

THE INLANDS II:

Chain of the Worlds

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First published by Rising Sun 12/01/06

ISBN: 0-7795-0154-3

Library of Congress Control Number: C2006-906484-9

Printed and bound in Canada by Blitzprint

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Dedication

*For my beautiful wife.
And my loving family.*

Thanks for the support



PART I

ONE WORLD AND THE NEXT

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

William Blake



PROLOGUE

1

The explosion in the mines hadn't been merely an accident, a spark inflicted on a working face where fumes combusted. He had known this, and even though a part of him tried to deny it, the realization that it was meant to happen seemed to tarnish his beliefs, his *old* beliefs in an old philosophy where life was open to suggestion.

His wife had always been against his venturing into the mines, prying loose rubble, or slack, from the ceiling, and like one of the guys, loading the tractor with coal; it didn't make sense, for him at least, to just sit behind a desk with paperwork in front of him. There was no meaning behind that. Meaning had always been in the work the guys did in the mines. That's why it hurt him to remember watching those men struggle to breathe, struggle to find one last gasp of air while climbing back up the shafts, feeling, in some morbid way, the hemoglobin in their blood absorb the carbon monoxide that would leave them dead in ten minutes.

Be careful, he had thought to himself, watching a man tap the roof, sounding the mine to see if the material was safe to work under. It had all started with that one image, as if the slate bar had been a detonator. Nothing made sense after. The man had been connected to a wire rope, which was tethered to a pulley, illuminated by a headlamp. He was wearing a surgical mask, coughing as dust fell around him. He pulled it down over his chin when he spoke, and in the light of the lamp trails of dust washed into his mouth; his face seemed covered by a cloud.

"Some subsidence down here," he said, "the grounds sloped and broken, but if we set timbersets along this shaft, the roof should hold."

The man who shouldn't have been there nodded. His thoughts weren't with his wife but were, strangely enough, excited by the distinct possibility

that these men, these down-to-earth men, considered him a part of their meaningful community. He coughed as the dust traveled the path of the light; if there was one thing he hated about the shafts, it was the deadness in the air, the claustrophobic feeling that the men were actually burying themselves. The man pulled his SCSR (self-contained self-rescue) over his mouth and took a couple gulps of his oxygen supply.

And part of the roof caved in.

It had happened quick, and the man standing underneath the loose rock, the man holding the slate bar and wearing the cheap surgical mask, fell under the load and there was a sharp clap as his hardhat broke beneath the weight.

“Tony,” another miner screamed, and he ran forward, knocking over the headlamp in his rushed progress. The light fell forward and smashed on the ground.

Everything was dark for a moment. A quick moment.

The fumes had combusted, and in a few seconds a trail of odd flames would travel up the shaft, exploding more coal dust along the path, into off-shoots. The man in the SCSR dove behind the pulley, listening to the wire cable stretch into the flames as the man tethered to the wire was flung backwards. He felt the fire surround him, pebbles hitting his head, burying into his hat like mites, nestling in the curls of his hair.

And there was a much stronger light. The man knew it wasn't the fire anymore. He could feel a fresh breeze against his marred flesh, and the terrible sensation claustrophobia smothered into him dissipated. When he opened his eyes he looked not into an exploding mine but into the sky, his breaths fogging the lens of his mask—

But there was no sun, no sky here. There was only pain. The man was much older now, but that wasn't the worst of it; the worst had been a missed chance, a skewed opportunity.

You almost had your hands on the Fountain of Youth, Kenny, you almost did. But time's slipping now.

In his deep slumber, his body twisted so that his stomach rested above his shattered hips, Kenneth Auger gritted his teeth. His mind was filled with thoughts, all of them different, all of them colliding. Part of this was because of the air in the mines; the exit had been closed off by collapsed rock, and oxygen had been increasingly thinning.

Death was coming; it blared its sordid horn like wind through an open mouth. A hungry mouth.

Kenneth Auger lay in his tomb, a tomb that had stolen him from his old

beliefs in the first place; he was back now, back where he watched his men die. He was back and he knew he missed his chance. Somewhere beneath the rubble lay a wolf, and he understood now, just as he understood the explosion in the mines was beyond accident, that Jarak the wolf had used him to pursue his own personal salvation. He had missed his chance for eternity to become another's saving grace; it was all rather ironic. Cole was supposed to become Auger's saving grace, by sacrificing himself to retrieve the blood.

One world and the next.

A chain.

These worlds were connected. Connected by coincidence, connected by consequence. It was this understanding that led Kenneth Auger to believe these mines weren't merely one chain, one connection, but a link of infinite possibilities—the mine explosions, perhaps, had subsequently progressed into the destruction of whole mountains in a different world. Or maybe it was the other way around.

2

Kenneth dreamed of Judith. And he dreamed of wizard's blood.

When he finally opened his eyes he saw light.

3

They were called the Barrens, the desolation of the broken mountains. Long ago people believed these parts were privy to granting wishes; the land was once a beautiful valley of green hills and trees that beckoned the clouds, touching the sky with pointed, golden leaves, and winding the earth with roots that caressed the grass like knotted serpents. People would say those trees were a connection, an oracle with Mystic. Farmers would venture to the open fields and touch the bark of the Everwood trees, feeling Mystic's touch within the wood. They would wish for good crops and great health, always in that order. But that was a long time ago. The land has since died, the trees falling in jumbled heaps, twisted branches digging into thin soil like the plunging fingers of the dead. When the mountains fell, their doom spread like a disease. The land choked on the swirling scum of the Sordids, and the Everwoods teetered to the ground in a storm of hopelessness.

