

A Warrior of Perdition

A fantasy fiction novel written by Wayne Densley

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email : densleyw@shoal.net.au

In the half light of a ragged dawn the Demon waited, his form indistinct as he stood patiently upon the crest of a barren, rock-strewn hill. From somewhere within the veils of a blood-red gloom, the first tendrils of light were cast by a pallid sun that climbed torturously from the horizon, its glow shrouded in mist and haze. In the gleam of its smothered fires, the world below remained dark and dissolute, but there was something rousing within the shadows and Absalom was waiting for it. Carefully he gazed into the gloom and focused his thoughts on the plains below. This, he thought to himself, was the best time of the day. The violence and the pain would be fresh and vigorous. It was something he appreciated, something he depended upon.

In the dark his novices slept, but the rising of the bloated red sun would bring them back to life, and the process of selection would start once again. Today, he hoped, he would find at least one worthy of ascension. With this in mind he placed his hands upon his armoured waist and waited for the carnage to come. It would not take long.

Silently the sun rose out of the mists and the long shadows began to withdraw. The plain below was clear of movement, its surface a forest of broken, twisted metal and shattered bones that spread across its vast expanse. As the light of day hit the bare ground a low murmur began to rise, a cry of pain and anguish that quickly grew into an audible clamour of despair and outrage. Absalom smiled, the troops sounded restless; grudges and despite had festered in the long night and that could only mean a good harvest for the day.

As he watched, his Lost Souls began to arise from the dusty earth. They were just Souls, without form or substance, but as they clambered from their resting places the earth itself clung to their essence, infusing them with the form needed to grasp at weapons and begin the violence of the day. Every stroke would be felt as if they still had corporeal form, every cut as keen as a freshly opened wound, but it was their fate that they would fall back into the earth as dust again when the sun finally set. They were Souls on a path to Damnation. Only a few would avoid the fall.

Absalom was both Gatekeeper and an Arbiter of Souls in this place, a Demon of great power, and a selector of those souls fit enough to escape Damnation and become acolytes to one of the Demonic Orders. Without compassion or care he was built to intimidate, a brutish creature of night-blue skin and black armoured scale. Since the dawn of consciousness his existence had been one of violence and pain, and his body mirrored the rigours of such a role. Deep were the scars of his torment and powerful the muscles that flexed beneath his dulled body armour. Great leathered wings rested at his back, and from his skull protruded two huge horns of bleached bone, that glimmered red in the malevolent light of the sun. Cloven feet and hands edged with razor-sharp talons made him a formidable adversary, someone to be avoided at all cost.

Here upon the Fields of Arbitration he would watch his charges as they lashed out at each other in their fear and their pain, and from them pick those that were strongest of spirit. The rest would be sent to Damnation, but that was the province of the Volkari Order. It was no business of his.

In the pallid light he watched as the Souls arose. The air was full of their cries and it sounded to Absalom as harmonious as a Church choir. The pain and suffering of these beings gladdened him, for he knew that in their torment they would tear each other apart, and that was exactly what he required. Today some would fall into Damnation, but a very few would be

given the choice of joining the Demonic Orders. The rest would return to the dry earth and await the coming of another day.

As the wide plains below awoke to the light, the Gatekeeper watched as earthen forms climbed slowly from the ground, searching the plain for any weapon they could feel out with unseeing eyes. As each found a discarded shard of metal, they were given sight and the violence began. At first isolated pockets of fighting broke out within the stumbling mass of forms. Then, as more of the Souls found weapons and their sight returned, the violence escalated into a grinding, mangling battle that tore away at the forms, rising in power as a tide might upon the shores of another Plane.

Absalom watched and revelled in the energy of their desperation. With the force of a wind whipped up by the heating earth it buffeted and tore at him, and within its gale he could feel his Souls writhing in their torment. Until Judgement Day none of these wretches would see the light of compassion again, and whilst they remained here they were his playthings. He was not going to make it easy for any of them.

Tens of thousands of Souls struggled desperately upon the plain and within this chaos Absalom spied something that struck him as promising. One soul had taken a position upon a slight rise in the ground between two contorted pieces of metal. As the fighting broke around it the form lashed out at the surrounding combatants, picking off those nearest and using the safety of the position to remain uninjured. Here lay a possibility, one that he would need to investigate. From his belt he pulled a long hafted axe. In the glow of a red sky it glimmered with fire, and with it raised at his shoulder he strode down into the midst of the melee and made his way towards the solitary Soul. Other Souls barred his way and he threw them aside as he advanced. Some even tried to put up resistance and were sent to Damnation with precise strokes of his axe. The plain was wide and it took some time to reach the Soul, but as he forced his way through the bodies and dust he could see that here was indeed a real possibility.

