in on each. Quinn tried to look in one, but the door seemed to be twelve feet tall. It was then he realized he was the size of a child.

He heard sounds from down the hall. Whimpering and cries. A dull red glow shone from around the corner. He crept toward the noises in silence.

He peeked around the corner. Two glowing orbs hung in the air, casting a blood-like shade over the scene. There sat a demonic exaggeration of a dragon, coiled and wrapped in its wings. It was covered in spikes, with ichor dripping from its mouth. Its teeth were pointed. Flames leapt from its eyes.

The demon-dragon had two small children before him. He hissed a command, and the little boy hit the little girl with a club. She cried out in pain. The dragon hissed another command. The little girl burned the little boy with a red hot poker. He wailed.

Quinn leapt out and shouted, "Stop! How can you be so cruel?"

The dragon smiled — not as dragons do, but like a man, baring all its teeth in a pointy grin. "I do it *because* it is cruel. I *enjoy* cruelty. For its own sake!"

"What kind of a monster are you?" asked Quinn.

"I'm no monster," said the thing. "I'm just a dragon who does what he likes. And what this dragon likes to do is torture and devour children. I find it great sport."

With that, the dragon swept up the girl in its mouth and swallowed her whole. Quinn watched her screaming face as she vanished down the serpent's esophagus. He could still hear her screaming for a moment after.

Quinn burned with anger. He reached for his sling. It wasn't there.

He looked down. Where was his sling? Why was he wearing these clothes? These weren't his clothes. Where was he? How did he get here? And why was he a child?

"Waaaaait," he said. "Wait just a minute. This can't be real."

Eyes of the Dragon

Zebulun could hold no longer. The serpent compressed his arms, his legs, and his chest. He couldn't breathe.

The dragon loosened its grip ever so slightly. Zebulun gasped for air. The creature brought its eye right up to Zebulun's face.

I can feel your bones crack, it said, with a hint of glee. *Where is your god now?*

The dragon's eye exploded in a shower of blood. It recoiled in shock and pain and let loose a deep bass hiss that shook the building.

The shock had loosened the serpent's grip. Zebulun managed to free his sword arm.

The dragon turned his other eye to look at Quinn. It hissed into his mind, *You DARE?* Still coiled around Zebulun, the dragon lunged at Quinn behind him. As its head passed by, Zebulun drove his sword through its jaw and into its brain. The serpent fell dead, taking his sword with it to the cold, hard stone. Zebulun pulled himself out of the coils, wincing at the pain.

"You okay?" asked Quinn.

"Fine," said Zebulun. "Bruised and battered."

Zebulun retrieved his sword and gouged out the dragon's other eye. "Let that be a lesson to dragons everywhere."

"Yeah," said Quinn. "Sic semper tyrannosaurus!"

Zebulun looked at Quinn.

Quinn blushed and said, "It's something I heard Davion say, once. Is from some old, dead language." Quinn's expression changed to concern. "What's wrong with Davion, anyway?"

Zebulun looked. Davion sat huddled by the wall, his arms wrapped around his knees, rocking back and forth. Zebulun went over and placed a hand on his shoulder. Davion recoiled in fear.

"The dragon hit him with powerful sorcery," said Zebulun. "He has battle fatigue."

"Can you fix him?" asked Quinn.

"My well has run dry," said Zebulun. "I need to rest before I can heal him completely. In the meantime, I can give him some of my strength."

Zebulun placed a hand on Davion, who squirmed but then relented. He had no spiritual energy left to channel, so he gave Davion a portion of his own spirit. Davion's breathing slowed. He looked around, then at Zebulun.

"Zeb?" he asked.

Zebulun nodded.

"Are we alive?"

"We are."

"Did we win?"

"We did."

Davion was shaking. "Good. Good. Can we go now?"

Zebulun nodded. He took out sacks and handed one to each of them. "Take as much gold and silver as you can carry."

Fly By Night

Zebulun, Davion, and Quinn slipped away under the cover of darkness and the remains of the fog. They rode all through the next day, not resting until they were well beyond the fuzzy Western boundary of the kingdom. Zebulun shot a rabbit. The trio roasted and devoured it, then collapsed of exhaustion.

Zebulun woke before dawn. Rest had replenished his reservoir of spiritual energy. He healed his wounds and went to Davion.

Davion jerked in his sleep and fought tremors, as if having night terrors. His skin was still blistered from the dragon's imaginary fire. Zebulun knelt, placed his hands over Davion's head and heart, and let the power flow. His blisters healed, his breathing slowed, the tremors stopped, and he opened his eyes.

He looked up at Zebulun and opened his mouth, as if to speak. Zebulun placed a finger to his lips, then slowly moved the finger to point. Davion followed the gesture to see Quinn sleeping with his arm draped over a strange canine, also asleep.

Davion whispered, "Is that a dog?"

Zebulun shook his head slowly, mirth in his eyes. "That's a coyote."

Davion looked up at him with disbelief, looked over at Quinn, and stifled a laugh. "He really can make friends with anyone."

Quinn woke well after dawn. He sat up, yawned, and stretched. He looked down at the coyote and said, "Oh, yeah. I thought I dreamed that part."

"How did you wind up with a coyote?" asked Davion.

"I woke up in the middle of the night and went to take a leak," said Quinn. "When I came back, he was sniffing around the remains of our rabbit, so I fed him."

"Fed him what?" asked Davion. "We picked that rabbit clean."

"Yeah," said Quinn, "I had to pinch him off some bites from one of our bricks of chili."

Davion looked at Quinn. "You gave chili peppers to a coyote?" He looked down at the canine. "Is it dead?"

"He's not dead," said Quinn. "He's just drunk."

"You gave spirits to a coyote?" asked Davion.

"I gave him wine," said Quinn. "It didn't take much. He's a real lightweight."

"I'd say about thirty pounds," said Zebulun. He looked at Davion. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," said Davion. "Thank you. I feel sane again."

"What did that snake do to you?" asked Quinn.

"It's hard to describe," said Davion. "He filled my mind with a overwhelming feeling of horror mixed with... something else. Sorrow? Pointlessness? For a time, I felt like it was pointless to do anything in life. To take any action. I kept thinking that we're all just animals destined for the grave, and nothing mattered."

"Please understand," he said, "these are not things I normally think."

"Dragons can mess with your mind," said Zebulun. "It's how they appear to transform into men. It's how he could burn you with a fire that wasn't there."

"Right," said Davion. "Now I've seen it for myself. And felt it."

"Me too!" said Quinn. "That place he sent me was *ugly*, just like him."

"What did you see?" asked Davion.

Quinn took on a sad countenance and said, "You don't want to know."

"We should get moving," said Zebulun.

"What do we do about him?" asked Davion, indicating the coyote.

"He'll be fine," said Zebulun, kneeling beside the canine. "I'll give him a blessing to keep him safe."

They broke camp and rode west. The coyote woke two hours later with a mild headache, wondering why he couldn't remember the night before.

Will of Iron

Nahash and Sirajuddin flew over Eastwood under a gray sky. They wore new adornments around their necks: powerful magnets with small iron spheres attached. The two looked at Sarah's camp and entered her cave, finding both abandoned.

Michael appeared before them as they returned to the sky. He said, "Dragons, you are trespassing."

Nahash looked at Sirajuddin, then back to Michael. He whispered, *It is you who are trespassing on the kingdom's new lands.*

"Leave this place."

Make me! said Nahash. An iron sphere freed itself from his necklace and hovered in the air before him. *I heard a rumor that your kind don't like iron.*

With that, the sphere shot towards Michael with incredible speed. Michael dodged a few yards upward in the space of a heartbeat. The iron sphere slowed, stopped in midair, and returned to hover in front of Nahash.

I can do this all day, said Nahash.

"I have done this for millions of years," said Michael.

Nahash and Sirajuddin began a coordinated barrage, sending their spheres at Michael from different directions. He dodged or deflected nineteen attacks. Nahash focused his will and sent the iron forth once again. Michael dodged out of its path and right into the path of Sirajuddin's. He disappeared with a loud buzz and a flash of static.

Did I get him? asked Sirajuddin. *Did that really work?*

No way of telling, said Nahash. *Let's circle a bit and see if he comes back.*

They circled. Minutes passed with no sign of the fairy.

Something huge and fast zoomed at Sirajuddin, who narrowly dodged.

Was that an arrow? asked Nahash. *At this height?*

Yes, said Sirajuddin, *and it was seven feet long. The shaft was as thick as a spear's.*

Nahash looked down at the woods with disbelief. *Have giants come to save their fairy friends?*

Another arrow flew at Nahash. He deflected it with his mind.

I saw where that came from, said Sirajuddin. He dove. Nahash followed.

The two of them crashed through the tree cover, sending branches and leaves flying, and hit the ground with a boom. They coiled up back-to-back and looked around. Nothing.

An arrow came flying from a direction they weren't watching and tore a hole in Sirajuddin's wing.

He hissed and clenched his teeth.

There! said Sirajuddin, and sent a ray of heat in the indicated direction. The ray hit a tree, which caught fire. *Curse the tree cover,* he said.

Nahash focused his mind and sucked the air away from the fire. It went out.

I saw movement, said Sirajuddin.

They heard booming footsteps moving away.

Go! said Nahash, and slithered towards the sound.

They could see something big moving through the trees as they closed the distance. The quarry crossed a clearing and entered the woods on the other side.

Hold, said Nahash. *Feels like a trap.*

I agree, said Sirajuddin.

Seven small white lights appeared in the clearing and hit them with a barrage of light and sound. Both dragons were blinded and deafened. Nahash felt a sharp pain in his side as some large blade grazed him.

Up! he whispered to Sirajuddin.

The dragons took flight, weaving and spiraling upward until vision and hearing returned. They found themselves alone in the sky.

Well, said Nahash, *we now know how to hurt the fairies. Giant arrows notwithstanding, I think we can invite the woodcutters back.*

And the soldiers? asked Sirajuddin.

I was going to say no, said Nahash, *since they're useless against the flying lights, but they may be useful against whatever's been shooting spears at us.*

Possibly, said Sirajuddin.

Let's head back, said Nahash.

Hours later, Gabriel and Quetzal found Sarah huddling beneath a mighty oak miles from her camp. She had no fire, so they bathed her in warmth.

"The dragons know how to harm us," said Quetzal. "They came wielding iron."

"They got Michael," said Gabriel.

Sarah looked at him with a pained expression. "I'm sorry. I hate to see you suffer for our struggle."

"It is ours too," said Gabriel. "We love these woods and wish to preserve them."

Sarah looked off into the distance. "I hope reinforcements arrive soon. I hope the cyclopes choose to

help, if only for their self-interest."

She took a deep breath and looked off to the west. "I wonder how Zebulun is doing."

Progress and Poverty

"I've been thinking about what you told me."

Davion looked up at Zebulun. They were camped in the western wild, under a sky crowded with stars, well outside the kingdom. It had been a quiet half-hour since supper, as everyone sat digesting.

Zebulun continued, "Ur told me feed the people. To care for the widows and orphans, and for the blind, the crippled, and the mad. I've been wondering how to do that. How do we solve these problems?"

"That's complicated as well," said Davion.

"You guys are gonna talk about land and money and taxes and stuff again, aren't you?" asked Quinn.

Zebulun looked at Quinn with mirth. "Yes."

"Okay," said Quinn. "Then I'm gonna get drunk while I listen to ya."

"I've seen you drink," said Davion. "I don't think we brought enough wine to get you drunk."

Quinn grinned and said, "I brought more than you think." He pulled out two wineskins and took a sip of each. "Don't mind me," he said. "Go on with your boring conversation."

Zebulun turned back to Davion. "Let's simplify," he said, "like in Chess. Let's start with the first: rent. What do we do about it? Force lords and princes to keep rents low? Divide up their lands among the people?"

Davion shook his head. "I don't think either of those would work."

"For the first: you can't just pretend that a parcel is worth less than it is. Do that, and the owner will wind up making under-the-table deals for the real rent. Or, of you're able to prevent that, then whoever rents the land can secretly sublet it to another for the full rent and pocket the difference. You'd just create a middleman landlord."

"For the second: that might work in the country, where most workers know how to farm and the lands don't differ that greatly in value in one place. You would still, however, be taking lands from those who are good at farming and giving it to those who aren't, at least in some cases. That could lead to shortages of food."

"And forget about the cities. City land is the most valuable of all, but its value varies widely across the city. I doubt you could figure out any way to divide that evenly, and trying would likely cause chaos."

"Why is city land more valuable?" asked Zebulun. "I prefer the country."

"Sure," said Davion, "So do many who have the skill to survive in the wild — or wealth and land enough to retire. For common folk, there's more work and better wages in the city, especially for skilled artisans. That was one of the big changes, when the kingdom abolished slavery and serfdom

centuries ago: no longer tied to a master or an estate, craftsman could come to the city for better wages. This meant lords had to pay their artisans more to make them stay."

"So rents are higher in the city," said Zebulun.

"Right," said Davion, "and they vary dramatically from place to place."

"So," said Zebulun, "how do we solve the problem? How do we stop rent from taking a third of people's wages?"

"I'm not sure that's possible," said Davion. "A plot of land is worth what it's worth. It's up to the renter if it's worth it to them. The problem is that most have little choice in the matter."

"But," he said, "I may have a solution."

"Go on," said Zebulun.

"One of the oldest scrolls I have is the story of the founding of a new port city. The author wasn't a philosopher or a minister; he was just a common man looking for work. The kingdom he inhabited decided to build a new port city, so a number of workers showed up to earn the promised wages."

"Then others followed: people who weren't involved in the construction, but sold to those who were. They brought better food, new clothing, tools, that sort of thing. The new arrivals, like the builders, enjoyed much higher wages than in the established cities of the kingdom."

"He said no one was rich or poor. Everyone had around the same amount, and it was enough. People lived in tents."

"As the new city progressed, tents became permanent buildings, the periphery expanded for new arrivals, and some became wealthy...while others became poor."

"It puzzled the worker. Why should progress and poverty go hand-in-hand?"

"Why does it?" asked Zebulun.

"He noticed that wages stayed strong as the population grew. Even though more people meant more competition for work, it also meant more people to hire or sell to. The thing the workman noticed: *rents* went up far more quickly than *wages*."

"As more and more common folk came there looking for work, wages went down. There were only so many jobs that could pay the rent, and those desperate to keep them were happy with the bare minimum rather than lose their position to one of the hungry, who grew more numerous each year."

Zebulun thought for a moment and asked, "How do we fix it?"

"This worker," said Davion, "should have been a philosopher. He came up with this idea: get rid of all the kingdom's taxes on common folk, and charge the lords and princes of the kingdom rent for the lands they claim. Common folk will still have to pay rent, but will be much better off without the taxes, and less likely to fall into perpetual usury."

"So you take a portion of the rent from the landlords?" asked Zebulun.

"Yes," said Davion, "but not just a portion of whatever rents they charge. You charge them rent on whatever lands they hold idle as well, such as the lords of the great estates and their vast, private hunting grounds. If holding land idle costs them treasure, it may entice them to sell off some of their vast estates to the landless at prices they can afford."

"Won't the lords and princes just raise their rents?" asked Zebulun.

"It doesn't seem to work that way," said Davion. "A plot is worth what it's worth based on where it is and how many people want it. If the rentiers could raise rents without consideration of external conditions, we would all be paying thousands of gold coins in rent for every scrap of land in the kingdom. This is, of course, impossible. Most don't have that kind of money."

Zebulun looked at Davion for a moment. "So the king would be lord of lords and prince of princes."

"In a sense, yes," said Davion.

Zebulun sat quiet for a time. "That covers rent and taxes. What about usury?"

"It might be less of a problem," said Davion, "having solved the other problems, but it would still entrap a number of people in lean times."

"How do we fix that one?" asked Zebulun.

"On that," said Davion, "I'm less sure. Some ancient kingdoms forbade the lending of money at interest altogether, seeing it as the exploitation of one's fellow man. On the other hand, it's good for people to be able to get loans. Not just for the desperate, but for those who want to build something that will benefit themselves and the community."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think you can prevent moneylenders from charging usury on the black market (like Quinn's friend Ezekiel), but you could at least limit what the kingdom will enforce. Maybe eliminate compound interest, and limit simple interest to some reasonable percentage. Seven or ten?"

Zebulun nodded and looked up at the stars.

"Ezekiel is my friend," said Quinn, in slurred speech. "He's not usually such a jerk. He just owes money too. Like, *a lot* of it." Quinn chuckled and shook his head slowly.

"How are you drunk?" asked Davion. "That wineskin still looks half-full."

Quinn's eyes twinkled at Davion. "This isn't wine," said Quinn. "This is *whiskey*." He held it up. "Want some?"

Zebulun took a swig and handed it back to Quinn.

Davion laughed. "Where did you get whiskey? You're always broke."

"I got a lot of friends in the capital," said Quinn. "People who are always happy to see me. They gifted me whiskey and wine for my journey."

"You told them about our journey?" asked Davion.

"Not where or why or with who," said Quinn. "Just that I had more traveling to do, and wouldn't see them for awhile, so they gave me nice things."

"You have generous friends," said Davion.

"Some of them are rich, like you!"

"I'm not *that* rich," said Davion.

"No-ho," said Quinn with a grin, "you're not. Not like some of the folks I know."

"Wait," said Davion. "When did you see them? At the bar?"

"I woke up after y'all fell asleep," said Quinn. "It was still early, so I wandered around town saying 'hi' to a few people."

Davion blinked. "You did?"

"Believe it!" said Quinn.

"I didn't hear you go," said Davion.

"Of course not!" said Quinn. "You had three glasses of wine! That's got to be a record for you. You were out cold."

"I had a mild headache all the next day," said Davion. He looked at Zebulun. "Did you hear him go?"

"I thought I heard something," said Zebulun, "but the boy is quiet as a mouse. My gut told me the sound wasn't important, so I stayed asleep."

Davion looked at Quinn and shook his head. "You're amazing."

Quinn smiled and said, "I know!"

Into the Wild

Zebulun, Davion, and Quinn rode west under a clear blue sky.

"So," said Davion, "Where are we going?"

Zebulun looked at him. "West."

"Any particular place?" asked Davion.

"None that I know of," said Zebulun. "Ur said to flee into the western wilds after killing that serpent. I guess he wants us here for some reason."

"I suppose," said Davion, his brow furrowed.

"Come on, dude!" said Quinn. "It's an adventure!"

"Leading to what, I wonder?" asked Davion.

"A new kingdom," said Zebulun. "A new era."

"I wish I had your confidence," said Davion.

Zebulun almost smiled.

"Is it colder here, out west?" asked Quinn.

"We've been going uphill," said Zebulun. "Into the high plains."

"Oh," said Quinn. "Higher places are colder?"

"They are," said Zebulun.

"You didn't know that?" asked Davion.

"I've never been high before!" said Quinn. "I know it gets way warmer when you go from north to south; I figured maybe it gets colder if you go from east to west."

"Not the same," said Zebulun. Quinn shrugged.

It was near sunset when they saw two riders atop the crest of a hill. The riders saw them. One spoke to the other, who rode off down the opposite side.

Zebulun raised a hand in greeting. Seeing this, Quinn waved. The rider tipped his broad-brimmed hat. Zebulun led the three of them up the hill at a snail's pace.

A dozen more riders crested the hill before they reached the top. Zebulun continued, undaunted. Davion and Quinn followed.

"Who are these guys?" whispered Quinn.

"The west is full of warring clans," said Davion. "They sometimes raid the western edge of the

kingdom for livestock."

"They sound dangerous," said Quinn, with a gleam in his eye.

"Definitely," said Davion. Quinn gave him a devious smile.

Zebulun stopped a few yards from the assembled riders and nodded to them. "I'm Zebulun Koh. These are my companions, Davion and Quinn."

Davion raised his hand in an awkward greeting.

Quinn waved and said, "Hi!"

The lead rider tipped his hat and said, "I'm Jed. What are you doing in these parts? You don't look local."

"We hail from the kingdom to the east," said Zebulun. "I'm a wandering healer. Do you have any sick or injured?"

Jed narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You're a healer?"

"I am."

"And your friends here?" asked Jed. "Are they healers?"

Zebulun shook his head. "This one is a philosopher. This one is a performer."

The riders laughed.

"What on Earth is a philosopher doing out here?" asked Jed.

"Protecting me," said Zebulun, with laughter in his eyes.

The riders chuckled.

"Well," said Jed, "maybe y'all ought to come see the boss."

The riders led the trio down into their camp, a few score tents made from animal skins. Women tended cookfires while children ran about at play. In the center sat an unusually large tent. Jed went in, then came back out with a dragon. It had blue scales, with flecks of turquoise, and adorned itself with jewelry.

"This here's the boss," said Jed.

The serpent flicked his tongue and transformed into his avatar. It looked like one of the riders, except he still had his blue scales and serpent's eyes.

"Greetings," said the dragon. "I am Zan. Jed tells me you're a healer."

"I am," said Zebulun.

"What do you seek?" asked the dragon. "Payment for your services? Steady employment?"

"Nothing," said Zebulun. "I wander the land and heal the sick and injured."

"So," said Zan, "just passing through?"

"Yes."

The scaly cowboy regarded Zebulun for a moment. "You know what we are out here?"

"Warring tribes who steal from each other and the kingdom," said Zebulun.

"You *do* know!" said Zan. "So why would you come here?"

"By the will of Ur, creator of this world," said Zebulun. "I am his prophet."

Some of the cowboys chuckled.

"Your god told you to come see us?" asked Zan.

Zebulun shook his head. "Ur told me to flee into the western wilds after executing a dragon lord."

"Ah," said Zan. "And did you?"

"We did."

"How, exactly, did you manage that?" asked Zan.

"I'm a prophet," said Zebulun. "I was a soldier before. Davion here is a mage. Quinn's a good shot with a sling."

Zan looked amused. "I can't imagine a sling would be much good against one of us."

"You'd be surprised," said Zebulun.

Zan's avatar turned to Davion. "You're a mage?"

"I am, yes," said Davion.

"Show me something," said Zan.

Davion looked at Zebulun. Zebulun nodded.