“These here lands are godless now. The hounds run free, movin from the south in packs; they hunt, always on the hunt. Have to fence the herds, draw the slope on the barns. These days, we have to put faith on the Watchers, for faith n’only faith’ll greet good folk during bad tidings,” Merd Haruck said, spitting a wad of phlegm which hung from his lower lip. He sat in his cart, holding the reins on his horses. It was his obligation to travel to the Everwood hills and wish for good crops and great health. The farmers had waited three weeks for the dust to settle after the mountains collapsed. The noise was huge, like a thousand trampling oxen on scattered planks.

“Pa, the oracles are gone. This is a graveyard,” Merd’s son, Koff, said in his nasally voice, a boy still in his fifth year. He looked over the valleys, the dead grass blowing in the stiff breeze, the scorching sun sizzling the drying scree where the earth once lay in the shadow of the mountains. He believed, at that point at least, that there would be a poor harvest. Perhaps a drought.

“We’re staring at desolation boy, at the barren lands. Mystic has all but turned its gaze from the hills.” Merd spat again. “Guess we hope now boy. All there ever was really. Hope.” Merd hitched the reins and the cart jeered forward. He left behind two solid wheel tracks and a plume of dust.

Those wheel tracks are gone now, replaced only by listless dunes and red dust which spins in the breeze. The gnarled trees remain, lying on their crumbling sides, reaching to the sky with split branches as if in pleading. There are new tracks now, tracks which weave between trees and over hills, flattening the few patches of grass growing from the long cracks in the ground. In some spots the tracks have been covered by blowing dust and large paw prints. These tracks are nothing like the simple divots left by four wooden wheels; these tracks have awkward patterns, imprinted into the clay like alien ideographs.

There is a new smell in the Barrens. A terrible burning smell that isn’t the sun or the scorched ground, but a seeming mixture of petrified rot and fire. The smell seems to follow these new tracks.

“Stupid safety, stupid stupid *stooooo*pid.” A voice says, and it wavers in between a throaty rumble.

Not many voices are ever heard in the Barrens.

There is silence for a moment, other than that ugly growl, that mechanized grumble. “Of course I wanted to do it,” the voice continues. “I wouldn’t have taken the time to aim. If I could’ve, I would have stopped the quad all together and made sure, but *nooo*, I was in a hurry. What am I

saying?”

Through the tangled brush and brambles, sputtering smoke from a blackened exhaust pipe, Alvin Leonardo sits on an ATV, one which he used to escape from Edwin Krollup. He has a gun in his waistband. He seems to look over his shoulder every so often—but he’s not exactly looking *over* it, as much as he’s staring *at* it, perhaps finding validation with the slope of his arms.

It was choice, Leo. Nothing more. Either you wanted to kill the man, or you didn’t. Either way, Leo, you’re not stuck in his leash anymore.

Leo looked at his shoulder. “Yes, I’m not on his stupid leash.”

The wolves got him anyway, another voice said, and Leo looked at his other shoulder. He looked, this time, with a grimace. He didn’t particularly like this voice.

“Yeah, the wolves.”

Leo had been driving for almost three hours. He drove directly south, away from the ruins, until about an hour ago when he hit a sharp drop; he was forced southwest, through the tangled brush of the forest-graveyard. It was awkward. He felt like he was in a rush. He felt like he was running from something. He had left the sounds of battle a long time ago.

You’re running to something, that same cold voice said from his shoulder.

Leo shivered. He realized he hadn’t taken the time to stop the quad and breathe the air, stare at the sky, feel the sun beat on his pallid skin. He hadn’t left the fireplace for a year, and yet here his absolute fear of being caught overshadowed the niceties of a freedom he had ultimately regained.

Leo looked at the gas gauge; he was running on fumes really. He decelerated the quad. His back hurt. He looked behind him to judge how far he had gotten. All he could see were hills. The ruins were far behind now.

He swung his leg over the seat like a cowboy and picked the gun out of his waistband. He hated the way it felt in his hand; it felt, morbidly enough, like the cranium of his exploding robot—he remembered hearing the burst through the mines, hearing it and realizing just what he had created. Leo thought about Cole and Jimmy. He had looked for them as he drove down the mountain pass, veering around the ruins, but all he’d seen was stone colliding with fur.

“You see,” Leo said to his shoulder, “that’s why I don’t listen to you.”

You’re mad because the safety was on, the cold voice said.

Leo grunted and flipped the gun around his hand. It was heavy. He walked over to a fallen tree, dusted off the top of the blackened bark and sat

down.

Where was he?

If he was to begin life anew, he needed to acquaint himself with his surroundings. He was in a dead grove, where the ancient leaves of these cadaverous trees had turned to mulch so thin he was seemingly breathing them in. But the air was refreshing. In a way he was glad he left the mines. Everything had been a choice. It was inevitability really that led him here, away from the mines. Why would he want to remain the Robot Bomber? He didn't want to live chained to his mistakes. He didn't want to live in that world anymore.

He closed his eyes and felt their hands on him, the way they groped him, pulling him from the car until his legs dipped to the ground with a painful bump. He had seen City Hall through a mess of intermingled bodies, most of them screaming at him, hitting him. He opened his eyes.

"It was a dud," he said aloud, startling himself. He knew that though. Who was he trying to persuade?

And then it happened. It was far too quick for him to react, but he still tried, and despite his hours of mental debating, when he finally did turn with the gun drawn, he had forgotten to switch the safety off.

4

The hound had jumped from behind, snapping a twig as it leapt from the ground. This alerted Leo. He turned, slid off the tree and pulled the trigger, hoping the beast's midsection might explode in a puff of blood. Nothing happened though, and Leo realized his stupidity had followed him into this world, like the tire treads along the ground. The hound, which stood like a lion but had a much larger skull, and whose mouth seemed hardly able to close over the fangs distended from its lower jaw, had a peculiar look in its yellow eyes when the gun dry snapped. It hesitated for a moment; the sound, like most sounds, seemed deliberately aimed at the hound's keen hearing, and therefore aimed at the part of it which had been trained and controlled by the keepers in Skriker City.