This Soul had mastered the fear and the pain, and had found the strength of will to resist intelligently. It had proven itself worthy of ascension and now it would need to feel the pain of death once more to achieve its passage to an immortal life. Absalom had the power to bring this Soul back to life, a brief existence where it might be offered the choice of Damnation or Demonhood. A choice for Damnation would send the Soul back into the dust to await the new day. A choice for Demonhood would bring swift action from Absalom in the form of a lethal stroke of his axe. Death at his hands would open the Gates and allow entry of the Soul to the Halls of the Demonic Plane. There it would be consumed and reborn as a Demon.

From the armband at his wrist the Gatekeeper shot an orb of pulsating green light at the Soul. It tried to dodge the blast but could not evade its power. With an audible thud the glowing sphere hit the Soul and enveloped it, holding it tight. As the sphere shrank about the struggling being it infused the Soul with its own essence and took on the shape of its previous form. In a contortion of energy and earth the Soul slumped to the ground, now a physical presence, both living and breathing.

To Absalom's surprise it was a young woman. She had a look in her eye of defiance that seemed out of place with her slim form, and she hurriedly grabbed up a weapon as the Gatekeeper approached. He smiled and shook his horned head. What could this offspring of the Mortal Realm possibly do to resist him. Then he looked closer at her face. There was no fear, no hesitation. Something was not right. Then she spoke.

"I know who you are, Gatekeeper. Keep your distance for I have no wish to join your dissolute ranks."

Absalom took a breath and stopped. In all the ages of his interment within the Demonic Plane

he had never heard a Soul speak until it had been asked for a choice. And this one was not finished.

"I have a message for you, one that you should heed well. Tell your Lords and Masters that the Nef knows who they are, and he knows where they reside. He is coming for them, and with their fall he will tear the fabric of the Omniverse to shreds!"

Before Absalom could react the girl threw herself upon a shard of razor-sharp metal protruding from the ground and fell to dust. She was now beyond his reach, her act of suicide ensuring a quick passage to Damnation. The Volkari would now have to deal with her.

Such words from a mortal Soul confused him. All the ages of Time he had spent upon the Fields of Arbitration and never had he heard such a threat. Yes, he knew of the Nef but that Demon had been confined to the Pits many ages ago. He would need to consult the Sextants of his Order before this day was done. Such mysteries needed to be explained.

His musing was broken abruptly by the approach of his Adjutant, a Bokari Demon named Feshak. He was a nasty little creature that Absalom knew had ambitions far beyond his station.

"Sire, the Clave of Lords sits in dire session and has bid you attend the Halls of Despair. There has been an *incident* and they need your council."

Absalom turned to his aide and sneered.

"My council? Why would the Lords need my help, I am but a Gatekeeper, a lowly Arbiter of Souls?"

Feshak did not have an answer. "I know not what they might need Sire. All I know is that you are required. Shall I return to them and inform them that you will not come?"

Absalom turned to face his Adjutant, any humour that he might have entertained from the morning's carnage had evaporated quickly in the heat of the day. He had been lumbered with this Bokari some centuries earlier, and found the experience had hardened the loathing he had harboured for him and his Order. It was not just that the Bokari were small of stature and thin of limb, making them worthless in a fight. It was more the snide, whining manner of their kind that hid the subtle, but no less treacherous nature of their actions. Of all the Demonic Orders he trusted these Bokari the least and took every opportunity he could to put them in their place.

For Feshak he had little patience.

"Feshak, I do not appreciate your tone and I will warn you only one more time. The Lords of the Clave are not to be dealt with flippantly, and if you continue to do so you will soon find yourself languishing in the Pits. You need only give me one good reason and I will throw you there myself!"

Feshak backed up and considered his master. "I am sorry Sire, I will tell them that you will attend shortly."

Absalom re-holstered his axe and waved Feshak away. He would indeed attend the Halls of Despair but first he needed to think and there was only one way that he could do that. A Demon without certainty was an angry one. Within the frenetic violence that surrounded him he saw an opportunity and he took it, wading into the thrashing Souls with his bare hands, tearing them apart as he went, sending each that he caught to Damnation. In his anger he had decided they were not good enough, and he was in no mood for mercy.

