



The Scythian Stone



by Jon F. Waxley



The Scythian Stone

© 1999 Jon F. Baxley

This eBook publication and its images may not be reproduced, copied or distributed, in whole or in part via print, electronic means or any other method without the expressed written consent of the author.

**Published by
Cloudy Mountain Books, Inc.
www.fictionforest.com**

All Rights Reserved

A product of the United States of America

Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

This book is dedicated to all the aspiring and as yet unheralded writers who toil in obscurity, hoping that their work will soon stand beside this book as part of the great domain of literature.

I would also like to thank all of my friends and associates on the world wide web for their help, encouragement and daily support that brought this project to fruition.

Jon F. Baxley

The Scythian Stone

by Jon F. Baxley

© Copyright 1999



Cloudy Mountain Books, Inc.
www.fictionforest.com



Britain, Spring, 988AD

It came to him in a dream. Or was it a dream? Merlin's image was so real. Then the image spoke, and he knew he was not dreaming.

"Kruzurk Makshare, the time has come to avenge me," the image said, as it seemed to glide closer to the back of the wagon.

"Merlin?" the old man questioned aloud. "Is it really

you, or have I passed to the other side?"

The silky, colorless image floated into the wagon and settled less than a foot from his face. It hesitated, as if studying the craggy lines of the old man's hideous features. "It is I, Kruzurk. Has it been so long that you have forgotten your teacher?"

"Merlin! It is you!" Kruzurk swore aloud. "It's been---how long---sixty, no seventy seasons. It's true, then, what they say about your powers of making. I never really believed that you could---"

The image interrupted, saying, "Kruze, my old friend! I have little time, and much to say. My powers have weakened from the long stay on the other side. There is no need of magic there, you see. But I must ask of you a boon. It will take great courage, and I can think of no other better suited for the task."

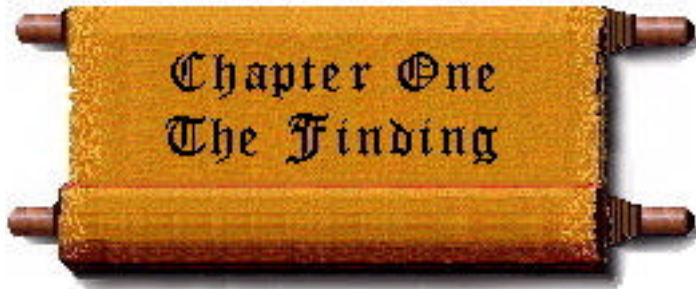
"Merlin, you need only ask."

"Avenge me, Kruzurk," the image said. "The Seed has gained great powers. He must be stopped. All that you will need is contained herein."



A tightly rolled black oilskin scroll appeared in Kruzurk's lap. "The powers of light be with you, old friend, for I can help you no further."

As the image seemed to dissipate in a sparkle of moonlight, Kruzurk cried out, "It will be done, Merlin-upon my magician's oath, I swear it!"



"On with you, now!" the old man cried out, his voice becoming distant and hollow in the damp evening's clamminess. "Pull my ladies!" he shrieked. "'Tis but a waine strip you've ta complete afore the light fails. On with you, now! Pull, ya big-butted sisters of perdition."

Daynin waited patiently at the edge of the field as his grandfather finished plowing the last three rows for the seasonal planting. The boy amused himself by slinging the small grey stones for which his adopted shire had been named. Already his keen eye and quick release had felled two of the fat, hairy rodents that scurried in and

about the deep ruts his grandfather's plow had furrowed only moments before.

His amusement was cut short by a loud snort from one of the two great Rhone mares on his grandfather's team. Quickly, the other mare snorted and joined the revolt against the heavy strain the team had encountered in the last row of the field. The old man slapped at the horses' backsides with a heavy leather thong that Daynin had grown to know all too well.

"Curse ye, get on!" the old man bellowed.

Daynin was not accustomed to hearing his grandfather swear, and in none of his fifteen previous planting seasons, had he ever seen him strike one of the animals in anger. "Something's wrong," he whispered aloud.

The sound of the lash on bare horseflesh caused the boy to shudder. He agonized for the mares, knowing how

badly that thong could sting when wielded by a man as stout as was Ean McKinnon. Sixty planting seasons and three terms as bowman in the service of Caledonian and Scottish lords had done little to weaken the stocky, stone hard features that Daynin had come to know and love above all others.

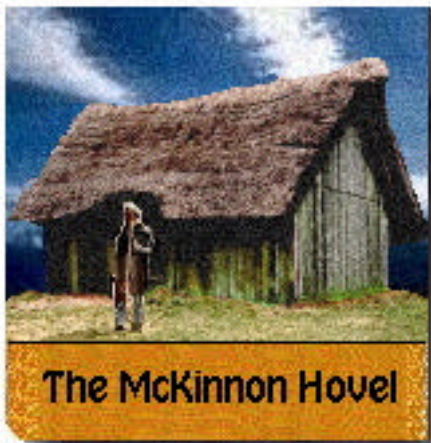
"Bring a staff and come 'ere, boy!" came a shout from across the rows.

"What's wrong, grandfather?" Daynin shouted through the thickening darkness. Staff in hand, he was already half way across the field.

"I'll be a blaggard's whore if I can tell ye, boy. A bloody great stone is buried here, where none has ever been afore. Agnes and Matildy canna barely budge it. Some black evil it is that's left this here booty in my field."

As Daynin reached the far side of the plowed field he

could see, square in the middle of the last furrow, the upturned edge of what appeared to be a great round headstone. The few curious markings that were visible in the failing light gave little evidence of the stone's meaning to the two McKinnons.



With Daynin's help, and a mighty heave from the mares, the stone was finally dragged from the furrow and cast aside for the night. Ean and his grandson, both tired from the long day's work, talked little of the stone on the way back to their village. Daynin asked at supper what his grandfather intended to do with the stone, and was met with a brief, pointed rebuke for reminding the elder McKinnon of the stone's annoying presence.

The next day was market day for the village. Daynin had little to do except wander around and investigate all the wonderful things the traveling merchants had brought to Hafdeway to sell. He stopped at one wagon and stared for a long time at three magnificent books that were on display. The ornate covers and beautifully inscribed writing were fascinating to the boy, his having not had the pleasure of being so close to a real book in a long time.

When he reached out to explore the cover of one book, a thin wooden stick struck from nowhere, slapping across his knuckles with the swiftness of a black snake. Tears welled in Daynin's eyes as he rubbed the stinging flesh on his hand.

"Look ye, brat, but touch ye not!" came a harsh admonishment from inside the wagon. "Lest, of course, ye be the Duke's heir and have brought me ten pieces of silver for the pleasure," the gruff, squeaking voice

continued.

"But I was just—" Daynin protested.

"Just is dust when profit I must, says I," the voice interrupted again.

Daynin peered carefully around the tailgate of the wagon to see from whence his admonishment came. A mop of long, unclean, stringy hair growing from a too-small head, sitting atop a too-small body was what met his eyes.

"Nosey bit o' work, ain't ye, sprite?" the hairy head asked.

The shock of seeing the head talk, seemingly without the benefit of a mouth, temporarily struck the boy dumb. He stepped back from the tailgate and briefly considered running away. Strangely, his feet wouldn't respond to

the warning his brain was giving him.

"Rat got your tongue, boy?" the hair demanded.

"Uhh, no, I—uhh, I just uhh—"

The hairy head turned and screeched, somewhat less loudly, "There ye go using that **just** word again. Ain't no profit in that word, boy. You got to be pure, or sure, otherwise you ain't fit for nothin' but cleanin' up horse droppin's in the middle of the road. Remember that, lad! Remember what old Boozer tells ye, 'cause there's profit in it, if'n ye'll listen and mark it well."

Daynin's eyes grew large as the screaming in his head exploded again. His feet still refused to move. The ugliness of the heavily scarred face staring down at him from the wagon was almost more than he could bear.

The boy's eyes dropped, preferring to stare instead at the

mud and animal dung caked on the wagon's axle. Words totally escaped him. The horror of the man's face and of the whole situation made him hope he was dreaming and not really there.

"Ye never see'd a face like this afore, have ye, boy? Never see'd a face spoilt like this one, eh? Here, give us a good look at that sweet cherub smile of yours," the hairy face said, his long bony hand reaching down to cup the boy's face in its palm.

Daynin cringed at the touch of the hairy thing's rough skin. He noted the lack of fingernails on the hand, as well as the bluish white coloring of the flesh. The hand slowly pulled his chin up, forcing his eyes to meet those of his tormentor.

"Please, I only wanted to look at the—" Daynin pleaded.

"Manuscripts? Truly it is with everyone. And what

happens if I let every curious bloke touch me books? 'Ere long, the covers get tore, the pages bespoiled and then me books are as worthless as three-day-old pig guts. What's yer name, cherub? What is it they call you, or do you JUST go by boy? Eh...speak up!"

"Daynin's my name, sir. I live just, er, uhh, half a league outside the village."

"Daynin, eh? Bloody curious christenment for these parts, says I."

"I'm not **from** here, m'lord. My grandfather brought me here from the highlands of Scotia. He is a McKinnon, of the McKlennan clans."

"Then what need have ye of books, master McKinnon? 'Tis common knowledge that highlanders are a wild lot and have little need of education. Their swords do most of their talking, so I've been told."

Daynin rankled at that notion. He thought of the books in his father's house, and how they had smelled as the great fire engulfed all that he had known of life in the highlands. His mind flashed to the blood splattered snow and the image of his father's still warm brains melting a hole in the soft white ground cover.



Daynin's home in the highlands

Gone was the clan of McKinnon, killed one and all by the order of men he knew not. All gone, save for Daynin and his grandfather, and they alive only by the grace of good providence and the luck of being caught out in a late winter's storm.

He had never forgotten that scene, the smell of the

burned flesh, the agony of finding all of his kin murdered in one bloody afternoon. He seethed with anger at the loss of the books his family had cherished so much.

"I have to go," Daynin replied sheepishly. "I have chores—"

"Run away if ye must, lad, but stay, if me books you wish to muse."

"But you said—"

"Not many have the stomach to stay and chat with old Boozer. Let alone make an argument with 'im that has the looks of the devil's own nightmare. You got the grip, boy, and that's rare these days. What say you, now? Have ye a readin' eye, or was ye only lookin' outta curiosity?"

"I can read," Daynin replied, matter-of-factly. "Latin and some Greek, but it's been a long time."

The Boozer held up a small sign and said, "Then read this, and I'll let ye spy me books. If'n ye can't, I'll swat ye again for bein' the liar."

"BOOZER'S BOOKS AND MAGICAL ITEMS," the boy read out loud.



"Hanged if ye ain't a reader!" the hairy one declared excitedly. "Sit down and tell me what the village of Hafdeway is doin' with one as bright as you."

Daynin reluctantly agreed, his mind having finally convinced his feet that he was in no mortal danger for the moment. He jumped up on the wagon's tailgate opposite the Boozer and began to describe how he and his grandfather managed their harrowing exodus from the highlands.

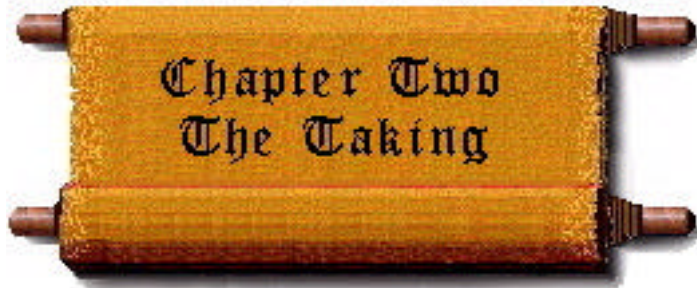
The Boozer listened attentively for a while. Then the boy's story reached its climax at yesterday's finding of the great stone in his grandfather's field.

"Headstone, says you?" the Boozer asked excitedly. "Rounded like and wider than a man is tall, with strange markings on it? Gimme the lay of those markings, boy. If they weren't Latin, tell me what they looked like."

"Like that," Daynin replied, pointing to an ancient astrological chart the Boozer had hanging inside his wagon.

The old man's head twisted around rapidly, as though not connected to his body by a neck. "RUNES, says you!" he spat out. "On a bloody great stone, buried in a highlander's field. Friar's Rush, boy, **that** ain't no headstone! No wonder t'was never found. The legend says a highlander's field—but it don't say the field is **in** Scotia," he crowed.

"Every mage for a thousand years has been lookin' for that sacrosanct slab of infernal sedition, and it took a cherub like you to find it. Luck is indeed with you, boy. The powers of all the heavens is alayin' out there in that field right now. You could well have discovered the Scythian Stone!"



"What do you mean?" Daynin begged. "What is this Sa-Si-than Stone?"

"Scythian, boy, SSScythian," the Boozer hissed. "The legend says it has the secrets of all the heavens writ down for 'im what finds it. Take the Stone to the Great Circle at Briarhenge, and ye can read when the sun rises at the equinox. Supposedly, ye can even predict when the sun and the moon are gobbled by that great black demon in the sky. Imagine it, boy. To be able to say when the sky'll go black for a time. No one's ever done

that in our day. But it's said the Scythians could do it, and they were worm meat long before the Norsemen came. That stone's the only record, and there's those that'll pay a Duke's ransom, or slit your gullet to possess it."

"My grandfather said—"

"Words is words right now, boy!" the Boozer snapped. "We got to be haulin' out there to get that Stone. Quick now, you get down and throw my goods in the wagon, whilst I hitch ole Abaddon to the trace. Go on! Daylight and prosperity's a burnin'."

Daynin did as the Boozer ordered. The old man's excitement was rapidly becoming contagious. The boy could feel his heart beating faster as he loaded the wagon, carefully placing the Boozer's books last on top of the heap.

"What do we do with it once we get the Stone?" Daynin asked, as the wagon trounced heavily over the last remaining ruts of the field.

