

The Ogre at the Crossroads

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Web Edition

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Chapter 1

The crossroads was desolate and situated a good day's ride from the nearest village. On those maps where it appeared at all it was placed in the territory of any one of several of the successor baronies that had replaced the declining Amarian Empire. That the roads were still viable testified to the talent of the Empire's engineers; certainly no one had bothered to keep them up in the years that had passed since then.

The roads met at the edge of a range of rolling hills, craggy tors that grew increasingly steep and rugged the further one delved into them. There was a marker there, an old stone with chiseled marks that looked like they might have dated back to the days when Amar's legions had last passed this way. Beside the stone a barely-visible track marched back into the hills. That pathway made the roads look well-traveled by contrast, but clearly *someone* came this way, kept the dense tangles of brush that formed a fringe around the bases of the hills from creeping up and reclaiming the route.

A late autumn breeze blew down from the hills, ruffling the wild grass that surrounded the marker stone. The sky above was a thick blanket of gray clouds that completely hid the afternoon sun. To the east, where the hills gave way to an expanse of forest, those clouds were a deeper shade that suggested a brewing storm.

A noise became audible over the sound of the wind. It resolved into the cllop of horses on the packed earth of the southwest road, accompanied by the faint clink of metal. The sounds announced the arrival of two riders, who approached the crossroads at a slow but steady pace.

The two men were a study in contrasts. The lead rider was a warrior, clad in a breastplate over layered mail and leather. Greaves of metal plate protected his arms and shins, and metal links were woven into the backs of the heavy gloves that held his reins. A helmet of leather bolstered with iron rings protected his head. A sigil was marked into its brow, a silver starburst. His breastplate bore a similar device, the bright marker etched into the steel directly above his heart. A heavy broadsword was slung across his back, with a smaller blade dangling from his saddle within easy reach. He bore a third weapon at his side, an odd device fashioned from what looked like a dozen or so reeds or thin sticks bound together, the whole contraption about as long as his arm.

His companion was dressed far more plainly. A shirt of mail links protected his torso, but he lacked the accessories worn by his companion, and upon his head he wore only a simple cloth cap that lacked decoration. His coat also bore the starburst mark, if only stitched in white thread. He was armed with a small knife and a similar weapon of bound sticks, his somewhat thinner and slightly longer. He looked to be at least a full decade younger than the warrior, perhaps twenty years old.

The warrior slowed his animal as they approached the crossroads marker. The faded writing was unreadable from the road, but his attention was more on the faint trail that led into the hills. He finally stopped his horse with a slight tug on his reins.

"We might want to set camp here and make for the shrine in the morning," he said to his companion.

"Think we'll run into trouble in the hills?" the younger man asked.

“Always expect trouble, Matthias, and you will be prepared for it,” he said.

The younger man suddenly turned toward the east, toward the forest. “I think I hear someone coming,” he warned.

The warrior straightened in his saddle and unfastened the buckle on his baldric, smoothly sliding the heavy broadsword around into his lap. “Stay behind me,” he ordered. He nudged his horse forward slightly, so that the path leading into the hills was just behind him.

Matthias’s warning proved accurate as another pair of riders emerged from the forest, approaching along the east road. They too appeared to be in little hurry, and as they drew closer it became evident that they were not soldiers.

Like the first pair, the two new arrivals were starkly different. The lead rider was a man of perhaps fifty, with a balding pate lined from exposure to the sun and wind. He was dressed in a simple robe of undyed wool and carried no weapons. He rode a mule rather than a horse, with only a blanket for a saddle, an arrangement that had to be less than comfortable.

His companion was a young woman, maybe a few years older than Matthias. She was dressed more practically in a warm coat and trousers with a dark cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Her horse, little more than a pony, had a basic saddle from which packed saddlebags dangled. She carried a short staff across her lap, but it wasn’t really long or heavy enough to pose a significant threat as a weapon.

The riders watched the pair at the crossroads as they approached. The old man’s expression was sour. He’d taken something out of his robe, a small iron amulet shaped like a torch that dangled from a simple leather thong around his neck.

No one spoke until the old man and his female companion stopped on the far side of the marker.

“What do *you* want here, Vidran?” the warrior asked.

“The shrine does not belong to you, Arunite,” the old man returned.

Matthias bristled at the insult laden in the name. “This is Dane Avarel, ordained priest of the Order of the Sword,” he said. He looked as though he might have said more, but the warrior forestalled him with a slightly raised hand.

“I care not who you are,” the old man said. “I am going to the shrine.”

“We were here first,” Avarel said lightly.

“What you do does not concern me, heretic,” the old man said. “Stand aside.”

“You are hardly equipped to tell me what to do,” the warrior returned.

“You would threaten a priest of the Khel’vidra?” the woman asked.

“Patience, Selyne,” the old man said. “It is in the nature of the Khel’arun to rely on violence and aggression to promote their agenda. We must trust in the true teachings of the Book of Khel, and not let ourselves be drawn to anger.”

“I did not come here to argue doctrine with a Vidran,” Avarel said. “There are dangers in these hills, hazards that will not respond to a sermon and a piece of stick.”

“We do not fear mere mortal threats,” the Vidran priest responded. “Our faith in Khel protects and sustains us.”

“So be it,” Avarel replied. “I take no responsibility for what happens to you beyond this point.”

“We do not ask for your ‘protection,’ nor do we want it,” the old priest said.

The young woman leaned over, a look of concern on her face. "Prelate Barzen, perhaps we should..."

She was interrupted as Matthias started in surprise, his horse rearing up as he jerked on its reins. The others all turned at the disturbance, and saw what had alerted the young Arunite.

An old man stood on the faded path near the stone marker. Somehow he had come from the hills without making a sound or drawing the attention of the travelers gathered at the crossroads, for there was nowhere else that he could come from unless he'd sprung out from the rocks that flanked the trail. He was of an age that made the Vidran priest look hale by contrast, his years worn heavy on his frame. But despite the noticeable bend in his spine and the white wisps that made up his hair and beard there was a certain presence to him, a sharpness in the eyes that swept over both groups of intruders with equal intensity. His robes were thin, almost tattered, and the sandals that protected his feet seemed utterly insufficient against the challenges of the hills, but he seemed little concerned by the chill wind and the looming storm clouds to the east.

The Arunite warrior-priest had nearly drawn his sword at Matthias's commotion, and he was slow to lower it again. "Who are you, old man?" he asked.

"Why, I am Efrasim," he said. "Of the Khel'nadar."

"It seems that someone got here even before you, Sword," Barzen said.

Avarel shot the Vidran priest a harsh look before turning back to the old man. "You dwell at the shrine, old man?" he asked.

Efrasim shrugged. "I was but a pilgrim, much like the four of you. But your words are true more than you know, priest of the Khel'vidra," he added, looking over at the two Vidrans. "There was someone already there even before I arrived."

"Why do I not think that you are speaking of another pilgrim?" Avarel asked.

"I doubt that this one came seeking the light of Khel," Efrasim said. "For the current resident of the shrine is an ogre."

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The wind picked up as the sun faded below the hills, but thankfully the steady breeze had kept the storm clouds at bay, at least for the moment. The flames that rose from their campfire flickered and danced as a sudden gust whipped down over the surrounding hills, and Matthias coughed as smoke was blown into his face. But the draft ended as quickly as it had begun, and the flames steadied.

The five travelers, collectively representing three sects of the church of Khel, had relocated to a small dell not far from the crossroads. The Nadaran hermit had led them there even as the daylight had given way to twilight. The route had been hard going at first, with tangles of dry brush grasping at their clothes the moment they stepped off the path, but once through the fringe they'd found themselves in the course of a dry stream that had allowed them easier going. Their suspicion of each other still evident, the Arunites and Vidrans had led their animals along the meandering route until it had deposited them in the natural hollow where they'd made camp.

"This is intolerable," Avarel said, pacing back and forth, the flames casting tall shadows on the rocks that surrounded their camp as he moved. Matthias, recovered

from his misadventure with the fire, rose to tend to their horses. "I should have pressed on to deal with this creature at once."

"What a wise plan," Selyne said. She was kneeling beside the fire, taking out cookware and small pouches of neatly-packed foodstuffs from her saddlebags. "Stumbling through the hills in the darkness, the ogre would never hear you coming in all that metal."

"Not all adversaries can be prayed away," the warrior shot back.

"Where did it come from?" Matthias asked, as poured out a ration of oats for the priest's horse. The stallion snapped at the feedbag before he had fitted it over its head, and the young man nearly dropped it as he stumbled back.

"From a female ogre's belly, presumably," the woman said, smirking at his plight.

The expression on the Arunites' faces said that they did not appreciate the joke. "Ogres live in the mountains," Matthias persisted. "These hills are rugged, but the nearest range is many days away, and I've never heard of a tribe that has wandered this far south."

"Ask him," Avarel said, nodding toward Barzen. "The ogres allied themselves with the Vidrans in the war between Evros and Aldrem."

The Vidran priest let out an exasperated sigh. He sat on a flat rock near the fire, obviously tired from the day's ride. "That conflict was madness," he said, "with plenty of guilt to be shared on all sides. Though from all that I have heard, the ogres took advantage of the fighting to attack an isolated outpost along the mountain frontier, nothing more."

"Our accounts differ," Avarel said. "There was a priest of the Khel'arun at that outpost, who lived to return the truth to the Arunite hierarchy."

"Ah, yes. And naturally they care only for truth," Barzen said.

Avarel turned toward him, but Efrasim stepped between them. "Gentlemen," the old monk interjected. "Does this dispute serve any purpose? However the ogre got here, there is no denying that it is here now."

"Did you get a good look at it?" Matthias asked. "Are you certain it was an ogre?"

Efrasim nodded. "There was no mistaking it, believe me, young acolyte." He headed off to collect more fuel from the dry clumps of brush that surrounded their camp.

"Maybe a dark spirit haunts this place," Selyne suggested.

"Ogres are real threats, and they bleed readily enough," Avarel said.

"You seem quite eager for matters to come to blood," the young woman said.

"And you seem quite eager to deny reality," the priest returned.

"There is nothing that can be done tonight," Barzen said. "But it may not be mere coincidence that has placed this danger here. The creature may have been sent here as a test of faith, with our presence the instrument for the cleansing of the shrine."

"And how will you cleanse it, Vidran?" Avarel said. "With prayer?"

"The prayer you mock so easily will show us the answer. Wisdom is a superior weapon to that slab of steel you venerate."

"Pray all you wish, Vidran. My slab of steel will remove the ogre's presence in the morning," Avarel said.

"Perhaps," Barzen replied. "We shall see."

They went about their various tasks in quiet for a few moments, with Matthias tending to the horses and Selyne putting together the materials for supper. For all their

arguments, it seemed a given that they would share their meal. Avarel tended to his weapons, cleaning each of his swords carefully with a piece of oiled cloth. Barzen, in his turn, closed his eyes in prayer.

"I only caught a brief glimpse of the creature, but it seemed most fierce," Efrasim said, returning to the circle of light from the fire with a bundle of dry branches tucked under one arm. He nodded in thanks as Selyne got up and helped him with the burden. "We might be better served by cooperating against it." He sat down and began breaking the branches into smaller pieces for the fire, the snapping sounds echoing the crackle of the flames.

"With all due respect, elder, I have been trained to deal with such threats," Avarel said. "It would be best if the rest of you stayed out of my way. In a fight with an ogre, you would only serve as distractions."

"How do you know it will fight?" Selyne asked. "Perhaps we can reason with it."