Within the solitude of the Halls of Despair the metal-shod tips of Absalom's cloven hooves rang out loudly upon the ancient stonework. In the dark of these unlit chambers he strode quickly, anxious to see why the Lords would wish his attendance at a gathering of the Clave. Beside him pranced Feshak, overwhelmed with anticipation and bounding about the Arbiter of Souls as if he was a pet trying to attract the attention of its Master.

"Will you stop that inane grovelling, you disgusting rodent! It is hard enough to gather one's thoughts without having a simpering little weasel like you constantly at my side. It is beyond the comprehension of my tortured soul as to what value the Lords felt you possessed that was great enough to give you over to me for duty. I can only think they wished to punish me for some transgression."

Feshak grinned and said nothing. He had heard it all before and gave no thought to it. His indenture to Absalom had been the product of centuries of conniving and malicious scheming and soon it would pay off for him. It was now only a matter of time. For his part Absalom looked upon his Bokari adjutant with nothing but absolute contempt. The Order of the Bokari were little more than bookkeepers, recorders of all that happened in the Demonic Planes, and as far as Absalom could see were without backbone or strength of purpose. His position as an Arbiter of Souls required an Adjutant and Feshak had been allocated. He wished however, that he could just wring the grovelling slug's neck and be done with him. Things were never that simple though.

Absalom walked on and tried to ignore the ramblings of his aide. He had given up trying to understand the little toad's motivations long ago and instead considered the import of his summoning to the Clave. It was significant that they had chosen to meet here, deep within the bowels of Despair. The Clave was the formal congregation of all the Demon Lords and their supplicants, and he entertained the chance that the Dominus himself might attend. To be asked to such a meeting would be an honour indeed. Still, it could just as easily be a ruse aimed at luring him to his death. There had been more than one attempt on his life over the years and this place was certainly big enough to ambush a fellow Demon. He resolved to be wary as he followed the jabbering Feshak deeper into the Halls.

The Halls of Despair were a series of massive chambers that had stood upon shattered ground since the dawn of Time. Here could be found the Lords of Perdition and their henchmen, a swirling cesspool of corruption within which was manifested all the evil of a thousand Planes of Existence. Within these walls malice had built upon hate, infecting the rock itself with malevolence, and in its festering it had become a diseased and fractured structure. From deep gouges in the floor and walls geysers vented plumes of noxious gases, coating every surface of the caverns in a black, tar-like film. The air itself was a toxic fume that whipped and roiled as Absalom made his way forward. For an Arbiter of Souls this was the most unholy of places, a sanctuary of evil born of pain and torment. He felt very comfortable here.

He walked on, and as he did so he found himself passing through one of the Libraries. Within this crumbling Hall was housed a complete record of every Lost Soul that had ended up in Damnation and it made interesting reading, if one had the time. In the gloom he could see the books that held these names, filed in long rows upon shelves carved into the dead rock of the Hall. Within alcoves along its length could be found exits to other chambers and the monstrous statues of each of the Demons who had, whether it was by murder or merit, risen to the station of Dominus, High Lord of Perdition and Master of the Demonic Planes.

The Gatekeeper smiled to himself as he considered each of the exalted figures as he passed. Such figures commanded respect and absolute obedience, but they were also the focus of factional fighting within the Orders, and Absalom had not been immune to such intrigues. It had not been that long since the last Dominus had fallen, somewhat less than two thousand years in fact, and Absalom remembered it well. It had been a time of war between the Demonic factions, and in that time of disorder he had commanded the Eisgard in their final assault that

had toppled the Elarii Order, excising their High Lord from his position as Dominus. He mused on such memories fondly. Never had there been bloodshed on such a scale, and the vengeance they had visited upon the Elarii had removed them to Damnation forever. As a final insult their Dominus had been cast into the Pits and had been shackled there, never to know the taste of power again. That Elarii Demon had been the Nef. Absalom walked quicker now, the air flowing past him in thick gusts of toxic fume. Ahead lay the arena designated as the Clave meeting place. He would need to be on his guard.

At its end the Hall opened into a wide arched entranceway. In spite of the feeble illumination and belching gases he could see the outlines of great statues ahead, winged demons reaching over the arch embracing its curves as they struggled to attack each other. In the dark of this great space only a few smouldering torches shed any light upon his way. It was a dim, rank place that gave no comfort and provided no mercy to the unworthy. He was no sure yet why he had been called, but he would soon find out.