The snap of the whip, the hound recalled with a memory prone to disabling—when the gun clicked, the hound remembered an image of the man with the whip, the man with the black hat. The hound growled. Those days were gone now. The cage was gone. Forever.

The hound, which was black and shone the hot sun in streaks, pounced forward again—

But there was a loud yelp.

Leo, who had closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable, opened one eye and then the other.

He wasn't alone anymore. He didn't believe he ever was.

The hound was lying on the ground, a rope tied around its neck like a harness. It was pulled back when it jumped, Leo assumed, like a pet with the insatiable desire to go wandering off. Holding the rope, like the strong men Leo would sometimes watch on television (in what seemed like a hundred years ago) was a man wearing a torn cotton shirt, exposing a burly chest covered in hair; his head was completely bald, save for one big bushy eyebrow and a moustache that hung on either side of the man's brown lips.

There were other men surrounding him, some carrying ropes tied to more snarling hounds. One of the men grinned at him, and Leo fumbled with the gun; he wanted so badly just to use it, to use it and climb back on the quad to see how far the fumes would take him. It was a sorry little thought, but it somehow calmed him.

This was how Chuck and the gang used to surround you.

Yes it was, and Leo, the new Leo, the Leo of this world wasn't going to become yet another victim. He had escaped that part of his life already. He fully turned around. A couple of men were looking at the quad, smelling the exhaust pipe, running their filthy hands over the leather seat.

Leo turned off the safety with a quick tug of his thumb.

A man stood to his left, a man wearing a dirty rag around his head like a turban, carrying two scimitars crossed in front of him like crossbones. Leo was sure that if he shot, this man, who had a crimson beard of fading luster, would catch the bullet between both blades and drop the smoldering lead to the ground with a satisfying grunt.

"O'er the seas the wind blows, lo n' behold from the galleys comes the sorcerer the stories told. 'Tis a fable in deed, sire, but ye ride among the dead on a cart we heard two leagues away. Ye must be the sorcerer of legend, writ upon the throats of the Inlands like scars, ridin yer glory steed out on the hunt, slaughterin Yilaks in the shadows, huntin hounds midday alone in the heart of the Barrens." The man laughed an awkward laugh that sounded more like hiccups. "Ye look nothin' like the stories say, sire." The other men laughed. Leo gritted his teeth. He sensed something behind that laugh, something he didn't like. Something incredibly familiar.

"Stories be deceivin', Firelips, sire," the strong man holding the rein around the hound said. Beads of sweat dotted his bald forehead.

The man with the red beard (Firelips, Leo thought) nodded and smiled, revealing a set of brown teeth that seemed shoved crookedly back into gums

after they had fallen out. He looked at Leo crossly and emphasized the scimitars; he wore a red belt tied around his waist, one which held three daggers that Leo could see. “What is one man doin’ alone in the Barrens? Up to no good I s’pose?”

Leo didn’t know what to say; he understood he was the butt of their jokes, but he also understood how serious these men were.

“Yer past the borders of Samniite; yer into the marked lands, kipper, huntin grounds o’ the Pirates of the Indin.” Firelips raised his scimitars—

And the hound broke free from the strong man; the rope had snapped in half, sending the big pirate to the ground holding nothing but a frayed end. It knocked aside one pirate, who dropped his sword with a loud clang, and it leapt toward Firelips.

Leo pulled the trigger, and the hound fell to the ground in a jumbled heap.

“Mercy Mystic,” Firelips said, staring at the smoking gun in Leo’s shaking hand, “’tis a sorcerer with the likes of fire in his hands.”



CHAPTER 1

HUNTRESS

At the moment she didn't remember what happened; she was in pain, that was obvious, but why she was in pain seemed to elude her. Her senses seemed confused, burning for one second only to freeze the next. But none of that mattered. She realized that.

She was standing in the middle of a vastly decorated room, covered in fur blankets and imported silk. There was a smell like perfume, and at once she was reminded of her mother—the perfume had been the heavy scent of Croisois and Creek flowers. She also realized there was a sense of balance in the room, something she had neglected to notice for years; she had, since she could remember, worn a mask, a mask that concealed the left side of her face, including an eye which became used to blindly scouring the underside of rough hide. At this moment, Isabella looked at this room with both of her eyes.

“I haven't looked upon that face for time and ages.”

A voice. Startled, Isabella turned. Her movements were slow, and when she rotated her torso, she felt a stab in her shoulder; there was blood on her tunic, splattered down her front like a mess of tomato paste fresh from the farms. That much didn't matter; she knew that voice, just as well as she knew she was looking with two eyes. Just as well as she knew she was a lady again.

“Father.”

“M'asha, grown up like your mother, which is who you look like.”

Isabella tried to move forward; she wanted nothing more than to feel her father in her arms. She couldn't move. There was a horrible sense of struggle, until Isabella lost to her invalidity; she burst into tears. She couldn't help it. Her father, a man she had sought vengeance for her entire life,

was but a few measly steps away from her, standing in front of a plush bed of feathered pillows, and here she stood with anchors for feet.

“Father?” That was the only word she could push out—there was so much more she wanted to say, but he looked at her with a certain understanding.

“I’m sorry m’asha, here, in this void, midway between life and death we are both but poles, connected to the ground like the roots of trees. We are but a few voices here, so we must be quick.” David the Hunter smiled. He looked at his daughter and sighed. “Life is forever cruel, for my blasted purpose stole me too soon. A Hunter sometimes forgets what it is that’s truly important.”

“I miss you,” Isabella, who was once a man named Ashton, said in a croaked voice. “Your death shattered this world.”

“Everything happens for a reason.” David gestured to her face with his eyes. He smiled again. She loved his smile. Here, in this place, he didn’t have any scars, and the few teeth he had lost in the latter years of his life, were replaced by white ones gleaming the light of the room. “Life is a chain, m’asha. That is why I am here.”