Davion looked around. He raised his hand, and a rock rose off the ground and into the air above them. With a flick of his wrist, it flew off out of the camp. The men surrounding them murmured among themselves.

"Impressive!" said Zan. "Never met a man who could do that. Most dragons can't even do that."

"I, uh," said Davion, "just learned it recently."

Zan looked over them for a moment. "You three intrigue me. I'll welcome you for the moment." He turned to one of his cowboys. "Cal," he said. "Take Zeb here around to anyone who's hurt."

Cal nodded and motioned for them to follow.

"Don't worry," said Zan. "We'll watch your horses."

Zebulun looked at Zan's avatar, then up into the serpent's real eyes with mirth. He then turned and went with Cal.

Zan turned to Quinn and said, "Jed tells me you're a performer."

Quinn's face lit up. "Want to hear a song?"

Zan's avatar smiled.

Zebulun followed Cal around the camp. He healed a man whose leg had been gored by a bull. He healed the broken leg of a man thrown from a horse. He healed a woman whose cough had lasted three years.

It was well past sunset when they returned to the center. Quinn stood before a bonfire. Zan sat coiled nearby. Cowboys sat cross-legged all around. He heard laughter as they approached, and then song. Zebulun walked up to the ring around the fire and watched.

Cal went over and whispered to Zan. He looked at Zebulun, who heard Zan's voice in his mind. *You really can heal.*

Zebulun looked at the serpent from across the fire and nodded.

Quinn sang an old folk song about a traveler far from home. He sang in a voice simple and sweet, without pretension, that spanned four octaves. The cowboys gave him applause. He entertained for another hour or so before bowing out. The audience stood, stretched, and faded out into the surrounding camp.

"I figured you would go on all night," said Davion. "You seemed to be enjoying yourself."

"I was!" said Quinn. "That was a great audience! I could have gone all night, but that's just not how it's done. Number one rule of entertainment: never bore the audience. Always leave them wanting more."

Davion looked thoughtful.

Zan whispered to Zebulun, *I'd like to see you in my tent.*

Zebulun nodded and followed him inside.

Zan's avatar appeared. "Where on Earth did you get so much gold and silver? Did you really kill a dragon?"

"We did," said Zebulun, "and for the promise of safe passage through your domain, I'll tell you where to find a horde of gold, and a massive herd of cattle, unguarded by any dragon."

Zan looked at him and smiled. "I don't know what new cult you hail from, but Cal tells me you really can heal. I've never heard of such power."

"It's not common," said Zebulun. "And it's not mine."

"I could just take your gold," said Zan, "and be done with it, but... you interest me. I think I'll let you pass just so I can see where you end up."

"Thank you."

"Sadly," said Zan, "the cattle won't do us much good. We can't even feed what we have. We've had no rain all summer. We don't get some soon, we'll have to cull most of the herd."

"You need rain?" asked Zebulun. "I can help."

Zan looked at him with skepticism. "You can make it rain?"

"I can. Give me three days."

Zan's avatar raised its hand to its chin and stroked it softly. Behind it, Zebulun could see the real dragon stroking its chin with its wing.

"Alright," said Zan. "This, I would love to see."

Zebulun showed him. For three nights, he went into a trance and summoned a heavy rain that soaked the ground. The rain faded each day at dawn and resumed each night. By the end, the pasture land around them had turned from brown to yellow-green.

On the third day, exhausted, Zebulun slept late into the morning.

Zebulun Dreams of Ur III

Zebulun found himself at the foot of a small hill in a verdant valley. Atop the hill sat a mighty oak surrounded by piles of stones that were once a temple. Moss and grass covered the stone steps. Zebulun ascended.

Before he could reach the summit, the oak burst into blue-white flame. Zebulun gazed into it. Ur was in the flame, and the flame was Ur. Zebulun bowed.

A voice spoke from the fire. "I am Ur. You have slain the vile murderer of children. You have done well."

"Seek the dragon Amalek."

Within the flames, Zebulun saw an image of a great and powerful dragon emperor. His scales were so black they seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it.

Said Ur, "He is a creature of great power. He will be your greatest ally. Find him in the mountains to the south and west."

Zebulun saw the image of a mountain. It had two peaks, the higher peak topped with a flat ridge of bare rock jutting into the sky.

Zebulun bowed. "I'll leave tomorrow."

Going South

Zebulun woke with the sun in his eyes. It was directly overhead.

He sat up. Had he ever slept til noon?

"You're awake!" said Quinn. "I've never seen you sleep so hard."

"Changing the weather takes a lot out of a man," said Zebulun. "Makes me respect Sarah even more."

Davion came over and sat down. "So, Zeb," he said, "what's next? Stay here? Keep going west?"

Zebulun shook his head. "We need to go south."

"Why south?" asked Quinn.

"I dreamt of Ur," said Zebulun. "He told me to seek out a dragon in the mountains to the south."

"Ooh!" said Quinn. "Another dragon? Are we going to fight this one too?"

"I don't think so," said Zebulun. "Ur said he would be our ally."

"That's tough to imagine," said Davion.

"It is," said Zebulun. "but I don't doubt Ur."

"Forgive me if I still have doubts," said Davion. "You obviously have power, and we did defeat that dragon, but... I don't know. I can't say I have a better explanation than yours."

Zebulun nodded.

Jed wandered over. "I couldn't help but overhear. If y'all are headed south, there's something you should know. As barren as this here scrubland is, it turns into real desert further down the way. There ain't nothing to drink or hunt."

"Thank you for the warning," said Zebulun. "We'll find a way."

"Well," said Jed with a grin, "I guess if you can make it rain..." Jed thought for a second. "That ain't all, though. Tale is, there's strange magic in those mountains. Animals grow to giant size. Cougars the size of hills."

"Have you seen these?" asked Davion.

"Not personally," said Jed, "but other folks have."

Jed wandered off. Zebulun turned to Davion and asked, "The name 'Amalek' mean anything to you?"

Davion furrowed his brow for a moment, then raised his eyebrows. "Yes. I seem to remember that the last emperor had a dragon named Amalek. He was supposed to be jet black, and one of the most powerful dragons in history."

Zebulun nodded. "That's who we're going to find."

"Really?" said Davion. "I've read nothing about what happened to him after the empire fell."

"He's up on a high mountain to the southwest," said Zebulun.

"If so," said Davion, "I'm curious to find out why."

Zebulun and friends went south the next day, wearing hats given to them by the cowboys. "You'll need them for the desert," said Cal. The trio traded silver to the cowboys for some bricks of chili for the journey.

Five days later, Zan and his cowboys arrived at the estate of the late Herod Wrathkinder. Guards assembled to oppose them.

Zan flew above his horse archers and bellowed into the mind of every man present, *Guardians of this late idiot domesticated dragon's estate, remember: I am a dragon, and you have no dragon to protect you.*

The assembled guards suddenly found themselves on fire. They started to panic, beating at the flames, when the fire disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. The men were barely singed.

That was a demonstration, said Zan. *If you want to live, leave your weapons and horses and walk east. **Now.***

The commander of the guard looked left and right at his men. He saw tension and uncertainty.

Zan whispered to the commander alone, *You know I can kill every man here with a thought.*

The commander looked up into the eyes of the great serpent, looked back at his men, then turned back to the dragon and nodded.

"Men!" he shouted. "Do as he commands. We're going east."

Good, whispered Zan to the commander. *You value your men. So do I. Glad I won't have to lose any for nothing.*

The guards turned and walked away. Zan and his cowboys secured a massive mound of wealth, more cattle than they could handle, and rode off into the sunset.

Gloom of Rain

"Ugh. Ten days of this crap. It's just like last time."

David looked up at William. "At least it hasn't stormed the entire time. And we learned to cook our breakfast well before dawn."

"Yeah," said William, "but being wet for too long makes me grumpy. I need the sun on my face."

David nodded. "I feel like a creature of the night. The men are getting cranky too. They want something to do besides soak up water."

"Ugh," said William again. "I want to retire to some place where it never rains."

"Don't think there'd be much to eat," said David.

"I don't care," said William, his eyes wide. "I'll live on sunlight!"

David laughed.

"I miss the stars, too," said William. "I hate going a week without stargazing."

"Yeah," said David. "The clouds get old."

The two finished eating in silence and waited for the sun to rise and the rain to begin.

The sun rose. The two of them looked around. When the sun rose over the treetops, David looked at William and said, "It's not raining."

High Plains, Low Desert

"It's warm again."

Zebulun looked over at Quinn. "We've been going downhill, out of the high plains. The desert is below sea level. It likely gets scorching hot in the summer."

"How do you know?" asked Davion. "Have you been here before? Our maps have little information on things this far west."

"Never been here," said Zebulun. "I can tell by the thickness of the air."

"Huh," said Davion. He looked at the ground with his brow furrowed.

The vegetation grew sparse, as they entered the desert, until they saw little at all. Tiny patches of scrub dotted lifeless dirt. They saw few animals, just the occasional rodent or bird of prey.

Zebulun meditated before dawn each day. He found small sources of water to sustain them: a half-dry pond here, a cactus there. He even caught a rabbit to add to their chili.

After two days, the trio saw the mountains rise out of the desert before them. They reached them at nightfall on the third day.

Sneak Attacks

After three days of sunlight and dry ground, the soldiers moved in. The plan was simple. Woodcutters would fell trees just inside the treeline. Soldiers would form a ring around them. Nahash would stay in the center, watching things on the ground, while Sirajuddin flew in circles above.

The plan worked. The workers cut down numerous trees before midday, some of which had grown for hundreds of years.

It was high noon when the star folk arrived in force. Sirajuddin sensed a sudden change in energy as a score of fairies fired attacks at him all at once. They attacked with heat, frost, and lightning. Sirajuddin managed to dodge or deflect most of them.

Sirajuddin whispered to Nahash, *The fairies are back.*

Do you need assistance? asked Nahash.

There's a lot of them, said Sirajuddin, *but I think I can handle it.*

Good, said Nahash. *I'll stay on ground in case this is a distraction.*

Sirajuddin fought the angels. For every three hits they landed on him, he nailed one of them with his sphere of iron. Each vanished in a buzz of static. After he got five of them, the rest flew off to the east.

They're retreating, whispered Sirajuddin. *Pursue?*

No, said Nahash. *If you can still see them, they're trying to bait us again.*

Acknowledged, said Sirajuddin. *I did get a few of them, at least.*

Fantastic, said Nahash. *There can't be that many of them, or we'd have seen a more sizable force by now.*

The workers continued. The star folk attacked twice more, losing more of their numbers and flying away each time. The dragons refused the chase.

At sundown, the soldiers and woodcutters returned to camp with a bounty of fresh timber. The mood was lively, even celebratory.

The mood in Sarah's camp was different.

"They refuse to be baited," said Quetzal. "We tried three times. They won't give chase. We lost ten more of our number."

"There aren't enough of you to risk that again," said Sarah. "What to do next? Ambush them on the ground?"

"I can't advise it," said Apollo. His huge eye narrowed and looked to the sunset. "We know a few things about dragons. One of those things is that you can't sneak up on one. They have eyes like a

hawk. They don't see much better at night than we do, but they also have ears like a cat and a nose like a dog. They can even sense the vibrations of footsteps through the ground."

"Then we have no choice," said Sarah. "We have to attack. In force."

Big Mountain Fauna

Zebulun, Davion, and Quinn wound their way through the mountains led by Zebulun's intuition. Somehow, he knew the way.

On the second day of travel, an ear-splitting cry filled the air. The three of them looked up to see a raptor soaring over them.

"What kind of bird is that?" asked Quinn.

"Looks like a zone-tailed hawk," said Zebulun. He turned his gaze back to the way ahead. Silence reigned for a moment.

"How big do those hawks get?" asked Quinn, his gaze skyward.

"They're around twenty inches long, with a fifty inch wingspan," said Zebulun. "They only weigh a couple of pounds."

"Why does this one keep getting bigger?" asked Quinn.

Zebulun and Davion looked at Quinn, then up and back. The raptor grew larger and larger as it swooped down from the sky at them. Zebulun turned Othniel around and drew his sword. Seeing this, Quinn readied his sling.

The predator came at them and went for Samson. The hawk had large talons—large enough to wrap around the huge mule—and its wings blocked out the sun.

It almost had Samson in its grasp when a sling stone bounced off its beak. It shook its head, a look of bird surprise on its face. Quinn looked the creature in the eye and said, "Leave my friend Samson alone, you big bully!"

Othniel reared up and kicked the bird square in the chest, causing it to squawk. Zebulun slashed open one of its talons, causing it to shriek.

A ball of lightning hit the bird square, shocking it and sending it flying off.

"Ha!" yelled Quinn. "Not as easy prey as you thought!"

Near sunset, the hawk returned. It swooped at them again. Davion turned in his saddle, looked the great bird in the eye, and focused his mind. Seeing him, the bird's eyes widened in shock. It froze in midair, stumbled, and flew off to the west.

"I'd say you earned it's respect," said Zebulun.

Davion gave him a sheepish grin. "I think I'm getting better at this."

At noon on the third day, they came to the mountain of Zebulun's vision.

"That's it," said Zebulun. He turned to Davion. "Can you get us up there?"

Davion frowned, his brow furrowed. "I don't think so. It's too high. I don't think I could target a

portal with any accuracy that far away. I can probably get us past some obstacles on the way, but we'll need to climb."

"Okay," said Zebulun. "Let's go."

Massive Attack

Something is coming. Lots of somethings.

Sirajuddin heard Nahash's whisper and replied, *Shall I come down?*

Not yet, said Nahash. *Could be another distraction.*

Right, said Sirajuddin. He continued soaring above.

Enemy incoming, whispered Nahash to his general.

"Men!" shouted the general. "Look alive! We have company!"

The soldiers stiffened and readied themselves, spears, shields, and bows out.

Movement in the trees. Various figures darting back and forth. Some on two legs, some on four.

I have a huge mass of birds coming at me, whispered Sirajuddin to Nahash.

Ravens? asked Nahash.

Looks like, said Sirajuddin. *A few hundred?*

They're a distraction, said Nahash. *Watch for those fairy lights.*

The movement in the trees stopped. An eerie silence fell.

Butterflies surrounded the soldiers, blinding them.

"This again!" said William.

"I hope the dragon can deal with the wasps," said David.

Wolves charged into the line of soldiers. Some fended them off. Others got knocked to the ground by lupine momentum.

Nahash focused his will and sent a blast of arctic air radiating out from him in a wave. The butterflies fell to the ground, paralyzed. The soldiers lined up against the attacking wolves as best they could, given the trees and uneven terrain. Archers began to take them out one by one. Nahash threw several wolves into trees with his mind, crushing their spines.

Arrows flew from between the trees and hit a number of soldiers. Nahash peered into the darkness. He saw men with bows there — and one woman? — lining up their next shots.

Nahash fired rays of heat at five of the attackers he could see. Two managed to dodge. The other three had holes burned right through them and fell dead.

Above the fray, the cloud of ravens circled Sirajuddin, blocking his vision. After tolerating it for a moment, he focused his mind and sent a conical wave of force into their midst. A score of them fell to earth. The rest scattered.

At that moment, thirty-seven star folk appeared and fired energy attacks at the dragon. Sirajuddin managed to deflect most of them, but not all. He found himself blind, deaf, burned, frozen, and shocked.

The fairies are back, said Sirajuddin to Nahash. *A whole host of them. I'm not sure I can handle this many.*

We have our own problems down here, said Nahash. *Get to ground. If we can lure the fairies down here, at least the soldiers can swing their swords at them.*

Yes, sir, said Sirajuddin. He blindly opened a portal between himself and the ground and dropped through it. He hit the ground hard, causing the trees around them to shudder. The portal closed behind him.

You okay? asked Nahash as he killed more men and wolves.

Blind and deaf, said Sirajuddin, *but not too wounded. Their spells are not that powerful. Give me a minute.*

They heard a shout. "Fire ants!" The ants had moved in during the fight and now attacked the soldiers beneath their clothes.

There was a loud buzzing. The wasps were back. The men began to swat at themselves, making them easier prey for the wolves.

Nahash clenched his jaw. Enough of this. He focused and sent a wave of flame out from him. It was hot enough to singe the hair off the arms of every man there, and enough to rob the wasps of their wings. They fell to earth and began to swarm with the ants.

Nahash siphoned heat from his surroundings. For a hundred feet, the temperature dropped to below freezing. The men shivered, but the ants and wasps stopped moving and biting.

Sirajuddin and Nahash felt searing pain. The star folk were attacking from above, around thirty feet up. Nahash slung his iron at them, but missed.

Nahash felt strong vibrations coming their way. Far too big to be men.

Do you feel that? Nahash whispered to Sirajuddin.

Something big is coming, said Sirajuddin. *I still can't see.*

Stay behind me, said Nahash.

The star folk focused their attacks on Nahash. It took all of his concentration to deflect them. He had nothing left to throw the iron.

One of the forest folk charged at David with a spear. David held up his spear and shield and waited. The attacker went at him like he were wild game. He blocked, causing the enemy's spear to get stuck in his shield, and drove his spear into the enemy's side. He fell the the ground, writhing in pain.

"Dave! Look out!" shouted William. William was suddenly at his left, his shield blocking an arrow

meant for David. "It's a woman!" he shouted. He pointed.

David looked. He saw a dark-skinned woman with angry eyes aiming another arrow at him. He got his own shield up in time, this time. A wolf leapt on William, knocking him to the ground, and tried to bite his face off. David put his spear through its heart.

A hail of seven-foot arrows flew from the trees. Three of them flew right up to Nahash's face or torso before stopping in mid-air and falling to the ground. Two others hit Sirajuddin in the stomach and liver. He let out a loud hiss and fell forward, holding himself up with his wings.

Fly! said Nahash. *Get out of here!*

Not sure, said Sirajuddin, *I can do that, sir.* He continued his downward pose. It almost looked like he was bowing to Nahash.

A ray of heat severed Sirajuddin's necklace. It fell to the ground. A kuchibu sprang out from nowhere, grabbed it, and took off into the brush.

A bolt of lightning flew at Nahash from beyond the trees. He deflected it, sending it veering down into the ground at the last moment.

Nahash and his soldiers watched in horror as a dozen one-eyed giants emerged from the wood. All but one had breastplates and helmets of steel. Five wielded a sword four feet long and a shield four feet in diameter. Five others had bows twelve feet long. One wore armor, but bore no weapons. The last wore hunting garb and wielded a different bow.

The sword-wielding cyclopes advanced on Nahash as their archers drew more arrows. Nahash put rays of heat through two of their bodies, felling them and igniting the trees behind them.

The star folk rained down another batch of spells. Nahash and Sirajuddin were seared.

The wolves were dead or scattered. The soldiers held their own against the natives firing arrows at them. Their archers fired back and killed a few.

Nahash took stock. The soldiers could handle the forest people. He and Sirajuddin could handle the fairies, but Sirajuddin was down. The cyclopes were a new and unknown threat. And there was a mage somewhere.

He hissed at his general and whispered, *Call a retreat! Everybody back to camp!*

The general did as he was told. The soldiers began an orderly disengagement.

Nahash wrapped his tail around Sirajuddin and took to the air. He opened a portal to one thousand feet up. One of the cyclopes reached them just as he flew through and slashed Sirajuddin open with his massive sword. Sirajuddin made no sound.

Nahash looked down. He didn't see the fairies. Men fled from the forest in ones and twos.

William and David held the rear guard while their men escaped. They were almost to the treeline when they came face to face with a cyclops. He swung his sword, splintering David's shield. David tossed it and gripped his spear with both hands.

William thrust his spear at the giant, who flicked his wrist and chopped the spear in half with his sword. William drew his own sword. He gave a stern look to the giant's one huge eye and said, "We're leaving."

He and David slowly moved in a circle around the cyclops. David held his spear high and said, "Let us go, dude. I'll poke your bulbous eye out."

The cyclops's eye got wide. He backed off.

Nahash watched as his soldiers fled the woods. The enemy did not pursue.

He flew back to camp.

Amalek

The sun sat low on the horizon when they reached the summit. The peak was a long, narrow stretch of barren rock eight thousand feet up. The wind blew strong and brisk. In the distance, looking like a dot, sat their objective.

Zebulun led them forward at a slow, casual pace. As they grew closer, the size of their quarry revealed itself. The dragon sat coiled like a snake, its wings wrapped around its body, its head tucked beneath its left wing. It looked to be sleeping. Its black scales seemed to absorb the light of the sunset.

Davion whispered to Zebulun, "Should we announce ourselves? I would hate to startle a dragon."

"You can't sneak up on a dragon," said Zebulun. "He can hear your heartbeat from here."

Davion looked at Zebulun with wide eyes and closed his mouth.

The three of them went forward. The dragon remained immobile until they were within thirty feet, at which point the serpent slowly, deliberately, took its head from beneath its wing and uncoiled, raising its head to a full forty feet above them, and unfurled its wings, stretching like a feline after a good nap. It curled its wings back around itself and looked down into their eyes.

Zebulun spoke with his command voice. "Amalek," he said, "I am Zebulun Koh. These are my companions, Quinn and Davion. We've come to ask for your help."

The dragon stared down into Zebulun's eyes for some time. He then looked at Quinn, who gave him a friendly wave. He looked at Davion, who avoided his gaze.

The serpent lowered his head and extended his body forward until his eyes were mere feet from Zebulun's face. Zebulun held his gaze, unmoving. The serpent turned his gaze to Quinn, who blushed, but waved again. Davion kept his eyes firmly to the ground when the serpent turned to him.

The serpent reared its head back, flicking its tongue in and out, sampling their scent. It paused, looked down at the three of them, and transformed. Wings became arms. The serpent's lower body split into legs. Its reptilian head became a human face. In the end, it assumed the form of a tall, lean old man with skin black as onyx and woolly white hair. His avatar had a regal bearing; grace without arrogance. He looked upon the three of them.

"I have so many questions," he said.

Zebulun looked past the avatar and up into the dragon's real eyes. "Ask."

The dragon's avatar looked at Zebulun, looked back at his serpentine self, and then back at Zebulun. "You must be strong willed, for a man," he said, "if you can see through my sorcery."