Beyond the arches Absalom could see the flickering fires of the Clave chamber sending waves of fractured, dancing shadows across the walls of the Hall. A great uproar was issuing forth from its depths and Absalom's blood pumped hard with anticipation at the possibility of death or torture. As he quickened his gait Feshak fell back. Unsure of the response his Master might have when he found the true nature of his summoning, he had decided to remain out of sight until its purpose was fully apparent. He had decided that if his Master was to be denounced then he would be first in line to give testament against him. The truth of what they found was quite different.

As the Gatekeeper stepped into the wide forum of the Clave the hall fell silent. Standing around the base of a wide circular pit were representatives of all eleven remaining Demonic Orders, and behind them writhed supplicants from the many subjugated realms that scratched a desperate existence upon the borderlands of the Demonic Planes. All were looking directly at the Gatekeeper and more than one of his fellow Demons stood in awe and fear of him. Absalom surveyed the assemblage as they stood uneasily upon the edges of the arena. He could feel grit beneath his cloven feet and noticed that the place normally reserved for the Dominus was empty. All the Lords were here though and that was unusual. He knew them all by name, and as he stood alone in the centre of the pit did not wait for permission to speak.

"Why have I been called here? My work upon the Fields of Arbitration is not yet done and Damnation does not wait for idle gossip!"

As his words echoed into the surrounding stone the Clave erupted again but this time in outrage at Absalom's impertinence. Amongst the jeering and shouting, it was the Sextants of the Orders that stepped forward to answer. In all, eleven of the ancient DemonMages stepped forward but only one spoke. It was the Sextant HashMai, of the Eisgard Order.

"Gatekeeper, you are here for no idle purpose. A situation of some gravity has been brought to light and the Clave believes that you must play a part in its undoing."

Absalom considered the Sextant and bowed his head in deference to the old Demon's station. The Sextants were the only creatures in the Demonic Plane that were completely neutral in all matters between the aggressive and sometimes genocidal Orders. Their power and status arose from their role as keepers of the Law. Their sole purpose to ensure that the balance between Good and Evil in the Omniverse was maintained. Everything, whether it be Mortal, Demonic or Luminous depended on that balance. If it was to be altered, if either Good or Evil gained an upper hand, then the Planes of Existence would shatter and bring down all that was, and all that would be.

To keep that balance meant a strict adherence to the Law, the unchanging code of what was possible and what was not. The Sextants ensured the Law was kept and had done so since

the beginning. Such was the respect granted to them that even the Dominus himself would accept their counsel if offered. The Sextant continued to speak as the chamber fell silent once again.

"Absalom, the Lords of the Clave has summoned you here for a purpose. Your Masters have felt a disturbance in the balance of the Planes and it is the intention of the Orders to correct it. To do this will require that you leave the Fields of Arbitration for a much more difficult duty. How say you?"

The Gatekeeper looked at the assemblage and shook his head.

"I do not see any reason to leave what has been a well-earned position. You summon me here and ask for something I have no intention of giving up. What might be the duty that you wish to bestow? Perhaps you would send me to the Halls of Despair as a bookkeeper to work alongside these spineless Bokari?"

With that the representatives of the Bokari Order screamed accusation and filth at the Eisgard. The assembled hierarchy of the Eisgard responded in kind, hurling insults of their own and edging towards the Bokari with weapons at the ready. It was only the intervention of the other Orders that pulled them apart and spared either group bloodshed.

The Sextant raised his hand and brought the Clave back to silence. HashMai had a look on his horned face that would not brook any further difficulties from Absalom. He descended into the pit and stood before the Gatekeeper, staring him squarely in the face.

"We have no doubt of the merit of your work Absalom, but you are needed for a far greater task, one which will come with great rewards if completed to our satisfaction. The Nef has escaped his shackles and we need you to kill him."

Absalom stepped back and took in the Sextant's statement. He could feel his blood pounding through his veins and the very possibility of real violence excited him, he could not help one final dig at the Bokari Order however.

"You want me to kill a Dominus? Why not send somebody else to do the job, surely any one of these overly-ambitious Bokari would grovel at the chance..."