Isabella struggled to step forward again, and the feeling burned in her thighs.

“You have the most beautiful eyes, m’asha.”

“I love you, father.” She exhaled. She thought of her life without him, thought of what she would have liked to ask him had she the chance to ever see him again. She looked at her arms, at her cursed arms, veins circulating the blood of a woman.

“It is good to see you without a mask.”

“Father, I’ve believed for ages that that mask was my only option, for to be a Hunter one was to be male. The prophecies spoke only of men, of warriors. Did my birth anger you? For wasn’t it your intention to carry the bloodline through a boy? I had for years struggled to let myself in your life, but mother...you and mother had me tend to the chores. For years your little *asha* was anything but, for to be a little fighting girl, a warrior, one would have to follow in the footsteps of a father in the line of battle. I heard you fight while mother and I hid in the catacombs. As I grew older I realized I could do nothing, for it was my duty to light the candles, to make sure the dust on the beams wouldn’t spoil our meals,” this saying had always implied a woman’s place, and Isabella spoke the phrase with harsh intent. “The sword I wear I found like a common thief, for it was never handed to me. And I listened to mother tell me of your death, through tears and ache, and I knew I could do nothing but light a candle vigil for your path to

Mystic. I severed Isabella when I could no longer sit around, anticipating some revenge on the behalf of the weaker few, the Hunters in training, whose blood never met the blade of a Yilak, and whose callused hands knew only the plow and sickle. I became Ashton when I understood your death birthed cowardice in the Hunters. You fought with Shavin, but your passing left a shadow ingrained on his passion, on his motivation, for I confronted him, for I sought his aid against the wolves, and he only passed my intentions off as rubbish, for he himself realized the Hunters were merely men, farmers. I have lived in a world that had contemplated the birth of your son—the bloodline of the Hunters is only tainted by my cursed female flesh.” She violently scratched at the skin on her arm, tugging it until the fat beneath her fingernails turned red.

“It was always your safety I cared about, m’asha. If it was my ignorance that put the mask over your beautiful face, then Mercy Mystic, death could not have come sooner, for a father to put his child through such aggravation—I have lived for years with the sole intent of saving my people, and in doing so I forgot the most important person who needed saving. But to claim,” his voice raised, “your birth angered me burns my very soul. Everything has a purpose, Isabella. Your sword was meant to save your people; you found it beneath the floorboards in the kitchen, which creaked awkwardly just as you stepped on it in your eighteenth year. You were supposed to find it. Nothing happens by coincidence, m’asha, for Mystic deemed life a chain, linked by consequence.

“I was afraid of your capabilities, Isabella. I watched you practice with the kitchen knives when you should have been setting the table. When you were five years old you could blindly throw a dagger through the heart of a mite; you were born into the Hunter’s bloodline, but it is never a father’s desire to drag his only child to the desolate lands, to put his child in harm’s way. I always protected you. You were too young. And you’re just too damn important. To me. To everybody.”

“What do you mean?” Isabella asked.

“Mayhaps I was meant to die so you would avenge my death.”

Isabella looked at her father, her face haggard with shock. When she looked down briefly, she caught the morbid image of Grak Ulak’s head laying haphazardly on the ground, drowning in a pool of blood, his tongue sunken in the chunky mess like a submerged whale. “That’s ridiculous,” she finally said.

“Is it, Isabella? Or is hiding in the ruins of a mountain wearing a mask ridiculous?”

“You suppose it was my purpose to kill Grak, then, to lay his body on

the ground and mock the wolves? That is all I'm meant to do? Then my life is spent, and this void may just be my final beckoning to join you in the timeless depths."

David smiled at his daughter; her cheeks had become flushed, and in this perfumed room, which was endless beyond the closed doors, her rising voice echoed. "Mayhaps, Isabella, you were meant to *end* the war with the wolves, just as I *began* it. I wouldn't put such parallelism past Mystic." He drew the slope down his chest.

"Why?"

"Because you are the bloodline reborn, when all hope has ceased. Shavin will die soon, asha. He will follow you till his end. You are their means now. They all have lived serving the code of the Hunter; but the code waned with the bloodline. Aye, did it ever. They followed you, did they not, into the slums of war? The Hunters became strays, hiding amongst the land, hated by those whose boys they stole, but they never served a purpose. They traveled mindlessly like refugees, fleeing the real troubles of the world. Like you said, Shavin refused your invitation to retaliate against the wolves—"

"Only to team with Haspin and the King's Crest when he realized he allowed Grak's armies to grow too strong. If it weren't for me, for Granum and the alliance we constructed in the Leeg, then he'd be with you, father."

"You see, your actions were a saving grace."

"What do you mean?"

"You are their savior. You are their purpose. They threw down their swords when you were caught in Grak's grasp. They realized, even the stubborn and ignorant, that without you, their fight would progress without cause, without motivation, without hope. You are distinct. You are the Huntress. You are the blood."

Isabella was surprised. And scared. It was like the prophecies she would hear as a child, the stories that told of a Hunter that would finally unite man and rebuild the world. "Father, you are only telling me stories."

"Perhaps I was met in a room like this, by a man with all the answers. Every story, m'asha, is based on purpose."

"Why are you telling me this? Why am I here?" She suddenly felt the flaring pain in her shoulder and thigh; she had almost forgotten about them.

"Your purpose goes beyond vengeance. You slaughtered Grak, and now your motivations will seem conflicted, but I know you will be led against a more dangerous threat. My daughter, so beautiful." His voice had trailed off with a tone of lament.

And then everything was gone: the room, the scent, her father; she grew dimly aware that none of it had been real. She opened her eyes. It was still night. The clouds shone the moon like spun silk in the dark sky, and there was an eerie silence, one that either warned her that the war had turned in their favor, or that it was finally over, the wolves had won.