"DO? Why, with it, boy, we can do anything we want!" the Boozer exclaimed. "Once we've got the Stone and can read it, the very powers of the heavens'll open up to us. Think of it, boy! The magic I know now will pale in significance compared to that of the Scythian Stone."

Daynin turned abruptly to stare at the Boozer's gnarled profile. Suddenly he was afraid again. He wished to be back at his grandfather's hovel, safely asleep in front of the fire. "Are you a sorcerer?" he asked sheepishly, as if afraid to hear the response he knew was coming.

"Magician," the Boozer proclaimed. "There's a world of difference. Sorcerers are them what's evil with nothing but evil intent. You know what a sorcerer would give to have the power of the Scythian Stone?"

Daynin shook his head, "no".

"Anything they had, boy, that's what. The Stone'd make 'em legitimate, you see. Not just some evil crackpot who does bad things for the fun of it, but genuine knowledge and power, that's all. If this is the Stone, we're gonna be real careful who we be tellin' about it, wager on that!"

The magician pulled the wagon to an abrupt stop a few yards from where the Stone lay. He climbed down and hurried over to examine it. Within seconds, he was convinced. "Help me turn it over, lad. If they's runes on the backside, it's treasure we've got and not some mislaid headstone."

The backside proved to be full of the same mysterious encoding as the front. Even the edge of the stone was engraved all the way around with more of the intricate carvings. The Boozer could barely contain his excitement. He danced a strange jig around the upturned

stone, chanting words that Daynin had never heard before.



The old magician smiled and brushed the dirt off his hands as he patted himself mentally on the back. "There it is, boy. That's a handy bit of work, eh? You didn't think my rigging would lift the Stone's weight did ya, now?"

Daynin smiled and shook his head. "No. I've never seen such a contraption. Is it magic?"

"Of course it's magic, you bean-headed plowboy, but not the way you think. It's ropes and pulleys, that's all. Best magic there is—common sense and leverage. Remember that, boy. Now, let's get this plunder over to your grandfather that he may have a say in its future."

It was mid-afternoon when the wagon rolled up to the modest hovel that the McKinnon clan called home. Daynin's grandfather stormed out of his front door, ready to argue or fight with the unwanted visitor until he saw his grandson's face appear from under the wagon's cover.

"Can ye not see it's well past the dinner time, boy?" he bellowed.

Daynin jumped down from the wagon, expecting to be clouted for his tardiness. Instead, his grandfather seemed transfixed, staring up at the wagon's driver. "This is my friend, grandfather," Daynin blurted out.

"Boozer's me name, kind sir—" the magician said as he climbed down clumsily from his lofty perch, "—and magic is me game. That is, it was, until your young cherub of a grandson, there, told me about you and the Stone."

"What about the stone?" the elder McKinnon demanded.

The Boozer replied, "Sure it is I am you've unearthed a treasure of immense significance in your field. Have ye n'er heard of the Scythian Stone, Ean McKinnon?"

"Aye, that I have," McKinnon answered. "And so I've heard of a thousand other such treasures. I give 'em as little thought as flies on a boar's ears. They be nothin' but old fool's tales and myths."

"Then take a spy in me wagon and see a myth come to life," the Boozer countered. "There be nothing but truth in this tale, and we brought it to you so's you can help us make a disposition of the spoils."

"Spoils!" McKinnon scoffed. He poked his head in the wagon and shook it mockingly. "Nothin' here but a bloody headstone."

"But grandfather," Daynin pleaded, "the Boozer says it's a treasure, and I believe him."

The elder McKinnon pushed the boy aside and stormed toward his front door, saying, "Then take it to the Duke and collect your reeeward. That is, if ye live long enough. Be gone with you, now. I'll have nothing further to do with this lot." With that, he went inside and slammed the door.

The Boozer remounted the wagon. "Come on, lad," he said. "There's some spice in what your grandpere says. We'll take it to a man I know what can say for sure if it is the Stone, and the worth thereof."

"But I can't leave the village," Daynin protested. "I have to help with the planting tomorrow. You don't understand---"

"I understand aplenty, boy. I understand that with the

spoils you can get from this here Stone, you can take your grandpere and go back to Scotia in the style of a real genteel highland clansman. 'Course that probably ain't much to be considered, you bein' the great landlords here in Hafdeway and all. I mean, you'd have to be leavin' this here great and mighty estate behind and such."

Daynin's ears burned at the very thoughts the Boozer was implanting. "Go back to Scotia?" the boy questioned aloud. "Back to McKinnon land?" he chirped. Daynin practically flew into the wagon. "I'll go, but I have to be back by first light."

"First light it is, boy," the magician agreed. The cackling inside his ugly, hair covered head seemed so loud, the Boozer feared the boy might actually hear him celebrating. *It's working*, he thought. *Better than e'er I thought it would. Now, on to Tendalfief!!!*



After a long, jolting silence on the road to Tendalfief, Daynin finally summoned enough courage to ask the Boozer the question he'd held onto all afternoon. "What happened to uhh, to your uhh—"

"Me kisser? Burned in a cauldron, boy. Seethin' with all manner of slime and black bile. Warn't a pretty sight, you can pledge on that one."

"But what happened? Did you fall into the cauldron?"

"Manner o' speakin', t'was so," the magician replied. "Only I had a little help from a man I trusted. Seed was 'is name. Seed of Cerberus. Vilest of the vile, he turned out to be. He was an apprentice to Merlin himself, just like me, afore Merlin found out the boy was a demon seed, that is. By then it was too late. The Seed stole all

of Merlin's charms of 'making' and then his 'chants' to boot. I tried to stop him when I found out what he was about to do. This here mess was my reward. The Seed pushed my head into a vat of boiling goo, then cursed me with an evil spell. Lucky for me he hadn't yet learned any powerful spells. I might've ended up a cockroach for life. But my hair's been dirty ever since, for if I wash it, spiders and roaches come a crawlin' out. And if I cut it or shave it, great oozing scabs appear."

Daynin's heart was in his throat listening to this horrendous tale. He cringed at the thought of spiders, and felt a great pity for the Boozer, cursed as he was. "Is there no way to lift this curse?" he asked.

"Sure there is. They's always a way to reverse a curse, boy. But ye got to get right in the face of the one what put the curse on ye, and make him take it back. That's the only way, short of killin' the curse maker."

"Have you ever tried to go back to, uhh, wherever this Seed is? To get the curse lifted I mean?"

"Can't. The Seed never leaves Blackgloom. He'd likely lose his powers if he did. There's no way in or out of there, save by the use of sorcery."

"What is Blackgloom?" the boy asked.

"Bloody great fortress north of Insurlak. Surrounded by trees so tall ye cannot see the tops. Trees of a girth so great that three men can't link arms around one. And guarded inside, it's said, by demons and beasts of which nightmares are made. No place for the faint hearted, wager that."

Daynin's curiosity was growing with each new facet of the old magician's story. He asked, "Then no one's ever been there?"

"None what's lived to tell of it, boy," the Boozer snapped. *But with any luck at all, that, too, is about to change*, he thought to himself.



"Lights ahead!" Daynin cried out after another long stretch of silence.

"Aye, that'll be The Never Inn. We're just ten leagues from Tendalfief and the Al Cazar. Then we'll know if we be fools or finders."

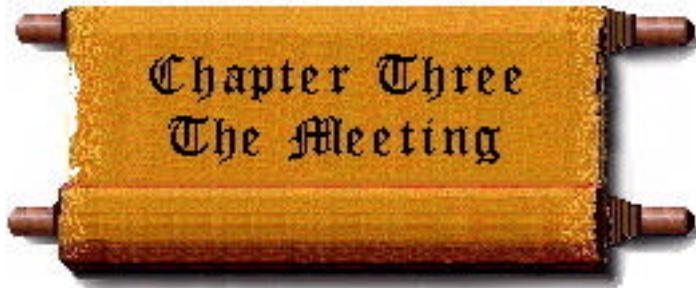
"What's the Al Cazar, Boozer?"

"He ain't a what, master McKinnon, but a who. He's the biggest cheese in the north of Britain. His mage'll

know if the Stone's real, and may even make us an offer for it. We'll have to be keepin' a sharp eye after that. Once the word gets out, every blaggard for a hundred leagues'll be after the booty we've got. Have ye knowledge of weapons, boy?"

The question came as a mild shock. The idea that they might have to fight for the Stone had never entered Daynin's mind. "No, but I'm good with stones," he said. "I can bring down a squirrel at a hundred paces."

Let's hope the "squirrels" we'll be encountering will stay that far away, the Boozer mused to himself. He pulled the wagon to a stop near the barn of the inn. He held his hand out to the boy and said, "Take this silver and get us some cheese. Bread and a tankard of ale, too, if you've enough. It's a long ride to Tendalfief, and I don't want to be stoppin' on this here thieves' road."



Daynin opened the huge doors of the inn very cautiously and peeked inside. The roar of a large, poorly vented fire had the top third of the room full of light smoke. Blackened lanterns cast eerily dancing shadows from the dozen or so figures moving about within. In one corner was a large harp, seemingly out of place in the hazy den of iniquity.

"Close the gate, you weedy little dolt!" the barkeeper growled from across the room. "Leave the cold outside where it'll do the most good."

Sheepishly Daynin entered the room, quickly shutting the great doors behind him. He felt a flush of embarrassment coming over him as he made his way to the bar. Off to his left, he caught just the swirl of a long skirt moving across the darkened side of the room.



"Some cheese, and, and bread, and a tankard of ale," he stuttered, holding out the coins in his hand.

"A tankard says he!" one of the bar's scruffy patrons scoffed. "And would ye be needin' a room for the night, Sir Puke?" he added, bringing a round of heavy, raucous laughter from the small crowd.

"Leave him alone, you crowbeat blaggards!" came a

resounding rebuke from the shadowy corner.

Daynin turned to see from whence his honor was being defended. "Who are you?" he asked of the mysterious figure.

"Never mind, boy," the shadow answered. "You just get your goods and be off. The Never Inn's no place for the likes of you. Especially at this time of night."

Daynin realized the voice, though deep and somewhat hardened, was that of a young woman. He stepped toward the corner and was stopped in his tracks by another strong rebuke. "Get thee hence, swineboy, before I lose my patience and let these blaggards have their turn with you."

"I just wanted to thank you for—for, uhh, helping me. I'm Daynin McKinnon of Hafdeway. My friend and I are on the way to—"

"To hell, sooner or later, as are most of us! That is, if you're lucky and don't get that scrawny little throat slit right here, tonight. Now be off with you!" the woman warned. "You've no business in a place like this."

Daynin backed up to the bar, still facing his mysterious benefactor. He tried desperately to see some semblance of a face, but the smoke and darkness made that impossible. He did make out some detail, along with one shapely ankle that protruded into the light, and he liked what he saw. He was at a loss as to what course to take then, as his curiosity had completely overcome his fear of the situation.

The tavern's doors swung open just then, and in marched the Boozer, looking for all the world like a deranged demon in the hunt for its prey. The room fell coldly silent for several seconds while the magician sized up the situation. "What's keepin' ya boy?" he roared. "Time's a wastin'. We got no time for the dillydally. Did you get

my ale?"

"Uhh, not yet, m'lord," Daynin responded, attempting to cast the manly image of himself as servant rather than plowboy for the benefit of the shadowy female enchantress. "Ale, innkeeper!" he ordered loudly.

The heavy clump of metal on the spiral wood stairs above the room announced the arrival of a new player to the scene. "Play, woman!" a harsh, gruff voice demanded from the stairs. "I didn't bring that harp here for an ornament, you know. Get over there and earn yer keep."

Daynin swirled about to catch a glimpse of the woman, but was attracted instead to the thump of horse boots on the floor of the inn. He saw the long black hauberk first, its tiny, intricate rings of iron a flowing masterpiece of smithwork. Then his eyes met the heavily gold inlaid belt with a magnificent silver dirk protruding angrily at

the man's waist. He had not yet gotten to the stranger's face when his inspection was interrupted.

"What're you lookin' at, pup?" the black hauberk growled. He pushed a chair out of his way and strode rapidly toward the corner where the woman was as yet unmoving.

Before Daynin could answer, the magician intervened. "He looks at nothing, my lord," he said apologetically. "He is but a foolish boy. May I buy you a tankard of ale for your trouble?"



The hauberk roared, "Woman! I told you to play! Now make that harp sing, or there'll be the devil to pay for you this night." With that, he stormed into the darkened corner and shoved the woman out into the light. "Do

what I tell ye, now, or the lash'll be your reward."

The young McKinnon was struck through instantly by the woman's beauty. The bodice front of her dress fell away from her as she attempted to get up from the floor. Even in the poor light of the inn, he could see the round fullness of her breasts heaving with each breath. Her long black hair glistened from the sparkle of firelight, her skin reflecting the yellow glow of the room's lanterns. She was a dream come true for Daynin. He had never before seen such a beautiful woman.

"Let's go, boy," the Boozer urged, so as not to intervene further.

"No!" Daynin replied. "He can't treat her that way! It's not—"

"It's none of your business, lad. We've a trek to make, remember?" the old magician urged again, this time

jerking on Daynin's leather frock sleeve.

Daynin jerked his arm free and took two steps to where the woman was just coming to her knees. He held out his hand and asked, "Are you all right? I mean, are you hurt? Can I help you?"

"Help her at your peril, boy," the innkeeper snapped. "She belongs to the Marquis, there, and he's as apt to break your head as look at you."

The woman pushed herself to her feet, her eyes meeting briefly with Daynin's. It was then that he realized she was no woman, at least not by her age. The marks on her face and hands belied her true age, but he knew her eyes were those of a very frightened young girl, not much older than was he. He smiled, and received the barest hint of a smile in return.

The Marquis' great shadow descended upon them like a

demon's breath. Daynin's eyes flashed from the woman's face to the black hauberk just as the blow fell upon her. The Marquis struck her in the back of her head with his heavy studded gauntlet, stunning the woman and splattering blood on Daynin's face and arms.