Again the Clave erupted as the Bokari Demons jumped to the floor of the arena and raced for the Gatekeeper. Too late the other Demons interceded and with weapons drawn they fell upon the lone Eisgard. Absalom swept his axe from his belt in one fluid movement and sliced into the attacking creatures, forcing them back. As the Sextant ran for cover the Bokari stabbed and hacked at the Eisgard trying to bring him down. Absalom knew only contempt for his adversaries and stood his ground, keeping the Demons at bay with wide sweeping arcs of his weapon. It was only the intervention of all the Sextants that separated the Demons and restored order once again.

From amongst his colleagues the Sextant HashMai emerged and held up his hand. Within the cup of his taloned palm he held a dimly glowing orb of green light. At the sight of this the warring Demons within the Clave put down their weapons and returned to their respective places. Even Absalom settled at the sight of it. The Sextant did not speak until all was perfectly silent once again.

"Here me well my Brethren, I hold in my hand the immortal essence of one of you. If this Clave is disturbed any further then it will be extinguished."

This was the true power of the Sextants. Above all others they had the knowledge required to extinguish an immortal life. Not just send one to Damnation but utterly extinguish it. It was a

power the Demons of the Eleven Orders feared.

The Sextant looked again to Absalom and spoke.

"The Nef has escaped his shackles within the Pit, and now machinates to tip the balance between Good and Evil. In his madness he has schemed and plotted, gathering about himself many followers who wish the end of all things. You have been chosen to kill him and you will do your duty Eisgard, even at the expense of your precious Fields of Arbitration."

The Gatekeeper rubbed his face and glanced at the rest of the Clave. He had no doubt that he would do his duty, but the faces of his fellow Demons showed an unease that he could not fathom. Something was not quite right. As he searched the dark recesses of the arena he began to feel another presence within the chamber. It was something different, out of sight and alien to this place.

The Sextant saw the look of uncertainty on Absalom's face and spoke carefully, almost at a whisper.

"You feel it, don't you? This is the first consequence of the Nef's intrigues. When it was found that the Nef had escaped we sent agents to every corner of the Demonic Planes to seek him out. When he could not be uncovered we had to search farther afield, and sure enough found his trail disappearing into the multitudes of the Mortal Plane. He has somehow broken the barrier between the Planes of Existence, evaded the Nephreen and has crossed over with his followers. You know what that means don't you?"

Absalom shuddered and searched the corners of the chamber all the more intently. If the barrier between the Planes had been breached then there was nothing the Sextants could do without the help of *others*.

"Is one here, now?"

"Yes Absalom, as soon as it was determined that the Nef had gone we had no choice. The Law is specific in this regard. The only way we can get him back is with the help of the Luminous Realm. As we speak one of their emissaries stands only a short distance from us."

The Gatekeeper stood silent. If such a being was close then here was an opportunity to kill an immortal foe. It was a thought that must have crossed the minds of most of the Demons gathered here as well. The Sextant saw the look in his eyes and shook his head slowly.

"It has been a long time since we have been in direct conflict with the Luminous Ones. Now is not the time to rekindle old animosity. Without the help of their emissary we cannot open a pathway to the Mortal Realms. Negotiations with the Being have led to only one outcome. The Nef is one of ours, and one of ours must go to retrieve him. This job is to be yours Absalom, and yours alone."

"But why me, surely there are far more powerful Demons here that can take this challenge?" The Sextant pointed at Feshak as he cowered in the shadows. "It is your Adjutant that deserves the credit of your selection Gatekeeper. It was he that volunteered your services and it was he that told the Clave of your encounter with Nef's messenger upon the Fields of Arbitration. It is with him that you may share the honour of this duty."

Feshak. Absalom should have known. As his Adjutant he had the authority to speak in the Gatekeeper's name and for some snivelling purpose had used that power. The rage and murderous hatred he had for the Bokari seethed within him but he held it at bay. The Sextant still held the shining green orb of someone's essence in his hand and a reckoning with Feshak could wait. He did have a question of his own however, for him it was the only one that really

mattered.

"What's in it for me?"

HashMai grinned and looked towards the representatives of the Eisgard Order. They nodded silently and then turned away.

"It has been decided Gatekeeper that your reward will be the eternal gratitude of the Dominus, and ascension as a Demi-Lord of the Eisgard. It is yours in you so wish."

Absalom considered the offer and then agreed. He added one condition of his own and in a whisper made his position clear to the Sextant.

