

Not Another Bard's Song

By

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Chapter 1.

Sugarfoot's eyes fluttered open. A chill scurried down his spine, like a multitude of spider legs, and he pulled the blanket tighter about his shoulders and head. He looked to the iron bars of his cell and was greeted by a bowl of soup and two bread rolls waiting just outside. The old man sat upright, rubbing his chin and glancing this way and that. He was no longer feeling cold, being clothed in a light grey tunic and pants shaded with dungeon grime. He really was not sure of why he was shivering in the first place. Sugarfoot moved from his blanket and cursed the arthritic rust in his joints. He squatted at the cell door and ate the meal left for him from between the bars. It was a tasty broth, full of spices, and he spooned it from bowl to mouth using the rolls.

They were treating him like a man again.

Damnation, compared to the pisspool he was pulled from by Rawlins, he was being treated like a king. All because of telling one story to one set of ears. Well, Sugarfoot supposed it was two sets of ears, but Rawlins had only been present in case he had fouled up. Gratefully, he had not done such a thing. He had managed to live to ...

Sugarfoot stopped chewing, his meal suddenly tasteless and soggy.

This day. No... tomorrow. Tomorrow was the day of his next telling. He could scarcely believe it had arrived so fast. It was tomorrow he would have to be a bard once again. He was obligated with entertaining appointed judges who would ultimately grant him his freedom from his confining home here. By rights, he should have been freed at the end of the first story he had told. The judge had seemed entertained enough. But somewhere in the dungeon records something was overlooked or plainly forgotten. Some

pertinent clause someone failed to mention to Sugarfoot, but remembered for their own convenience.

In any case, he was still here.

Unfortunately, here was not where he wanted to be. And worse, he had to do it all over again tomorrow. Worse still, he had no tale to tell...

“Bugger it,” he swore softly, and snapped up the last bit of bread. He was merely a gnat in a much bigger machine, dodging cogs and gears until finally, one day, one would finally squat him, rudely squeezing his innards out of his orifices. It was inevitable.

Why didn't he just give up then? He thought as he finished his meal and pushed the bowl away from the bars with a clatter. He rubbed his thinning crown of hair and ended up tugging at some caught filth in his rag of a beard. It was really easy enough to have someone to kill him. Rawlins wanted to do him in for some time now. Sugarfoot almost considered the legendary executioner as a friend for that. The main problem with the notion was that Sugarfoot essentially still enjoyed living too much. He didn't want to die just yet. He wanted to die as much as he wanted an axe in his head, truth be known.

Truth be known.

Sugarfoot sighed and gazed out into the torch lit corridor, resting his head against the cold wrought iron of the prison bars with a fleshly *thud*. It was cruel to do this to him. Dangling freedom before his old frame. What crime had he committed to justify such torture? He never stole from anyone who could not afford it. He never assaulted anyone smaller than himself. He never killed anyone who didn't attempt to kill him first. Was his criminal mind so bad to endure this?

Well... he shrugged.

The door at the end of the corridor opened and closed with a crash. Footsteps approached. Several footsteps. Shadows flittered along the passageway, heralding the approach of three figures. They came into Sugarfoot's vision. Two of them were guardsmen. One of them fished about a pouch at his waist. He pulled out a key and inserted it into the lock of the cell across from Sugarfoot's. The third man was ushered into the small pen. Chains could be glimpsed securing the hands behind the man's back. Chains that were removed once the prisoner was inside his cage. The door closed behind him and the note of the withdrawing key lingered in the prison stillness.

"Enjoy yer time killer," one of the guardsmen said as a parting shot. "Treat every last hour like it was a year."

There was no rebuttal.

The guards, disappointed at the lack of spirit in the prisoner, withdrew. In the distance, the door opened and closed with a resounding bang.

Now that they were alone, Sugarfoot glanced across the way. He saw no need to waste any time. It had been a while since he had company.

"Killer `eh?"

The man sat on the floor, as there was no bunk or bedding in the bare cell. He stared sullenly at the ceiling. He wore no shirt, and Sugarfoot could see he was a well-built individual, with cords of muscle lacing his upper body. He wore a ragged pair of dark pants. A black mane of hair clouded his head and face. Sugarfoot believed the man probably was a killer of sorts; probably very good at it as well. The newcomer didn't seem to be in a talkative mood, so Sugarfoot decided to warm the waters.

“Well, I know a few killers around here. Not recently mind you. You’re the first bit of live company I’ve seen in a while. But they still have them around. Worst still, the king employs them and gives them titles. Rawlins being the worst. He’s the worst, y’see, cuz it’s his job to murder. And he’s good at it. And all cutpurses, thieves, and murderers of innocents are sent to Rawlins, and if you get on his bad side, he’ll purposely blunt his axe before taking your head.”

Sugarfoot paused for a moment, studying the dark form for a reaction. He did not wait for long.

“I never killed innocents.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said,” the man turned his dark eyes, mere flicks of light in the shadows, towards Sugarfoot, “I never killed innocents.”

“Oh.” Sugarfoot allowed. “So how many of the *guilty* have you done away with?”

The eyes drifted away. “I didn’t count.”

“They all deserved it though, I suppose.”

“They were the king’s own soldiers.”

“Ah, they deserved even more then.”

“Devils in the guises of men, the lot of them. Dogs without leashes,” there was heat in the fellow’s voice.

“So I take it you don’t care for them then,” Sugarfoot asked. He was becoming interested in this hard case now. Not so hard to do considering some of the company he previously knew here. It was strange how he missed them...

“I don’t,” the man stated, silencing his rambling mind.

“What could they have done to deserve your hatred now, hm?”

“Enough for a hundred people’s hate, if not a whole nation.”

There was a quality to the man’s voice now that disturbed Sugarfoot. He could not identify it just yet, but he was familiar with it. He continued with his questions. The fellow seemed inclined to talk.

“So what did they do to you?”

“They murdered my family.”

“That’s all?” As if the king’s soldiers had never done such a thing before.

“They butchered my two youngest children.”

“Sorry to heard that,” Sugarfoot had heard similar stories elsewhere.

“Not before raping my wife before their innocent eyes, and then killing her.”

Sugarfoot nodded tiredly. He had heard one or two tales of woe like that before as well.

“They then...” the man paused for a moment, then choked it out like a piece of meat caught in his throat, “they then raped *me*.”

Sugarfoot’s mouth hung open.

“They were about to violate my children as well, but I freed myself and killed most of them with a sword. The last killed my children before I could kill him.”

“Oh,” the old prisoner said in a small, awkward voice. The other man did not answer.

Sugarfoot now recognized the tone in the man’s voice and it was a frightening one. It was a voice that had no emotion. No life. A dead sound that did not care if it were made or not. The makers of such hissing were not to be taken lightly at all, for feelings

were lost to them like those they once loved. They were capable of killing another person upon making such sounds, and Sugarfoot believed people should heed their voices like the rattle of a snake, or the snarl of a rabid dog. If such people had killed, they were capable of any act.

The old prisoner was suddenly grateful for the bars between them.

“I’m to be executed before dawn,” the man said in a lifeless voice. “I’m to be slain in the night like some thief. They won’t even allow me seeing the sun for one last time. Sunset or rise. Not that I care really. I have my memories of far more dearer events.”

“Such as?” Sugarfoot’s memories of mornings and evenings were colorful and vivid and full of scent. His one treasure remaining to him was his memory and the vast wealth stored within it. Sunrises and sunsets were some of the more special ones.

“The marriage to my wife. The first night we had together. Our first child,” his voice was so distant Sugarfoot had trouble believing the man was still here. The newcomer had him at a disadvantage. He had never experienced any of those memories of his own. He did not doubt those memories were as wondrous as seeing morning light.

Or a mug of beer.

“All gone now.” The fellow’s head arched backwards until it touched the wall behind him. For a moment, neither man said a word.

“Would you grant me a boon?”

Sugarfoot blinked with surprise. “What do you mean? I cannot grant such things here. And chances are I’ll be done away with before long.”

“But you can. You can. The guards told me they were going to place me with the storyteller, the imprisoned bard. You.” The sound of his voice trailed away into the gloom.

“Tell me something,” he said cryptically. “Anything.”

“We have no time.”

“Then begin now.”

“They are coming for me at any time!”

“Then begin *now*,” the other insisted. “I don’t care if you finish it or not. Perhaps it will be good enough to cloud my mind from the time of my ...my...”

“How are you to go?” Sugarfoot asked guardedly.

The man cleared his voice. “By spitting.”

Sugarfoot swallowed. His throat clicked hard. “What in the Lords’ names did you do to deserve spitting?”

“I think one of the soldiers I slew was the son of a captain or some noble. Someone of importance anyway.”

“That might be it. Rawlins only spits the truly heinous of criminals. It’s one of those deaths that...that,” Sugarfoot’s words dropped away. The man was watching him. He could not finish the thought, and abandoned it.

“Hm. Well, now he has me.”

“Where will the lance enter?” Sugarfoot regretted the question immediately. He remembered. His stomach knotted and his bottom became horribly aware. It took a long time to die that way, even when the lance finally pushes its way into the heart after slipping through ropes of...of...

Sugarfoot shook his head to dislodge the image. The last man spitted was alive for minutes. Rawlins was instructed not to hurry and, lords above, the man must have made it every impaling inch feel like a year.

The method of execution was purloined from hell, and the pain was legendary.

“I don’t care where you end it,” the man said again, his voice softer, and with a slight tremor. “As long as you take me away from here...and keep me from thinking of ...it. It’s a long time from now until then. If you allow me to be your audience of one, you won’t be an audience to my screams.”

The two prisoners met stares then, and Sugarfoot could see there was still emotion left in the condemned man after all. Fear. He corrected himself. It was not fear he saw in the man’s dark eyes...fear was of spiders, and ghosts from graves and cutting oneself with a rusty blade. This was sheer terror. The kind a trapped animal may have when it hears the sharpening of the knife. Sugarfoot could not begin to imagine what force of will it required to contain such terror. The king’s soldiers were indeed a twisted lot. They purposely told the poor lout when and how he was going to perish and locked him away with the knowledge, to let him dwell on it in his final hours. For his actions, he was going to go deep into the Abyss, but while he still existed here, the soldiers wanted him to experience anguish ...if only for a short time.

“What is your name?”

“Kanson.”

“My name is Sugarfoot,” he said solemnly, as if dictating before a funeral’s gathered mass.

“And I will tell you...what I have prepared.”

Chapter 2.

Harger did not remember when things went wrong. Perhaps earlier this evening, when he finally decided where and what form of entertainment he would spend his purse of silver moons on. Wealth was a fleeting thing with the mercenary Koldman. Payment for services rendered in a successful campaign was always a happy occasion and only because of the merry weight of a full purse. It was proof that he lived once again, and in those brief sojourns between work, life was to be appreciated to its fullest. Whether it was carousing, gambling, drinking, or more carousing, as McKiggan liked to do, a full purse would soon be an empty one and would have to be filled again within time.

But Harger's purse had emptied far too quickly.

The stout son of a blacksmith patted the top of his head. His choice of entertainment this evening was gambling. The game was that of cloves, and his opponents were a piling of sailors and ogreish street men. It was the usual company one kept in Kragland, a land legendary for its coldness of hospitality. It was said that even though Death walked one to the afterlife, Kragland *threw* a soul in that direction. Perhaps it was Kragland itself that had vexed Harger and caused him to lose all but a handful of coins. The game was without any real skill and relied on luck. Perhaps that was Harger's problem, as his luck was considered by some to be the worst. In cloves, one merely had to toss the wooden dice into the air, and kept track of the number of points resulting from the toss, mindful to clear of the cloven number of three or its deathly increments on the dice. A person could keep tossing as long as they pleased, provided their points *ended* in a cloven number. Money was exchanged on betting on the tosses.

Harger had been tossing and he had been winning. Everything.

Now he had practically lost everything, and feeling none too pleased about it.

Mobos grinned evilly at the legionnaire, exposing what teeth remaining in his head to be black. His breath reeked of ale and salted fish. “ Blast and bugger it if’n this sailor’s luck changes like the wind. And timely enough, `eh mercenary?”

Even though Harger stood a good three paces away from the man, he still caught too much of the man’s foulness. The others were smiling viciously as well, slapping their champion on the shoulders with loud cursing praises. Mobos accepted the praise, letting the silver moons spill through clawed fingers into the hands of his companions.

His companions.

Harger had been too involved with his earlier streak of luck to notice that the circle of gamers had practically crumbled into two camps. He was the only man on his side. Mobos had five.

“What’ll it be, ye hellion?” Mobos crooned through a smug smile. Harger did not like that smile at all. It was too certain. “Another bout with the cloves or would ye rather slink away to yer blood pools and see if’n ye can’t find more coinage?”

Harger made a fist about his last few moons. It was still Mobos toss. When Mobos began tossing, Harger had begun losing.

Mobos mouth hung open in a twisted grin of surprise. “I believe he’s actually considerin it! Saimon’s balls! They grow `em stupid where ye come from now don’t they!”

The walls of the buildings forming the alley had ceased to be for Harger and his vision filled with only those opposing him. All were suddenly laughing and crooning like

a pack of misbehaving schoolchildren. One was serious, however, showing an inkling of knowledge that he knew what was going through Harger's mind. Harger did not like that look either.

Gnashing at the inside of his mouth, the blacksmith's son inhaled deeply and forced a skeletal grin to his face. That brought a round of laughter from the collections of rogues.

"He is!" Mobos squealed with rancid delight. "Saimon caught on a whore! Yer goin' to try again, ain'tcha! Haven't had enough just yet have ya? Fine with me to send a stupid man away with nary a cent. Where's the place ye say yer were hailing from?"

"Kold Keep?" one of the pack behind Mobos supplied.

"Arr!" Mobos barked "I heard about them northmen and their lack of brains. Ye surprise me to tell the truth. I didn't believe ye could talk from up there! Though I did hear some folks say northmen speak funny. Is that true? Do ye speak funny? Do ye? Speak some northern talk for us then? C'mon...I'll even pay ye!"

Harger's eyes narrowed. His face became drawn.

"Yer toss, Mobos."

Mobos' eyes opened wide. "Was that it?" He cackled without humor. And tossed him a coin. "Well, that *was* funny! Don't worry, it won't be yours fer long! "

Harger said nothing, placing the last of his money on the ground before the cloven dice.

"Stupid as rain over an ocean." Mobos decreed. Shaking his smiling head, Mobos tossed the dice in to the night air. The legionnaire watched them tumble through space,

seeing their apex, then the descent. Harger did not watch the final results. He knew what they would be. His gaze stopped at the expectant faces arching towards the ground.

Harger lunged, never pausing to consider the odds. It was not his way. It never was when it came to fighting, and his fortunes always ran in his favor when he heeded his instincts. Harger crushed Mobos' nose with one punch. The man beside the sailor looked up in time to have an elbow pistoned into his face. Both men reeled backwards, vainly attempting to escape their attacker.