She tried to sit up but her wounds exploded. She bit her lip.

And Shavin stood over her. His face was bleeding, but there was a resound satisfaction in his eyes that couldn't be mistaken. Satisfaction, or dread, she decided.

"Mercy Mystic," he said, and he drew the slope down his chest.

2

"It is almost morning," Shavin said, cradling Isabella's neck with his dirty hand, cupped to caress her bare flesh. "We pulled you along the base of the pass, away from Grak's body, for it drew Yilaks beyond the measure of an eye."

She tried to move, but was only met by incredible pain. "What happened?"

Shavin moved Isabella an inch, giving her a look that asked if he hurt her; she shook her head. It wasn't a matter of physical pain, at the moment, but a curiosity that seemed parasitic to an invalid whose head barely turned, and whose shoulder seemed plastered to dust by drying blood—she could smell fire, and perhaps noticed the sordid tinge of burning flesh. This frightened her—none of it seemed real anymore, as if the night were actually just a cloak, an illusion over an illusion. She wanted to ask if she was dying, but realized that she couldn't form the words; her mouth was dry. She had a balloon canteen filled with the remainder of water she had scooped from Fog Lake, but her arms wouldn't budge.

Shavin turned his head and looked at the sky; he paused for a moment. She noticed three long scratches along his cheekbone, and in one point, the gash was so deep she could see splinters of bone. Shavin was in pain, but found in dire times the strength to cradle the Huntress. *Could it have all been true? she thought—everything I saw, the room, my father, the void between life and death? Was this all part of an inevitable chain?*

Am I the Huntress?

"We all thought it was over when he got you. We stopped. Most of us, the ones that realized your importance in all of this at least, we threw down our swords in hope to draw a stalemate. If surrendering would forego the

possibility Grak might take another so vital to the bloodline, then battle, then bloodshed didn't seem necessary." Shavin stroked her cropped hair. "I knew you since you were a baby. David was so happy when you were born; we believed his fight was over. That *you* were his purpose, and that his rebellion was only a link in the chain that led to your conception."

"You're crying," Isabella finally said, and she tasted blood. He quickly checked her shoulder and thigh, and she realized both wounds had been bandaged in cloth.

"Your father spoke once, after the city was lost. We all had lived with hope that we would win the war. We watched the city burn, the skyline like pillars of flame, and we lamented our loss, for hope, Isabella, hope was pulled from us like the beating heart from a tortured soul."

Isabella tried to sit up, the smell of fire stronger, the stench of burning, of blood and rot, of scorched dirt and fallen swords. "What did my father tell you?"

Shavin smiled, patted her leg then stood up. He brushed his hand gently down his face, spreading blood along his jowl. "The destiny of the bloodline was revealed when you pulled that mask from your face."

"*Your* face, Shavin, what happened?" She looked around briefly; she was tucked into a crook of rock. She could see smoke rising into the dark sky like tainted pearls pulled by some unseen axis.

He covered his brow with his hand, and it didn't take long for Isabella to notice he had begun crying again. "I am an old man, and I have lived to see the horrors of undoing. I have fought battles because I believed them just; your father was the same. But I lived to teach. When your father passed, I realized his war hadn't been finished; it would never be finished, for the people would always need protecting, but the Hunter's line had all dissipated. So many had fallen, aye, so many. So I drew young men from the farms, village boys, conscripting them to a life they were not ready for. I turned you away, I mean when you were Ashton, because I felt, all those years ago, a responsibility for these young men that didn't include leading them off to their deathbeds. I wanted to watch them become great...to become like your father. Asron, he worked with his father as an apprentice blacksmith, a craftsman, but only a boy, and tonight, tonight I watched him die. Tonight, I watched them all die, before I could aid, before I could help these poor young men, I had to watch them fall; I had to watch their blood spill. All of them, Isabella, every man we rode with as the sun set; each fell as their turns came. Was it my responsibility to march them all to death?" He cried into his hand, tears mixing with blood. "We stand alone. And you know what hurts me the most?"

Isabella shook her head; she didn't understand what he meant. A part of her did, but the rest of her wanted to ignore such assumptions. *They're all dead. The Hunters fell. You stand alone—alone.*

"They believed for a moment, when you took off your mask, when you slaughtered Grak, they believed that their fighting had a purpose, for this war would have saved all of man. They believed David's kin would save them all."

Isabella stood up. The attempt was in vain, because she fell back to the ground with a thud. Her fault? She hadn't meant to give these boys false hope. Had her father warned her of this? Had her father explained the job of the Huntress was to give the Hunters' a belief that would ultimately kill them? Had the prophecy explained this? "Don't stand up," Shavin said. "You shouldn't even be moving."

"What happened to them all?" She clenched her hand, and her fingers pressed into the gunn in her palm; she forgot she had been carrying it. Its weight seemed familiar in her grasp, and the thought frightened her. "How could they have died? I killed Grak, their General fell—how could the Hunters have fallen?" Her eyes were rimmed with tears, and the side of her face which had been covered by a mask for seventeen years—this side, which despite the dirt and blood, seemed untouched and smooth—twitched as if in rejection to the air; as if it felt, she felt, she needed to hide herself again, to deny her identity.

"Granum returned—"

"He did?"

"—in a ball of light, holding the horse's reins from within. He looked like the sun, for the light he threw forth lit the entire sky, as if morning had come early. The wolves howled. Oh, I'd never heard such a noise. Like the piercing shrieks of a thousand banshees. Most retreated into the caverns below the bluff; I do not know what they saw in that ball of light, for I saw nothing sinister, but the force by which they crammed into the caverns seemed to awaken the mountain's spirit. She-wolves and Yilaks alike, Isabella, trampling each other to death to escape, leaving the body of their general on the pass like a forgotten pest; perhaps it was their mourning that led them to such drastic measures. But the side of the pass collapsed, rubble on rubble, leading a tremendous slide to the ground."