The Arunite priest let out a snort of derision. "Reason. With an ogre." He walked back over to where Matthias was finishing tending to the horses, and started unfastening the straps of his armor. The acolyte turned to help him. "Perhaps you can engage it in a game of finger shadows, or dragon dice, while you are at it," Avarel said.

The young woman did not back down. "Violence is never a good solution," she said.

"If you'd come upon bandits in the forest, you might have come to regret that philosophy," Avarel said. "The world is not as simple as your doctrine would have it be."

"Does that mean we should not do all that we can to make it better?" Barzen asked.

Avarel took off his breastplate and laid it carefully on the rocks next to him. "The Khel'arun work in the world as it is," he said. "The Sword works with the Orders of the Bracer and the Heart to advance the cause of the god in the world."

Barzen shook his head in disappointment. "There is only one true way to knowing the god, not many," he said. "You Arunites have lost your way with your orders and hierarchies and armies. It is a sadness, and we pray that someday that the church will be reunited in the Light."

"Yes, I recall hearing of how the Vidrans promoted... *unity* in the north."

"The war was a great tragedy." Barzen said. "Baron Robarr was not justified in his aggression, but dark deeds were done on all sides."

"Robarr had a Vidran priest at his side," Avarel persisted.

Selyne rose up angrily, the cook pot held in her hand like a weapon. "How dare you suggest that—"

Barzen took her arm gently, and stepped in front of her. The look of sadness he wore on his face seemed genuine. "I cannot deny the culpability of Priarch Tovram. He lost his way and wandered far from the Light. But one man's fall does not change the truth. And none of us are above weakness, temptation, and doubt. They are always present, to lead us astray."

Selyne lowered her head as if her superior had rebuked her directly, her lips moving silently. But if Avarel was affected by the other priest's words, he did not show it in his manner. "We should retire early, if we are to get an early start," he said gruffly. "Matthias and I will stand watch."

"We should share the responsibility of vigilance," Barzen said. "Selyne and I can each take a watch, if you trust us."

Avarel's expression made it clear that trust was not part of the equation, but that he considered the Vidrans harmless enough. "Suit yourself," he said.

Selyne filled a pot with water, and settled it on the rocks on the edge of the fire. She took out a packet wrapped in cloth and unfolded it to reveal half a dozen round pieces of flatbread. She handed one to Barzen and offered another to Efrasim, and after only a moment's hesitation added Matthias and Avarel. Barzen held his and turned again to the Arunites. "Would you at least join us in the mealtime thanks?" he asked. "It is something that our sects all have in common, I believe."

The five clerics knelt around the fire and offered thanks to their god for the bread. But the moment of unity was brief, and they ate the dinner that followed in stony silence.

"I'll clean the dishes," Matthias said, rising quickly as Selyne began to gather the plates and spoons. He shot a quick look back at Avarel, as if to verify that it was all right, but the older priest merely nodded.

"A fine meal, my dear," Efrasim said. "A full belly is a blessing, especially in harsh lands such as these." He put more sticks upon the fire, building it back up against the deepening night.

"You're welcome," Selyne said, as she packed up the leftovers as carefully as she had unwrapped them.

"Better get some sleep," Avarel said. "Tomorrow will be a difficult day." He rose and trudged out from the circle of firelight, his big sword slung in the crook of his arm. They could hear the sounds of Matthias scraping the dishes a little ways off. Selyne looked at Barzen much as Matthias had looked to his superior earlier.

"Have faith," the old priest said.

The priests took to their bedrolls, settling in close around the fire, while Avarel stood silent watch from the darkness, a silent and somber figure silhouetted in the night.

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Chapter 2

The morning sky was still inclement, but the rain that the heavy gray clouds promised remained at bay as the pilgrims returned to the trail that wound into the hills. The Vidrans and Arunites both walked their animals, following the old hermit who led them unerringly along the faint path. At times the route vanished altogether, faded beyond recognition or overrun by the tangled growth that filled the low spaces between the hills, but each time Efrasim found it again.

They had been marching for about an hour when their surroundings began to change. The hills grew steeper, the trail taking them past tall bluffs surrounded on all sides by cliffs that were in some cases almost sheer. At the same time the trail itself began to change, widening and becoming more defined until they could see the faint impressions of ancient stones set into the earth.

"There was a road here once?" Matthias asked, as his horse's iron-shod hooves clotted on the half-buried stones.

“Yes, long ago,” Efrasim said. “At a time when Amar itself was just a dream in the hearts of men of vision.”

“I didn’t know that the shrine was that old,” the young cleric admitted.

“If you don’t watch where you’re going, you’re likely to end up marching straight into the ogre’s belly,” Selyne said. She’d been following Matthias, with Barzen bringing up the rear.

“I thought that your faith was going to protect us,” Matthias shot back.

“What would you know about...” the young woman began angrily, but she was interrupted by Barzen. “Child,” he said, a hint of remonstrance in his voice. Selyne subsided, but she shot Matthias a venomous look before he turned back toward the front of the little column.

The hills rose up steeply ahead, forming a canyon between them. The trail continued that way, vanishing around a natural bend a few hundred paces beyond the entry. The mouth of the canyon was flanked by a pair of tall pillars that looked natural at first, but as they drew closer showed clearly the working of human hands.

“The Watchers,” Efrasim announced.

“Impressive,” Avel said. The two carvings easily reached ten times the height of a man, fashioned from the stone of the cliffs so that they faced each other across the open gap. They had been crafted into the shape of men, but were so eroded by time that it was difficult to make out anything other than the vague outlines of their forms. They each held something against their bodies, a staff or perhaps some sort of weapon, it was impossible to be sure. Their faces had been worn down until they were almost blank, with just the slightest hint of a protruding nose. A faint sound of wind whistling down the length of the canyon added to the eeriness of the scene.

“It must have taken a lot of effort to carve them,” Selyne observed. “To have watched for so long...”

“They have been lax in their duty,” Avel said. He stopped his horse and turned to the others. “You should wait here. I will go on ahead and confront the beast.”

“Dane, no... I mean, I should accompany you, at least,” Matthias said.

“We will not remain behind,” Barzen said.

Efrasim had gone on for a bit before noticing that the others had stopped. He came back to rejoin them. “The shrine is at the end of the canyon, it’s still quite a ways off,” he told them. “There’s a place near it where you can leave the horses; they will not be able to manage the final ascent in any case.”

“And if we encounter the monster in the canyon?” Avel asked. “There is little room to maneuver.”

“Your horses should be able to outdistance it on this road,” Selyne pointed out.

“And leave behind the old man and your mentor?” Avel asked. “That mule would be lucky to outrun the Nadaran, let alone an ogre.”

“Again, we do not ask for your protection, Arunite,” Barzen said.

“You do not have to ask for it,” Matthias said. “The Swords protect all who cannot protect themselves.”

“Enough of this banter,” Avel said. He took the smaller of his two swords from its saddle hook and buckled it around his waist. The hilt of his big broadsword jutted up from over his back. “If you will not listen to reasonable counsel, then let us proceed.”

They made their way cautiously forward. There were places where rockfalls from the cliffs had created minor obstructions upon the ancient roadway, but none of them were sufficient to block their path. Those walls narrowed steadily as they made their way deeper into the canyon, making even the quiet sounds of their passage sound ominous as they echoed back to them.

They came around a final bend in the canyon, and they were there.

There was no mistaking the site that the old hermit had referenced. A mound of dull gray granite blocked their way ahead, a wall that rose to half the height of the surrounding cliffs. A narrow cleft broke to its right, as though a giant had taken to the barrier with a massive axe. The source was obvious and more mundane, as a trickle of water descended through the tight gap before falling the remaining dozen or so feet into a small pool at the base of the ridge. There had to be some sort of drainage underground, for the pool didn't overflow. Likely when the spring rains came the entire canyon became a torrent, but for now the way was clear.

"How do we get up there?" Matthias asked.

"There's a path up the face," Efrasim said. "You'll see it as we get closer."

"The shrine is on the far side?" Avel asked. His eyes swept the area, as if enemies might have been hiding in every nook and cranny in the rock. There certainly weren't many places to hide; other than scattered weeds that rarely rose to knee height, and a ragged fringe of more durable bushes around the edges of the pool, the canyon was barren and desolate.

"Yes," the old hermit said. If he was alarmed by the danger in their surroundings, he didn't show it; if anything he seemed to have grown calmer since they'd entered the canyon.

They approached warily. The Nadaran's words proved accurate, and as they drew close to the pool they could discern the steps carved into the rock face. The ascent was steep and no doubt treacherous, the steps worn smooth by time and the elements.

"He's right, we'd never get our horses up there," Matthias said. "Even a man would have to be part goat to make that climb, I think."

"The ogre made the ascent," Avel said. "And so shall I." He led his horse to the pool, and pulled aside one of the bushes to make room for the animal to drink. Patting the stallion on the shoulder, he left it and turned to the stair. He looked up its length for a long moment before turning to the others.

"You should all stay here, with the horses," the warrior priest said. His eyes were drawn back to the ascent, and he looked almost eager as he slid his heavy broadsword off his back.

"We've already had this argument," Barzen said. "You do not speak for us, Arunite."

Avel looked back at them, and a hint of anger crossed his features before he replied. "While you might grant me a small advantage by distracting the beast, I cannot in good conscience allow you to do so. I am obligated to defend all those who cannot defend themselves, even a pair of suicidal Vidrans."

"Perhaps it is you who needs protection," Barzen said. "Have you considered that your presence, in plate iron and wafting around that big cleaver, might provoke the creature to violence?"

Avel blinked in incredulity. "It is an *ogre*, man. Even you cannot be so naïve as to..."

“Gentlemen,” Efrasim interjected. “While this debate is interesting, we may not wish to hold it here. The canyon walls carry sounds a great distance, and we are hardly safe here. There is a place above that overlooks the shrine. Perhaps we should reconnoiter from that vantage.”

“You speak wisdom, old one,” Avarel said. “I will go.”

“As will I,” Barzen quickly said.

“We should all go,” Selyne said. “We are all in danger here, and should at least be in a place where we can see it coming.”

Matthias said nothing, but his face showed agreement with the young Vidran’s words. Avarel looked at all of them before turning back to the stair. “Come on then,” he growled, moving ahead to take the lead.

The climb proved to be as difficult as it had looked from below. The steps had been fashioned ages ago, and many of them were little more than smooth nubs in a slope that otherwise approached vertical in several places. Avarel did not hesitate, even though with the weight of his armor he would have experienced a rapid and uncomfortable trip to the rocks below if his heavy boots slipped even once. Matthias followed close behind him, despite the risk of going down with him, and the Vidrans trailed behind, Selyne supporting her master much as the Arunite acolyte did. The old hermit brought up the rear, having little difficulty despite his age and the shoddy condition of his footwear.

Near the top of the ridge the stairs entered a defile that started out as a small gap but which widened into a more navigable descent. The route down was only a fraction of the way up, as the canyon floor was much higher on this side of the barrier. They could see that it spread out in a broad bowl several hundred paces across, surrounded on all sides by sheer cliffs.

Avarel started toward the defile but Efrasim hailed him from below, pointing toward a shelf of rock that extended out along the summit of the ridge. That had to be the vantage that the Nadaran had indicated, as the rest of the crest was so uneven and treacherous that it made the worn staircase look easy by contrast. The Arunite priest hesitated, but only for a moment, before he turned and made his way through the maze of exposed boulders that pushed out of the ridge like a row of broken teeth. The others followed behind. Avarel had nearly reached the shelf when Barzen finally reached the top of the stairs. Selyne was almost carrying him at that point, but the old priest continued his dogged progress. As he stepped off the path his feet slipped out from under him, and he would have fallen had the woman not grabbed hold of him.