Things became black for Harger then. Refuse though they were, they had still survived the streets of Kragland and had learned from their cruel environment. The remaining men quickly encircled the legionnaire, grabbing for limbs instead of their own weapons. Harger was not thinking about killing his fellow gamblers and did not draw his sword. A mistake he would languish in another time.

They caught him, pinned him to the ground, and a recovered Mobos went to work on him. The sailor's nose was a grotesque smear of red and his teeth were laced with blood. He grabbed Harger's tunic and punched his face. The legionnaire's head rocked to the side.

"Did that hurt?" Mobos demanded, horrid breath much too close to Harger's face.

In reply, Harger's leg snapped out its captor's grip and flashed into the sailor's groin. Mobos let out a girlish squeak before dropping to his knees and rolling over.

"Not as bad as that," Harger growled.

His leg was secured again, and this time, the man with the knowing look took Mobo's place. His face leaked not a drop of emotion as he produced a knife. He began to worry Harger. This one was all business. He grabbed Harger's tunic and rammed the

knife's pommel onto the bridge of Harger's nose. The connection brought a yelp of pain. It was a tender spot for the smithy's son.

"Ye broke me nose," he said groggily, his brain buzzing with pain. "Bastard broke me nose..."

He fixed the man with a hateful eye. The man didn't flinch. Yes, his somber face said, and it was the beginning.

"Let the little man go."

Everyone looked up at the commanding voice. Though it was night and darker still in the alleyway, beyond the shimmer of the lamps used to play their game the combatants had no difficulty seeing a monster of a man. To say that that Harger was small was a jest. Short he was, perhaps, but thick as a barrel and hard with muscle. Compared to his brother, however, the man was a cub in the shadow of the bear.

"I'll give ye one warnin only," Angus said sternly, eyeing each of Harger's captors. Though he would never admit it, the big man cared the world for his younger, smaller brother.

The serious man measured up the bald ogre before him. Something perhaps frightened him as he placed the edge of the blade to Harger's throat. "I'll cut him," the man spoke. No emotion. All business.

"Kill `im Angus," Harger whined with a nasal slur.

"Shaddup," Angus said. Then to the businessman. "Leave `im and we'll be on our way."

"He started this," the stoic man stated. "We're teaching him a lesson."

"That so now?"

“They were cheating Angus!” Harger accused. Angus moved closer.

“Like hell we were,” said one of the men holding Harger’s arms. The others grunted their support. “He was losing is what the problem was.”

“Awright, so much fer that then,” Angus said calmly. “Let’s just break off and go our separate ways. Ye can keep the money.”

“Angus!” Harger swore.

“*Shaddup*. Ye can keep the money and we’ll call it a night. No more blood has to be spilled.”

The businessman never wavered, knife poised just below the nut of Harger’s throat. Both he and Angus were reading each other quite well. Neither wanted to kill tonight. Not this way, away from a battlefield or on the high seas, over a gambling game.

Angus showed his palms in a gesture of *well?*

Harger watched as the knife was dropped from his throat. Relief unknotted his stomach, but his heart fumed with the conditions. That was *his* money!

“Done then,” the businessman said, facing Angus. “Let him up.”

Harger waited until he was standing before tackling both men on the left. Their cries of surprise ended in pain. Harger’s leg shot out, his boot connecting with and shattering a man’s knee. He whirled on the other. The businessman moved for Harger from behind but suddenly remembered Angus. He spun about to come level with the warrior’s chest. *Fast!* His surprise at the quickness of the big man lasted only as long as it took Angus to box the man’s ears. Both hands hitting like wooden mallets.

“Ye stupid bastard! Brainless git! Why can’t ye simply back down for a damn change `eh? Surprise me for once, why don’t ye? Shock the hell outta I!”

Harger had grabbed an opponent's arm and was hitting the stomach and head in a flurry of short punches.

"Me nature," Harger huffed with exertion. "By's will be by's!"

"Aye but it's time t'grow up!"

"Bugger that," Harger ended by driving a fist into the man's chin. The unconscious man slumped against the alley wall and was slowly sucked down to the street.

"They cheated me anyways."

"Did they really? Or did ye just get all damn hot with the thought and decided to start bashin first and askin later?"

"They were askin fer it!"

"*Six* men were askin fer it?" Angus shook his head and rested both fists on his hips. "Ye took on six, Harger. With yer fists. Yer not some damned hellion. Seems to me there was only one doin the tellin'!"

One of the senseless men on the ground moaned and rolled over. Without a thought, Harger kicked him in the head.

"*Damnation!*" Angus grabbed his brother by his tunic and faced him. "Ye and I are gonna talk. Yer getting to like this too damn much."

"Me business," Harger returned.

"No Harger. Our business is one of control and choice as much as action. Except, yer not *makin* any choices any more. And ye sure as hell has no control."

Harger met his brother's flinty eyes. "That's what yer for, ye big animal."

“There’s only one animal here lad, and I’m the unfortunate bastard straining with the chains.”

Harger squirmed ferociously . “Then give some slack Angus, before ye gets bit.”

Angus tightened his fists and lifted his brother up. His hard eyes softened and his voice was full of wonderment. “What the hell is the matter with ye?”

Harger’s hands roped around his brother’s wrists. Both men studied each other, attempting, in vain, to know the other’s thoughts.

“Let me go Angus.”

“Or what?”

Harger exhaled and his features hardened. Angus answered by increasing his grip. Rocks could be crushed to sand in that grip and his knuckles began cracking, one after the other in a menacing tune.

“Ye think about this Harger,” Angus warned him in a quiet voice. “Before the leash becomes a noose.”

Harger bared his teeth. Blood still trickled from his bloodied nose. His breath quickened. Angus knew what his brother’s choice would be.

And then, something unbelievably hot stroked the bone behind his throat and he saw blood spray Harger’s face. *Damnation!* Was his only thought as the strength fell away from his legs as a stone to the ground. Harger grabbed for his brother as he slumped, his brain not convinced that Angus just had his throat cut before his eyes. The legionnaire fell like a huge oak, and stepping back from the falling man was a recovered Mobos, bloodied knife in hand.

“That’s one,” Mobos promised and crouched, fingers wagging Harger to come on. “Right `ere ye bastard. I’ll teach ye to scream some.”

Harger stood staring, his brother’s body becoming still. Angus’ eyes fluttered and became still. His neck a dying fountain. The well would become dry soon enough, and Angus did not get up. He did not move.

Nor did Harger.

Movement beyond Angus broke his paralysis. Harger’s head slowly came up. Blood clouded his vision. Distant laughter in the street night. Mobos was there, slinking in the shadows, a pitiful knife in his hand.

And Mobos swallowed, as if realizing only now a knife would not be enough. Perhaps even a sword would not be enough. Perhaps—

Harger came on.

Seconds later, the streets of Kragland echoed with the abrupt shriek of a young girl, before it was silenced by the weight of something unspeakable.

And the roar of a monster.

Chapter 3.

“I am Stephanos. Captain Stephanos of the *Conquest*.”

The man was large and husky and clothed in an ebony garb that made him appear all the paler. A thin beard was growing about his neck and he still had a full dark mane of hair, despite rich veins of silver running through it. Wide set eyes twinkled at the men before him. There was something almost grandfatherly in the way the flesh about his eyes crinkled happily about the edges.

“Please sit down,” he gestured graciously at the three guests. His deep voice, scratchy from years of shouting above sea winds, was easily heard over the din of the tavern.

Prince Eric needed no invitation these days, but there was something about the captain that he instantly liked, like a favorite uncle appearing unannounced. He was reminded of the ancient Prospero Gallus of days gone by and their adventure together. A little part of his mind thought of his distant father to the north, King Roland of Kold Keep. Or maybe he was simply charmed by the older man’s way of addressing strangers as if they were old friends. Prince Eric sat down. McKiggan followed, as did the older war hound of Hodge, who stroked the bare grizzle of his skull, somewhat envious of Stephanos’ wild crown.

Only when the three were at the table did Stephanos take his own seat.

“I am glad that you came at such short notice. Not many would do such thing at such an hour of night,” Stephanos began, his eyes meeting the gazes of all in turn. The northland prince seemed affable enough, though when he heard the story of the warrior

prince working as a mercenary in the southlands, he was skeptical. The man before him was well grown and weathered, perhaps in his late twenties now, just beginning his thirties. He saw that his smile was missing a tooth in the far left. His dark hair was cut short, and a dark crust of a beard, perhaps only two days old now, covered his face. He kept his appearance clean and his clothes relatively simple, something that added doubt to Stephanos' mind that the man was truly a prince. In truth he cared little. He was glad to have someone hear him out, and these legionnaires of Eric's had a solid reputation for honoring their contracts.

"It isn't that late, I s'pose," Eric replied. "Besides Hodge here is a bit of a rabbit's foot when it comes to finding work for us. He's made some great finds for us."

Unknownst to Stephanos, the Northman's accent had receded somewhat over the years. Prospero Gallus would have smiled. Eric had taken the man's advice.

"And now he's made another that I can guarantee," Stephanos brow danced a jig on his forehead. "But first, who is this handsome fellow?"

"McKiggan," the handsome fellow introduced himself.

"McKiggan is another trusted soul I talk with."

But one he rarely listens to, McKiggan thought without malice.

"He's me reason, I guess ye could say, behind me madness," Eric reached and held onto the shoulder of his boyhood friend. His face remained unchanged, but McKiggan felt a warm rush flow throughout his person. They were indeed best friends, and perhaps he was what Eric said he was. It was no idle compliment and McKiggan would find himself remembering it for days to come.

“That is good. It is good to have people about you can trust. I try to do the same with my crew. Thus far, my caution has kept me away from the rocks.” With that, Stephanos rapped twice on the wood of the table, hopefully exorcising whatever foul influences listening nearby.

“How long have ye sailed?” Eric asked.

“Ah,” Stephanos raised a hand dismissively. “I don’t keep track of passing years. Time is a measure created by people and I do not accept it. So, I am timeless, you see.” The sailor gave a wry smile. “But I have been on the water for as long as I can remember.”

McKiggan was thinking the man was probably on grog for as long as he could remember as well. Timeless his arse. He barely managed to keep his eyes from rolling.

“And you? How long have you been in Kragland?” the sailor asked.

“Maybe a week,” Eric answered. “We just finished some business to the north of here and we decided this was the closest place to take our leave.”

“Really? I would not have thought Kragland to be a choice vacation spot.”

“Ye and I both, captain,” McKiggan commented, eyes shifting about reproachfully.

Stephanos smiled. “And you Mr. Hodge?”

“Me arse is cleaner that this place.”

Stephanos’ smile split into laughter. It was a light wheezing noise that struck all three legionnaires as maniacal. Even more ominous, after his long chortle, he suddenly stopped as if the joke never existed. The captain leaned in close.

“What do you know of the Sanjou?” he asked in a sly voice.

“Very little. Nothing really,” Eric answered for them all. He glanced at Hodge whose travels had taken him far and wide, but the veteran shook his head. McKiggan’s expression was also blank. Perhaps Hawkeye knew? The legionnaire scout had studied many a map in his time. But the man was elsewhere at the moment.

“Good fortunes smile on the ignorant,” Stephanos grinned. “That I’m talking to you this night is proof enough.”

McKiggan’s eyes narrowed. Had they just been insulted? He was beginning to have mixed feelings about this character.

“What would you say to a partnership then? Between my crew and yours?”

“Depends on the terms,” Eric said.

“An even cut of the prize. To be distributed as we like amongst our people. You and your soldiers—“

“Legionnaires.” Eric corrected.

“Legionnaires,” Stephanos accepted without trouble. “And my crew and I. Our task will be to bring you, aboard the *Conquest*, safely to our destination, that being the Sanjou. I actually believe that we have the easiest part of the mission. It is you who will have to endure the tangles of the Sanjou.”

“Yer scarin me with yer honesty, captain,” McKiggan said.

The captain’s tone became frigid then. “I believe that you should know what you are in store for. I won’t take anyone otherwise and you are the first people who have stayed with me after I have mentioned the place I intend to go. You really don’t know anything about the Sanjou?”

“It’s an island?” Eric guessed.

“You are correct,” Stephanos beamed. Then his smile vanished like a brilliant moon being covered by a thick fog. “It is roughly 10 days travel from here, by ship of course. To the south. It has a crown of the tallest cliffs I’ve ever seen in all of Parth. A valley bowl filled with guts of jungle lies past that rocky ring, haunted by headless specters and soulless monsters of legend. It is an island but truth be known it is big enough to be another continent, and I have yet to sail around its girth. Untouched by civilization as we know it, it is a vast nest of savages and cannibals. Tanned devils that joyfully hunt for the heads of voyagers like myself and will take them without hesitation. Most folks here know of the rumors and legends surrounding the Sanjou, and, to be honest with you,” a smile flicked at McKiggan, “most of them would rather abandon their first born than to go to such a place.”

“So what is the prize?” Eric asked.

Stephanos’ weathered features became dreamy, as if he had seen the faces of the Lords above and had been blessed because of it.

“A ransom of gemstones.”

“A ransom `eh?” McKiggan said. “A fortune you’ve never seen, I wager?”

Stephanos came back at the sound of the man’s doubt. “I have seen a sparkle of its luster. Several months ago, I was skirting the coastline of the Sanjou, for there is one point known in its high cliffs where sailors can climb up and replenish their ship’s stores with fruit, fresh water, and small game. This one day, we found swimming in the waters a half dead adventurer, stripped to his breeches, with a satchel tied `cross his back. We fished him out, for I am not a heartless man, and he offered a fee in return for safe passage back to the mainland. Far be it from me to turn away a fare so I accepted.

Unfortunately, he was soon overcome with a fever, a result of a shoulder wound that was a rotten shade of apple red. He would die from that wound before the dawn, but not babbling his story to my burning ears. And scalded they were after I found what was in his satchel.”

“Gemstones,” Eric supplied.

“A ransom of stones, “ the captain said throatily. “Greener than the eyes of a cat! Enough to outfit my ship for several voyages! Enough to endear my crew to me for life! And though there were but a handful of stones, as I expect the poor dog had a bagful before he took to the water, they were but pebbles groomed from a mountain.”

“So there’s more?” Eric asked.

“Much more! If a dead man’s ravings prove true, there is so much more, waiting for someone to grab it.”

“And the only trouble is...”Eric led.

“It is in the Sanjou.” Stephanos bore the look of a healer who had to inform a family of a relative’s passing. He waited for the legionnaires to laugh at him, like so many had done before, immediately after learning of the quest involved the Sanjou. There would be others and he could wait, but each spent day was one more day away from his home, the sea, and his life’s obsession; immeasurable wealth.

But to his surprise, the leader of this trio of warriors leaned forward and motioned Stephanos to do the same.

“Our fee is three quarters of the prize,” he said.

And the old seadog grinned.

Chapter 4.

“He yours?” The jailor asked.

