

BOOKS OF

SKYRIM

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2920: The Last Year of the First Era

Morning Star - Book One

by Carlovac Townway

1 Morning Star, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

Almalexia lay in her bed of fur, dreaming. Not until the sun burned through her window, infusing the light wood and flesh colors of her chamber in a milky glow did she open her eyes. It was quiet and serene, a stunning reverse of the flavor of her dreams, so full of blood and celebration. For a few moments, she simply stared at the ceiling, trying to sort through her visions.

In the courtyard of her palace was a boiling pool which steamed in the coolness of the winter morning. At the wave of her hand, it cleared and she saw the face and form of her lover Vivec in his study to the north. She did not want to speak right away: he looked so handsome in his dark red robes, writing his poetry as he did every morning.

"Vivec," she said, and he raised his head in a smile, looking at her face across thousands of miles. "I have seen a vision of the end of the war."

"After eighty years, I don't think anyone can imagine an end," said Vivec with a smile, but he grew serious, trusting Almalexia's prophecies. "Who will win? Morrowind or the Cyrodilic Empire?"

"Without Sotha Sil in Morrowind, we will lose," she replied.

"My intelligence tells me the Empire will strike us to the north in early springtide, by First Seed at the latest. Could you go to Artaeum and convince him to return?"

"I'll leave today," she said, simply.

4 Morning Star, 2920
Gideon, Black Marsh

The Empress paced around her cell. Wintertide gave her wasteful energy, while in the summer she would merely sit by her window and be grateful for each breath of stale swamp wind that came to cool her. Across the room, her unfinished tapestry of a dance at the Imperial Court seemed to mock her. She ripped it from its frame, tearing the pieces apart as they drifted to the floor.

Then she laughed at her own useless gesture of defiance. She would have plenty of time to repair it and craft a hundred more. The Emperor had locked her up in Castle Giovesse seven years ago, and would likely keep her here until he or she died.

With a sigh, she pulled the cord to call her knight, Zuuk. He appeared at the door within minutes, fully uniformed as befitted an Imperial Guard. Most of the native Kothringi tribesmen of Black Marsh preferred to go about naked, but Zuuk had taken a positive delight to fashion. His silver, reflective skin was scarcely visible, only on his face, neck, and hands.

"Your Imperial Highness," he said with a bow.

"Zuuk," said Empress Tavia. "I'm bored. Lets discuss methods of assassinating my husband today."

14 Morning Star, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

The chimes proclaiming South Wind's Prayer echoed through the wide boulevards and gardens of the Imperial City, calling all to their temples. The Emperor Reman III always attended a service at the Temple of the One, while his son and heir Prince Juilek found it more political to attend a

service at a different temple for each religious holiday. This year, it was at the cathedral Benevolence of Mara.

The Benevolence's services were mercifully short, but it was not until well after noon that the Emperor was able to return to the palace. By then, the arena combatants were impatiently waiting for the start of the ceremony. The crowd was far less restless, as the Potentate Versidue-Shaie had arranged for a demonstration from a troupe of Khajiiti acrobats.

"Your religion is so much more convenient than mine," said the Emperor to his Potentate by way of an apology. "What is the first game?"

"A one-on-one battle between two able warriors," said the Potentate, his scaly skin catching the sun as he rose. "Armed befitting their culture."

"Sounds good," said the Emperor and clapped his hands. "Let the sport commence!"

As soon as he saw the two warriors enter the arena to the roar of the crowd, Emperor Reman III remembered that he had agreed to this several months before and forgotten about it. One combatant was the Potentate's son, Savirien-Chorak, a glistening ivory-yellow eel, gripping his katana and wakizashi with his thin, deceptively weak looking arms. The other was the Emperor's son, Prince Juilek, in ebony armor with a savage Orcish helm, shield and longsword at his side.

"This will be fascinating to watch," hissed the Potentate, a wide grin across his narrow face. "I don't know if I've even seen a Cyrodiil fight an Akavir like this. Usually it's army against army. At last we can settle which philosophy is better -- to create armor to combat swords as your people do, or to create swords to combat armor as mine do."

No one in the crowd, aside from a few scattered Akaviri counselors and the Potentate himself wanted Savirien-Chorak to win, but there was a collective intake of breath at the sight of his graceful movements. His swords seemed to be a part of him, a tail coming from his arms to match the one behind him. It was a trick of counterbalance, allowing the young serpent man to

roll up into a circle and spin into the center of the ring in offensive position. The Prince had to plod forward the less impressive traditional way.

As they sprang at each other, the crowd bellowed with delight. The Akaviri was like a moon in orbit around the Prince, effortlessly springing over his shoulder to attempt a blow from behind, but the Prince whirled around quickly to block with his shield. His counter-strike met only air as his foe fell flat to the ground and slithered between his legs, tripping him. The Prince fell to the ground with a resounding crash.

Metal and air melted together as Savirien-Chorak rained strike after strike upon the Prince, who blocked every one with his shield.

"We don't have shields in our culture," murmured Versidue-Shaie to the Emperor. "It seems strange to my boy, I imagine. In our country, if you don't want to get hit, you move out of the way."

When Savirien-Chorak was rearing back to begin another series of blinding attacks, the Prince kicked at his tail, sending him falling back momentarily. In an instant, he had rebounded, but the Prince was also back on his feet. The two circled one another, until the snake man spun forward, katana extended. The Prince saw his foe's plan, and blocked the katana with his longsword and the wakizashi with his shield. Its short punching blade impaled itself in the metal, and Savirien-Chorak was thrown off balance.

The Prince's longblade slashed across the Akavir's chest and the sudden, intense pain caused him to drop both his weapons. It a moment, it was over. Savirien-Chorak was prostate in the dust with the Prince's longsword at his throat.

"The game's over!" shouted the Emperor, barely heard over the applause from the stadium.

The Prince grinned and helped Savirien-Chorak up and over to a healer. The Emperor clapped his Potentate on the back, feeling relieved. He had not realized when the fight had begun how little chance he had given his son at victory.

"He will make a fine warrior," said Versidue-Shaie. "And a great emperor."

"Just remember," laughed the Emperor. "You Akaviri have a lot of showy moves, but if just one of our strikes comes through, it's all over for you."

"Oh, I'll remember that," nodded the Potentate.

Reman thought about that comment for the rest of the games, and had trouble fully enjoying himself. Could the Potentate be another enemy, just as the Empress had turned out to be? The matter would bear watching.

21 Morning Star, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

"Why don't you wear that green gown I gave you?" asked the Duke of Mournhold, watching the young maiden put on her clothes.

"It doesn't fit," smiled Turala. "And you know I like red."

"It doesn't fit because you're getting fat," laughed the Duke, pulling her down on the bed, kissing her breasts and the pouch of her stomach. She laughed at the tickles, but pulled herself up, wrapping her red robe around her.

"I'm round like a woman should be," said Turala. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"No," said the Duke. "I must entertain Vivec tomorrow, and the next day the Duke of Ebonheart is coming. Do you know, I never really appreciated Almalexia and her political skills until she left?"

"It is the same with me," smiled Turala. "You will only appreciate me when I'm gone."

"That's not true at all," snorted the Duke. "I appreciate you now."

Turala allowed the Duke one last kiss before she was out the door. She kept thinking about what he said. Would he appreciate her more or less when he knew that she was getting fat because she was carrying his child? Would he appreciate her enough to marry her?

The Year Continues in Sun's Dawn

Sun's Dawn - Book Two

by Carlovac Townway

3 Sun's Dawn, 2920
The Isle of Artaeum, Summurset

Sotha Sil watched the initiates float one by one up to the oassom tree, taking a fruit or a flower from its high branches before dropping back to the ground with varying degrees of grace. He took a moment while nodding his head in approval to admire the day. The whitewashed statue of Syrabane, which the great mage was said to have posed for in ancient days, stood at the precipice of the cliff overlooking the bay. Pale purple proscato flowers waves to and fro in the gentle breeze. Beyond, ocean, and the misty border between Artaeum and the main island of Summurset.

"By and large, acceptable," he proclaimed as the last student dropped her fruit in his hand. With a wave of his hand, the fruit and flowers were back in the tree. With another wave, the students had formed into position in a semicircle around the sorcerer. He pulled a small fibrous ball, about a foot in diameter from his white robes.

"What is this?"

The students understood this test. It asked them to cast a spell of identification on the mysterious object. Each initiate closed his or her eyes and imagined the ball in the realm of the universal Truth. Its energy had a unique resonance as all physical and spiritual matter does, a negative aspect, a duplicate version, relative paths, true meaning, a song in the cosmos, a texture in the fabric of space, a facet of being that has always existed and always will exist.

"A ball," said a young Nord named Welleg, which brought giggles from some of the younger initiates, but a frown from most, including Sotha Sil.

"If you must be stupid, at least be amusing," growled the sorcerer, and then looked at a young, dark-haired Altmer lass who looked confused. "Lilatha, do you know?"

"It's grom," said Lilatha, uncertainly. "What the dreugh meff after they've k-k-kr-krevinasim."

"Karvinasim, but very good, nonetheless," said Sotha Sil. "Now, tell me, what does that mean?"

"I don't know," admitted Lilatha. The rest of the students also shook their heads.

"There are layers to understanding all things," said Sotha Sil. "The common man looks at an object and fits it into a place in his way of thinking. Those skilled in the Old Ways, in the way of the Psijic, in Mysticism, can see an object and identify it by its proper role. But one more layer is needed to be peeled back to achieve understanding. You must identify the object by its role and its truth and interpret that meaning. In this case, this ball is indeed grom, which is a substance created by the dreugh, an underwater race in the north and western parts of the continent. For one year of their life, they undergo karvinasim when they walk upon the land. Following that, they return to the water and meff, or devour the skin and organs they needed for land-dwelling. Then they vomit it up into little balls like this. Grom. Dreugh vomit."

The students looked at the ball a little queasily. Sotha Sil always loved this lesson.

4 Sun's Dawn, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

"Spies," muttered the Emperor, sitting in his bath, staring at a lump on his foot. "All around me, traitors and spies."

His mistress Rijja washed his back, her legs wrapped around his waist. She

knew after all these many years when to be sensual and when to be sexual. When he was in a mood like this, it was best to be calmly, soothingly, seductively sensual. And not to say a word unless he asked her a direct question.

Which he did: "What do you think when a fellow steps on his Imperial Majesty's foot and says 'I'm sorry, Your Imperial Majesty'? Don't you think 'Pardon me, Your Imperial Majesty' is more appropriate? 'I'm sorry,' well that almost sounds like the bastard Argonian was sorry I am his Imperial Majesty. That he hopes we lose the war with Morrowind, that's what it sounds like."

"What would make you feel better?" asked Rijja. "Would you like him flogged? He is only, as you say, the Battlechief of Soulrest. It would teach him to mind where he's stepping."

"My father would have flogged him. My grandfather would have had him killed," the Emperor grumbled. "But I don't mind if they all step on my feet, provided they respect me. And don't plot against me."

"You must trust someone."

"Only you," smiled the Emperor, turning slightly to give Rijja a kiss. "And my son Juilek, I suppose, though I wish he were a little more cautious."

"And your council, and the Potentate?" asked Rijja.

"A pack of spies and a snake," laughed the Emperor, kissing his mistress again. As they began to make love, he whispered, "As long as you're true, I can handle the world."

13 Sun's Dawn, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

Turala stood at the black, bejeweled city gates. A wind howled around her, but she felt nothing.

The Duke had been furious upon hearing his favorite mistress was pregnant and cast her from his sight. She tried again and again to see him, but his guards turned her away. Finally, she returned to her family and told them the truth. If only she had lied and told them she did not know who the father was. A soldier, a wandering adventurer, anyone. But she told them that the father was the Duke, a member of the House Indoril. And they did what she knew they would have to do, as proud members of the House Redoran.

Upon her hand was burned the sign of Expulsion her weeping father had branded on her. But the Duke's cruelty hurt her far more. She looked out the gate and into the wide winter plains. Twisted, sleeping trees and skies without birds. No one in Morrowind would take her in now. She must go far away.

With slow, sad steps, she began her journey.

16 Sun's Dawn, 2920
Senchal, Anequina (modern day Elsweyr)

"What troubles you?" asked Queen Hasaama, noticing her husband's sour mood. At the end of most Lovers' Days he was in an excellent mood, dancing in the ballroom with all the guests, but tonight he retired early. When she found him, he was curled in the bed, frowning.

"That blasted bard's tale about Polydor and Eloisa put me in a rotten state," he growled. "Why did he have to be so depressing?"

"But isn't that the truth of the tale, my dear? Weren't they doomed because of the cruel nature of the world?"

"It doesn't matter what the truth is, he did a rotten job of telling a rotten tale, and I'm not going to let him do it anymore," King Dro'Zel sprang from the bed. His eyes were rheumy with tears. "Where did they say he was from again?"

"I believe Gilverdale in easternmost Valenwood," said the Queen, shaken.

"My husband, what are you going to do?"

Dro'Zel was out of the room in a single spring, bounding up the stairs to his tower. If Queen Hasaama knew what her husband was going to do, she did not try to stop him. He had been erratic of late, prone to fits and even occasional seizures. But she never suspected the depths of his madness, and his loathing for the bard and his tale of the wickedness and perversity found in mortal man.

19 Sun's Dawn, 2920
Gilverdale, Valenwood

"Listen to me again," said the old carpenter. "If cell three holds worthless brass, then cell two holds the gold key. If cell one holds the gold key, then cell three hold worthless brass. If cell two holds worthless brass, then cell one holds the gold key."

"I understand," said the lady. "You told me. And so cell one holds the gold key, right?"

"No," said the carpenter. "Let me start from the top."

"Mama?" said the little boy, pulling on his mother's sleeve.

"Just one moment, dear, mother's talking," she said, concentrating on the riddle. "You said 'cell three holds the golden key if cell two holds worthless brass,' right?"

"No," said the carpenter patiently. "Cell three holds worthless brass, if cell two --"

"Mama!" cried the boy. His mother finally looked.

A bright red mist was pouring over the town in a wave, engulfing building after building in its wake. Striding before was a red-skinned giant. The Daedra Molag Bal. He was smiling.

29 Sun's Dawn, 2920
Gilverdale, Valenwood

Almalexia stopped her steed in the vast moor of mud to let him drink from the river. He refused to, even seemed repelled by the water. It struck her as odd: they had been making excellent time from Mournhold, and surely he must be thirsty. She dismounted and joined her retinue.

"Where are we now?" she asked.

One of her ladies pulled out a map. "I thought we were approaching a town called Gilverdale."

Almalexia closed her eyes and opened them again quickly. The vision was too much to bear. As her followers watched, she picked up a piece of brick and a fragment of bone, and clutched them to her heart.

"We must continue on to Artaeum," she said quietly.

The Year continues in First Seed.

First Seed - Book Three

by Carlovac Townway

15 First Seed, 2920
Caer Suvio, Cyrodiil

From their vantage point high in the hills, the Emperor Reman III could still see the spires of the Imperial City, but he knew he was far away from hearth and home. Lord Glavius had a luxurious villa, but it was not close to being large enough to house the entire army within its walls. Tents lined the hillsides, and the soldiers were flocking to enjoy his lordship's famous hot springs. Little wonder: winter chill still hung in the air.

"Prince Juilek, your son, is not feeling well."

When Potentate Versidue-Shaie spoke, the Emperor jumped. How that Akavir could slither across the grass without making a sound was a mystery to him.

"Poisoned, I'd wager," grumbled Reman. "See to it he gets a healer. I told him to hire a taster like I have, but the boy's headstrong. There are spies all around us, I know it."

"I believe you're right, your imperial majesty," said Versidue-Shaie. "These are treacherous times, and we must take precautions to see that Morrowind does not win this war, either on the field or by more insidious means. That is why I would suggest that you not lead the vanguard into battle. I know you would want to, as your illustrious ancestors Reman I, Brazollus Dor, and Reman II did, but I fear it would be foolhardy. I hope you do not mind me speaking frankly like this."

"No," nodded Reman. "I think you're right. Who would lead the vanguard then?"