The two Arunites watched for a moment, and finally Matthias went back and took the old priest’s arm. For a moment it looked as though Barzen would protest, but he finally let himself be led across the brief but difficult stretch by the two acolytes.

The stone protrusion was large enough for all five of them to rest comfortably. It rose up at a slight angle, offering concealment as well as a clear view of the canyon ahead.

There wasn’t much to see. The ground within the bowl was anything but even, rising from a low point directly beneath their perch up to almost level with them at its far end. At no point were the surrounding cliffs less than twenty paces tall, and while there were places where there were gaps, crevices and cracks caused by wind or water, they couldn’t make out any places where an ascent looked feasible.

Their eyes were drawn to the high point on the far side of the bowl, where a more or less flat shelf of stone stood surrounded by several rough pillars. At their current distance it was too far to see whether the formation was natural or worked by human hands. To their immediate right a trickle of water like the one that had worn through the granite ridge descended from a similar breach in the cliff before tumbling into another natural pool. The pool extended along the base of the cliff for a good thirty paces before it narrowed into the stream that made its way into the breach, almost directly below them. The water gathered again at that narrow gap, though not enough to offer reassurance of safety if one of them were to slip off of the shelf and drop the twelve feet to the ground below.

The priests crept forward, even Avarel's dignity giving way to practicalities as he lowered himself to the stone. The top of the shelf was almost smooth, and not so steep that someone couldn't stand upon it, but with the sharp drop just beyond the edge and the stone slick with the moisture from the waterfalls, none of them wanted to take an unnecessary risk.

The priests studied the landscape in silence. "I thought the shrine was underground," Selyne finally said.

Efrasim was the last to reach them, creeping through the rocks like a spider. He heard the Vidran woman's comment and pointed as he shuffled forward onto their perch. They all followed the line of his finger to the far side of the canyon, just beyond the ring of stones. There was a dark cleft there at the base of the cliff, barely visible in the rock face. It was subtle enough that they almost certainly would have missed it had it not been pointed out to them. "There is a chamber inside," he told them. "The ogre is there."

"How can you know that?" Selyne said. "Is this the only way in or out?"

"There is no other way, unless one has wings," the old Nadaran said.

"What if he slipped out last night, while we were encamped?" Matthias asked.

"Surely he has to venture out to hunt, we haven't seen anything in here that one can eat."

"It doesn't matter," Avarel said, sliding back from the lip of the shelf back onto the more solid structure of the ridge. "If he is there I will find him, if he is not then we will face him when he returns."

"I do not recall any agreement being made on how we will proceed," Barzen said.

Avarel's face darkened again, but after a moment's effort he mastered himself. "Look. There are differences between us, and a history of bad blood between our orders, but let us leave that aside now. You could barely get up here without assistance. How effective do you think you will be down there? Will you bring the girl down with you, to share your fate?"

"I am not afraid," Selyne said, but her face was pale.

"I do not question your courage," Avarel said. "But I have been trained for this. You have no armor, and while a stick can be a weapon in the right hands, have you ever been trained to use it as such?"

He turned back to Barzen. "You are right, I cannot stop you from following me down there. But know this: not only do you place yourself at risk, but your actions may cause others harm as well. For I must do my duty as I see it, and if I die because I turned

aside to protect you, or Selyne, or even Matthias here, then we would share blame for any others that would fall to the creature's rage in the future."

Barzen held his eyes for a long moment. "You make many assumptions, Arunite. But very well, we shall not interfere. Should you fail, then we will proceed as we see fit."

Avarel nodded. He started back toward the defile, but paused as Matthias came forward and took his arm.

"I do not need to remind you of your duty," the older priest said.

"No," the acolyte responded. "But I too have trained. I can help you. If nothing else, we can divide its attention, to your advantage."

"Your heart is bold," Avarel said quietly. "But you are not an initiate of the Sword, not yet. Until that day, which I have no doubt *will* come, you are my responsibility." He clasped the young man's shoulder. "Fear not, all will be well."

With that he trudged back to the cleft in the rock face that led down into the bowl canyon. Matthias watched until he had vanished entirely from view then returned to where the others waited. Barzen gave the acolyte barely a look, but Selyne hesitated then touched his arm.

"He is brave, I will give him that," she said.

"He is a Sword," Matthias said.

"He said you are not yet an initiate," she said. "I'm sorry," she added, at the look that crossed his face. "I did not mean to eavesdrop, but..."

"It's all right. He was right, I have not finished my training yet, have not completed the Trial."

"The Trial?"

"Would-be Swords are set upon by three armed commoners to test their... virtue," Barzen said without looking up.

"It's not like that," Matthias said. "Not like he said," he added. "We are taught that we must always be prepared to defend ourselves and those under our protection."

Selyne looked as though she would have said something else, but Efrasim interrupted. "Look, there he is!" he hissed, drawing their attention back ahead.

The sun's rays turned the Arunite priest into a torch as he trudged up the slope, the light reflecting brilliantly off his armor and the bare steel shaft he carried in his hands. His appearance made the surrounding landscape seem especially dull by comparison, the muddy ground punctuated by an endless field of rocks crusted in dirt and lichens. It was almost as though the warrior was walking across the back of a scaled beast. Avarel moved cautiously, careful of where he put his feet, but they could hear the clank of his metal armor clearly even as he moved out into the center of the canyon.

"He is making a lot of noise," Selyne said.

"The cliff walls, they amplify sound," Barzen observed.

"The ogre, won't it..."

As if summoned by her words, a form emerged from the cleft, a shadow that seemed to swell until it came fully into the light and revealed itself as the monster they had come here to face.

At first it was difficult to make it out against the frame of the jagged face of the cliff. It had hunched over to make it through the cleft, but even after it fully emerged into the light it continued to walk with a huddled gait, like an old man with a bent spine. It was draped generously in furs, layers of them, covering its body from the top of its head to

the bottom of its feet. As it unfolded from the entrance of the shrine the watchers could see that it was carrying heavy burdens in both hands. On its left side it bore a crude shield that consisted of animal hides twined with uneven bits of wood, wrapped in a bundle around its arm. Opposite was its weapon, a club that looked like a small tree that had been yanked from the ground complete with jutting branches and roots.

Avarel had seen it as well. The priest held his ground, preferring the muddy dirt of the path to the uneven footing of the rocks. The ogre continued forward, coming around the spires at the top of the rise, rocks cracking under its heavy tread. Its arms dangled at its sides, slightly too long for its frame, as though someone had taken a man and stretched him out. As it got closer to the waiting priest they gained a better perspective on its size; even hunched over as it was, Avarel would barely come up to its breast.

“By the god, it’s *huge*,” Selyne whispered. Barzen shot her a hard look, but she didn’t even notice. Matthias felt a cold dread in his gut, and he wondered if Avarel felt it too, down there without anything standing between him and the monstrous death that had emerged to face him.

“If only we had bows,” he found himself saying, more to have something to say than anything else. His hands were shaking, and he clutched them against his gut to keep the others from seeing his shame. He looked over at Efrasim. The old priest shook his head sadly, as if to say, *I told you so*.

As the ogre closed with Avarel it slowed. Its head came up, and the priests watching from above could clearly see its face. One look was enough to show it wasn’t human; its ridged brow jutted out too far, its broad, squished jaw not enough. It looked ancient, its face a landscape of wrinkles, with fleshy jowls that dangled in loose folds. Matthias would have thought it almost pathetic, if it wasn’t for the obvious strength it still possessed.

Avarel shifted, his sword coming up and pivoting in formal salute as though it weighed nothing. The familiar movement somehow soothed Matthias; he’d made that same motion himself a thousand times in his training. The ogre of course was no sparring partner, but this was something the young priest could understand.

The ogre seemed to recognize the danger in the smaller foe; it hesitated briefly, its shield and club coming up warily. Avarel waited, saying nothing, or at least nothing that Matthias could make out over the intervening distance. He heard a noise from next to him and almost jumped; he looked over to see that it was coming from Barzen. The old priest was praying. That too should perhaps have comforted him, but somehow it only brought back Matthias’s terror.

Selyne let out a strangled hiss, and Matthias turned back just in time to see the ogre lurch forward, its club sweeping out ahead of it in a broad arc. Avarel moved just as Matthias would have expected, pivoting to the side, evading the sweep of the club. His sword swept up and forward in its wake, but the ogre jerked back, and instead of carving into its forearm the steel only glanced off the wooden shaft of the club.

It’s not as stupid as it looks, Matthias thought.

Avarel had already come to the same realization, as his opponent circled around to his right, crossing the muddy path and stepping into the rocks on the far side. The ogre was ancient, one look was enough to tell that story, and it moved with ponderous deliberation, but it was also obviously a cagey veteran.

The priest was patient. He let the ogre complete its circuit, and was ready when it suddenly planted one foot heavily and lunged at him again. It poked its club at his chest, the spread roots at its end like the tines on a military fork. Avarel shifted and countered again, but again the ogre drew back before his sword could bite into its arm. The ogre had a far superior reach, and its weapon was half again the size of Avarel's sword.

The ogre didn't wait this time, abruptly reversing its retreat and coming forward again before Avarel could recover, its club sweeping around in a low arc. But the priest was ready for that move as well, and even as the branch started around he was rushing forward toward its off-side. The ogre aborted its attack and brought its "shield" up. The fine edge of the steel bit deep into the mess of hides and branches, and it was only luck on the ogre's part that allowed it to fall back before the sword could rip through into the flesh beneath. Avarel lunged as it withdrew, the point of his sword biting into the ogre's side just barely enough to draw blood. The ogre growled in pain but the priest didn't pursue, a wise decision as the club swept through the space he would have occupied if he'd given chase.

The two combatants faced off for another long moment. The priest had drawn first blood, and the ogre was obviously fatigued, making a huffing sound that swelled the loose flesh of its cheeks like a bellows. But it gave no indication that it was ready to retreat, and the heavy head of its club did not quiver as it came forward to engage Avarel once more.

The ogre lowered its club like a lance and charged forward, mud flying up around its feet as it maneuvered its considerable bulk along the confines of the path. It didn't leave much room for Avarel to evade, but somehow the priest managed, ducking under the thrust of the club and under the ogre's guard. His sword swept up and bit deep into the ogre's side, opening a gash that was only partly absorbed by the layered furs. Bright droplets of blood flashed in the air as the sharp steep opened a shallow tear in the ogre's flesh.

The ogre's momentum carried it forward, and while Avarel had dodged the club, the bulk of the creature itself was something else entirely. The priest had no choice but to steer off the path into the rocks. Even then he would have been fine, the ogre narrowly clearing him as it stormed past, except that his left foot landed awkwardly on a sloping stone covered in damp lichens. His boot slid out from under him as he shifted his weight, and the whole joint twisted painfully as his foot dug into a narrow crevice in the rocks.

Pain shot up Avarel's leg, and he almost went down before he was able to plant his other foot under him, using his left hand to balance while the right held onto the long hilt of his sword. For a moment he felt a thrill of panic as the stones refused to release his foot, but then with a terrible pop it came free. He staggered back onto the mud of the path, staying upright through a sheer effort of will.

A yell from behind warned him an instant before he heard the familiar heavy tread, now almost on top of him. Avarel pivoted, the simple motion alone almost drawing a scream as his ankle protested, but he got his sword up into a defensive position.

It availed him nothing as the ogre's club slammed into him. The sword went flying, and he watched it glittering as it spiraled into the air. His eyes followed it even as his mind absently noted the crack as one or both of the bones in his forearm snapped.