Prince Eric and McKiggan regarded the slumped form of Harger in the cage. The blacksmith’s son showed no signs of being aware of his visitors, even though his eyes were open and his gaze centered on the wall just beyond his outstretched legs. He was covered in dried blood. Blood caked around his nostrils. Eric guessed it was broken. It was the worse on a face welted with black and purple bruises.

“Lords awmighty,” McKiggan breathed. He did not like the man’s character, but the beating his sword brother had absorbed moved him.

“He’s mine,” Eric answered. “ We’ll take `im.”

“Can’t.” The jailor informed him. “He killed seven men. One he had torn apart with his hands it seemed. He’s to be executed in the morning.”

“Executed?” McKiggan blurted out, startled.

“Murder is a crime punishable only by death.” The jailor shrugged. “It’ll be a walk compared to what he did to those men.”

Eric exhaled. The news was black. He did not want to think of Angus’ reaction when he heard of his brother’s fate.

“Listen, he comes with us. I’ll pay to get him out.”

The jailor appeared cross. “This man broke Kragland law. He is as good as dead. What part of that do you not understand?”

“The part about Kragland law,” McKiggan sneered. The jailor gave him dirty look.

Eric felt heat spread into his cheeks. He was not going to leave his man in this hole. It was not the first time Kragland law had been violated. The prince was certain of that. Anyone could violate the law here at the drop of a coin. Something else was afoot. He nodded and dropped his gaze to the floor.

“Aye, the law is just that then. May we stay with the lad a while yet?”

The jailor shrugged. “Do what you want. It matters not to me. Mind you though. We have plenty of soldiers about so no ideas. I’m only concerned with delivering that bastard to the headman’s block tomorrow.”

Spitting on the floor, the man took one last look at the prisoner before leaving. That one look scorched hatred. The professional had disappeared and Eric knew the jailor’s grudge was personal against Harger, for whatever reason.

When the man left them, Eric cast a knowing look at McKiggan. The man’s brow flexed. He had seen it too. A fence post could have detected that hatred.

“What do ye think?” Eric asked.

“I think he nailed someone he knew.”

“Me thoughts too.” Eric set his jaw. “Ye really done it tonight, Harger me son. If we do get ye out of here, Angus will have yer hide.”

“Maybe we should just leave him here?” McKiggan suggested. “I mean, with the public executioner, at least it won’t be personal.”

“Ye make sense there, Keg.”

“Tell me when I don’t.”

Eric couldn't. "Be that as it may, I ain't leaving him in here. Who knows how many people perish in one night in Kragland without the guardsmen batting an eye. It's a bloody accepted form of population control. Why should he be singled out?"

"He did do in seven men," McKiggan pointed out. "But I see what yer sayin." He studied Harger's form. "Ye heard that Harger? Ye black hearted bastard. Because of the Eric's warped reasoning we're gonna liberate yer buggered arse."

Harger said nothing. Eric watched the man. If Harger's stare was afire, then the wall he was fixated on would be a blaze.

"Harger?"

The legionnaire remained still.

"Harger?" McKiggan asked again, a hint of concern in his voice. "Harger make a sound so we know ye hear us."

McKiggan could almost see his reflection in the man's eyes. He was staring into both eyes and the sudden shock made him shiver.

"Lords awmighty," he swore. If the eyes were mirrors to the soul, then both of Harger's had been smashed out.

"Damnation," Eric said in disbelief.

"Watch yer language `eh?" McKiggan said.

"Jigger yerself," Eric replied softly. "Harger? Ye awright? Tis us."

Dead eyes bore into Eric's and he was sure he was talking with an unliving creature here. The face was Harger's, but Harger was nowhere to be seen in that husk. The fire in the hearth had been somehow extinguished, and he was as cold as the spark of

winter. Eric was suddenly relieved that he was on this side of the bars. The idea that the jailor was not exaggerating about Harger tearing apart a man hit Eric.

“Harger,” Eric caught the tremble before it could be heard in his voice. “Harger listen to I. We’re going now, but we’ll be back with help. I’m going for Angus. I’ll bring him back with me and we’ll get ye out of here. Ye just sit back and stay good awright? Stay good.”

McKiggan wondered if Harger was hearing any of this. In his opinion, the lad was out. The sooner Angus got here the better.

“We’ll bring back Angus. Don’t worry a bit. We’ll bring Angus back.”

Still screwing a dead gaze into Eric’s head, Harger frightened him by asking, “Are ye one of the Lords, Eric?”

For some unknown reason, Eric was suddenly very worried about everything. “No Harger,” he answered cautiously. “That I’m not. Why?”

Harger only gave a slow measured nod of his head. A sort of *and I know you’re not* motion. The relief of hearing Harger talk was a short-lived thing. He would say no more.

Chapter 5.

“When did they find out about Angus?” Kanson asked from the dreariness of his cell. Thus far he was impressed with Sugarfoot. The bard’s reputation was well placed. The condemned man had momentarily forgotten about what awaited him and how the legendary Rawlins would care for him.

“Only after they had rescued Harger from the dungeons. It was on board of the *Conquest* that Harger began to talk, if the dead talk that is. It was as if the Reaper itself had draped an arm about the man’s shoulders and whispered the words into his ear. The news of Angus’ death rocked the assembled legionnaires. He was believed invincible, you see. Men would perish in any action but Angus would always be standing. He was a bar of iron that no force could bend.”

“And yet his throat was cut from behind,” Kanson finished. “A disappointing end bard. A terrible one. I wish I could have heard the earlier tales about him.”

“He was only a minor character.” Sugarfoot admitted. “Yet, his presence was there nonetheless. You could not ignore Angus.”

“You are still telling a story right?” Kanson asked abruptly, suspicious of Sugarfoot’s tone.

The voice was silent for a moment and Kanson believed the man was deciding on how to answer.

“That I am.”

Kanson was not sure he believed that reply, but he had not the time to challenge it

“How did they get Harger out?”

“By the hand of one of their own. A man called Spidler. He was one of the first men initiated into the legionnaires without being a native of Kold Keep, the home of the legionnaires. At one time the man was a thief and a very good one at that. It was little trouble to break into a dungeon from the outside when he spent most of his life on the inside breaking out.”

Sugarfoot caught himself. “Does that make sense?”

“What does make sense?” Kanson wanted to know.

“Hm. Anyways, Spidler cracked Harger’s prison and set him free, stealing him away to the waiting ship. The break enraged Kragland authorities and soon a massive hunt was on for the escaped killer. The legionnaires stayed safely aboard the *Conquest* with Stephanos watching over them all. Grinning and cackling like a madman who has seen the abyss and returned to tell of it.”

“Had he?” Kanson wanted to know. He liked the captain and did not want to be surprised or disappointed later.

“Be patient,” Sugarfoot soothed. “All shall be told in time.”

Or so he hoped, but his outward appearance betrayed nothing of his uncertainty. That was good. He did not want his audience to know that he had no idea of what Stephanos was about, or what would happen to them on their fateful trip.

Sugarfoot only knew that both of them had very little time.

Chapter 6.

The rolling of the sea did not disturb Prince Eric's stomach in the least. Standing near the bow of the Conquest, salty air and brine smacked him in the face. It washed away the filth that was Kragland and the prince was glad of the scrub. He had wondered how the sea would affect him, after hearing tales from the others about sea travel. The only thing he found unsettling was the absence of land in all directions. It was only the dawn of the second day, but Eric realized that to see even Kragland, as despicable as it was, would be reassuring. Soothing evidence that they had not just sailed out into the unknown without knowing how to get back.

There was a brisk wind in the ocean, and the bow rose and fell like a ponderous boot crushing something. It rose again, a little higher than before, before gradually pushing forward. Fine spray hit Eric across the face again and he blinked against its chill.

In that darkness he glimpsed Amber. Radiant, little teeth smiling, dark eyes as deep as the ocean he sailed upon.

"Sailed all my life," Stephanos spoke at his left, startling the prince. His scratchy voice a loud purr above the commotion of the sailors, sail, and sea.

"Given me the best ride of my life, better even than Kragland's whores. Watching the roll of *these* hips are even better than those of flesh."

McKiggan would have called the captain a foolish bugger if he were here for such a comment. Eric listened to the captain however. The sailor's voice was as comforting as his dear father Roland. There was safety in his tone, as magical as it seemed, and Eric felt

the captain could probably steer his ship and all on board into the deeps of the abyss and emerge on the other side.

“I started out rough, but I paid attention and quickly learned. Paid in sweat fathoms deep, but I learned. And when the last captain of the *Conquest* died, crushed to death in a storm, I was the one who took command. It was the fiercest gale that I have ever encountered, even to this day. We were in the south seas, and it came upon us like Saimon himself were swimming underneath and it were his thrashings that threw waves as tall as castles on us, and his breath that blew men overboard. In that tempest I was born again. When I took command, no one questioned me. I knew it all, the stars, the charts, the mood of the ocean and the ship. I took command of the ship in that hellish storm and I saved her that night and those that remained. Brought her safely out just as if the lords themselves were swimming alongside.”

The captain paused. “And maybe they were,” he admitted, staring ahead thoughtfully. “The storm practically vanished when I took the helm and I mean that as no boast. T’was as if some power wanted to appoint a new captain and did so the only way it knew how. But, tis bad luck to dwell on such things, especially on a new voyage.”

“How long to the Sanjou?” Eric asked.

Stephanos’ mouth made an `o.’ “Another seven days or so, depending on the winds. If they are against us the whole way then perhaps three or more days longer. Are your men comfortable?”

Eric nodded. “As comfortable as we’re going to be. S’pose this ship of yours is pretty damn full with us, provisions, yer own crew... tis a tight pinch. And the lads still

haven't got their sea legs just yet. Some are still feeling each dip and rise of the bow in the worst possible way. I imagine ye'll be glad to be rid of us."

Stephanos grinned broadly and slapped the weathered wood of the *Conquest's* railing. "So you may think, but I actually enjoy being heavy on the open water. It comforts me you see, as one would feel after a grand meal of meat and vegetables. A light ship is a quick one, mind you, but I sleep better when there is something holding her down. A good omen I think, to be heavy in the water. I only hope that you and your men will add weight to the return trip to the mainland. May the Lords watch over our bloody souls and keep those flying rats called gulls from feasting on our bleached bones if we ever ran aground."

"As for the sea legs," Stephanos smirked. "You can take it as a character test...see who got the stomach for life and who doesn't."

He gave a wizened wink at the prince then. Eric knew then that he would be sad if anything ever happened to this old sea dog. He enjoyed the man's company.

Stephanos unexpectedly became serious. "Have you ever been in a jungle before?"

Eric shook his head. He never had. He had walked the woods of his native Black forest as a youth but nothing else.

"The reason being is your armor. You'll be in a warmer climate you see. Damn hot in truth. I've never worn a vest of mail in my life but I'll wager that it isn't the choice of fashion to be wearing in temperate climates."

Eric shrugged. “Can’t be helped Captain. Our second skin it is. In any campaign. I’d be naked without it. Skinned in fact.” A silly image of his men romping through the vegetation without a stitch popped into his head. He wiped the thought clean.

“The natives do without it.” Stephanos pointed out.

“Maybe so, but we’ll make do.”

Stephanos became silent then, hypnotized with the laughing waves. Eric suddenly became aware of the Conquest’s bow breaching a particularly high crest, before sharply dropping. With it went his stomach. He made a face, and Stephanos laughter rang out across the water, his hand slapping the Kold prince on the back.

A ways behind them and holding onto the rigging for dear life was McKiggan. Hodge was across from him. Standing next to Hodge was the shaggy bearded wild man known as Jers Snaffer, a tall well-muscled veteran that had been sword brothers with the venerable Hodge since most could remember. His bush of woolly black hair had more streaks of grey running through it, but like Hodge, none dare bring up the question of retiring to the man, for fear of being rent to pieces.

All three men, up until now, had little struggle to keep down a possible mutiny of their stomachs

“Jigger me,” McKiggan groaned. His knuckles edged back to a normal color as his grip lessened on the ropes. “I hope there isn’t too much of that.” McKiggan’s stomach felt less than solid, and his normally handsome face, cropped off with a generous topping of blue-black hair, was skewed in agony. His blue eyes regarded the others, and Hodge thought that the man looked quite pale.

The ship leveled off and McKiggan exhaled a huge lungful of relief. An old sailor, bare-chested and dressed in whipcord muscle, grinned a toothless smile at the legionnaire. Without a word, McKiggan detached himself from the ropes and moved for the cargo hold.

“Young ones think themselves immortal eh? Until the sea slaps them silly about the head.” The sailor spoke to the remaining legionnaires. Both Koldmen agreed with the comment. They had learned fast during their earliest campaigns. One of the more important lessons was that of one’s own mortality. They would not live forever, but if one kept that in mind, they could perhaps perish when they were good and ready.

“How long have ye been on the water?” Hodge asked gruffly.

“As long as I can remember. Always been on this ship too.”

“A good thing,” Hodge said.

“A fortunate thing,” the sailor replied grimly. “The sea is an unruly creature and a monstrous one at times. If you don’t pay attention to it, you’ll feed it with your own corpse.”

“Ye know eh?”

“I’ve learned it all,” The man replied. “And I’ve listened when I was told. If more people did the same, well...you don’t have to be old to be wise.”

“What’s yer name?” Hodge asked. He figured the man to be a few years his elder, judging by the lines of his face and the grey in his knotted hair.

“Muggins. And you?”

“Hodge. The beast here is Jers Snaffer.”

Snaffer grunted.

Muggins nodded his head at the two veterans and it was done in that single moment, whatever happens when like souls meet and fuse together in the briefest of exchanges. The bond could have been made by the closeness of their ages, their sharing of experiences on sea or on land, or by the agreement that one does not have to be old to be wise.

Muggins sized them both up. “You know what you’re in store for down in the Sanjou?”

McKiggan’s feet landed flat on the wooden boards of *Conquest’s* and stung with the impact. The ache ebbed away and he cautioned himself not to ever jump to the lower levels again. That’s what ladders were for and considering the circumstances; he was lucky he did not empty his stomach after jumping. Live and learn fast, he supposed.

Men watched him come down.

“How you feeling?” asked the man called Spidler. The lanky thief had matured quite a bit since their initial meeting in the small northern town of Cairn, so long ago. McKiggan grunted. “Been better me son. How about ye?”

Red-rimmed eyes stared back. Spidler was not used to sea travel at all. “Holding on. But I can’t stand to watch another person eat tho’. It’s too much.”

“It’ll be over in a week,” McKiggan assured him.

“You said that a week ago,” Spidler grimaced. McKiggan half returned it and moved on past. The hold was large and well maintained, dashing McKiggan’s earlier

images of rotten beams and infested deck heads. A scent of wood and salt brine seeped throughout. If anything else, Stephanos kept his ship clean.