In a heartbeat the boy reacted in anger for the first time in his life. Perhaps it was the memory of his family's fate at the hands of black-armored slayers. Perhaps it was the passion of a young man long held in abeyance to the harsh injustices of the Duke's realm.

Regardless the cause, the result was the same. He grabbed blindly at the Marquis to stop the assault. His hands found the hilt of the man's dirk. With the precision of a trained assassin, he pulled the blade free and jammed it to its limit into the seam of the hauberk. Instantly, blood gushed from the deep wound, the Marquis toppling forward onto the boy like a great oak felled by lightning.

Pandemonium reigned in the room. The innkeeper climbed over the bar with a short, studded board in his hands. Several of the patrons drew their dirks in anticipation of more bloodletting. Everywhere there was confusion. The woman screamed, then swooned as a scarlet river of blood she must have thought was her own, spread rapidly on the barroom floor.

The Boozer jumped between the innkeeper and the boy's exposed backside. He, too, drew a large dirk from under his cloak, and that, combined with his naturally fearsome features, served to stem the tide of the others. They stopped in their spots or backed away quickly, preferring not to be added to the casualty lists for the inn that night.

"You best be takin' your leave, afore the Duke's men hear of this," the innkeeper warned. "The Marquis was the Duke's cousin, you know, and he'll not take lightly to his kinsmen's murder, dog that the Marquis was. And take that wench with ye as well. She's been nothin' but

trouble since she's been here. Good riddance to ye all!"

"Help the woman to the wagon, Daynin," the magician ordered. "We'll be headin' back to Hafdeway now. Be quick with ye, boy!"

The magician's wagon was roaring down the track to Tendalfief before Daynin came to fully realize what had happened. The woman lay stunned in the bottom of the wagon next to the Scythian Stone, still bleeding from the gash in the back of her head. All Daynin could hear was the Boozer lashing out at Abaddon, urging the old horse onward through the gloomy darkness.

The last three leagues to Tendalfief flew by in a haze of private reverie for the magician. He thought to himself, *the boy was a wise choice, after all. It's obvious he has the grit for the task ahead of us. I don't know what will become of him after that, but I'll do the best I can by him. I swear that to you, Merlin, and to the magician's*

guild. That is, if I'm still alive on the morrow to make good on any of my pledges.

The heavy jostling of the wagon finally broke through the stupor where Daynin's senses had gone. He reached over to touch the girl's jet black hair, now lightly matted with blood at the base of her skull. She moaned slightly as she tried to turn her head.

"Best be still," Daynin cautioned. "You've a bad knot on your head."

"Owhhhh," she said, after running her fingers across the bump. "That **bastard**! I'll strangle him with his own lash the next chance I get."

"Then you'll need a spade to do it. He'll be feedin' the worms 'ere you see him again," Daynin said, somewhat boastfully.

She sat up, holding her head as if it were a melon balanced on a fence post. "Owww! Charon's Cross! I'll make that felon pay," she swore.

"I'm trying to tell you," Daynin insisted, "the Marquis crossed over to the other side this night. He'll not be bothering you, nor you him, **ever** again. At least not as a mortal man."

"The Marquis is dead?" she begged. "By whose hand, and for what price was this deed of heaven's justice done?"

"Is that important?" Daynin evaded. "Isn't it enough that the man is dead? He's paid the ultimate price for his misdeeds, that's for sure."

"You killed him!" she said with a finality of recognition. "You've condemned yourself to the gallows, and **me** in the bargain. **Damn** you!"

"The man gave me no choice. He would have killed you if I hadn't—"

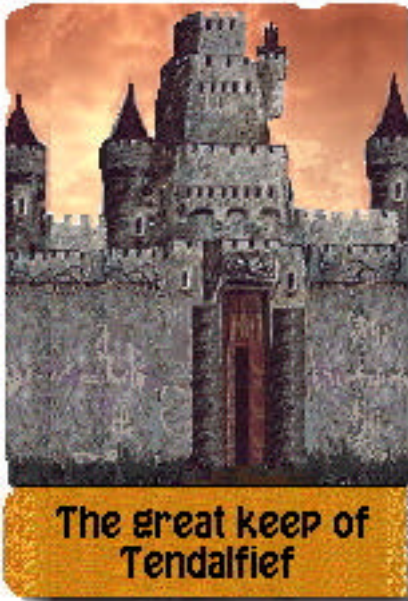
She pulled up her sleeve and snapped, "Do you not see these bruises and scratches? He's beaten me before, but I've lived to tell of it. Besides, he owns me. It's his right. I'm indentured to him for life."

"Not any more," Daynin scoffed with a large sigh. "Might I at least know the name of the person I've chosen to share the gallows with?"

"Sabritha, if it matters. And after this night, I doubt it will. We'll all be hanging from an oak tree before the cock crows twice. And who might **you** be, anyway, sir knight of the barroom?"

Daynin could feel the flush of embarrassment flooding his face again. "I already told you. I'm Daynin McKinnon of Hafdeway. And that is the Boozer, a

traveling magician. We are on our way to—"



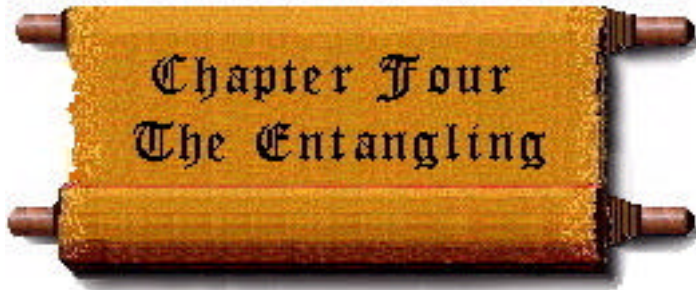
"I don't give a render's puke where you're going!" she growled. "If we don't head for the border of Scotia, *right now*, we're going to be crow's food when the Duke's men catch us. The Marquis was Duke Harold's cousin, you know. Not a liked man, to be sure, but a Marquis—"

Daynin interrupted. "Are those lights in Hafdeway, Boozer?"

"Tendalfief," he replied. "We can't go back to Hafdeway just yet."

"Tendalfief!" Sabritha cried out, then shuddered with the pain echoing in her head. "The Al Cazar is the sheriff of Anglia. You've saved 'em the trouble of looking for us, you old fool! Turn around now, before it's too late!"

Daynin pointed toward the back of the wagon. "It's already too late," he whispered. "There are soldiers behind us!"



"Quiet! Both of you," the Boozer demanded. "No one here knows of the Marquis' death, yet. We'll do our business and be gone by daylight."

Hardly had old Abaddon pulled to a stop before three heavily armored gatemmen surrounded the magician's wagon. "What's yer business here at this hour of the night, hawker?" the sergeant of the gategatch demanded.

"I must see the Al Cazar," the Boozer answered, very solemnly. "I have something of great value he will wish

to see."

One of the gatewatch held his torch higher to get a better look at the visitor, then jerked it back down, wishing he'd not seen the horrible apparition the torch presented. "That's what you hawkers all say," the sergeant mocked. "You be gettin' down from there and we'll see what this here 'something' is."

The Boozer was not about to play his only card on a lowly gate guard. "I am sent here as a personal emissary of Duke Harold's," he boasted. "If you value your commission, sergeant, I suggest you go and wake the Al Cazar."

The Duke's name had the desired effect, as the heavy gates of Tendalfief swung open slowly, and the magician's wagon was allowed to enter. The place was as silent as a graveyard, its magnificent stone edifices rising at a steep angle to the level of the rocky hill upon which

the great keep had been built. Tendalfief had long been the only stone fortress in the whole of northeastern Anglia and was frequently the sight of bloody engagements between the Duke's men and the wild highland clans of Scotia.

The hollow "rrhuump" of the gates closing behind him caused the Boozer to wish he'd never made the vow to Merlin's ghost. That was especially true now that he had the blood of an innocent man staining his sacred vow. He mused to himself, *Once the Al Cazar knows of the Stone, it won't take long for word of it to reach Blackgloom and the Seed. Then will I know if my plan has succeeded.*

Daynin had listened curiously to the conversation between the gatewatch and the Boozer. Something about it bothered him, but he couldn't quite decide what. Then it struck him. "Boozer," he whispered, as the magician wheeled the wagon into the stables area of the keep,

"you talked differently with the gatewatch than you have before."

The Boozer laughed and then said, "Aye, you got the grip, that's for sure. Don't much fly between them ears, says I. Solid as a rock you are, boy. Sure, I talks different with them what's got the authority, boy, because they make the rules. The rules say that if ye be smarter or better educated than the next man, he's got to bow down to you. That blaggard of a gatewatch would've kept us waiting all night, if I'd let him. But you see how fast he moved when I talked down to him. That's the lay of things, boy, and you best be learnin' that rule right now."

"What happens if the Duke's men come looking for us?" the boy asked.

"They'll be lookin' toward Hafdeway, I expect, since that's the clue I gave 'em in the tavern. But it won't

matter, 'cause nobody could've got here faster than we did, and we'll be out of here by first light with any luck at all. You just tend to the wench and keep her quiet. Let me do the talkin' and there'll be no trouble."

A light, cold rain began to fall outside, pattering quietly on the wagon's oilskin cover. Daynin wetted a cloth in the rain, and placed it gently on Sabritha's neck. Her skin was clammy to his touch. He began to worry that she was seriously hurt or that she might not recover from her wound.

"You've the manner of a blind ox when it comes to healing," Sabritha blurted out, rather unexpectedly.

Daynin recoiled from the surprise onslaught. "I-I'm sorry," he stuttered. "I didn't know you—I thought you felt hot. I just wanted to—"

"To what? Touch my skin? You're not the first to want

that, plowboy. But most are willing to pay, and pay handsomely. What are **you** willing to pay, huh?" she jabbed.

"Nothing!" he shouted, involuntarily pulling his hands away to prove his innocence. "I was just trying to help. I would never—I mean, I wouldn't do that to you—I wouldn't, I couldn't—"

"You never have! That's what you really mean, isn't it?" she parried.

Daynin seemed confused. He replied, "Never have what?"

"Been the Duke's minstrel, of course!" She laughed, then continued, "Been with a woman, you rock-headed son of a bean planter."

Daynin feigned confusion. He shuffled his position in

the wagon, making a pretense of looking out for the Boozer, and allowing himself an escape from the conversation.

"Boozer's been gone a long time. I hope this Al Cazar can tell us what we need to know, so we can get out of here."

Sabritha sat upright, leaning her back against the Stone. "What is it that's so full of importance the old man had to bring us here anyway?"

"That," Daynin said, flatly, pointing at the Stone.

"A headstone? He's risking our necks for a headstone?"

"No. It's—it's something special. We've come here to find out how special. Boozer thinks the Al Cazar may even want to buy it."

Sabritha ran her hand along the edge of the Stone, feeling the runes around the rim. "Never seen a headstone with runes like these. Is it magic?"

"We'll soon find out," Daynin answered. "The Boozer's coming with some men. Now keep quiet, and say nothing about last night."

"Whatever you say, your worship," she quipped, mockingly.

"Open the wagon," the order came.

Two men-at-arms threw open the back of the wagon, and stopped, as if frozen in time. Sabritha's presence surprised, and instantly delighted them both. "Hold!" one of them bellowed. "We've got a wench bestored here, and a sightly one at that!"

"Step aside!" the Al Cazar ordered. He leaned into the

back of the wagon, apparently more curious to see the woman than the Stone. "You failed to tell me you brought us a treat, old man. We may indeed have some bargaining to do, after all."

"Good morn, your lordship," Sabritha purred.

Daynin's anger flared once again. This time his tongue did the work, rather than a dirk. "Quiet, wench!" he snapped. "The Al Cazar is an important man. He has no need of your diseased services. Now move aside, so the Stone can be got."

"Diseased is it?" the Al Cazar repeated, stepping back quickly.

"Aye, m'lord," the Boozer joined in. "Something she picked up in the north, I'm afraid. You know how nasty those highlanders are."

The Al Cazar stepped back further, his interest in the woman obviously diluted with a twinge of fear. "Get the Stone," he ordered.

"Get back, wench!" the man-at-arms ordered, fear evident in his tone, as well.

As the Stone was unwrapped, an elderly mage stepped forward with a large leather-bound manuscript. He waved for a torch to be brought closer, and opened the book to a premarked spot. He studied the writing in the book for several seconds, then compared it to what the Stone contained. He ran his hands across the face of the Stone, carefully tracing the etched runes with his fingernails. He stopped, turned the page in his book and repeated the process.

"M'lord," he whispered, "I believe it to be genuine. It appears to be the Scythian Stone." The mage turned to the Boozer and asked, "Where did you find this?"

"In a highlander's field, just as the legend says," he replied.

"Bring the Stone inside," the Al Cazar ordered. "We'll examine it further in good light."

The Boozer stepped between the mage and the Stone. "A moment, if you will, m'lord," he said firmly. "We've a bit of hagglin' to do afore the Stone leaves the wagon."

"Haggling!" the Al Cazar exclaimed. "Name your price, old man, and be quick about it. Throw the woman in the deal and it's a Duke's ransom you'll be getting."

"It's not just silver I be needing, your lordship. 'Tis a pardon by your hand for any and all crimes committed here in Anglia that I would wish for me and my mates. We've, uhh, had a minor scrape or two with the Duke on occasion, and you bein' the high sheriff, why, I figure you could grant us your pardon. 'Course, I realize your

word don't carry the weight of the Duke, but, 'tis better'n a sharp stick in the eye, as you might say."

The Al Cazar thumped his mailed hand into the Boozer's chest, boasting, "The law's the law, merchant. And I make the laws in Anglia, not the Duke. But your pardon'll only be good for past crimes, understood?"

"Clear as a fall day, m'lord. Now, as to the price. Five thousand talens should about cover it, I expect. And the woman's no part of this deal."

"Five thousand talens!" the Al Cazar roared. "Why not five times five thousand, you witch-faced trammel? There's not that much silver in the



whole of Anglia. Maybe a year or two in the dungeon will lower your demands, eh? Or a week on the rack, perhaps?"