Then the only thing he could see was the ogre, its bulk swelling in his vision before its shielded arm slammed into his body. He was flung up into the air, sky and ground rotating in his vision before he hit the ground. He was only dimly aware of impacts, a rapid series of them, so fast that he could not separate them in his muddled mind.

He must have blacked out for a few moments, for the next thing he knew he was lying face down in shallow water, the chill of it biting even through the haze of pain that overlaid all other perceptions. His limbs felt numb, and he felt a sense of urgency, but it was a vague feeling, as though he'd forgotten something important but couldn't quite remember what it was.

A triumphant roar cut through the fog in his mind and brought him back to the moment. Oh, yes. The ogre. He tried to get up, but the ground underneath him was slippery, or maybe it was that his limbs were too damaged for him to manage the feat. He remembered that his arm was broken, but he couldn't feel it anymore, and it didn't hurt more than anything else as he slid back down into the mud.

He could feel more than hear the tread of its feet upon the ground as the ogre approached. The priest made another effort and only just managed to get his head up enough to see. There was something wrong with his vision, everything all streaks and distortions, but he could not mistake the creature, a vast shadow that swelled as it drew closer. He couldn't see its face clearly but he didn't need to see it; he'd heard its intent clearly in its roar.

But then he made out another sound, a shout that was both familiar and terrifying, for he knew what it portended. He tried to yell, tried again to get up, but only managed to slump back down into the mud. A cold wetness flooded into his mouth. He tried to twist to the side, to lean onto his unbroken arm, but again couldn't get more than a temporary reprieve from the slippery grasp of the muddy ground. He tried to speak, even just one word of warning to deny what was about to happen, but he couldn't do even that much. He could only watch as the ogre turned from its path, turned to face a smaller shadow that blended into the bigger outline of the beast as Matthias struck at it. There was another roar, this time carrying pain, but Avarel knew instinctively that it wasn't enough pain, that it only presaged an outcome perhaps as inevitable as his own fate when he'd slipped on the rocks above.

There two shapes blurred and parted again. He didn't see the final blow, but he *felt* it, in that place where instincts held more truth than what his failing senses told him. The scream lasted only a moment, one harsh note that accompanied and surrounded Avarel as he slid back into the mud and lost consciousness.

* * * * *

Chapter 3

When Avarel woke he was still lying in the mud. That much he realized quickly as he tried to move and his limbs slid out from under him. He felt a moment of fear that he would slip into the pool and drown before he realized that someone was there with him,

holding on to him. His fear spiked into panic before he realized that the outline was too small to be the ogre. Then it all came back into clarity, including Matthias's fate, and the fear and pain was overwhelmed by a sense of shame and despair.

It was Selyne leaning over him. She was holding him with one hand while the other held something over his face. "Drink this," she said. She looked around furtively, that telling Avarel that there was still danger here. The sun had shifted in the sky but was still well short of the canyon's western summit. He had not been unconscious for long.

He managed to keep his head up long enough for her to dribble the contents of a flask into his mouth. Whatever was in it was neither water nor a liquor, but it had an effect on him, sending tendrils of life through his battered body as it settled into his stomach. The sensations awakened a new surge of pain as well, but that kind of pain he could deal with.

"What was that?" he asked. "A magical draught?"

"Efrasim had it," she said. She looked around again before her eyes settled on the relative security of the ridge. "We cannot stay here."

He nodded; as the potency of the hermit's elixir worked through him he thought he could actually move without passing out again. But he had a question that he could not deny any longer. "Matthias?"

Her expression told him the answer even before she spoke. "The ogre carried him off. We all saw him struck down. He... he could not have survived."

Inwardly Avarel agreed, but still he shook his head. "Help me up. Alive or dead, I cannot leave him here." He shifted, and while his limbs responded to his commands, even that slight motion reminded him of how damaged his body was. His sword arm was broken badly, and he could feel the hard stabbing pain that suggested broken ribs as well. He was familiar with both types of injury.

"No!" Selyne said, obviously alarmed. The word came out louder than she'd intended, and she quickly bent low next to him. "No," she repeated more quietly, urgency in the word. "If you insist, I will leave you here."

He had already acknowledged his defeat, or at least the honesty of his own body's messages had forced him to do so. "Help me up," he said again.

It was an agony, and both of them were covered in the clinging mud of the pool by the time she got him on his feet. With his good hand he fumbled for the short sword still buckled to his hip, but the hilt slipped through his mud-slicked fingers. He finally gave it up, knowing it was useless anyway. Were the ogre to reappear to finish the job, there was nothing he could do against it in his current condition. Still, he looked around for his primary weapon, knocked free when the creature had laid into him. "My sword?" he asked.

"I don't know. I didn't see where it fell."

Supporting his weight against her body, his uninjured arm slung across her shoulder, she led him toward the breach in the ridge. But they had only covered a half-dozen steps when Avarel saw something lying in the rocks and veered in that direction. Selyne reluctantly let herself be led there.

Avarel bent to recover the fallen object. It was a withe, or the remains of one; the slender sticks were broken, the iron rod at its core the only thing still holding it together. The rod was bent at a sharp angle. He stared at it for a long moment.

"He went up against the ogre armed only with that and a dagger," Selyne finally said.

“He was a Sword,” Avarel replied.

He let her lead him away. They remained silent save for the pained grunts of effort that accompanied every step the injured priest took. But when they reached the gap in the ridge, and what would no doubt be a difficult ascent back up, he turned to her.

“Surely you can see now that it cannot be reasoned with,” he said.

She didn’t respond, but looked troubled.

* * *

He had several broken ribs, a broken arm, a badly sprained ankle, and a concussion. Efrasim had gone over the litany as he’d worked on the Arunite knight, but Selyne would have known even without the shriveled old hermit’s words. The story of Avarel’s battle with the ogre was written clearly on the flesh of his body.

The Arunite didn’t look like much without his armor and weapons, though it might have been his current state, the hard lines of his form covered in tight bandages that Efrasim continued to wrap around him. The hermit had already reset the bones in his arm and secured them with splints.

As if he sensed the weight of her stare on him, the injured priest suddenly looked up and met her eyes. He didn’t say anything, but there was something in that look that made her profoundly uncomfortable. She didn’t want it to seem like she was fleeing from that gaze, so she stepped closer and addressed Efrasim.

“You were trained as a healer?” she asked him. “It seems like you’ve done this before.”

“In a past life,” the old man said. He didn’t elaborate, and there was something in his manner that seemed to block further questioning, so she turned her attention back to Avarel.

The priest was still looking toward her, but not *at* her, and she felt a shudder as she looked at him. The stare seemed to go right *through* her, as though he was seeing something far away that none of the rest of them could perceive. “Why didn’t it kill me?” the priest asked. “Why did it leave me alive, and take Matthias’s body?”

Efrasim put a hand on Avarel’s shoulder in an effort to keep him still as he applied the last roll of bandages around his battered torso. “Who can guess at what goes on inside the mind of such a beast?” He said it matter-of-factly, but Selyne got the sudden strange impression that the old hermit knew more than he said.

Something else came together in her mind, a memory of the scene that she knew would return to revisit her in her dreams. “It couldn’t see very well,” she said. “It has poor vision,” she repeated, feeling more certainty as she spoke the words.

Avarel looked up at her, his vacant stare suddenly sharp. “It saw well enough when we fought. It saw well enough to strike down Matthias.”

She came forward. “The sunlight,” she said. Seeing his incomprehension, she went on, “It shone off your armor, very bright. It was like a beacon during the fight.” She spoke quickly, her hands moving to punctuate her words. “When it was coming for you... it kept moving its head around, as if trying to find out where you’d gone. The mud... it covered you after you fell, so you blended in with the ground. We could see you just fine, but the creature was clearly having trouble. It didn’t turn toward Matthias until after he shouted.”

“The eyes weaken with age,” Efrasim noted. “The ogre was clearly of advanced years; it could be that you are correct.”

Avarel’s expression was more doubtful, but he finally nodded. “Perhaps,” he said. “But I do not see how it matters now.” Selyne could understand his reluctance; to have suffered such defeat at the hands of a ferocious monster was one thing, but if the creature was in fact aged and feeble...

Efrasim finished his working and helped Avarel struggle into a clean tunic. Selyne turned as Barzen came up to them. She knew her master well enough that one look at his face was enough to confirm the dread she’d been waiting for. She almost protested, but he turned his gaze to her, and against the hard edge in his eyes she could not speak.

He turned back to face the others. “I am going to the shrine,” he told them.

The Arunite priest and the old hermit looked up at him in surprise. Avarel’s expression quickly changed, however, to the angry scowl that Selyne was starting to find so familiar on his face. “What? Are you daft, man? Did you not just see what happened up there?” He started to rise, but his face twisted in a spasm of pain and he succumbed to Efrasim’s hand on his shoulder, easing him back down to the rock. “What do you hope to gain?” the Arunite persisted.

“The ogre comes from a violent and barbaric race, but they are not without intelligence,” Barzen responded.

“You hope to *reason* with it?” Avarel asked.

“With *him*,” Barzen countered. “He is not a thing, but a thinking creature, if barbaric and ungodly.”

“You speak of it as though it were a man,” Avarel said.

“Not a man, but not an animal either,” Barzen replied.

“Master, it could be that this course is not the wisest...” Selyne found herself saying, but she faltered at a look from the elder priest.

“We cannot just abandon the shrine to such a creature,” Barzen said. If he felt any fear, he kept it well hidden. “Nor would I leave Matthias’s body to his custody.”

Avarel straightened again, and this time he shrugged off Efrasim’s touch to struggle to his feet. Selyne could see the effort it cost him. “I will not leave him,” he said, his words thick through the haze of his pain. “I will return with a force sufficient to cleanse this place, and avenge my brother.”

“I do not mean to dishonor your grief,” Barzen said. “I ask only that you have faith in the god that we share.” Selyne had often seen him use this tactic, awakening anger with words and then changing to sympathy to draw an opponent closer to his point of view. It didn’t look like it was working on Avarel, but she wasn’t sure what he could do now to stop her master from going through with his plan.

The Arunite apparently recognized the same. “Your faith will not strike down the ogre,” he said. “I wash my hands of you then, Vidran.”

“My actions are my own responsibility,” Barzen said, his voice taking on more of its usual edge. “And perhaps there will be no need to strike him down.”

“What of your aide, then?” Avarel asked.

Selyne felt momentarily conspicuous as all three men turned to look at her. She wanted to be brave at that moment, to make the same offer that Matthias had, but with his fate fresh in her memory she found that she could not.

Barzen shook his head. "If I should fall, I ask that you see her back to Caelmbron," he said.

Selyne thought it more likely that she would be the one helping the Arunite back, but Avarel nodded solemnly. "Master," she said, the one word all the protest she could muster.

"We must have faith," he said. That was the only farewell she got before he turned and walked toward the cleft in the ridge.

She stood there, just watching as he negotiated the difficult ascent up the face of the ridge. He didn't hesitate or look back once, and it wasn't until he had vanished into the narrow gap at the summit that she was able to move. She started after him, but hesitated as Avarel called out to her.

"Wait," he said. He took a step toward her, but that was all he could manage. "I will need your help."

"You should remain here. You're certainly in no shape for another climb, and if... you should stay with the horses."

"Please," he said, and she could tell what it cost him to say it.

She looked back at the path. Even with both her and Efrasim helping it would be almost impossible to manage the ascent. But after a moment she had an idea, and hurried over to her mule.