"I accept the challenge Sextant but I have one demand that must be met. As I step through the portal that will take me to the Mortal Realm the last thing I wish to hear is the screams of Feshak's execution upon a tearing frame. The Bokari has gone too far and needs to appreciate it. Do this and I will be your willing Agent."

In a loud voice the Sextant turned to the gathered Clave and shouted out into the dark spaces. His voice resonated within its walls as he announced Absalom's acceptance.

"Absalom, Demon of the Eisgard, Gatekeeper of Damnation and Arbiter Of Souls has accepted his fate. Upon the rise of a new sun he will enter the Mortal Realm and end the imbalance that threatens us all. In the name of Damnation it will be done!"

As the Sextant returned to his brothers the Clave erupted with howls and screams, a bitter cacophony of dire oaths and insanity. In unison the Demons of the Clave vented their collective relief that they were not going themselves and urged Absalom on as he turned and left the chamber. The only thing on his mind as he walked back out into the Halls was the unfettered desire to find that little rodent Feshak and deal him a quick lesson in discipline. Tomorrow he would pass over to the Mortal Realm and the Bokari would meet his fate upon a tearing frame. There he would know the true meaning of torment as his immortal soul was torn from him and extinguished by the Sextants. He smiled as he pondered the anticipation of it.

A night in the Demonic Plane passes slowly but Absalom did not spend it idly. In the solitude of his private quarters he studied intently a set of papers sent to him by the Sextants. They had arrived shortly after he had returned to his quarters and the parchments proved to be heavy reading, the product of considerable torment and interrogation. One particular piece of crumpled paper interested him most. It was a listing of all the Nef's known followers and the possible locations that he might be found. A large number of Demons had somehow passed into the Mortal Realm and the balance of all the Planes would not be returned until they were all dead. He pondered the papers and found himself picking at the entrails of a great conspiracy, one that had drawn in many different players, all seemingly intent on the destruction of the Planes. It was a conspiracy that the Sextants did not yet fully understand, the plan to release the Nef proving to be a tangled web of intrigue and treachery that spanned millennia.

He found as he read that the Sextant's had spent most of their energies on determining one simple fact, and that centred on the unusual behaviour of the Nephreen. The Nephreen had allowed the passage of the Nef and his followers to the Mortal Realms without resistance. These creatures of the Ethereal Realms guarded the boundaries between the different Planes with a genocidal passion that spared neither Luminous nor Demon. Any transgressor caught trying to move between realities without permission was annihilated, removed from the Planes of Existence in a frenzy of violence that left nothing behind. If they had done their job and prevented the Nef's escape to the Mortal Realm then the affair would have ended as a local matter, one easily handled by the Orders themselves. His passage to another Plane had made his intrigues everyone's problem. Their lack of action was another clue to the extent that

the Nef's treacheries threatened them all.

The more he studied the papers the more he could see a possibility of hard combat and merciless violence. He was warming to the nature of the duty before him, and found the idea of his ascendance to the station of Demi-Lord of the Eisgard very appealing. Only once did he rest from his studies and he used that time to find Feshak.

The Bokari was easy to locate. He only caroused with his own kind, and for reasons not apparent had been celebrating with a number of his fellow Order in a local Bloodpit. Absalom said nothing to his Adjutant, instead he took Feshak by the throat and hauled him out of the blood baths, dragging him off as his fellow Bokari looked on. His Adjutant squealed like a Emurian Bileworm as Absalom beat him mercilessly, venting the anger he felt for the screaming rodent's impertinence. When he was done his Adjutant lay still upon a mound of barren ashes, bleeding and unconscious. Absalom felt well pleased with himself and left the hapless creature to whimper where he lay, returning to his quarters and the study of the Sextant's papers. Tomorrow was to be a busy day.

Demons do not sleep, they cannot. For an Eternal Soul time is a something used but never spent. In the long hours of night they wait patiently for the dawn, meditating on the pain that they might inflict, or the fear that they might invoke upon the worthless. Absalom had much to think on, and he used the time before dawn to clear his thoughts and digest the information he had been given. He was a brutal merciless killer, but he was also meticulous about the duties he was directed to perform. This mission to the Mortal Realms would only be of value to him if he was completely successful. Ascendance within the Order would only occur if the objectives of his mission were completed, and that meant every last one of them.