"I would say Prince Juilek, if he were feeling better," replied the Akavir. "Failing that, Storig of Farrun, with Queen Naghea of Riverhold at left flank, and Warchief Ulaqth of Lilmoth at right flank."

"A Khajiit at left flank and an Argonian at right," frowned the Emperor. "I never do trust beastfolk."

The Potentate took no offense. He knew that "beastfolk" referred to the natives of Tamriel, not to the Tsaesci of Akavir like himself. "I quite agree your imperial majesty, but you must agree that they hate the Dunmer. Ulaqth has a particular grudge after all the slave-raids on his lands by the Duke of Mournhold."

The Emperor conceded it was so, and the Potentate retired. It was surprising, thought Reman, but for the first time, the Potentate seemed trustworthy. He was a good man to have on one's side.

18 First Seed, 2920
Ald Erfoud, Morrowind

How far is the Imperial Army?" asked Vivec.

"Two days' march," replied his lieutenant. "If we march all night tonight, we can get higher ground at the Pryai tomorrow morning. Our intelligence tells us the Emperor will be commanding the rear, Storig of Farrun has the vanguard, Naghea of Riverhold at left flank, and Ulaqth of Lilmoth at right flank."

"Ulaqth," whispered Vivec, an idea forming. "Is this intelligence reliable? Who brought it to us?"

"A Breton spy in the Imperial Army," said the lieutenant and gestured towards a young, sandy-haired man who stepped forward and bowed to Vivec.

"What is your name and why is a Breton working for us against the

Cyrodiils?" asked Vivec, smiling.

"My name is Cassyr Whitley of Dwynnen," said the man. "And I am working for you because not everyone can say he spied for a god. And I understood it would be, well, profitable."

Vivec laughed, "It will be, if your information is accurate."

19 First Seed, 2920
Bodrums, Morrowind

The quiet hamlet of Bodrum looked down on the meandering river, the Pryai. It was an idyllic site, lightly wooded where the water took the bend around a steep bluff to the east with a gorgeous wildflower meadow to the west. The strange flora of Morrowind met the strange flora of Cyrodiil on the border and commingled gloriously.

"There will be time to sleep when you've finished!"

The soldiers had been hearing that all morning. It was not enough that they had been marching all night, now they were chopping down trees on the bluff and damming the river so its waters spilled over. Most of them had reached the point where they were too tired to complain about being tired.

"Let me be certain I understand, my lord," said Vivec's lieutenant. "We take the bluff so we can fire arrows and spells down on them from above. That's why we need all the trees cleared out. Damming the river floods the plain below so they'll be trudging through mud, which should hamper their movement."

"That's exactly half of it," said Vivec approvingly. He grabbed a nearby soldier who was hauling off the trees. "Wait, I need you to break off the straightest, strongest branches of the trees and whittle them into spears. If you recruit a hundred or so others, it won't take you more than a few hours to make all we need."

The soldier wearily did as he was bade. The men and women got to work, fashioning spears from the trees.

"If you don't mind me asking," said the lieutenant. "The soldiers don't need any more weapons. They're too tired to hold the ones they've got."

"These spears aren't for holding," said Vivec and whispered, "If we tired them out today, they'll get a good night's sleep tonight," before he got to work supervising their work.

It was essential that they be sharp, of course, but equally important that they be well balanced and tapered proportionally. The perfect point for stability was a pyramid, not the conical point of some lances and spears. He had the men hurl the spears they had completed to test their strength, sharpness, and balance, forcing them to begin on a new one if they broke. Gradually, out of sheer exhaustion from doing it wrong, the men learned how to create the perfect wooden spears. Once they were through, he showed them how they were to be arranged and where.

That night, there was no drunken pre-battle carousing, and no nervous neophytes stayed up worrying about the battle to come. As soon as the sun sank beneath the wooded hills, the camp was at rest, but for the sentries.

20 First Seed, 2920
Bodrum, Morrowind

Miramor was exhausted. For last six days, he had gambled and whored all night and then marched all day. He was looking forward to the battle, but even more than that, he was looking forward to some rest afterwards. He was in the Emperor's command at the rear flank, which was good because it seemed unlikely that he would be killed. On the other hand, it meant traveling over the mud and waste the army ahead left in their wake.

As they began the trek through the wildflower field, Miramor and all the soldiers around him sank ankle-deep in cold mud. It was an effort to even keep moving. Far, far up ahead, he could see the vanguard of the army led

by Lord Storig emerging from the meadow at the base of a bluff.

That was when it all happened.

An army of Dunmer appeared above the bluff like rising Daedra, pouring fire and floods of arrows down on the vanguard. Simultaneously, a company of men bearing the flag of the Duke of Mournhold galloped around the shore, disappearing along the shallow river's edge where it dipped to a timbered glen to the east. Warchief Ulaqth nearby on the right flank let out a bellow of revenge at the sight and gave chase. Queen Naghea sent her flank towards the embankment to the west to intercept the army on the bluff.

The Emperor could think of nothing to do. His troops were too bogged down to move forward quickly and join the battle. He ordered them to face east towards the timber, in case Mournhold's company was trying to circle around through the woods. They never came out, but many men, facing west, missed the battle entirely. Miramor kept his eyes on the bluff.

A tall Dunmer he supposed must have been Vivec gave a signal, and the battlemages cast their spells at something to the west. From what transpired, Miramor deduced it was a dam. A great torrent of water spilled out, washing Naghea's left flank into the remains of the vanguard and the two together down river to the east.

The Emperor paused, as if waiting for his vanquished army to return, and then called a retreat. Miramor hid in the rushes until they had passed by and then waded as quietly as he could to the bluff.

The Morrowind army was retiring as well back to their camp. He could hear them celebrating above him as he padded along the shore. To the east, he saw the Imperial Army. They had been washed into a net of spears strung across the river, Naghea's left flank on Storig's vanguard on Ulaqth's right flank, bodies of hundreds of soldiers strung together like beads.

Miramor took whatever valuables he could carry from the corpses and then ran down the river. He had to go many miles before the water was clear

again, unpolluted by blood.

29 First Seed, 2920
Hegathe, Hammerfell

You have a letter from the Imperial City," said the chief priestess, handing the parchment to Corda. All the young priestesses smiled and made faces of astonishment, but the truth was that Corda's sister Rijja wrote very often, at least once a month.

Corda took the letter to the garden to read it, her favorite place, an oasis in the monochromatic sand-colored world of the conservatorium The letter itself was nothing unusual: filled with court gossip, the latest fashions which were tending to winedark velvets, and reports of the Emperor's ever-growing paranoia.

"You are so lucky to be away from all of this," wrote Rijja. "The Emperor is convinced that his latest battlefield fiasco is all a result of spies in the palace. He has even taken to questioning me. Ruptga keep it so you never have a life as interesting as mine."

Corda listened to the sounds of the desert and prayed to Ruptga the exact opposite wish.

The Year is Continued in Rain's Hand.

Rain's Hand - Book Four

By Carlovac Townway

3 Rain's Hand, 2920
Coldharbour, Oblivion

Sotha Sil proceeded as quickly as he could through the blackened halls of the palace, half-submerged in brackish water. All around him, nasty gelatinous creatures scurried into the reeds, bursts of white fire lit up the upper arches of the hall before disappearing, and smells assaulted him, rancid death one moment, sweet flowered perfume the next. Several times he had visited the Daedra princes in their Oblivion, but every time, something different awaited him.

He knew his purpose, and refused to be distracted.

Eight of the more prominent Daedra princes were awaiting him in the half-melted, domed room. Azura, Prince of Dusk and Dawn; Boethiah, Prince of Plots; Herma-Mora, Daedra of Knowledge; Hircine, the Hunter; Malacath, God of Curses; Mehrunes Dagon, Prince of Disaster; Molag Bal, Prince of Rage; Sheogorath, the Mad One.

Above them, the sky cast tormented shadows upon the meeting.

5 Rain's Hand, 2920
The Isle of Artaeum, Summurset

Sotha Sil's voice cried out, echoing from the cave, "Move the rock!"

Immediately, the initiates obeyed, rolling aside the great boulder that blocked the entrance to the Dreaming Cavern. Sotha Sil emerged, his face smeared with ash, weary. He felt he had been away for months, years, but only a few days had transpired. Lilatha took his arm to help him walk, but

he refused her help with a kind smile and a shake of his head.

"Were you ... successful?" she asked.

"The Daedra princes I spoke with have agreed to our terms," he said flatly. "Disasters such as befell Gilverdale should be averted. Only through certain intermediaries such as witches or sorcerers will they answer the call of man and mer."

"And what did you promise them in return?" asked the Nord boy Welleg.

"The deals we make with Daedra," said Sotha Sil, continuing on to Iachesis's palace to meet with the Master of the Psijic Order. "Should not be discussed with the innocent."

8 Rain's Hand, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

A storm billeted the windows of the Prince's bedchamber, bringing a smell of moist air to mix with the censors filled with burning incense and herbs.

"A letter has arrived from the Empress, your mother," said the courier. "Anxiously inquiring after your health."

"What frightened parents I have!" laughed Prince Juilek from his bed.

"It is only natural for a mother to worry," said Savirien-Chorak, the Potentate's son.

"There is everything unnatural about my family, Akavir. My exiled mother fears that my father will imagine me of being a traitor, covetous of the crown, and is having me poisoned," the Prince sank back into his pillow, annoyed. "The Emperor has insisted on me having a taster for all my meals as he does."

"There are many plots," agreed the Akavir. "You have been abed for nearly

three weeks with every healer in the empire shuffling through like a slow ballroom dance. At least, all can see that you're getting stronger."

"Strong enough to lead the vanguard against Morrowind soon, I hope," said Juilek.

11 Rain's Hand, 2920
The Isle of Artaeum, Summurset

The initiates stood quietly in a row along the arbor loggia, watching the long, deep, marble-lined trench ahead of them flash with fire. The air above it vibrated with the waves of heat. Though each student kept his or her face sturdy and emotionless, as a true Psijic should, their terror was nearly as palpable as the heat. Sotha Sil closed his eyes and uttered the charm of fire resistance. Slowly, he walked across the basin of leaping flames, climbing to the other side, unscathed. Not even his white robe had been burned.

"The charm is intensified by the energy you bring to it, by your own skills, just as all spells are," he said. "Your imagination and your willpower are the keys. There is no need for a spell to give you a resistance to air, or a resistance to flowers, and after you cast the charm, you must forget there is even a need for a spell to give you resistance to fire. Do not confuse what I am saying: resistance is not about ignoring the fire's reality. You will feel the substance of flame, the texture of it, its hunger, and even the heat of it, but you will know that it will not hurt or injure you."

The students nodded and one by one, they cast the spell and made the walk through the fire. Some even went so far as to bend over and scoop up a handful of fire and feed it air, so it expanded like a bubble and melted through their fingers. Sotha Sil smiled. They were fighting their fear admirably.

The Chief Proctor Thargallith came running from the arbor arches, "Sotha Sil! Almalexia has arrived on Artaeum. Iachesis told me to fetch you."

Sotha Sil turned to Thargallith for only a moment, but he knew instantly

from the screams what had transpired. The Nord lad Wellig had not cast the spell properly and was burning. The smell of scorched hair and flesh panicked the other students who were struggling to get out of the basin, pulling him with them, but the incline was too steep away from the entry points. With a wave of his hand, Sotha Sil extinguished the flame.

Wellig and several other students were burned, but not badly. The sorcerer cast a healing spell on them, before turning back to Thargallith.

"I'll be with you in a moment, and give Almalexia the time to shake the road dust from her train," Sotha Sil turned back to the students, his voice flat. "Fear does not break spells, but doubt and incompetence are the great enemies of any spellcaster. Master Welleg, you will pack your bags. I'll arrange for a boat to bring you to the mainland tomorrow morning."

The sorcerer found Almalexia and Iachesis in the study, drinking hot tea, and laughing. She was more beautiful than he had remembered, though he had never before seen her so disheveled, wrapped in a blanket, dangling her damp long black tresses before the fire to dry. At Sotha Sil's approach, she leapt to her feet and embraced him.

"Did you swim all the way from Morrowind?" he smiled.

"It's pouring rain from Skywatch down to the coast," she explained, returning his smile.

"Only a half a league away, and it never rains here," said Iachesis proudly. "Of course, I sometimes miss the excitement of Summurset, and sometimes even the mainland itself. Still, I'm always very impressed by anyone out there who gets anything accomplished. It is a world of distractions. Speaking of distractions, what's all this I hear about a war?"

"You mean the one that's been bloodying the continent for the last eighty years, Master?" asked Sotha Sil, amused.

"I suppose that's the one I mean," said Iachesis with a shrug of his shoulders. "How is that war going?"

"We will lose it, unless I can convince Sotha Sil to leave Artaeum," said Almalexia, losing her smile. She had meant to wait and talk to her friend in private, but the old Altmer gave her courage to press on. "I have had visions; I know it to be true."

Sotha Sil was silent for a moment, and then looked at Iachesis, "I must return to Morrowind."

"Knowing you, if you must do something, you will," sighed the old Master. "The Psijics' way is not to be distracted. Wars are fought, Empires rise and fall. You must go, and so must we."

"What do you mean, Iachesis? You're leaving the island?"

"No, the island will be leaving the sea," said Iachesis, his voice taking on a dreamy quality. "In a few years, the mists will move over Artaeum and we will be gone. We are counselors by nature, and there are too many counselors in Tamriel as it is. No, we will go, and return when the land needs us again, perhaps in another age."

The old Altmer struggles to his feet, and drained the last sip of his drink before leaving Sotha Sil and Almalexia alone: "Don't miss the last boat."

The Year Continues in Second Seed.

Second Seed - Book Five

By Carlovac Townway

10 Second Seed, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

"Your Imperial Majesty," said the Potentate Versidue-Shaie, opening the door to his chamber with a smile. "I have not seen you lately. I thought perhaps you were ... indisposed with the lovely Rijja."

"She's taking the baths at Mir Corrup," the Emperor Reman III said miserably.

"Please, come in."

"I've reached the stage where I can only trust three people: you, my son the Prince, and Rijja," said the Emperor petulantly. "My entire council is nothing but a pack of spies."

"What seems to be the matter, your imperial majesty?" asked the Potentate Versidue-Shaie sympathetically, drawing closed the thick curtain in his chamber. Instantly all sound outside the room was extinguished, echoing footsteps in the marble halls and birds in the springtide gardens.

"I've discovered that a notorious poisoner, an Orma tribeswoman from Black Marsh called Catchica, was with the army at Caer Suvio while we were encamped there when my son was poisoned, before the battle at Bodrum. I'm sure she would have preferred to kill me, but the opportunity didn't present itself," The Emperor fumed. "The Council suggests that we need evidence of her involvement before we prosecute."

"Of course they would," said the Potentate thoughtfully. "Particularly if one or more of them was in on the plot. I have a thought, your imperial majesty."

"Yes?" said Reman impatiently. "Out with it!"

"Tell the Council you're dropping the matter, and I will send out the Guard to track this Catchica down and follow her. We will see who her friends are, and perhaps get an idea of the scope of this plot on your imperial majesty's life."

"Yes," said Reman with a satisfied frown. "That's a capital plan. We will track this scheme to whomever it leads to."

"Decidedly, your imperial majesty," smiled the Potentate, parting the curtain so the Emperor could leave. In the hallway outside was Versidue-Shaie's son, Savirien-Chorak. The boy bowed to the Emperor before entering the Potentate's chamber.

"Are you in trouble, father?" whispered the Akaviri lad. "I heard the Emperor found out about whatshername, the poisoner."

"The great art of speechcraft, my boy," said Versidue-Shaie to his son. "Is to tell them what they want to hear in a way that gets them to do what you want them to do. I need you to get a letter to Catchica, and make certain that she understands that if she does not follow the instructions perfectly, she is risking her own life more than ours."

13 Second Seed, 2920
Mir Corrup, Cyrodiil

Rijja sank luxuriantly into the burbling hot spring, feeling her skin tingle like it was being rubbed by millions of little stones. The rock shelf over her head sheltered her from the misting rain, but let all the sunshine in, streaming in layers through the branches of the trees. It was an idyllic moment in an idyllic life, and when she was finished she knew that her beauty would be entirely restored. The only thing she needed was a drink of water. The bath itself, while wonderfully fragrant, tasted always of chalk.