Zebulun nodded.

"Very well," said Amalek. "First: how did you know where to find me?"

"I saw it in a dream," said Zebulun.

"You dreamed I was here?" asked Amalek.

"I did."

Amalek regarded him for a moment. "Alright. Second: what on earth made you think I would help you?"

"Ur," said Zebulun.

"Ur?" asked Amalek. "Is that a person, place, or thing?"

"It's just a name," said Zebulun, "among many, for The Creator of the world."

"Ah," said Amalek, "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with this religion."

"It's new," said Zebulun.

"Your new god told you where to find me?" asked the dragon.

"Yes," said Zebulun. "Ur said you would be my greatest ally."

"I must wonder why he would say such a thing," said Amalek. "Men are livestock to me. Why would I help a cow or a goat fulfill its goals?"

"I don't know," said Zebulun. He looked into the dragon's eyes with mirth. "I only know that you will."

Amalek's avatar smiled. "Confident, are you? Out of pure curiosity — because I cannot imagine how you even found me — what, exactly, do you want help with?"

"I want you to help me forge a new kingdom," said Zebulun. "The Kingdom of Ur. Based on the law of Ur: love others as yourself."

Amalek's avatar laughed. It was not a snide or haughty laugh, just a genuine chuckle. "Why on earth would any god believe I would do that, if it knew what I am?"

"A good question," said Zebulun.

A moment of silence passed between them. Quinn broke the silence.

"Hey," he said, "Why'd you leave?"

Amalek looked at Quinn. "Hm?"

"My man Davion tells me the last emperor was, like, boss of the whole known world. From what I've seen, that means you were in charge. Why'd you leave when you were on top?"

Zebulun looked at Quinn, then up at Amalek. Amalek paused for a moment, lost in thought.

"I had just conquered a vast island kingdom that had vexed me for decades," said Amalek. "I celebrated by spending weeks bathing in the sun of their glorious beaches. After I returned from my triumphant relaxation, I came down with draconic lung rot — a disease of the tropics. It's a fungus that's not dangerous to men at all, but deadly to my kind. It would kill me within years."

Amalek's avatar looked off to the setting sun in dramatic fashion. Zebulun saw that the dragon's real face looked in the same direction. "Upon learning of my death sentence," said Amalek, "I wondered what it had all been for. What had been the purpose of any of it? I had forged an empire spanning the entire known world... and I was going to die. Someday, despite any monuments, it would be as if I never existed. What was the point of it all, in the end? It was all vanity and striving after wind."

"I became despondent. I saw no reason to do anything. I left it all behind and came here. The fungus does not like the cold. It hates dry air. Living atop a mountain keeps it at bay. It will still kill me, in time, but much more slowly."

"You got sad," said Quinn.

Amalek's avatar looked at Quinn with amusement. "That's a human term," he said, "but I suppose it fits. I felt a great melancholy at my own mortality."

"And it was more than that," the dragon said. "I had defeated every one of my enemies. At some point, there was no one left to fight. There was nothing more to gain. I felt...tired."

"Bored?" asked Quinn.

Amalek looked down at him. "Yes," he said. "I was bored. My reign had become too easy."

"What if we could offer you a brand new challenge?" asked Quinn.

Amalek looked at Quinn with a raised eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Well," said Quinn, "You ever tried building a kingdom where everyone is happy? Not just the dragons and their flunkies, but all the common people too?"

Amalek gave Quinn a knowing smile. "Such a thing is not possible. The strong do what they will; the weak suffer what they must. There has never been a kingdom that made everyone happy."

"That," said Quinn, looking up into Amalek's serpent eyes with humor, "sounds like a *challenge*."

The dragon looked down into Quinn's eyes for a moment before opening its mouth and pupils in amusement. His avatar looked at Quinn. "You are clever, aren't you?"

Quinn blushed with false modesty and said, "I been accused of worse."

Amalek's avatar smiled at them, then looked sad. "It doesn't matter," it said. "Even if I were inclined to entertain you, I still have this disease. I won't live long if I leave the cold, dry air of these mountains."

"I can heal you," said Zebulun.

Amalek's avatar gave Zebulun a skeptical look. "Really?" he asked. "You have that power?"

"The power is not mine," said Zebulun, "but yes."

"So that's the deal? You heal my disease, and I help you forge a new kingdom?"

"No," said Zebulun. "No deal. I'll heal you right now. After that, you can decide for yourself whether to help us."

Amalek's avatar stared at Zebulun for a moment. "Truly?" he asked.

"I swear it."

Amalek allowed Zebulun to approach him. Zebulun laid on hands. Amalek felt holy fire burn away the semi-dormant fungal spores living in his lungs. He breathed better than he had in years. He leapt into the air and circled, joyful in his regained youth.

Amalek returned to earth. His avatar appeared and looked at Zebulun with narrowed eyes. "I am impressed," he said. "I'll entertain your crusade for now. But I promise nothing."

Aftermath II

"How many did we lose?"

Emet looked at Sarah and sighed. "Eleven killed," he said, "and nineteen wounded. I hope you can see to them soon."

"Of course," said Sarah. She turned her attention to the captain of the cyclopean squad. "And you, Polymachos?" she asked.

"We lost two of our number," said the cyclops. "The leaves us with eight soldiers and the mage."

"Will they be sending more?" asked Sarah.

"Perhaps," said Polymachos, "but not soon. The aristocracy moves slowly — we're here because we volunteered. There's a chance they may wish to keep quiet rather than escalate against the dragons. They've become wary of interfering in the affairs of other worlds."

Gabriel appeared before them. "We have lost eleven."

Sarah took a deep breath and looked at Gabriel. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "At least we recovered this."

She held up the iron necklace stolen from Sirajuddin by the kuchibu.

Aftermath III

"How many did we lose?"

The general looked up at Nahash's avatar. "Twenty-three casualties. Seven dead, sixteen wounded. Though every last soldier got stung or bitten by wasps or ants at least five times."

"Not ideal," said Nahash, "but I think we killed more of theirs. I'm sure I killed at least two of their giants."

"There didn't look to be many of them," said the general. "My men could probably handle them and the natives if they don't have wasps and wolves harassing them."

"Perhaps," said Nahash, "but we don't know how many there are. And then there's the fairies. A lot more of them showed up that time."

The general shifted, uncomfortable.

"No," said Nahash, "I think we're going to have to go back to the capital *again* and ask for reinforcements." The dragon looked off the the west and let out a low hiss, a kind of draconic sigh. "The king will *not* be pleased to see me again."

The general said nothing.

"Have the men dig in," said Nahash. "Tell them to wait for supplies and reinforcements — and to stay far, far away from the woods."

"Yes, sir," said the general.

"Your men built the pyre?" asked Nahash.

"They did, sir."

"Good. I have something to do before we go west."

Nahash left the tent and took wing. He flew to the place, a mile from the stockade, where a dragon's body lie atop a massive pile of wood. Nahash coiled up ten yards from the display.

Sorry, soldier, whispered Nahash. But you died in battle, right? So you'll be reborn, in the next life, as an emperor. At least, that's what they say.

Emperor Sirajuddin, said Nahash, with a wry chuckle. I relieve you of your duty.

Nahash focused his will. Sirajuddin's funeral pyre bust into white-hot flame, consuming his huge bulk within moments, rendering even the bones to dust.

When the flames cooled, Nahash ordered servants to collect some of the ashes in a large leather bag. He flew thousands of feet up, to the cold part of the sky, and scattered the ashes to the winds.

From the Dragon's Mouth

They camped atop Amalek's mountain. Amalek caught a mountain goat for the three of them. They roasted it over a roaring bonfire.

Quinn looked up at Amalek. In between bites of goat and flatbread, he asked, "You sure you don't want any?"

Amalek's avatar appeared. "No, thank you. I ate a mere three days ago. I won't be hungry again for a few more."

"Dragon's only eat once a week?" asked Quinn.

"We can go for a month," said Amalek. "Most civilized dragons eat more often, but one who eats every day is considered a glutton."

"Wow," said Quinn. "We have to eat several times a day."

"That's your hot-blooded constitution," said Amalek.

"You know," said Quinn, pointing at Davion, "This guy wants to ask you a whole pile of questions."

Davion looked up from the fire. "Hm?"

"I was just telling the dragon how much you want to ask him about dragon stuff," said Quinn.

"I do?" asked Davion.

"I *know* you do!" said Quinn. He looked up at Amalek. "Davion's shy. He doesn't want to pry."

Amalek looked over at Davion.

Davion cleared his throat. "It's true," he said. "I have so many questions."

Amalek gave him a benevolent smile and said, "Ask."

"Okay," said Davion. "Let me see. Is it true that only one dragon is born at a time?"

"Not exactly," said Amalek. "An impregnated female carries a clutch of two to seven eggs. She keeps them within until the time is right, then the eggs burst and the offspring are born live."

"At that point," said Amalek, "The first instinct of each baby dragon is to kill its siblings."

Davion raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"Truly," said Amalek. "This is to make certain that the newborn gets all of the mother's attention and resources. The mother allows it, leaving only the strongest of her brood to live. Sometimes, not even that — it is not uncommon for even the victor to succumb to its battle wounds."

"So," said Amalek, "The number of dragons born at once is between two and seven, but the number of *survivors* is always zero or one."

Silence reigned, for a moment, as the men contemplated Amalek's words.

Amalek continued. "When there is a clear victor, its next instinct is to attack its mother. The female slaps the child down *hard* to make sure it knows who is in charge. It sometimes takes weeks for the mother to establish absolute dominance. The longer it takes, the more proud the mother is. Such willfulness is taken as a sign of strength."

"That is so alien," said Davion. "It's horrifying."

Amalek grinned. "You haven't heard the best part. Once the mother has established initial dominance, she shreds the remains of the dead siblings and feeds them to the whelp to give it strength."

Davion looked ill. "You eat your brothers and sisters?"

Amalek grinned. "We do. Not that I remember it."

"Is cannibalism common with dragons?" asked Zebulun.

"Only at birth," said Amalek.

Davion set aside his food.

"Does papa dragon have anything to do with raising kids?" asked Quinn.

"Not instinctively," said Amalek. "The nature of the male is to impregnate a female and leave the problem to her. Once we became civilized, however, we began to see the value in being a part of our offsprings' educations. Building a great house requires loyal followers, and none are more loyal than those one trains from birth."

"A great house," said Davion, staring into the fire. "Do dragons marry?"

"We do," said Amalek. "We marry for strength, or for allegiance."

"Never for love?" asked Quinn.

Amalek smiled. "Empathy is the province of pack hunters. We are solitary predators."

"You know," said Amalek, "Centuries ago, a powerful dragon might have a dozen wives, or even a hundred. We had to do away with such polygamy. Turns out it's dangerous to have a large number of hot-headed, ambitious young males who can't find mates. Several kingdoms fell to this before we figured it out. We eventually decided to limit ourselves to single wives. Naturally, we forced the same policy onto your people."

Amalek paused. "Not that it stops any of us from mating with whoever we choose, outside of marriage arrangements."

Davion stared into the fire for a moment. "What about culture? What is dragon society like, outside of what men are allowed to see?"

"As you may imagine," said Amalek, "It is based entirely on hierarchy and domination. The powerful rule. The less powerful serve."

"Ooh," said Quinn. "What about art? Do y'all write poetry, or music, or stories?"

Amalek grinned. "We usually demand that others write them for us. Some dragons have authored works of literature or philosophy (mostly to glorify themselves or their house), but you can believe they made their scribes write them down. Our claws are not quite as nimble as men's fingers. That's what makes you so useful to us."

Camp was quiet as the trio chewed on their roasted goat and Amalek's words.

Amalek addressed Davion. "Who taught you magery? Was it a dragon?"

Davion swallowed his latest bite hard, cleared his throat, and said "Star folk."

"Star folk," said Amalek. "I'm unfamiliar."

"You know," said Quinn, "Angels. Fairies. Jinn. That sort of thing."

Amalek looked at Quinn with narrowed eyes. "Such things exist?"

"They must," said Quinn through a mouthful of bread. "He learned how to throw lightning from his fingers and open holes in the air from somebody."

"This, I would like to see," said Amalek.

Quinn looked up. "Bluebonnet? You still following us around?"

A small star appeared before Amalek's serpent face and grew to a few inches in diameter. Bluebonnet appeared within. She smiled and waved at Quinn, then raised her hand towards the dragon's face. A thin spark of lightning shot from her fingertip into the serpent's snout. His head recoiled for a split-second, then he leaned in to look at the angel. He flicked his tongue a few times.

"You don't smell like anything at all," said Amalek.

"No," said Bluebonnet. "We have no scent. You can't see or hear us either, unless we want you to."

Amalek stared at Bluebonnet for a moment before she winked out. He looked over at Zebulun. "I have been on this Earth for six hundred and forty-one years. It's not often I see something new. You have healed my disease, and now you've shown me a type of creature I never believed to exist. Perhaps you are a prophet."

"I'm trying to be," said Zebulun.

"How, exactly, did you find this new god and religion of yours?" asked Amalek.

"The woman who protects the eastern wood gave us a potion that grants visions."

"And this gave you the power to heal?" asked Amalek.

"Among other things," said Zebulun.

"He made it rain for three days!" said Quinn.

Amalek looked thoughtful. "Let's say I accept it. What makes you think you can overthrow the kingdom? How do you plan to do this thing?"

"I don't know," said Zebulun. He looked up into the serpent's real eyes with mirth. "I hoped you might have some ideas."

Amalek's avatar broke into a grin. "I suppose this is more in my line of work than that of a prophet or philosopher."

"Or a performer!" said Quinn.

"On the contrary," said Amalek, "performance is integral to the exercise of power. When you speak, others must believe it."

"Huh," said Quinn. He screwed up his brow like Davion, put his chin on his hand, and looked skyward. "That's interesting. Many of the fair folk I've met love the theater."

"As they should," said Amalek. "They are, themselves, performers. They perform the role of our front men. If there is ever a revolt, it is they who pay with their lives, not us."

Davion looked up. "Is that the reason for the subterfuge? I wouldn't think dragons would be afraid of men at all."

"We never have been," said Amalek, "but there was a time, centuries ago, when some human hero — what was his name? Rog? Ragnar? I can't recall. At any rate, he got together a small band of extremely talented people and set about assassinating dragons. It had something to do with his wife, or children, or something—your classic revenge story. Which, by the way, dragons do appreciate."

"He succeeded?" asked Zebulun.

"He had a good run," said Amalek. "I think he managed to kill five of our kind before we dealt with him. That episode taught us that mankind could, in fact, be dangerous. We treat your kind like cattle; and, most of the time, it works. But it turns out some of you are still feral wolves. We invented the fair folk to distract you."

"Invented?" asked Davion.

"I'm sure you know the old legends," said Amalek. "Dragons ruled and terrorized your kind until the fair folk came, from a far away land, and subdued the dragons with their powerful magic. They brought the dragons low and freed you from their clutches."

"Sure," said Davion. "I've heard that story."

"We made it up," said Amalek. "My kind imported pale mercenaries from the north. We selected for intellect, loyalty, and ruthlessness. We put on a great show of them defeating numerous dragons in combat. Of course, we had to provide the magery and sorcery ourselves, as we hadn't yet taught that to them."

"So it is all a charade," said Davion.

"I'm afraid so," said Amalek. "We invented your religion as well, though we were wise enough to base it on existing tribal beliefs."

Davion frowned at stared into the fire.

"Why from the north?" asked Quinn. "That's where I'm from."

"Really?" asked Amalek. "I assumed you were one of the fair folk. This was all before my time. From my understanding, we wanted the saviors to look like rescuers from the outside: a classic *deus ex machina*. We also thought it would be useful if one could tell a man's class just by the color of his skin, but that turned out to have problems of its own. In time, we had to elevate some darker-skinned folk into the fold to preempt rebellion."

"How does the hierarchy work?" asked Davion, still staring at the fire. "You have the common folk on the bottom, and the fair folk above them, but how does it work at higher levels?"

"It's ultimately about houses and alliances," said Amalek. "It's all about who owns what — who can protect their claims, and who can not. The major factions, at least in my time, were the traditionalists and the imperialists."

"Trads tend to be lords of the great country estates. They've been siphoning wealth from their livestock for centuries, and are happy with the large piles of gold they have. They prefer to cull the population with small, civil wars that are more like games of Chess than a real war between kingdoms. They don't want any foreign adventures damaging what they have."

"Imps, on the other hand, tend to be the princes of the cities. Imperialist adventures bring in new resources and open new trade routes, which benefits the princes far more than the lords. Imps like to control the domestic population by conquering other lands."

"There are others," said Amalek. "The reactionaries hate the charade and want to go back to ruling men in the open. But they (and others) are not numerous."

"You were an imperialist," said Zebulun.

"Yes!" said Amalek. "Through and through. My empire covered the entire known world. I knew better, however, than to browbeat the trads. I taxed the princes to fund our conquests, leaving the lords to keep order at home. It worked quite well."

"What are you now?" asked Zebulun.

Amalek looked at him with mirth. "An abdicator, I suppose. Perhaps a traitor. I have no idea what the dragons who remained thought of my disappearance."

"You didn't say anything to anyone?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Amalek. "Not one word. I left, late one night, and never returned."

It was Quinn's turn to look at the fire. He seemed sad. "I did the same thing, when I left home."

"What do you suspect they'll think?" asked Zebulun.

Amalek thought a moment. "The trads believe in rules. They believe in honor. I imagine many of

those who swore fealty to me still live. Some may join our cause. The imps are hopeless, unless you plan to build an empire."

"I do not," said Zebulun.

"Then the imps are our enemy. And most of them have no attachment to rules, or honor, or even decorum. They will use any means necessary to win. I should know."

Zebulun looked up at the stars. "We should start," he said, "by introducing you to our existing allies."

Flying North

"We'll need to go the long way," said Zebulun. "We're fugitives in the kingdom, and I don't think we want anyone seeing you yet. We can go north, through the high plains, until we reach the rose river. We can cross where it's shallow and follow it all the way east. It passes the eastern wood right before it turns south."

The men ate breakfast as Amalek and his avatar looked on.

"I could fly us there in mere days, even taking the scenic route," said Amalek. "I'm an old serpent, but I'm sure I can carry the three of you."

"Can you carry our beasts?" asked Zebulun. "I won't leave them behind."

"Animal lover, are you?" asked Amalek. "Very well. You three ride north. I'll fly above in as casual a pace as I can manage."

They left the mountains and rode north to the desert. Amalek flew above. When the dragon got too far ahead of them, he flew a long, slow loop that left him behind.

Quinn stared at Amalek with wide eyes and a look of longing. He watched the serpent fly for hours.

"What's wrong?" asked Davion. "What are you staring at?"

Without taking his eyes off the dragon, Quinn said, "*Flying...*"

They camped in the desert, next to a spring Amalek spotted from above. Amalek slithered up to the fire as Zebulun prepared food. Quinn stared at Amalek with the same look of longing.

Amalek looked down at Quinn, his serpentine face unreadable. Quinn clasped his hands before him in a begging gesture. Davion gave him a quizzical look.

Amalek's avatar appeared. "You want a dragon ride, don't you?"

Quinn fell to his knees, his hands still clasped before him. "More. Than. Anything."

Amalek smiled. "I'm afraid I don't have the harness I once used to carry my pet 'king' around. I fear you would fall to your death."

"I have rope," said Zebulun. "I could rig something up."

"Could you?" said Amalek.

Zebulun nodded. "I've been on a couple of maritime campaigns. I made the sailors teach me everything they knew about knot-tying."

Quinn turned towards Zebulun, still in his begging stance. "Would you? Please?"

Mirth entered Zebulun's eyes. "Sure, Quinn. For you."

"Thank you!" said Quinn, jumping to his feet. He turned back to Amalek. "And you!"

Quinn barely slept that night. He was too excited.

After breakfast, Zebulun brought out hemp rope and wound it around Amalek's torso and wings in complicated fashion.

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Davion.

"Sure," said Zebulun. "See how these crossed ropes all hold one another in place? It won't slip off. So long as Quinn stays lashed to it, he won't fall."

Davion followed the path of the rope with his gaze. "Look at the topology! I never knew knots were such a complicated subject."

"There are hundreds of knots," said Zebulun. "I know a dozen of the most useful. Sailors know more."

"I guess I need to meet some sailors," said Davion.

"I'll introduce you to some!" said Quinn.

"Go on up," said Zebulun.

Quinn climbed onto Amalek's back. Zebulun lashed the rope around Quinn's waist and shoulders and tied it off. Quinn tugged at the ropes in a few directions.

"Feels secure!" he said.

Zebulun nodded.

He and Davion rode north through the desert. Amalek and Quinn took to the sky.

Quinn and Amalek

Quinn laughed with delight as they took to the air. Amalek flew up a few hundred feet, then leveled off to let Quinn take in his surroundings. Wind blew Quinn's blond hair about his face.

"This," said Quinn, "is everything I hoped it would be!"

It is delightful, is it not? whispered Amalek.

"So delightful!" said Quinn. "I would think you'd be used to it by now, though. Does it ever get old?"

You might think it would, said Amalek, *after hundreds of years. But, the truth is...no. Flying never gets old.*

"I knew it!" said Quinn.

I didn't get to fly much, when I was emperor. I was always too busy. I would only be able to get out for a hunt on rare occasions. Since I left, however, I've flown every day. I've enjoyed a hunt every week. I've wrestled with the giant animals in those mountains.

"We saw a giant hawk!" said Quinn. "Davion had to teach it some respect."

In time, said Amalek, *I found that I enjoyed the flying and the hunting and the wrestling far more than I had enjoyed being emperor of the world. Being on top satisfies nothing but vanity; the visceral fight for survival satisfies something far greater: **instinct**.*

They flew in silence for a moment as Quinn contemplated Amalek's words.

"Can we go higher?" asked Quinn.

Sure, said Amalek, *within limits. The air gets thin and cold, the higher you go.*

"It did seem awfully chilly on top of that mountain."

Here we go. Let me know if you become cold or breathless.

Amalek soared upward on a rising column of warm air. He circled within the column until they were two miles above the ground.