"Did they all die?" Isabella asked.

"Much of them did, and much of them are trapped within the ruins. You can hear them when all is silent, their howls going unheeded through the deep fissures of the pass."

They both listened for a moment but heard nothing.

“None knew it was going to happen; there was no warning. Spiders fell beneath the mighty weight of boulders. This war began with numbers beyond count, and ended with but a saddened few. It is morbid to have survived such terror, Isabella, for we should be celebrating, but I find that in the turmoil of war, grief is born. Grief and regret.”

“Where is Granum, Shavin?”

Shavin turned to point up the pass when the wizard stood before her eyes.

“It is good to finally have you up.”

3

He was wearing the same torn robe, tied in the middle by an old frayed rope. His hair was in tangles, and in the back it seemed to stick out behind him, like a billowed tail with split ends. His face was haggard, rough, and the bags dipping beneath his eyes proved his absolute exhaustion. He stood hunched over so that his shoulders drooped forward, and his spine curved into his neck.

“Granum,” Isabella said in a croaked voice, again trying to stand up but falling due to the incredible pain.

“No, don’t move my dear,” he said in a gentle voice. What had he just gone through? “Your wounds are like nothing I’ve ever seen; they are precise, and I suppose it was fate that allows breath to pass those lips.” His hand had been balled into a tight fist, and when he opened his fingers, lying on his palm like two bloody bits of bone were pellets. “I watched your eyes move beneath your eyelids; I knew it was safe to help you. I knew you would not feel me.” His fingers, she noticed, were also stained with gore, and she wondered what exactly her wounds looked like underneath the bandage.

“You took those out of me. That was what Grak shot?”

Granum nodded, and looked at the gunn in Isabella’s hand with a note of distaste. Shavin walked to the wizard, carrying his sword lazily in his hand, wiping blood from his cheek with the other.

“I can hear them burrowing. We haven’t much time,” he said in a whisper.

“Yes yes, of course,” he said, and he looked back at Isabella; he had seen her face before, and yet every time he looked into *both* of her eyes he marveled at her beauty. “We must leave. We haven’t the time to sit around these lands anymore.” He tucked the bloody pellets back into a fold in his

robe, wiped his fingers and then shoved them into his mouth and whistled; she noticed a trickle of blood sneaking from the scar on his neck, staining his beard.

Jilay ran along the pass to her side, and the horse licked her face.

“Jilay,” Isabella said. She slowly stroked the horse’s mane.

“You must get into the horse’s saddle, my dear.” He grabbed her arm and he helped pull her up. Shavin ran to her other side and guided her. She hopped on her good leg, the hot pain in her shoulder and thigh trying to collapse her; she gritted her teeth and stepped into the stirrup, swinging her leg over the horse. Granum tied the rein around her waist, gently but tightly, and secured it around Jilay’s muzzle so that she wouldn’t be flung over the horse.

She looked at Wolf Country curiously; it was getting lighter. She could see bits of the sun rising over the Joon Mountains, the clouds in the east turning into pink fluff. She saw where the pass had collapsed, about fifty yards from the mines, blocked by fallen rubble like a fragmented gate. Torches littered the grounds like random specks in a dull cloud, and she saw the debris among the camp, the bodies strewn about in cluttered heaps, the torchlight branding their sides and tops with flickering coronas.

“Shavin,” Granum said, “go ready the cart; the pass is unstable, for the wolves may burrow through the fissures. I have tried to seal as many cracks as I could find in the alcoves, weaving the rock with stitches of tree roots, but no magic can overcome the sheer determination of desperation, of survival. We must travel southeast into the Barrens.”

“The Barrens?” Shavin asked, confusion drawn across his slashed face; he turned toward the slope of the pass. Isabella watched him limp toward the camp. He has to be nearly seventy years old, she thought. She turned to Granum.

“The boys are okay?”

Granum had been pulling Jilay’s muzzle up the mountain pass, and he answered without turning. “The boys are here if that’s what you mean, but I do not think they are okay. They have seen much and act accordingly. Jimmy has the true mark of your ancestry, Asha, for he wandered the Towers in search for his brother.”

“I told him to stay with Jarat outside the Sordids, away from all of this.”

“No matter what you say, sometimes people desire to walk bearing their own laws.” Granum stopped and pulled the horse to his side. He looked up at Isabella. “I remember when I first met you. You didn’t care that I had known your father, you cared that I may be able to help you avenge his death. You have walked your life bearing a certain burden, Asha, and for a

long time you believed that burden was your isolation, your loss. But that look is gone from you now. You have the look of revelation, of realization.”

“I saw my father,” Isabella said. She knew the wizard had known, for some reason, as if he had been inside the void with her.

Granum smiled and looked at the wall of rock that had toppled over the opening of the mines. “I was right, Asha, you did take that mask of yours off. I couldn’t very well explain why you had to, for in the purpose of life, one has to reveal his or her part in the chain; there isn’t any validation in another’s involvement.”

“Then, I could have taken the mask off years ago? I could have known everything if I had just taken it off?”

“I’m sure your father explained one thing to you, Asha. You have to understand, would we have fought this war, would we have even had a chance in this war, if you had revealed yourself earlier, if you had opened up the opportunity for self-revelation?”

“What do you mean?” Isabella asked.

“You will learn, in time, Asha, for you know more now than you did yesterday, and tomorrow, you will realize even more. The chain works that way.”

Isabella looked at the fire on the pass, the one she must have heard earlier. “Where did I go Granum? You must know that much, at least.”