"Water!" she cried to her servants. "Water, please!"

A gaunt woman with rags tied over her eyes ran to her side and dropped a goatskin of water. Rijja was about to laugh at the woman's prudery -- she herself was not ashamed of her naked body -- but then she noticed through a crease in the rags that the old woman had no eyes at all. She was like one of those Orma tribesmen Rijja had heard about, but never met. Born without eyes, they were masters of their other senses. The Lord of Mir Corrup hired very exotic servants, she thought to herself.

In a moment, the woman was gone and forgotten. Rijja found it very hard to concentrate on anything but the sun and the water. She opened the cork, but the liquid within had a strange, metallic smell to it. Suddenly, she was aware that she was not alone.

"Lady Rijja," said the captain of the Imperial Guard. "You are, I see, acquainted with Catchica?"

"I've never heard of her," stammered Rijja before becoming indignant. "What are you doing here? This body is not for your leering eyes."

"Never heard of her, when we saw her with you not a minute ago," said the captain, picking up the goatskin and smelling it. "Brought you neivous ichor, did she? To poison the Emperor with?"

"Captain," said one of the guards, running up to him quickly. "We cannot find the Argonian. It is as if she disappeared into the woods."

"Yes, they're good at that," said the captain. "No matter though. We've got her contact at court. That should please his Imperial Majesty. Seize her."

As the guards pulled the writhing naked woman from the pool, she screamed, "I'm innocent! I don't know what this is all about, but I've done nothing! The Emperor will have your heads for this!"

"Yes, I imagine he will," smiled the captain. "If he trusts you."

21 Second Seed, 2920
Gideon, Black Marsh

The Sow and Vulture tavern was the sort of out-of-the-way place that Zuuk favored for these sorts of interviews. Besides himself and his companion, there were only a couple of old seadogs in the shadowy room, and they were more unconscious from drink than aware. The grime of the unwashed floor was something you felt rather than saw. Copious dust hung in the air unmoving in the sparse rays of dying sunlight.

"You have experience in heavy combat?" asked Zuuk. "The reward is good for this assignment, but the risks are great as well."

"Certainly I have combat experience," replied Miramor haughtily. "I was at the Battle of Bodrum just two months ago. If you do your part and get the Emperor to ride through Dozsa Pass with a minimal escort on the day and the time we've discussed, I'll do my part. Just be certain that he's not traveling in disguise. I'm not going to slaughter every caravan that passes through in the hopes that it contains Emperor Reman."

Zuuk smiled, and Miramor looked at himself in the Kothringi's reflective face. He liked the way he looked: the consummate confident professional.

"Agreed," said Zuuk. "And then you shall have the rest of your gold."

Zuuk placed the large chest onto the table between them. He stood up.

"Wait a few minutes before leaving," said Zuuk. "I don't want you following me. Your employers wish to maintain their anonymity, if by chance you are caught and tortured."

"Fine by me," said Miramor, ordering more grog.

Zuuk rode his mount through the cramped labyrinthine streets of Gideon, and both he and his horse were happy to pass through the gates into the country. The main road to Castle Giovese was flooded as it was every year

in springtide, but Zuuk knew a shorter way over the hills. Riding fast under trees drooping with moss and treacherous slime-coated rocks, he arrived at the castle gates in two hours' time. He wasted no time in climbing to Tavia's cell at the top of the highest tower.

"What did you think of him?" asked the Empress.

"He's a fool," replied Zuuk. "But that's what we want for this sort of assignment."

30 Second Seed, 2920
Thurzo Fortress, Cyrodiil

Rijja screamed and screamed and screamed. Within her cell, her only audience was the giant gray stones, crusted with moss but still sturdy. The guards outside were deaf to her as they were deaf to all prisoners. The Emperor, miles away in the Imperial City, had likewise been deaf to her cries of innocence.

She screamed knowing well that no one would likely hear her ever again.

31 Second Seed, 2920
Kavas Rim Pass, Cyrodiil

It had been days, weeks since Turala had seen another human face, Cyrodiil or Dunmer. As she trod the road, she thought to herself how strange it was that such an uninhabited place as Cyrodiil had become the Imperial Province, seat of an Empire. Even the Bosmer in Valenwood must have more populated forests than this Heartland wood.

She thought back. Was it a month ago, two, when she crossed the border from Morrowind into Cyrodiil? It had been much colder then, but other than that, she had no sense of time. The guards had been brusque, but as she was carrying no weaponry, they elected to let her through. Since then, she had seen a few caravans, even shared a meal with some adventurers camping for

the night, but met no one who would give her a ride to a town.

Turala stripped off her shawl and dragged it behind her. For a moment, she thought she heard someone behind her and spun around. No one was there. Just a bird perched on a branch making a sound like laughter.

She walked on, and then stopped. Something was happening. The child had been kicking in her belly for some time now, but this was a different kind of spasm. With a groan, she lurched over to the side of the path, collapsing into the grass. Her child was coming.

She lay on her back and pushed, but she could barely see with her tears of pain and frustration. How had it come to this? Giving birth in the wilderness, all by herself, to a child whose father was the Duke of Mournhold? Her scream of rage and agony shook the birds from the trees.

The bird that had been laughing at her earlier flew down to the road. She blinked, and the bird was gone and in its place, a naked Elf man stood, not as dark as a Dunmer, but not as pale as the Altmer. She knew at once it was an Ayleid, a Wild Elf. Turala screamed, but the man held her down. After a few minutes of struggle, she felt a release, and then fainted away.

When she awoke, it was to the sound of a baby crying. The child had been cleaned and was lying by her side. Turala picked up her baby girl, and for the first time that year, felt tears of happiness stream down her face.

She whispered to the trees, "Thank you" and began walking with babe in her arms down the road to the west.

The Year Is Continued in Mid Year.

Mid Year - Book Six

by Carlovac Townway

2 Mid Year, 2920
Balmora, Morrowind

The Imperial army is gathered to the south," said Cassyr. "They are a two weeks march from Ald Iuval and Lake Coronati, heavily armored."

Vivec nodded. Ald Iuval and its sister city on the other side of the lake Ald Malak were strategically important fortresses. He had been expecting a move against them for some time. His captain pulled down a map of southwestern Morrowind from the wall and smoothed it out, fighting a gentle summer sea breeze wafting in from the open window.

"They were heavily armored, you say?" asked the captain.

"Yes, sir," said Cassyr. "They were camped out near Bethal Gray in the Heartland, and I saw nothing but Ebony, Dwarven, and Daedric armor, fine weaponry, and siege equipment."

"How about spellcasters and boats?" asked Vivec.

"A horde of battlemages," replied Cassyr. "But no boats."

"As heavily armored as they are, it will take them at least two weeks, like you said, to get from Bethal Gray to Lake Coronati," Vivec studied the map carefully. "They'd be dragged down in the bogs if they then tried to circle around to Ald Marak from the north, so they must be planning to cross the straits here and take Ald Iuval. Then they'd proceed around the lake to the east and take Ald Marak from the south."

"They'll be vulnerable along the straits," said the captain. "Provided we strike when they are more than halfway across and can't retreat back to the

Heartland."

"Your intelligence has once again served us well," said Vivec, smiling to Cassyr. "We will beat back the Imperial aggressors yet again."

3 Mid Year, 2920
Bethal Gray, Cyrodiil

"Will you be returning back this way after your victory?" asked Lord Bethal.

Prince Juilek barely paid the man any attention. He was focused on the army packing its camp. It was a cool morning in the forest, but there were no clouds. All the makings of a hot afternoon march, particularly in such heavy armor.

"If we return shortly, it will be because of defeat," said the Prince. He could see down in the meadow, the Potentate Versidue-Shaie paying his lordship's steward for the use of the village's food, wine, and whores. An army was an expensive thing, for certes.

"My Prince," said Lord Bethal with concern. "Is your army beginning a march due east? That will just lead you to the shores of Lake Coronati. You'll want to go south-east to get to the straits."

"You just make certain your merchants get their share of our gold," said the Prince with a grin. "Let me worry about my army's direction."

16 Mid Year, 2920
Lake Coronati, Morrowind

Vivec stared across the blue expanse of the lake, seeing his reflection and the reflection of his army in the cool blue waters. What he did not see was the Imperial Army's reflection. They must have reached the straits by now, barring any mishaps in the forest. Tall feather-thin lake trees blocked much

of his view of the straits, but an army, particularly one clan in slow-moving heavy armor could not move invisibly, silently.

"Let me see the map again," he called to his captain. "Is there no other way they could approach?"

"We have sentries posted in the swamps to the north in case they're fool enough to go there and be bogged under," said the captain. "We would at least hear about it. But there is no other way across the lake except through the straits."

Vivec looked down again at his reflection, which seemed to be distorting his image, mocking him. Then he looked back on the map.

"Spy," said Vivec, calling Cassyr over. "When you said the army had a horde of battlemages, what made you so certain they were battlemages?"

"They were wearing gray robes with mystical insignia on them," explained Cassyr. "I figured they were mages, and why else would such a vast number travel with the army? They couldn't have all been healers."

"You fool!" roared Vivec. "They're mystics schooled in the art of Alteration. They've cast a spell of water breathing on the entire army."

Vivec ran to a new vantage point where he could see the north. Across the lake, though it was but a small shadow on the horizon, they could see gouts of flame from the assault on Ald Marak. Vivec bellowed with fury and his captain got to work at once redirecting the army to circle the lake and defend the castle.

"Return to Dwynnen," said Vivec flatly to Cassyr before he rode off to join the battle. "Your services are no longer needed nor wanted."

It was already too late when the Morrowind army neared Ald Marak. It had been taken by the Imperial Army.

19 Mid Year, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

The Potentate arrived in the Imperial City amid great fanfare, the streets lined with men and women cheering him as the symbol of the taking of Ald Marak. Truth be told, a greater number would have turned out had the Prince returned, and the Versidue-Shaie knew it. Still, it pleased him to no end. Never before had citizens of Tamriel cheered the arrival of an Akaviri into their land.

The Emperor Reman III greeted him with a warm embrace, and then tore into the letter he had brought from the Prince.

"I don't understand," he said at last, still joyous but equally confused. "You went under the lake?"

"Ald Marak is a very well-fortified fortress," explained the Potentate. "As, I might add, the army of Morrowind has rediscovered, now that they are on the outside. To take it, we had to attack by surprise and with our soldiery in the sturdiest of armor. By casting the spell that allowed us to breathe underwater, we were able to travel faster than Vivec would have guessed, the weight of the armor made less by the aquatic surroundings, and attack from the waterbound west side of the fortress where their defenses were at their weakest."

"Brilliant!" the Emperor crowed. "You are a wonderous tactician, Versidue-Shaie! If your fathers had been as good at this as you are, Tamriel would be Akaviri domain!"

The Potentate had not planned to take credit for Prince Juilek's design, but on the Emperor's reference to his people's fiasco of an invasion two hundred and sixteen years ago, he made up his mind. He smiled modestly and soaked up the praise.

21 Mid Year, 2920
Ald Marak, Morrowind

Savirien-Chorak slithered to the wall and watched through the arrow slit the Morrowind army retreating back to the forestland between the swamps and the castle grounds. It seemed like the idea opportunity to strike. Perhaps the forests could be burned and the army within them. Perhaps with Vivec in their enemies' hands, the army would allow them possession of Ald Iuval as well. He suggested these ideas to the Prince.

"What you seem to be forgetting," laughed Prince Juilek. "Is that I gave my word that no harm to the army or to their commanders during the truce negotiations. Do you not have honor during warfare on Akavir?"

"My Prince, I was born here in Tamriel, I have never been to my people's home," replied the snake man. "But even so, your ways are strange to me. You expected no quarter and I gave you none when we fought in the Imperial Arena five months ago."

"That was a game," replied the Prince, before nodding to his steward to let the Dunmer battle chief in.

Juilek had never seen Vivec before, but he had heard he was a living god. What came before him was but a man. A powerfully built man, handsome, with an intelligent face, but a man nonetheless. The Prince was pleased: a man he could speak with, but not a god.

"Greetings, my worthy adversary," said Vivec. "We seem to be at an impasse."

"Not necessarily," said the Prince. "You don't want to give us Morrowind, and I can't fault you for that. But I must have your coastline to protect the Empire from overseas aggressions, and certain key strategic border castles, such as this one, as well as Ald Umbeil, Tel Aruhn, Ald Lambasi, and Tel Mothrivra."

"And in return?" asked Vivec.

"In return?" laughed Savirien-Chorak. "You forget we are the victors here,

not you."

"In return," said Prince Juilek carefully. "There will be no Imperial attacks on Morrowind, unless in return to an attack by you. You will be protected from invaders by the Imperial navy. And your land may expand by taking certain estates in Black Marsh, whichever you choose, provided they are not needed by the Empire."

"A reasonable offer," said Vivec after a pause. "You must forgive me, I am unused to Cyrodiils who offer something in return for what they take. May I have a few days to decide?"

"We will meet again in a week's time," said the Prince, smiling. "In the meantime, if your army provokes no attacks on mine, we are at peace."

Vivec left the Prince's chamber, feeling that Almalexia was right. The war was at an end. This Prince would make an excellent Emperor.

The Year is Continued in Sun's Height.

Sun's Height - Book Seven

by Carlovac Townway

4 Sun's Height, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

The Emperor Reman III and his Potentate Versidue-Shaie took a stroll around the Imperial Gardens. Studded with statuary and fountains, the north gardens fit the Emperor's mood, as well as being the coolest acreage in the City during the heat of summertide. Austere, tiered flowerbeds of blue-gray and green towered all around them as they walked.

"Vivec has agreed to the Prince's terms for peace," said Reman. "My son will be returning in two weeks' time."

"This is excellent news," said the Potentate carefully. "I hope the Dunmer will honor the terms. We might have asked for more. The fortress at Black Gate, for example. But I suppose the Prince knows what is reasonable. He would not cripple the Empire just for peace."

"I have been thinking lately of Rijja and what caused her to plot against my life," said the Emperor, pausing to admire a statue of the Slave Queen Alessia before continuing. "The only thing I can think of to account for it is that she admired my son too much. She may have loved me for my power and my personality, but he, after all, is young and handsome and will one day inherit my throne. She must have thought that if I were dead, she could have an Emperor who had both youth and power."

"The Prince ... was in on this plot?" asked Versidue-Shaie. It was a difficult game to play, anticipating where the Emperor's paranoia would strike next.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Reman, smiling. "No, my son loves me well."

"Are you aware that Corda, Raja's sister in an initiate of the Morwha

conservatorium in Hegathe?" asked the Potentate.

"Morwha?" asked the Emperor. "I've forgotten: which god is that?"

"Lusty fertility goddess of the Yokudans," replied the Potentate. "But not too lusty, like Dibella. Demure, but certainly sexual."

"I am through with lusty women. The Empress, Rijja, all too lusty, a lust for love leads to a lust for power," the Emperor shrugged his shoulders. "But a priestess-in-training with a certain healthy appetite sounds ideal. Now what were you saying about the Black Gate?"

6 Sun's Height, 2920
Thurzo Fortress, Cyrodiil

Rijja stood quietly looking at the cold stone floor while the Emperor spoke. He had never before seen her so pale and joyless. She might at least be pleased that she was being freed, being returned to her homeland. Why, if she left now, she could be in Hammerfell by the Merchant's Festival. Nothing he said seemed to register any reaction from her. A month and a half's stay in Thurzo Fortress seemed to have killed her spirit.

"I was thinking," said the Emperor at last. "Of having your younger sister Corda up to the palace for a time. I think she would prefer it over the conservatorium in Hegathe, don't you?"

Reaction, at last. Rijja looked at the Emperor with animal hatred, flinging herself at him in a rage. Her fingernails had grown long since her imprisonment and she raked them across his face, into his eyes. He howled with pain, and his guards pulled her off, pummeling her with blows from the back of their swords, until she was knocked unconscious.