"Your lordship knows the power of this Stone," the Boozer said, quietly. "You said yourself it's worth a Duke's ransom—"

"Duke's be hanged if there's one I'd give more'n a thousand for, and that's if he be blood kin, old man. You'll take seven hundred and be on your way, or you'll be my guest till the rats feed off ya."

The Boozer turned and flipped the cloth covering back over the Stone and said, "A bargain made fair by the details, your lordship," his voice flat and unemotional. "When can your mage draw up the pardons?"

"By first light, and we'll need the names," the mage replied.

"Done!" the Boozer agreed, holding out his hand for the clincher.

Daynin couldn't believe his ears. Seven hundred silver pieces split three ways, as the Boozer had agreed to include a share for his grandfather, was more than the boy had ever hoped to earn in his life. And now he would have it all in one lump sum. A vivid image of the highlands lit in the back of his mind. A brief image of something much closer that he could now afford, also made his head swim.

"If you don't mind, your lordship, I'll be keepin' the Stone in the wagon until morning," the Boozer said. "Not that I don't trust you, you see, it's just that the Stone is quite heavy, and I wouldn't want any risk to come to it."

"First light, old man," the Al Cazar warned. "I'll have an extra guard posted at the front gate, just in case."

The Boozer climbed into the wagon and waited until all the men of Tendalfief had departed. He pulled Daynin very close and whispered, "We got to beat it out of here, boy. We got to make a break, or we're goners for sure. This Al Cazar's no man of his word, and besides, I think he's hot for the woman. I want you to open this keg and grease up the wheels on the wagon, so's we can make a run for it. I'm gonna spy us a way out."

"But—I don't understand!" Daynin protested. "I thought the deal was made. Why do we have to run for it?"

"Gut feelin', lad. He means to slit our throats for that Stone."

Sabritha agreed, though her council seemed unheeded. "The old man's right, Daynin. The Al Cazar would sooner part with his mother than seven hundred talens."

"What do you know about that kind of plum?" Daynin

scoffed.

"Never mind that, now," the Boozer interrupted. "Get out there and grease those wheels, so's we can make a run for it. I'll be back in a while."

The magician removed a small bag from under the wagon seat and disappeared into the gloomy darkness. His black cloak and diminutive size made him all but invisible in the light rain and haze of the fortress.

Daynin finished greasing the wheels and took a large handful of grain to feed Abaddon. Having accomplished all he could to ready the wagon, he climbed back in and settled down to wait. In minutes, he was fast asleep.



The rain was beating hard on the wagon's cover,

drowning out the sound of the dark shadow as it crept closer and closer. The shadow reached its long bony fingers through the open canvas front, feeling for the soft human flesh it knew to be inside. Slowly, the tip of its fingers crawled unseen onto the boy's neck. Another instant, and the shadow's prey would be struggling for its last breath.

"Ahhhhrrghh!" Daynin screamed. "No!" he gurgled, desperately trying to gain some air through his throat.

"Shut up and go back to sleep!" Sabritha scolded.

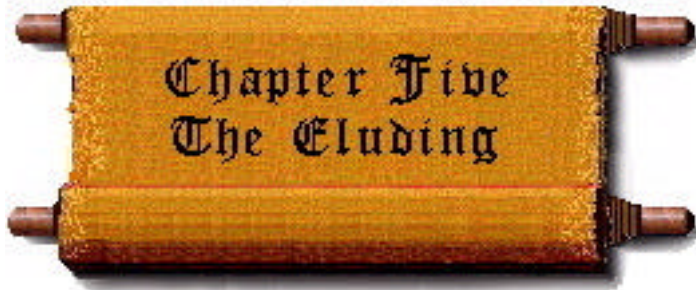
Daynin sat up and felt for his neck. His eyes were so wide that Sabritha could see them in the dark. "The Marquis! He was here!" Daynin moaned. "He—he was—he had no skin. He was going to kill me."

"Bad dream, that's all. Now go back to sleep."

"I may never sleep again," Daynin whispered, his throat still aching from the phantom's attack.

Outside, he could hear a loud commotion stirring toward the main gate. The clatter of horse hooves on stone and heavy voices, though not loud, seemed definitely out of the ordinary for that early hour. Daynin peered out from under the canvas, and instantly recognized the distinctive yellow and red standard of the Duke fluttering across the courtyard. "Sabritha! The Duke's men—they've found us!" he whispered, almost choking on the words.





"Damn!" the woman replied. "The Al Cazar betrayed us. That weasel eyed son a skunk. Where's the old man? We've got to run for it!"

"I don't know where he is," Daynin answered. "He never came—"

Just then, the wagon lurched forward, throwing both of its passengers to the rear in a confused heap. Daynin fell face first into the woman's lap, unable to cushion or redirect his fall. He looked up at Sabritha, a deep

crimson tide of embarrassment flooding his whole body.

"Closest you been to a woman since you was birthed, eh plowboy?" she jabbed, laughingly.

Daynin was speechless. The momentum of the wagon was so great, he could not easily escape from his unsightly position. It hit him what Sabritha had just said, and another wave of embarrassment washed over him. He put his hands on her thighs and tried to push away, but fell forward again, face first, into her lap.

Sabritha laughed uproariously and said, "If this weren't so funny, I'd kick you all the way back to Halfwitway, or wherever it was you said you were from."

"Hafdeway!" Daynin screeched. He finally managed to right himself, his mind instantly jumping from her warm lap to their more immediate plight. By now the wagon was roaring across the cobblestone courtyard at a

breakneck speed. He still had no idea who or what was guiding it, but the image of his dream's dark shadow suddenly popped into his head.

"Onward, Abaddon!" the Boozer hollered. "Drive for that gate my weathered old friend!"

Daynin couldn't believe his eyes. The frail little man was astride the horse's neck, lashing him for all he was worth. The magician's long dirty hair and flowing robe made him look for all the world like a demon unleashed. The gatewatch must have thought so, too, for they scattered like a batch of chickens when the wagon roared through. The gate was standing wide open, its portcullis raised just high enough to allow the wagon's escape. A squadron of the Duke's men, still horsed outside the gate, reeled in terror at the oncoming spectre. They, too, scattered to avoid being run over by the hairy demon.

As the wagon passed through the group, the magician

cast his bag to the ground. Its effect completed their escape. Before the gates of Tendalfief disappeared into the darkness, Daynin watched with great amusement as the Duke's horsemen tried in vain to control their animals.

"What was in the bag, Boozer?" Daynin cried out.

"Wasps, boy. No armor in the world'll keep a mad wasp out. Those troops will be licking their wounds for a week," he shouted over the roar of the wagon. "That's leverage, boy, at its best. Mark it well."

A half league away, he stopped to dismount Abaddon. Daynin was amazed by the agility demonstrated by a man of his age. "How did you know to run for it when we did? How did you know the gate would be open?"

The magician climbed onto the seat and handed the reins to Daynin. "Simple, my boy. Leave nothing to chance

and risk becomes your ally. I put a hard clout on the head of the gatekeeper. When the Duke's men came, I opened the gate. The rest was a matter of momentum."

"But how did you know the Duke was coming?" Daynin persisted.

"Because the Stone would have been unloaded otherwise. Why unload that which you intend to move anyway? Simple deduction."

"I'll have to hand it to you, old man, you sure made the Duke's men look like a gang of drunken minstrels," Sabritha said, laughingly.

"Aye, but they'll be untangled and after us by daylight," the Boozer warned. "We've got to run for Briarhenge. The more people and roads the better. They'll have a hard time tracking us once we reach the Great Circle. Then on to the border. We'll be out of the Duke's reach

there." He added, cryptically, in his own mind, *and every other mortal being's reach, as well.*

"The border!" Daynin yelled. "But I've got to get back to Hafdeway."

The Boozer put his hand on the back of Daynin's neck and said, "You best be forgettin' about that for now, lad. There's nothin' but a gallows waitin' for you there. We get the booty for the Stone, then you can go back as someone else—a prince of Scotia mayhaps, or some such ruse. But your life as Daynin McKinnon ended in that bloody tavern."

"But what about my grandfather? He won't know what's happened to me. He'll probably come looking for us. Then I'll never find him."

"Never is a word that loser's use, boy, and you ain't no loser. We've got time and momentum on our side. And

we've got the Stone. Now lay on those reins and let's get on to the Circle. We'll mingle with the pilgrims, then disappear like we were never on this earth. Upon that, you have my pledge as a member of the magician's guild."

"That certainly makes me feel secure," Sabritha quipped sarcastically, instantly drawing a quiet, but angry look from Daynin.



Six hours later, the magician's wagon passed through the first great encampment south of Briarhenge. Pilgrims from the whole of Britain had come for the Rites of Spring festival at the Great Circle. Thousands of travelers, hundreds of wagons, and more animals than could be counted were clogging all the roads leading into Briarhenge.

Sunrise over the forests of Briarhenge was more brilliant than any Daynin could recall. Perhaps he realized how narrowly they had just escaped from an eternal darkness. Or maybe it was the realization that he was less than five leagues from the border of his ancestral land, and safety.

While his mind raced along through images of the night's escapades, it kept stopping at the same place—with Sabritha. He thought of her coal black hair, her long, shapely legs and the beautiful smile that seemed to beckon his closer attention. He remembered how she had laughed, then why. A hint of flush came over him as he thought about being in her lap. The one thing he recalled most vividly about the night was how Sabritha had smelled when he was close to her.

Daynin had nothing to compare it to. He thought of the tea berry soap his mother had often used, but Sabritha's smell was wonderfully different. There was a mixture of wood smoke and heather to it, or perhaps lavender and

clover. He could not decide which, but he knew, somehow, that her smell would be with him forever.

Wheeling the magician's wagon around a sharp bend in the road ahead, his reverie abruptly stopped. Standing square in the middle of the track was a man so large that at first, Daynin thought him to be a tree. He slowed the wagon, realizing that he could not pass the man on either side. A quick glance into the back of the wagon told him that the Boozer and Sabritha were both sound asleep. Rather than wake the old man, he decided to stop.

"Hold!" came a shout from the stranger in the road.

"You're blocking the road!" Daynin replied. "Move aside!"

"A moment of your time, kind sir, if you will," the stranger said.



"I've no time to stop," Daynin replied, sharply.

From out of nowhere, another man, small, wiry and covered with hair, appeared and jumped onto the side of the wagon. "Mayhaps this here blade'll be changin' yer mind, boy," he slurred.

A long, lancet of a knife flashed in the corner of Daynin's eye. He froze in terror. The man was less than an arm span from him before he could react.

Daynin stuttered, "Wha-aat do you want? We have nothing! We uhh, we're pilgrims. On our way to the, uhh, Circle."

"Pilgrims, aye," the wiry little man hissed. "It's pilgrims we seek, boy. Them what's got the goods to make our days some'at easier here in these woods. Now, you be easin' them reins down and we'll be havin' a look in this 'ere wagon of yours."

The tree man grabbed old Abaddon's trace chain and steadied the animal while the knife man climbed inside the wagon. Another man came out of the woods on the right side of the road and disappeared around the back of the wagon. Daynin could do little but submit to the knife man and his woodland band. His only hope was that the magician would once again display his wit to help them escape this new threat.

The Boozer awoke to find the third man climbing into the back of his wagon. He reached for his dirk, but was stopped by the knife man climbing through the front of the wagon.

"Hold yer piece, there, old man," the knife man ordered. "We'll be lookin' through yer plunder, here, and that ain't worth dyin' for. You just take out that there frog sticker and hand it over, and nobody'll get hurt. Otherwise, this here blonde haired cherub'll be feedin' the worms a might sooner than ye might wish. Understood?"

"Yes," the Boozer snapped. He glanced at the woman, completely covered by a blanket, and realized that she, too, was at risk. He pulled his dirk very slowly and handed it to the knife man. "We've nothing of value here, but if it's food you want, I can give you whatever we have."

"Value's in the eyes of the beholder, as it were," the knife man said. He climbed over the Boozer and began to rummage through the bundles and bags at the front of the wagon. He pulled a large woolen cloak from the pile and tossed it out of the front of the wagon. Next he took

a small wooden box without opening it and disposed of it similarly. Finally, he reached for the blanket.

The man in the back and the knife man both whooped at the same instant. "Value, says he!" the knife man hollered. "Guess where he comes from, they don't hold much with women, eh Tom?"

Tom's eyes were as large as silver talens, his filthy face broad with a smirk of delight. "May be she ain't worth nothin' to them, Blackjack. But wenches is hard to come by in these parts—especially them what's got the looks of this 'ere beast."

"Leave her alone!" Daynin snapped. "She's very ill. That's why we're bringing her to the Circle—to get her healed."

"Or to bury her," the Boozer added. "That's to be her headstone, there in the back. The mage at Tendalfief told

us to keep her away from others. She's got the fever, so he told us. If I were you, I would—"

"Ohhhh, ohhhh," Sabritha groaned aloud. "Where am I? Is this the other side?" she moaned, adding her part to the charade.

The two bandits fell back in horror as the woman reached out and flailed her arms at them blindly. Tom tumbled toward the open back end, while Blackjack grabbed for the Boozer to steady himself in the close quarters. "Damned pilgrims! Ye've all got some kinda disease. Get thee gone from here, afore I light up this whole pestilent wagon."

Before the knife man could extricate himself from the front of the wagon, a great commotion erupted in the back. Tom had suddenly been jerked completely out of the wagon by an unseen adversary. A brief struggle ended in a loud "thump" as poor Tom's head was bashed

in by his attacker's staff.

The tree man at the front of the wagon ran to help Tom, but was met half way by Tom's attacker. Blackjack grabbed his plunder, took a quick look at the lopsided battle at the side of the wagon, and charged off into the woods. The tree man was felled by one swing of the stranger's staff, and collapsed in agony on the side of the road, his kneecaps shattered. In a matter of seconds, the fray was over.