"Wow," said Quinn. "This is just like being on top of Mount Amalek! I can see everything from up here."

Ha! I never gave my mountain a name, but I suppose it fits.

"I can't even see Zeb and Davion, anymore."

I can see them. They're riding along.

Quinn sat quietly for a while, taking it all in.

"You know," said Quinn, "I should have brought a blanket. It's freezing up here."

How are you breathing? asked Amalek.

"I'm fine," said Quinn "I have good lungs."

Amalek focused his mind. A cushion of warmth surrounded them.

"That's great!" said Quinn. "You and Davion have the same skills."

We have, said Amalek. *Not many men can do that. Most dragons can't even manage magery.*

"Really? I thought you could all breathe fire."

None of us can, said Amalek, *but those of us inclined towards mathematics can learn magery and use it to start fires. Other dragons have to use sorcery to fake it. It's primarily military dragons and high-ranking lords and princes who learn magery. Others rely on their natural telepathy.*

"You can read minds?"

No, we can't see what's in your head, but we can project our thoughts and images into yours.

"And that's how you do sorcery."

Precisely. It comes naturally to us.

"Can you teach me?"

You want to learn sorcery?

"You know those visions we had, back in the forest, where Zeb met Ur? In mine, I met a dragon who told me I should ask the next dragon I meet to teach me sorcery. I asked the one we killed just before we killed him, but he didn't think it was funny. I never got a chance to ask Zan."

I suppose I could. I suspect you'll be a natural at it.

"Yay! I love learning new things. Not math, but most other things."

Sorcery requires no math. It is all about performance. One need not be telepathic or a dragon to do it — one needs only the ability to manipulate the perceptions and emotions of others.

"Like I do with music?"

Exactly! Music, art, oratory: all of these things can be used for sorcery.

"I can't wait!"

I'm afraid you'll have to wait til we've landed.

"I can wait that long."

They flew in silence for a time.

"Hey, Amalek."

Yes?

"Can dragons swim?"

Yes. We are strong swimmers. We've been known to hunt sharks and crocodiles, when they aren't too large to swallow.

Quinn sat quiet for a while.

"Can I ask you something about dragons?"

Be my guest.

"Why do dragons hoard their wealth? I know you guys are solitary predators and all, but you're also smart. You have so much gold and silver that you could easily spare some, make people's lives so much better, probably make your own lives easier in the process, and still be rich. So what gives?"

Imagine a wealthy rancher — a freeholder, let's say, unburdened by rent to any lord or prince. He has a large herd of cattle which makes him a good living. Would you ask him why he doesn't share his gold and silver with the cattle? Or why he doesn't build them more comfortable quarters, or give them gourmet fodder?

"I guess not."

*No, you wouldn't, because you already know the answer. The rancher does not keep the cattle for **their** benefit. He keeps them for **his**.*

Quinn decided to lighten the mood. "I watched you, yesterday. You were doing all kinds of acrobatics in the air. Could we do some of that?"

Amalek's pupils dilated in mild amusement. *Hold on to your rope.*

Amalek rolled over, putting his belly to the sky, and went into free-fall. Quinn, now upside down, shouted in delight as they fell. After a few seconds, the dragon dove and looped, bringing them upright.

"That was amazing!"

Amalek performed more aerobatics: loops, dives, barrel rolls. Quinn held on tight, laughing all the way until it was time to land for lunch.

Wing of Dragons

Nahash slithered into the throne room. Aurelius Antipater sat coiled behind the throne.

You've returned, whispered Aurelius. *I hope you have good news for me.*

I have good news and bad news, said Nahash. *The good news is that we managed to fell some trees and secure some timber.*

Excellent, said the dragon king. *The bad news?*

The bad news is that I had to use most of that timber for Sirajuddin's funeral pyre.

The king gave Nahash a blank stare. *Your lieutenant is dead?*

He is, said Nahash. *He was killed by a whole host of fairies and the arrival of unexpected reinforcements: cyclopes.*

Aurelius gave Nahash a hard look. *Cyclopes?*

I saw them myself, said Nahash. *At least a dozen. I killed two of them before we had to retreat.*

Aurelius turned his head and stared off to the east. *How did they get to you? Can they fly too?*

Nahash ignored the king's sarcasm. *Not that I've seen; but fairies can, and Sirajuddin couldn't handle their numbers alone. He came to ground, where I sat protecting the soldiers and workmen. That's when the giants showed up. They hit him with massive arrows. One disemboweled him right before I escaped with him.*

The king turned back to the soldier and gave him a hard look. *How are you going to solve this problem?*

There are more of the light-things than we thought, said Nahash, *and we have no idea how many cyclopes there are, or if more are coming. At least one of them knew magery.*

Nahash looked up at the king. *A partner won't be enough. If I'm to fix this, I'm going to need an entire wing of military dragons. Experienced combat veterans.*

Aurelius stared at Nahash for a long time before speaking. *Fine. Choose your team. Take whoever you like, so long as you don't leave a hole in our defenses.*

Thank you, sir, said Nahash.

Dismissed.

Nahash turned to leave. As he reached the door, the king whispered one last command into his mind. *If you can't complete the objective with an entire wing of dragons, don't bother to return.*

Nahash paused, nodded, and slithered out the door.

A Lesson in Sorcery

"The key to sorcery is subtlety."

Amalek and Quinn stood beneath the stars, far from the fire where Zebulun and Davion rested after dinner. Quinn looked at Amalek's avatar, grinned, and said, "That's never been my style."

Amalek smiled. "Melodrama can get one only so far. You see, sorcery works best if the target is not prepared for it. Let people know you intend to trick them, and it becomes far more difficult. It's not uncommon for a dragon to proclaim their ability as a sorcerer, as a taunt, during a duel, but this is not the best use of it. The best sorcery is subtle. The best sorcery is when one's victim not only does not expect it, but will never even *recognize* that they were fooled."

"How you manage that?" asked Quinn.

"Simple," said Amalek. "Fear, anger, and pride. These are the sorcerer's best friends. The fearful and wrathful are irrational; it is far easier to fool those who aren't thinking clearly. The more terrified or enraged they are, the easier it is to misdirect them. Calm is the best defense against sorcery."

"Fear," said Amalek, "can also be trivially transformed into wrath, if you so desire. All you have to do is give the fearful a scapegoat. Tell them their terror is the fault of this person or that group, and watch their terror turn to rage. Watch as they attack the identified enemy without mercy."

"What about pride?" asked Quinn.

"Pride is different," said Amalek. "It doesn't necessarily make one more easy to fool, but it does insure that the proud person will *stay* fooled once you've fooled them. Many would rather believe a lie for their entire lives than admit—even to themselves—that they are wrong about *anything*. Their vanity won't allow it." Amalek grinned. "Were they to learn that they are *anything* less than flawless, their whole world would come crashing down."

"So how do I do it?" asked Quinn. "I don't have your dragon powers."

"I've taught men sorcery before," said Amalek, "when it was useful to me. I'll show you numerous examples of it. Learn to see through it; in time, something will click in your mind. You'll be able to do what we do."

"What about magery?" asked Quinn. "You ever teach men that?"

"I have not," said Amalek. "As I said, most men are not capable of it. Even if I had one that was, and I were inclined to teach him, it is against draconic law."

"Really? Why?"

Amalek smiled. "Because most dragons labor under the illusion that magery is ultimate power. The ability to throw lightning from your claws, or flames from your eyes, to lay waste to armies and cities. It's all very dramatic. They fear teaching this to men would make them dangerous to us."

"But the truth," said Amalek, "is that sorcery is *far* more powerful than magery."

Quinn furrowed his brow. "Really?"

"Truly. A mage of a certain power level could, if he took time to summon the energy, raze a good-sized city to the ground. A sorcerer of the same power level could make everyone in that city worship him as a savior and liberator. Which of those sounds more powerful to you?"

Quinn scratched his chin and cocked his head, thinking.

Amalek said, "There are many forms of power: land, gold, armies, magery. But the power of those who control the land, the money, and the army pales in comparison to the power of those who control *the narrative*. One who can control the narrative can control all of those other things."

"Consider: everything you think you know — about life, yourself, or the world around you — is based on one of two things: direct, personal experience, or *a story that someone else told you*. That's what we dragons do. We weave the narratives that men believe."

Quinn stared at Amalek. "So... performers are the most powerful people in the world?"

"If they're any good, they are," said Amalek. "We often use actors, musicians, playwrights, and other artists to spread our message. And then there's the ministers of government who speak for us; politics is nothing more than theater for the unattractive."

Quinn laughed. "Alright, so...show me something!"

Said Amalek, "Behold!"

The night sky disappeared, replaced with blue skies and bright sunlight. Shadows no longer hid the desert around them.

"Neat!" said Quinn. "This is much nicer than the last illusion a dragon cast on me."

"You see that cactus in the distance?" asked Amalek.

"Yeah."

"It's not really there. At least, not that I know of. Dragons don't see much better at night than men, so I have no idea what *is* over there. I decided to put a cactus there because it is believable. Believability is another important part of sorcery. Implausible things are easier to see through than reasonable."

The scene shifted. They no longer stood in a desert at all, but in the throne room of an imperial palace. Amalek sat coiled behind the throne, a handsome blonde man in splendid finery seated in front of him.

The blonde man spoke with Amalek's voice. "This was my throne room, some hundred and fifty years ago. This handsome fellow was my pet 'emperor'. He was great as his job: tall, strong, commanding. He inspired love and fear." Amalek paused for a moment. "I wonder what became of him after I left."

The scene shifted again. Quinn found himself floating above the clouds, four miles up. The full moon shone bright upon the clouds below. The wind blew harsh and cold.

He saw Amalek flying upward, straining. Another dragon, with scales in bands of blue and green,

flew at his heels, as if chasing him. Quinn found himself floating upward, pacing the dragons as they reached ever-greater heights.

When they reached five miles in height, Amalek's pursuer stopped, went limp, and fell to Earth. Amalek flew over to Quinn.

"What was that?" asked Quinn. "Some battle you fought?"

"No," said Amalek. "It was a kind of race. It's a game played by young, brash males of my kind. You see, even with our powerful lungs, a dragon can only fly so high. The air gets too thin and cold for us to take. Fly high enough, and one will pass out."

"The game involves two rivals flying as high as they can to see who passes out — or turns away in fear — first. This was my last contest between myself and Xiphos, the greatest rival of my youth. He passed out first, and I basked in the glory of my victory."

"He had always been just a *little* better than I at *everything*. Racing, hunting, magery training, you name it: he was the one person I could rarely beat. It infuriated me! I strove to improve, to overcome my nemesis. This time, I did."

"That must have been satisfying," said Quinn as he looked down into the clouds.

"It was," said Amalek, "until it wasn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Most young males who play this game don't play for keeps," said Amalek. "Most will dive when they feel their consciousness begin to slip away. Neither of us could do that. Our hatred was too strong. We flew up and up until one of us passed out. Even then, most who pass out manage to wake and right themselves before hitting the ground. My enemy did not. He died."

"Oh," said Quinn. "Did you get in trouble for that?"

"Trouble?" said Amalek. "Oh, no. Dragons don't get punished for proving their power. My peers celebrated me. They were impressed."

Amalek looked up at the moon. "It was I who was troubled. When I learned of his death, a sudden realization hit me: he had helped to make me as powerful as I had become. My desire to best him had made *me* better. I realized, in that moment, what I had lost. I realized that a dragon is as defined by his enemies as his friends. From that day forth, I swore to treat even hated enemies with respect. Because one might miss them when they're gone."

Quinn took a deep breath and shivered. "I just realized that you've been talking like your avatar, but he's not here. You're in dragon form."

"That's because I'm not here," said Amalek, "and neither are you. Go on. Focus your will. Try to break through the illusion."

Quinn focused. He thought back to the lair of the sadist. He looked at Amalek. "This can't be real."

"Not likely."

The scene shifted, and Quinn found himself back in the desert night. Amalek looked down upon him. Quinn looked up.

Good, whispered Amalek. *Well done*.

"Can we practice some more?" asked Quinn.

Indeed, said Amalek.

Amalek showed Quinn sorcery for hours.

Cowboys and Dragons

*They say the stars are suns like ours
just very far away
there are other worlds than ours
I hope to see one day*

*there are other worlds than this
with cyclopes, dragons, and kuchibu
angels and fairies fall from heaven
to watch the lives of me and you*

*I hope, one day, to find a ship
a ship to sail the stars
I hope to meet exotic things
out in those wilds where planets have rings
and I hope that all those places
have taverns and bars!*

The cowboys cheered Quinn's silly song. Their mood was celebratory, given their recent windfall. They sat around a roaring bonfire that kept the high plains cold away. Amalek sat coiled opposite Zan. The serpents sat in silence.

"That's it!" said Quinn. "That's all I got for tonight, boys." Most of the crowd wandered away.

Amalek whispered to Zan, *Care for a flight?*

Zan looked Amalek in the eyes. *Why not?*

Without a word, the dragons slithered away from the fire and took wing.

Jethro looked over at Zebulun. "So... now y'all got a dragon too."

"Seems so," said Zebulun.

"He's great!" said Quinn. "He let me ride on his back on the way here."

"No foolin?" asked Jethro. "I can't picture Zan giving none of us a piggyback ride."

"Well, yeah," said Quinn. "He's kind of your boss, right? Amalek's more like a friend."

Cal snorted. "Amalek, the friendly dragon."

Quinn grinned. "I should make *that* into a song." He looked at Davion. "You have got to try it, dude. Flying is amazing."

Davion grimaced. "I'm afraid of heights."

Quinn sighed. "Of course you are. What about you, Zeb? Fancy a dragon ride?"

"If necessary," said Zebulun, "but I like my horse."

The remaining cowboys laughed.

A few thousand feet up, Amalek and Zen circled in the moonlight.

Not many clouds, here out west, whispered Amalek.

Barely any, said Zan. *We're lucky your friend Zebulun made it rain, or we couldn't have fed all the cattle we just stole.*

Quinn mentioned that, said Amalek. *I'm skilled in magery, and I don't know how he does what he does.*

Maybe he does speak for a god, said Zan.

Perhaps so, said Amalek.

They flew in silence for a time.

Tell me, said Amalek, *how did you come to be out here, so far from civilization? How did you wind up being leader of a bandit gang?*

I was born out here, said Zan. *My mother was from Axolotl. She hated my father, so when she realized she was pregnant, she fled out to the wilds to raise me as her personal slave in the high mountains to the west.*

You seem to have escaped her clutches, said Amalek.

She died, said Zan. *Some kind of sickness. She was only three hundred eighty-three.*

How old were you? asked Amalek.

Old enough, said Zan. *One hundred fifty-seven. I wandered for a while, hunting, flying, enjoying my newfound freedom. I got tired of the cold and headed east. I watched from above as the local clans of men warred with each other over territory and water rights. They raided each other's livestock constantly. That's when I got an idea...*

To form your own clan? asked Amalek.

Exactly! said Zan. *I recruited boys from thirteen to seventeen. I picked the best from every clan. With me leading them, we pretty much run the roost out here.*

And you raid the kingdom as well, said Amalek.

We sure do, said Zan.

Once we take over, said Amalek, *perhaps we could pay you to watch our western flank. To keep the other clans from raiding us.*

I don't want to work for you, said Zan. *I like being my own boss.*

Don't think of it as working for us, said Amalek. *Think of it as the kingdom paying tribute to a dangerous warlord in exchange for his forbearance.*

Zan looked over at Amalek with his mouth parted in amusement. *I like you.*

Amalek grinned back.

So you really plan to take that kingdom for your human buddies? asked Zan.

I may, said Amalek. *I've taken a throne before. Numerous thrones, to be fair. I can do it again.*

But first, said Amalek, *I want to see the things they've seen.*

Rose River

Zebulun and companions said goodbye to Zan and his cowboys and rode northeast. It took seven days to reach the Rose River. They crossed where it was shallow and turned east, following its path.

Over twelve days, the gentle river became a torrent. It flowed through a gorge one hundred feet beneath them, the chasm that separated the kingdom from the wild north. They camped on a hill overlooking the great stone bridge that led across.

"That bridge looks to be an incredible feat of construction," said Davion. "I wonder who built it."

Amalek's avatar appeared. "It looks cyclopean."

Davion looked to Amalek's avatar in surprise. "Really? You know about cyclopes?"

"Oh, yes," said Amalek. "They were before my time, of course. I'm old, but I'm not one thousand years old. My kind saw them as a competitor, so we drove them out. We used your people as a proxy."

"So it is true," said Davion.

"I'm afraid so," said Amalek. "They were too sophisticated to make good livestock, so we dealt with them."

"Is it true that your people came here from another world, like the cyclopes?" asked Davion.

"I believe so," said Amalek, "Our scriptures speak of us as a race of conquerors who travel from world to world, devouring everything in our path. That said, I have never seen it. I don't know how to get there. It could be myth."

"You have scriptures? As in, religion?" asked Davion.

"Of course!" said Amalek. "Not that many of us truly believe them, but every tribe needs a shared narrative to bind it in solidarity. We even have a special, esoteric religion just for the fair folk. They aren't allowed to talk about it with outsiders."

"What kind of religion?" asked Davion.

"Oh, there's plenty of pomp and ritual," said Amalek, "but the main gist of it is simple: be a good servant to the dragons, and you will be reborn as one of us. I doubt many of them believe it either, but they pretend to."

"That's fascinating," said Davion.

Amalek smiled. "I thought you'd like it."

Davion sat up and looked around. "Where's Quinn?"

"He's over there," said Zebulun, and pointed. Quinn stood on the apex of the hill, staring north.

"He's been there for some time," said Amalek. "I left him out of my side of the conversation; he

seemed like he wanted to be alone."

"That's not like him at all," said Davion.

Davion stood up, stretched, and walked over to where Quinn stood. He looked down at him. "Are you okay?"

Quinn looked up at him with sad eyes. "I never thought I would miss it."

"Miss what?"

"Home," said Quinn. "This is the closest I've been to home since I left. I crossed that very bridge down there to get away. I remember stopping, right in the middle, to take a deep breath. Once I crossed this bridge, I thought, it would be the end of my old life and the beginning of a grand new adventure. I kept going. I never even looked back."

"But now?" said Quinn. "After ten years? I feel something. A longing. For the people and places of my youth."

Davion put his hand on Quinn's shoulder. "Sorry, Quinn. This is the furthest I've ever been from home."

Quinn gave him a soft smile. "You need to travel more."

"I think I'm getting my fill on this trip," said Davion.

Quinn smiled. "Let's go back to the fire."

Fairy Warning

Sarah sat before the fire in camp, stirring her cauldron. Elu tended to the fire. Apollo carved arrows. Things had been quiet since the dragon flew away.

A small star appeared, expanding to reveal a tiny fairy with blue skin and butterfly wings.

"Bluebonnet," said Sarah. "Welcome back. Zebulun has returned?"

"Yes. Davion and Quinn are with him."

"Good," said Sarah. "I had hoped they would return before dragons do."

"They have a dragon with them."

Elu and Apollo exchanged a glance. Sarah looked up at Bluebonnet with narrowed eyes. "A dragon?"

"An old one. His scales are black. They call him Amalek."

"He travels with them?" asked Sarah.

"Yes. They found him on a mountain in the far west. He agreed to help Zebulun. He teaches Quinn sorcery."

Sarah cast her eyes downward for a moment, thinking. She raised her head to look at Elu, then Apollo, then off to the west. "I hope Zebulun knows what he's doing."

A Dragon's Request

"You desire visions?"

Sarah looked up into Amalek's eyes. His avatar appeared before them.

"I do," he said. "I want to see the things my companions have seen. I've seen forest folk, star folk, cyclopes, and yourself; now I wish to witness what they experienced beyond the veil."

"I can't promise what effect the potion will have on a dragon," said Sarah. "One or all of the ingredients may be toxic to you."

"I'm not concerned," said Amalek. "Our systems are hardier than yours; if you can survive it, I imagine I can as well. Besides, Zebulun has already proven he can heal me if I get into trouble."

"Alright," said Sarah. "It's your risk to take."

"I am nothing if not a risk-taker," said Amalek. "I could never have forged an empire, otherwise."

"Will it work on him?" asked Quinn. "He's like three thousand pounds or something. I bet it would take a barrel of whiskey just to give him a mild buzz."

"It will work," said Sarah. "The vine will see to that."

It took days for Sarah to gather the necessary components. She brewed them together for a number of hours before announcing it was ready.

"Anyone besides Amalek?" she asked. "I've made it so concentrated that you'll only need a sip."

Quinn raised his hand with gusto. "I'm in!"

Sarah looked at Davion. "Um, yes," he said. "I think I would like to explore that again."

"What about you, Z?" asked Quinn.

"No need," said Zebulun. "I've seen all I needed to see. I'll stand watch with Sarah."

Sarah looked at Elu. He nodded.

She looked over at Apollo. He scratched his chin and furrowed his eyebrow. "I'm wary," he said, "but I think if I don't, I'll always wonder. I guess I'm in too."

Davion, Quinn, Elu, Apollo, and Amalek took the potion. Within an hour, the world began to vibrate.

"This is interesting," said Amalek. Then his avatar disappeared.

"Not sure what I've gotten myself into," said Apollo.

"You'll love it!" said Quinn. "Trust me."

By the second hour, the five of them were gone.

Academy

Davion woke with a start. He'd fallen asleep at his desk again. He raised his head and looked around. This was not his home.

He sat in an opulent-but-tasteful office. The desk before him was huge. A pile of scrolls covered most of it.

Then he noticed his hands. They were gnarled and wrinkled, as if he were old. He looked at them in wonder.

A knock at the door. Davion said, "Yes?"

A young man walked in. He was brown-skinned and handsome, with dark hair and eyes. He couldn't have been older than nineteen. He held a scroll in his hand.

"I have the scroll you asked for, sir," said the youth.

Davion looked up at him in surprise. The youth held out the scroll. Davion took it and unrolled it; it was a treatise on knots. It had his name on it.

"Why does this bear my name?" asked Davion.

The youth shifted uncomfortably. "Isn't this the one you wanted? You asked me to scribe a copy of your work on knots."