A healer was called at once, but the Emperor Reman III had lost his right eye.

23 Sun's Height, 2920
Balmora, Morrowind

Vivec pulled himself from the water, feeling the heat of the day washed from his skin, taking a towel from one of his servants. Sotha Sil watched his old friend from the balcony.

"It looks like you've picked up a few more scars since I last saw you," said the sorcerer.

"Azura grant it that I have no more for a while," laughed Vivec. "When did you arrive?"

"A little over an hour ago," said Sotha Sil, walking down the stairs to the water's edge. "I thought I was coming to end a war, but it seems you've done it without me."

"Yes, eighty years is long enough for ceaseless battle," replied Vivec, embracing Sotha Sil. "We made concessions, but so did they. When the old Emperor is dead, we may be entering a golden age. Prince Juilek is very wise for his age. Where is Almalexia?"

"Collecting the Duke of Mournhold. They should be here tomorrow afternoon."

The men were distracted at a sight from around the corner of the palace - a rider was approaching through the town, heading for the front steps. It was evident that the woman had been riding hard for some time. They met her in the study, where she burst in, breathing hard.

"We have been betrayed," she gasped. "The Imperial Army has seized the Black Gate."

24 Sun's Height, 2920
Balmora, Morrowind

It was the first time in seventeen years that the three members of the Morrowind Tribunal had met in the same place, since Sotha Sil had left for Artaeum. All three wished that the circumstances of their reunion were different.

"From what we've learned, while the Prince was returning to Cyrodiil to the south, a second Imperial Army came down from the north," said Vivec to his stony-faced compatriots. "It is reasonable to assume Juilek didn't know about the attack."

"But neither would it be unreasonable to suppose that he planned on being a distraction while the Emperor launched the attack on Black Gate," said Sotha Sil. "This must be considered a break of the truce."

"Where is the Duke of Mournhold?" asked Vivec. "I would hear his thoughts on the matter."

"He is meeting with the Night Mother in Tel Aruhn," said Almalexia, quietly. "I told him to wait until he had spoken with you, but he said that the matter had waited long enough."

"He would involve the Morag Tong? In outside affairs?" Vivec shook his head, and looked to Sotha Sil: "Please, do what you can. Assassination will only move us backwards. This matter must be settled with diplomacy or battle."

25 Sun's Height, 2920
Tel Aruhn, Morrowind

The Night Mother met Sotha Sil in her salon, lit only by the moon. She was cruelly beautiful dressed in a simple silk black robe, lounging across her divan. With a gesture, she dismissed her red-cloaked guards and offered the

sorcerer some wine.

"You've only just missed your friend, the Duke," she whispered. "He was very unhappy, but I think we will solve his problem for him."

"Did he hire the Morag Tong to assassinate the Emperor?" asked Sotha Sil.

"You are straight-forward, aren't you? That's good. I love plain-speaking men: it saves so much time. Of course, I cannot discuss with you what the Duke and I talked about," she smiled. "It would be bad for business."

"What if I were to offer you an equal amount of gold for you not to assassinate the Emperor?"

"The Morag Tong murders for the glory of Mephala and for profit," she said, speaking into her glass of wine. "We do not merely kill. That would be sacrilege. Once the Duke's gold has arrived in three days time, we will do our end of the business. And I'm afraid we would not dream of entertaining a counter offer. Though we are a business as well as a religious order, we do not bow to supply and demand, Sotha Sil."

27 Sun's Height, 2920
The Inner Sea, Morrowind

Sotha Sil had been watching the waters for two days now, waiting for a particular vessel, and now he saw it. A heavy ship with the flag of Mournhold. The sorcerer took the air and intercepted it before it reached harbor. A caul of flame erupted over his figure, disguising his voice and form into that of a Daedra.

"Abandon your ship!" he bellowed. "If you would not sink with it!"

In truth, Sotha Sil could have exploded the vessel with but a single ball of fire, but he chose to take his time, to give the crew a chance to dive off into

the warm water. When he was certain there was no one living aboard, he focused his energy into a destructive wave that shook the air and water as it discharged. The ship and the Duke's payment to the Morag Tong sunk to the bottom of the Inner Sea.

"Night Mother," thought Sotha Sil, as he floated towards shore to alert the harbormaster that some sailors were in need of rescue. "Everyone bows to supply and demand."

The Year is Continued in Last Seed.

The Alduin/Akatosh Dichotomy - Book Seven [sic]

By Alexandre Simon

High Priest of the Akatosh Chantry, Wayrest

As High Priest of the Akatosh Chantry, I have dedicated my life to the service of the Great Dragon. He who was first at the Beginning. He who is greatest and most powerful of all the Divines. He who is the very embodiment of infinity.

I am, quite obviously, a man of deep and unwavering faith. But not blind faith, for I am also a man of scholarly endeavors, and have always valued education and the pursuit of truth, in all its forms. And so, I have had the honor and privilege of making it my life's work to discover the truth about Akatosh, in all of our beloved Divine's incarnations.

Throughout the civilized world (and I refer not only to the Empire, but to every nation on great Nirn that has embraced the virtues of learning and letters), the Great Dragon is worshipped. Usually, the highest of Divines is referred to as Akatosh. But what some may not be aware of is that he is occasionally referred to by two other names as well.

The Aldmer refer to Akatosh as Auri-El. The Nords call him Alduin. These names come up repeatedly in certain ancient texts, and in each one, it is clear that the deity in question is none other than he whom we call Akatosh.

Yet there are those who believe, even in this enlightened age, that this is not so. That the regional interpretations of Akatosh are not interpretations of Akatosh at all. Rather, they are references to altogether different deities, deities who may or may not share the same aspects or be the Great Dragon at all.

Many Altmer of Summerset Isle worship Auri-El, who is the soul of Anui-El, who in turn is the soul of Anu the Everything. But if you ask the high

elves themselves (as I did, when I traveled to Summerset Isle to continue my research), the majority will concede that Auri-El is but Akatosh with a different name, colored by their own cultural beliefs.

So maybe it comes as no surprise that the real theological dissention lies in Skyrim, among the Nord people - renowned as much for their stubbornness as they are their hardiness and prowess on the fields of valor. When I journeyed to the stark white province, I was surprised to find a people whose views on Akatosh are almost diametrically opposed to those of the Altmer. The majority of Nord people seem to believe that their Alduin of legend is not Akatosh, but another deity entirely. A great dragon, yes, but not the Great Dragon.

Determined to get to the heart of this matter, I consulted with several Nords, chief among them an old and respected clan chief by the name of Bjorn Much-Bloodied. And what surprised me most about those I talked to was not that they believed in Alduin instead of Akatosh, but that they recognized Alduin in addition to Akatosh. In fact, most children of Skyrim seem to view Akatosh in much the same way I do - he is, in fact, the Great Dragon. First among the Divines, perseverance personified and, more than anything, a force of supreme good in the world.

Alduin, they claim, is something altogether different.

Whether or not he is actually a deity remains in question, but the Alduin of Nord folklore is in fact a dragon, but one so ancient, and so powerful, he was dubbed the "World Eater," and some accounts even have him devouring the souls of the dead to maintain his own power. Other stories revolve around Alduin acting as some sort of dragon king, uniting the other dragons in a war against mankind, until he was eventually defeated at the hands of one or more brave heroes.

It is hard to deny that such legends are compelling. But as both High Priest and scholar, I am forced to ask that most important of questions - where is the evidence?

The Nords of Skyrim place a high value on their oral traditions, but such is

the core of their unreliability. A rumor passed around the Wayrest market square can change so dramatically in the course of a few simple hours, that by the end of the day, one might believe half the city's residents were involved in any number of scandalous activities. How then is an educated, enlightened person possibly supposed to believe a legend that has been passed down, by word of mouth only, for hundreds, or even thousands of years?

The answer to such a question is simple - he cannot.

And so, it is my conclusion that the Alduin of Nord legend is in fact mighty Akatosh, whose story grew twisted and deformed through centuries of retelling and embellishment. Through no real fault of their own, the primitive peoples of Skyrim failed to understand the goodness and greatness of the Great Dragon, and it was this lack of understanding that formed the basis of what became, ironically, their most impressive creative achievement - "Alduin," the World Eater, phantom of bedtime stories and justification for ancient (if imagined deeds).

Last Seed - Book Eight

by Carlovac Townway

1 Last Seed, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind
They were gathered in the Duke's courtyard at twilight, enjoying the smell and warmth of a fire of dry branches and bittergreen leaves. Tiny embers flew into the sky, hanging for a few moments before vanishing.

"I was rash," agreed the Duke, soberly. "But Lorkhan had his laugh, and all is well. The Morag Tong will not assassinate the Emperor now that my payment to them is at the bottom of the Inner Sea. I thought you had made some sort of a truce with the Daedra princes."

"What your sailors called a daedra may not have been one," said Sotha Sil. "Perhaps it was a rogue battlemage or even a lightning bolt that destroyed your ship."

"The Prince and the Emperor are en route to take possession of Ald Lambasi as our truce agreed. It is certainly typical of the Cyrodiil to assume that their concessions are negotiable, while ours are not," Vivec pulled out a map. "We can meet them here, in this village to the north-west of Ald Lambasi, Fervinthil."

"But will we meet them to talk," ask Almalexia. "Or to make war?"

No one had an answer to that.

15 Last Seed, 2920
Fervinthil, Morrowind

A late summer squall blew through the small village, darkening the sky except for flashing of lightning which leapt from cloud to cloud like

acrobats. Water rushed down the narrow streets ankle-deep, and the Prince had to shout to be heard by his captains but a few feet away from him.

"There's an inn up ahead! We'll wait there for the storm to pass before pressing on to Ald Lambasi!"

The inn was warm and dry, and bustling with business. Barmaids were rushing back and forth, bringing greef and wine to a back room, evidently excited about a famous visitor. Someone who was attracting more attention than the mere heir to the Empire of Tamriel. Amused, Juilek watched them run until he overheard the name of "Vivec."

"My Lord Vivec," he said, bursting into the back room. "You must believe me, I knew nothing about the attack on Black Gate until after it happened. We will, of course, be returning it to your care forthwith. I wrote you a letter to that effect at your palace in Balmora, but obviously you're not there," he paused, taking in the many new faces in the room. "I'm sorry, let me introduce myself. I'm Juilek Cyrodiil."

"My name is Almalexia," said the most beautiful woman the Prince had ever seen. "Won't you join us?"

"Sotha Sil," said a serious-looking Dunmer in a white cloak, shaking the Prince's hand and showing him to a seat.

"Indoril Brindisi Dorom, Duke-Prince of Mournhold," said the massively-built man next to him as he sat down.

"I recognize that the events of the last month suggest, at best, that the Imperial Army is not under my control," said the Prince after ordering some wine. "This is true. The army is my father's."

"I understood that the Emperor was going to be coming to Ald Lambasi as well," said Almalexia.

"Officially, he is," said the Prince cautiously. "Unofficially, he's still back in the Imperial City. He's met with an unfortunate accident."

Vivec glanced the Duke quickly before looking at the Prince: "An accident?"

"He's fine," said the Prince quickly. "He'll live, but it looks like he'll lose an eye. It was an altercation that has nothing to do with the war. The only good news is that while he recovers, I have the use of his seal. Any agreement we make here and now will be binding to the Empire, both in my father's reign and in mine."

"Then let's start agreeing," smiled Almalexia.

16 Last Seed, 2920
Wroth Naga, Cyrodiil

The tiny hamlet of Wroth Naga greeted Cassyr with its colorful houses perched on a promontory overlooking the stretch of the Wrothgarian mountain plain and High Rock beyond. Had he been in a better mood, the sight would have been breathtaking. As it was, he could only think that in practical terms, a small village like this would have meager provisions for himself and his horse.

He rode down into the main square, where an inn called the Eagle's Cry stood. Directing the stable boy to house and feed his horse, Cassyr walked into the inn and was surprised by its ambience. A minstrel he had heard play once in Gilderdale was performing a jaunty old tune to the clapping of the mountain men. Such forced merriment was not what Cassyr wanted at that moment. A glum Dunmer woman was seated at the only table far from the noise, so he took his drink there and sat down without invitation. It was only when he did so that he noticed that she was holding a newborn baby.

"I've just come from Morrowind," he said rather awkwardly, lowering his voice. "I've been fighting for Vivec and the Duke of Mournhold against the Imperial army. A traitor to my people, I guess you'd call me."

"I am also a traitor to my people," said the woman, holding up her hand

which was scarred with a branded symbol. "It means that I can never go back to my homeland."

"Well, you're not thinking of staying here, are you?" laughed Cassyr. "It's certainly quaint, but come wintertide, there's going to be snow up to your eyelashes. It's no place for a new baby. What is her name?"

"Bosriel. It means 'Beauty of the Forest.' Where are you going?"

"Dwynnen, on the bay in High Rock. You're welcome to join me, I could use the company." He held out his hand. "Cassyr Whitley."

"Turala," said the woman after a pause. She was going to use her family's name first, as is tradition, but she realized that it was no longer her name. "I would love to accompany you, thank you."

19 Last Seed, 2920
Ald Lambasi, Morrowind

Five men and two women stood in the silence of the Great Room of the castle, the only sound the scrawl of quill on parchment and the gentle tapping of rain on the large picture window. As the Prince set the seal of Cyrodiil on the document, the peace was made official. The Duke of Mournhold broke out in a roar of delight, ordering wine brought in to commemorate the end of eighty years of war.

Only Sotha Sil stood apart from the group. His face betrayed no emotion. Those who knew him best knew he did not believe in endings or beginnings, but in the continuous cycle of which this was but a small part.

"My Prince," said the castle steward, unhappy at breaking the celebration. "There is a messenger here from your mother, the Empress. He asked to see your father, but as he did not arrive --"

Juilek excused himself and went to speak with the messenger.

"The Empress does not live in the Imperial City?" asked Vivec.

"No," said Almalexia, shaking her head sadly. "Her husband has imprisoned her in Black Marsh, fearing that she was plotting a revolution against him. She is extremely wealthy and has powerful allies in the western Colovian estates so he could not marry another or have her executed. They've been at an impasse for the last seventeen years since Juilek was a child."

The Prince returned a few minutes later. His face betrayed his anxiety, though he took troubles to hide it.

"My mother needs me," he said simply. "I'm afraid I must leave at once. If I may have a copy of the treaty, I will bring it with me to show the Empress the good we have done today, and then I will carry it on to the Imperial City so it may be made official."

Prince Juilek left with the fond farewells of the Three of Morrowind. As they watched him ride out into the rainswept night south towards Black Marsh, Vivec said, "Tamriel will be much healed when he has the throne."

31 Last Seed, 2920
Dorsza Pass, Black Marsh

The moon was rising over the desolate quarry, steaming with swamp gas from a particularly hot summer as the Prince and his two guard escort rode out of the forest. The massive piles of earth and dung had been piled high in antiquity by some primitive, long-dead tribe of Black Marsh, hoping to keep out some evil from the north. Evidently, the evil had broken through at Dorsza Pass, the large crack in the sad, lonely rampart that stretched for miles.

The black twisted trees that grew on the barrier cast strange shadows down, like a net tangling. The Prince's mind was on his mother's cryptic letter, hinting at the threat of an invasion. He could not, of course, tell the Dunmer about it, at the very least until he knew more and had notified his father. After all, the letter was meant for him. It was its urgent tone that made him

decide to go directly to Gideon.

The Empress had also warned him about a band of former slaves who attacked caravans going into Dorsza Pass. She advised him to be certain to make his Imperial shield visible, so they would know he was not one of the hated Dunmer slavers. Upon riding into the tall weeds that flooded through the pass like a noxious river, the Prince ordered that his shield be displayed.

"I can see why the slaves use this," said the Prince's captain. "It's an excellent location for an ambush."

Juilek nodded his head, but his thoughts were elsewhere. What threat of invasion could the Empress have discovered? Were the Akaviri on the seas again? If so, how could his mother from her cell in Castle Giovese know of it? A rustle in the weeds and a single sharp human cry behind him interrupted his ponderings.