McKiggan moved ahead, keeping with the roll of the ship and bracing himself for some of the harsher dips. Legionnaires had packed themselves away in amongst the ship's stores of provisions and equipment. The men had scattered themselves everywhere, still and staring and waiting to be called into action. He went past the faces of men who were mostly Kold Keep natives, all told about a score of them remained. Spidler and Zizka were the only remaining outsiders to have joined them and survived. All made themselves as comfortable as possible in the hold. The sailors themselves usually slept above deck as the night were becoming comfortable and warm. No storms had driven them below just yet. McKiggan finally greeted the dour faces of Duncan and McKern. The pair reminded him of the black bears found in the great forests surrounding Kold Keep. Hairy, quiet, and somewhat bulky with well maintained paunches and a layer of fat. Also terribly quick on their feet and quick to anger if interrupted during mealtime. The burly pair were solid legionnaires, even if they had sometimes had a heavier hand than most at times. Both regarded McKiggan with slow dips of their heads.

“How is he?” McKiggan asked. McKern's surprising blue eyes looked in the direction where Harger sat while Duncan shook his head.

“The same,” the man reported. McKiggan saw that Harger was still sitting with his back against a wall and his eyes closed and facing the ceiling. He looked asleep, but truth be known, no one knew when the man slept anymore. He kept his eyes closed these days, like dungeon doors shutting out the sun.

“Hasn’t made a peep.” Duncan went on. “He eats but only when it’s brought to him. I figure he’d starve otherwise. The only other time he does anything is when he gets up to empty the bull.”

“Empty the bull?” McKiggan repeated sardonically. Duncan only shrugged.

McKern took a turn. “When he does, he doesn’t say a damn word to us. We keep a watch just in case he tries something stupid but he hasn’t just yet.” He grimaced, showing a gap in his front teeth.

“Damn shame,” McKiggan said to himself. Then he directed it at Harger’s form. “Tis a *damn* bloody shame.”

“I don’t think he’d do away with himself anyway,” Duncan said.

“Who’d thought Harger would get on like this in the first place?” McKiggan asked. Neither man answered. “I’se sure as hell never did.” Then again, he never thought on Angus dying. Men around Angus died but never Angus himself.

“Anyways, when he does decide to talk again--live again—it’s best someone be around him.”

“We’ll be right here,” McKern vowed, regarding Harger’s prone form with regret. Both of the men greatly respected Harger. When brute strength and sheer ferocity counted on the battlefield, Harger was second to none. If McKern and Duncan were regarded as bears, they were but cubs before the beast that was Harger. “If he says anything, we’ll be the first to know,”

Duncan nodded his head in agreement.

“Fine. Keep talking to him. Maybe that’ll bring him back.”

“Talk about what?” Duncan wanted to know.

“Damnation I don’t know,” McKiggan’s stomach was rolling again. “Whatever it is ye gits usually talk about. How many babies ye’ve eaten raw, or heads ye’ve had to bash in. Just get a response out of him. If something happens, I’ll be topside tryin to keep me supper down.”

McKern nodded. He only just conquered his own seasickness.

McKiggan left the pair with Harger. Only McKern and Harger had any real sort of friendship with Harger, and that camaraderie was based only on splitting heads together. As McKiggan moved back to the opening, a shadow intercepted him. A feral grin illuminated the contours of a mouth, yet failed to reveal any other feature of the face except the obsidian eyes. McKiggan jumped in spite of himself.

“Jigger me ye bastard,” the lieutenant swore. “Ye want me to vomit? Just try that again.”

“Not my intentions, Lieutenant,” Zizka the Salahdien said. “I do not believe that the captain of this ship would appreciate a mercenary’s juices staining his hold.”

McKiggan liked the man’s accent. It made him sound like exotic royalty. He had practically forgotten the place they had first encountered this mystical warrior. But all of the legionnaires remembered the deeds he had done on the field. Rumor had it that the man was once a killer for an order called the Asai Suudyn and that he had come from that land in the far east to seek a fortune in spiritual enlightenment. One day, McKiggan would have to ask his questions and clear the room of mythical smoke. One thing was for certain; he didn’t want Zizka coming at him in the dark. Dressed as he was in long flowing robes of black silk, a hood resting on his shoulders, the man would be undetectable. He had a handsome face with a blunt wedge of a nose, but the most striking

feature was his smile. The man's smile shined in his dark face like the brightest chiseled marble. It was there most of the time as well, as if he were reflecting on the funniest thoughts. Yet if he fixed his eyes a certain way, that good humored smile could become something to make one's balls jump up inside oneself in fright. And though he dressed like a priest of sorts, but McKiggan knew that any embracing the man's religion would be quickly Saimon-bound. The order Zizka supposedly belonged to--the Asai Suudyn—was a legendary denomination of the deadliest killers.

And to think they first found him in a bar, fighting with common thugs.

"I would like to ask how he is?" Zizka asked.

"Ye would?" McKiggan was surprised even more. "I don't believe he would return the same consideration. In fact if roles were reversed, I dare say, well..."

"I believe you Lieutenant. However, he is a rugged sort and it would be a greater tragedy to loose him after his brother."

McKiggan nodded." Yer right there. Much as I hate to admit it. Why don't ye go and ask fer yerself?"

Zizka's grin never dimmed. "The pair watching him will not allow me, I fear. And my insistence would only provoke them." It was eerie how the man's smile never left his face. "I feel that they dislike me as much as Harger."

"Well, they're the only ones."

"Really?" Zizka replied, sounding as if he really cared less about what anyone thought of him. "How is he then?"

"Alive, but that's as good as it gets."

"A terrible thing to lose one's blood in such a manner."

“Aye.”

“And the prince is topside?”

“That he is, with the captain.”

The smile flickered out for a brief moment, and then flared up again as if someone had tossed oil onto the flame. McKiggan guessed that it had to hurt to keep smiling that way all the time.

“Very good. I sure we will all arrive at this Sanjou in good spirits. That includes Harger.”

“I hope so. We can use the bugger.”

“Yes,” Zizka hissed, the smile spreading even wider. “I’m sure we could. Please excuse me, Lieutenant. I believe I will go sleep. One should rest while they can.”

“Go ahead,” McKiggan said, envious that the man could actually sleep on board during the sea voyage. His own sleep was restless and he often woke with little reason. He needed a woman he supposed. It had been several nights since he had laid with a woman. A young lady in Kragland. Unlike the capitol, she was full of warmth. He had enjoyed rolling about on her ocean.

He left Zizka, the lady still fresh in his mind and momentarily rescuing him from the troubles of his stomach.

Harger watched the backs of McKern and Duncan. He did not recognize them. He did not even know where he was. He didn’t care either. Nothing mattered anymore except for the light in Angus’ eyes blown out like a candle, and the warm wetness of his brother’s blood spraying across his face. Over and over the image tormented him. He

tried combating it with the memory of tearing Mobos apart but it was rapidly fading from his thoughts. When he closed his eyes he saw his brother dying. The sensible thing would be to keep one's eyes open, but as time went on, Harger realized something grim. He had no other memory of his brother except that of his dying. Seeing Angus die over and over again was the only memory he had, and he could not bear, for the life of himself, however terrible the image might be, to let it go. It was like this for days perhaps. Then the terrible memory began to fade. He thought he was hardening towards it...but a new assault ripped new wounds of grief. Childhood memories slowly began seeping into his head, creeping back like something wild once frightened away. Vivid memories of childhood played in the theatre of his mind and each one scratched him like an unfriendly cat. Cruel memories. Angus falling unto the ground and splitting his head open on a rock, and Harger running to his aid, stripping his shirt and applying it to the wound. Actually hoping that his brother would not perish then and there while his shirt gradually became blotted with red. What had happened to them over the years? Why had the last few years been so bitter?

The tempest whipped winds of sadness inside of Harger and the rain that fell was cold and freezing and endless black. Pain. He never thought such pain would torment him. If the loss of a limb would relieve it he would do so. All his life, he had erected icy walls about his heart, armoring him against the horrors of the battlefield, but Angus's death pushed a mighty icicle through those shields and skewered his heart. What was worse, the hole had healed but the stake was still there. Lodged in his being and he could not free himself from the impalement. The piercing of his heart was bad enough, but it was coated with a poison. A terrible poison that coursed through his being even now. A

venom concocted from the good and bad memories of Angus, all turned to acid. And it burned. It burned so very strongly.

Harger ground his teeth together. He could get through this. He could...he knew he could. But it was so very painful.

The days on the water passed slowly, unfortunately for the legionnaires. The winds were light and the weather fine. If the winds were stronger, Captain Stephanos had declared, they would have reached the far shore of the Sanjou a day earlier. Despite this, spirits were high and the Kold men were managing to sleep fitfully now, and walked the decks with their new sea legs. Holding down their meals no longer was a concern. For exercise, Eric had his men man the oars. Two dozen sword arms were useless if they were in poor condition, and for that one day, legionnaire backs powered the big ship forward. The songs they sang were legionnaire songs, but the sailors were quick to learn them and joined in after a time. The ship made admirable time, earning the men high praise from Stephanos and the mate named Muggins.

Even Harger took his turn at the oars, which surprised all when his inanimate form finally lurched to his feet and walked towards the oars. Harger would not relinquish his place among the oars when it was time; heedless of voices telling him his shift was up. He simply continued working the wood like some tireless machine. It was as if he were attempting to sweat out whatever was coursing through his person. His demeanor was uneasy to be about, and even Eric found other things to concern himself with rather than confront the dour faced Harger. Only Duncan and McKern stayed with him.

Conversing amongst themselves in low tones and making each other smile with private jokes.

That night, after several turns at the oars, Eric slept his best sleep of the voyage. He last thought being that the day's medicine was a good one, and he would have more of it in the morning.

He would not, however, for with dawn's light, the dark spires of the isolated Sanjou would be spied from the heights of the crow's nest.

They were almost there.

Chapter 7.

“Morning,” Eric said to the captain as he climbed up onto the bridge.

“Good morning,” Stephanos returned. The man was dressed in colors of bright blue and sea green with a long flowing cape behind him, heralding the presence of a healthy wind. A wide dark hat crowned his silver streaked head and the eyes below the shade of the brim twinkled jovially at the prince. The man pointed to the sea.

Eric saw a dark crown in the middle of the ocean, whose peaks were jagged and irregular as if the metal smith had worked them with a broken hand. The distance was too great to see any further details but the prince was glad with the sight all the same. His work would soon commence and it would mean getting off the *Conquest*, though he would never say it as so in front of the captain. The thought of no more sea until they had their prize and were sailing back was a pleasant one.

“Looks fine enuff,” Eric commented and drew a short chuckle from the captain.

“Though I have never been past those cliffs I can tell you that I have stood on them, for I am as curious as the next man, and what lies beyond that mountainous coastline is a mess of jungle. You will see quite a bit more of it than I, and I am not envious in the least!”

“Really?” Eric smiled good-naturedly.

“Well...perhaps a bit. But I like to consider myself as wise, and the coastline is as far inland I want to go. This seahorse was meant for the water. Just return with our treasure and any envy I harbor will be gone. That I can guarantee you.”

“If ye got that much from the lad ye fished out of the sea, then why are yer going back for more? Eric asked abruptly. This was a question that he was mulling over since yesterday.

“I think of it as a retirement fund,” Stephanos said wistfully. His cape suddenly blew up around him. He did not bother to straighten it out. “I suppose I’m greedy, but I am getting old and I wish to settle down. Buy myself a home. With what I’ve seen and heard, I believe it’ll be quite easy to do even after I divide the booty up amongst my crew.

“A home? On land?”

“Lords no!” Stephanos declared. “A new ship of course. But one more suited to just to the docks. The more prestigious docks if you will.”

The man gazed at the Sanjou then. Unable to think of anything else to say, Eric joined him. The Sanjou seemed very far away, though it would change soon enough. The place was indifferent to the approaching visitors.

That would change.

The next day, as afternoon was passing into evening, the *Conquest* dropped her anchor as directed by Stephanos. Before her sea-washed deck the mountainous spires of the Sanjou rose up, no longer a thing of tales around a dark table. A gloomy mist hung from the monstrous cliffs, hanging and falling about the craggy peaks like some cottony

sheet covering everything. One half expected to see a dark shape scuttling spider-like underneath that canopy.

Legionnaires and sailors busied themselves with preparations on the deck. The Koldmen made last minute checks of weapons and provisions. Sailors toiled with the business of the ship while Muggins ordered a handful of sailors to prepare the longboats. He roared at them that the expedition would not be swimming ashore.

Amidst it all, McKiggan was standing near the railing and rigging of the ship. He wore his chainmail vest and a sword hung in a scabbard at his waist. A shield and backpack with other commodities and weapons lay nearby. He beheld the tall shelf of the island, and let a breath hiss from between clenched teeth. He hated climbing. And he hated the idea of heat as well. Climbing up over *that* in armor and then hauling up supplies was not going to be easy. But he also discovered a deep loathing for the place as well...as if he had found a ball of hatched spiders underneath his doorframe. The Sanjou radiated hatred it seemed. Its peaks towered over the bay where the *Conquest* now rested, leaning forward and imposing itself. Close enough that a chunk of its stony features could fall onto the ship and smash it. The rock face was gray and even green in some places, and appeared grooved and lined, like the throat of an impossibly ancient man. Sea birds cried out from unseen heights and hidden crevices, and others soared overhead before circling back.

Just seeing who's at their doorstep, McKiggan thought.

"See anything?" Hodge asked gruffly, scratching at his bald head. McKiggan shook his head.

"Nah. Nothing."

“Look there then,” Hodge pointed to a crack high above them, like a gap between two teeth. McKiggan saw that the cliffs continued to rise above it and it would be no easy time to climb for certain. However, compared to the rest of the rocky barrier, it seemed the most accessible. His eyes drifted down the front of the granite face, all the way down to where the sea crashed against huge rocks pounded smooth. It was a long way down it seemed.

“We gotta get up there `eh?” McKiggan asked in a sarcastic voice. Hodge nodded, his face tired.

“The sailors will help. Seems a few of the lads have made the climb before and they know the safest route. Lest that’s what the mate says.”

“Then it’s left to us,” McKiggan stated, feeling the weight of the quest ease onto his shoulders.

Hodge brought his fist down on McKiggan’s shoulder.

“Always up to us lad,” he said.

McKiggan did not answer, finding some peace in chewing on the inside of his mouth. To his right, the longboats were being lowered into the sea by screaming pulleys and wenches. Men dove into the sea beside them, splashing about briefly before clambering into the boats. Backpacks full of provisions were handed down, as were bare bows waiting to be restrung on dry ground.

Eric rounded a group of legionnaires and sized them up approvingly. Zizka caught his attention as always with that unnatural smile on his face. The man was studying the challenge of the Sanjou before him and the ebony robes he wore rattled in the wind.

“A worthy adversary my young prince,” Stephanos said at Eric’s side, startling him.

“Who?” Eric blurted, glancing from the Salahdien to the *Conquest’s* captain.