“You are the bloodline, Asha. A part of you, a part deep within you, hidden, perhaps, exists the sole choice whether or not you want to face the incredible tasks before you. You are only human, Asha, but a part of you doesn’t believe that, doesn’t believe that you are merely a speck in time, a mortal whose purpose will only brand the surface of the world for a split second. That part of you exists in a different frame; I have seen it, like an aura, when we first met. I have known for years your potential, your meaning, but what I know doesn’t matter. It is what you know that does. This other part of you has the capability to choose which landscape it wants to see, or visit. It would probably scare you to say that while you were with your father, the part of you lying on the ground had stopped breathing.”

“I died?” Isabella asked in shock.

“No, you chose which scape you wanted to be part of.”

“But I didn’t choose,” Isabella said.

“You were beckoned.”

“Then why couldn’t I hold my father when I chose to?”

“You aren’t dead. Your father isn’t alive. The void is a place of illusions. I’m sure the room you chose has some specific relation to the both of you.”

Isabella looked down for a moment. “It smelt like my mother.”

Granum walked towards the mines, touching a boulder’s hefty side with his palm, caressing the rock. “I promised the boys I would try. When they saw the mines had fallen behind this wretched wall of rock, I told them I would at least try.”

“Why did you come back?” Isabella asked, holding Jilay’s harness with her good arm, her other shoulder relaxed and hunched forward, nestling the cold gunn in her lap. “You haven’t got the stone on you.”

Granum turned around and sat on the rock, pulling the robe out at either side of his skinny legs. He stroked his beard for a moment. “Priority, Asha, priority. It wasn’t my desire to turn while you marched to war, but I feel a certain responsibility for those Towers. Perhaps one day you’ll know how far my guilt runs, but as Kannef carried me to the Sussa coast, following the tracks of the Guardian, its footprints ingrained in the ground like craters, I realized the intense emotion, the surprising alliance that had been forged, one I had not seen the likes of in hundreds of years. It isn’t often that one sheds his discriminatory perceptions for one common goal, Asha, but it was your purpose to prove to the Hunters the importance of indifference; to prove to the spiders their borders were not threatened by man’s existence.” Granum saw the peculiar look in Asha’s eye and corrected himself. “Man *and* woman’s existence. It is in such actions that I believe you have the power within you to fulfill your responsibilities.” Granum smiled.

“I looked out into the sea, the raging waters where beyond the murk I knew Logres’ tilted coasts caught the surf, its sand marked by the heavy prints of a giant, and I knew it would always be there, *that* thing from the stone. It would be there waiting, just as it had when I retrieved it the first time. I would get it soon, for I realized my presence was needed elsewhere.

“I looked into the Sandglass and watched the spiders’ struggle, and watched the Hunters resort to combat as their quivers emptied; it was *my* beckoning, you might say. I ushered Kannef, touching his belly with my finger, giving him the ability to jump great lengths, and when I reached the fangs of Sordid, I found your horses outside the ruins, shivering in the wind, cowering from the bodies of the wolves, smoldering at the base of rock like twisted pieces of charcoal. I took the horses to the northern valley and showed the wolves the light.”

“The Wizard’s Lantern,” Isabella said to herself. “I have read stories, how Ignatius ignited himself in a ball of flame when he fought the seedling gnomes from the Odin tides—how they retreated in utter fear, for they saw not the flames but what they believed stood behind them, breathing harsh gusts of fire from the dragon’s belly. It was an illusion. You created an illu-

sion to startle the wolves.”

Granum stroked his beard.

“What did they see?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Granum said. “We are in a hurry. They have already tethered the cart to the horses; it is us they wait for.” The wizard turned, leaving Isabella in a mode of deep curiosity and confusion. He touched the boulder again, bending forward so that the arch of his back seemed transformed into the heft of a rock. He strained his arms, pushed down with a strong grunt and pulled up as he straightened his back and reached upward with his hands. There was a sharp flash of light. White light.

“Granum,” she screamed.

The wizard had fallen forward, his robes draped over his head so that he looked decapitated.

4

It felt like they had been pulling him for hours. Each of their joints felt ready to pop, and the burn in their clenched fingers urged them to loosen, to stop, to let go of the extra baggage.

Edwin moved a couple of times as they pulled him through the tunnel: once he had turned and mouthed a small grunt as his elbow smashed into the side of the cave; but he had scared the boys most with his random jabbering. He yelled out, in timed intervals it seemed, “I killed my dad...no. Close that door. Close it!” And then he would fall silent, as if the words he had spoken were just part of the boys’ imagination.

“We should leave him here. He’s freaking me out Cole,” Jimmy said, looking at the cluttered man, both his shoulders collapsed so that his wide frame would easily pass between two sloped outcrops.

“Shut up Jimmy, we can’t leave him.”

“Why not? What has he ever done for us?”

Cole thought about that for a moment, pulling Edwin as hard as he could so that the man’s pant cuff would rip from the snag in the rock. “Don’t think of it that way. Pretend he’s got no choice but to kiss the ground we walk on. Once we get home, Jimmy, he’ll realize we saved his life. People change when they’ve almost died.”

“Yeah, they lie,” Jimmy said absently. Their father had been forced to face certain death during Desert Storm, and when he returned, a much thinner man with a dark complexion from the Middle East sun, he had most

assuredly seen the barrel of a gun pointed in his direction—but what had it proved though? It proved that in living your second life, as Jimmy thought of it, there was a seeming belief that chance hadn't been a fluke but a revelation of invincibility. Their dad thought he couldn't die, so he looked at his boys directly in the eyes and told them he would never smoke a cigarette again. But he had lied. He smoked more. He smoked because he didn't think it mattered. He smoked whenever he got the chance and look how that ended up—their father was in a coffin, his ragged body dressed in a suit much too big for his frail build.

Cole looked at Jimmy coldly for a moment. He felt the vial thud against his chest and he tucked the twine further into his collar. “We shouldn't start this again. Not now. Look, the end of the tunnel is about thirty yards away.”

“I told you, we're safer in here than we are out there.”