"I did?" asked Davion.

"Uh," said the youth, "are you feeling okay, sir?"

"I feel old," said Davion. "There's strange pains in my back and knees I've never felt before." He stood and stretched, then looked at the youth and asked, "What's your name?"

The kid looked upset. "I'm Malachi. I'm your student. Are you okay?"

Davion looked around the office, then looked at Malachi and smiled. "I'm sorry. I'm fine. I think I've traded places with my younger self for a moment."

"I see," said Malachi.

"Will you do me a favor?" asked Davion.

"Anything, sir," said Malachi.

"Pretend I'm a newcomer," said Davion. "Pretend I've never been to this place before. Show me around and tell me all about it."

Malachi looked confused, but agreed.

He took Davion to the library. Davion marveled at the massive collection of scrolls and the thirty-foot ladders needed to retrieve the ones highest up. He stood staring, in awe, for some time.

"Marvelous," he said. "Amazing. To think of so much wisdom collected in one place..."

Malachi took him next to the lecture hall. There was a dais for the lecturer and enough seats for a hundred students. Davion stood at the podium and looked out over the hall, imagining it full of students eager for knowledge.

"This is something," said Davion, his eyes far away. "Who created this place?"

Malachi looked uncomfortable again. "You did, sir. You built this academy."

Davion looked at Malachi with raised eyebrows. "I did this?"

"Yes."

Davion looked out over the empty seats. He imagined himself speaking before a crowd, something that would normally strike terror into his heart. He imagined a crowd of eager learners, and felt somehow less afraid.

He looked at Malachi with soft eyes. "I never imagined doing anything like this. I've always been a solitary man. I've always been afraid of people."

"But," he said, "now that I see it? It makes so much sense. Life isn't just about mastering philosophy. It's about sharing it with others."

"Yes, sir," said Malachi.

"Thank you, Malachi," said Davion. "Thank you for showing me this."

"Sure thing," said Malachi, a look of incredulity on his face.

Theater

Quinn found himself onstage.

He stood in an amphitheater. In a massive half-circle before him stood one hundred thousand audience members. Most were men and women, but he saw cyclopes and dragons as well. He stared at them in awe.

Perform for us, fool! someone whispered in his mind.

Quinn looked for the source. There, nestled among the human audience, sat coiled the dragon from his previous vision. Its scales seemed darker than before. Quinn smiled at the serpent and waved.

Sing, fool! said the dragon. *Your audience is holding their breath.*

"They're all here to see me?" asked Quinn.

The dragon smiled.

Quinn took a deep breath, looked around at the crowd, and threw his hands into the air. The multitude cheered. He began to sing.

He sang a song he did not know; a song he had never heard or sang. It flowed out of him like water, unbidden. It told a tale of warriors far from home, seeking a treasure they would never find. It hit all the right notes: camaraderie, purpose, betrayal, madness, and sorrow. When it ended, the crowd stood silent for a second before bursting with applause.

Quinn's whole face lit up. He sang more songs from nowhere: love songs, comical songs, uplifting songs. He danced, juggled, and did feats of acrobatics. He went on for two hours before he remembered: always leave them wanting more. He came back for only two encores.

It was during the first encore that something clicked in his mind. He focused his will, and every person in the audience saw visions of star folk dancing around him and above them. The crowd gasped with awe.

The dragon whispered to him, *See how easy it is?*

At the end of the second encore, He looked over at the dream-dragon and said, "I could get used to this!"

You will.

Narkonus

Amalek found himself in flight above a barren desert. The setting sun was dim, red, and massive, taking up a fifth of the horizon. Up and to the right from the red giant sat another sun, stark white and smaller than the moon. A handful of lonely, blood-red clouds hovered in the purple sky.

Amalek circled. There was nothing but rock and sand as far as his eyes could see. Having no better plan, he flew towards the setting sun.

After a time, he saw a city in the distance. Gigantic pyramids stretched to the sky, but were dwarfed by a statue of a man hundreds of feet tall. The marble figure wore black armor on its body and a stern visage on its face.

Amalek flew closer. He saw thousands of slaves, bound in chains, worshiping at the feet of the statue. A host of men, cyclopes, and dragons bowed and prayed in fear and awe. The statue seemed to look down upon them with contempt.

Amalek flew close to the statue's face. He wondered which ancient god-king this was supposed to be. The statue's eyes swiveled to look up into his.

"You don't know me?" asked the statue. "I am offended. Your kind have told your livestock all about me. I am the devil they fear."

"Ah," said Amalek. "You must be Narkonus, son of Ram and Luva. He who rejected truth and love in the pursuit of power and domination."

"Correct," said Narkonus. "Now bow and worship me."

Amalek regarded the god with amusement. "I'm fairly certain we invented you."

"Perhaps so," said Narkonus. With blinding speed, he snatched the dragon from the air with his right hand, pinning its wings against its sides and leaving its tail dangling below. The great granite hand raised the serpent's face right up to its eyes. "And yet," it said, "*here I am.*"

"So you are," said Amalek. "Dreams often contain things that do not exist."

Narkonus tightened his grip. Amalek felt pain.

"Are you saying dreams do not exist?" asked Narkonus. "Does your pain exist?"

Amalek struggled to breathe. "Point taken."

"No," said Narkonus. "I don't believe you do get the point. I intend to punish you for your insolence. I hate you most of all."

"Why me?" asked Amalek.

"Because you have forsaken me. You were my greatest pupil: strong, intelligent, competent, and ruthless. You forged an empire that spanned the known world. You may as well have worshiped at my altar."

"And then," said Narkonus, "*you abandoned it.*"

"I fell ill," said Amalek.

Narkonus squeezed. Amalek hissed in agony. "Don't lie to me. I am the father of lies as well as violence. You could have given orders from your mountain home. You could have forced your livestock to build you a great palace there, complete with servants and all the pleasures of life."

Narkonus stared into Amalek's unblinking eyes. "But *you didn't.*"

Amalek took as deep a breath as he could manage and said, "I suppose I grew bored with you."

Narkonus looked at Amalek with disgust. "You're a worm. Nothing. Not worth my concern."

"And yet," said Amalek, "here you are giving me your undivided attention."

Narkonus gave Amalek a cruel, granite smile. "I'm going to show you something," he said, "that you need to see." He paused for dramatic effect. "You won't enjoy it."

Narkonus opened his fist. Rays of heat shot from the statue's eyes. Fire immolated Amalek as he lay, helpless, in the giant's palm.

"I'm burning away your astral body," said Narkonus. "There are easier methods, but I hope this is the most painful. When I'm done, I shall cast you into the mental plane. Follow the tower of abstraction to the top. Try to return here, and I'll make certain you regret it."

Amalek said, in a weak voice, "I regret it already."

The flames consumed him. Amalek found himself without form, in a place with no sensation or language — a place of pure *concept*. Ideas without context. This thing is like this thing; this thing is not like this other thing; this set of things are alike in this way.

He did as bidden, following the trail of ideas upward, from the most concrete to the most abstract, until he reached the ultimate idea.

He found himself in a place of pure calm. A place beyond life or thought. The edge of existence.

After a time, Amalek grew bored with mere existence and ended his.

Ur II

I am Ur.

With My Will and My Word, I created The Law.

The Law gave birth to the world.

The world gave birth to life.

Life gave birth to thought.

Thought gave birth to me.

I am the beginning and the end of existence.

Welcome, My creation. I have a task for you.

You shall aid my prophet in his quest.

You shall use all your power and wisdom to help him forge a new kingdom based on My Law.

I will bless you with even greater power than you now possess.

Zebulun Koh is my right hand. You shall be my left.

The Day After

Amalek woke up laughing.

Zebulun and Sarah did not know this, at first. They heard a series of low, booming hisses in staccato. They left their trances and approached him.

Amalek's pupil opened wide and turned toward them. The hisses grew shorter and less frequent. The dragon's avatar appeared, a big grin on its face.

"Forgive me, friends," said Amalek's avatar. "I doubt you've ever seen a dragon give a good belly-laugh."

"You woke up laughing?" asked Sarah.

"Indeed I did," said Amalek, still beaming.

Amalek whispered into Zebulun's mind. *Tell Ur I will do as I desire. As I command.*

Zebulun looked at Amalek with amusement.

Davion woke next. He stood, stretched, and sat back down before the fire.

"How'd it go?" asked Zebulun.

"I dreamed I was old," said Davion. "I founded a school to teach people philosophy."

"Sounds like a fine dream," said Zebulun.

"It's strange," said Davion. "I never thought about doing anything of the sort. I'm not exactly the most social of people, and I hate being the center of attention. But now, having seen it in a vision? It makes an odd sort of sense."

Zebulun nodded.

Elu woke. Sarah asked, "What did you see?"

"I saw my grandfather," said Elu, his eyes far away. "He said I would join him soon." He looked off toward the rising sun.

Apollo woke. Sarah asked, "What did you see?"

"I saw..." Apollo trailed off. "I saw the passage of time. I saw our old colony, back before the fall. I saw the humans rebel, killing numbers of us or poking out our eyes."

"And then," he said, "I saw into the future. I saw my people rebuild our colony and live in peace with men."

"Interesting," said Sarah.

Quinn woke last. He leapt to his feet, threw up his hands, and declared, "I performed for an audience of one hundred thousand! It was **incredible!**"

"Sounds like a fine use of your talents," said Amalek.

"Oh!" said Quinn. "That reminds me. All that stuff you've been showing me? I think it finally clicked. Everyone, look what I just learned to do!"

Quinn waved his arm in slow, dramatic fashion. The world around them became a cartoon. Bright, primary colors shone out from the rocks, the trees, and the fire.

Each of them looked like caricatures of themselves, their greatest features exaggerated. Zebulun looked eight feet tall. Davion looked bony as a skeleton. Quinn's face appeared even more triangular and impish, and his nose more pointy than usual. Elu appeared to be part bear. Apollo looked thirty feet tall. Amalek looked like a demon, flames rising from his eyes. Save for the primary coloration, Sarah looked the same.

"Impressive!" said Amalek. "All that practice paid off. I told you understanding would come in time, but I must say that I've never seen it happen in such a *short* time. You must be a natural."

"I bet Sarah's mystic brew helped," said Quinn.

"I imagine it did," said Amalek.

Master Mage

"What are we doing here?"

Davion and Amalek stood in a clearing a dozen yards across. Davion looked up at Amalek. The dragon's avatar appeared.

"You need practice," said Amalek.

"Practice?" asked Davion.

"You're a mage," said Amalek. "You've demonstrated that you can control the forces and energies of the physical world. But... you don't know how to fight."

"Fight?"

"We have three mages on our side: myself, the cyclops Helios, and you. We're going to need every one of them. If you've killed two dragons in these woods, I expect them to send an entire wing next time."

"How many is that?" asked Davion.

"Too many," said Amalek. "That's why you need to practice. You need to learn control; to harness your powers in a life-and-death situation."

"I'm not sure how well I can do that," said Davion. "I'm not Zebulun. I don't think I was much help against that dragon we killed out west."

"Zebulun says different," said Amalek, "but it matters not. I can make you better."

"How?"

"Simple," said Amalek. "I'm going to throw spells at you, and you try to deflect them."

"It's not going to kill me or set the forest on fire, is it?" asked Davion.

"No," said Amalek. "I'll use minimum intensity. Once you've mastered deflection, we'll try dispelling. Then we'll work on your offense."

Davion took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's practice."

Amalek's avatar vanished. A thin spark of lightning shot from the dragon's left eye into Davion's right shoulder. Davion gasped in pain.

"Ouch!" he said. "That hurt!"

It has to, whispered Amalek into his mind. *Giving you real motivation to succeed will speed the learning process. It will also help you learn not to flinch when attacked.*

"What?" asked Davion.

On guard! said Amalek.

Another bolt shot forth. Davion managed to deflect this one in time. It hit the ground next to him, causing the grass to sizzle.

Good, said Amalek. Again!

Amalek threw spell after spell at Davion. Davion focused all his will on deflecting them. He succeeded half the time and gasped in pain the other half. After ten minutes, he sat down on the grass, exhausted, and held up his hand.

"Truce," said Davion. "You've already taken a lot out of me."

Amalek's avatar reappeared. "You did better than I expected. You must be excellent at mathematics."

Davion breathed heavy and looked up at him. "I'm always been good with numbers."

"We'll practice more tomorrow — and every day until the day comes. In the meantime, let's try something else: I'll throw a spell into the air, and you try to dispel it. See if you can cancel another's control."

"Alright," said Davion, catching his breath. He stood up. "Ready."

Amalek focused his will. A bright light appeared. It looked like a small sun.

Davion focused his mind on the light. He could feel to ebb and flow of energy all around them. He felt the source of energy for the light and tried to invert it. The light blinked out.

"Well done!" said Amalek. "I'll give you a greater challenge."

A pillar of fire appeared. It began a few feet above the dewy grass and stretched up to the sky.

"Wow," said Davion. "Okay. Let me try."

Davion focused his will on the flame. He did the necessary calculations in his head, channeled the energy, and let it loose. The pillar remained.

"Ugh," said Davion. "Sorry. The power is too high."

"It's fine," said Amalek. "I would have been surprised if you could have dispelled that one. I'm doing a binary search, testing you at the lowest and highest levels until I find your level. We'll get there in time, and then we'll raise it."

Davion nodded. "Thank you, Amalek. I do want to help Sarah and the forest folk."

"You will," said Amalek. "We'll practice more after dinner."

The Magnificent Seven

"Captain."

David looked up from his desk. William stood before him. "Lieutenant. What's up?"

"The sentries spotted dragons on the horizon."

"Plural? How many?" asked David.

"Looks like an entire wing," said William.

David let out a breath. "Man, the king must *really* want these woods."

"Looks that way."

"Alright," said David. "Let's go greet our heroic returning general."

William cracked a smile and followed David out of the tent.

Nahash landed. The other dragons circled above. The general climbed down from the dragons back. David and William bowed.

"I brought reinforcements," said the general.

"So I see," said David.

"We'll need six more dragon-sized tents put up," said the general.

"I'll see to it, sir."

"Good," said the general. "Also see to it that your men are ready to re-enter the forest in three days."

David bowed and left with William. Nahash returned to the sky.

Regulus hovered before him. He had golden scales like his cousin, the king. *What's the plan, general?*

There's no point in taking our army in there, said Nahash. *The natives know the terrain. They could ambush them a hundred times.*

Hassan's dark blue scales looked black under the setting sun. *A forest isn't the best place for a phalanx formation,* he said.

No, said Nahash. *It is not.*

Parvaneh had scales of every color, in a spiral pattern. *What about the previous plan?* he asked. *They've shown they won't stand by while we fell timber. We can make them come to us.*

That didn't work out so well before, said Nahash.

Mahazioth had scales of dull greenish-brown. He said, *It would let us choose the place of battle, at*

least.

But not the time, said Nasrallah. Nasrallah had red scales, like Nahash, but less darkened by age. *They may attack after we retire for the night.*

True, said Talal. His forest green scales showed him to be middle-aged. *The fairies — and the beasts of the wood — harassed the army with numerous skirmishes.*

I still think it's wisest to draw them out, said Regulus. *As you said, we don't know the terrain.*

No, said Nahash. *I'm tired of waiting for them to pop up, damage us, and disappear. We are **dragons** — we are supposed to be the hunters, not the hunted.*

We're taking the fight to them.

Property Rights

Silence reigned around the campfire.

Davion finally broke it. "They have *how many* dragons?"

"Seven," said Gabriel.

"An entire wing," said Zebulun. "All of them military, which means all are mages."

Davion looked pale. "That does not sound good for our side."

"We can take them!" said Quinn with a smile. "As my grandma used to say: we'll show them how the cow eat the cabbage."

Zebulun looked at Sarah. "We should rain them out, for a few days, while we marshal our forces."

"I agree," said Sarah. "It will take time to gather the forest folk warriors. There's still hope the cyclopes will send more help."

"I wouldn't count on it coming soon enough," said Polymachos. "The aristocracy moves with the speed of a lame snail."

Amalek's avatar appeared. "I can take two, maybe three, on my own," said Amalek, "but not all seven. The rest will be up to you."

"We can help against those in the air," said Gabriel. "It will be dangerous. All seven wield spheres of iron."

"No surprise there," said Zebulun.

"Iron?" asked Amalek. No one answered. Gabriel vanished.

Polymachos went back to the cyclopean camp at the foot of the hill. Elu and Apollo went to gather firewood for the night.

"You know, Zebulun," said Sarah. "If you succeed, we'll be happy to have more open relations with the kingdom. The legend of the haunted forest has protected us, but the charade is over. We could use more metalwork tools. We would be happy to trade furs, leather, and timber for them."

Davion looked at Sarah with astonishment. "Timber? I thought the whole point of all this was to prevent them from cutting down your trees?"

"The point was never to keep them from felling a single tree," said Sarah. "The forest is vast. Some degree of pruning can even be beneficial, so long as you don't clear-cut entire swaths, or fell trees that take one thousand years to grow."

"No," she said, "The point was to keep them from felling a single tree *without our permission*. To stake our claim to these lands."

Davion lowered his eyes and said, "Oh." He looked thoughtful.

Amalek's avatar turned to face Sarah. "If you want the dragons of the kingdom to respect your claim to these lands, you must defeat them *utterly*. It must be a complete humiliation."

Sarah looked past his avatar and into his real eyes. "What do you propose?"

Origins

Apollo and the humans sat around the fire to ward off the cold air. The moon was high when Amalek spiraled down from the sky.

"Where'd you go?" asked Quinn.

Amalek's avatar appeared. "For a hunt. I thought I might need the strength, so I found and swallowed a deer. I wanted to have a few days to digest; fighting on a full stomach is unpleasant."

"You swallowed a deer whole?" asked Davion.

"That's how serpents eat," said Amalek. "I did have to trim the buck's antlers first."

Amalek turned to Zebulun. "How long were you in the army?"

"Twenty-three years," said Zebulun.

"You were fourteen when they took you?" asked Amalek.

Zebulun nodded.

"When was your first battle?" asked Amalek.

"When I was sixteen," said Zebulun.

"You kill anyone in that first battle?" asked Amalek.

"I think so," said Zebulun, "but it's tough to say. In the midst of melee, you hit someone and they go down. Maybe you hit them again for good measure, if you're not sure. Maybe you killed them, maybe you just knocked them out."

"How did you feel?" asked Amalek.

"Terrified," said Zebulun, "at the start. I'd had two years of training. I knew what I was doing, and had confidence in my brothers in arms. That didn't stop the animal fear."

"But you overcame it," said Amalek.

"So to speak," said Zebulun. "I learned, that day, that the thinking part of myself wasn't the one in charge. I watched, helpless, as the beast I dwell within butchered men to save myself and my friends."

"I've read about this," said Davion, his eyes on the fire. "Survivors of traumatic situations often say they felt like they were watching themselves from the outside. They felt like they had no control over their actions."

"Right," said Zebulun. "The part of you that you think of as *you* is not the part who decides and acts. It's just an advisor."

"That's a terrifying thought," said Davion.

Quinn smirked at Davion. "Does it make you see yourself from the outside?"

Davion turned his head toward Quinn without raising his eyes, chuckled, and said, "Not yet."

"You've seen much combat," said Amalek. "Struck down many men."

"I have," said Zebulun.

"You advanced quickly?" asked Amalek. "When did you make captain?"

"I made corporal at seventeen," said Zebulun, "sergeant at nineteen, lieutenant at twenty-three, and captain at twenty-nine."

"So you've been leading men for twenty years," said Amalek.

"Right," said Zebulun.

"Good," said Amalek. "The leader of the attack should be experienced."

They sat in silence for a time.

"What about yourself, Amalek?" asked Zebulun. "How did you rise to power?"

"My story mirrors your own," said Amalek. "My father was a general in the army. He fell in battle against a kingdom that no longer exists. It was a meaningless death in a minor skirmish."

"Our house fell out of favor. Another dragon took our lands. I was only one hundred and fifty-one years old, but I was shrewd and ambitious. Having few options, I joined the army as well."

"Turns out I had a talent for magery. I turned the tide in many battles. Within a few decades, my reputation was such that I was able to depose the king and take his place. I was one hundred and ninety-nine."

"Then you expanded," said Zebulun.

"Yes," said Amalek. "I had grand designs, back then. With clever use of force, deception, and diplomacy, I managed to double the size of my kingdom by my three-hundred and seventh birthday. At age four hundred and one, I ruled the entire known world, save for a few of the island kingdoms. I conquered the last of those at four-hundred and forty-three."

"Then I fell ill," said Amalek, "and I left."

"So no one in the kingdom has seen you for almost two hundred years?" asked Davion.

"Correct," said Amalek. "I wonder how many of my friends and allies remain."

"You think they'll help us?" asked Quinn.

"If they're still my friends and allies," said Amalek. "The upcoming battle will do much to determine that. A dragon's *friends* are limited to those who he believes can benefit him."

He looked around at the six of them. "We have to win."

Ruinous Battle

After days of rain, Nahash led his wing of dragons to Sarah's camp. It sat abandoned.

Hassan spotted the remains of the cyclopean camp at the base of the hill.

Nahash turned to Nasrallah and Talal. *Can you follow the tracks?*

Easily, said Nasrallah. *The ground is wet, and these giants of yours have ten times the mass of a man.*

I think these footprints might be permanent, said Talal.

They followed the tracks. They led north, deeper into the woods and hills. They followed them for hours, with Nasrallah and Talal often landing to see which way to go next.

The sun was low in the sky when the clouds rolled in. Bolts of lightning scattered across the cloud ceiling to peals of thunder.

Didn't you tell us a dragon died flying into a thunderstorm? asked Parvaneh.

Yep, said Nahash. *Of course, it was pouring rain and howling winds. This looks to be a dry storm.*

I'm sure that makes it better, said Mahazioth, without a hint of sarcasm.

Let's hope, said Nahash.

They reached the cyclopean ruins at sunset. The full moon rose opposite the setting sun. The lightning grew more frequent and violent. Seven bonfires burned on top of buildings in the city.

What do you suppose that means? asked Hassan.