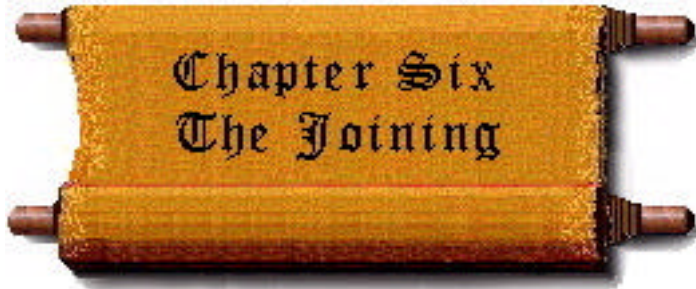
Daynin had watched in amazement as the stranger dispatched his much larger opponent with nothing more than a hickory staff. He cheered wildly when the giant went down, urging Boozer to come and watch the spectacle before it was over. Sabritha, too, scrambled for a better vantage point, but was too late to witness the action.

"Who are you?" Daynin cried out excitedly. "Where are

you from?"

"Never mind that," the stranger replied. "We should go before they come back with more men. Everyone in the wagon, now, quickly!"

Sabritha jumped back into the wagon hurriedly, followed by the tartan-clad stranger. Daynin lashed at Abaddon, and off they went until reaching the edge of the next encampment. Feeling safe there, the Boozer ordered a stop.



"We owe you a debt, stranger," the Boozer exclaimed.

The stranger jumped from the tailgate and walked to the front of the wagon. "These woods are full of blaggards and cutthroats," he said, a heavy highlander's accent more evident, now, in his rolling words. "You should'na stopped when you did, boy. Don't make that mistake again. You canna trust anybody on this road."

"Where're you going?" Daynin asked, as the man walked away.

"To Scotia," the stranger replied.

"Then travel with us," the Boozer offered. "We're headed for Insurlak, and would be grateful for your company."

"I travel alone," he replied, "and you've a sickly woman with you."

Sabritha poked her head from the front of the wagon, and said, "I'm not sick—just bored. I'll wager you'd make the trip more interesting, eh?"

Daynin's ears burned to hear that conniving tone in her voice. "Fare thee well, stranger," he bellowed, raising the whip to snap Abaddon into stride again. "We thank you for your help."

Sabritha grabbed Daynin's wrist and stayed his motion. "We're in no hurry," she snipped. "Join us, stranger. It's

a long walk to Scotia."

The man seemed to hesitate, then agreed. The woman's beautiful smile was more than he, or any man could resist, it seemed. Daynin waited for the man to climb onto the tailgate once more, then angrily snapped the reins, jerking the wagon forward abruptly.

The Boozer grabbed the reins to steady both the boy and old Abaddon. "Yer time'll come, boy. Best be patient," he said.

Sabritha's sharp tongue couldn't resist the temptation. "That would indeed be a trick of magic," she jabbed, as she quickly disappeared toward the back of the wagon.



With the morning rushing quickly toward its midday

axis, the road to Briarhenge seemed to sprout all manner of men and beasts. The Boozer became impatient with the slow moving traffic. *Mustn't be in too big a hurry, now,* he counseled himself. *The word should reach Blackgloom by nightfall tonight. By tomorrow at the latest. Then I'll know if the Seed has taken the bait. After that, my patience will indeed be tested.* He glanced at Daynin seated next to him and added, somewhat sadly, *as will yours, my young friend.*

"You've not said a word all morning, stranger," Sabritha finally had the courage to say. "Are we not worthy of your conversation?"

"Worthiness comes from one's values when applied to another's plight," the stranger recited, almost as if from a manuscript. "Even though I didna seek your company today, yet here I am. Neither did I seek to fight a pitched battle this morning, yet so I did. Now it's my desire to ride with you to Scotia, but that doesna mean I wish to

converse whilst we're about it."

The hair on the back of Sabritha's neck stood up at the stranger's mild rebuke. Not to be outdone, she snapped back, "No need to be haughty, sir highlander. I'll have you know that I am a personal friend of the Marquis of Greystone."

"Then you've no knowledge of his demise?" the stranger replied.

Sabritha's anger at the man's verbal saltiness was quickly overshadowed by her concern for his knowledge of the Marquis' death. She could not believe the word had spread so far, so rapidly. "Demise?" she dodged. "The Marquis is dead?"

"At the hands of a straw-haired plowboy, so I'm told—in a drunken brawl over some sprightly wench. The Duke's men're searching every village from Wingsdale north to

Tendalfief. When they find 'im, they'll hang 'im for sure. Him and his cohorts in the deed, that is."

"Cohorts?" she asked, continuing to feign ignorance.

He stared at her, as if to decide the depth of her interest in the matter. "Curious, m'lady. Of such matters, most women make little note."

Sabritha avoided the stranger's gaze by crawling over the Stone and into the wagon. She decided to change the direction of their conversation, and quickly. "Have you been away from Scotia for a long time?"

"Aye, too long," he answered, wistfully. "My business in this country is finished. With any luck, I'll not be leaving Scotia again."

"Soldiers!" the Boozer gasped aloud from the front of the wagon. "Sabritha, under the blankets, quickly! And

you as well, Daynin."

"That's the first place they'll look, old man," the stranger said, with a knowing tone in his voice. "Let me take the boy through the woods and we'll meet you at the Widow's Bridge over the Tweed."

The Boozer hesitated, then realized the stranger knew who it was he was traveling with. He also knew the stranger was right. "Go with 'im, boy. Ye've no chance here if they search the wagon."

"But Boozer," Daynin pleaded, "I don't want to go with him!"

"Come on, boy, we've no time to waste," the stranger ordered.

Before they could move, the Boozer stopped them. "Wait," he said. "They're not searching the wagons.

There's just a big crowd ahead. Daynin, you get in the back and hide with Sabritha. Stranger, come join me here in front. We'll bluff our way through whilst the soldiers are busy."

The stranger did as he was asked. The instant he reached the wagon's front seat, he knew what the hubbub ahead was all about. "It's a flogging," he said. "Probably some poor pilgrim caught stealing food. Or one of my kinsmen in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Highlander it is, eh?" the Boozer probed. "I thought so. Damned few of your countrymen would wear the tartan so boldly in the Duke's realm."

"The Duke's realm, indeed," the stranger scoffed. "Only by treachery and deceit, it is. Otherwise, t'would still be the land of my kinsmen. And someday t'will be so again, have I anything to say of it."

"Do you know who the boy is?" the Boozer whispered to the stranger.

"Aye. I do now. Like as not, he's the one that laid low the Marquis of Greystone. And you'd be the scarecrow that was with 'im in the deed."

"But how did you hear of it so quickly? It was only—"

"I was **there**, old man—in the inn, that is—upstairs. And your boy there did a deed t'was meant for me to do. I was sent by my kinsmen to take the Marquis, or to kill 'im, whichever. We planned to trade 'im for one of our chiefs held captive in Tendalfief. I've been following you ever since."

"Why? Where's the profit in that?" the Boozer fished.

"It's said your boy's of Scotian blood. If that be true, the honor of avenging my kinsmen is his, and I intend to see

he gets it."

"That may not be so easy, my friend," the Boozer continued. "I must warn you, this boy has a task ahead of him even the stoutest of heart would do well to avoid. I can tell you no more of it, as that is all I know for sure."

"It matters not, old man. His deeds will give my kinsmen the courage they need to fight the Duke, if I can persuade him to go to Donnegal with me. To that end, I will follow him to the very gates of hell if need be."

The Boozer shook his head and cracked a wry smile. "Ye may be closer to that end than either of us wants to know, good sir. By the bye, what is it that we should call you, or would you prefer to stay a stranger?"

"McCloud, of the Dunlock Moor McClouds," he said, extending his hand. "Caelum's my given name, but it's

seldom used where I come from. Most call me Cale, as was my father's name, and his father afore him."

The throng gathered about the soldiers was unusually quiet as the Boozer's wagon passed by on the road. Suddenly a unanimous groan went up when the first "crack" of the whip was heard. Cale shuddered at the sound, knowing well the pain that a nine-tail could inflict. He stood up on the wagon seat to see who the unfortunate soul was on the sharp end of the cat.

"Stop the wagon!" Cale ordered.

The Boozer jerked Abaddon to a halt. "What's wrong?"

Cale dropped down onto the seat and reached for his dirk. "I know the man being flogged," he whispered. "He's Toobar the Ferret. He helped me escape the Duke's dungeon when I was Daynin's age. Save for him, I would have grown no older. I have to help him."

"There's a score of soldiers, highlander. What do you think you'll accomplish by yourself? Wait 'til the flogging's over, then make your move."

"He'll likely be dead when they're through with him, old man. Now you just be on your way and if we can, we'll catch up to you at the bridge."



The Boozer waited for a few seconds while Cale disappeared into the crowd, then decided his oath to Merlin would not permit him to risk further involvement. He urged the horse on as another loud crack echoed through the still midday air.

The wagon was half a league down the road when a

great roar erupted behind him. He knew what it signaled, and instinctively lashed out at Abaddon to put distance between them and the problem.

The sudden lurch in speed brought Daynin to the wagon's front. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Where's the stranger?"

"Where we don't want to be, I'm afraid," the Boozer replied. He lashed the horse harder, scattering pilgrims in the road ahead. "Keep a sharp eye out the back, Daynin. We've trouble on our heels."

No sooner had Daynin turned than the Boozer's warning proved out. "Riders coming—hard!" Daynin shouted. "Looks like soldiers, and they're chasing somebody—a man—and a boy—on horseback."

"Open the keg of axle grease and be ready to dump it when I say. That's our only chance to stop 'em this side

of the bridge."

"It's the stranger!" Daynin screamed in recognition. "How much farther to the bridge, Boozer? The soldiers have almost caught them!"

The Boozer whooped, "There's the bridge! Wait 'til they're upon us, boy, then dump that grease so's to catch as many of the soldiers as ye can."

Old Abaddon's hooves clattered when they hit the great stone bridge over the Tweed. It was the signal Daynin awaited. Cale and his companion were but a wagon's length behind them now. Sabritha helped Daynin tip the heavy keg as the Boozer shouted, "Now, boy! Do it now!"

The thick goop splattered heavily on the road, barely missing Cale's hard charging animal. The first two soldiers avoided the slippery mess as well, but the third

went down in a confused heap as his animal lost all traction. The rest of the soldiers drew up and stopped well back from the bridge, fearing the same disastrous fate as their companion.

In a moment of unplanned joy, Daynin and Sabritha hugged each other and shouted, "We did it!" almost at the same instant.

The Boozer pulled hard on Abaddon's reins at the far side of the bridge. He turned the wagon broadside in the road, knowing the horsemen would be forced to stop or go headlong into the Tweed. The plan worked.

Cale's horse buckled first, throwing his much smaller companion under the wagon with the sudden stop. The lead soldier's horse slammed into Cale's fallen mount and collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The second catapulted the first and crashed into the side of the wagon, throwing its rider into the wagon cover. Cale

and the first soldier immediately became entangled in close combat with their dirks. The second soldier lashed out at the wagon cover to free himself and quickly joined the fight. The little man under the wagon leaped onto the back of the second soldier to keep him busy while Cale continued the fight with the other.

Across the bridge, the Boozer spied a half score of dismounted soldiers forming up to rush the wagon. He knew the fight would be brief if those men were able to cross the bridge. Suddenly, his attention was drawn away from the battle to an enormous black cloud that had appeared overhead.

A heavy, deep rolling rumble seemed to stop all the action in place. Every head turned to watch the awesome spectacle unfolding above the bridge. The cloud churned and rumbled again, a monstrous blue black, snake-like funnel formed and danced across the sky. With an accompanying flash of brilliant lightning, the huge

vortex darted straight down and engulfed the wagon and everything near it. The wind whirled violently and sucked the wagon, men, and horses high into the air.

As the cataclysmic event unfolded around them, the Boozer held on to the wagon and smiled, knowing the first part of his plan had succeeded. *Blackgloom can only be entered by the use of sorcery, he mused. The Seed has taken the bait at last! If only the rest of the plan works as well...*



The melodic chanting echoed from wall to wall in the dank blackness of the great chamber. The low groaning voice repeated the chant for the third time, "*Maelstrom mach, trochilics and gyre, vortex to swirl, then to tire.*"

Every candle in the great hall wavered in unison from the change in air pressure outside. The huge swirling cloud descended upon Blackgloom's courtyard, its funneled vortex slowly spinning to dissolution. The Boozer's wagon and all that had been picked up with it dropped abruptly to the black cobblestone surface.

Horses, people and wagon became a tangled mess as the cloud disappeared, leaving them all in a confused, disoriented pile.

The Boozer smiled inwardly, then shook off the effects of the dizzying delivery. The horses were first to move, clamoring to their feet out of instinct. Cale was the first to notice the ring of fully armored paladins surrounding them, each guarded by a massive, drooling animal held in check by heavy chains. Daynin's first instinct was the awful smell of the place. Sabritha gasped at the eerie yellow darkness of their surroundings. One of the soldiers cringed in terror at the whole spectrum of events to which he had unluckily been made a part. The other soldier lay motionless, having been crushed under the weight of two horses and a wagon wheel. Only the Ferret seemed to relish his new surroundings.

"I don't know where this is, but it beats the lash, that's for sure," the diminutive Toobar quipped, breaking the

otherwise tomb-like silence.

"Dinna judge too quickly my friend," Cale advised.

"Nor would I move too fast," the Boozer warned. "Rogs are deadly."

"Rogs!" Daynin moaned. "I thought they only existed in legends."

"THIS is the place such legends come from, I fear," the Boozer added.

Sabritha shook off her initial dizziness and peered from under the wagon cover. She stared at the ring of magnificent paladins, each adorned in black polished armor. "Well, well," she purred in mock heroics, "there'll be no want of men here."

The Boozer shook his head and whispered, "I do not

believe these are men. They are spectres, controlled by the master of this dark place. Legend says they have neither body nor soul. They do not relish life as do we, nor have they any compassion for it."