It only took a few minutes to actually manage the climb, once the preparations were complete, but Selyne still felt the trickling sands of an invisible hourglass within her mind. She left the mule tethered securely in a cluster of rocks at the top of the ridge, and hurried over to the stone shelf that offered a vantage over the entire canyon. Behind her Avarel and Efrasim followed more slowly, the old hermit assisting the injured Arunite over the uneven rocks.

For a moment she didn't see Barzen, and feared that she had missed him, that he had already gone into the shrine. But then he stepped into view, emerging from the deep shadows at the base of the ridge into the bright sunlight that covered the path up from the pool. He must have stopped for a prayer, or perhaps to gather his will for the confrontation that would come. She almost called out to him, but she feared that even a soft cry would echo loudly through the canyon, alerting the ogre.

She needn't have feared that, for Barzen was still well short of the pillared flat at the top of the path before he let out a shout. "Ogre!" he cried. "Ogre!"

Despite his age and physical frailty Barzen had a voice trained to carry. It filled the canyon like the insides of a cathedral, echoing off the sheer stone faces that surrounded them. He stumbled on the slick mud of the path but kept on going. He had left behind his walking stick, Selyne realized. She glanced back at the camp where they'd left the horses, but it was too far to see it. Maybe he didn't want the ogre to see it and think it was a weapon. Matthias had attacked it with little more than a stick, and his fate...

She swallowed back her fear as Avarel and Efrasim finally shuffled up behind her. She felt exposed standing there on the edge of the ridge, but couldn't bring herself to fall to a crouch or a crawl. She felt as though she was bearing witness here to something important, even though she could not see what her master was doing as anything but foolish. Perhaps her own faith was lacking, she thought, clutching her hands together to keep them from trembling.

Avarel could not remain standing; he slumped forward, the hermit easing him into a seated position on the edge of the outcrop. Efrasim's face was a withered mask; she could not tell what he was feeling. Avarel shared her fears, that much was clear, but she also read frustration. He held himself up with one hand, but the other clutched at his side where the hilt of his sword would have been.

Barzen kept moving up the trail; he was now closer to the pillars surrounding the summit than he was to the ridge where Selyne and the others watched. He continued his loud summons to the ogre. "Ogre! You have defeated our warrior! Come out! I wish only to speak with you!"

He came into the shadow of the rock formation and had turned toward the cave opening in the far cliff when the sound Selyne had dreaded finally came. Barzen came to a stop, facing that dark opening.

She had seen the creature once before, but the effect of the ogre's appearance was no less the second time around. Again he seemed to swell as he emerged from the narrow cleft in the cliff face, briefly rising to his full height before he bent forward again to resume his shambling gait forward. He carried something that glittered in the early afternoon sunlight; Selyne didn't recognize what it was at first, until she heard a gasp from Avarel, lying on the bare stone in front of her.

The ogre had the priest's sword.

She must have looked away before, missed it when the ogre had recovered the blade. In his hands it didn't look as big as it had when Avarel had wielded it, but she knew that with the ogre's strength behind it the weapon could carve Barzen into pieces.

Her shoes scuffed on the uneven rocks before she realized she'd taken a few steps back. Terror gripped at her insides, but something else had taken hold of her, and before she had come to any conscious decision she was making her way through the line of boulders back toward the cleft that led down into the canyon. She heard a startled hiss, then her name. "Selyne!" Avarel called after her with more urgency, but she ignored him, refused to look back as she rushed forward, while in the canyon ahead death shuffled forward to confront her master.

* * *

Barzen knew fear. He did not think of himself as a coward, and he did not run as the ogre approached, but he could feel the thunder of his tread through the ground and could sense its echo in the trembling of his limbs. He held his sigil in his hand, the hard contours of the iron torch offering a familiar reassurance. His lips moved as he whispered the first line of the Invocation of Dawn; the words of the prayer steadied him.

The ogre looked down at him. The sword he had stolen was a brilliant shaft of fire in the bright sunlight. This close the priest could see that the suppositions of his student were correct. The ogre's withered features betrayed his age, and the eyes that were just visible under its protruding brows and sagging lids were coated with a milky film. But Barzen guessed that the creature's weight equaled his five or six times over, and he could see the matted blood that soiled his filthy tunic and leggings. If he was suffering from the wounds he had taken in the fight with the Arunites, he did not show it now.

He was still a good ten paces off when the priest raised his hands. Somewhat to his surprise, the ogre came to a stop.

“Ogre,” he said, pitching his voice to the tone he used when preaching the word of Khel to congregations large or small, “There has been enough violence done here. One of us lies dead at your hand, and another has been grievously injured. We do not seek to fight you further, but know that this place is sacred to our kind. The spirit of our god speaks to us here. More men will come, many men. Leave now in peace, and we will not hinder you further.”

The ogre stared at him, and Barzen began to feel that he’d miscalculated, that the ogre did not understand his language or could decipher his words. He closed his fingers tight around the blessed symbol of his faith, and opened his mouth to make one more effort, to try to explain to this brutish creation why he *had* to keep going, why he could not just turn around and walk away. It went beyond proving something to the Arunite priest or even to himself.

But before he could speak the ogre beat him to it. A deep rumble sounded from within his chest, a sound like rocks being broken. With a start, Barzen realized that he was laughing at him. His surprise deepened as the creature addressed him.

“Fool hoo-man,” he said. “This my place, now.”

Barzen swallowed. “This is a holy place...” he began, but his voice faltered as the ogre took a ponderous step forward, slashing his sword through the empty air between them.

“I shit on you holy ground, shaman. Power in this place mine now. Your warrior broken, you send more I break too. Tonight when moon rise I rip out beating heart from your boy man and eat, gain his courage. You...” he said, extending the sword so it pointed at Barzen’s chest, “You only good for carve up flesh.”

The ogre came forward, the sword coming up above his head in a glittering arc. Barzen staggered back, his arms coming up reflexively in a vain effort to protect himself. His holy symbol slid from his suddenly nerveless fingers. He grasped at it in vain as it fell, the sun flashing off the metal as it tumbled down toward the muddy ground at his feet. It struck the edge of a rock and bounced away. Barzen dove for it but only managed to trip himself. He stumbled forward and felt pain explode in his side as he landed awkwardly on his hip. He never even saw the blade that carved through the air where his head had been a moment before.

The old priest tried to get up, but the slope of the ground confounded him and he fell again, rolling down several paces before he came to a stop in a muddy patch of tangled grass. The ogre had turned to come after him, but the rocks that had stolen his sacred icon stymied the giant brute, and he let out a roar as the sharp edges cut at his feet. He swung at Barzen again as the priest staggered to his feet, clutching his injured side. The tip of the blade came close enough that the wind of its passage stirred up the priest’s hair around his face.

Barzen fled toward the nearest cover, the ring of stone pillars that he’d passed on his way to confront the ogre. They were spread over irregular intervals in two concentric circles, the outer roughly twenty paces across, the inner perhaps half that. The center was bare save for some pieces of stone that one might have been the foundations of an altar or perhaps a statue of some sort; it was impossible to be sure now.

The priest ran down the slope, his torn and dirty robe trailing behind him. The ogre followed, circling around on the path rather than taking the more precipitous route that

the priest had accidentally taken. But that delay only gained Barzen a scant few heartbeats, and it was clear that there was no way that he would get much further before the ogre could catch him.

The Vidran staggered into the outer ring of pillars. Up close it was still difficult to tell if they were natural pieces of stone that had been moved here, or deliberately sculpted creations worn ragged by centuries of time. Most ended in jagged tops that failed to rise much higher than six or seven feet, and some were just waist-high stumps, shorn off by some calamity.

Barzen ducked behind one of the taller pillars. They averaged about three feet thick, not much to hide behind when it came to that. The priest crouched there for a moment, trying to steady his breathing, then with an effort he stood up, his back pressed against the cold stone. He had proven himself a coward after all, but he would not die like a dog cringing on the ground.

He didn't have to look around the pillar to know where the ogre was; each step he took was a clear announcement of his coming. He heard a harsh ringing sound that was repeated at irregular intervals, and belatedly realized it was the tip of the sword bouncing off the rocks as he approached. *He'll dull the blade*, a mad voice whispered in his head, but he realized it didn't matter; the ogre didn't need the sword to kill him.

The ogre came to the edge of the ring of stones and stopped. He couldn't have been more than a few paces away, Barzen thought. He didn't know why the monstrous thing had hesitated, but bad eyes or no, it wouldn't take him long to find where he had hidden himself. He could hear the sound of the ogre's breathing; it sounded like a heavy bellows being worked in a forge. He'd done some of that work in his youth, what seemed like a dozen lifetimes ago. It was a strange thought to summon in such a moment. He'd heard that sometimes it happened that way, when one faced death.

He pressed his cheek against the cold stone. The edge of the pillar was rough enough that it scraped on his skin. He took a slow steadying breath and let it out. Silently he offered a final prayer to his god as he prepared to step out and confront his fate.

But before either he or the ogre could take that final step, a loud noise jolted him. It startled him so much that he nearly fell down, and had to grab onto the pillar to steady himself. It was a raw, bestial sound, and it took him a moment that it wasn't coming from the ogre, but from somewhere back down the path toward the entrance of the canyon.

When he finally recognized the sound he was almost more surprised than by the initial shock. He leaned out from around the pillar, not quite enough to reveal himself to the ogre, but enough to see the mule that shot up the path, braying frantically. He had obviously just missed something, for he could see about fifteen paces behind it the muddy form of Selyne, who was slowly getting to her feet.

The animal was making a terrific racket, its panicked cries building as they echoed off the canyon walls, but Barzen could still clearly hear the sound made by the ogre as he turned to face the charging mule. Clearly the poor beast had detected the threat as well, for it suddenly veered off into the rocks, heading away from Barzen's vantage rather than toward the relative security of the ring of pillars. Not that either choice would have saved it. The ogre stomped quickly to intercept it, one, two, three massive strides that sounded like the hammer of a giant struck against the ground. Barzen didn't see

the denouement, but it was clearly announced as the mule's cry abruptly changed, the braying transformed into a darker note of pure agony that grabbed at the priest's guts like a cruel fist. The first blow hadn't killed it cleanly; he could hear its frenzied squeals as it flopped around in the rocks.

He didn't wait to find out the mule's fate. He pushed away from the pillar and half-ran, half-staggered across the empty center of the inner circle toward the far side of the ring. Selyne appeared even as he stepped past the remnants of whatever shrine had once existed there. He saw her and started to run toward her, but she came to him and pulled him into the nearest gap in the pillars. He opened his mouth to speak but could not; it took all of his effort not to stumble and to stay with her as they left the ring of stones. He had thought that she would try to run back down the slope and rejoin the path, but they'd barely reentered the rock field before she dragged him to the ground. Fresh pains erupted in his legs and bruised side, but he bit them back as she pulled her dark cloak around the both of them.

"What..." he finally managed to gasp out.

"Sshhh," she said, cutting him off.

The cloak covered most of his body and part of his head, but he could clearly see between the uneven rocks that concealed them. Their current hiding place offered little protection; against a man he would have guessed the chance of escaping notice to be almost nothing. He realized that Selyne was gambling their lives on her assessment of the ogre's vision. He could feel the warmth of her and the harsh rasp of her breathing as she fought to remain quiet.

He could hear the tread of the ogre before the creature came into view. His earlier fantastic hope that somehow the ogre could not enter the consecrated space within the ring of pillars was shattered as he saw him, the stone teeth thin and frail against his bulk. The ogre stepped back through the outer ring and looked over the hillside. He was so close that Barzen could have tossed a pebble and hit his massive feet with hardly any effort. There was no way he could fail to see them, and the priest forced himself not to breathe as those murky eyes passed over their pathetic hidey-hole. The mule's screams continued, weaker now but no less terrible for that.