They're signaling us, said Nahash. *They want a fight.*

So this is a trap, said Mahazioth.

Yep, said Nahash. *Let's go spring it. Stay at least a hundred yards up.*

The dragons flew over the ruined city. The full moon rose in the sky, painting the black clouds above with its pale light. As they approached the center, a shadow rose from the roof of the largest building and hovered before them.

What is that? asked Nahash.

That's one of us, said Hassan. *A dragon with scales so black I can barely see him.*

He must be old, said Parvaneh.

They flew closer. The old dragon whispered into their minds.

Greetings, fellow dragons, he said. *I am Amalek.*

Amalek who? asked Nahash.

The Amalek.

Nahash stared at the dragon in shock. *It **is** you.*

You remember me? asked Amalek. *I'm flattered.*

I remember you from two hundred years ago. Your scales still had some red in them, then.

Yes, said Amalek, *I have grown quite old. Yet, I feel young; two hundred years of hunting in the western wilds has done wonders for my vigor.*

Has it been you all along? asked Nahash. *You're behind all of this?*

Oh, no, said Amalek. *I've only just arrived. My new friends did a fine job of repelling your assaults before today. Now that I am with them, I think they might have a chance to defeat an entire wing of dragons.*

I know you're powerful, said Nahash, *but do you really believe you can best all seven of us?*

Amalek gave him a draconic smile. *Watch me.*

A host of star folk appeared. They flanked the wing of dragons on all sides.

You're friends with the fairies? asked Nahash.

I am, said Amalek. *And the cyclopes, and the men. I intend to defend their claim to these lands. I offer you the chance to surrender; leave those iron spheres, and you may go in peace.*

I have nothing left to go back to, said Nahash. *The king made it clear that he would not tolerate failure a third time.*

Ah, said Amalek. *A pity. I guess it's a fight to the death for you, then?*

I guess so, said Nahash.

So be it! said Amalek.

Amalek focused his will. The world went dark for each member of the wing. The seven froze and began to fall.

Nahash cursed to himself. He focused his will, expended far more energy than he wanted to, and snapped out of the spell. He was thirty yards up.

He righted himself and looked for the others. Regulus, Hassan, Mahazioth, and Nasrallah shook the sorcery off and remained aloft. Parvaneh and Talal kept falling.

Nahash whispered, *Hassan! Mahazioth! With me!* He led them towards Amalek. *Regulus and Nasrallah: you two kill as many of those fairies as you can.*

Nahash, Hassan, and Mahazioth all fired rays of heat at Amalek. He deflected the spells and responded with a massive bolt of lightning that shocked all three to the bones of their spines.

*How are his spells **that** powerful?* asked Hassan.

He's using up energy fast, said Nahash. We just have to wear him down.

Regulus and Nasrallah found themselves swarmed by fairies. The star folk threw all manner of spells at them — heat, cold, lightning, and waves of pure force. The dragons deflected the spells as best they could and sent their iron weapons swinging through the enemy in wide arcs.

Parvaneh and Talal hit the ground in separate locations.

Nahash, Hassan, and Mahazioth circled Amalek. Hassan hit Amalek with a bolt of lightning. Amalek look at him, smiled, and sucked all the heat from the air around him. Hassan's blood ran cold as arctic temperatures surrounded his body. He gasped and fell to Earth.

Mahazioth hit Amalek's wing with a ray of heat. It burst into flame, briefly, before Amalek extinguished it with frost.

Nahash slung his iron sphere at Amalek. It shot toward him at incredible speed only to stop a few yards from his face and fly back towards Nahash. Nahash dodged.

Regulus hit one of the fairies with iron. It vanished with a flash of static and a loud buzz. Nasrallah hit another two. Rays of heat seared their wings and tails as the other star folk zapped them with spells.

Talal rose up on his coils. Some of his ribs felt broken, as did two of the spines in his right wing. Tattooed men poured into the square where he landed. Behind them came one-eyed giants bearing massive weapons.

The men and cyclopes fired arrows at Talal. He deflected the volley with a wave of force from his mind, then knocked down the wave of forest folk with another. Cyclopes closed on him with twelve-foot spears.

Parvaneh managed to shake his daze and slow his fall just before hitting the ground. He was bruised, but uninjured. He lifted his wings to take flight, then heard a small human voice.

A little man with a pointy nose poked his head from around a building. He smiled at the dragon, waved, and said "Hi! I'm Quinn."

Parvaneh gave the little man a blank stare.

Quinn strolled out from behind the building. "We don't have to fight, you know. We could be friends. I'm already friends with one dragon."

Parvaneh focused. A ray of heat shot from his brow into the man before him. It seemed to go right through.

Quinn looked back at the ray scorching the stone street, then back at Parvaneh. "Sorry, that won't work. You see, I'm not really here." Quinn pointed to his right. "I'm over there."

The serpent looked at him, then turned to where he pointed. He saw Quinn over there. He looked back to where he had been and saw no one.

What sorcery is this? asked the dragon.

"It is sorcery!" said Quinn. "Amalek taught me."

Parvaneh decided to ignore the interloper and took flight. Five seconds later, he smashed his head into the ground. How? He he had been headed upward.

"It's opposite day!" said Quinn. "Down is up and up is down."

Fool! said Parvaneh. He focused his will and tried to cast off the spell. He found it more difficult than anticipated.

Terrible pain wracked the dragon's body. He felt like he was on fire. *I see*, he whispered to Quinn. *Using sorcery to make me think I'm burning? That's our oldest trick.*

"That's not me," said Quinn. "You are *totally* on fire."

Parvaneh tried to hit Quinn with another heat ray. Quinn vanished. A voice behind the dragon said, "I'm over here now!"

The dragon looked back and saw Quinn behind him. *I'm not falling for that again*, he said. He turned away and focused on breaking the illusion. He felt a sharp pain as a sling stone bounced off the back of his skull.

Hassan, bruised but alive, stretched his wings, still shivering. He surrounded himself with a cushion of hot air. A moment later, a cyclops walked into view from behind a building. He wore armor, but did not appear armed.

"Surrender!" said the cyclops.

To you? asked Hassan. *You must be delusional.*

The cyclops threw a bolt of lightning at Hassan. Hassan deflected it.

A mage? asked Hassan. *Good. I feared there would be no sport in killing you.*

High above, Nahash and Mahazioth flanked Amalek, circling him on opposite sides. Amalek deflected their latest barrage, then hit Mahazioth with a powerful blast of light and sound.

Ugh, whispered Mahazioth to Nahash. *I'm blind and deaf.*

Just maneuver, said Nahash. *I'll distract him.*

Nahash focused his mind and summoned a vortex of wind around Amalek, pinning him in place.

Nice one, said Amalek. He focused his will and dispelled the vortex.

Regulus and Nasrallah had managed to hit thirteen of the star folk with iron, almost halving their number. Both were covered in wounds from the fairies' spells.

Gabriel spoke to Quetzal and Bluebonnet with light-speak. *Ready?* he asked.

Yes, they flashed in unison.

Gabriel positioned himself above the battling serpents. Quetzal placed himself below Gabriel.

Bluebonnet hovered below the dragons.

A huge bolt of lightning shot from the clouds above. It went through Gabriel, hit Quetzal, and split into three bolts, one each for Nahash, Regulus, and Nasrallah. Nahash and Regulus managed to dodge; Nasrallah did not. He died mid-air and fell. The bolts shot through Bluebonnet and down to Earth.

Five cyclopes closed on Talal. He focused his will and hit them with sorcery. Each writhed in pain as their bodies twisted and contorted themselves against their will. Talal slashed at the nearest with his claws, killing him.

Three more cyclopes came at him from behind. He slashed one's throat; the other two stabbed him with their spears. He shattered the spears with a wave of force and killed another with his claws.

Parvaneh broke through Quinn's illusion and found himself on fire. He surrounded himself with frost, dousing the flames. Before him stood two men. One was tall, for a man, and held a sword. The other was tall, but less so, and gaunt. He looked unarmed.

A sword? asked Parvaneh. *Really?*

"It's killed one dragon," said Zebulun. He advanced on the serpent.

Helios dueled with Hassan. He fought defensively, focusing more on deflecting Hassan's spells than on throwing his own.

Not bad! said Hassan. *Now it will be a pleasure to kill you.*

"I've been practicing for a hundred years," said Helios.

Amateur, said Hassan. *I've been at it for three hundred.*

The serpent lunged forward and slapped Helios with the back side of his left wing, knocking him for a loop. Hassan circled around and over him, crushing the cyclops with his body, as constrictors do. Helios gasped for air. He tried to focus, to cast a spell, but he couldn't breath.

Mahazioth banked and swerved, still blind. He occasionally felt the sear of heat or the shock of lightning from one of the star folk. As his vision cleared, he saw that he had fallen to just twenty yards up.

A seven-foot arrow pierced his guts. He hissed in pain and rage.

He whispered to Nahash. *I'm hit. I have to land.*

Go, said Nahash.

Nahash turned to face Amalek. The two hovered in place, thirty yards apart, and stared.

It's not too late to surrender, said Amalek.

I have nothing left to lose, said Nahash.

You could switch sides, said Amalek. *We could use a general of your power and experience.*

The king may be a jackass, said Nahash, but I still have my honor.

Very well, said Amalek. I respect that. Fancy a duel, then?

Nahash responded with lightning. Amalek grinned.

Regulus nailed three more star folk with his ball of iron, but their barrage of spells had taken their toll. He felt his power waning.

Mahazioth landed on the largest building below, a behemoth of granite and marble. He pulled the giant arrow from his form with a hiss and seared the entry and exit wounds with fire. A cyclops stepped from the roof's shadows and fired two arrows at the dragon in rapid succession. The dragon swerved his coils out of the way and gave the cyclops a hard look. Men with bows ran into the square below and aimed at the serpent.

I am going to kill every last one of you, said Mahazioth.

Talal threw up a field of force to deflect the forest folk's arrows. He whirled and blocked the remaining cyclops's sword with his claws, then sent the giant flying backward into a wall with a wave of force. The cyclops crumpled.

Men swarmed from the streets around him and stabbed at him with their spears. He blocked, dodged, fainted, and killed men with fire until Emet drove his spear through the serpent's heart. Talal fell dead.

Parvaneh set the men before him on fire. Flames roared up for a moment, then subsided. The men were unburned.

More sorcery? asked Parvaneh.

"No," said Zebulun. "The blessing of Ur."

Zebulun slashed at the serpent with his sword. It slithered its coils aside.

Davion hit the dragon square with ball lightning, stunning him.

Another sling stone bounced off the dragon's skull. The dragon whirled its head around, looked at Quinn, and said, *Really?*

Hassan slowly squeezed the life from Helios. The cyclops tried to accept his fate, to make peace with the Eye of Heaven before his death. Then he watched as large bear of a man leapt from a nearby building and pinned the serpent to the ground with his spear.

The dragon hissed in pain, a deep bass sound. He crossed his wings around the attacker, then flung them apart, his claws gouging out huge chunks of flesh. Blood fell like rain. Elu fell to the ground.

An arrow pierced Hassan's guts. He hissed again and looked up; there, on the building, stood a dark-skinned woman with a bow in her hand. She stared at him with hatred and fired three more arrows in rapid succession.

Hassan deflected the arrows with his mind and threw out a tentacle of pure force. It wrapped around the woman, immobilizing her. She struggled for breath.

A shadow jumped from another building onto Hassan's back. It dug into his flesh with four sets of claws. Before the dragon could react to the pain, Kulth-Ing pierced his skull with his powerful jaguar jaw, driving his fangs into the serpent's brain. Hassan fell dead.

Mahazioth knocked Apollo off his feet with a wave of force, then spawned a ring of white-hot flame around his perch. Men of the forest folk screamed as they burned. The rest fell back. Apollo stood, took aim, and fired more arrows. Mahazioth knocked them out of the air and shot a column of flame in his direction. Apollo managed to get out of the way in time.

Parvaneh found himself upside-down in a cartoon. Legions of fairies danced around him, singing a jaunty tune:

*Oh, I'm just a little dragon from the kingdom to the west,
Because I am a dragon, I know that I'm the best
I never thought that men could be any threat to me
but no one told me one of them had learned some sorcery!*

Parvaneh stared in amazement. He felt lightning rip through his body, but could see no attacker. He focused his will, channeled his power, and threw off the spell just in time to see Zebulun chop off his left wing with his sword. Parvaneh gasped. He fell unconscious from blood loss within seconds.

Men of the forest scaled the walls of the building where Mahazioth took refuge. He threw a spell, creating a hemisphere of force to keep them out. Push as they might, they could not break through. Mahazioth sent eleven rays of heat beyond the barrier, killing every man who couldn't dodge in time.

An arrow went through Mahazioth's wing. He hissed, spun around, and focused his mind. Apollo's bow shattered into splinters. Apollo drew his dagger; it was the size of a man's sword.

Amalek and Nahash dueled high above the fray. Amalek calmly deflected all of Nahash's attacks.

*Are you toying with me, **emperor**?* asked Nahash.

Not at all, said Amalek. *I'm merely letting you expend all of your energy before I finish you.*

Nahash opened a portal with his mind and flew into it. He emerged right on top of Amalek. He whipped his tail around his enemy and squeezed, then slashed at him with his claws.

I may not be able to best you in magery or sorcery, said Nahash, *but I bet I can beat you with good, old-fashioned violence. **Old snake.***

I welcome it! said Amalek.

The two wrestled in the sky. Each alternated between flapping their wings to maintain altitude and using them to slash at the other. Both were soon covered in bleeding wounds.

This is invigorating! whispered Amalek.

Glad you're enjoying it, said Nahash.

Nahash had his body wrapped around Amalek twice. Without warning, Amalek took his dangling

tail and wrapped it around Nahash's neck. He then wrapped his wings around Nahash's body, right above the wings, and snapped his spine. Nahash went limp.

You have killed me, he said.

Not yet, said Amalek. *You may yet live*.

Why would I want to live as a cripple? asked Nahash.

You don't have to, said Amalek. *I have a friend who can fix this*.

Amalek held Nahash's limp body aloft with his tail and looked at Regulus. The angels halted their assault. Regulus stared up at him.

Surrender, said Amalek.

Regulus stared at Amalek for a good minute. He looked around at the fifteen fairies who still surrounded him. He saw no other dragons in the sky.

He looked at Amalek. *I surrender*.

Amalek and Regulus flew down to where Mahazioth stood. He had lain waste to numerous forest folk. He bled from a slash across his belly. Apollo lay prone on the ground before him, burned but breathing.

It's over, Mahazioth, said Regulus. *Nahash is beaten. Others are dead. I've surrendered*.

Mahazioth looked at Nahash's limp body, then looked at Regulus with disbelief. *We lost?*

We did.

Mahazioth surrendered.

Everyone gathered before the ancient temple in the center of the city. Zebulun and Sarah healed everyone they could with what energy they had left.

Amalek spoke to Nahash. *My friend Zebulun can heal your paralysis*, he said. *So long as you swear never to trespass in these lands again. You can even join us, if you like. We plan to take the kingdom. We could use your help*.

Nahash thought for some time. *I don't think I can help you fight Aurelius Antipater*, he said. *But I don't work for him anymore, so I'm happy to promise never to return to this accursed place. This has been the worst mission ever*.

Amalek laughed. *Dealing with the star folk must have been the height of frustration*.

You have no idea, said Nahash.

Amalek turned to Regulus and Mahazioth. *You two are free to leave. Return to the kingdom. Tell the king what happened here*.

But first, said Amalek, *we're going to need your balls*.

Aftermath IV

Days passed.

Regulus and Mahazioth surrendered their iron spheres, sent the soldiers and woodcutters home, and flew away.

The forest folk took their forty-one dead braves to the top of the sacred mountain for their sky-burial. The birds and beasts of the forest would dine on their flesh, then nourish the forest folk in turn, making the cycle complete.

Apollo, Helios, and the four remaining cyclopean hoplites took the remains of their fallen comrades—including their leader, Polymachos—and returned to their world to bury them with honors in their homeland.

Zebulun healed Nahash. Amalek and Nahash cremated the remains of Hassan, Parvaneh, Nasrallah, and Talal. They scattered their ashes in the sky.

Zoya wept alone in darkness, far from the fires. Emet found her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know I'm not supposed to be womanly."

Emet gave her a soft smile. "I'll overlook it just this once."

He looked up at the waning moon and sighed. "Elu died defending his people. He fought a dragon for us. All his sins are forgiven. We will honor and remember him."

Zoya placed her hand on his. Emet gave her shoulder a squeeze, then turned and left. Many more needed comfort.

Bound in Irons

"Are you ready?"

Amalek's avatar stood before Davion with his hand placed on his real body. Zebulun had shown Davion the ways and means of Amalek's harness, but Davion still blanched at the thought of flying.

"I'm afraid I'll be ill," said Davion.

"I'll be gentle," said Amalek. "No dives or barrel-rolls for you."

"Are you sure we can't do this on the ground?" asked Davion.

"Not unless you wish to set the forest ablaze," said Amalek.

Davion sighed, took a few deep breaths, and said, "Okay." He climbed into the harness. Zebulun handed him a sack.

"Ugh," said Davion. "It's heavy."

"Why lift with your arms, mage?" asked Amalek. "Lift with your mind."

"Oh," said Davion. "Right. I forget, sometimes."

Amalek's avatar grinned at him. "Hold on tight," he said, and vanished.

Amalek took to the air.

Davion felt his stomach lurch. A wave of panic began to form as the Earth fell away before them. He gripped the ropes of the harness until his knuckles turned white.

Amalek eventually leveled off. *You can open your eyes now*, he whispered. *Just don't look down.*

Davion opened his eyes. They flew at least one thousand feet above the ground. "It's like looking off the top of a mountain in all directions," he said.

We'll fly for a time so you can grow accustomed to the motion, said Amalek. *It's like growing accustomed to riding a horse, or being on a ship.*

"Alright," said Davion. He still felt queasy.

Amalek flew for an hour, soaring on rising waves of warm air. He then stopped and hovered in place, slowly flapping his wings.

Zebulun blessed you? asked Amalek.

"He did," said Davion.

You may as well use all of it. From what the star folk say, we need to do more than just melt these things; we need to vaporize them.

"What will that do to the forest below?"

The metal will cool and solidify rapidly, then rain little drops of iron into the forest below, nourishing the soil. We need the initial reaction to be energetic enough that no large clumps of iron remain intact.

"Alright," said Davion. "Let's do this. It's the least I can do for the star folk, after all they've taught me."

Toss them in front of me. I'll move them to a safe distance and hold them in place.

Davion removed the iron spheres from the sack, one by one, and tossed them into the air before them with his mind. Amalek caught them with his. When all eight spheres floated before them, Amalek sent them racing to five hundred yards away. They hovered in the air.

It's difficult, at this range. Take your time aiming.

Davion took a deep breath and focused his mind. He sensed the energy all around them, and the spiritual energy Zebulun had granted him. He channeled said energy into physical form, triple-checked his math, and sent eight beams of intense radiation towards the hovering spheres.

There was a sound like steam coming from a pot when the lid is lifted. The iron spheres turned into vapor. Even at their distance, Davion felt the wave of heat wash over him. After the metal cloud faded and fell to Earth, a score of angels appeared.

Michael manifested before them. "Davion! You have freed us?"

"I have," said Davion. "This is Amalek. He helped."

"The dragon is your friend?"

Davion paused for a moment before saying, "Yes. He is my friend."

"Then he is our friend too. We are grateful to be free. Our kind can be trapped in iron for thousands of years."

Happy to make your acquaintance, said Amalek.

"I never expected to befriend one of your kind."

*And I never expected to **meet** one of your kind, much less befriend one. Life is full of surprises.*

Live Not By Lies

Zebulun, Davion, Quinn, Sarah, and Amalek sat around the fire in Sarah's camp. The waning moon sat above the horizon. Owls hooted in the darkness.

Amalek's avatar appeared. "I think it's time we spoke about what comes next."

Zebulun looked at Amalek. "Agreed."

Amalek turned to Sarah. "I think it's safe to say that the dragons will have more respect for you and yours, from this point on. I don't think they'll try you again soon."

Sarah nodded. "But they will try again."

"Yes," said Amalek, "eventually."

"Unless," he said, turning back to Zebulun, "we conquer a kingdom."

"You have some ideas?" asked Zebulun.

"In fact, I do," said Amalek. "I'm going to see an old friend. She is the lady of a vast estate along the Rose river, right on the northern border."

"Was she your girlfriend?" asked Quinn.

Amalek chuckled. "Not as such. We did have *relations*, but nothing serious. She was two hundred years my senior, but managed to seduce me with her power."

"She sorcery-ed you?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Amalek. "I admired her strength. She's one of the few females of my species who managed to master magery. She enforces her own claims. Believe me, males treat her with respect."

"She sounds cool," said Quinn.

"Cool she is," said Amalek. "She will enlighten me as to the current state of politics in the kingdom. She can tell me what support I might expect if I try to claim the throne."

"But you're gonna claim it for Zeb, right?" asked Quinn.

"Of course," said Amalek, "but the throne will be far easier to take if they think I'm taking it for myself. Some of those who swore oaths to me four hundred years ago still live. I see no reason they need to know otherwise."

"Live not by lies," said Zebulun.

"Hm?" Amalek asked. "Is that some soldier's proverb?"

"You could call it that," said Zebulun. "It's something an old veteran said to me once. We had just come back from battle. I'd lost friends. We were drinking hard when I cursed the enemy for their barbarity."

"He said to me, *live not by lies*. He told me the enemy soldiers were no different than us. He said our leaders made them out to be demons to make it easier for us to kill them."

Zebulun looked up into Amalek's real face. "I don't want to forge the Kingdom of Ur based on deception."

Amalek's avatar laughed. "Oh, my dear Zebulun," he said. "I need not lie at all. I'll tell every dragon that I intend to place you on the throne. What they will *hear* is that you are my new favorite pet, and I intend to use you as my front. They'll wonder why I brought it up at all."

Quinn and Davion chuckled.

Zebulun nodded, mirth in his eyes. "I guess that's okay, then."

"Of course," said Amalek, "all this assumes the old lady is still alive."