The papers provided by the Sextant's gave him most of the information he needed. As far as could be ascertained the Nef had crossed over into the Mortal Realms with more than three dozen of his followers. They had chosen the Earth as their place of sanctuary and a better Realm could not have been chosen. The Earth was the most untidy of the Mortal Realms, its human inhabitants a bickering, chaotic lot that had multiplied to fill every corner of their world. Unlike most of the other Realms, Humanity teetered close upon the dividing line between good and evil. A Demonic presence would be masked to some extent by the ill-deeds of others, and because of that it would be difficult to smell them out. But there was a way.

The Law for existence in other Realms was simple and unambiguous. A Demon who transgressed upon the Mortal Realms took on all the characteristics of that Plane. Time would move forward quickly, and a Demon could be killed as if it was mortal. Mortals however could not see Demons, they existed slightly out of phase of that Plane and because of that only Mortals who were especially sensitive could feel a Demon's presence. Buildings and other solid items were a different matter. Demons were as constrained by brick walls and solid doorways as any Mortal, they could however pass through any material that was transparent. It was an unusual quirk of being only slightly out of phase with that Plane's celestial vibration. From the information given it was clear that the Nef had entered the Realm of Earth in the squalor of a town called Ravernum sometime during the Dark Ages. That was where the hunt would begin and Absalom's primary objective was the finding, and killing of the Nef. An added bonus would be his unfettered authority to slaughter the Nef's followers. Such carnage would bring him great respect within the Eisgard hierarchy, and he would need it if he was to one day ascend to become a High Lord. Although he would not admit it he was an ambitious Demon, one who would take advantage of such opportunities with both claws.

In a moment of silence he pondered also the strange impertinence of his Adjutant, Feshak. When he had been told of the worm's skulduggery he had been angry, but after dispensing his own piece of justice on the Bokari he could look at what had occurred with a clearer head, and nothing about it felt right. The Bokari as an Order were simply not risk takers. Yes, they weaselled and schemed their way into positions of high office, but rarely at the risk of their own skins. Feshak however, had blatantly provoked him, doing the one thing that was sure to elicit

swift retribution. In the cold of the early morning it did not make sense. Absalom resolved to take great pleasure from Feshak's screams. It would indeed be a fitting departure for him from the Demonic Plane.

As he meditated a harsh call came from the hall beyond his chamber. It was time to go. Carefully he collected the few items he would need for his journey, and hefted his favourite axe upon his shoulders. He would go on no mission without it, and it was a ferocious weapon. Absalom stood roughly half as high again as any Mortal. His axe's blade could rest upon the ground and the strapping at its handle would touch his chest. It was crudely made, but lethal in combat and the Gatekeeper did not feel whole without it by his side. With luck it would send many blasphemers to Damnation and one of them would be the Nef.

To Absalom's surprise he was given an escort to the Vortices. Four Nostra Demons stood waiting for him at the entrance to his quarters. These hooded Demon Warriors were part of an Order that existed only for combat and the cruelties that could be inflicted in warfare. Of all the Demonic Orders the Nostra were the most human-like in appearance but the resemblance was only co-incidental, they were as merciless as any of the other Orders and just as vicious. Absalom had no fear of them though, they were tall and well armoured but in small numbers were no match for him. Their power lay in their multitudes and the favour they held with the current Dominus. As he stepped out into the Hall the Nostra took position at his sides and guided him on the long march that was ahead. Absalom could not say who might have ordered such an honour but he accepted it and allowed the Nostra to guide his steps. Within the Planes there were only a few places strong enough to open a gate to another existence. The Vortices were located at the root of the world, deep within the foundations of the Halls of Despair, and it would be there that he would find the Sextants and the *other*. He did not want to think about that Entity. In truth he had only ever seen one once, and for such memories he had to reach across an ocean of time to unearth them. Already the Halls of Despair had started to change, struggling against the purity of the Luminous One as its truth and compassion infected the essence of the Demonic Plane. Such a creature of Light had no place here and he would be glad to see it gone. First however, he would have to face it in the Vortices, and he felt a twinge of trepidation at the thought of it.

To reach the chamber within which the Vortices were conjured meant a long walk deep below ground. Within the bowels of the Demonic Plane could be found many creatures taken from other Planes of Existence and most were held in the area surrounding the Vortices. As Absalom followed, his escort trudged downwards, their path a series of endless staircases and landings, branching tunnels and dark chambers. The air was stifling, the ground sometimes a shifting morass of ash and dirt, and everywhere was the red glare and flicker of torchlight or open pits of flame. Here he felt close to his essence. Within these deep, dark pits and tunnels lay the engine of the Demonic Plane, the energy of creation that spawned new Demonic life and stripped it from those that had been entrapped by it. It was a place full of activity and work, one that underlined the power of the Demonic Orders. Here could be found the residue of life from a thousand mortal realms, the corporeal and spiritual forms of a billion shattered lifeforms. It was a noisy place also. The shrieking howls of souls that had been lost in the endless corridors gave Absalom something interesting to listen to as he trudged behind his silent escort.