Turning around, the Prince discovered that he was alone. His escort had vanished.

The Prince peered over the stretch of the moonlit sea of grass which waved in almost hypnotic patterns to the ebb and flow of the night wind billowing through the pass. It was impossible to tell if a struggling soldier was beneath this system of vibrations, a dying horse behind another. A high, whistling wind drowned out any sound the victims of the ambush might be making.

Juilek drew his sword, and thought about what to do, his mind willing his heart not to panic. He was closer to the exit of the pass than the entrance. Whatever had slain his escort must have been behind him. If he rode fast enough, perhaps he could outrun it. Spurring his horse to gallop, he charged for the hills ahead, framed by the mighty black piles of dirt.

When he was thrown, it happened so suddenly, he was hurdling forward before he was truly conscious of the fact. He landed several yards beyond where his horse had fallen, breaking his shoulder and his back on impact. A numbness washed over him as he stared at his poor, dying steed, its belly

sliced open by one of several spears jutting up just below the surface of the grass.

Prince Juilek was not able to turn and face the figure that emerged from the grass, nor able to move to defend himself. His throat was cut without ceremony.

Miramor cursed when he saw the face of his victim more clearly in the moonlight. He had seen the Emperor at the Battle of Bodrum when he had fought in His Imperial Majesty's command, and this was clearly not the Emperor. Searching the body, he found the letter and a treaty signed by Vivec, Almalexia, Sotha Sil, and the Duke of Mournhold representing Morrowind and the Prince Juilek Cyrodiil, representing the Cyrodiil Empire.

"Curse my luck," muttered Miramor to himself and the whispering grass. "I've only killed a Prince. Where's the reward in that?"

Miramor destroyed the letter, as Zuuk had instructed him to do, and pocketed the treaty. At the very least, such a curiosity would have some market value. He disassembled the traps as he pondered his next step. Return to Gideon and ask his employer for a lesser reward for killing the heir? Move on to other lands? At the very least, he considered, he had picked up two useful skills from the Battle of Bodrum. From the Dunmer, he had learned the excellent spear trap. And abandoning the Imperial army, he had learned how to skulk in the grass.

The Year is Continued in Hearth Fire.

Hearth Fire - Book Nine

by Carlovac Townway

2 Hearth Fire, 2920
Gideon, Black Marsh

The Empress Tavia lay across her bed, a hot late summer wind she could not feel banging the shutters of her cell to and fro against the iron bars. Her throat felt like it was on fire but still she sobbed, uncontrollably, wringing her last tapestry in her hands. Her wailing echoed throughout the hollow halls of Castle Giovese, stopping maids in their washing and guards in their conversation. One of her women came up the narrow stairs to see her mistress, but her chief guard Zuuk stood at the doorway and shook his head.

"She's just heard that her son is dead," he said quietly.

5 Hearth Fire, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

"Your Imperial Majesty," said the Potentate Versidue-Shaie through the door. "You can open the door. I assure you, you're perfectly safe. No one wants to kill you."

"Mara's blood!" came the Emperor Reman III's voice, muffled, hysterical, tinged with madness. "Someone assassinated the Prince, and he was holding my shield! They could have thought he was me!"

"You're certainly correct, your Imperial Majesty," replied the Potentate, expunging any mocking qualities from his voice while his black-slitted eyes rolled contemptuously. "And we must find and punish the evildoer responsible for your son's death. But we cannot do it without you. You must be brave for your Empire."

There was no reply.

"At the very least, come out and sign the order for Lady Rijja's execution," called the Potentate. "Let us dispose of the one traitor and assassin we know of."

A brief pause, and then the sound of furniture scraping across the floor. Reman opened the door just a crack, but the Potentate could see his angry, fearful face, and the terrible mound of ripped tissue that used to be his right eye. Despite the best healers in the Empire, it was still a ghastly souvenir of the Lady Rijja's work in Thurzo Fortress.

"Hand me the order," the Emperor snarled. "I'll sign it with pleasure."

6 Hearth Fire, 2920
Gideon, Cyrodiil

The strange blue glow of the will o' the wisps, a combination, so she'd be told, of swamp gas and spiritual energy, had always frightened Tavia as she looked out her window. Now it seemed strangely comforting. Beyond the bog lay the city of Gideon. It was funny, she thought, that she had never stepped foot in its streets, though she had watched it ever day for seventeen years.

"Can you think of anything I've forgotten?" she asked, turning to look back on the loyal Kothringi Zuuk.

"I know exactly what to do," he said simply. He seemed to smile, but the Empress realized that it was only her own face reflected in his silvery skin. She was smiling, and she didn't even realize it.

"Make certain you aren't followed," she warned. "I don't want my husband to know where my gold's been hiding all these years. And do take your share of it. You've been a good friend."

The Empress Tavia stepped forward and dropped from sight into the mists.

Zuuk replaced the bars on the tower window, and threw a blanket over some pillows on her bed. With any luck, they would not discover her body on the lawn until morning, at which time he hoped to be halfway to Morrowind.

9 Hearth Fire, 2920
Phrygias, High Rock

The strange trees on all sides resembled knobby piles crowned with great bursts of reds, yellows, and oranges, like insect mounds caught fire. The Wrothgarian mountains were fading into the misty afternoon. Turala marveled at the sight, so alien, so different from Morrowind, as she plodded the horse forward into an open pasture. Behind her, head nodding against his chest, Cassyr slept, cradling Bosriel. For a moment, Turala considered jumping the low painted fence that crossed the field, but she thought better of it. Let Cassyr sleep for a few more hours before giving him the reigns.

As the horse passed into the field, Turala saw the small green house on the next hill, half-hidden in forest. So picturesque was the image, she felt herself lull into a pleasant half-sleeping state. A blast of a horn brought her back to reality with a shudder. Cassyr opened his eyes.

"Where are we?" he hissed.

"I don't know," Turala stammered, wide-eyed. "What is that sound?"

"Orcs," he whispered. "A hunting party. Head for the thicket quickly."

Turala trotted the horse into the small collection of trees. Cassyr handed her the child and dismounted. He began pulling their bags off next, throwing them into the bushes. A sound started then, a distant rumbling of footfall, growing louder and closer. Turala climbed off carefully and helped Cassyr unburden the horse. All the while, Bosriel watched open-eyed. Turala sometimes worried that her baby never cried. Now she was grateful for it. With the last of the luggage off, Cassyr slapped the horse's rear, sending it galloping into the field. Taking Turala's hand, he hunkered down in the

bushes.

"With luck," he murmured. "They'll think she's wild or belongs to the farm and won't go looking for the rider."

As he spoke, a horde of orcs surged into the field, blasting their horns. Turala had seen orcs before, but never in such abundance, never with such bestial confidence. Roaring with delight at the horse and its confused state, they hastened past the timber where Cassyr, Turala, and Bosriel hid. The wildflowers flew into the air at their stampede, powdering the air with seeds. Turala tried to hold back a sneeze, and thought she succeeded. One of the orcs heard something though, and brought another with him to investigate.

Cassyr quietly unsheathed his sword, mustering all the confidence he could. His skills, such as they were, were in spying, not combat, but he vowed to protect Turala and her babe for as long as he could. Perhaps he would slay these two, he reasoned, but not before they cried out and brought the rest of the horde.

Suddenly, something invisible swept through the bushes like a wind. The orcs flew backwards, falling dead on their backs. Turala turned and saw a wrinkled crone with bright red hair emerge from a nearby bush.

"I thought you were going to bring 'em right to me," she whispered, smiling. "Best come with me."

The three followed the old woman through a deep crevasse of bramble bushes that ran through the field toward the house on the hill. As they emerged on the other side, the woman turned to look at the orcs feasting on the remains of the horse, a blood-soaked orgy to the beat of multiple horns.

"That horse yours?" she asked. When Cassyr nodded, she laughed loudly. "That's rich meat, that is. Those monsters'll have bellyaches and flatulence in the morning. Serves 'em right."

"Shouldn't we keep moving?" whispered Turala, unnerved by the woman's

laughter.

"They won't come up here," she grinned, looking at Bosriel who smiled back. "They're too afraid of us."

Turala turned to Cassyr, who shook his head. "Witches. Am I correct in assuming that this is Old Barbyn's Farm, the home of the Skeffington Coven?"

"You are, pet," the old woman giggled girlishly, pleased to be so infamous. "I am Mynista Skeffington."

"What did you do to those orcs?" asked Turala. "Back there in the thicket?"

"Spirit fist right side the head," Mynista said, continuing the climb up the hill. Ahead of them was the farmhouse grounds, a well, a chicken coop, a pond, women of all ages doing chores, the laughter of children at play. The old woman turned and saw that Turala did not understand. "Don't you have witches where you come from, child?"

"None that I know of," she said.

"There are all sorts of wielders of magic in Tamriel," she explained. "The Psijics study magic like its their painful duty. The battlemages in the army on the other end of the scale hurl spells like arrows. We witches commune and conjure and celebrate. To fell those orcs, I merely whispered to the spirits of the air, Amaro, Pina, Tallatha, the fingers of Kynareth, and the breath of the world, with whom I have an intimate acquaintance, to smack those bastards dead. You see, conjuration is not about might, or solving riddles, or agonizing over musty old scrolls. It's about fostering relations. Being friendly, you might say."

"Well, we certainly appreciate you being friendly with us," said Cassyr.

"As well you might," coughed Mynista. "Your kind destroyed the orc homeland two thousand years ago. Before that, they never came all the way up here and bothered us. Now let's get you cleaned up and fed."

With that, Mynista led them into the farm, and Turala met the family of the Skeffington Coven.

11 Hearth Fire, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

Rijja had not even tried to sleep the night before, and she found the somber music played during her execution to have a soporific effect. It was as if she was willing herself to be unconscious before the ax stroke. Her eyes were bound so she could not see her former lover, the Emperor, seated before her, glaring with his one good eye. She could not see the Potentate Versidue-Shaie, his coil neatly wrapped beneath him, a look of triumph in his golden face. She could feel, numbly, the executioner's hand touch her back to steady her. She flinched like a dreamer trying to awake.

The first blow caught the back of her head and she screamed. The next hacked through her neck, and she was dead.

The Emperor turned to the Potentate wearily, "Now that's done. You said she had a pretty sister in Hammerfell named Corda?"

18 Hearth Fire, 2920
Dwynnen, High Rock

The horse the witches had sold him was not as good as his old one, Cassyr considered. Spirit worship and sacrifice and sisterhood might be all well and good for conjuring spirits, but it tends to spoil beasts of burden. Still, there was little to complain about. With the Dunmer woman and her child gone, he had made excellent time. Ahead were the walls surrounding the city of his homeland. Almost at once, he was set upon by his old friends and family.

"How went the war?" cried his cousin, running to the road. "Is it true that Vivec signed a peace with the Prince, but the Emperor refuses to honor it?"

"That's not how it was, was it?" asked a friend, joining them. "I heard that the Dunmer had the Prince murdered and then made up a story about a treaty, but there's no evidence for it."

"Isn't there anything interesting happening here?" Cassyr laughed. "I really don't have the least interest in discussing the war or Vivec."

"You missed the procession of the Lady Corda," said his friend. "She came across the bay with full entourage and then east to the Imperial City."

"But that's nothing. What was Vivec like?" asked his cousin eagerly. "He supposed to be a living god."

"If Sheogorath steps down and they need another God of Madness, he'll do," said Cassyr haughtily.

"And the women?" asked the lad, who had only seen Dunmer ladies on very rare occasions.

Cassyr merely smiled. Turala Skeffington flashed into his mind for an instant before fading away. She would be happy with the coven, and her child would be well cared for. But they were part of the past now, a place and a war he wanted to forget forever. Dismounting his horse, he walked it into the city, chatting of trivial gossip of life on the Iliac Bay.

Frostfall - Book Ten

by Carlovac Townway

10 Frostfall, 2920
Phrygias, High Rock

The creature before them blinked, senseless, its eyes glazed, mouth opening and closing as if relearning its function. A thin glob of saliva burbled down between its fangs, and hung suspended. Turala had never seen anything of its kind before, reptilian and massive, perched on its hind legs like a man. Mynistera applauded enthusiastically.

"My child," she crowed. "You have come so far in so short a time. What were you thinking when you summoned this daedroth?"

It took Turala a moment to recall whether she was thinking anything at all. She was merely overwhelmed that she had reached out across the fabric of reality into the realm of Oblivion, and plucked forth this loathsome creature, conjuring it into the world by the power of her mind.

"I was thinking of the color red," Turala said, concentrating. "The simplicity and clarity of it. And then -- I desired, and spoke the charm. And this is what I conjured up."

"Desire is a powerful force for a young witch," said Mynistera. "And it is well matched in this instance. For this daedroth is nothing if not a simple force of the spirits. Can you release your desire as easily?"

Turala closed her eyes and spoke the dismissal invocation. The monster faded away like a painting in sunlight, still blinking confusedly. Mynistera embraced her Dark Elf pupil, laughing with delight.

"I never would have believed it, a month and a day you've been with the coven, and you're already far more advanced than most of the women here.

There is powerful blood in you, Turala, you touch spirits like you were touching a lover. You'll be leading this coven one day -- I have seen it!"

Turala smiled. It was good to be complimented. The Duke of Mournhold had praised her pretty face; and her family, before she had dishonored them, praised her manners. Cassyr had been nothing more than a companion: his compliments meant nothing. But with Mynistera, she felt she was home.

"You'll be leading the coven for many years yet, great sister," said Turala.

"I certainly intend to. But the spirits, while marvelous companions and faultless tellers of truth, are often hazy about the when and hows. You can't blame them really. When and how mean so little to them," Mynistera opened the door to the shed, allowing the brisk autumn breeze in to dispel the bitter and fetid smells of the daedroth. "Now, I need you to run an errand to Wayrest. It's only a week's ride there, and a week's ride back. Bring Doryatha and Celephyna with you. As much as we try to be self-sufficient, there are herbs we can't grow here, and we seem to run through an enormous quantity of gems in no time at all. It's important that the people of the city learn to recognize you as one of the wise women of Skeffington coven. You'll find the benefits of being notorious far outweigh the inconveniences."

Turala did as she was bade. As she and her sisters climbed aboard their horses, Mynistera brought her child, little five-month-old Bosriel to kiss her mother good-bye. The witches were in love with the little Dunmer infant, fathered by a wicked Duke, birthed by wild Ayleid elves in the forest heart of the Empire. Turala knew her nursemaids would protect her child with their lives. After many kisses and a farewell wave, the three young witches rode off into the bright woods, under a covering of red, yellow, and orange.

12 Frostfall, 2920
Dwynnen, High Rock

For a Middas evening, the Least Loved Porcupine tavern was wildly crowded. A roaring fire in the pit in the center of the room cast an almost

sinister glow on all the regulars, and made the abundance of bodies look like a punishment tapestry inspired by the Arcturian Heresies. Cassyr took his usual place with his cousin and ordered a flagon of ale.

"Have you been to see the Baron?" asked Palyth.

"Yes, he may have work for me in the palace of Urvaius," said Cassyr proudly. "But more than that I can't say. You understand, secrets of state and all that. Why are there so many damned people here tonight?"

"A shipload of Dark Elves just came in to harbor. They've come from the war. I was just waiting until you got here to introduce you as another veteran."

Cassyr blushed, but regained his composure enough to ask: "What are they doing here? Has there been a truce?"

"I don't know the full story," said Palyth. "But apparently, the Emperor and Vivec are in negotiations again. These fellas here have investments they were keen to check on, and they figured things on the Bay were quiet enough. But the only way we can get the full story is to talk to the chaps."

With that, Palyth gripped his cousin's arm and pulled him to the other side of the bar so suddenly, Cassyr would have had to struggle violently to resist. The Dunmer travelers were spread out across four of the tables, laughing with the locals. They were largely amiable young men, well-dressed, befitting merchants, animated in gesture made more extravagant by liquor.

"Excuse me," said Palyth, intruding on the conversation. "My shy cousin Cassyr was in the war as well, fighting for the living god, Vivec."