“I don't care,” Cole said defiantly. Edwin murmured behind the two. “The only way home is out there.” Cole tucked his fingers back under Edwin's arms and began pulling. “A little help here.”

Jimmy dug his hand under Edwin's arm and the two pulled the dazed man to the end of the tunnel.

There were deafening sounds outside, the clash of swords and high-pitched howls.

“I told you, we're safer in here,” Jimmy said, confidently. The land outside the tunnel was hidden under a black veneer, dappled in spots by flickering torchlight. Though not clearly, both boys could see tangles of legs dancing around the flames, and figures moving in and out of the light.

“Come on, help me get him down,” Cole said, ignoring everything going on before him. Cole climbed down from the lip of the tunnel, touching the dried ground with exhausted toes that felt swollen with blisters. He grabbed Edwin's shirt collar and eased the man's torso over the edge; Jimmy held the man on the other side, taking most of the weight. Cole heard a sharp snap to his right, and saw an arrow, broken in two, lying at the base of the edifice. It had struck the wall nearly four feet from his head.

“Hurry,” he said, and he pulled Edwin. The man toppled over the lip and tumbled to the ground with a loud grunt. “You said you had a ride,” Cole said smugly.

“We do,” Jimmy said, and from the shadows beyond the tunnel's vicinity, like a monster easing its way through a crack in the door, approached a spider whose head looked down at Cole from its heightened perch, held aloft by eight arched legs, each beyond reaching distance over Cole's head.

“Oh. My. God.” Cole said, his jaw dropping; he had never truly liked

spiders, but he could tolerate them. He had always used Jimmy's fear of them to retaliate in order to even a rivalry, grabbing them from dark corners when he had to, but in those instances he had been in control. That had comforted him. Control wasn't an option here.

"Close your mouth," Jimmy said.

Cole, ignoring Edwin's heaped body at his feet, pulled Jimmy beside him. "What is this? I...I don't understand. You hate spiders."

"And you hate getting your nipples twisted," Jimmy said, grabbing at Cole's chest as he turned away from his brother's touch. "Think of it this way," he said calmly. "One day you're gonna meet a woman, we hope, so I thought I'd get some practice chumming with a giant spider since I knew any girl who'd stoop to your level wouldn't look any better; its obviously brother-courtesy."

"Shut up," Cole said, still eyeing the spider. He contemplated reaching for the wizard's blood in the vial around his neck; it had worked against the eyeless corpse inside the Towers, so, he supposed, why wouldn't it repel this thing? "It's safe?"

"Do you see me screaming, Cole? Remember when you put that spider in my Science book? When I opened it first period, and saw that little thing mashed against the page, I screamed. It's different now."

"I see that."

"Trust me." Jimmy turned. "Jarat, this is my brother, Cole."

Jarat the Spider bowed, or at least Cole thought it did; its legs bent momentarily, and its body hunched forward so that Cole could see the glistening pattern on its back, mostly covered by ripped leaves. "We must hurry," it said in a low whisper. Cole could see the spider's fangs separating as it spoke. "We aren't safe here."

Cole bent down and grabbed Edwin's shoulder. "You're sure?" he asked Jimmy, who had just bent down to grab the man's other arm.

"Just help me get Krollup on the saddle."

They draped Edwin's body over Jarat's huddled back, and Cole accidentally dug his hand into the side of the spider's flesh, feeling the gel slop over his fingers, gathering between his digits like liquefied moss.

Cole heard another arrow break against the Tower a few feet away. A wolf howled in the distance and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end; he wondered where the old man was. All of a sudden everything was coming back to him. For a moment he had been driven to escape this place, but the importance of everything he had just done seemed to wash back over him.

"Auger," Cole said, "where is he?" He was supposed to grab this blood for Kenneth Auger—but a certain part of him didn't want to give up the

phial. *The war scared him away*, he thought; there wasn't much confidence in the tone, but he believed the vial was his for now. *Or he was killed*. He hoped the latter.

"You okay?" Jimmy asked, climbing onto Jarat's back.

Cole nodded.

And the sky turned bright white, as if the night had just been a slip of paper which slid off a slick surface. Jimmy instinctively looked to his right, shielding his eyes with his hand; there was a luminous glow emanating from the space between the ruins and the edge of the Towers. There were ribbons of light shooting from within the glow, brighter than the imminent white that had scarred the night sky, and for one curious second Jimmy thought he saw a giant, standing fifty feet tall, its body a husking frame against the brilliant light, the strips of glow like coattails—and its head had been the head of a wolf, its fur brazened white, its eyes in a grimace that darkened its brow despite the commanding light...and then the image was gone, replaced only by the sound of panic.

Jimmy watched the distant torches fall over, lighting parts of the ground with specks of flame, listening to the startled yelps of wolves as they retreated, clambering over one another; he could barely see, but he could hear them, all of them, scurrying in a fury of claws and blood, the weight of one snapping the other's shoulders.

"What are they doing?" Jimmy asked Jarat in a disturbed voice. He watched the flickering torches tattoo the wolves' fur as they paraded the ground in an effort to forget whatever that image in the light had been.

Jarat had ignored Jimmy, seeing not the wolves' utter panic but the spiders caught in the flurry of bodies. Jarat chattered over the screaming Yilaks, his palps swinging from his jaw like hairy pendulums. Jimmy covered his ears.

And, in that split second, without warning or the courtesy of sound and sense, the bluff over the grounds had collapsed, releasing an avalanche of stone most certainly loosened by the giant's step, and the pernicious antics of the mysterious figure from the stone—it was, in most onlookers humble opinions, the mountain's last life.

Jarat fell forward in horror, throwing both Jimmy and Edwin from his back.

And Cole, who hadn't noticed the giant with the wolf's head inside the glowing orb of light, or even the pandemonium caused by the wolves, stood holding his hips, his eyelids snapped open to reveal shining eyes rimmed by tears.

Cole couldn't see the mines.