“The Sanjou,” Stephanos purred as if they were about some midnight campfire with a bloated cemetery at their backs. “I must give you some final words of advice. Practice caution. Always. This is one of those places people rarely return from. Where parents swear they will send children if they do not behave. It is a nest of legends and ghosts and all manner of tales that would leave a man trembling in fright. I know you take me lightly for you would not be here otherwise, and I am greedy enough to keep my tongue from prattling on about this accursed place—else you change your mind.”

Eric’s smile was genuine. “Well, we’re still going as ye can see.”

Stephanos tried to return the smile, his eyes crinkling, and Eric again was reminded of his father.

“I can see that you are truly a brave lot. But be cautious. I did not sail you all the way here to bury you.”

“I understand,” Eric replied. He did like Stephanos. Even though this was business, the captain still valued their lives...or at least gave the appearance of concern.

“This is a hot place,” Stephanos said. “The ocean’s winds will not reach you there. Again your armor—“

“Our skin, captain. We must wear it.”

“So be it then. You will see otherwise soon enough. There should be plenty of fresh water and fruit to supplement the dried meats we’ve packed for you. Do not eat anything alien. Strike southeast as fast as you can. I can’t tell you much else as to where

the treasure is...such details were not given to me. But it is deep within. We will stay here, off the coast for as long as we can, replenishing our store from the Sanjou. But by the first full moon, about 20 days from now, we will leave for the coast. If this happens and you do not appear, we will return to Kragland, restock, and return by the following full moon. We'll wait as long as we can. If you have not appeared by then, well...."

Stephanos tsked and glanced at his feet before looking Eric straight in the eye. "Know that I will not bring anyone else to this place. I am not that greedy."

Their hands shook once and Stephanos held on for a lingering moment before releasing, leaving Eric's hand warm.

The Koldman nodded. He was grateful for the words. He did not think there were many people as straightforward as Stephanos. Muggins shouted that the longboats were ready. On a wave from McKiggan, the legionnaires began to climb down to them.

"My thanks to ye, Captain Stephanos," Eric said. "For giving us the opportunity to share in some of the spoils from this adventure. And I can tell ye that there *will* be spoils to share."

Stephanos grinned. "I hope so!"

Eric turned away and climbed down from the bridge to where the men were working. In a longboat below, sailors and legionnaires waited. Eric climbed over the railing of the *Conquest* and fumbled a bit with the rope ladder on the side. He made it down and the men pulled him into the boat.

"Hardly a way to get to shore, sar," Hodge said, "Swimmin the distance in yer armor."

"Afraid I'll race ye?" Eric said, positioning himself amongst the men.

“Doubtful yer that energetic,” Hodge answered.

“I feel I could bed down all of McKiggan’s wenches in one night!”

“All of her `eh?” Hodge asked, amused.

“Aye!” Eric said loudly in his friend’s direction in another boat. “Course, after she put in her wooden teeth!”

“He’s makin fun of I again,” McKiggan muttered to Hawkeye sitting next to him. The legendary scout flexed his brow in half interest and pressed the upper curve of his bow to his cheek. The Sanjou filled his dark eyes. He had never been in a jungle before.

“Pull!” Muggins shouted, drowning out Eric’s banter and the men of the *Conquest*. The bows of their boats in line with the far shore, both sailors and legionnaires began to row. Within moments they had pulled away from the safety of the big ship and were making steady time for the beach.

Eric craned his head around from the gray face of the Sanjou.

“Careful not to rock the boat,” Muggins warned from the rear.

Eric nodded his understanding.

“No jiggin about on this trip, sar” Hodge said, winking at the first mate. Next to Hodge, Jers Snaffer drew in a deep breath nearby and hauled on his oar.

Eric looked to the *Conquest*. Stephanos still had not moved from where he stood, but as the prince watched, the cloaked figure leaned forward and placed both hands on the railing. Shadows veiled the captain’s features, but Eric could guess there was a blaze of hope in his eyes and a prayer on his lips.

“Lords watch over them,” Stephanos whispered to himself as the boats neared the shadows of the Sanjou, and rapped soundly on the wooden railing three times.

Chapter 8.

“Sounds as if some of them won’t be returning,” Kanson said from the shadows of his cell. The man had moved closer to the bars to hear and he rested his forehead against the iron.

“Really?” Sugarfoot paused for a moment in reflection. His face shriveled up as if he had tasted something sour. “I suppose it does sound that way, now that I think of it. Does it have dire overtones?”

“Nothing like that,” Kanson said. “I just don’t expect to hear many of them returning. Am I right?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“I’m not asking for names, bard, I’m just stating a prediction. I’ve only hours to live and I think I can do that and get away with it. Anyone can see that there will be some deaths. I’ll just content myself with guesses on who will go first.”

“Cheerful one, aren’t you?” Sugarfoot grated.

“Just keeping myself with the tale,” Kanson admitted, running a hand over his head and checking it as an afterthought.

Sugarfoot was suddenly worried. “You don’t find it interesting?” If there were sparse details or it was altogether boring he would like to know. He would have to retell the story soon enough.

Kanson was silent. For a little too long, Sugarfoot felt.

“Kanson?” He asked, gripping the bars of his own cell.

The cell opposite Sugarfoot’s erupted with laughter. The sounds repelled him like a cat from a body of water.

“A fine audience you are,” the once-thief accused. “You should be damned grateful I’m saying a bloody word to you at all. There was a time when I was colder than Rawlin’s heart buried in glacier ice.”

Kanson regained control of himself and pressed his face into what meager light there was.

“Only a small joke, and if it makes you feel better, I was laughing a great deal more than just your nervousness.”

“Like what?”

“Private things,” was all Kanson would say on the matter. “But you are right about one thing. I am glad. Very glad that you are here with me. You are doing me what I hoped you would.”

Sugarfoot was uncertain. “You mean, keeping your mind occupied?”

Kanson nodded once, lightly thumping his head against the bars. “So very hard these bars. I’ll try not to interrupt you again but if I think I’ll get a reaction like that I just might try. Have you told this story before?”

Sugarfoot never hesitated. “Countless times.”

“Who is this Amber girl?” Kanson asked. “The one the prince was thinking of?”

“That’s the woman he doesn’t quite know if he loves or not.”

“Oh. How long has he been unsure of that?”

“Quite some time now,” Sugarfoot confessed, rubbing his stubby chin. “In his defense, I will say he has never eyed another woman since leaving her. He’s been quite celibate.”

“That’s good to hear,” Kanson said. “Is this a true story?”

“Of course it is!” Sugarfoot declared in mock outrage. “How could you ever doubt it?”

Kanson did not answer and merely smiled. He was not sure if his bard was being entirely truthful or not with him. Regardless, it was not particularly important to him if the tale was tall or not. It was just a question, and one he did not need to know.

“Any other qu—“Sugarfoot began when the crash of the dungeon’s outer door opened and closed, silencing him. Both men turned but the angle was too steep to allow them to see. Footsteps, heavy and sinister, made their way towards their cells. It was only one set, and soon enough a huge shadow fell across them.

It was Rawlins.

Jailor and executioner.

Rawlins stood between them with two great hands on his hips. He was an ogre of a man, dressed in traditional black. Black of hair and of beard as well. Eyes, in which sickle moons gleamed, flicked back and forth between the prisoners. Waiting, almost daring, for one of them to reach for him through the bars. Not knowing about Kanson, Sugarfoot was wise to this. It was so easy to break a man’s arm that way when caught

between the bars. Sugarfoot remembered some of Rawlins's victims—usually the new ones—and remembered the awful snap of bone.

Kansan said not a word. After a while, Sugarfoot thought to break the stillness.

“Aren't you going to say something?”

“Shut-up,” the executioner said flatly.

A start, Sugarfoot supposed.

Rawlins set his baleful gaze upon Kansan and kept it there. The prisoner did not move. Every so often the jailor's eyes would flick up and down the prisoner's body.

Though his execution was hours away, the action worried Kansan badly.

Rawlins was a legend in the kingdom and very few saw this boogeyman outside of his workplace. Or, at least, no one knew Rawlins to be Rawlins when he was outside in the real world. The man could even have a family, for all both prisoners knew. But in here, he was a lord and granted special powers by the king himself to exercise justice and reform measures as he felt were needed. To the king, Rawlins was a prized professional and performed a great service for the realm. To the souls he watched over, he was an agent for Saimon himself.

And here, now, he reminded Sugarfoot of a shrike that had spotted its next meal.

“Well?” Sugarfoot bravely asked.

Rawlins ignored him.

“You're going to make the lad feel as if you're going to bugger him. Do you really want that?”

“You are a sore, Pepperface,” Rawlins said, not bothering to look in his direction. “And I am not of that persuasion,” he aimed at Kanson. Though he did not show it, Kanson was greatly relieved to hear it.

Rawlins turned about to stare at Sugarfoot. Disdain was there. “Ever since you managed to keep your head, I have felt something amiss, like a spider that had managed to crawl under my floorboards before I could stomp on it. But every spider comes out sooner or later.”

“Just wanted to make a point.” Sugarfoot said. “Why make him more uncomfortable than he already is?”

“It’s my job.” Rawlins said, suppressing a yawn.

“He’s good at it too,” Kanson muttered from his cell.

“It isn’t easy to be this cruel. Took months of being heartless. Years of coldness.”

“So why are you trying to intimidate him now?” Sugarfoot again rose to Kanson’s defense. “Seems odd to me, since his fate’s been decided.”

“It has that!” Rawlins chuckled. “My, but you’ve been bad!”

“So why further intimidate a man who’s going to die?”

“I’ve told you, you git. It’s my job.”

“Your job is corrections and reform, with execution as a last resort.”

“Not always last. And always with justifiable cause...” Rawlins declared imperiously. “And since this one is a special case...a *very* special case. The powers that be have instructed me to make the lad’s last few hours as deliciously uncomfortable as possible. That’s how they put it. *Deliciously* uncomfortable. I’ve been playing with that idea all afternoon. Had thoughts of swallowing broken glass and all that...”

Rawlins went quiet then, holding his chin in one hand, considering his thoughts again. “No offense, however, lad. I happen to think the bunch of soldiers you did in were a bunch of bastards.”

“Then why are you doing this?” Sugarfoot asked on Kanson’s behalf.

“My *job*,” Rawlins shrugged wearily. “And because one soldier was a relation to an even bigger bastard of a bishop.”

Sugarfoot and Kanson were both shocked by the news. Rawlins face twisted in annoyance. That information was supposed to be secret. Damned if this Sugarfoot character was an irritant. Rawlins worried for a moment on how the slip could affect him later. He relaxed, however. They were only two, and one would be dead by morning. The other just might rot down here for the remainder of his life.

“And part of that job is staring at me?”

Rawlins smile was a thin line of evil intent. The expression was so unsettling both prisoners became quiet almost immediately. The resulting silence pleased Rawlins. He would have to remember how to smile that in particular way. A flea could fart thunder in this place now, he thought blackly. The jailor turned to leave.

“I’ll return before long. Keep the merriment down will you? No need to be so damned cheerful.”

The big man exited, heavy footsteps receding until the dull clatter of the dungeon door opening and closing.

Then nothing.

Sugarfoot looked over to Kanson. The man’s face was pallid in the gloom, and the knuckles gripping the bars were white with tension.

“Why did he do that?” he asked quietly.

“He’s a bastard,” Sugarfoot answered. “Pay no mind to him.” The words did not make him feel any better however. He doubted they comforted Kanson.

“Isn’t it enough that my life was taken from me before, and will be taken from me again? I don’t need to have my mind played with.”

Sugarfoot did not answer. For some people—especially the vengeful ones—something like that is never enough. Kanson stared off into the blackness for a while before saying anything else. Sugarfoot honored the silence, not attempting to break it until the man across from him was ready.

“Take me away from here, bard,” Kanson eventually said in a voice half full of despair and sweetened with sadness.

Sugarfoot would try just that.

Chapter 9.

Hand over hand, Eric hauled himself upwards with the rope he clung to. His feet kicked, scuffed, and slipped on the cliff's face, irritating the weathering features. He did not look down, as a rock took a good five heartbeats to fall back to the rocky beach below. Eric focused on his two hands working before him. It was a long way up. Pointed rock took the odd poke at his body, like an ungentle finger. He had heard that time goes faster when one faced only the immediate task before one, ignoring all else. Almost like watching one's own feet while walking instead on the horizon...and the prince wanted this episode finished badly. Heights didn't bother him, but the damn climbing was getting on his nerves. Why couldn't there be an easier way into this place?

"Yer doin' fine, sar!" Hodge sung out above him. He went after the old first mate who was familiar with the route. Eric was wondering if he had somehow crossed the mate without realizing it. It would not be the first time he had done such a thing to someone. He was regretting it now. But Muggins knew the toeholds and cracks, and had climbed up first. That was a sight many of the legionnaires would remember well into the night. Once at the top, the mate secured ropes and tossed them down to the others. One lad at a time went up each rope, as the cliff wall was slippery. Small samples of shrubbery grew out of the granite wall in places, daring someone to grab onto them for support. To do so would be dead foolish however. Anyone could see the sparse vegetation had no purchase

on the cliffs themselves and Muggins had warned them all that there were much better things to look at than an uprooted weed in your hand as you fell back to the beach.

Supplies had been hauled up and the remainder of the legionnaires shinnied up the ropes. Eric was one of the last few, and when he reached the heights, he did so with a wide smile of relief.

Harger was the last on the beach.

“What the bloody hell?” McKiggan swore. Looking down at the man.

“Move it, Harger!” Hodge roared down.

“What is wrong?” Zizka asked nearby.

“Harger’s knotted by something,” McKiggan answered him and looked to Eric. “I’se thinking he should’ve stayed on the ship. Anyone can see he still isn’t right in the head.”

“Angus.” Eric muttered and nodded.

“Aye,” Hodge grumbled. “Daresay. Wouldn’t ye be bothered?”

“He had to come tho,” Eric said. “If he didn’t, he would’ve gone crazy with idleness. And that’s something I wouldn’t want Stephanos to deal with. Harger would kill them all, I daresay.”

Most all of the nearby men agreed with the prince in grunts, with the exception of Zizka.

“We got no time for this foolishness. *HARGER!*” McKiggan thundered, his face reddening.

“Hey!” Muggins scratchy voice insisted from behind them all. “You’re screaming at the top of a cliff. The noise carries.”

McKiggan threw up his hands in apology and glared at the man on the beach.

“Well, he’s not listening to ye,” Hodge said in a tired voice. The climb up here had taken more out of him than he cared to admit. “Ye’ll have to do it sar, else I imagine he be quite content sleeping on the beach.”

“Bastard,” McKiggan swore. “I figured he be a damn harder case to manage without Angus.”

“That isn’t the thing to say,” Eric said, frowning. He was thinking the same however. Harger was three handfuls even with his brother around. He gazed downwards at the forlorn warrior, the man’s battleaxe strapped to his back. He would have to pay greater heed to Harger. That was all. Try not to fill Angus’ gap but at least provide some guidance.