"The only Cassyr I ever heard of," said one of the Dunmer drunkenly with a wide, friendly smile, shaking Cassyr's free hand. "Was a Cassyr Whitley, who Vivec said was the worst spy in history. We lost Ald Marak due to his bungling intelligence work. For your sake, friend, I hope the two of you were never confused."

Cassyr smiled and listened as the lout told the story of his failure with bountiful exaggerations which caused the table to roar with laughter. Several eyes looked his way, but none of the locals sought to explain that the fool of the tale was standing at attention. The eyes that stung the most were his cousin's, the young man who had believed that he had returned to Dwynnen a great hero. At some point, certainly, the Baron would hear about it, his idiocy increasing manifold with each retelling.

With every fiber in his soul, Cassyr cursed the living god Vivec.

21 Frostfall, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

Corda, in a robe of blinding whiteness, a uniform of the priestesses of the Hegathe Morwha conservatorium, arrived in the City just as the first winter storm was passing. The clouds broke with sunlight, and the beauteous teenaged Redguard girl appeared in the wide avenue with escort, riding toward the Palace. While her sister was tall, thin, angular, and haughty, Corda was a small, round-faced lass with wide brown eyes. The locals were quick to draw comparisons.

"Not a month after Lady Rijja's execution," muttered a housemaid, peering out the window, and winking to her neighbor.

"And not a month out of the nunnery neither," the other woman agreed, reveling in the scandal. "This one's in for a ride. Her sister weren't no innocent, and look where she ended up."

24 Frostfall, 2920
Dwynnen, High Rock

Cassyr stood on the harbor and watched the early sleet fall on the water. It was a pity, he thought, that he was prone to sea-sickness. There was nothing for him now in Tamriel to the east or to the west. Vivec's tale of his poor spycraft had spread to taverns everywhere. The Baron of Dwynnen had

released him from his contract. No doubt they were laughing about him in Daggerfall, too, and Dawnstar, Lilmoth, Rimmen, Greenheart, probably in Akavir and Yokuda for that matter. Perhaps it would be best to drop into the waves and sink. The thought, however, did not stay long in his mind: it was not despair that haunted him, but rage. Impotent fury that he could not assuage.

"Excuse me, sir," said a voice behind him, making him jump. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering whether you could recommend an inexpensive tavern for me to spend the night."

It was a young man, a Nord, with a sack over his shoulder. Obviously, he had just disembarked from one of the boats. For the first time in weeks, someone was looking at Cassyr as something other than a colossal, famous idiot. He could not help, black as his mood was, but be friendly.

"You've just arrived from Skyrim?" asked Cassyr.

"No, sir, that's where I'm going," said the fellow. "I'm working my way home. I've come up from Sentinel, and before that Stros M'kai, and before that Woodhearth in Valenwood, and before that Artaeum in Summurset. Welleg's my name."

Cassyr introduced himself and shook Welleg's hand. "Did you say you came from Artaeum? Are you a Psijic?"

"No, sir, not anymore," the fellow shrugged. "I was expelled."

"Do you know anything about summoning daedra? You see, I want to cast a curse against a particularly powerful person, one might say a living god, and I haven't had any luck. The Baron won't allow me in his sight, but the Baroness has sympathy for me and allowed me the use of their Summoning Chambers." Cassyr spat. "I did all the rituals, made sacrifices, but nothing came of it."

"That'd be because of Sotha Sil, my old master," replied Welleg with some bitterness. "The Daedra princes have agreed not to be summoned by any

amateurs at least until the war ends. Only the Psijics may counsel with the daedra, and a few nomadic sorcerers and witches."

"Witches, did you say?"

29 Frostfall, 2920
Phrygias, High Rock

Pale sunlight flickered behind the mist bathing the forest as Turala, Doryatha, and Celephyna drove their horses on. The ground was wet with a thin layer of frost, and laden down with goods, it was a slippery way over unpaved hills. Turala tried to contain her excitement about coming back to the coven. Wayrest had been an adventure, and she adored the looks of fear and respect the cityfolk gave her. But for the last few days, all she could think of was returning to her sisters and her child.

A bitter wind whipped her hair forward so she could see nothing but the path ahead. She did not hear the rider approach to her side until he was almost upon her. When she turned and saw Cassyr, she shouted with as much surprise as pleasure at meeting an old friend. His face was pale and drawn, but she took it to be merely from travel.

"What brings you back to Phrygias?" she smiled. "Were you not treated well in Dwynnen?"

"Well enough," said Cassyr. "I have need of the Skeffington coven."

"Ride with us," said Turala. "I'll bring you to Mynistera."

The four continued on, and the witches regaled Cassyr with tales of Wayrest. It was evident that it was also a rare treat for Doryatha and Celephyna to leave Old Barbyn's Farm. They had been born there, as daughters and grand-daughters of Skeffington witches. Ordinary High Rock city life was exotic to them as it was to Turala. Cassyr said little, but smiled and nodded his head, which was encouragement enough. Thankfully, none of the stories they had heard were about his own stupidity. Or at the very

least, they did not tell him.

Doryatha was in the midst of a tale she had heard in a tavern about a thief who had been locked overnight in a pawnshop when they crossed over a familiar hill. Suddenly, she halted in her story. The barn was supposed to be visible, but it was not. The other three followed her gaze into the fog, and a moment later, they rode as fast as they could towards what was once the site of the Skeffington coven.

The fire had long since burned out. Nothing but ashes, skeletons, and broken weaponry remained. Cassyr recognized at once the signs of an orc raid.

The witches fell from their horses, racing through the remains, wailing. Celephyna found a tattered, bloody piece of cloth that she recognized from Mynistera's cloak. She held it to her ashen face, sobbing. Turala screamed for Bosriel, but the only reply was the high whistling wind through the ashes.

"Who did this?" she cried, tears streaking down her face. "I swear I'll conjure up the very flames of Oblivion! What have they done with my baby?"

"I know who did it," said Cassyr quietly, dropping from his horse and walking towards her. "I've seen these weapons before. I fear I met the very fiends responsible in Dwynnen, but I never thought they'd find you. This is the work of assassins hired by the Duke of Mournhold."

He paused. The lie came easily. Adopt and improvise. What's more, he could tell instantly that she believed it. Her resentment over the cruelty the Duke had shown her had quieted, but never disappeared. One look at her burning eyes told him that she would summon the daedra and wreak his, and her, revenge upon Morrowind. And what's more, he knew they'd listen.

And listen they did. For the power that is greater than desire is rage. Even rage misplaced.

Sun's Dusk - Book Eleven

by Carlovac Townway

2 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Tel Aruhn, Morrowind

"A man to see you, Night Mother," said the guard. "A Kothringi tribesman who presents his credentials as Lord Zuuk of Black Marsh, part of the Imperial Garrison of Gideon."

"What makes you think I'd have even the slightest possible interest in seeing him?" asked the Night Mother with venomous sweetness.

"He brings a letter from the late Empress of the Cyrodilic Empire."

"We are having a busy day," she smiled, clapping her hands together with delight. "Show him in."

Zuuk entered the chamber. His metallic skin, though exposed only at his face and hands, caught the light of the fireplace and the lightning of the stormy night from the window. The Night Mother noted also that she could see herself as he saw her: serene, beautiful, fear-inspiring. He handed her his letter from the Empress without a word. Sipping her wine, she read it.

"The Duke of Morrowind also offered me an appreciable sum to have the Emperor murdered earlier this year," she said, folding the letter. "His payment sunk, and never was delivered. It was a considerable annoyance, particularly as I had already gone to the trouble of putting one of my agents in the palace. Why should I assume that your more-than-generous payment, from a dead woman, will arrive?"

"I brought it with me," said Zuuk simply. "It is in the carriage outside."

"Then bring it in and our business is complete," smiled the Night Mother.

"The Emperor will be dead by year's end. You may leave the gold with Apaladith. Unless you'd care for some wine?"

Zuuk declined the offer and withdrew. The moment he left the room, Miramor slipped noiselessly back from behind the dark tapestry. The Night Mother offered him a glass of wine, and he accepted it.

"I know that fellow, Zuuk," said Miramor carefully. "I didn't know he worked for the old Empress though."

"Let's talk about you some more, if you don't mind," she said, knowing he would, in fact, not mind.

"Let me show you my worth," said Miramor. "Let me be the one to do the Emperor in. I've already killed his son, and you saw there how well I can hide myself away. Tell me you saw one ripple in the tapestry."

The Night Mother smiled. Things were falling into place rather nicely.

"If you know how to use a dagger, you will find him at Bodrum," she said, and described to him what he must do.

3 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

The Duke stared out the window. It was early morning, and for the fourth straight day, a red mist hung over the city, flashing lightning. A freakish wind blew through the streets, ripping his flags from the castle battlements, forcing all his people to close their shudders tightly. Something terrible was coming to his land. He was not a greatly learned man, but he knew the signs. So too did his subjects.

"When will my messengers reach the Three?" he growled, turning to his castellan.

"Vivec is far to the north, negotiating the treaty with the Emperor," the man

said, his face and voice trembling with fear. "Almalexia and Sotha Sil are in Necrom. Perhaps they can be reached in a few days time."

The Duke nodded. He knew his messengers were fast, but so too was the hand of Oblivion.

6 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Bodrum, Morrowind

Torchlight caught in the misting snow gave the place an otherworldly quality. The soldiers from both camps found themselves huddled together around the largest of the bonfires: winter bringing enemies of four score of warring close together. While only a few of the Dunmer guard could speak Cyrodilic, they found common ground battling for warmth. When a pretty Redguard maiden passed into their midst to warm herself before moving back to the treaty tent, many a man from both army raised their eyes in approval.

The Emperor Reman III was eager to leave negotiations before they had ever begun. A month earlier, he thought it would be a sign of good will to meet at the site of his defeat to Vivec's army, but the place brought back more bad memories than he thought it would. Despite the protestations of Potentate Versidue-Shaie that the rocks of the river were naturally red, he could swear he saw splatters of his soldier's blood.

"We have all the particulars of the treaty," he said, taking a glass of hot yuelle from his mistress Corda. "But here and now is not the place for signing. We should do it at the Imperial Palace, with all the pomp and splendor this historic occasion demands. You must bring Almalexia with you too. And that wizard fellow."

"Sotha Sil," whispered the Potentate.

"When?" asked Vivec with infinite patience.

"In exactly a month's time," said the Emperor, smiling munificently and

clambering awkwardly to his feet. "We will hold a grand ball to commemorate. Now I must take a walk. My legs are all cramped up with the weather. Corda, my dear, will you walk with me?"

"Of course, your Imperial Majesty," she said, helping him toward the tent's entrance.

"Would you like me to come with you as well, your Imperial Majesty?" asked Versidue-Shaie.

"Or I?" asked King Dro'Zel of Senchal, a newly appointed advisor to the court.

"That won't be necessary, I won't be gone a minute," said Reman.

Miramor crouched in the same rushes he had hidden in nearly eight months before. Now the ground was hard and snow-covered, and the rushes slick with ice. Every slight movement he made issued forth a crunch. If it were not for the raucous songs of the combined Morrowind and Imperial army gathered about the bonfire, he would not have dared creep as close to the Emperor and his concubine. They were standing at the curve in the frozen creek below the bluff, surrounded by trees sparkling with ice.

Carefully, Miramor removed the dagger from its sheath. He had slightly exaggerated his abilities with a short blade to the Night Mother. True, he had used one to cut the throat of Prince Juilek, but the lad was not in any position to fight back at the time. Still, how difficult could it be to stab an old man with one eye? What sort of blade skill would such an easy assassination require?

His ideal moment presented itself before his eyes. The woman saw something deeper in the woods, an icicle of an unusual shape she said, and darted off to get it. The Emperor remained behind, laughing. He turned to the face of the bluff to see his soldiers singing their song's refrain, his back to his assassin. Miramor knew the moment had come. Mindful of the sound of his footfall on the icy ground, he stepped forward and struck. Very nearly.

Almost simultaneously, he was aware of a strong arm holding back his striking arm and another one punching a dagger into his throat. He could not scream. The Emperor, still looking up at the soldiers, never saw Miramor pulled back into the brush and a hand much more skilled than his slicing into his back, paralyzing him.

His blood pooling out and already crystallizing on the frozen ground, Miramor watched, dying, as the Emperor and his courtesan returned to join the camp up on the bluff.

12 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

A gout of ever-erupting flame was all that remained of the central courtyard of Castle Mournhold, blasting skyward into the boiling clouds. A thick, tarry smoke rolled through the streets, igniting everything that was wood or paper on fire. Winged bat-like creatures harried the citizens from their hiding places out into the open, where they were met by the real army. The only thing that kept all of Mournhold from burning to the ground was the wet, sputtering blood of its people.

Mehrunes Dagon smiled as he surveyed the castle crumbling.

"To think I nearly didn't come," he said aloud, his voice booming over the chaos. "Imagine missing all this fun."

His attention was arrested by a needle-thin shaft of light piercing through his black and red shadowed sky. He followed it to its source, two figures, a man and a woman standing on the hill above town. The man in the white robe he recognized immediately as Sotha Sil, the sorcerer who had talked all the Princes of Oblivion into that meaningless truce.

"If you've come for the Duke of Mournhold, he isn't here," laughed Mehrunes Dagon. "But you might find pieces of him the next time it rains."

"Daedra, we cannot kill you," said Almalexia, her face hard and resolute. "But that you will soon regret."

With that, two living gods and a prince of Oblivion engaged in battle on the ruins of Mournhold.

17 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Tel Aruhn, Morrowind

"Night Mother," said the guard. "Correspondence from your agent in the Imperial Palace."

The Night Mother read the note carefully. The test had been a success: Miramor had been successfully detected and slain. The Emperor was in very unsafe hands. The Night Mother responded immediately.

18 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Balmora, Morrowind

Sotha Sil, face solemn and unreadable, greeted Vivec at the grand plaza in front of his palace. Vivec had ridden day and night after hearing about the battle in his tent in Bodrum, crossing mile after mile, cutting through the dangerous ground at Dagoth-Ur at blinding speed. To the south, during all the course of the voyage, he could see the whirling red clouds and knew that the battle was continuing, day after day. In Gnisis, he met a messenger from Sotha Sil, asking him to meet at Balmora.

"Where is Almalexia?"

"Inside," said Sotha Sil wearily. There was a long, ugly gash running across his jaw. "She's gravely injured, but Mehrunes Dagon will not return from Oblivion for many a moon."

Almalexia lay on a bed of silk, tended to by Vivec's own healers. Her face, even her lips, was gray as stone, and blood stained through the gauze of her

bandages. Vivec took her cold hand. Almalexia's mouth moved wordlessly. She was dreaming.

She was battling Mehrunes Dagon again amid a firestorm. All around her, the blackened husk of a castle crumbled, splashing sparks into the night sky. The Daedra's claws dug into her belly, spreading poison through her veins while Almalexia throttled him. As she sank to the ground beside her defeated foe, she saw that the castle consumed by fire was not Castle Mournhold. It was the Imperial Palace.

24 Sun's Dusk, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

A winter gale blew over the city, splashing the windows and glass domes of the Imperial Palace. Quivering light rays illuminated the figures within in surreal patterns.

The Emperor barked orders to his staff in preparations for the banquet and ball. This was what he enjoyed best, more than battle. King Dro'Zel was supervising the entertainment, having strong opinions on the matter. The Emperor himself was arranging the details of the dinner. Roast nebfish, vegetable marrow, cream soups, buttered helerac, codscrumb, tongue in aspic. Potentate Versidue-Shaie had made a few suggestions of his own, but the tastes of the Akaviri were very peculiar.

The Lady Corda accompanied the Emperor to his chambers as night fell.

The Year is Concluded in Evening Star.

Evening Star - Book Twelve

by Carlovac Townway

1 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Balmora, Morrowind

The winter morning sun glinted through the cobweb of frost on the window, and Almalexia opened her eyes. An ancient healer mopped a wet cloth across her head, smiling with relief. Asleep in the chair next to her bed was Vivec. The healer rushed to a side cabinet and returned with a flagon of water.

"How are you feeling, goddess?" asked the healer.

"Like I've been asleep for a very long time," said Almalexia.