The ogre stood over them for a few moments longer, then he turned and walked back the way he had come. Selyne remained unmoving beside Barzen, and he forced himself to stay the same despite the blooming agonies in his legs and back. Whatever temptation he might have had to move was cured as the mule's cries were abruptly cut off with a single loud crack.

The ogre came into view again a few moments later. He was heading back along the path toward the cleft in the cliffs. The mule was slung over one shoulder, trailing fresh blood down the back of his coat. The sun gleamed brightly on the parts of his sword that were not stained with blood.

They watched the ogre until he had vanished back into the cliff. He seemed to shrink as he bent low to slip through the narrow opening. And then he was gone.

Barzen turned to Selyne, trying to think of what he could say that would be up to the moment. For once, nothing came to mind.

"Come on, we have to get out of here," she said. Helping him despite her own obvious pains, she pulled him to his feet and started the difficult trek back to the trail and the ridge.

* * * * *

Chapter 4

“You are absolutely certain?” Avarel repeated for what had to be the third or fourth time. “You did not mishear its words?”

Barzen looked up from where Efrasim was tending to his injuries. He had escaped from his encounter with the ogre rather more well off than Avarel had, but even the slight motion caused his face to twist in a grimace of pain. “The ogre was quite clear,” he said.

Avarel paced back and forth, favoring his injured leg but otherwise trying to ignore the pains that he still quite clearly felt. Selyne, crouched next to her master, gestured toward the Arunite priest and said, “Oh, do sit down, before you fall down. You’ll do no good to anyone if you aggravate your wounds and have to be carried out of here on a litter.”

“We have to get Matthias out of there,” Avarel said.

Selyne did not flinch from the intensity of his gaze. “I know,” she said. “But you’ll do him no good by wasting your strength here.”

For a moment she thought he would turn away, but he finally came forward and joined the others on the rocks that surrounded the pool at the base of the ridge. The surviving mounts had cropped clear the shoots that jutted up from around the stones. They were nervous, pulling at their tethers, a reminder that their position here remained precarious. The priests stayed close to the animals, but if the ogre appeared in the gap of the ridge behind them they would be hard pressed to get away before it could reach them. But at the same time, none of them were quite willing to relocate their camp back down near the entrance to the canyon, not after the ogre’s revelation to Barzen.

“Efrasim, what more can you...” Barzen began, only to gasp as the Nadaran priest applied pressure to his hip.

“Are you all right?” Avarel asked.

“The bone is not broken, but the bruising goes deep,” Efrasim said. “Normally I would recommend rest and hot compresses, but in this case...”

“Hardly a viable option. Thank you,” Barzen said. “I was asking, what more can you tell us about the interior of the shrine? Is there another way in?”

The old hermit shook his head. “Nay. There is only the one big room inside, a natural cavern that is accessed by the cleft in the cliff face. There is a pool on one side of the chamber, but it is fed through small cracks in the rock that are not large enough to admit a person even if one could find its source. There is an opening in the roof, a narrow shaft that lets light in during high sun.”

“Or high moon,” Avarel said darkly.

The hermit nodded. “The altar stone is directly underneath it.”

“Maybe I could climb up there, take a look,” Selyne suggested.

"It would be quite difficult," Efrasim pointed out. "You'd have to get up the cliffs first, then ascend a dome of rock that's nearly sheer on all sides."

"I'm a decent climber," Selyne said.

Avarel shook his head. "There's no time. It'll be dark in a few hours."

"I could try to sneak in," Selyne persisted.

"A risky strategy," Efrasim said. "Within the shrine there are crevices within the interior where one could escape notice, but the entry is a nearly smooth tunnel that is within clear view of the interior. Anyone inside could clearly see and hear anyone who tried to enter."

Avarel settled his hard stare on her again. "You are brave," he said. He looked at Barzen. "What say you, priest? Perhaps another prayer that you can offer to Khel?"

Selyne started to get up, but Barzen held her with a hand on her arm. "Your rebuke is fair, Arunite," he said. "I will admit that I was wrong about the creature, but I do not regret the effort. And had I not made it, we would not know that the boy was still alive."

"Matthias is no child," Avarel said, but the anger had gone out of him.

"I know that you care for him," Barzen went on. "But we will not be able to help him unless we work together."

Avarel's expression sharpened. "What do you suggest?"

"Selyne is the only one of us with enough strength remaining to bring the boy— Matthias out of the shrine. But first, we must remove the ogre, distract him."

Avarel nodded. "That I can do."

Barzen raised a hand. "Self-sacrifice is noble, but not sufficient in this instance. If the ogre merely emerged to kill you, that would not give Selyne enough time to pull Matthias out and hide him, as she hid me from the creature's eyes."

"Perhaps we can lure him out into the canyon," Selyne suggested.

Avarel had kept his eyes on Barzen, weighing. The older priest did not flinch from the scrutiny; he seemed more at peace now than he had before, even as battered as he was.

"No," the Arunite said. "It hasn't shown a willingness to leave the upper canyon thus far, and even if we could draw it out, it would still trap you and Matthias up there. No, we have to do more than distract it," he said.

Barzen nodded.

"Say then what is in your thoughts," Avarel said.

The old priest explained his plan as the afternoon sun dipped lower in the western sky.

* * *

The sun had fallen below the level of the ridge, casting much of the upper canyon into deep shadow, but it briefly flashed bright on the armored figure that stepped into the narrow cleft in the summit. The figure lingered in the cleft only briefly, the fading evening rays forming a halo around him before he descended into the steep culvert that led down to the canyon floor below.

He disappeared from view as he entered that dark opening, but the sounds he made as he navigated the climb down were clearly audible even from a good distance away. His armor clanked and rattled, the damaged plates only haphazardly repaired after the

unfortunate encounter with the ogre that morning. His helmet fit awkwardly on his head, as one of the metal plates that curved down to protect his jawline had been seriously bent, such that it would take a smithy to fully repair.

When the armored warrior emerged back into the shadowed space at the base of the ridge it quickly became clear that the armor had not been the only thing damaged in that fight. The priest's steps were anything but certain as he navigated the path around the edge of the upper pool, his boots squelching loudly in the mud. He carried a thick wooden staff that was half again the size of the sword that the ogre had stolen, and as he reached the start of the trail that led up into the canyon he began pounding it against the rocks that surrounded the path. There was a metal rod tied to the end of the staff, and the sound it made when it hit the stones echoed loudly through the canyon.

The warrior began a slow, labored ascent. Every few steps he would stop and let out a loud cry. They were all variations of the same sentiment.

"Ogre! I am coming for you, ogre!"

"You will die this day, ogre!"

"Hide within your hole, ogre, it will not avail you against me!"

The shouts were deep and powerful, but within fifty paces it was evident that the speaker was faltering. He continued pounding the staff against the rocks, but in between he sagged against it, relying on its support to keep from falling down. At a few places his boots slid on the mud and he nearly fell, and once he did slip down to one knee, only the staff keeping him from collapsing completely. But he got up again, and again issued another loud challenge.

"Ogre! Prepare for your death!"

The last word was barely out when it was answered by a fearsome bellowing cry. The warrior stopped in mid-step as the ogre exploded out of the narrow gap in the far cliff. This time he did not hesitate or slow to take a look around; instead he charged forward, eating up the distance from the cliffs to the ring of pillars in huge strides. No longer did he look aged or infirm; if anything he looked more terrifying than he had in the earlier confrontations, with blood and filth caked on his ragged clothes, and his face twisted into a violent snarl. He still carried the Arunite priest's broadsword, and as he reached the summit of the path he raised the weapon into the retreating sunlight. The steel caught the light and for a moment was transformed into a firebrand that dazzled as though it had become the sun itself.

* * *

Selyne willed herself to be small and unseen as she crouched in the rocks, a long stone's throw from the crack in the cliff. It had taken her the better part of an hour to get that far, creeping all the way around the edge of the canyon, moving slowly and carefully to avoid disturbing the loose rocks scattered around the base of the cliff to her right. The sun had been just above the top of the cliffs to the west when she'd started, descending until only a tiny sliver had been left. As the opening leading into the shrine had come into view even that bright line had faded, leaving just a vague glow that deepened quickly down the spectrum of colors. She welcomed the approaching twilight. She'd had to muster all her courage to get this close, and while it seemed a

long stretch to cover, especially over the uneven ground, it also seemed far too close given her memories of the ogre.

The gap seemed to grow smaller yet as the ogre's roar blasted out of the narrow opening. The sound was deafening, and she had to resist the sudden impulse to turn and run back the way she had come. Instead she nestled down deeper into the rocks, ignoring the edges that pressed through her clothes into her skin. Her dark cloak was spread over her, the cowl raised so that only a narrow slit let her look out. She hadn't looked back but had heard the sounds made by her approaching distraction.

She'd wondered what she would do if they failed to lure their adversary out, but that worry was ended as the ogre exploded out of the opening on the heels of that echoing challenge. Her worries that somehow the creature would sense her presence proved groundless; the ogre went charging straight down the trail without hesitation, so quickly that he was gone from the narrow slit of her vision before she could even get a good look at him.

She wanted to wait until he was well past, but in her mind she felt the trickle of sands slipping through an hourglass that was all too thinly packed from the start. Worry filled her, not only for herself, but for the man waiting below. Their plan depended on the beast responding to their provocation, but the ogre had been moving so fast...

She had to force herself not to stop or look back, focusing on the uneven ground that rose and fell with each step. The rocks were slick with mud and crusts of lichen that made each step treacherous, but she'd gotten good practice in her approach, and she didn't slip as she crept quickly forward, using her hands almost as much as her feet. Her pulse seemed to pound in her chest and in her head, almost drowning out the disturbing sounds that continued behind her. From the ogre's roars they had certainly succeeded in getting his attention.

And then the cleft was right in front of her. When they'd watched the ogre squeeze through from afar it had seemed tiny, but now that she was up close she could see how it widened into a corridor that penetrated deep into the stone face of the cliff. It was broad enough that she could walk through with arms outstretched and not be able to touch the walls to either side. It started as a natural opening in the cliff face but she could soon see where it had been worked by human hands, the floor and walls becoming smooth.

She went inside. It was amazing how quickly the tunnel swallowed her up; within just a few steps both the light and sounds from outside faded as though she'd passed through an invisible curtain of heavy cloth. The passage began to slant noticeably downward, though not enough to make the footing treacherous. She moved to one side, running her hand along the wall to help guide her. There was little need, as there was only one way to go and no obstacles that she could see, but the cool firmness of the stone was somehow reassuring as the darkness deepened.

After about thirty paces she could see that the passage opened onto a larger space ahead. The opening was limned by a faint glow that looked to originate from somewhere above. From Efrasim's description that would be the narrow opening that let natural light into the shrine.

She hesitated about ten steps away from the tunnel's end. She could just make out some of the features of the room beyond, enough to tell that the space was cavernous. The shrine. She still felt the pressure of time. Enough of it had passed that the ogre

might have already dealt with their distraction and was on his way back, or perhaps he had abandoned the chase to return prematurely. The thought awakened a sudden panic. Why had the ogre come here in the first place, and why had he kept coming back to the shrine instead of pursuing the priests after each previous encounter? Did he have a mate here, or a child, or an injured companion, perhaps? Was it love or duty or friendship that kept the creature anchored here? Did ogres even experience such feelings in the same way that humans did?