When Absalom arrived at the Chamber of Vortices he was met by both the familiar and the unfamiliar. The chamber was large, with a high ceiling that reached upwards into the darkness. The walls were crudely carved with the contorted shapes of gnarled, withered trees and ash settled everywhere, swirling and eddying as it was vented from shafts dug into the floor and walls.

The Gatekeeper was pleased to see that a torture frame had been installed and that Feshak had already been bound to it. He was screaming and swearing at all who stood by unconcerned by his fate. He kept his most vitriolic attack for Absalom. Buried deep within a

flood of profanity and insult the Bokari delivered his message to the Gatekeeper.

"You think you have me, don't you, but greater powers than you rule this Plane, you puss-sucking Scree!" he screamed, "Enjoy the pain you inflict, for it will be returned a thousand fold upon you!"

Absalom strode over to his Adjutant and spoke quietly into his ear, "I have no doubt I will meet you in Damnation Feshak, but you can go first. Keep a warm place by the fires for me." Feshak spat out at his Master and struggled to break free of his bonds but he was securely tied to the frame. Breathing heavily he continued to pour scorn upon all in the chamber as

Absalom turned to the assembled group.

Within the chamber the Gatekeeper found congregated all the Sextant's and a single representative of the Dominus. To one side stood the Luminous One, a shining Being of Light that lit the chamber such that Absalom could not look directly at its brilliance. What he could see was a bright glowing veil that was in constant motion, a vaguely human form wrapped in light that appeared as diaphanous as the air itself. He was not fooled by its apparent lack of substance. These Beings were powerful and had been immortal enemies of Demonkind since the creation of Good and Evil. He would be glad when it was gone.

Behind the group swirled a large vortex, held securely within a wide circle of dull black metal. About the circle's engraved form were arcane and powerful symbols of magic and before it the Sextants raised their arms in supplication, chanting the mantra that kept it open. This would be his gate to the Realm of Earth.

From within the Sextants strode forth HashMai, attired in the robes of High Sextant and obviously eager to send Absalom on his way. The Gatekeeper acknowledged him without ceremony.

"I am here Sextant, and ready to do my duty."

Hashmai bowed slightly and brought forward a small cloth bag. Absalom accepted it and took a moment to inspect its contents. Inside was a Dirgecompass and a small piece of parchment. "The gate has been opened Absalom and will remain open only as long as it takes for you to complete your journey. Do not doubt that if you fail your mission you will suffer a similar fate to that of your Adjutant. The Nef must be removed from the Mortal Realm, his followers must be annihilated. Do this and the rewards will be great."

Absalom bowed slightly in response and began to walk towards the revolving pool of light. As he advanced the Sextant Hashmai walked beside him and he could sense a slight anxiety in the DemonMage. The Vortex spun before him, a conflagration of fire and energy through which could be seen the vague outline of a basement or cellar beyond. This was to be his objective, his jumping off point to the Mortal Realm. With the Gate open the Sextant turned and spoke softly into Absalom's ear. He was sure the words were for him alone.

"Tread carefully Gatekeeper, for all is not as it seems. Read the parchment when you are on the other side, there is information within that will explain much. There is more to your mission than that which meets the eye."

Absalom nodded and began to step through the Gate. It pleased him greatly to hear Feshak's screams as he passed from the Demonic Plane.

Feshak may have been screaming but he was not finished. As Absalom disappeared into the Mortal Realm the Chamber of Vortices broke into swift and deadly violence. The four Nostra escorts who had delivered Absalom to the chamber broke their ranks and attacked the

Sextants as they stood manipulating the Gate. Three DemonMages fell before the alarm could be raised and in the melee that followed Feshak was released from his bonds. To a plan that had been centuries in the making, the Bokari Demon grabbed up a spear and a small bag that had been placed unnoticed near the Vortex. Without hesitation he stumbled headfirst into the collapsing Gate. Before the remaining Sextants could shut it down Feshak was gone.