Damrina Ashurina

I don't believe it.

Damrina Ashurina sat atop a pile of silk pillows in her chambers. Her once-turquoise scales had long since faded to black. Two mountain lions sat lazily against her body.

It's true, said Amalek. I have returned.

Everyone thought you were dead, said Damrina. I figured you had been assassinated while out hunting.

*Really, dear? asked Amalek. Who could assassinate **me**?*

A group of us could ambush you, she said. You're not invincible, you know. Damrina stretched her wings. I don't fly much, these days. Leaves me too sore.

Amalek looked at the cougars. I see you're still a cat lady.

Oh yes, she said. I do love felines.

You would have loved the black jaguar I met in the forest, said Amalek.

*She looked him in the eye. Amalek, where have you **been** all this time?*

Out west, said Amalek. Flying, swimming, hunting, wrestling with giant animals. That kind of thing.

Why on Earth? she asked. You had everything. You were emperor of the whole world — all the parts of it that matter, anyway. Why would you leave?

Ennui, said Amalek. Melancholy. I acquired the tropical lung rot. I realized I would die young, and everything I worked for would have been for nothing. So I left.

Falling ill made you philosophical? she asked.

I suppose so, he said.

But you didn't die, she said. Here you are.

I went to a mountain surrounded by desert, he said. It was high and dry enough to keep the rot at bay for two hundred years. Then I met a man named Zebulun Koh, who healed my affliction.

I know that name, she said. The rubes keep talking about this giant who wanders around healing people and preaching some new religion. I imagined him to be a sorcerer of some kind.

He is not, said Amalek. He can heal. And he has power. I intend to put him on the throne.

Damrina gently stroked one of the cougars with her claws. He's your new favorite pet, then?

He's my new favorite something, said Amalek.

So you intend to take the throne? she asked. You plan to rebuild your vast empire?

Not at all, he said. This kingdom is large enough. My new challenge is to forge a small kingdom that is strong and prosperous enough to withstand the empires of the world.

Sounds like an impossible task, said Damrina.

You know I love a challenge, said Amalek.

I know you do, she said with a sly, draconic grin. That's why I chose you, all those years ago.

How is that whelp I sired? he asked.

He's doing well, she said. He's a minister to one of the princes of Harlan. Not that he ever comes to see his mother and thank her for raising him to be strong.

Our kind never thank anyone, said Amalek. Not sincerely.

A little flattery and insincerity goes a long way, said Damrina.

Amalek played with one of the cougars, teasing it with his claws. What is the political situation in the kingdom, these days? What happened after I left? I've heard some things, but you've watched it happen.

You should be flattered, said Damrina. Dragons feared you enough that it took several weeks for anyone else to assert a claim to the throne. When one did, they all did. Civil war broke out, and the empire fell apart. Local and regional authorities took over. Antipater forged this kingdom out of a few warring states.

I do not remember him, said Amalek.

He was young, during your reign, she said. He had no real wealth or rank, but he had ambition. Much like yourself, in the old days — except that you had grace. King Aurelius is a sourpuss.

He is not beloved by all, then? asked Amalek.

No, said Damrina. The trades hate him for being an imp. The imps think he's been expanding too slowly; it is this pressure that has him obsessed with building the world's biggest navy. But he is feared enough to keep most in line, most of the time. He has no real challengers.

Had, said Amalek. Damrina smiled.

How many of those who swore oaths to me still live? asked Amalek. How many would uphold those oaths?

*Some of the older ones are gone, said Damrina, but most are still around. I suspect around a third of the trades would support you for the sake of their oaths and honor. Others will say their oaths were nullified when you abandoned them to their fate, but may still support you **if** you can convince them of two things: one, that you have gone trad, and want no empire; two, that you can win. None of them will back a hopeless cause.*

I suppose the imps are a lost cause, said Amalek. I don't plan to expand. I may be able to win some over by promising to make them rich, but likely not many.

Likely not, she said.

I should be able to get the rats on my side, he said. I plan to end the charade.

You do? asked Damrina. *What has gotten into you?*

Amalek thought for a moment before replying. *Religion.*

Damrina laughed.

What about yourself, my dear? asked Amalek. *Will you support me?*

Amalek, my dear, said Damrina, *You **always** have my support.*

Happy to hear it, said Amalek. *Will you call a conclave?*

Davion Questions The Law

Davion and Zebulun sat alone by the fire after lunch. Sarah had gone to gather herbs. Quinn ran off to play with the star folk.

"Zeb," said Davion. "I've been thinking."

Zebulun looked up at Davion. "What's on your mind?"

Davion said, "After that last battle — when we somehow managed to defeat *seven* dragons — I began to think that we might actually win. You might really become king. It sounds crazy to me, even now, but I think I'm starting to believe."

"Glad to hear it," said Zebulun.

"Let's say we do win," said Davion. "Let's say you ascend to the throne. What kind of law do you plan to have?"

"The Law of Ur," said Zebulun. "Love others as yourself."

"Right," said Davion. "I get that. That maxim is universal enough that it seems like a great basis for *personal* morality, but I wonder if its enough to run a kingdom."

"How do you mean?" asked Zebulun.

"Well," said Davion. "For example: a man who murders another has obviously broken the law, right?"

"Right."

"So," Davion continued, "has a man who steals from another."

"Yes."

"And a man who refuses to save someone's life," said Davion, "when he could do so at no cost to himself: he's also guilty."

"I'd say so."

"But," said Davion, "Should all three of those men suffer the same penalty? The same punishment?"

"I'd say no."

"It seems to me," said Davion, "that there are *degrees* of violation of the law. Some violations are worse — some far worse — than others."

"Seems so."

"I think you may need to spell this out," said Davion. "*Love others as yourself* is a fine law, but it doesn't tell judges or enforcers how to deal with those who break it. This could lead to arbitrary punishment. I think we need something a bit more detailed — something that spells out the rights and duties of every person. Some document to give guidance on how to apply the law."

"That's a good idea," said Zebulun. He stirred the coals for a moment, causing flames to lick the new log on the fire, then looked Davion in the eye. "Will you write it?"

Davion raised his eyebrows in surprise. He looked down at the fire, thought for a moment, then looked up at Zebulun and said, "Okay."

Conclave

Thirty-one dragons assembled at the peak of a pink granite dome in the hill country west of the capital. A thirty-foot stone wall ringed the base of the hill. The wall had no gates. Land-bound creatures were not welcome, in this place.

Aurelius Antipater sat coiled in the center, his head held high. Regulus and Mahazioth flanked him on his right and left. A bonfire burned to ward off the cold of night. The crescent moon sat high in the sky, smiling down at them.

Damrina Ashurina rose up and stretched her wings out wide, asking for every dragon's attention. *Thank you all for coming, she whispered to the crowd, especially on such short notice. I apologize for any inconvenience.*

Aurelius gave her a blank look. *Why have you called us here? What business demands our immediate attention?*

Not in the mood for formalities, I see, said Damrina. *Very well. I'm informed of a new threat to the kingdom.* She looked at Aurelius. *To you in particular.*

What is this new threat? asked the dragon king.

An old friend of mine, said Damrina. *He has returned. He speaks of taking the throne for himself.*

Who is this old friend? asked Aurelius.

Damrina smiled. *I'll let him speak for himself.*

She looked at the sky and focused her mind. A bright blue-white light appeared a hundred yards above them. It shone brighter than the full moon. The assembled dragons looked around in all directions.

There, whispered Mahazioth to Aurelius and Regulus. *To the east.*

The king looked. In the distance, barely visible in the night sky, something approached. It grew larger as it closed the distance, but no brighter. Only when it was within half a mile could the assembly recognize it as one of theirs; a dragon with scales so black they could scarcely see him.

The newcomer circled the granite peak twice before he spiraled down to greet them. He coiled up next to Damrina, placed his wing around her, and looked over the crowd. *Greetings,* he said. He looked at Aurelius. *I am Amalek.*

Regulus told me you had returned, said Aurelius.

Yes, said Amalek. *The prodigal snake returns. I would first like to thank Damrina Ashurina for calling this conclave. I see some familiar faces here, and some new. I look forward to getting to know all of you, in time.* Amalek gave them a draconic grin.

Amalek looked over the dragons. Most sat stone still, faces blank, but he knew whispers were flying between minds at a frantic pace. He sat back and let his words sink in.

Damrina says you want my throne, said Aurelius.

Yes! said Amalek. I do. I plan to place Zebulun Koh on it.

The crowd sat silent, but Amalek could sense the murmuring behind the blank faces.

I suppose you think I'll abdicate, said Aurelius. To flee in fear at the mere presence of the mighty Amalek?

I hope not, said Amalek. I'm told you're a better challenge than that.

Is that what I am? asked Aurelius. A challenge?

*The real challenge, said Amalek, is to create a small kingdom strong enough to thwart empires. **That** is my new dream. You are simply in the way.*

You plan to make war on me, then? asked Aurelius.

Oh, no, said Amalek. I couldn't do that. I have no army, for one, and I promised Zebulun no war.

*No, said Amalek. I want a **quiet** revolution.*

You think you can overthrow this regime without a fight? asked Aurelius.

Amalek grinned. There's no need for widespread bloodshed and destruction. We could duel for the throne, you and I. We can settle matters right here, if you're willing.

I'm no fool, said Aurelius. Regulus and Mahazioth told me about your battle. Perhaps I could best you, but I see no reason to stake my throne on it when you have no way to depose me.

*You **are** intelligent! said Amalek. A shame. I suppose I'll have to think of something else.*

Good luck with that, whispered Aurelius to Amalek.

Be seeing you, Amalek whispered back.

Zebulun Dreams of Ur IV

Zebulun found himself back in the verdant valley. The air was cold. The great oak sat barren of leaves. Zebulun walked up the ruined staircase.

The stars of the winter triangle bounded the barren oak. As he stared into the center, a voice came from the stars, through the tree, and into his heart.

"I am Ur. You have gathered all the allies you need. You have defended the eastern wood from the dragons. You have done well."

"You will spread the word to the people, near and far: come to the capital city of Azulan on the eve of the new year. Come to witness a miracle. Come to experience the birth of a new kingdom and era."

"You will lead your people there to witness."

Zebulun bowed. "I will do as you command."

Politics by Other Means

Amalek returned to Eastwood and told the others of his experience at the conclave.

"I went to see Damrina again, afterwards," said Amalek's avatar. "She says half the trads are ready to support me, while the other half want to wait and see. The reactionaries are behind me, but are also wary of betting on a dark horse. The imps, of course, are a lost cause. All will oppose us."

"I don't think we need them," said Zebulun.

"The imps?" asked Amalek. "With the trads and rats on our side, we'll have them outnumbered, but the imps have a great deal more gold on their side."

"I don't mean them," said Zebulun. "I don't think we need any of them. I don't think we need to engage in politics any more than war."

Amalek stared down at him. "If not war, and not politics... then what is your plan for dethroning the dragon king?"

Zebulun looked at Amalek with mirth. "I had a dream."

"Ah," said Amalek. "Another dream of Ur? I met Ur myself, and have yet to be visited in a dream. What did he say this time?"

"To go to the capital on the eve of the new year," said Zebulun. "He promised a miracle."

"Well, then," said Amalek, "you don't much need my talents."

"I may need your power," said Zebulun.

"I am happy to accompany you," said Amalek. "I would love to see what kind of miracle Ur comes up with to defeat a horde of dragons and their armies. Do you think he will consume them with fire and brimstone from the skies?"

"Hope not," said Zebulun.

Amalek grinned.

Zebulun looked skyward. "Star folk? I hope you can help me with something."

Michael and Gabriel appeared, followed by Bluebonnet and Quetzal.

"Yes, Zebulun Koh?" asked Bluebonnet.

"I need your help to deliver a message far and wide."

The Message

The residents of the village of Nod had finished supper. They lounged around the fire pit, listening to the tales of their ancestors. At the end of the last tale, a star appeared above their village.

All stared in wonder as the star expanded into a sphere of soft blue light, then filled with static. The static transformed into a translucent man with dark hair, eyes, and skin. He wore the garb of an ancient warrior and wielded a flaming sword. A hush fell over the village.

The angelic being spoke. "Hear me, people of Nod. You have been poor and downtrodden for long enough. A miracle is due."

The angel raised his sword and sent a pillar of fire into the sky. The crowd gasped. The angel said, "Go to the capital city of Azulan on the eve of the new year to witness the birth of a new kingdom and era."

Silence reigned for a moment. An elder of the village spoke up. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

"A friend," said Gabriel. "I am a friend to men and women everywhere, and a herald of the prophet Zebulun Koh."

Gabriel flew up into the sky and winked out. After a moment of quiet, the entire village broke out in excited conversation.

This scene repeated, in different villages and with other star folk, all over the land.

A Tale of Angels

"Angels?"

Paul stood in the throne room after midnight. The human "king" sat on his throne. The real king sat coiled behind him, his avatar standing next to the king.

"Right," said Paul. "'Angels' keep appearing to bumpkins in backwaters all over the kingdom. They're telling people to come to the capital on the eve of the new year to witness a miracle. They say it will be the birth of a new kingdom."

"The vernal equinox is only six weeks away," said the false king.

Aurelius narrowed his fake human eyes. "Amalek is behind this. This is his sorcery."

Paul shrugged. "Maybe," he said, "but it seems to have happened on opposite sides of the kingdom at the same time. They also mentioned your old friend Zebulun Koh by name. No mention of Amalek."

Aurelius sat silent for a moment. He turned to Paul. "You spread the rumors about Zebulun Koh?"

"Yeah," said Paul. "The sorcerers told everyone he was a fraud and a womanizer. City folk seem to believe it, for the most part, but too many farm folk have met him in person and seen him heal, or know someone who has. It doesn't seem to have taken in the hinterlands."

"Spread more rumors," said Aurelius. "But only in the backwaters, this time. Tell them there is plague in the capital. Tell them its not safe to come."

"You're the boss," said Paul.

Aurelius turned to his pet king. "Tell the marshal that I want every military dragon he can spare in the capital by the equinox. Bring as many as you can without leaving our borders unguarded."

"Yes, sir."

"Leave me, both of you," said Aurelius. His avatar vanished.

Paul and the king left the throne room by different exits.

Aurelius coiled up around the throne and brooded for some time.

The Sign

"They're coming from all over."

Paul stood before the dragon king and his pet. "Men are closing in on the capital. Not just hillbillies from the hinterlands, either — citizens from Dalton, Harlan, Santana, and everywhere else have heard the rumors. No one wants to miss whatever is coming."

Aurelius summoned his avatar. "*Nothing* is coming," he said. "It's all theatrics on the part of Amalek. He has no army. He can't oppose me."

Paul shrugged. "They're still coming. Maybe not just men, either. Some of the rubes claim to have seen giants traveling by night."

Aurelius's avatar rolled his eyes. "Fairies too, I suppose?"

Paul said nothing.

"The plague isn't scaring them away?" asked Aurelius.

"Doesn't seem so," said Paul. "They either don't believe it or don't care."

Aurelius looked at his pet king. "I want the gates closed for days before the equinox. Announce it ahead of time. The city will be sealed both before and after the new year."

"I will see to it," said the king.

Aurelius looked at Paul. "And you," he said, "I want you to spread whatever rumors you must to keep the masses at bay. Tell them a winter storm is coming. Tell them gangs of rapists roam the capital. I don't care. Just discourage them."

"I'll do what I can," said Paul, "but nothing seems to work right now. People are inspired."

"So *uninspire* them," hissed the dragon king. "Demoralize them by any means necessary."

"Will do," said Paul.

"One last thing," said Aurelius. "Should Zebulun Koh show his face anywhere near the capital, I want him assassinated. Have killers on retainer for this sole purpose."

"Yes, sir."

Zebulun and friends stayed away from the main roads. They traveled by night, at times, to avoid attention. Twenty of the forest folk came with them, determined to witness a miracle. They reached the capital three days before the equinox.

A host of people surrounded the city—people from all walks of life. Rich and poor, fair and common, urban and rural came to witness something special. They came in the hope to see something none of them had ever seen: a genuine miracle. The angels said it would happen.

On the second day, Quinn came to Zebulun and said, "Someone wants to meet you."

Zebulun went with him. Quinn took him to a huge tent made from foreign cloth. Upon entry, Zebulun was greeted by thirty cyclopes.

"Welcome, Zebulun Koh," said the leader. "I am Xeninikos. Our aristocracy sent me to your world, along with my honor guard, to witness this supposed miracle the jinn told us about."

Zebulun looked around. Apollo and Helios were there too. Had Davion been present, he would have recognized Sophokrates as well.

Zebulun looked at Quinn. Quinn shrugged.

"You told the fairies to spread the word far and wide," said Quinn. "I guess they didn't limit themselves to our world?"

Zebulun looked at Quinn with mirth, then turned back to Xeninikos. "I welcome you. You won't be disappointed."

"I hope not," said Xeninikos. "I've brought one of our most eminent historians to bear witness. I hope also that our peoples can open relations again, should your revolution succeed."

"I would like that," said Zebulun.

Zebulun and Quinn headed back to their camp among the tens of thousands who converged on the capital.

The assassin stalked Zebulun Koh through the crowd. One last kill. This one was worth enough that he could retire to the islands in luxury.

"I'm so glad the giants made it here!" said Quinn as they walked. "And the forest folk. Some of the people I've talked to came here from Axolotl, or from one of the island kingdoms. Whatever happens here, word will spread to all corners of the world. And to others!"

Zebulun nodded, lost in thought.

One poisoned blade. That's all it will take. This dose could kill a dozen horses.

Zebulun felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention like soldiers. He whirled around in time to see Daniel, the madman he had healed on the road, pick up his would-be-assassin by the neck and left wrist. The assassin dropped the throwing star from his left hand.

With his right, the assassin drew a knife and stabbed Daniel in the chest. Daniel gasped and snapped the man's neck. The assassin's crumpled form fell to the ground. The crowd around them went silent.

Daniel clutched at his wound, his breathing ragged. His wound hissed and bubbled; the assassin had penetrated his lung. He fell to one knee. Zebulun ran to his aid.

The crowd watched in awe as Zebulun laid hands on the muscled giant before them. His wound closed. His flesh healed into a jagged scar. He stood and took a deep breath. The crowd murmured with excitement.

Daniel looked at Zebulun with pleading eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know I'm not supposed to kill,

but he was going to kill you."

"How did you come to be here?" asked Zebulun.

"I came south after you saved me," said Daniel. "I was afraid to go home. They all think I'm a monster. I wanted to start over."

"Then I had a dream: Ram and Luva spoke to me and told me I had to come to the capital and save you from a murderer. They even showed me what he looked like. They said it would be my redemption."

Daniel looked at his feet. "I don't feel redeemed. I feel like I've just killed one more person."

Zebulun put his hands on Daniel's mighty shoulders and looked up into his eyes. "Thank you for saving my life. Know that you are forgiven for your past sins."

Tears fell from Daniel's eyes.

"Redemption," said Zebulun, "is a long road. You may need to do far more to help others before you'll feel whole."

He nodded to Zebulun. Zebulun let him go.

More and greater numbers flocked to the capital. At least sixty thousand people camped outside the walls. Men came with their wives, children, and livestock in the hope for something better in life. Purpose. Meaning.

On the eve before the equinox, Quinn came to Zebulun and said, "Dude! You have to bless me this evening."

Zebulun regarded Quinn with curiosity. "Of course," he said. "I'll bless you and Davion, just in case there's trouble."

Quinn smiled. "Great!"

Zebulun blessed he and Davion as the sun went down.

Excitement grew as the evening wore on. The encamped host shared food, music, and stories with one another. People met others who they would never encounter in their ordinary lives. Strangers came to understand one another.

Twenty-nine military dragons circled in the air above the capital. They watched for any sign of aggression. The gates stood closed, but the dragon king ordered his dragons to remain vigilant. A brigade of soldiers manned the walls in case of insurrection.

The full moon rose high into the night. Thousands of fires burned in unison around the walls of the capital. Folk songs from hundreds of villages and clans rang out for all to hear.

Amalek looked at Quinn. *Ready?* he asked.

Quinn just grinned and climbed into his harness. Amalek took to the air.

Aurelius and Regulus sat coiled atop the royal palace at the top of the highest hill in the city. They watched with contempt as the throngs of livestock danced and celebrated below. Even the cynical residents of the capital were out in the streets to witness.

Sir, whispered Mahazioth from high above, I see Amalek.

Aurelius looked up. *What is he doing?*

Nothing yet, said Mahazioth. He's just hovering a thousand yards up, outside the city walls.

Keep an eye on him, said Aurelius. I don't know what treachery he has planned, but I want you and your dragons to kill him the moment he gives the order to attack.

Acknowledged, said Mahazioth.

Amalek soared up on thermal winds. Quinn smiled. Amalek was right. Flying never got old.

It was two minutes to midnight when the host of angels appeared.

They appeared first as new stars in the sky, then expanded — far beyond their usual dimensions and efforts — so that all those who surrounded the city could see. Hundreds of creatures of light, of all shapes and colors, manifested for the people below. The crowd gasped in astonishment, then murmured in excitement.

Davion looked up in surprise. He cried out, "Lao!"

Lao looked down on Davion with mirth and winked.

All of a sudden, the hundreds of angels became thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds, and then an uncountable number that rivaled the stars in the sky. One hundred thousand people cheered.

Then a new star appeared, brighter than all others. It grew in size, as if growing closer and closer to our world. Within moments, it shone brighter than the moon. Moments later, it shone brighter than the sun. It wasn't long before it shone brighter than any light anyone had ever seen. All men, cyclopes, and dragons shielded their eyes from light more powerful than any of them had ever experienced.

A voice rang out. It seemed to come from the light, but also from everywhere.

It said:

I am Ur.

With my will and my word, I created The Law.

The Law gave birth to the world.

The world gave birth to life.

Life gave birth to thought.

Thought gave birth to me.

I am the beginning and the end of existence.

Welcome, all of my children. I visit my blessings upon all who witness this day.

Zebulun Koh is my prophet. Make him your king, and you will know happiness and prosperity like no man has ever known before. You will have a nation strong and kind. Your grandchildren will live in a better world.