She realized that she was thinking herself into paralysis, and that there were only two choices: forward or back. The thought of Matthias drove her ahead, and she continued her slow descent.

* * *

Against the fearsome charge of the ogre the warrior held his ground for only a few heartbeats. By the time that the ogre passed the ring of pillars and started down the trail the priest was already in retreat, his mail clanking loudly as he half-ran, half-staggered back the way he had come. The staff rang loudly as its metal-tipped end bounced off the rocks, flapping back and forth behind the fleeing warrior.

At the base of the trail as it curved around the pool the warrior faltered, his boots sliding on the slick ground. He staggered into the pool, his staff almost coming out of his grasp as he fought to avoid going head-first into the water. He somehow was able to recover, though his escape was anything but elegant. Water sprayed up all around him as he thrashed clear of the pool and stumbled back onto the path.

He looked up to see the ogre halfway down the slope. The giant had not slaked his speed, and if anything accelerated as he approached the bottom of the hill. His head came down as though he intended simply to batter the priest into submission with a single blow from his broad skull.

The priest fumbled clear and limped heavily along the edge of the pool. He was leaning hard on the staff now, the steel prod at the end poking deep into the muddy ground with each step. The deepening shadows along the base of the ridge enfolded him as he approached the cleft, but there was no cover, and with the smooth surface of the pool and the almost sheer face of the ridge as backdrops it was impossible to miss him even in the weak light.

He was still a good twenty paces shy of the narrow opening in the base of the cliff when he paused and glanced back. There was a dangerous moment as the ogre reached the bottom of the hill; as fast as he was going, there was a good chance he would stumble as the priest had and tumble into the pool. But the ogre planted his feet and leapt, the sheer weight of him digging his feet deep into the muddy bank and letting him transfer his momentum without losing his footing. The maneuver allowed him to quickly close the remaining distance separating him from the priest. Both realized at that moment that the warrior had no chance of making it to the cleft before the ogre would reach him.

* * *

Selyne had to admit that the interior of the shrine was impressive, even in the deepening twilight. From the entrance she could not see the opening in the ceiling that let in the light, as the upper part of the cavern was a maze of ridges and crevices. By contrast the floor of the cavern was remarkably clear, the stone worn smooth by the tools of ancient men and the passage of generations of their feet.

The features of the shrine were precisely as the hermit had described. Off to the right was the pool, its surface a pristine sheet of glistening black. To either side of the entrance was a great fire bowl of carved stone, left abandoned so long that not even ashes remained within their basins. Around the edges of the room were various narrow crevices, black mouths where the light from above did not reach. Each could have held hidden passages or a lurking ogre, but her eyes were drawn to the center of the room, to her destination and goal.

The bier was a vast smooth slab, a gray just slightly darker than the surrounding stone. It was big enough that two ogres could have laid upon it side-by-side without touching, but the only thing upon it now was a limp figure that lay huddled at one end.

She found herself walking forward, her legs moving as though animated by some external force. She stepped around the edge of the bier and approached the man lying unmoving upon the bare stone.

She did not know how he could have survived the blow that the ogre had inflicted upon him in the canyon above, and for a moment she thought that he was dead. He did not react when she touched his arm, and as she pulled him over his head lolled on the stone. His flesh was pale, his skin bruised around the neck.

"Matthias," she whispered. She reached for his throat to check for the heartbeat there, but was startled by a sudden sound that she only belatedly realized had come from the young priest's lips.

"Khel's grace," she said. "Matthias!"

The young man stirred, but seemed incapable of much more than another groan. "Ogre," he managed.

"It's gone for the moment," she said. She put her arm under his body and pulled him to her. He wasn't an especially big man, but it looked like he wasn't going to be able to give her much help in their escape. He groaned again, but then drifted off once more into unconsciousness.

"It's all right," she said, touching his face. "I'll get you out of here."

She tugged him to the very edge of the bier, then bent underneath him so that the bulk of his weight would fall upon her shoulder.

"Khel, give me strength," she said, then she yanked him onto her.

* * *

With the ogre almost on his heels, there was no escape for the armored priest. Still, he tried. He turned and ran, but only managed a few steps before his exhausted legs collapsed underneath him. He fell to the ground, his helmet tumbling off his head and clattering into the rocks. His staff was trapped under his body, useless.

The ogre raised his sword. He barely slackened his pace as he came under the shadow of the ridge.

The fallen priest looked up. Even in the poor light the drawn features of Barzen were clearly visible. But the ogre saw only a man in armor.

A figure rose up in the rocks above and ran out onto the jut of stone that protruded out from the summit of the ridge. It was Avel, clad only in torn leggings and a tunic, his bare feet making hardly a sound on the smooth stone. He carried his short sword, and as he reached the end of the rock and sprung out into open space he brought it forward, both hands clutched tight to the hilt.

Perhaps the ogre was alerted by a shifting of the shadows, or maybe he heard something. It was too late to stop, but he turned his head, looking up in time to see the man falling straight toward him. The creature's eyes widened in surprise, and he tried to jerk back, but even as his arm came up Avel struck. He slammed into the ogre's back, the sword driven by his full weight into the gap where the brute's neck met his shoulder. The bright steel, forged in an Arunite monastery, penetrated fur and leather and flesh alike, sinking into the ogre's body until only the hilt stuck out from the wound.

Avel tried to hold on, but his own weight and the ogre's reflexive movement pulled them apart. The Arunite priest was flung roughly to the ground. A scream of pain was torn from his lips as he fell onto his injured ankle. He landed awkwardly in the rocks, and it took all of his effort just to roll over onto his side and look up at the ogre.

The creature had staggered several steps off to the side, splashing into the shallow water at the edge of the pool. He was almost close enough to touch the sheer face of the ridge. He faced away from the two priests, hunched over until it seemed that he *had* to fall. A long silence stretched out, the two priests staring at the wounded monster, unwilling to do so much as breathe lest they alter the course of the unspooling thread of fate.

Finally the ogre straightened. He turned, his muddy feet shifting ponderously on the uneven ground. The bloody hilt of the sword still jutted from above his shoulder blade, tiny against the sheer bulk of the creature. Blood matted his furs in a spread around the wound, and was flecked on his lips as his breath hissed out from its body.

"Great Khel," Barzen breathed. Avel, lying in the rocks a dozen steps away, tried to get up, but his body had absorbed too much abuse. He fell back, defeated. The warrior priest could only stare as the ogre raised the great sword, *his* sword.

The ogre let out a harsh cry and swung the sword around in a wide arc. Both priests flinched despite being well out of the reach of even those long arms, but the blade slammed into the stone face behind it. With a loud ring the steel snapped off just above the hilt, the long shaft tumbling end over end before it fell into the deeper water of the pool where it gathered around the crack in the cliff face. The ogre hurled the useless hilt of the sword across the pond; it bounced off the far cliff and landed in the water with a plop.

Then the ogre turned and trod ponderously over to the gap in the ridge that led up to the cleft. The two priests watched as he made the ascent. The ogre was so large that he seemed to fill the space, and he disappeared only for a few moments before his head emerged again at the summit. The two priests laid there in stunned silence until he dropped out of sight again over the far side.

The two seemed to come out of a haze as the ogre disappeared. Barzen groaned and rolled over onto his side, while Avel managed to crawl out of the rocks onto the muddy fringe of the path. "Efrasim... horses..." the Arunite managed to gasp. But there

was nothing he could do about either now; he could not even get up, coughing weakly as he sagged back down to the ground.

"It's in the hands of the god," Barzen said.

Avarel didn't respond; he'd lost consciousness. After a few moments Barzen laid his head back and stared up the sky.

Selyne found them there, lying in the mud beside the pool.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

The fire crackled and spat as it consumed the tangle of dried branches crammed into a gap in the stones. The light it shed drove back the night, but the darkness seemed to press in against that glow, as if waiting for it to falter.

On the edge of the firelight Avarel knelt beside Matthias, who had been tucked in under a layer of blankets. Some of the acolyte's color had returned and he slept easily, his body drawing strength from the broth they'd been able to get into him.

"I should not have let her go," the Arunite said. "Not alone."

"Neither of us can manage twenty steps right now, let alone that climb," his companion replied. Barzen sat in a huddle on the far side of the fire, a cloak draped over his shoulders. The priest looked like he had aged a decade in just the last few days, but he'd recovered his calm expression as he sipped at a mug of hot tea.

That equanimity faded somewhat as a noise from the darkness that loomed over the camp reached them. Avarel turned at once and scrambled awkwardly to his feet, reaching for the club he'd improvised to replace his lost swords. Barzen too rose painfully and faced the darkness. "Selyne? Selyne!"

A light appeared above them, brightening until the flame of a torch materialized in the cleft in the ridge. The woman holding it was visible only for a moment before she descended into the gap that led down to where they had established their camp, but that moment was enough for relief to show on the faces of both priests.

Both men waited until the Vidran acolyte reemerged and came toward them. Her torch showed clearly how ragged she looked, if not quite as battered as the two older priests or the young man sleeping beside the fire.

"What did you see?" Avarel asked her. "The hermit? The horses? The creature?"

"By Khel's grace, let the girl speak," Barzen said, though he seemed hardly less eager for her report.

"No sign of Efrasim or the ogre," she said. "I saw some bloodstains on the ridge, but nothing beyond. And the horses were where we left them. I fed them and checked their hobbles and tethers, and got some of the supplies." She indicated the bag she had slung over one shoulder.

"It must have gone down the canyon," Avarel said. "Either Efrasim fled from it, or it took him."

"Doubtful that he outran it on foot," Selyne said. "Why wouldn't he have taken one of the horses? Or just hidden in the rocks until it went past? There were plenty of places atop the ridge where he could have stayed." She seemed more than a little distraught.

"We'll find him," Avarel said, though his own expression spoke of his feelings about the old man's chances.

"I wonder," Barzen said, in a way that drew the attention of the two others to him.

"What do you mean?" Avarel asked.

"The hermit, the ogre, this place it makes me think."

"I do not understand," Avarel said.

"What are you saying, master?" Selyne asked. "That Efrasim and the ogre were connected somehow?"

Avarel frowned. "You believe that the old man was a sorcerer of some sort? That he was in league with the creature? To what gain?"

Barzen shook his head. "I do not know. But just consider. The old man appeared and disappeared as quickly as the ogre himself. The creature was deadly, yes, but he spared Matthias when he could have killed him, and he retreated several times when he could have killed all of us. Even at the end, he fled when we were powerless to stop him."

"I would have thought that you would have claimed that Khel was watching over us," Avarel said. "But instead you are suggesting... what? That this was all part of some sort of trick, or game?"

"No, not a game," Barzen replied softly.

Avarel, however was not appeased. "There are many possible explanations for what happened," the Arunite priest said. "The ogre was nearly blind, and clearly old. Perhaps its brains were addled. It could not know how weak we were, and my sword was buried in its body, there at the end. Maybe it had lost its fury for the fight."

"Or maybe he never intended to kill us," Barzen said.

"Bah," Avarel said, shaking his head. "I think that perhaps you hit your head a bit harder on those rocks than we first thought," he said. "The ogre was just a barbarian creature, nothing more. And as for Efrasim... He was odd, but no more so than other Nadarans that I have met."

"He treated both of you," Selyne pointed out. "His healing may have saved your life," she said to Avarel.

"And I shall not forget. Tomorrow, if Matthias is well enough to be taken down to the horses, we will see. The ogre was grievously wounded, if it did carry off Efrasim, it might not have taken him too far."

"I do not think you will find anything," Barzen said.