"So you have. Fifteen days," said the healer, and touched Vivec's arm. "Master, wake up. She speaks."

Vivec rose with a start, and seeing Almalexia alive and awake, his face broke into a wide grin. He kissed her forehead, and took her hand. At last, there was warmth again in her flesh.

Almalexia's peaceful repose suddenly snapped: "Sotha Sil --"

"He's alive and well," replied Vivec. "Working on one of his machines again somewhere. He would have stayed here too, but he realized he could do you more good working that peculiar sorcery of his."

The castellan appeared in the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt you, master, but I wanted to tell you that your fastest messenger left late last night for the Imperial City."

"Messenger?" asked Almalexia. "Vivec, what has happened?"

"I was to go and sign a truce with the Emperor on the sixth, so I sent him word that it had to be postponed."

"You can't do me any good here," said Almalexia, pulling herself up with effort. "But if you don't sign that truce, you'll put Morrowind back to war, maybe for another eighty years. If you leave today with an escort and hurry, perhaps you can get to the Imperial City only a day or two late."

"Are you certain you don't need me here?" asked Vivec.

"I know that Morrowind needs you more."

6 Sun's Dusk, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

The Emperor Reman III sat on his throne, surveying the audience chamber. It was a spectacular sight: silver ribbons dangled from the rafters, burning cauldrons of sweet herbs simmered in every corner, Pyandonean swallowtails sweeping through the air, singing their songs. When the torches were lit and servants began fanning, the room would be transfigured into a shimmering fantasy land. He could smell the kitchen already, spices and roasts.

The Potentate Versidue-Shaie and his son Savirien-Chorak slithered into the room, both bedecked in the headdress and jewelry of the Tsaesci. There was no smile on their golden face, but there seldom was one. The Emperor still greeted his trusted advisor with enthusiasm.

"This ought to impress those savage Dark Elves," he laughed. "When are they supposed to arrive?"

"A messenger's just arrived from Vivec," said the Potentate solemnly. "I think it would be best if your Imperial Majesty met him alone."

The Emperor lost his laughter, but nodded to his servants to withdraw. The door then opened and the Lady Corda walked into the room, with a parchment in her hand. She shut the door behind her, but did not look up to meet the Emperor's face.

"The messenger gave his letter to my mistress?" said Reman, incredulous, rising to take the note. "That's a highly unorthodox way of delivering a message."

"But the message itself is very orthodox," said Corda, looking up into his one good eye. With a single blinding motion, she brought the letter up under the Emperor's chin. His eyes widened and blood poured down the blank parchment. Blank that is, except for a small black mark, the sign of the Morag Tong. It fell to the floor, revealing the small dagger hidden behind it, which she now twisted, severing his throat to the bone. The Emperor collapsed to the floor, gasping soundlessly.

"How long do you need?" asked Savirien-Chorak.

"Five minutes," said Corda, wiping the blood from her hands. "If you can give me ten, though, I'll be doubly grateful."

"Very well," said the Potentate to Corda's back as she raced from the audience chamber. "She ought to have been an Akaviri, the way the girl handles a blade is truly remarkable."

"I must go and establish our alibi," said Savirien-Chorak, disappearing behind one of the secret passages that only the Emperor's most trusted knew about.

"Do you remember, close to a year ago, your Imperial Majesty," the Potentate smiled, looking down at the dying man. "When you told me to remember 'You Akaviri have a lot of showy moves, but if just one of our strikes comes through, it's all over for you.' I remembered that, you see."

The Emperor spat up blood and somehow said the word: "Snake."

"I am a snake, your Imperial Majesty, inside and out. But I didn't lie. There was a messenger from Vivec. It seems he'll be a little late in arriving," the Potentate shrugged before disappearing behind the secret passage. "Don't worry yourself. I'm sure the food won't go bad."

The Emperor of Tamriel died in a pool of his own blood in his empty audience chamber decorated for a grand ball. He was found by his bodyguard fifteen minutes later. Corda was nowhere to be found.

8 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Caer Suvio, Cyrodiil

Lord Glavius, apologizing profusely for the quality of the road through the forest, was the first emissary to greet Vivec and his escort as they arrived. A string of burning globes decorated the leafless trees surrounding the villa, bobbing in the gentle but frigid night breeze. From within, Vivec could smell the simple feast and a high sad melody. It was a traditional Akaviri wintertide carol.

Versidue-Shaie greeted Vivec at the front door.

"I'm glad you received the message before you got all the way to the City," said the Potentate, guiding his guest into the large, warm drawing room. "We are in a difficult transition time, and for the moment, it is best not to conduct our business at the capitol."

"There is no heir?" asked Vivec.

"No official one, though there are distant cousins vying for the throne. While we sort the matter out, at least temporarily the nobles have decided that I may act in the office of my late master," Versidue-Shaie signaled for the servants to draw two comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace. "Would you feel most comfortable if we signed the treaty officially right now, or would you like to eat something first?"

"You intend to honor the Emperor's treaty?"

"I intend to do everything as the Emperor," said the Potentate.

14 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Tel Aruhn, Morrowind

Corda, dusty from the road, flew into the Night Mother's arms. For a moment, they stayed locked together, the Night Mother stroking her daughter's hair, kissing her forehead. Finally, she reached into her sleeve and handed Corda a letter.

"What is it?" asked Corda.

"A letter from the Potentate, expressing his delight at your expertise," replied the Night Mother. "He's promised to send us payment, but I've already sent him back a reply. The late Empress paid us enough for her husband's death. Mephala would not have us be greedy beyond our needs. You should not be paid twice for the same murder, so it is written."

"He killed Rijja, my sister," said Corda quietly.

"And so it should be that you struck the blow."

"Where will I go now?"

"Whenever any of our holy workers becomes too famous to continue the crusade, we send them to an island called Vounoura. It's not more than a month's voyage by boat, and I've arranged for a delightful estate for your sanctuary," the Night Mother kissed the girl's tears. "You meet many friends there, and I know you will find peace and happiness at last, my child."

19 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Mournhold, Morrowind

Almalexia surveyed the rebuilding of the town. The spirit of the citizens

was truly inspirational, she thought, as she walked among the skeletons of new buildings standing in the blackened, shattered remains of the old. Even the plantlife showed a remarkable resilience. There was life yet in the blasted remains of the comberry and roobrush shrubs that once lined the main avenue. She could feel the pulse. Come springtide, green would bolt through the black.

The Duke's heir, a lad of considerable intelligence and sturdy Dunmer courage, was coming down from the north to take his father's place. The land would do more than survive: it would strengthen and expand. She felt the future much more strongly than she saw the present.

Of all the things she was most certain of, she knew that Mournhold was forever home to at least one goddess.

22 Sun's Dusk, 2920
The Imperial City, Cyrodiil

The Cyrodiil line is dead," announced the Potentate to the crowd gathered beneath the Speaker's Balcony of the Imperial Palace. "But the Empire lives. The distant relatives of our beloved Emperor have been judged unworthy of the throne by the trusted nobility who advised his Imperial Majesty throughout his long and illustrious reign. It has been decided that as an impartial and faithful friend of Reman III, I will have the responsibility of continuing on in his name."

The Akaviri paused, allowing his words to echo and translate into the ears of the populace. They merely stared up at him in silence. The rain had washed through the streets of the city, but the sun, for a brief time, appeared to be offering a respite from the winter storms.

"I want to make it clear that I am not taking the title Emperor," he continued. "I have been and will continue to be Potentate Versidue-Shaie, an alien welcomed kindly to your shores. It will be my duty to protect my adopted homeland, and I pledge to work tirelessly at this task until someone more worthy takes the burden from me. As my first act, I declare that in

commemoration of this historical moment, beginning on the first of Morning Star, we will enter year one of the Second Era as time will be reckoned. Thus, we mourn the loss of our Imperial family, and look forward to the future."

Only one man clapped at these words. King Dro'Zel of Senchal truly believed that this would be the finest thing to happen to Tamriel in history. Of course, he was quite mad.

31 Sun's Dusk, 2920
Ebonheart, Morrowind

In the smoky catacombs beneath the city where Sotha Sil forged the future with his arcane clockwork apparatus, something unforeseen happened. An oily bubble seeped from a long trusted gear and popped. Immediately, the wizard's attention was drawn to it and to the chain that tiny action triggered. A pipe shifted half an inch to the left. A tread skipped. A coil rewound itself and began spinning in a counter direction. A piston that had been thrusting left-right, left-right, for millennia suddenly began shifting right-left. Nothing broke, but everything changed.

"It cannot be fixed now," said the sorcerer quietly.

He looked up through a crick in the ceiling into the night sky. It was midnight. The second era, the age of chaos, had begun.

An Accounting of the Elder Scrolls

by Quintus Nerevelus
Former Imperial Librarian

After the supposed theft of an Elder Scroll from our Imperial Library, I endeavored to find any sort of index or catalogue of the Scrolls in our possession so that such situations may be avoided (or at least properly verified) in the future. To my dismay, I discovered that the Moth Priests are notoriously inexact when it comes to the actual physical manifestations of the Scrolls, and had no idea how many they held, or how they were organized. Merely asking the question evoked chuckles, as if a child was asking why dogs cannot talk.

I will confess, my jealousy of the ones who can read the Scrolls grows, but I am not yet willing to sacrifice my sight to alleged knowledge. The older Moth Priests I attempt to engage in conversation seem as batty as any other elder who has lost their mind, so I fail to see what wisdom is imparted from the reading.

In any case, I set out to create my own index of the Elder Scrolls, in cooperation with the monks. Day by day, we went through the tower halls, with them telling me the general nature of each Elder Scroll so that I might record its location. Always careful never to glimpse the writings myself, I had only their word to go on. I meticulously drew out a map of the chambers, where Scrolls relating to various specific prophecies were located, where particular periods of history were housed. In all, it took nearly a year of plodding, but at last I had rough notes on the entirety of the library to begin my collation.

It was here that things began to go amiss. In studying my notes, I found many areas of overlap and outright contradiction. In some cases different monks would claim the same scroll to be at opposite ends of the tower. I know they have no taste for jesting, or else I would suspect I was being made the fool in some game of theirs.

I spoke to one of the older monks to relate my concerns, and he hung his head in sorrow for my wasted time. "Did I not tell you," he coughed, "when you started this that all efforts would be futile? The Scrolls do not exist in countable form."

"I had thought you meant there were too many to be counted."

"There are, but that is not the least of their complexities. Turn to the repository behind you, and tell me how many Scrolls are locked therein."

I ran my fingers over the metal casings, tallying each rounded edge that they encountered. I turned back -- "Fourteen," I said.

"Hand me the eighth one," he said, reaching out his hand.

I guided the cylinder into his palm, and he gave a slight nod to acknowledge it. "Now, count again."

Humoring him, I again passed my hands over the Scrolls, but could not believe what I was feeling.

"Now... now there are eighteen!" I gasped.

The old monk chuckled, his cheeks pushing up his blindfold until it folded over itself. "And in fact," he said, "there always were."

It was then that I enrolled as the oldest novice ever accepted into the Cult of the Ancestor Moth.

The Adabal-a

Editor's Note: The Adabal-a is traditionally believed to be the memoirs of Morihaus, consort to Alessia the Slave Queen. While this cannot be historically verified, the Adabal-a is certainly among the oldest written accounts to come down to us from the early First Era.

PELINAL'S DEATH

And in the blood-floored throne room of White-Gold, the severed head of Pelinal spoke to the winged-bull, Morihaus, demigod lover of Al-Esh, saying, "Our enemies have undone me, and spread my body into hiding. In mockery of divine purpose, the Ayleids cut me into eighths, for they are obsessed with this number."

And Morihaus, confused, snorted through his ring, saying, "Your crusades went beyond her counsel, Whitestrake, but I am a bull, and therefore reckless in my wit. I think I would go and gore our prisoners if you had left any alive. You are blood-made-glorious, uncle, and will come again, as fox animal or light. Cyrod is still ours."

Then Pelinal spoke again for the last time: "Beware, Morihaus, beware! With the foresight of death I know now that my foe yet lives, bitter knowledge to take to my grave. Better that I had died believing myself the victor. Although cast beyond the doors of night, he will return. Be vigilant! I can no longer shield the host of Men from Umaril's retribution."

ALESSIA'S YOUTH DURING THE SLAVE-YEARS

Perrif's original tribe is unknown, but she grew up in Sard, anon Sardarvar Leed, where the Ayleids herded in men from across all the Niben: kothri, nede, al-gemha, men-of-'kreath (though these were later known to be imported from the North), keptu, men-of-ge (who were eventually destroyed when the Flower King Nilichi made great sacrifice to an insect god named [lost]), al-hared, men-of-ket, others; but this was Cyrod, the heart of the imperatum saliache, where men knew no freedom, even to keep family, or choice of name except in secret, and so to their alien masters all of these designations were irrelevant.

Men were given over to the lifting of stones, and the draining of the fields, and the upkeep of temple and road; or to become art-tortures for strange pleasures, as in the wailing wheels of Vindasel and the gut-gardens of Sercen; and flesh-sculpture, which was everywhere among the slaves of the Ayleids in those days; or, worse, the realms of the Fire King Hadhuul, where the begetting of drugs drawn from the admixture of daedrons into living hosts let one inhale new visions of torment, and children were set aflame for nighttime tiger sport.

MORIHAUS EXPLAINS ALESSIA'S NAMES

Then Morihaus said to them: "In your tales you have many names for her: Al-Esh, given to her in awe, that when translated sounds like a redundancy, 'the high high', from which come the more familiar corruptions: Aleshut, Esha, Alessia. You knew her as Paravant, given to her when crowned, 'first of its kind', by which the gods meant a mortal worthy of the majesty that is killing-questing-healing, which is also Paraval, Pevesh, Perrethu, Perrif, and, in my case, for it is what I called her when we were lovers: Paravania."

"Though she is gone to me, she remains bathed in stars, first Empress, Lady of Heaven, Queen-ut-Cyrod."

And they considered themselves full-answered, and departed.

Advances in Lock Picking

by Unknown

I am not a writer. I am a thief. I am a good thief. I am not such a good writer. Anyway, I want to write about picking locks. I read a book about designing locks once. It was good. It gave me lots of ideas.

Some guys make locks with angled keyholes. Always carry a bent lockpick. They will work good in these locks. I do, and I open lots of locks. Sometimes I carry copper lockpicks. Copper bends easy. That way I can bend it right there. Copper lockpicks break easy too. Be careful.

Sometimes the locks have weird spings. They all spring differently, which makes picking it hard. I hold my torch close to the lock. This makes it hot. When it's hot, the springs are all the same. They don't bounce so differently any more. Be careful not to burn yourself.

Some thieves can't read. If you can't read, get someone to read this book to you. It will make more sense then.

Ahzirr Trajijazaeri

By Anonymous

This is an absurd book. But like all things Khajiiti, as the expression goes, "gzalzi vaberzarita maaszi", or "absurdity has become necessity." Much of what I have to say has probably never been written before, and if it has, no one has read it. The Imperials feel that everything must be written down for posterity, but every Khajiiti kitten born in Elsweyr knows his history, he drinks it in with his mother's milk.

Fairly recently, however, our struggles to win back our homeland from the rapacious Count of Leyawiin have attracted sympathetic persons, even Imperials, who wish to join our cause, but, it seems, do not understand our ways. Our enemies, of course, do not understand us either, but that is as we wish it, a weapon in our arsenal. Our non-Khajiiti friends, however, should know who we are, why we are, and what we are doing.

The Khajiit mind is not engineered for self-reflection. We simply do what we do, and let the world be damned. To put into words and rationalize our philosophy is foreign, and I cannot guarantee that even after reading this, you will understand us. Grasp this simple truth -- "q'zi no vano thzina ualizz" -- "When I contradict myself, I am telling the truth."

We are the Renrijra Krin. "The Mercenary's Grin," "The Laugh of the Landless," and "The Smiling Scum" would all be fair translations. It is a derogatory expression, but it is amusing so we have adopted it.

We have anger in our hearts, but not on our faces. We fight for Elsweyr, but we do not ally ourselves with the Mane, who symbolizes our land. We believe in justice, but do not follow laws.