"What is this place?" Cale demanded.

"As near hell as mortal man will ever view," a hard, gravelled voice answered from the air around them.

The Boozer stood up to see from whence the answer came, but was quickly admonished by the voice. "Make not a move you'll regret, old man. My rogs will make quick work of one as skinny as you. Now! All of you, and I say this only once—you will do as my minions bid, or your flesh will feed my pets for supper. Simple. My house—my rules. No others apply. Cooperate and you may yet see your precious sun again. Refuse, and you will forever dwell in a black pit of pain."

The Boozer hesitated, then demanded, "Why did you bring us here?"

"Quiet, old man!" the gravelly voice boomed, its words coming slowly and ominously. "You have something of great value to me. If it pleases me, you may live. If not, then you will satisfy me in other ways. **Take** them!"

Upon that order, the paladins moved as one. The rogs snarled and drooled at the prospects of fresh meat, pulling hard on the binding chains held fast by their keepers. The paladins formed a column and urged their captives forward with the points of their lances toward the gates of the inner keep. None of the prisoners resisted, though Cale had to be held back by Boozer's strong hands and knowing gestures.

The prisoners were disarmed and led down a series of steep, winding passages to the very bowels of the Blackgloom keep. Sabritha was quickly separated from

the men and shoved into one of the upper cells of the dungeon. Daynin, too, was taken from the group and locked in an upper cell. The rest were thrown into a deep, circular pit, surrounded at the top by a narrow catwalk. The pit was accessible only by rope ladder from the catwalk above. Stationed on the catwalk were three of the half dog, half giant rat "pets" of the Seed. The rogs were left unchained by the paladins, free to roam the catwalk and the lower reaches of the dungeon. Remains of the pit's previous inhabitants were scattered all about the straw covered floor. The only light was from a single small slit of a window high above the pit.

Toobar did a quick reconnaissance of the dark pit, then quipped to no one in particular, "Damned poor hospitality in this inn, I must say."

"We're lucky to be **alive**," the Boozer snapped.

The poor soldier was still shaking uncontrollably, barely

able to keep his sanity. He began to whimper and utter Latin prayers under his breath.



Cale immediately began trying to scale the slimy pit walls, but without success. "It's a long way from Donnegal to die—for nothing," he whispered.

"We're a long way from death, my young friend," the Boozer offered. The magician removed two small pellets from the lining of his cloak and rubbed them slowly. His palms began to glow a warm green color, its light spreading out gradually to illuminate the whole lower pit.

"There, now we can see what we're up against. Toobar, my little thief, find me a long, stout bone—one that

won't break under your weight. Cale, take my cloak and tear it into long strands, then tie them together end on end—long enough to reach that window."

"Aye, then we'll climb out," Cale responded. "But what of the beasts?"

Toobar produced a tiny flute from inside his shoe and brandished it in the air as if it were a broadsword. He smiled and said, "Those creatures be no match for this little gem. Watch 'ere!"

He huffed and blew hard into the flute, but not a sound was heard. Immediately, the rogs began to stir above them. Toobar blew again, and this time the rogs snarled and growled and shuffled around angrily on the catwalk. A third blow and all three of the horrible creatures took off for the nether reaches of the dungeon.

"They hear what we cannot," Toobar explained

triumphantly. "Many a watch dog have I dispatched with this little tool. Makes thievin' a good deal easier, as you might say."

Cale slapped the Ferret on the back, practically knocking him down. "Ya dinna earn the name 'Ferret' without good reason, eh?"

"Quickly now, we've no time to waste," the Boozer ordered. "Make fast those strips. Hurry. Daynin and Sabritha are in great danger."

As Cale worked, a nagging question came to mind. "Boozer," he finally asked, "how is it that you know so much about this place?"

"I cannot answer that. You have to trust me. And you must do exactly as I tell you. We will have but one chance to escape from here alive."

Cale couldn't contain his curiosity. "It's that stone in the back of your wagon, isn't it? That's what this is all about. That's what we've been brought here for." He threw down the cloth shreds to confront the Boozer face to face. Grabbing the old man's tunic and jerking him around he growled angrily, "You KNEW this would happen, didn't you?"

The magician maintained his composure and said quietly, "I told you not to come with us. I knew something like this could happen. That Stone is of greater value than you can begin to imagine--especially to the keeper of this place. He will do anything to possess its power. We are not important at all. The Scythian Stone is."

Cale backed off and stared in angry silence. "I've heard the legend of the Stone. I've also heard that it was destroyed by Norsemen because they feared its power. How is it that you came by it, old man?"

"We are here. It is here, and that is reality. If you do not help me, all of us will remain here—forever! And that is no legend. Now, can I count on you, or do you wish to argue more while our chances of escape dwindle?"

Toobar stepped between the two to separate them. "Count on me," he boasted. "I've no wish to rot in this filthy hole."

"What is Daynin's part in this?" Cale demanded. "He is the reason I am here. For his sake, I will spend my life if that be the price of his freedom."

"I cannot tell you that, for I do not know. But if we don't get out of here now, his life will mean nothing. Nor will yours. Now, let's get to work."



The upper reaches of the dungeon reeked of the smell of death from the cells below. Daynin's only escape from the nauseating odor was a small crack in the stone masonry that allowed outside air to penetrate. He leaned against the wall and pressed his face to the crack. He thought of home, and of the spicy porridge his grandfather made on Sundays. He could almost smell the flat bread cooking in the fireplace. Then he thought of Sabritha.

His mind jumped instantly to the wagon and his embarrassing episode in Sabritha's lap. Strangely, he jerked his head from the crack, having for a moment relived that mysterious and wonderful event. He could feel the passion building in his stomach as the memory of her smell and of her soft, supple thighs engulfed him. Suddenly the room seemed less dark, less foreboding

with her images all about him.

"SABRITHA!" he cried out, his voice echoing time and again through the maze of narrow passageways outside the iron mesh gate that was his keeper. A rog heard the cry and growled angrily somewhere in the darkness. In an adjoining passage, a much more intuitive pair of ears made note of the boy's obvious desires.

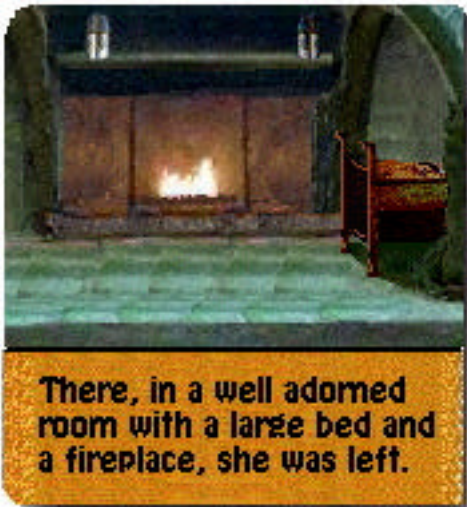


Sabritha was almost asleep. Exhausted from the last two days, she had collapsed on the stone platform that lined one side of her tiny cell. She didn't hear the two paladins approach, but the creaking of her cell door brought her quickly back to reality. "What do you want?" she asked, angrily.

The paladins clanked over to her in unison and swept her

off the platform. Their cold iron gauntlets on her skin sent shivers throughout her body as she was lifted and dragged out of the cell.

"Where are the others? Where are you taking me?" she demanded.



There, in a well adorned room with a large bed and a fireplace, she was left.

There was, of course, no answer. The paladins dragged her up the steep, winding passageway toward the upper realm of the dungeon. There, in a well adorned room with a large bed and a fireplace, she was left.

While Sabritha sat pondering the warmth

of the fire, an old woman entered the room. "Is there anything you require?" the scraggly voice asked.

Sabritha was surprised by the visitor. She could think of nothing else to say, except, "Uhh—well, do you know where my friends are?"

The old woman put her serving tray down. Steam rose from a pot of tea as she poured Sabritha a cup. "Honey in your tea?" the woman offered.

"Uhh—yes, that would be nice," Sabritha replied, obviously taken in by the sudden show of hospitality. "Who are you?" she asked.

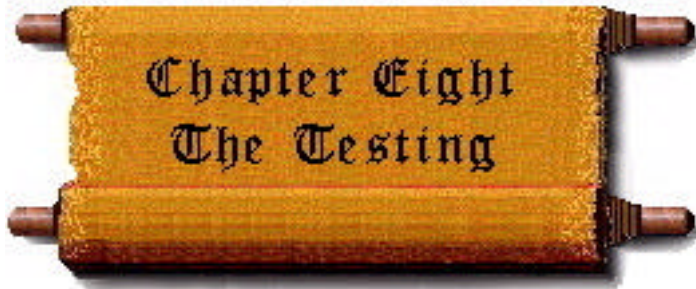
"Gretchin's my name, m'lady," the old woman purred. "I am here to serve you while you are our guest. I will be staying here with you for now."

Sabritha gulped down the cup of tea, quickly gesturing

to Gretchin for another. "What about my friends?" she asked again.

"I know not of them, my lady," the old woman whispered plaintively. "But please. I have so few human visitors. Tell me of life outside these walls. Tell me how you came to be here. Tell me of sunshine and flowers and of all the wonderful things I've not seen these fifty years."

Sabritha was completely fooled by the old woman's seeming innocence. She told Gretchin of many things, not the least of which was her growing desire to see Daynin again. It was obvious to the old woman that there was considerably more than a passing interest between the two. By the third cup of potion-laced tea, Sabritha had told the Seed all he would need to know.



"Sabritha! Wake up," Daynin pleaded. He shook her motionless body several times, then feared the worst. "SABRITHA!" Her skin was cold to his touch. Daynin began to panic. He shook her violently without result. He pinched her arm, and still there was no reaction. "God of life, if there be one, bring her back to me!" he begged.

He hesitated, then pulled the sheet back that covered her body. He placed his hand on her bare breast to feel for a heart beat. Daynin's own heart jumped with joy as a faint

beat was there. "She's alive!" he whispered aloud. He moved his hand slightly, then noticed the nipples of her breasts had hardened from his touch. He took his hand away and quickly pulled the sheet back over her chest.

"Day—nin?"

"Yes, Sabritha. Can you hear me?"

"Wha-a-at happened?" she whispered quietly.

Daynin hesitated, then sat down on the edge of the bed, careful to maintain his distance. "I don't know," he replied. "Two paladins just brought me here from the dungeon. I-I thought--I was afraid you were-- you didn't move or anything."

"I feel so dizzy," she whispered slowly. She tried to sit up, and in doing so, allowed the sheet to fall away from her body.

Daynin admired her female beauty, then turned quickly, as if to hide his embarrassment for having looked. "Sabritha, you—uhh—you don't have—uhh—they took your clothes," he finally blurted out.

With that, Sabritha seemed to come fully awake. "No wonder I'm so cold," she said, reaching for the sheet. "You can look now, if you want to."

Daynin turned and smiled sheepishly, the blush still evident in his skin coloring. He also adjusted his position on the bed in a vain attempt to hide the uncontrolled evidence of his desire. Sabritha smiled at Daynin's obvious predicament. "You know, you don't have to be ashamed of that. It's natural. And for a woman, it's very flattering to see a reaction like that from a man."

The word "man" surprised and delighted Daynin. Sabritha's reaction to his urge was totally unexpected. "Uhh, I uhh, I wonder where the others are?" he evaded.

"We should try to get out of here if we can."

"Daynin, this place is too heavily guarded for us to go anywhere. Besides, what would you do if you could get out? We don't even know where we are. At least we've got a fire. And each other."

Those last words inflamed the controlled fire in Daynin's stomach. He could feel the warmth of his blood coursing to one spot in his body. The excitement of the urge seemed to push all the air from his lungs. His head began to spin from the lofty heights to which his dreams were taking him. He tried in vain to forestall the intense desires he had felt for Sabritha since that first sight of her at the inn. He was looking at her, but images of her naked body completely obscured his vision. Words would not come to him. The blinding heat in his brain had all but taken over his senses.

"Daynin?" she said. "DAYNIN!"

He could barely answer. "Uhh, w-what?" was all he could say.

"Where are you?" she whispered, seductively. She reached out and put her hand on his.

He jerked his hand away as though it had been burned by a hot coal. Reality set in and again he blushed, the rush of blood to his face like that of a blacksmith's bellows on a fire. He jumped up from the bed and took several blind steps backward. His feet became entangled in the floor covering and down he went, falling hard on the cold stone floor.

Sabritha lunged to try and catch him, but too late. She leapt from the bed to his side, unmindful that she was completely naked. "Are you hurt?" she cried out to her fallen companion.

Daynin's eyes fixed on her chest as she leaned over him.

He was stunned by the fall, but not enough to lose his senses. His hands seemed to have a mind of their own, suddenly, when he reached out to touch her sides. The feel of her warm, soft flesh caused him to convulse all over. He shuddered, then pulled her down on top of him.

The taste of her lips was magic. One hand searched her body, feeling, touching, sensing with the ease of a practiced lover. The other sought the long black hair that covered her shoulders. Images of silk clouded Daynin's mind while his hands explored her skin, now afire with a growing passion.

Sabritha began touching where Daynin had never been touched before. Her body moved in a slow, rhythmic motion, making his whole being quiver with her every touch. She kissed him again, sensing the imminent release of passion he'd only known in his boyhood dreams.

"Make love to me, Daynin," she whispered.

"But—Sabritha—" he could barely manage to say.

Sabritha kissed him again, then whispered, "We may die in this place, Daynin. Please. Give me one last taste of life."

Daynin rolled over, bringing Sabritha under him. He tore at the laces of his tunic, maddened by the difficulty of the task. She pulled at the cord of his breeches, trying in vain to loosen the tight pants. Daynin kissed on her chest, searching her body with his tongue, then downward to her stomach. Suddenly, he stopped and pulled away abruptly.

Sabritha waited several long seconds, then opened her eyes to see him staring at her intently. "What's wrong? What's the matter?" she begged.