"Be that as it may, I will make the effort." He took a deep breath and turned back toward the fire. "We all need rest. I will take the first watch. Selyne, I will wake you at midnight." He hobbled off to one of the larger rocks that surrounded the camp, and propped himself against it. The two Vidrans watched him, a vague shadow in the night.

* * *

The night was deep and utterly still, the only sound the faint crackling of their fire.

The shadow of Avarel was just a vague outline in the darkness, standing sentinel over the camp well beyond the nimbus of light that shone from the flames. The moon had not yet risen and even the stars seemed muted, though the sky above remained clear of clouds.

Selyne, awake within her blankets, stirred and looked over at Barzen. The senior priest had not stirred from where he had been sitting earlier, staring silently at the fire. The acolyte hesitated for a few moments before she got up and slipped over to join him.

"You should rest, child," he said to her.

"I could not sleep," she said. "I was... preoccupied, at your words earlier. What you said to Avarel."

Barzen allowed a hint of a smile to creep onto his features. "I could not resist teasing him a bit. A failing of mine, perhaps."

"So you don't think it was true? That this was all some sort of test?"

He did not turn to look at her. "What do you believe?" he asked.

She shifted on the rocks. "I don't know," she said. "On the one hand, all that happens... it seems amazing that we all survived. Yet on the other hand, maybe Avarel's right, and it's all just coincidence, fate."

"What is fate?" Barzen asked.

"You sound like the priests back at the seminary," she said. "If this was all the will of Khel... I'm not saying it is or is not," she quickly added. "It just seems... capricious. Would the god do such a thing to his followers?"

"I do not have an answer for you, Selyne. But let me ask you this. Does it matter?"

She blinked at him in surprise. "I..." She trailed off, looked back at the faint wisps of the fire.

"Do you think that the god cares whether or not we worship him?" Barzen asked.

"Doctrine says..."

"I wasn't asking about doctrine," the older priest interrupted. "What do you *feel*?"

"I think that... those are human feelings," she said. "I mean, how can we really know or understand what the god thinks?"

Barzen nodded. "So why bother with worship?"

She sat there silent for a long moment, without an answer. It was clear that the question had troubled her, however.

"Why did we come here?" Barzen finally asked.

"It's a pilgrimage," she said. "A demonstration of faith."

"A demonstration to whom?"

"I understand what you're saying," she said. "But there is something real, isn't there? It's said that at places like this one, one can feel closer to the god."

"And do you feel Khel's presence here?" he asked her. He did look at her then, the firelight gleaming gently in his eyes.

"I don't know," she said.

He placed his hand on hers. "Maybe... maybe it's more important how belief shapes us, and our lives," he said.

"And the ogre?" she asked.

"Perhaps Avarel is right. Or maybe Efrasim was more than he seemed. Or perhaps there was something more to all of this, something more that we cannot understand. But what is important, Selyne, is what *you* take from this, what *you* have learned."

"I think I've learned that I don't like leaving the seminary," she said.

"And yet, when you return, you will be a different person than you were when you left," he told her.

"And is that the point of this?" she asked.

"That is the point of all of it," he said.

Her eyes traveled across the camp, from where Matthias was sleeping within the tight wrap of blankets, to the dark shadow where Avarel stood guard. "And what of them?" she asked.

"We are different, yet not so different as I had believed," Barzen said. "Maybe that is the lesson that I needed to learn."

"What will happen when we get back?" she asked.

"Why, we will go on with our lives," he told her. "Changed by what happened here, perhaps, but still trying to find our way."

* * * * *

Chapter 6

The horses snorted and fidgeted, perhaps sensing the tension of their masters as they were prepared for departure. The sun had risen wan and weak, just a diffuse glow beyond the clouds that lingered over the eastern horizon. But the clouds were pale, the threatened storm having gone on its way without paying the hills a visit.

The four priests made their preparations swiftly. Avarel had gone down to the lower camp while the Vidrans were packing up the upper, but his scout hadn't yielded anything that Selyne hadn't found the night before. Matthias had been able to move under his own power that morning, but just getting down from the ridge had exhausted him, and Avarel and Selyne had had to lift him into his saddle. Barzen mounted behind him, the old priest helping hold the injured acolyte upright. The horse shied a bit at the unaccustomed weight, but Avarel calmed it with a hand on its neck. The Arunite held the horse's reins as he went to his stallion. He paused to pick something up from beside the pool, and led the animals to where Selyse sat her pony.

"Don't forget this," he said, offering her the short staff. "Remember what I said before."

"I'm no warrior," she said. But she accepted the staff. Avarel had slid his club into the forward straps of his saddle, where it would be in easy reach, and wore Matthias's knife tucked into his belt. He had put on most of his armor, the pieces that still fit after the abuse that they and he had taken. Despite his wounds, he sprang up into the saddle with what seemed to Selyne to be an unfair degree of grace.

"Let's go," he said.

The Arunite led them down the canyon, holding the reins of the second horse, Selyse bringing up the rear. For once Barzen deferred to the Arunite, sitting somber behind the limp form of Matthias, keeping him steady in the saddle as the horse followed the stallion.

They made their way down the canyon, silent save for the sounds of the horses' hooves on the worn remnants of the ancient road. When they came to the Watchers they each looked up at the silent sentinels, their blank faces staring out into the hills. Matthias's half-dazed eyes lingered on them as they rode on, his head craned back as if he could see something that the rest of them could not.

Avarel led them back into the hills, toward the crossroads where their misadventure had begun just a few days before. But they hadn't gone far, the Watchers still just visible beyond the latest bend in the trail, when the Arunite priest twitched his reins and brought their column to a halt.

Curious, Selyne reined in beside the lead horses, tugging her pony aside so she could see past them. Avarel's hand was resting on the haft of his club, the sight awakening a tremor of fear that had her gripping the shaft of her staff tightly.

The trail curved around a steeply sloping hillside ahead, the rise covered in a thick carpet of boulders interspersed with dense clusters of tangled brush.

Lying in the road, almost on the edge of the growth that formed a low wall to either side, was a limp form. It might have been anything, were it not for the faint wisps of familiar fabric that fluttered in the breeze, and the dark spatters that were visible on the surrounding stone. The wind was flowing away from them, but Selyne knew what she would smell if it were coming toward them, the thick and horrible sweetness of death and decay.

"By the god," she said.

"Stay here," Avarel said. He swung down out of the saddle, slipping his club out of its straps and clutching it tightly in his hand.

"We should just ride on," Selyne said, clutching her reins tightly in her hand. "He's dead, we should just ride."

Avarel looked at her until she flushed and turned away.

"Be careful," Barzen said. The Arunite nodded and handed the reins of Matthias's horse to the old man. Matthias had slipped away, his head lolling on his chest.

Avarel approached the body, his eyes sliding over the flanking hillsides, lingering on places large enough to conceal an enemy. When he got to the bloody form he bent into a crouch, reached down to touch the body. The examination was brief, and then he looked up at the others and shook his head.

Barzen muttered a prayer under his breath, but Selyne found herself gripped by a growing thread of unease. "There is something not right here," she said.

The elder Vidran turned to look at her, but she was staring at the body, and the ugly marks it had left behind. Those bright flickers of red not only covered the road; she could see some on the branches of the nearby bushes, as though someone had dragged the body through them, or...

Her eyes widened even as one of the bushes near the trail began to move, quivering on its own out of tune with the steady breeze whipping over the hills. "Look out!" she warned, but Avarel had sensed it too, and was already turning.

The priest came to his feet even as the hillside exploded outward, bushes and dirt and stones flying up in a burst that pattered down upon Avarel. Behind them, rising up out of the ground, came the ogre. It no longer looked like a natural thing, crusted in dirt and dried blood, a guttural lowing noise coming from its jaws as it surged back onto the trail.

The horses shied back in alarm, even Avarel's trained mount discomfited by the sight. Barzen struggled both to control his horse and keep Matthias from falling out of the saddle; it was all he could do to accomplish both. Selyne's pony shied back and reared, threatening to dislodge her from its low-backed saddle. She yanked on the reins, twisting to keep Avarel and the monster in view. The Arunite priest had fallen back as the ogre had stepped forward onto the road, but it was clear that there was no easy escape from the creature's trap. It looked half-dead, she saw, bent over as though it could barely manage its own weight. It held something small in its hand, too straight to be a branch or a rock. Realization jolted her; it could only be Avarel's second sword, which he'd stabbed into the creature during their ambush the day before.

Avarel shouted some sort of challenge, lifting his crude club. The ogre stabbed with the sword, its body moving with ponderous strength. The priest, just as battered, managed to avoid the lunge, but even as he drove the club down toward its elbow the ogre thrust forward, knocking its forearm hard across Avarel's chest. The impact was far reduced from the overwhelming blow that had knocked the priest down the canyon slope in their first meeting, but it was still enough to fling him off his feet. He landed hard on his back, stunned.

The ogre took a ponderous step forward, the sword coming up in its hand.

Selyne yanked her reins hard enough that she felt a biting pain in her hand. Her horse, untrained and now thoroughly panicked, was already moving forward, but as its head was pulled around its body followed, moving *toward* the hulking figure that loomed over the fallen priest. She heard her mentor shout something, but it was lost over the chaos.

The sound of her horse penetrated through the ogre's muddled senses, and it started to turn. Selyne had a chance to see a face caked with dirt, milky eyes that blinked under thick brows. For an instant she locked gazes with it, then the sword coming around drew her eyes away. Underneath her the horse's muscles pulsed, and an animal shriek came from it that she could hear echoed from her own mouth.

The staff was in her hand—she'd forgotten it, but now it came up almost as if possessed by its own will. Avarel had been right, it was little more than a stick, no real weapon, certainly not against the indomitable strength of this foe. But she screamed and drove it forward, the strength of her arm backed by the momentum of the horse. The narrow tip drove into the ogre's right eye. The impact jolted up her arm and twisted her back in the saddle. The staff shattered an instant before the horse was struck, taking the poor animal out from under her. For a moment she was aware of flying through the air, just a moment before the ground rushed up to greet her and everything ended in a flood of utter black.

* * *

A wind blew in gusts at the crossroads, bending the tall grass back so that their tips touched the ground. The crests of the trees in the forest to the east whipped like waves, and swirls of dust and leaves spun in the air as they blew past, going wherever the wind would take them. The storm clouds had returned, blowing in hard from the northeast, promising rain sooner rather than later.

The priests stood beside their horses in a tight knot, the bodies of the animals sheltering them somewhat from the wind.

"You could come south with us," Avarel was saying, raising his voice to be heard over the wind. "These roads are still dangerous."

"I thank you for the offer," Barzen said. "But our road lies east."

"You might want to take shelter in the forest, at least until the storm passes," Selyne said. She nodded at Matthias, who clutched to his horse's saddle for support. The acolyte straightened at the attention, but could not hide the weakness that still held him in its grasp.

"We will be all right," Avarel said. "There are campsites not far from here."

"Then I will say farewell, and wish you safe journey," Barzen said.

"And you," Avarel said. "Both of you." He hesitated for a moment, then drew out the sheathed knife from his belt and offered it to Selyne. "What's this for?" she asked.

"For you to craft another staff," he said. "For the journey."

She looked at Barzen, paused a moment, then accepted it. "Thank you."

"Go in the Light," Avarel said.

"Go in the Light," the two Vidrans echoed.

They mounted, Avarel helping Matthias into his saddle while Selyne did the same for Barzen. She took the horse by its harness, leading it east while the two Arunites turned their animals and followed the wind south.

Within a handful of minutes the crossroads was empty again, quiet save for the rush of the wind through the tall grass.

THE END