I AM UR!

The light faded. The star receded into the heavens. The crowd sat in awed silence for several minutes after Ur vanished, then burst into a cacophony of cheers and bedlam. The revelry would last all night.

Regulus looked at his cousin, the dragon-king, and asked, *What do we do now?*

Aurelius let out a long, low hiss: the draconic equivalent of a sigh. He looked at his young, naive cousin and whispered, *We surrender.*

The Throne

"So... we won?"

Zebulun, Davion, Quinn, and Amalek sat in the throne room of the palace on the hill. Zebulun looked at Davion and said, "Seems so."

"I have to say," said Davion, "I've been doubtful this whole time. Despite your obvious powers — healing and rainmaking and such — I still wondered if your god Ur was real. I can't doubt any more, now that I've seen him for myself."

Zebulun looked at Davion with amusement. "That wasn't Ur."

Davion raised his eyes from the floor and looked at Zebulun. "What?"

Quinn giggled.

Davion looked at Quinn, then at Zebulun, then back at Quinn. His eyes widened. "That was *you*?"

Quinn burst out laughing.

Amalek's avatar appeared. It grinned from ear to ear. "That," he said, "is the single greatest act of sorcery I have witnessed in all my six hundred and forty-one years." He looked at Quinn with admiration. "Truly, the student has become the master."

Quinn blushed.

Davion stared at Quinn, incredulous, and repeated the question. "You did this?"

Quinn gave him a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I did. Amalek helped."

"I loaned him some of my power," said Amalek, "but the illusion was all his. And it was *glorious*. Truly, my friend: I salute you. You even managed to fool most of the *dragons* present. Their vanity will never allow them to admit they were fooled by a mere man. That's why Aurelius surrendered to me. He knew his cause was lost."

Davion shook his head. "Amazing. I can't believe it." He looked at Quinn. "Why did you include me in your deception?"

"I wanted you to see it," said Quinn. Then he grinned and said, "I also wanted to see if I could fool *you*. Since you're so smart and all."

Davion chuckled. "Color me fooled," he said. "What about the million star folk who showed up? Was that an illusion too?"

"Yes and no," said Quinn. "Your buddy Lao *did* show up with a couple hundred friends. When I saw that, I decided to make it to look like a whole lot more. Amalek told me the best sorcery is believable. If they already see a hundred angels, why not a hundred thousand?"

Davion looked over at Zebulun. "You knew about this?"

"No," said Zebulun. "I didn't know what Ur had planned. I didn't expect to win through deception, but I'll take it."

"What happened to *live not by lies*?" asked Amalek.

"I still believe it," said Zebulun, "but we've won. I won't demand bloodshed for my honor." He looked up into Amalek's real eyes. "Ur sent me to you for a reason."

"He did, indeed," said Amalek. "But... we haven't won yet. This isn't over. There will be resistance. It will take time to consolidate your rule."

Zebulun said, "I have time."

A Fond Farewell

Amalek sat coiled around the throne, his wings wrapped around his body. It was long past midnight. *I'm so glad we have this chance to talk*, he whispered.

Aurelius Antipater looked up at Amalek with scorn. He sat below the throne, his wings spread wide. *As if you gave me a choice.*

There is always a choice, said Amalek, *if one is willing to suffer the consequences. You could have just flown away. I'm happy you didn't.*

You want to kill me yourself? asked Aurelius. *Is that it?*

No, Aurelius, said Amalek. *I don't plan to kill you at all.*

Aurelius gave Amalek a sharp look. **What?**

I know, I know, said Amalek. *You take it as an insult. If I don't kill you here and now, it means I don't respect you enough to remove you as a threat. I hope you won't take it that way.*

How should I take such mockery? asked Aurelius.

Our kind, said Amalek, *are defined by our enemies. Great enemies make for great times — times of genuine **challenge**.*

Amalek looked deep into Aurelius's eyes and said, *I miss my old enemies. I would hate to lose a new one I've just made.*

So I'm supposed to serve you now? asked Aurelius. *You expect me to carry out your will?*

Not at all, said Amalek. *The least I can do to salve your wounded vanity is banish you from the kingdom. I consider you that dangerous, at least.*

I'm flattered, said Aurelius with disdain. *And should I conquer a new kingdom, raise an army, and come for you?*

I look forward to it, said Amalek. *Goodbye, Aurelius Antipater.*

Aurelius left before sunrise. He flew south.

A Beautiful Friendship

"You work for me now."

Amalek sat coiled behind the throne, his human avatar seated upon it. Paul stood before him. The spy shrugged and said, "I guess you're the new boss. Long as you're paying."

"I pay well," said Amalek, "and I know the spy game well. Don't try to pull wool over my eyes. I *will* eat you."

Paul smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"My new friends," said Amalek, "need know nothing of our relationship. King Zebulun and the others need not even know you exist. Sneak in and out as you always have, and speak only to me."

"Sure," said Paul, "except his friend Quinn already knows about me."

"How is that?" asked Amalek.

"Quinn knows everybody," said Paul.

Amalek's avatar burst into a grin. "Alright, then," he said, "I suppose you can talk to Quinn. I'll tell him not to talk to anyone else."

Paul left through a secret passage.

Burn It All Down

The next day, at high noon, Zebulun became king. Brother Mark performed the coronation ceremony.

The crowd cheered their new king, then watched in confusion as men began hauling armfuls of scrolls onto the stage and depositing them onto a huge stone block brought for the purpose.

The men finished stacking scrolls and left. Amalek, Davion, and Quinn ascended to the stage. King Zebulun raised his hands to quiet the murmuring crowd.

"This pile of scrolls," said Zebulun, "contains the entire corpus of law in the old kingdom: three-thousand one hundred eighty-seven individual laws."

Zebulun turned to Davion and nodded. Davion held up his hand to the pile. It burst into flames.

The crowd stared in shock, then burst into raucous applause.

The new king held up his hands as the old law burned behind him. "It is unreasonable," he said, "to expect every man to know and obey thousands of laws — laws most of them can't even read. Even a few hundred laws is too many. The old laws are hereby revoked. The Law of the Kingdom of Ur shall be far simpler."

The king held out his hand to Davion. Davion handed him a scroll.

King Zebulun stood before man, cyclops, and dragon and gave them The Law.

The Law of Ur

LOVE OTHERS AS YOURSELF

I. RIGHTS

Every thinking being is a person, whether dragon, cyclops, or man.

Every person has rights that may not be violated by any other person. No lord, prince, or king may abridge these rights without a fair trial.

All persons are equal under the law.

1. Life

Every person has the right to live.

Every person has the right to defend their life.

2. Liberty

Every person has to right to do as they please, so long as they harm no other.

Slavery is forbidden.

Serfdom is forbidden.

3. Property

Every person has the right to the full product of their labor.

Every person has the right to some share of the lands and waters of the kingdom necessary to sustain life.

II. STRUCTURE

1. The King

The king shall rule over the army and the navy. He shall ensure they are strong enough to repel invaders, to keep our roads free of bandits, and to keep our coastal waters free of pirates.

He shall maintain and improve the roads, bridges, and waterways of the land.

He shall pass judgment in cases appealed from local authorities.

He shall reign until he dies, abdicates, or is deposed by the Council of Elders.

2. The Council of Elders

Every city and estate of the kingdom shall choose three representatives from its willing and able residents aged 41 or more. Council members shall be chosen by lot. This council shall meet in the capital in a special chamber constructed for this purpose.

The council shall decide how to allocate the revenue of the kingdom. It shall determine how much coin will go to the king for his duties. It shall spend the rest in ways beneficial to the kingdom.

The council shall care for the least among us. It shall provide sustenance for the widows and orphans of the world. It shall provide asylums for the blind, the crippled, and the mad.

The council may depose a reigning king if two thirds of the body agrees.

When a king dies or abdicates, the council shall choose a new king. The king must have the support of two thirds of the council to ascend to the throne.

III. LAW

1. The Law of Harm

That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.

Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not violate others.

Those who violate this law must be punished in proportion to the crime.

2. The Law of Humility

Do not place yourself above others.

Do not succumb to pride, vanity, arrogance, conceit, or contempt for others.

Those who violate this law should be admonished for their foolishness.

3. The Law of Love

Love others as yourself.

This is the highest law.

Those who violate this law should be forgiven. It is the most difficult law to uphold.

4. The Law of Land

The lands and waters of the kingdom belong to the people of the kingdom.

The lords and princes of Ur shall pay the kingdom an annual fee equal to seven percent of the value of the lands they claim.

The kingdom, in turn, will recognize and defend their right to the land.

Those who violate this law shall lose their lands.

5. The Law of Labor

Every person is entitled to the full fruits of their labor. The kingdom shall not tax labor or commerce. No city or estate of the kingdom shall tax labor or commerce.

No person shall be forbidden from engaging in any lawful occupation.

Those who violate this law shall be stripped of their authority.

6. The Law of Coin

The kingdom shall coin a new currency with coins made from cheap steel. The kingdom shall treat this coin as if it were copper, accepting it in payment for all debts and duties.

Coins shall come in denominations of 1, 5, 25, 100, and 500.

After the initial coinage, the kingdom may only create more coin by vote of the Council of Elders. The council must be cautious and prudent in its increase, lest its coins lose all value.

Usury is forbidden. No moneylender shall charge more than seven percent interest on a loan. No person may be in debt bondage for more than seven years.

Those who violate this law shall be fined ten times their ill-gotten gains.

7. The Law of the King

The king is the servant of the people, not their master. It is his duty to protect the people from any who would harm them, whether common thieves or foreign invaders.

The king commands the army and the navy, but not the common man. No person is obligated to obey unlawful commands from any lord, prince, or king. No person is obligated to kneel before lord, prince, or king.

A king who violates this law is a tyrant and should be deposed by the Council.

Hail to the King

As Zebulun read the law, a halo formed around him. It was subtle, at first, then grew in intensity until it shone with the white-gold light of sunrise. The light seemed to come from behind him no matter where the observer stood. It left his face wreathed in shadow.

Murmurs went through the crowd.

"Are you doing this?" Davion whispered to Quinn.

It's not me, Quinn whispered into his mind.

Quinn whispered to Amalek, *Is that you giving Zebulun the golden glow?*

Not I, said Amalek. *I thought it might be you... but I can't seem to **unsee** it, no matter how I try. I don't think it **is** sorcery.*

The three of them watched in awe like the rest of the crowd.

As the halo formed, Zebulun saw himself from the outside. He saw himself through the eyes of every person present: man, woman, cyclops, angel, and dragon. He saw himself looking back at them.

Zebulun finished his reading of the law. The halo faded. They saw his face again.

Zebulun handed the scroll back to Davion, turned back to the people, and said, "That's it. All of it."

The applause grew slower, this time. The last round had been riotous; a celebration of the destruction of something old and cruel. This round was a reverent appreciation of something new and different.

"The Kingdom of Ur will obey its own law," said Zebulun. "We will treat other nations and peoples with respect. We will make war on no one but invaders, bandits, and pirates."

"Furthermore," said the king, pointing towards the luxurious royal palace, "I will raze that palace to the ground. In its place, I will build the Temple of Ur, where The Law shall be carved in stone for all to see."

Someone in the crowd cried out, "But where will you live?"

Zebulun looked down upon his people and said, "I'll find more modest accommodations."

The crowd laughed. Zebulun looked up into the sky and smiled.

Dungeon Family

"I don't believe it."

Ezekiel sat with two of his goons at a table in Jezebel's Dungeon. Quinn gave him a frantic wave from across the room. Ezekiel looked at his guys. "Is he really coming this way?"

"Looks like it, boss."

Quinn bounded over, plopped down on the bench next to Ezekiel, and put his arm around his shoulder. "Hey, Zeke! Long time no see!"

Ezekiel gave Quinn a blank stare.

"Oh, hey," said Quinn. He pulled out a pouch and whispered, "I got your money!"

Ezekiel looked at Quinn with skepticism, took the pouch, and shook it. "Feels a little light, Quinn."

Quinn smiled. "Look inside!"

Ezekiel opened the pouch and looked in. His eyes widened. He turned to Quinn and asked, "Is this *gold*?"

Quinn gave Ezekiel a giant grin. "I didn't know how much extra you'd want to charge me, given how long it's been — or how mad you might still be. So I did this. Doesn't matter, because *I'm rich!*"

Ezekiel looked at him in disbelief. "Where did *you* get money? You're always broke."

"I killed a dragon!" said Quinn. "A few dragons."

Ezekiel gave Quinn a cynical look.

Quinn shrugged. "I had help."

Ezekiel shook his head slowly, his mouth agape. "I'm sure you did."

Quinn gave him a pleading look. "Friends again?"

Ezekiel chuckled. "Sure, Quinn. I'd love to be friends."

"Great!" said Quinn. "Drinks are on me!" He waved to the barmaid, then turned around and said, "I don't believe it!"

"What?" asked Ezekiel.

"That's my friend Davion!" said Quinn. "He's a philosopher. He helped me slay dragons. I can't believe he came." Quinn waved him over.

Davion approached with caution. He held his hand up in greeting to Quinn's rough companions, then sat down next to Quinn.

"Hey, Davion," said Quinn, "This is Gad and Job. They're lock-picking enthusiasts too."

Davion looked at the men across the table and asked, "Really? How did you become interested in the hobby?"

Gad and Job looked at each other and snickered.

Quinn hugged Ezekiel's shoulder. "We have to tell you all about our adventures. You won't believe it!"

"I bet I won't," said Ezekiel.

"I named a jackass after you!" said Quinn.

Ezekiel furrowed his brow. "What?"

The reunited friends drank long into the night. They had to carry Davion home.

Zebulun Dreams of Ur V

Zebulun found himself back in the verdant valley. The air was warm, like springtime. The great oak was gone; in its place sat a small wooden cottage, its foundation made of stones from an ancient, ruined temple. Zebulun ascended.

The cottage door opened as he approached. A wizened old man smiled at him and gestured for him to enter. He poured them tea, and they sat together before a Chess board. It was rough-hewn, not nearly as ornate and crafted as Davion's.

The old man took a sip of tea and said, "I am Ur. You have done well. This is only the beginning. You will face many trials in the years to come. Davion, Quinn, and Amalek will be there to help you. As will I."

"I thank you for everything," said Zebulun.

"I thank you as well, My Creation," said Ur. "Care for a game?"

"Sure," said his creation.

Zebulun and Ur played to a hard-fought draw after one hundred sixty-three moves.

Amalek Dreams of Ur

Amalek found himself back in the desert. The great pyramids had crumbled to dust. The colossal statue of Narkonus was gone, save for the feet. He saw no worshipers.

Amalek glided down and landed next to the disembodied boots. At the base, he could almost make out the ancient writing: *Narkonus, Emperor of All*. Amalek chuckled to himself.

Another dragon appeared in the sky, this one a stark white albino with red eyes. It circled before gliding down to sit before him. It looked into his eyes.

"I am Ur," it said. "You have done well."

"Thank you, Ur," said Amalek. "I feel I did scarcely anything."

"You did enough," said Ur. "You must continue. You must do the things that my prophet Zebulun Koh can not."

Amalek bowed with flourish, his wings stretched out as far as they could go, and said, "I will do as I command."

Proposal

Zebulun rapped on the gate. Ruth answered.

"Zebulun," she said. "Good to see you."

"It's good to see you," said Zebulun. "I heard about your father."

"Yes," said Ruth, her eyes downcast. "He died weeks ago."

"I thought to give you time to grieve," said Zebulun, "before I came to visit. I'm sorry I couldn't save him."

Ruth nodded, her amber eyes sad. "Thank you for easing his pain."

Zebulun nodded and looked off to the horizon. "What will you do now?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I have no money. I have this house, and my father's boat, but no man to help me. I suppose I'll have to marry a fisherman from another town and leave my village."

Zebulun looked at Ruth and asked, "May I offer an alternative?"

Ruth looked up at him.

"Marry me, instead," said Zebulun. "Be my wife. Be my queen. Bear my children."

Ruth lowered her gaze. She held her breath for a moment before she let go, raised her eyes to his, and said, "Yes."

Zebulun smiled softly down at Ruth. "You make me happy. Take your time. Say your goodbyes. Gather your things."

"I don't have much," said Ruth, "but maybe more than I can carry. You brought horses?"

"No," said Zebulun. "I brought a dragon. He will fly us home."

Ruth looked up at Zebulun, eyes wide. "*Fly?*"

Epilogue

Zebulun and Ruth married in high summer. The sun shone brighter and hotter than on any day in recent memory. The citizens of Azulan celebrated their new queen for days.

The next seven years were times of trouble. Dragons resisted the new law. Lords and princes refused to pay their taxes. They stirred up trouble on all sides of the kingdom. Bandits and pirates took advantage of the chaos. Assassins made numerous attempts on Zebulun's life, and even one on Amalek's. All attempts failed.

In time, with Davion and Amalek advising him, King Zebulun consolidated his rule. He improved the roads and bridges of the kingdom. He built ports and canals. He built an army and navy strong enough to defend the kingdom, but not big enough to invade other lands. Zebulun made generals of William, David, and the dragon Nahash. He tasked them to deal with the bandits, pirates, and rebellious dragons. They did.

After seven years, the builders completed the Temple of Ur. King Zebulun named Brother Mark High Keeper of the Temple. Mark and his followers wore silver ankhs to identify themselves as Keepers of The Law. Zebulun visited the temple every seventh day to heal the sick and injured.

Zebulun declared the eastern forest to be the Protectorate of Eastwood. The forest folk traded meat, furs, and timber from their lands for metal tools and grains from the kingdom.

With the forest folk's permission, the cyclopes rebuilt their colony in our world. They would trade goods and stories with denizens of the forest and the Kingdom of Ur. The one-eyed giants learned from the fates of their ancestors; they treated men with respect.

The king forged trade agreements with Kanaark, Axolotl, and the myriad island kingdoms. He strove to keep the peace among all. Every nation prospered, Ur most of all.

Amalek convinced the warlord Zan to guard their western flank. The gold and cattle granted him by the kingdom made his cowboys the undisputed masters of the western wilds.

Daniel, the former madman, went south to the coast and founded a home for the troubled and insane. He showed eternal patience for the most lunatic and violent. He did what he could to ease their suffering.

Quinn convinced Zebulun and Davion to put their equines out to pasture. Loyal servants Othniel, Samson, Ganymede, Friendship, and Zeke spent the remainder of their days munching sweet grass in the field, free from duty or burden.

Kulth-Ing hunted near sunset when he caught a whiff of something strange in the air. He followed the scent until he heard the call: a loud growl. He answered. There, in a clearing, sat a beautiful, lithe female of his species. Her name was Lochnessa. She rolled around like a cat in heat, then presented herself. Kulth-Ing and Lochnessa traveled and hunted together for days before going separate ways. Ninety-nine days later, Lochnessa gave birth to four healthy cubs, two of which were as black as their father.

The first creature Zebulun healed, the red wolf, found himself a lone female. They founded a new pack and had generations of children. Their descendants hunt the eastern forest to this day.

Quinn's kuchibu, Bigfoot and Sugar, lived long, happy lives. Sugar bore him many cubs, all of which would go on to be little agents of chaos.

Zebulun sired three sons: Asher, William, and David. Ruth bore him four daughters: Jael, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah. King Zebulun would reign for thirty-one years. He abdicated at the age of sixty-seven and retired to a ranch near the village of Koh. The Council of Elders chose his son Asher to succeed him.

Zebulun lived to be eighty-nine. He died in bed, his wife Ruth at his side, surrounded by their children and grandchildren.

Davion never married or sired children, but he did found his academy. He taught mathematics and philosophy to students from all over the known world. He taught magery only to those he saw as the most intelligent and noble. He raised up seven apprentices in his time.

Davion lived to be one hundred seven years old. He died quietly, in the middle of the night, while writing at his desk. Three hundred seventy-three current and former students attended his funeral.

Quinn mastered sorcery and became a legendary performer. Folks flocked from all over to see him in action. No one understood how he performed such amazing tricks. Rumors swirled that he was in league with dark forces—rumors possibly spread by Quinn himself. He would travel the kingdom and to lands beyond. One day, when he was forty-three, he sailed away on a ship and never returned.

Quinn never married, before he vanished, but he sired sons and daughters all over the known world, with women of all shapes, sizes, and colors. His descendants number the Earth like the grains of sand in the desert to this day.

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Rules of Chess

This appendix explains the rules for the version of Chess popular in the kingdom during the events of this tale.

The game is played on a 9x9 board with black center and corner squares.

Initial setup, for each side:

First rank: Chariot, Horseman, Lord, Prince, King, Prince, Lord, Horseman, Chariot.

Second rank: a single Dragon in front of the king.

Third rank: nine infantrymen, one for each file.

The King (K) can move to any adjacent square, orthogonal or diagonal.

A Chariot (C) can move any number of vacant squares orthogonally.

A Horseman (H) moves one square orthogonally then one square diagonally, leaping over intervening pieces.

A Lord (L) may move like the King or leap like a Horseman.

A Prince (P) may move like the King for two spaces in the same direction.

The Dragon (D) can leap to any square one or two spaces away. It attacks all squares in a 5x5 matrix, and its attacks cannot be blocked.

The infantryman (i) can move one square forward. On its seventh rank, an infantryman *may* promote to a horseman. On its eighth rank, an infantryman *may* promote to a chariot, prince, lord, or horseman. On its ninth rank, an infantryman **must** promote to a dragon, chariot, prince, lord, or horseman.

If a piece moves onto an enemy piece, the enemy is captured. All pieces capture as they move.

The goal is to force the enemy king into a position where he cannot avoid capture. This is known as checkmate. This is a loss for the captured king.

If a player has no legal move on their turn, the game is a stalemate. This is a loss for the immobile player.

Variant: City vs Country

In this version, one side swaps its princes for lords; the other side swaps their lords for princes. Play is the same otherwise.

Variant: Wing of Dragons

In this version, black has the ordinary array of pieces and pawns; white has only seven dragons. White's dragons start on squares b2, d2, f2, h2, c3, e3, and g3. White wins if he checkmates the black king. Black wins if he captures all seven dragons.

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