"I don't know," he answered. "There's something—I don't know—"

"Daynin, I want you. Why do you hesitate?"

"I don't know. There's something wrong," he said, flatly.

"If you want me, there's nothing wrong with that."

"But you're not—the same," he whispered.

"Is it because you've never been with a woman?"

"No—well—yes, but that's not it. You're different, somehow."

Sabritha smiled and reached out for him. "Then you **are** a virgin, aren't you?" she said, her voice suddenly deepening.

"Yes, but, but, **you're not Sabritha!**" Daynin growled, recognition giving way to horror in his voice.

"**TAKE HIM!**" the voice from the courtyard boomed, as Sabritha's image changed to that of the Seed before Daynin's unbelieving eyes.

Two paladins stepped from the shadows of the room and grabbed Daynin's flailing arms. "**BASTARD!**" Daynin screamed. "What have you done with Sabritha? **Why** have you **done** this to me?"

"A virgin proved by his own admission," the Seed cackled aloud. With a sweeping motion of his arm, he ordered, "Take him to the Black



Room, and bind him there. This virgin's blood will soon cleanse my Stone!"



"There! We've got it!" Cale hollered.

The Boozer slapped Cale on the back for the accuracy of his throw. "Quickly, now, Toobar, up the rope," he said. "But beware of the rogs."

The little man blew his Egyptian flute once more, just to be on the safe side. He scaled the knotted rope with the skill of an acrobat and was quickly to the catwalk. He dropped the rope ladder for his companions, then left to search the passageway for paladins. The three in the pit made it to the catwalk without a word. The soldier was last to climb, still deathly afraid of what was to come next.

"What now?" Cale asked, having decided that cooperating with the Boozer was his only reasonable chance of escape.

"We must find the others before it's too late," the old man answered.

Toobar reappeared in the passageway. "Paladins--coming this way," he said breathlessly.

"Against the wall, all of you," the Boozer said, motioning for them to take station against the circular wall where the paladins would not see them.

When the dark spectres entered the chamber, they each stopped at the edge of the pit, as if confused by what they saw. With one motion, Cale, Toobar and the Boozer jumped them from behind and sent them cascading into the pit. The paladins fell into a heap of clanking metal at the bottom and lay motionless.

The Boozer motioned for the group to follow. "The Seed will soon realize what's happened. Quickly! To the upper dungeon."

"Who is this 'Seed'?" Cale asked as they ran.

"The master of Blackgloom," the Boozer answered. "He controls all but the rogs with his mind, so be careful you do not alert him to your presence. There's the way to the upper dungeon," he pointed out. "Go for the others. I must go this way. Escape if you can, but don't come back. One more thing—the Seed is limited on how many of the paladins he can control at once."

Cale grabbed Boozer's tunic. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Where you cannot follow. The evil in this place is far greater than I can begin to tell you. Hurry now, we have little time and much to do."

The trio worked their way up the spiral passageway, checking each cell as they went. At the top of the passageway, another paladin stood silent sentry at an arched portal. There was no way to approach him without being seen, and it was the only way out.



"Let's rush him," Toobar suggested.

"We may not have to," Cale advised. He jerked an iron brad from his tunic and tossed it into the passageway. The paladin

did not react. "Remember what the old man said? This one is not being controlled."

Cale approached the sentry cautiously, then reached out

to take his halberd. The sentry stood motionless, allowing Cale to take the weapon. "Help me with this," Cale ordered. Quickly, he donned the paladin's empty suit of armor.

Cale led the way through the portal, unsure what he might find on the other side. The great circular room was empty. Passageways led off in six directions. He motioned for the others to go in front, as though they were prisoners being led from one area to another. Two of the passages contained nothing but more empty cells. When they entered the third, they heard the distinct sounds of a woman crying.

"Where's it coming from?" Cale whispered. "I can't tell in this helmet."

As they turned the corner, two paladins were heading straight for them, dragging a sobbing Sabritha in between. Cale froze in position to mimic his

counterparts. Allowing the enemy to approach, he stepped in front of his two companions and delivered a crushing blow to the helmet of the left hand paladin. The other paladin dropped Sabritha's arm just in time to ward off a similar blow from Cale's halberd. The headless body of the first paladin seemed to flail blindly at his attacker. Toobar grabbed for its sword, but was knocked flat from one swing of the paladin's mailed fist. The Duke's soldier turned to run, but was speared by another paladin that appeared from behind them. He was gutted without so much as a sound.

Sabritha screamed at all the blood and gore splattering the walls of the passageway. Cale stunned the second paladin with a sharp blow to his helmet. He turned to face the new threat, but was knocked to his knees from behind by the headless paladin. Toobar recovered enough to reach for the legs of the headless paladin, and felled him with a push. Cale looked up as the third paladin lunged toward him. He knew the battle was over,

for he hadn't the strength to resist another attacker. He brought his arm up to block the blow, but the paladin seemed to just stop in place. In an instant, the others did the same.

"We've won!" Toobar whooped.

"No," Cale answered. "Their master's been distracted, somehow. Remember what the magician said? Let's go while we can. This chance may not last very long."



The Boozer followed the strong scent of bergamot and balm emanating from the floor above him. He recalled the Seed's fondness for the mixture of foul smelling oils in his early days as a magician's apprentice. Only now, the smell was heavily laden with the stench of death and decay that pervaded the whole of Blackgloom.

He scaled the last spiral of steep stairs carefully, not wanting to let the Seed know of his presence just yet. He gripped Merlin's black scroll tightly in one hand, a small crystal amulet in the other. Kruzurk Makshare was about

to face the greatest peril of his life, and he knew there would be no turning back, once he had revealed himself. If his plan worked, he could put an end to an evil unlike any the land had seen before. If he failed, he knew the powers of darkness would prevail, perhaps forever.

A low, wicked chant was Kruzurk's first proof he'd found the Seed's private and most secret of chambers. He crept silently to the entrance and peered through the inky yellow darkness. The glow of a large candle outlined the shadow of the Seed, kneeling and chanting before the Stone. The Stone stood against a wooden pillar in the middle of the room, supported by a strand of heavy rope tied to an iron bolt in the beam above it.

"Powers of darkness, powers of mine, make the Stone's secrets the Seed's to divine. Prince of all evil, from your well of fire, keen the gates open, bring me higher. Give me the power, great lord of the dark, with a virgin's blood, I'll make your mark."

Kruzurk shuddered at the horrible vows made by the sorcerer. He watched as the Seed ripped off Daynin's tunic. The boy was stretched on a large table, bound and gagged, unable to move. Kruzurk knew he could do little for Daynin, except to watch and wait for the right opportunity to make his move. Hopefully, his chance would come before the Seed drew the blood he thought he needed to cleanse the Stone of any ancient spells.

The Seed turned back toward the Stone and repeated his ritual. Kruzurk knew, too, that he would do that thirteen times before the boy's blood was drawn, but he had no way of knowing how many incantations had already been uttered. From somewhere in the darkness of the room, Kruzurk could hear the labored breathing of an animal. He knew the beast would be sacrificed on the eleventh chant, so he still had a little time to plan his move.



Sabritha sobbed quietly on the floor of the passageway, having all but given up to the dark powers of Blackgloom. Toobar tried in vain to reassure her that all was well, but she would not move. Cale was still recovering from the battle and the enormous effort it took for him to move in the heavy armor.

"We've—got to—get moving," Cale ordered. "Got to — find — Daynin—and get out—of this place."

"They took Daynin," Sabritha sobbed.

"Where?" Toobar asked.

Sabritha pushed herself from the floor and tried to regain some of her composure. "I don't know. I don't even know how I know. I just know."

"Are you all right?" Cale asked her.

"They—they gave me something. I went to sleep. But I dreamed."

Toobar helped her to her feet, then asked, "What did you dream?"

"That someone else was me. That Daynin and I, we were in a room, and—I—I don't know. Something happened. They took him away. To a tower, where he—Oh God! We've got to find him!"

"The old man said to get out if we could," Cale argued.

"But we have to **help** him, if we can," Sabritha continued. "It's—very important, somehow. More



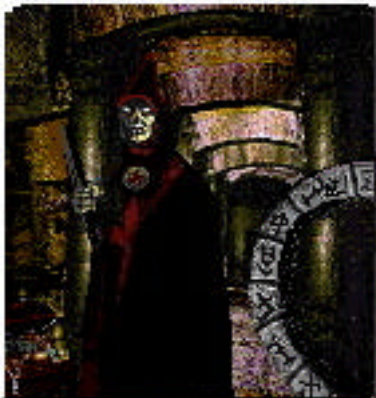
important than anything. Quickly, this way," she said, motioning for them to follow.



The Seed repeated his chant again, this time in reverse, as was the requirement. Kruzurk observed every movement, careful to note how long he turned away from the Stone each time. Those few seconds would be the only chance the magician would have to move unobserved across the room. He had to reach the Stone, as it would be his only protection from the awesome power the Seed could wield from his fingertips.

Kruzurk held his breath in anticipation of the next move. The Seed stood and turned to the table. Kruzurk moved with the precision of a cat. The Seed opened a box on the table and drew a magnificent jeweled blade from it. The jewels in the handle sparkled from the candlelight,

casting red and green reflections over the walls of the chamber. Kruzurk had managed to crawl half the distance across the floor toward the Stone before the rog



**"Easy, my pet,"
he whispered.**

sensed his presence. He stopped when it began growling and snarling, jerking violently against its binding chains.

The Seed turned from the table and smiled at the beast. "Easy there, my pet," he whispered. "They are only colorful shadows on the wall. Come now, it is time for your part in this great moment."

Kruzurk crawled closer to the Stone, fearful that his heart was pounding so loudly, the Seed would surely

hear him. The rog growled and gnawed at its chains, doing its best to warn the master of the unseen enemy it knew to be present, but in vain. The Seed was transfixed, with but one thought in his mind as he stood rigid before his grotesque pet.

He raised the blade high over his head, chanting for the evil power the blade possessed. The tip of the blade glowed red, then white as the heat traveled down to its grip. At the proper moment, the Seed stepped forward and plunged the blade to its hilt into the rog's massive neck.

The beast let out the most horrendous of howls. Blood squirted from the gaping wound, and the animal dropped to its haunches. The Seed took the rog by its tusks and held its snout aloft as he finished severing the creature's head. Blood pumped wildly from the opened veins of the headless carcass, forming crimson rivulets on the flagstone floor. Kruzurk shuddered at the horror of the

sight, but continued to crawl for the safety of the Stone.

The Seed brandished the beast's head above his own, gulping the thick red blood that gushed from the rog's throat. He doused himself generously in the sanguineous flow, chanting the Latin death knell, "*Sic itur ad astra*," like some mindless child at play in a horrible dream.

Kruzurk scurried behind the Stone as the Seed bathed himself in the blood of the rog. The magician knew the vile ceremony was about to reach its climax. He prepared himself mentally for the task ahead, and prayed that the powers of light would be at hand to protect him, for he knew that little of earthly value could.



"This way," Sabritha indicated, pointing to a long corridor that led to a set of steep, winding stairs. "He's

up there, somewhere. I feel it," she said.

"Look out," Toobar cried out. "Rogs—behind us!" He reached for his flute and blew it for all it was worth, but without effect.

Cale turned and hollered, "What's wrong with you? Blow that damned thing!"

"My flute's bent!" Toobar screamed. "Must've happened in the fight."

Cale pushed Sabritha behind him and stepped out to face the first rog, now only a huge, hairy blur as it charged out of the darkness. Toobar ducked when the beast launched itself from half way across the corridor. The animal slammed into Cale, sending him crashing against the wall. Cale's helmet flew off with the impact, and he dropped his halberd. It was all he could do to jam his armored forearm into the beast's massive jaws to stave

off its gnashing teeth. Sabritha grabbed the loose helmet and began beating the animal on its rock-hard skull, but with little effect.

Toobar managed to engage the second rog with Cale's halberd. That quickly proved to be a mismatch. The diminutive little man had neither the strength nor the skill to battle the monster for long.

With his free hand, Cale struggled to pull his dirk from its scabbard, but the weight of the rog made that all but impossible. Sabritha ran to the end of the corridor, jerked down a lantern and poured its oil into the helmet. She ripped a shred from her gown and lit it from another lantern, then rushed back to the fight.

"Cale! Cover your face," she screamed. Hesitating only a second, she threw the oil on the rog's back and ignited it.

The animal's thick fur burst into flame, instantly

releasing its jaws from Cale's arm as the beast bellowed in agony. It was the chance Cale needed to draw his weapon. In a flash, he slit the rog from belly to throat and almost drowned himself in the creature's foul smelling innards. The huge animal groaned once more and collapsed on top of its killer.

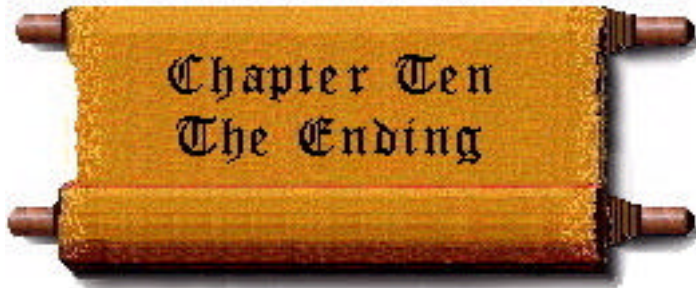
Toobar was quickly losing his fight with the other rog, having inflicted several bloody wounds on the beast in the process. Sabritha helped Cale escape from under the blazing carcass and get to his feet, but they were an instant too late for Toobar.

With one mighty leap, the rog toppled the Ferret, bending him over backwards and snapping his spine like a twig. The beast stopped only long enough to tear a great chunk from Toobar's throat, thus finishing its helpless prey.

Sabritha screamed in terror, then wilted against the wall.

Cale had only time enough to unsheathe his broadsword as the animal catapulted from Toobar's lifeless body. Fortunately, the broadsword was well aimed. Cale fell backward under the weight of the monster, his sword penetrating completely through the creature's neck, severing its jugular and killing the beast.