“Harger,” he called down. “Get yer arse up here before we leave it on the beach.”

Harger’s head bobbed up. There was a definite pause, filled with the sound of the wind blowing about the cliffs. Eric could not see his eyes but he could see that the man was looking this way. He unconsciously glanced about himself, suddenly feeling a little cold and not knowing why. Harger stared on.

“Well, shag it,” McKiggan swore again.

Harger suddenly rushed the rope.

He grabbed it with a ferocious yank, catching the men holding it off guard. They staggered forward a few steps before digging in. They began to pull back and up with it came Harger.

“Jigger me,” McKiggan said under his breath. Harger was practically running up the cliff’s face, his feet slapping the sheer wall and sticking. Upwards he charged with his

teeth bared and nostrils flaring He slipped once, but his hands kept pulling him forwards with a terrible energy. Feral grunts reached the legionnaires and more than one thought of releasing the rope before the man got to the top.

But then he was there, panting and sweating madly from his exertion. He flung the rope down at McKiggan's feet, and glared about at everyone with his chin thrust out.

"Good job," Eric said idly. "Now let's be off."

"Took yer bloody time," McKiggan muttered, though he was just as impressed with the display of strength. "Next time we'll strap on a pack or two. See how damn fast ye are then."

Harger ignored the man. He focused on the dark face of Zizka, and the somber look upon it. Salahdien and Koldman locked gazes and for once the dark man was without a smile.

"Who pissed in yer ale?" McKiggan declared abruptly, regarding both men.

"Cheer up for the Lords' sake."

Zizka granted himself a thin-lipped smile and his eyes darted to the lieutenant for a moment. Everything was fine with him, the glance said, but perhaps *he* has a differing opinion.

Harger's face had a distinct loathing on it, as if he had just stepped into a paddy of fresh offal—barefooted and toes spread wide.

"Eh?" Eric said forcefully. "Wake up by's. Let's get friendly real quick. There ye go, Harger. What say ye?"

Harger let all wait before answering, and in that silence the smithy's son looked beyond the Salahdien for but a moment. He then regarded the prince with a sly eye.

“Anything ye say Eric,” Harger said. “But I have one request.”

“Should be good,” McKiggan scoffed. “Seeing as there are no horses to steal, sluts to be shagged, or skulls to be broken.”

“I wouldn’t be sure of that,” Harger said serenely, appearing now to be in a trance. “But if ye don’t mind, I’ll be traveling next to ye, sar.”

Harger shot the Salahdien a knowing eye as he spoke. A challenge in his air.

“If ye don’t mind.”

“Jigger me, Prince,” Hodge blurted out. “Ye best take advantage of that offer. Especially savor the formality of it!”

McKiggan nodded as well. Even he was taken back by the request. Harger never addressed the prince as his rank deserved, and he was always reprimanded severely by Angus each time.

“Granted,” Eric said, appearing pleased with the legionnaire. “I don’t think me other bodyguard will mind?”

Zizka did not answer directly, matching Harger’s gaze. The corners of his mouth finally turned mechanically upwards.

“Not at all, my Captain. If he believes he can keep up with us.”

The men were stunned speechless at the words. Harger soaked them in and nodded slowly. “I thinks I can manage.”

But something was still unsaid. An ethereal message had passed between the two warriors and neither appeared ready to step back.

“Good then,” Eric said in a voice that was wondering if things were *indeed* good. “That’s what I like to hear. Sword brothers to the last.”

Harger suddenly grinned at that, and dipped his head ever so slightly at Zizka.

“To the last,” the smithy’s son echoed.

Zizka’s face was unreadable, but his eyes were as hard as mountain granite, and black as a starless night.

“Right then,” Muggins declared, standing away from the gathered legionnaires. The mate pointed north. “That’s where you be headed, Captain Prince sir. That’s the place. Strike hard but for the love of the Lords don’t leave a trail. Your guess is as good as mind as to what lives down there in that cabbage patch.” His hand dropped in the direction of the forest jungle, not so far below, cupped as if in a bowl. “And that probably won’t be the least of your worries.”

“The bloody heat will be that.” Hodge muttered, his brow popping heavy beads of sweat. The veteran drew a hand across his face and flicked away the moisture away. Other men agreed, but none considered removing their armor. One would not skin oneself.

“Remember, we’ll be waiting with the moons.” Muggins said, his eyes wide and glassy with age. “After that, it’ll be a while before you see the *Conquest* again. I’ll wager you’ll be dreaming of her just after yer first hour of thrashing about down there.”

“Unlikely. Not after the ride we had gettin here,” McKiggan grumped. “If I had to vomit one more time...”

“That was a smooth run if there ever was one.”

“Being on land must be boring for ye then, Muggins,” McKiggan said, peering out over the edge of the cliff and beholding a valley filled with fluffy plumes of mottled green. Unstrung ribbons of cloud rolled across the sky, frying against the light of an

angry sun. Sounds of alien birds reached him. A thin haze of heat shimmered in the air, and warped his vision ever so slightly when peering in the distance. "Except perhaps if ye ever had a woman under ye."

"Why do you think they prefer sailors?" Muggins asked.

McKiggan shrugged. It certainly wasn't because of personal hygiene.

"Because we handle the roughest of rides as if it were a boat on a morning calm."

"That so now?" McKiggan said without interest. It was so funny it was everything he could do to keep from studying the land below.

"Quite the drop eh?" Eric commented nearby.

"Tis not the fall that'll kill ye, tis the sudden stop." McKiggan said dryly.

"If he finds a lass down there it'll be a king's daughter." Someone said from the pack of men, knowing full well McKiggan's luck with wenches.

"Aye and she'll go to him, be sure of that," said another.

"Not if he still has the stomach breath from the ride from over here," Snaffer quipped while inspecting his weapons. The man's beard was so thick one had trouble telling if he was smiling or not. The laughter about him drew Muggins voice to silence them.

"Listen to ye. Remember, till the full moon awright? Then we're all gone home. If ye can find whatever's waiting for us all down there. The faster you do it the better for all of us. Myself in particular."

"Ye headin back after this Muggins?" Eric asked while adjusting his scabbard on his hip. He felt the sweat running underneath his armor.

Muggins nodded. “Damned so I am, and glad of it. I’m not ashamed to say that this place scares the horseshite from me.” He met the faces of Hodge and Snaffer, “Take care of yourselves down there.”

The old warriors nodded. They would do just that, just to put the sea dog’s heart at ease.

“And do I have to tell you again about being quiet down there?” Muggins asked ruefully.

“Not t’all,” Eric answered.

“But we could use the laugh before we’re off,” McKiggan added smartly.

Muggin’s cheeks blossomed red. “I thought some of you were smart, but I’ll know for certain the smart ones when next we meet. Only the smart ones will survive down there—the smart ones.”

A smiling Eric stepped up to where Muggins stood. “Now come on. No need to wish a plague on us. Never thought ye were as serious as this. Be assured we’ll be as careful as possible. Rest on that. We’re on land now, and I’se for one is glad of it. We know about the Sanjou and we’ll be cautious of her. Until the first full moon then.”

Muggins said nothing, seeing the legionnaires readying themselves with their weapons and equipment. They did so look impressive, with their assortment of well-maintained blades and cared for armor and shields. Bows were tossed across their backs. There was a dull gleam about this pack that spoke volumes of their past, and he found himself thinking that Stephanos had perhaps brought a shipload of hellions to the Sanjou. He also hoped for their safe return, treasure be damned.

Good souls were a shame to lose.

The young captain, a warrior prince full of smiles, slapped the first mate on the shoulder and passed by. McKiggan followed and gave a wink. Harger went by, and Muggins stepped back from the space about him as if it were cursed. Zizka was beside him. Hodge and Snaffer went by, the latter holding out a fist to be tapped, which the first mate quickly did. The others followed with packs on their backs. The prince got to the edge of the cliff and waved Hawkeye ahead of him. The scout was the only one wearing a leather vest with black shoulder guards. His pants were almost green and tucked into high soft padded boots. He dipped out of sight in an instant.

Eric watched him go, and then followed, taking the first step down into the valley of the Sanjou, as if being swallowed up. The lip of rock came to his hips, then chest, head...and he was gone in a wink.

The others stepped behind him.

Muggins saw the way the wild one with the axe eyed the black man. There was no trust there that he could see, and only bad things could come to them if trust was not had in the Sanjou.

Downwards they moved, snakelike, following a thin trail. Their knees eventually began aching slightly with the unevenness of their descent. Halfway down, the legionnaires were already sweating heavily.

Muggins moved to the edge of the cliff and watched them go. He watched until the last of the helmets was gone underneath the bushy roof of the jungle below. He saw the last man in the line—was his name Carrigan? Or McGann?—wiped the back of his sweaty neck with a hand.

And then they were gone, traveling underneath the green skin of the Sanjou. The pieces were away, Muggins thought. And now there was only the waiting for their return. Thinking of returning, Muggins thought about his own, and turned about to prepare for the climb down.

On ahead, Eric mopped the side of his face with his bare hand and flicked the sweat away. He could see no more than a dozen strides ahead or so. The forest greenery was thick and tangled beyond what he had encountered before, and on all sides was a collage of vibrant green, with splashes of yellow and even red matted the ground on which they trod upon. The ground gnashed at his soft booted ankles, scratching and slowing him. Unknown birds continued their cries from all around, and the air was heavy and saturated with moisture underneath the canopy of monstrous trees. With every breath Eric took, with every heave of his chest, he felt as if hot air went in and even hotter air came out. And the weight he carried, evenly distributed as possible, became a burden. He could feel the streams of perspiration coating his back. *Lords awmighty!* He thought in amazement. They were barely coming off the mountainside and the heat was already affecting him. Perhaps he *should* lose his chainmail hide.

“Lords tunderin,” McKiggan breathed from behind. Armor and leather creaked and groaned in the tepid air. “Damn this. The heat is one thing but when Harger starts to stink...”

McKiggan waited for his hook to be taken, and when it didn’t come he felt powerfully disappointed. There was still definite work to be done with Harger. It was difficult to see one of their own suffering so by the loss of another. When Angus was

alive, Harger appeared to have scant care for his bear of a brother. In death it seemed, he seemed to care much more than anyone expected. Including Harger himself.

Blood does rule after all, wild man Jers Snaffer thought to himself. There was a time when he would have enjoyed seeing Harger wallow in his anguish. The truth of it was that he only pitied the fool, and it was a rare call indeed when that particular houseguest lounged in Jers Snaffer's forge of a heart. In his own growing despicement of the heat, the sweat and the now buzzing mosquitoes sweet for the taste of blood, Snaffer realized he hoped that the bastard actually came through his melancholic daze. And soon.

Zizka's thoughts were outwardly unknown. The heat was increasing heavy and leaching, but his cowls and robes made of silk protected him. Underneath his clothes, his leather vest made his discomfort not at all as bad as the legionnaires. He was Asai Suudyn, and that ancient order of killers was bred in the desert. Though his body had forgotten, it would remember quickly how to deal with the increasing temperature. Though the bugs were whining about for his flesh, memories of his homeland made it all the easier to ignore them. Harger was of no concern to him. Zizka's Asai Suudyn name was the Watcher, and for some time now, he had watched the development of the prince. When the prince peaked at his prime power, the Watcher intended to take his life and add his heart to the contents of the large leather pouch strapped tightly to his waist. The heart was need for the blood ritual to achieve the end of his bloodquest, his life's hunt, to insure his place in the hereafter. If he had to take the lives of all those around the prince, then no matter.

They would all die.

Harger included.

The smithy's son followed behind him. No matter. He was not afraid of the man attacking him from behind, though the man's low breed and character would suggest that he would do just that. Zizka remembered the look of him only moments before. It was as if Harger suddenly knew what the Watcher intended, however impossible it seemed. Zizka had served the prince faithfully since the first time they had met and had proven his loyalty to the man countless times over, all to serve his own ends of course. The prince needed time to season, and Zizka's protection allowed him that time. No one suspected that he planned to kill the prince at a later time. No one. Yet, somehow, Harger had spotted—or at least suspected-- an assassin underneath the cover of Eric's companion. Zizka was certain that the others were not aware of the scorpion so close to their leader's heart. And while the Salahdien knew that Harger loathed him (in truth though, the man appeared to loathe *all* around him), the confrontation on the cliff left that queer feeling that Harger somehow *knew*, that it wasn't just hatred that had prompted Harger to stay close to his prince.

Zizka's face was calm, a word away from a smile, as they all trekked along. But inside, the Watcher decided that his paranoia was all knowing. Harger knew what he was about and because of that the man would have to die, lest the brute interfere with the slow hunt of the prince.

The prince was everything to Zizka.

And Eric himself had immersed into the pool of memory of the legendary Prospero Gallus. Stories abounded with the man in his head. Harger was a problem but Gallus' legacy was so much more to him. Could he attain such dizzying heights of glory as Prospero? He certainly felt as if all he had accomplished in past campaigns was a good

start, despite the men dying around him. He felt as if he could continue, and that in itself was all that was needed. Above all else, Prospero believed in himself. If Eric could do the same, he was destined for great things. His father would be dearly proud of his son and his travels of the known world and here, the unknown world. Eric had the riches already, after all, by birth alone. He was a prince. The riches here would be for the men that followed him in his quest for a name and the a song--songs even- of his adventures. For him, the fame was all consuming. It was why he was here.

And of course there was Amber. He knew she was waiting for him a world away. He still wondered if she was indeed the one. He supposed she was. He had never been with another woman since leaving Kold Keep, and he had no desire to in his time away. Was she still waiting for him? Would she be when he came back? Eric supposed he would find out when he returned home, and not a moment sooner.

All he wanted now, *needed* now, was the reputation. And he was working on that.

Prospero Gallus could indeed do anything, even in death he had. The man had told him so convincingly, so bereft of arrogance that Eric believed the legend *could* do anything. And if half of the stories were true, then Prospero Gallus had done it all.

Eric wanted the same.

The prince now wondered what he would have to do to reach that stated of confidence, of manner and ability, of lords fearing defiance and domination of everything about him. Whatever it was, perhaps a piece of it would be revealed to him on this journey. One more step towards that state Prospero had so obviously reached.

“Does this seem like a fresh trail to ye?” Eric stopped. The line behind him drew to halt. It was Hodge who had spoken, and now all were studying the grounds about them with greater interest.

Was it a fresh trail? Eric left that judgment up to Hawkeye, to tell the truth. Was the earth before him beaten down from another’s crossing? Had the flowers and the blanket of leaves been pushed away ever so slightly? He couldn’t tell.

“Hawkeye.”

“Aye sar?” came the answer from the best scout and tracker Kold Keep had ever produced.

“Move on farther ahead and see where it goes. If it is fresh.”

“Seems so to I, sar. ”

Eric turned to McKiggan standing close behind. “What do ye think?”

McKiggan shrugged. “Stephanos did say people had been here before.”

“But that was awhile ago right?”

“Aye, t’was so.”

Behind McKiggan and Zizka, Harger’s face came into view. His eyes flicked in the direction of Hawkeye, ahead of the prince. Eric noted the guarded look Harger had when he focused back on Zizka. For his worth, Zizka paid him no attention.

“Hawkeye’ll find out for certain if anyone has been here recently. He better stay quiet tho,” Eric said.

McKiggan frowned ever so slightly. Hawkeye was birthed dead, or so the midwife feared, he had emerged so quiet.

“Per’raps Zizka could go along?” the lieutenant suggested.

Eric considered this and whistled a bird's call to the leading scout. Up ahead, Hawkeye appeared from the jungle gloom. Eric pointed to Zizka and back to the scout. Hawkeye thought about the offer for a moment, and peered further ahead. He seemed to listen to the air. He studied the closeness of the greenery about him and the party. He was silent for a moment longer before finally nodding. The ebony warrior had worked with him before and Hawkeye knew he was capable of reading signs well.

Eric made a gesture and Zizka stepped out of line.

There was a short sharp *hiss*, not unlike a person drawing in breath when cutting oneself, and Hawkeye's head snapped back with half an arrow shaft plugging one of his famous eyes.

"*JIGGER US AWMIGHTY!*" Eric roared and ducked, shaking his shield free and up.

The jungle around the legionnaires exploded.

Back on the cliff's edge, Muggins' ears perked up and his head snapped about upon hearing the cry. He bolted to the edge of the cliff and peered down into the thick covering of green and saw nothing. The old sailor held his breath and waited. His hand gripped the hilt of a short sword at his waist while his heart slammed away in his chest. He strained to hear over the blood rushing in his ears but heard nothing. What was happening down there? He listened and heard another cry of a legionnaire, then nothing.

He waited. And waited. And *waited*. And though it was only a span of heartbeats, Muggins felt himself ageing.

Then the valley below became a roar of sound. A sound of what could have been a thousand screaming banshees in ferocious heat.

And the fear lashing Muggins' spine made his eyes go wide and his breath quickened. There was a bloody *nest* down there it seemed, and the legionnaires had walked right into the middle of it. Lords above. They had walked right into it!

There was a padded two-step behind the old sea dog, a sound of bare flesh on rock, and then a heart freezing scream and Muggins was half turning when his world thundered and went forever black.

Stephanos stood on the bridge of the *Conquest*. He had buried himself in his sea charts and was deciding on a safe haven for his ship while waiting for the legionnaires when he heard the same scream, ghostly and distant and skin crawling. Some of the deckhands heard it as well and paused, their heads turning in the direction of the savage Sanjou, a place where specters lived beyond the high cliffs and hungered for the coppery taste of raw, bleeding flesh.

Stephanos scanned the shoreline and could see the long boats there, hauled up on the Sanjou's rocky coast. He could see the sailors that had gone ashore and, as his eyes were keen, he could see that they had frozen where they had stood.

Then, from the cliff heights, Stephanos detected something falling. It hit the rocky coast behind the longboats and the sailors there. The sudden flurry of activity told the captain that something had gone terribly wrong. Men were screaming in terror now and they were frantically trying to push the boats back into the sea. More howls reamed over the Sanjou's rocky lips. A heart freezing cacophony of men's voices and monsters it seemed. Stephanos' fingers gouged the *Conquest's* railing. His back straightened as if in pain. There were figures rushing his men on the beach, coming from the left and right,

materializing from the dead rock it seemed. They were upon the sailors in moments, even those that had managed to push their boats back into the sea but not far enough to escape. Wooden oars flashed up and down like halberds, smashing at the savage boarders that had caught them. The cries were louder now and even more blood curdling, as Stephanos could tell that the figures were not civilized at all.

It suddenly occurred to him that the longboats were now coming towards his *Conquest*, but they carried a far more hellish cargo that they had brought ashore.

“WEIGH ANCHOR!” Stephanos roared at the deckhands. “To the oars and put your backs into them! GO!!”

Stephanos ignored the terrible commotion he had just invoked. His eyes were drawn to the three longboats cutting towards his ship, unwanted children desperately wanting to get home. What he saw in the boats made his bowels loosen and his jaw hang open.

Oh Lords all-powerful and mighty, he prayed, without a thought of the legionnaires ashore, and heedless of the rapid tattoo his fist peppered out on the wooden railing.

With his shield before him, Eric could just huddle and pray that whatever was nailing it did not get through to him. Teeth bared and ground together, McKiggan hunkered down next to him. The battle cries of their attackers screeched about them, rattling their nerves. Behind them, legionnaires had dropped into a defensive triangle,

broad shields going up and out for protection. Three trees were at each point of their reflexive defense, and arrows crashed loudly into the trunks.

Eric looked to his right and saw a legionnaire flat on his back with an arrow sticking in his neck. The man's legs kicked out once as if he wanted to run. A rattle of a scream bubbled from the legionnaire. He never saw his killer.

Who were they? The prince's mind yelled. *Who?*

More arrows rained about them, hissing as if dipped in acid.

"Keep down," Hodge roared over the shrieks from the jungle, for it seemed if the jungle itself were coming at them, repelling the foreign invaders infecting it. "Hug the trees! Use yer—" a dragon's roar tore from the veteran. An arrow had screamed through a gap and bit his calf, poking its bloody head out the other side. Hodge struggled to keep his shield above him. He limped into the back of McKiggan. Snaffer was there then, his wild head low as he hauled his sword brother to back to a tree base. The legionnaires crowded together even closer to seal up the gap.

Then a man, a *savage*, jumped into view with a short spear, stabbing and skewering a legionnaire over his shield and in his face. Eric heard the crunch of flesh but could not hear the man's cry.

Snaffer drew his sword and slashed at the killer, whose face looked to be on fire. The savage screamed as steel cut his stomach away, opening the door to death, and *still* flung himself at Jers Snaffer, hindering the veteran's swing. Snaffer brought up his shield lightening fast, cracking its edge off the dead man's head. The savage spilled to the ground inside the defensive triangle.

But the jungle had more. The foliage about them exploded in leaves and brush. It showered through the air and rained down in a kaleidoscope of madness. War cries intensified, becoming a hellish harmony. Eric saw Jers Snaffer facing down a wall of savage warriors as the ground under him thundered and rolled. Arrows forgotten now, Eric scrambled to his feet to face an onrush of savages screaming frenzied cries of gibberish and wielding spears blackened by fire. Where they had come from was not important now. The Sanjou had offered up its flesh and Eric wanted to carve his full name and a thought or two upon it.

“Take `em lads!”

He beat aside the spears with his arrow-studded shield. He twisted to dodge a spear seeking his legs. He cut down one hellion savage with a single chop, opening up the head to its black teeth, and slashed another through his bare sun-brown belly.

McKiggan chopped the third warrior away with his sword, appearing at Eric’s side. “Jigger this!” he shouted for the prince to hear. Eric grinned.

The rain of arrows ceased. More savages rushed them, howling as if their genitals were afire. The jungle became a full field of battle then as the legionnaires shrugged off their prickled shields and rose up to meet the attackers. A war club, crude in Eric’s mind, convincingly smashed into his shield arm—breaking several of the shafts sticking from it. Eric stabbed the owner dead. He cut away an entire leg of another. The savage dropped, thrashing and shrieking in a terrible rage.

Eric didn’t give him another thought.

Until the savage tripped him with his other leg.

The prince landed flat on his stomach, the air jumping from his lungs with the unexpected impact. He saw stars and then *teeth*.

Something warm, splashed over his head and he squinted against what could only be blood.

“Get *UP!*” A voice roared at him. He saw Zizka whirling his scimitar and dagger about him, dancing to and fro with each flash. More wild shrieks of rage and bloodlust. The prince saw a decapitated body minus a leg, lying next to him. He gripped his sword and his shield. He blinked. Bodies crowded into him. Voices he knew cried out, expelled on the brightest adrenalin. Eric wiped at his eyes and blinked.

“Move back for lords’ sake!”

“Where?” A voice roared back. “They’re all around—“

A scream of a small boy cut through Eric’s haze and a dead face he knew appeared at his feet, gore covered and without a helm.

“To the cliffs!” Someone roared.

“They’re *comin* from the cliffs!” Someone roared back.

“Bastards!” A voice bellowed.

And the world raged back.

Eric got his wind back. He saw a small ring formed about him, his legionnaires holding a pressed line against a tide of stabbing flesh. He felt his sword still in his hand. Snaffer was in front of him with McKiggan at his side. To the right of Snaffer, Duncan and McKern, shoulder to shoulder. Running the ring around him was Zizka, and others whose names escaped him.

As he watched a spear punched over a legionnaire's shield and split the man's head open like a plum. A blond haired legionnaire named Tilloch Galt roared in fury. Eric jumped into the gap; thrusting his sword forward and feeling it sink into tested flesh.

"The sar's back!" Galt shouted and began hacking thrice fold.

A grim faced Snaffer glanced and as reward a short knife sliced at his sword arm, cutting him in the bicep. His felt his fingers disappear into numbness. A savage pushed towards him, teeth bared in pure hatred.

McKiggan smashed the face with his blade.

Snaffer dropped his sword and put his shield before him, bracing it with his shoulder. By the Lords, he would not open that door to the enemy outside.

Eric knew not who pressed their back up against his, except it was one of his countrymen. Before him, he fought an enemy he had never encountered in all his campaigns. Men they were, savages true, faces painted the color of the jungle and highlighted with a fierce decal of red about the eyes. Dressed mostly in loincloths and wiry of muscle, they stabbed wooden spears at the legionnaires' faces or smashed clubs and stone axes at them. They screamed a tongue unknown to him, and blazed with an energy that was frightening.

And their eyes...

Bright and livid, like the flame of a candle in a pool of black, sharp to a point that Eric felt all his might and bravery wane. It was as if he were spied as an evil invader...

And wasn't he?

Perhaps, but he accepted his mission and he was determined to see it though. And here was a foe that the bards would *bawl* about!

Someone screamed behind him.

If he got back to civilization.

No, he decided then that these men, these savages, were evil. He could smell it as fragrant as the stench of sweat and guts. It was in the blackness of their teeth, the grease of their hair, and the fury in their war paint. Surely no self-respecting people would decorate themselves as thus.

The man called MacKougar blocked a flurry of strikes only to have a spear pierce his kneecap and another run through his heart. A red river gouted from the wound. Zizka filled the man's position as he dropped to the ground. The Watcher killed the savage who slew the legionnaire, but then they were on him like a blanket of locusts, stabbing and pulling and shrieking.

And he was gone.

Eric's eyes flew open.

He saw Hodge. Over the heads of his attackers, somehow the old warrior had been separated from the iron triangle. Hodge whirled and stabbed, slashed and blocked. A Savage jumped on him from behind and speared him through the knee. The Koldman crumpled to the ground, flipping over onto his back. A trio of half naked mad men descended on him, clubbing and stabbing his body into a pulp again and again and again...

The Kold Prince erupted.

The legionnaires above all, practiced discipline. It was their spine and a steely one at that. However, they had also been trained, if faced with a great fury, to respond with an even greater fury. How this was invoked wasn't in question. A desperate battle was

enough, or seeing a fellow legionnaire being cut down. Seeing several legionnaires cut down within seconds was a certain trigger. In one such moment, stores of adrenalin were devoured whole and rammed forward like a ballista missile into a breach, exploding into an insane all out berserk attack for survival.

Seeing his long time sword brother being hacked to pieces, Eric flung himself into the white rage of the berserker.

And he howled when he did.

The savages before him were cut down in a maelstrom of sword. Their own war cries, so legion, became sighs and gasps of shocked death. Those rushing into the gap were smashed aside by the prince. More came on, and more died, heads rolling and bodies being opened.

But the truly terrifying sight was the remaining legionnaires, for when the prince went over with a scream frightful enough to make the Lords above takes their own names in vain, his legionnaires saw it and followed. Like a iron battering ram shattering stained glass, the men about Eric solidified and pushed forward.

The savages of the Sanjou died in droves that day.

“FORWARD!” Eric roared, his arms afire with energy and he stepped in that very direction. He cut another man down. Another savage shrieked and challenged him. Dense trees could be seen beyond the painted hellions and Eric swung his hardest to meet them. A series of thrusts and cuts swept aside those before him and his legionnaires followed unerringly, reaping a terrible toll upon their attackers. Onwards they went.

Then a shrieking shadow dropped from above, spear first like a frightful stake, and skewered Duncan through his shoulder and lung. The man’s cry ended in a deflated

sigh. The screaming shadow left the spear in his kill and drew forth a club. A vengeful McKern brought his sword down and cut the savage into a jagged “v.” His lungs felt like twin bellows as he cried out for his fallen friend.

A legionnaire called McGann tripped and fell.

“I’ve *killed!*” He screamed out once, not quite as devoted to the berserker rage like those about him. The legionnaires slowed their push for the safety of the trees. Heedless, Eric pushed on. Several warriors paused. Their line stretched and suddenly broke. Warriors of the Sanjou poured in. The legionnaire named McCulloch shouted out when a stone axe crunched into his throat.

“SHAG!!” Tilloch Galt screamed in rage, killing the legionnaires’ slayer with a single thrust. Three savages surrounded him and a spear popped agonizingly through his leg. Screaming warriors began chopping up the Koldman as he fell to the ground.

“WE’S ALL KILLED!!” McGann wailed piteously, all berserking energy leaving him in a rush as he witnessed his sword brother being made short work of. The hellions were everywhere! McGann made it to his knees. “*WE’S KILLEDWE’S KILLED WE’S ALL—*”

A heavy body landed on his shield arm, the weight forcing it down. Screaming to his liege, he stabbed at the body and glimpsed up to see a stone ax descending between his eyes.

Eric didn’t hear his name from behind, before the sound was bludgeoned into the wind of the melee. He strove on, over the unevenness of the terrain, past brush that strove to hook him, tangle him, and slow him down. He sucked in hot air and fired it out. He glanced to his right—a wall of foliage, thick and pointed with branches. His left was

abruptly open. There was a trail, perhaps made by these things that attacked him, that led deep into the forest.

Ahead of him.

Screeching with fury and thoughts void of any bards now, Eric slashed his sword across a figure rushing him. Another appeared and he brought up his shield like a discus, racking its edge off the man's chin. The strapping suddenly broke and Eric shrugged out of the device.

“FORWARD!” He roared again, and he looked behind him.

His heart clenched up. His *men*...

“Lords awmighty!”

His berserker strength left him and his vision swam with dizziness.

“RUN!” McKiggan shouted and pulled at his friend's shoulder as he ran by. Eric did so, turning and seeing McKiggan's face without any color in his panicked fervor. Others passed them as he had turned around to see the slaying behind him: legionnaires being hacked and chopped and smashed where they had fallen. The savages danced over their corpses like hellions in an open fire, spirits riding high on bloodlust, higher even than the berserking invaders. They screeched and cavorted about with a madness the Kold Prince thought not possible.