At that instant, a horrible, unearthly wail emanated from the stairwell somewhere above them. The sound echoed time and again through every hall of the Blackgloom keep.



The Seed turned back to the table where Daynin was bound. He held the rog's head in his left hand and pulled Daynin's gag free with the other.

"Drink of the beast's blood, and your life will be spared. Come in to the darkness, and my power you'll share. Refuse this oath and your life you will give, for your heart I will take that my power shall live," the Seed chanted. "What say you boy? Open thy mouth and receive the blood of darkness."

Daynin jerked hard on his bonds with one last effort to break free. Then he screeched, "BASTARD SON OF A SNAKE! I'll die before I become a part of this."

"See this?" the Seed boasted, shoving the rog's head in Daynin's face. "Your head will soon be its mate on my mantle. Is that what you want? Or would you prefer to spend eternity here with the woman. Several women. All the women you want, in fact."

"Sabritha's alive?" Daynin begged.

"Alive and waiting for you. Or for me, if that be what you choose. She's a sprightly wench, that one. I like the fire in her. Took three cups of my potion to bring her down. That was a first."

"Bring her here that I might see she's alive," Daynin offered, "then if you swear to free her, I'll join you in this hell."

"Not that it matters, but she's on her way here as we speak. And you are in no position to demand a thing. Remember? My house, my rules. You will do as I say, or I'll put the woman's lifeless head in your lap."

"What of the others?" Daynin asked.

"Ahh, the others. An old fool, a young fool, a thief and a coward. What a gang of rescuers. The last I thought of them, they were working their way out of the dungeon, but that's been tried before. Which reminds me—how did you know that I was not the real Sabritha? I thought I did an admirable job of recreating her, especially the way I made her body respond to you."

"She would never have acted that way toward me," Daynin lamented.

"Ahh, but that's where you're wrong. I've studied her thoughts. I've even talked to her about you. Of course,

she didn't know it was me at the time. But she told me all about you—how she owed her life to you."

"Cowardly son of the darkness!" Sabritha screamed from behind them just as she hurled Cale's dirk at the sorcerer's exposed backside.

The Seed waved his hand in the air, and the dirk seemed to bounce off an invisible shield that surrounded him. "See," he laughed, "I told you she was coming!" He turned and leveled both hands at the woman, chanting, "*Amal Matrach, Dein Bei*, Spirits—take her away." Instantly, Sabritha was thrown hard against the wall, knocking her unconscious.

Cale stepped forward and threw his halberd as hard as he could throw it. The Seed slapped it down just as it reached him, causing the heavy spear to glance off the face of the Scythian Stone. The sharp point of the halberd splintered when it struck, cracking the Stone's

corner in the process.

The Seed let out a roar that was deafening. His anger swelled while he gathered his strength for one of his most powerful spells. Cale stood motionless, facing his enemy, for he had only seconds to live.

The Seed leveled his arms again and chanted in Latin, this time sprouting an enormous yellow flame from his fingertips. The flame exploded across the room, engulfing its target. Cale could do little to withstand the flames. The paladin's armor he wore became a flaming coffin as his body was instantly burnt to ashes by the blast.

Daynin writhed in agony and screamed at his tormentor, "Stop it! I'll do what you ask. Don't kill them!"

Kruzurk knew his opportunity was coming. The combined effect of the incantations and the spells the

Seed just cast had likely drained the sorcerer of much of his power. Cale's death weighed heavily on the magician but he prepared to stand up to the Seed. He hoped that Sabritha had survived, but decided that, too, was something he could not change. Daynin's life still hung in the balance, and that was the one thing Kruzurk could do something about.

The Seed dropped to his knees in front of the Stone. He ran his hands along the cracked edge, and sobbed quietly, "It could only be broken by sorcery. It can only be repaired by the same." He began to chant a new spell, "*Nexus, vinculum and trennel*. Powers be free, funnel through me, and mend what could not be broken."

Kruzurk waited, knowing that the Seed's futile efforts to repair the Stone would serve to further weaken him. He could tell with each successive chant that the Seed's strength was failing. His great gamble was about to pay off.

The Seed finally turned away from the Stone. He stood and grabbed the jeweled knife. "To hell with it," he cursed. "The Stone will work, even if it's cracked. And your blood will seal the bargain," he swore to Daynin.

He raised the dagger and was poised to plunge it into Daynin's chest when Kruzurk finally stood up. "Hold, evil one!" Kruzurk demanded.

The Seed turned about, his eyes flashing with anger at having been disturbed again. "Roaches!" he swore. "You're like cockroaches, coming out of every crevice. That shall be your punishment for having interrupted my pleasure, old man."



"You are, indeed, an evil one. Just as Merlin said," Kruzurk quipped, intending to draw as much anger from the Seed as possible.

The Seed raised his arms, as if to dash the magician with a spell, but he hesitated. "What do you know of Merlin, old man? He's been worm meat for more than seventy years."

"Do you not recognize a fellow apprentice?"

"No, and no one else will after I've turned you into a cockroach."

"It is I, Kruzurk Makshare."

"Impossible. I put a curse on him that would drive a man to madness."

"Yes, and I still carry that curse," Kruzurk said, shaking

his filthy hair loose from under a tight mesh cap.

"So! You've come back to test me, eh?" the Seed boasted.

"No. To **stop** you."

"Stop me, indeed. I can crush you with one word, fool."

"I think not. Remember this?" Kruzurk said, brandishing the opened black scroll in his hand.

The Seed gasped at the unexpected display. "Where-- how did you get that? I thought I destroyed that along with everything else before I left the guild."

"Merlin gave it to me. It is your apprentice bond. Signed with your own blood. Do you remember? You swore to uphold the magician's oath, and that if you did not, you would kneel before the bearer of this document and

recant your sorcerous ways."

"Ha!" the Seed laughed. "Those old crow-baits—they've no power over me, and I'll prove it!" Looking upward, he threw his empty hand in the air, and pointed the other one at the bond.

The oilskin scroll burst into flames, its contents dripping while the skin was instantly consumed. Kruzurk held the amulet under the flow of droplets, and smiled as a critical part of his ploy was completed.

He held the amulet aloft, and laughingly taunted the Seed, "Only through sorcery can a sorcerer be quelled! Do you recognize this?"

There was dead silence in the chamber. Then the Seed gasped, "Merlin's amulet! And my blood is upon it!"

The Seed lunged at Kruzurk with the jeweled knife.

Kruzurk dodged behind the Stone, knocking the blade aside with his arm. The Seed slashed again, cutting a deep wound in Kruzurk's hand and causing him to drop the amulet at the base of the Stone. As the Seed slashed a third time, his blade missed its intended target and cut cleanly through the rope that held the Stone in place. Kruzurk backed up when the heavy Stone began to topple.

"Look out!" Kruzurk warned, but his warning was too late.

With a deafening roar, the Stone crashed down on the Seed. The sorcerer was crushed like a mealy bug, his brains and blood exploding all over the floor.

"You're finished, Seed! Dead by your own hand," Kruzurk crowed.

"Boozer---" Daynin whispered, his voice hoarse from

screaming, "help me."

Kruzurk stepped to Daynin's side. He freed the boy's hands and helped him from the table.

"What happened, Boozer?" Daynin asked, weakly. "How did you—oh God," he gasped, as the awful realization of the gory scene around him became apparent.

"It's actually Kruzurk, or Kruze, as my friends call me. But never mind that now. You best see to the woman. She'll be needing you."

"But Booz, uhh—Kruze, I don't understand. How did you—what about the Stone? How do we get out of—"

"So many questions, boy. As for the Stone, it was a fake. You see, it never really existed at all. The Scythians used their knowledge, not a magical stone, to read the stars. The Stone was a fake to fool the Seed into

bringing us here. Our whole journey was made for that purpose. It was the only way I could get him to bring us into this place."

Daynin rubbed his shoulders to get his circulation back. Then it hit him. "The whole thing was planned? You USED us to get in here? Cale would still be **alive** if not for you!" he snapped.

"No, Daynin, he wouldn't. Cale had already given up his life for a vow of vengeance. Except for me, you would have never met with Sabritha, and the Seed would still be conjuring his evil over this land. Some things are worth dying for. I am truly sorry for deceiving you, but you have helped to rid the land of one of its greatest evils. For that, I and many others will forever be in your debt."

Daynin stumbled to Sabritha's side, more concerned with her life than his own at that moment. He leaned down

close to her and put his ear to her chest. The rhythmic beat was there, and so was the sweet smell of her body that with all his sorcerous ways, the Seed had been unable to duplicate.

"Sabritha," he whispered, "it's Daynin. The Seed is finished."

She reached out slowly and stroked his cheek. "Then take me home, plowboy. I've had all the adventure I can stand."



Kruzurk Makshare fulfilled his vow to Merlin in the dark halls of Blackgloom that day. He had defeated the Seed, last of the true sorcerers, and the likes of which the world would never see again. Blackgloom was destroyed, and all its beasts eliminated. The evil that Blackgloom and its master represented faded to little more than veiled legend, retold around a thousand campfires to this very day.

For his part in bringing the Seed down, Kruzurk was awarded the honor of Master Magician, and enshrined in

the magicians' role of honor for all time. He was destined to have many more interesting adventures before joining his old friend Merlin on the other side.

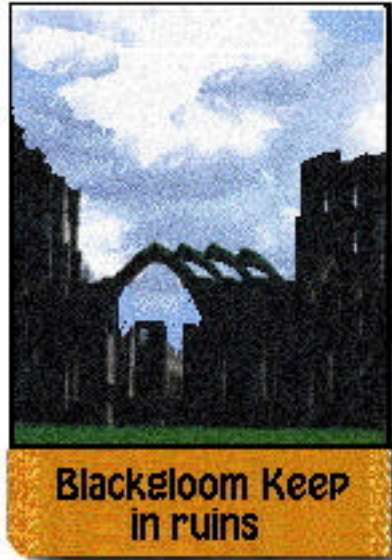
Caelum McCloud was honored by his clan with an enormous funeral pyre, built from the logs that had once encircled Blackgloom. His name is still mentioned first when the honor of the McCloud clans is recounted.

Daynin McKinnon faced his first true test of manhood at the hands of the Seed of Cerberus. He showed a wisdom and courage that was to bring him great glory in the years ahead. Sadly, he could not return home as a hefty bounty was placed on his head by the Duke and the Marquis' heirs.

Having seized a vast treasure of weapons and gold at Blackgloom, Daynin was determined to return to his father's clan holdings to reclaim that which was rightly his. With Sabritha at his side and a new branch of the

clan to build, Daynin was destined to become one of the most powerful clan chieftains the highlands of Scotia had ever seen.

Ahh, but that is another story. And it will have to wait.





The e-Pic Saga Continues . . .

Join Daynin, Sabritha, Kruzurk and a cast of many in the next episode of Jon Baxley's award winning medieval fantasy e-Pic that began with *The Scythian Stone*. The second episode, entitled *The Blackgloom Bounty*, is laced with even more action, mysticism and magic than the initial offering.

Can Daynin stand against all odds and finally win the beautiful Sabritha, despite unrelenting enemies and the most horrific specter he has yet faced? Can Kruzurk

elude the Duke's bountiers and rejoin Daynin in time to save him from forces bent on his destruction? Will Sabritha stand with Daynin in the face of more danger and adversity than even the Seed of Cerberus offered? And what about Daynin's grandfather--whatever happened to him? Read on for a hint of what awaits you in episode two, *The Blackloom Bounty...*





The Blackgloom Bounty

-Excerpt-

Daynin was momentarily stunned by the vast array of characters,

symbols and ancient words he was seeing, but the instant novice John made clear his next move, Daynin shouted, "NO! STOP!"

His sharp tone echoed through the chamber like the scream of a thousand people all crying "top" in cadence. Even the walls seemed to wither from the sudden and recurring cacophony of voices.

Both of the robed men turned in unison, shocked at the sudden outburst. "What the hell is WRONG with you, boy? This ground is sacrosanct!" the Bede barked, siring a hundred score echoes of his own.

Stepping between the priests, Daynin grabbed the crowbar from John and pushed them away. "You can't open this vault! Did you read what it says?"

"Pictish palaver, that's all it is. That language is older than Saxon tyranny. Take no heed of it, Daynin."

"Father, this is not just some fool's warrant. It's a warning. Can't you READ it?"

"No, I cannae read it and neither can anyone else, that I know of."

"Well, I CAN," the boy growled. "This is a traitor's tomb, sealed with a warrant to warn anyone who enters that they are in great peril. We can't open this--we just can't."

Prior Bede shoved his considerable girth against the boy, pinning him to the door. "Now look 'ere, boy. You came into this priory seeking help and shelter. I've given you that, and considerably more. All the other large vaults in these catacombs are inviolable. They are consecrated and protected. This one is not. If this be the resting place of a heathen, then so be it--that's why the brethren chose it. Now stand aside, or take your bounty elsewhere."

The Blackgloom Bounty
Coming soon to a computer near YOU!



Jon F. Baxley

Award winning author, historian, editor, and Internet entrepreneur Jon Baxley comes from a diverse background as golf professional, soldier and even a stint as a cold warrior with the United States

Information Agency in the former Soviet Union. Baxley's first venture into the exciting realm of eBooks garnered a "**Best Novel On The Web**" award from the Science Fiction Writers of America. Since then, his works have been widely distributed on the Internet and garnered numerous other awards and accolades.

A full time writer for thirteen years, Baxley has turned his talents to the fantasy genre because it is an area he knows well. The author draws heavily from research on factual medieval events, people and places to give this series a taste of reality that is both fun to read and where (if you're not careful) you just might learn something!

Contact the author via email at WASP1946@aol.com. Additional information and other works can be found at the following links:

<http://www.fictionforest.com/>
<http://hometown.aol.com/wasp1946/>

Published by Cloudy Mountain Books, Inc.

All rights reserved

Version 1142K