And the fury of sound in his ears did not lessen. More warriors leapt to pursue them.

McKiggan's voice shook him. “*RUN!*”

Eric ran and those who were able followed. McKiggan ran behind him, with sword but without shield. Snaffer drew up alongside the prince, chugging along like an overworked horse. McKern was behind them all.

“Where are the others?” Eric found the breath to shout.

McKiggan’s wide eyes face flashed towards him and then back to what lay ahead. He wanted to tell the prince that they were dead, but the breath was needed elsewhere.

The remaining legionnaires, with their proud history and experience, ran as if the earth were opening up behind them and vomiting hellfire. The path ahead whipped by the foursome, and they crashed through any brush seeking to slow them. Limbs whipped their bare arms. The ground rolled with earthy humps and dips and made their knees ache with every pounding step. Sunlight stabbed down through the canopy above with long sabers of light. In a weave they ran, as a straight route was non-existent, and the low brush masked stones seeking to trip.

Eric believed that they were heading north, but after a flurry of twists and turns he was no longer certain of any direction save one: away from the ambush.

“Stop!” Eric gasped, near collapsing against a tower of a tree. The forest around them was cathedral-like in size, its ceiling reaching high and latticing the sun. He took deep gulps of hot spicy air, and looked fearfully back the way that they had come. His chest heaved and blood banged away in his ears. The others fell about him. Snaffer dropped to his knees and landed on the battered shield he still held onto. He rolled over and flexed the hand of his wounded arm. He felt pain and was thankful for it.

McKiggan leaned heavily against a tree and looked to each of his surviving companions. McKern was laboring with his own breath, his shield hanging off his arm at

his side. His sword, bloodied, dropped to his other side and he gazed back the way they had come as well, searching for signs of pursuit.

Eventually, the war cries behind them lessened.

“Anything?” McKern rasped.

A heaving McKern shook his head.

“Can’t see a damned thing,” Snaffer puffed. “Too many damn trees. Too damn dark.” He began dressing his arm with strips of cloth taken from his backpack, trying to ignore the memory of Hodge being cut to pieces, the anger of not being able to help, and the shame of not dying with him.

“I can still hear `em,” McKern panted, and forced himself to be quiet. The others strained to silence their own lungs. They heard the faraway cries, haunting and harsh, like the gossamer sounds of a spider webbing up its prey.

“Have ye ever heard the like before?” McKiggan hissed, drawing his breath from between clenched white teeth. “Never have I. Not even close. Like a bloody story to get me to bed faster. Those were the likes I’ve never heard of or care to see again.” He thrust his sword point down into a nearby earthy bump and held his heads in both hands.

Eric watched his friend and gazed about at the others. Snaffer looked exhausted but the veteran was regaining his strength. His eyes narrowed underneath his bushy brow and hair.

“They’re all gone,” Snaffer expelled calmly. “All.”

McKern’s head whipped around at that, and McKiggan uncovered his face.

“Maybe not,” Eric said. “They may not have all gotten out the same way as we did but some may have gotten out.”

“Didn’t see Harger.” McKern breathed.

“Nor I,” McKiggan added, his slitted eyes darting about as if expecting company.

“Anyone else?” Eric pressed softly.

McKern stoutly shook his head.

Snaffer raised his hand for silence.

The men caught their breaths.

And held them.

Around them, underbrush snapped gently and crackled ever so evilly.

Snaffer laid his shield to the side. A short hand ax appeared in his right hand and a long dagger stuck out from his left. The white cloth bandage on his arm was already a rosy red. He came to a crouch. McKern peered back the way they had escaped. A fierce short shake of his head informed the others he could see nothing.

But they could all hear.

And the silence about their nest grew.

McKiggan felt the blood thump in his ears. Eric could feel the nervous energy gathering within, pressing against his chest. The hairs on his neck prickled icily. The jungle was gathering its strength again, and the silence swelled up like a ripening boil. In their small huddle, the legionnaires braced themselves for the break.

When Harger came to his senses he was surrounded by a shredded ring of corpses—none of them were legionnaires. He was on his back and drew himself to a sitting position. He blinked rapidly and drew in the huge gulping breaths. Light headed

as he was, he teetered on dizziness long enough that his stomach considered rebelling. He breathed, long and deep and kept his head low, as close as between his legs as possible. His fingers dropped his battle axe, the blade and opposite spike were colored in a bright silvery red.

Harger blinked and breathed again.

The glade he was in was a small one. The ring of trees were draped in a shadow of green. The ground was a mire of forest brown and green and human red. The coppery air of blood mingled freely with the woodland atmosphere and the spice it produced filled Harger's senses. Some folks would probably retch upon catching the barest of scents of the slaughter in the forest.

But not Harger.

"Just ye and I `eh?" Harger breathed out. A smile cracked the gore caking his face. Just ye and I. Like always. Nobody else..."

Harger swallowed. His throat was raw and bone dry. Once, when he was a boy, he had seen a snake--what was once a snake--crushed in the road by a cartwheel. The scalding sun had turned its flattened flesh into something crisp and flaky and without a drop of moisture. Harger's throat felt like that.

"WHAT THE HELL KEPT YE?" He barked, savage with rage. He glared straight ahead, fixed on a single point in the space.

"Ye could've warned us," he said after a moment, softer. "Tis too damned late now for apologies y'know."

Silence.

“A lot good that does I,” Harger growled sarcastically. He became suddenly pensive, listening to the air.

“I hear ye,” Harger said and slowly grinned, his teeth ivory yellow against the mess covering his face. His chainmail was nicked and torn but still serviceable. Scabbards at his waist held twin daggers. His pack was torn from his back long ago, as was his helmet. T’was just as well. It was too damn hot for a helmet anyway.

“Watch me now,” Harger whispered, his head bobbing in understanding. He stood up and spaced his feet.

Shadows moved beyond the glade.

He had yelled too loud it seemed.

One savage came into view, his painted face, jagged red and visceral blue, split into a black tooth snarl. A war club was held high and skull red. Another savage stepped out from behind a trunk, leering without a sound. Stone axe at the ready.

Other followed.

Harger’s blood quickened. The drum of his heart picked up its tempo. His steely eyes went wide.

High on their own bloodlust, the savages of the Sanjou came closer.

Harger charged them.

The closest had his head crashed off a nearby tree--such was the force of the decapitating swing of the legionnaire’s axe. The others swarmed inwards. Harger ducked and weaved, dodging a war club and parrying a spear. He ducked another axe seeking his brains and split open a knee. Coming up, he beat away another club, hacked open a bare chest and rammed an elbow into a shrieking face. Harger sidestepped a club and ignored

an exposed side. He klacked wood with a savage and peered into black eyes, smelling foul breath, before smashing his forehead into the face. Braying laughter like a jet of acid, his left fist shot out and exploded the nose of another. His axe chopped into a muscular abdomen and shredded it like flimsy cloth. A pungent stench squirted into the air. A stone axe sparked off Harger's spike and crashed into his shoulder. The savage roared with glee at the connection.

And Harger exploded.

An arm fell, lopped off at the elbow.

A leg fell beside it.

A savage dropped with his head cleft in. Harger spun about and drove his axe deep into the trunk of a tree. The impact cleared his head and he regarded the embedded axe with blinking stupidity. Grasping it with both hands, he wrenched it free and fell to the ground, landing on his rump. His hands splayed out behind him to soften his fall, cracking the fingers of his axe hand on something hard.

Heaving for breath, Harger was again the only survivor. Seven savages lay about him, on top of the others before.

The Northman grunted something altogether foul and got to his feet. He shook his weapon arm. It was fine. It was better that fine...it was *fugging* enraged.

Harger threw back his head and roared, not caring in the least who heard. For all he knew, he was the last. His comrades slaughtered to a man. If they weren't, perhaps they would hear him and come searching. That was the last thought to shoot through Harger's head. Months before Angus' death, he had known something was happening to him. Something that only revealed itself on the battlefield but was gradually becoming

more pronounced in his life beyond. With his brother's death he had entered a tunnel void of sound and scenery, a comatose where only the basic human functions were permitted. Harger could eat, drink, and relieve himself as necessary but he didn't see anyone beyond that dark corridor. Nor could he fathom where it would end or what it would reveal.

But now he had emerged.

As if splitting apart a pupa, Harger stood and stretched his arms wide, clasping them above his head, holding his axe and grinning madly.

He knew what he was.

He was insane.

Angus had been telling him so for years and now he finally realized it, and, at the moment, savoring it.

For if this was madness...then he was home.

Gritting his teeth Harger raged again, a scream straight from his core, his lungs shaking with the expulsion.

This Sanjou had slaughtered his sword brothers. Sad, but Harger knew it to be true. He was indeed the last of his little company. This place had taken all the others but it had not taken him.

He was going to die here. He knew that as well...but not before eating a chunk of the Sanjou and its savages to the living bone.

Roaring again, Harger stormed off into the gloom of the forest.

Hunting.

At the time Harger was splitting heads, Eric, McKiggan, Snaffer, and McKern were racing to through the jungle and following a trail to where they knew not. Ignorant of the fact they fact they were running away from a berserking Harger, but acutely aware they had just escaped entrapment. Knowing they were being encircled, Eric made the choice of pushing out and onward before the snare tightened. Like a quarrel from a crossbow, the four shot down the only path offered to them, running by a handful of whooping savages. The kold men cut them down quickly, and pressed on.

It was a foot race now, with an unknown finish line. The legionnaires paced themselves as best they could, but the last fight had sapped more strength from them than they would care to admit, and the heat pounded them from without and roasted them inside their chain linked skins. Thirst appeared as well, wicked and gumming up the corners of their mouths, and Eric's throat begged for a drink of water. They had all discarded their helmets, and a constant sheen of sweat fell from them all. Save for Snaffer who never wore a helmet. Their hair was flattened and slick with perspiration and McKiggan was swearing he would cut his mane to the crown if he lived to get the chance.

The landscape blurred by and still they ran the path ahead, leading deeper into the guts of the Sanjou. McKiggan and McKern both felt they spied other routes in the cavernous forest, but Eric showed no inclination of noticing. To the original path he stayed true and they followed.

A cluster of dead trees, fallen together to form a frame, lay ahead. Shrubbery grew unchecked all over and around, save for the shaded portal made by the fallen trees. In the lead, Eric headed for the doorway.

And ducked. A screaming savage swung and went wildly off balanced when his aim for a head missed and split nothing but air. Eric ran by him and the native fell into McKiggan. The legionnaire stabbed the man through the gullet without a thought. Others appeared magically then, cutting McKiggan off from the still moving prince. A savage jumped for him, seeking to encircle the lieutenant. McKiggan swore and struggled with the savage. He stepped to the side and was lucky that there was no one there to stop him. This one was fresher than he, and stronger. McKiggan twisted and ducked, breaking free of the man's grasp and almost gently inserting his sword up and into his attacker's chest. The harsh screams around him made his heart drop. He realized then he was almost spent. McKiggan heard a frantic yelp behind him, and strangely he thought of Snaffer.

Only for a moment. He had not the time to check as three fresh attackers jumped him.

Everywhere, Eric's mind ranted as he ran on. They were *everywhere*. A worm of fear flexed its length in his gut. What if the trail was actually bringing him to the village of these hellions? Eric's breath quickened. He needed more oxygen. He needed water and a place to rest. He needed Stephanos to appear and wave him towards the *Conquest*.

Ahead, a savage jumped onto the path with a short spear.

Eric stopped short of the man's thrust, knocked the weapon aside and slashed open the man's chest with a backhand cut. The prince ran past the falling man and got his sword up in time to deflect a stone axe. The heavy weapon smashed downwards, shearing off chainmail and flesh underneath. Eric screamed and stabbed. The savage gurgled on the steel in his throat.

The prince staggered on, wincing in frustration when he heard the footsteps behind him. Why wouldn't they just leave him alone?

Eric darted off the trail, spinning about and placing his back against a tree. He slid down quickly, and another axe wielder drove his weapon into wood instead of flesh. Eric rolled to his right and chopped at a leg. The axe man collapsed to the ground, clutching at a limb sheared to the red bone.

Eric stabbed him dead. Got up. Ran on.

He realized then he was alone. If he had dawdled a moment longer, perhaps he would have broken and went insane right there. But he looked ahead and saw sunlight breaking the forest murkiness ahead, an imperfect diamond brazenly flashing its magnificence at him. Like a wild animal, he bolted for it.

A trio of savage warriors sought to stop him. The kold prince ran through them, his desperate sword flashing and cleaving. One savage fell with a gasp, his hands clutching at his opened throat. Another backed away and tripped, his chest decorated with a deep gash from his right hip to his left shoulder.

And Eric was on a cliff, two strides away from the edge. The far side was a good bowshot away and dimly distant. A wind, hot and licking, sent the scent of fresh rushing water across his face and Eric near went insane with his thirst. It smelled so pure that he considered jumping off the cliff. Water was down there. He moved to the edge to better judge the distance when he abruptly whirled about, sword coming up two fisted and guarding.

Eric faced the last attacker. The one he had blown by on the trail.

Black eyes glittered at the prince, and a spear was weaving to and fro like an adder's tongue.

The savage fainted but Eric was not to be fooled. Breathing hard, the prince lunged and was surprised to see the savage leap back. The man's spear possessed a head of iron--an actual military weapon--and the head jabbed again.

Eric parried. It jabbed again.

Eric swatted it away.

But the warrior, as this clearly was no savage, spun on his foot, spear spinning in the sudden light of the sun, and whipped the butt across Eric's jaw. The connection was rock solid. Eric spun with it, seeing black stars, and got his guard up a second before the spearhead flicked across his chest, splitting mail and flesh., the pain scalding. Eric sidestepped towards the forest, and retreated a few steps. He was all instinct now, his arms dying, his lungs begging for more air. The prince realized wearily that this one wasn't screaming his head off either. Angry yes, he could tell that by looking into his eyes. Eyes that were framed in jagged lines of fiery red and black.

Eric stabbed using both arms, and it was easily beaten aside. The spear drew back and stabbed again, too fast, and pierced his left shoulder. The warrior jumped to the right, matching his foe's retreat, and probed again with his spear. The blade sunk into the prince's pelvis. Eric doubled over and staggered back towards the edge of the promontory, the spear point tearing him as he dragged himself off its needle tip. Hunched over and bleeding badly, the Kold Prince of Kold Keep waited behind his drooping guard.

The warrior spun his spear over his head, hypnotizing the exhausted prince, and its wooden butt cracked into Eric's exposed temple. The prince's eyes went white. The Sanjou's champion withdrew for just a moment. Before him, a stunned and exhausted invader stumbled about. The savage warrior bent his knees and leaned into the thrust this time, pushing with the strength of his legs behind him. The spear met no resistance and sunk into legionnaire chainmail, padding, and finally flesh. The force pushed Eric off his feet.

And hurtled him soundlessly over the cliff.