"Q'zi no vano thzina ualizz."

These are not rules, for there is no word for "rules" in Ta'agra. Call them our "thjizzrini" -- "foolish concepts."

1. "Vaba Do'Shurh'do": "It Is Good To Be Brave"

We are struggling against impossible odds, against the very Empire of Tamriel. Our cause is the noblest cause of all: defense of home. If we fail, we betray our past and our future. Our dead are "Ri'sallidad", which may be interpreted as "martyrs" in the truest, best sense of that word which is so often misused. We honor their sacrifice and, beneath our smiles, mourn them deeply.

Our bravery most obviously shows in the smile that is the "Krin" part of our name. This does not mean that we walk about grinning like the idiotic, baboonish Imga of Valenwood. We simply are entertained by adversary. We find an equal, fair fight tiresome in the extreme. We confidently smile because we know our victory in the end is assured. And we know our smiles drive our enemies insane.

2. "Vaba Maaszi Lhajiito": "It Is Necessary To Run Away"

We are struggling against impossible odds, against the very Empire of Tamriel. Honor is madness. Yes, we loved the Renrijra Krin who died in brave battle against the forces of the Empire, but I guarantee you that each of those Ri'sallidad had an escape route he or she failed to use, and died saying, "Damn."

When the great Senche-Raht comes to the Saimisil Steppes, he will find himself unable to hunt, unable to sleep, as the tiny Alfiq leap onto his back, biting him, and running off before he has a chance to turn his great body to face them. Eventually, though he may stubbornly hope to catch the Alfiq, the Senche-Raht always leaves. They are our cousins, the Alfiq, and we have adopted their strategy against the great tiger of Leyawiin.

Do not ally yourself with the Renrij if you yearn to be part of a mighty army, marching resolutely forth, for whom retreat is anathema. We will laugh at your suicidal idiocy as we slip into the reeds of the river, and watch

the inevitable slaughter.

3. "Fusozay Var Var": "Enjoy Life"

Life is short. If you have not made love recently, please, put down this book, and take care of that with all haste. Find a wanton lass or a frisky lad, or several, in whatever combination your wise loins direct, and do not under any circumstances play hard to get. Our struggle against the colossal forces of oppression can wait.

Good. Welcome back.

We Renrijra Krin live and fight together, and know that Leyawiin and the Empire will not give way very soon, likely not in our lifetimes. In the time we have, we do not want our closest comrades to be dour, dull, colorless, sober, and virginal. If we did, we would have joined the Emperor's Blades.

Do not begrudge us our lewd jokes, our bawdy, drunken nights, our moonsugar. They are the pleasures that Leyawiin denies us, and so we take our good humor very seriously.

4. "Fusozay Var Dar": "Kill Without Qualm"

Life is short. Very short, as many have learned when they have crossed the Renrijra Krin.

We fight dirty. If an enemy is facing us, we might consider our options, and even slip away if his sword looks too big. If his back is to us, however, I personally favor knocking him down, and then jumping on his neck where the bones snap with a gratifying crunch. Of course, it is up to you and your personal style.

5. "Ahzirr Durrarriss": "We Give Freely To The People"

Let us not forget our purpose. We are fighting for our families, the Khajiiti driven from the rich, fertile shores of Lake Makapi and the River Malapi, where they and their ancestors lived since time immemorial. It is our battle,

but their tragedy. We must show them, lest they are swayed by other rhetoric, that we are fighting for them.

The Mane, The Emperor, and The Count can give speeches, pass laws, and, living life in the open, explain their positions and philosophies to their people to stave off the inevitable revolution. Extralegal entities, such as the Renrijra Krin, must make our actions count for our words. This means more than fighting the good fight, and having a laugh at our befuddled adversaries. It means engaging and seducing the people. Ours is not a military war, it is a political war. If the people rise up against our oppressors, they will retreat, and we will win.

Give to these people, whenever possible, gold, moonsugar, and our strong arms, and though they hide, their hearts will be with us.

6. "Ahzirr Traajijazeri": "We Justly Take By Force"

Let us not forget our purpose. We are thieves and thugs, smugglers and saboteurs. If we cannot take a farm, we burn it to the ground. If the Imperials garrisoned in a glorious ancient stronghold, beloved by our ancestors, will not yield, we tear the structure apart. If the only way to rescue the land from the Leyawiin misappropriation is to make it uninhabitable by all, so be it.

We want our life and our home back as it was twenty years ago, but if that is not realistic, then we will accept a different simple, pragmatic goal. Revenge. With a smile.

Alduin is Real, and He Ent Akatosh

by Thromgar Iron-Head,
prowd Nord

As my da used to say - Imperials are idiutts!

That is why I am riting this book. I ent never rote a book before, and I do not reckon to rite one agenn, but sometimes a man must do what a man must do. And what I must do is set the recerd strate about the god called Akatosh and the dragon called Alduin. They ent the same thing, no matter what them Imperials mite say, or how thay mite wish it to be so.

My da was never one for the gods, but my ma was. She wershipped all the Divines, and tot me lots of things. So I noe a thing or two about Akatosh. Just as much as any Imperial. I noe he was the first of all the gods to take shape in the Beginning Place. And I noe he has the shape of a dragon.

My da even told me the story of Martyn Septim, and the things what happened when the gates to Oblivion opened. Septim turned into the spirit of Akatosh and killed Mehrunes Dagon. Now I dont noe about you, but any dragon that fites the Prince of Destruction is okay by me.

Now I hope you understand the problim. Akatosh is good. Everyone, from Nord to Imperial, noes that. But Alduin? He ent good! He's the oposit of good! That Alduin is evil thrue and thrue. So you see, Akatosh and Alduin cant be one and the same.

Growing up as a lad in Skyrim, I herd all the stories. Told to me by my da, who was told by his da, who was told by his da, and so on. And one of those stories was about Alduin. But see, he was not Akatosh. He was another dragon and a real wun at that.

Akatosh is some kind of spirit dragon I think, wen he bothers to be a dragon at all (and not a god livin in sum kind of god plac like Obliviun). But

Alduin is a real dragon, with flesh and teeth and a mean streak longer than the White River. And there was a time when Alduin tried to rool over all of Skyrim with his other dragons. In the end, it took sum mitey strong heroes to finally kill Alduin and be dun with his hole sorry story.

So I got to ask - does that sound like Akatosh to you? No, frend. No it do not.

And so I, Thromgar Iron-Head do firmly say, with the utmost connvicshun, that Alduin is real, and he ent Akatosh!

Amongst the Draugr

by Bernadette Bantien
College of Winterhold

It wasn't until my seventh month with the creatures that they seemed to accept me. Well, "accept" isn't really the proper word, but they seemed to have decided that I posed no threat to them and gradually ceased their attacks. Though more than capable of fending them off (a combination of fire and turning spells are generally sufficient), I admit that I tired of having to be ever vigilant in their presence.

I'll never know whether there was some sort of agreement communicated among them, for the only utterances they make seem to be in that heathen tongue that I can't even pronounce, much less transcribe. In time, I learned more of their intentions towards me from their general movements and tones rather than specific words. Hostility in any creature is easily read, but in these most peculiar of the living dead, with such variations in gait and speed, what amounts to a hostile charge in one may simply be casual movement in another. The eyes seem to be key to their intent, and I will confess to more than one dream haunted by the glowing pinpoints in the darkness.

I had always wondered why the ancient priests of the dragon cult insisted that their followers be buried with them. It seems the height of pagan vanity to drag your conscripts to their death along with you, but as I integrated into their presence, I began to observe the reasons. Every day, a different set of draugr would awaken, shamble their way to the sarcophagus of their priest, and prostrate themselves before it. Several hours of this, followed by a meticulous cleaning of the area. It would appear that the adherents of the dragon priest continue their worship of him in death, which would also explain the ferocity with which they defend his chambers.

It took several weeks before I felt comfortable approaching the dragon priest's resting place, myself. Inch by inch, until the snarling draugrs around

me seemed to tire of fending off my timid presence. I was able to set some simple scrying spells around the tomb, that I might get a sense of what magical energies resided there. When the next group of draugr came to pay homage to the priest, I noted a sort of transferal happening. A distinct flow of life force between the adherents and the master.

It was here that I finally understood the dragon cult's notion of resurrection. The second eternal life was only promised to those who ascended to the priesthood, but the lesser functionaries contributed their life force to sustaining them for eternity. I don't know what sort of eternal wellspring they draw from, but it's clear that each draugr carries only the barest whisper of life in it, and rekindles it nightly while resting in its niche. I now believe that the grotesque forms that we see in the barrows were, in fact, buried fully as men and women, and only over the thousands of years that have passed withered into the wretched things we know. If we had visited a barrow directly after its construction, we might not have even known any of its inhabitants were dead!

These discoveries and extrapolations excite me, and my mind aches to return to the barrows. I have only paused here at the College to transcribe these notes and gather further supplies for a more extended stay. My new hope is to learn some rudimentary way of speaking to them, for imagining what they could tell us of the early mists of time is staggering.

The Amulet of Kings

by Wenengrus Monhona

In the first years of the First Era, a powerful race of Elves called the Ayleids, or the Heartland High Elves, ruled central Tamriel with an iron hand. The high and haughty Ayleids relied on their patrons, the treacherous Daedra Lords, to provide armies of daedra and dead spirits; with these fearless magical armies, the Ayleids preyed without mercy upon the young races of men, slaughtering or enslaving them at their whim.

On behalf of the suffering human races, St. Alessia, the first in the line of Cyrodiils, sought the aid of Akatosh, the Dragon God of Time, and ruler of the noble Aedra. Akatosh, looking with pity upon the plight of men, drew precious blood from his own heart, and blessed St. Alessia with this blood of Dragons, and made a Covenant that so long as Alessia's generations were true to the dragon blood, Akatosh would endeavor to seal tight the Gates of Oblivion, and to deny the armies of daedra and undead to their enemies, the Daedra-loving Ayleids.

In token of this Covenant, Akatosh gave to Alessia and her descendants the Amulet of Kings and the Eternal Dragonfires of the Imperial City. Thus does Alessia become the first gem in the Cyrodilic Amulet of Kings. The gem is the Red Diamond in the middle of the Amulet. This is the Symbol of the Empire and later taken as the symbol of the Septim line. It is surrounded by eight other gems, one for each of the divines.

So long as the Empire shall maintain its worship of Akatosh and his kin, and so long as Alessia's heirs shall bear the Amulet of Kings, Akatosh and his divine kin maintain a strong barrier between Tamriel and Oblivion, so that mortal man need never again fear the devastating summoned hosts of the Daedra Lords.

But if the Empire should slacken in its dedication to the Nine Divines, or if the blood of Alessia's heirs should fail, then shall the barriers between

Tamriel and the Daedric realms fall, and Daedra-worshippers might summon lesser Daedra and undead spirits to trouble the races of men.

Ancestors and the Dunmer

Ghosts Walk Among Them

The departed spirits of the Dunmeri, and perhaps those of all races, persist after death. The knowledge and power of departed ancestors benefits the bloodlines of Dunmeri Houses. The bond between the living family members and immortal ancestors is partly blood, partly ritual, partly volitional. A member brought into the House through marriage binds himself through ritual and oath into the clan, and gains communication and benefits from the clan's ancestors; however, his access to the ancestors is less than his offspring, and he retains some access to the ancestors of his own bloodline.

The Family Shrine

Each residence has a family shrine. In poorer homes, it may be no more than a hearth or alcove where family relics are displayed and venerated. In wealthy homes, a room is set aside for the use of the ancestors. This shrine is called the Waiting Door, and represents the door to Oblivion.

Here the family members pay their respects to their ancestors through sacrifice and prayer, through oaths sworn upon duties, and through reports on the affairs of the family. In return, the family may receive information, training, and blessings from the family's ancestors. The ancestors are thus the protectors of the home, and especially the precincts of the Waiting Door.

The Ghost Fence

It is a family's most solemn duty to make sure their ancestor's remains are interred properly in a City of the Dead such as Necrom. Here the spirits draw comfort from one another against the chill of the mortal world. However, as a sign of great honor and sacrifice, an ancestor may grant that part of his remains be retained to serve as part of a ghost fence protecting the clan's shrine and family precincts. Such an arrangement is often part of

the family member's will, that a knucklebone shall be saved out of his remains and incorporated with solemn magic and ceremony into a clan ghost fence. In more exceptional cases, an entire skeleton or even a preserved corpse may be bound into a ghost fence.

These remains become a beacon and focus for ancestral spirits, and for the spirit of the remains in particular. The more remains used to make a ghost fence, the more powerful the fence is. And the most powerful mortals in life have the most powerful remains.

The Great Ghost Fence created by the Tribunal to hold back the Blight incorporates the bones of many heroes of the Temple and of the Houses Indoril and Redoran who dedicated their spirits to the Temple and Clan as their surrogate families. The Ghost Fence also contains bones taken from the Catacombs of Necrom and the many battlefields of Morrowind.

The Mortal Chill

Spirits do not like to visit the mortal world, and they do so only out of duty and obligation. Spirits tell us that the otherworld is more pleasant, or at least more comfortable for spirits than our real world, which is cold, bitter, and full of pain and loss.

Mad Spirits

Spirits that are forced to remain in our world against their will may become mad spirits, or ghosts.
Some spirits are bound to this world because of some terrible circumstances of their death, or because of some powerful emotional bond to a person, place, or thing. These are called hauntings.

Some spirits are captured and bound to enchanted items by wizards. If the binding is involuntary, the spirit usually goes mad. A willing spirit may or may not retain its sanity, depending on the strength of the spirit and the wisdom of the enchanter.

Some spirits are bound against their wills to protect family shrines. This

unpleasant fate is reserved for those who have not served the family faithfully in life. Dutiful and honorable ancestral spirits often aid in the capture and binding of wayward spirits.

These spirits usually go mad, and make terrifying guardians. They are ritually prevented from harming mortals of their clans, but that does not necessary discourage them from mischievous or peevish behavior. They are exceedingly dangerous for intruders. At the same time, if an intruder can penetrate the spirit's madness and play upon the spirit's resentment of his own clan, the angry spirits may be manipulated.

Oblivion

The existence of Oblivion is acknowledged by all Tamriel cultures, but there is little agreement on the nature of that otherworld, other than it is the place where the Aedra and Daedra live, and that communication and travel are possible between this world and Oblivion through magic and ritual.

The Dunmer do not emphasize the distinction between this world and Oblivion as do the human cultures of Tamriel. They regard our world and the otherworld as a whole with many paths from one end to the other rather than two separate worlds of different natures with distinct borders. This philosophical viewpoint may account for the greater affinity of elves for magic and its practices.

Foreign Views of Dunmeri Ancestor Worship and Spirit Magic

The Altmeri and Bosmeri cultures also venerate their ancestors, but only by respecting the orderly and blissful passage of these spirits from this world to the next. That is, wood elves and high elves believe it is cruel and unnatural to encourage the spirits of the dead to linger in our world. Even more grotesque and repugnant is the display of the bodily remains of ancestors in ghost fences and ash pits. The presentation of fingerbones in a family shrine, for example, is sacrilegious to the Bosmer (who eat their dead) and barbaric to the Altmer (who inter their dead).

The human cultures of Tamriel are ignorant and fearful of dark elves and

their culture, considering them to be inhuman and evil, like orcs and argonians, but more sophisticated. The human populations of Tamriel associate Dunmeri ancestor worship and spirit magic with necromancy; in fact, this association of the dark elves with necromancy is at least partly responsible for the dark reputation of Dunmer throughout Tamriel. This is generally an ignorant misconception, for necromancy outside the acceptable clan rituals is a most abhorrent abomination in the eyes of the Dunmer.

The dark elves would never think of practicing sorcerous necromancy upon any dark elf or upon the remains of any elf. However, dark elves consider the human and orcish races to be little more than animals. There is no injunction against necromancy upon such remains, or on the remains of any animal, bird, or insect.

Imperial Policy officially recognizes the practices of Dunmeri ancestor veneration and spirit magic as a religion, and protects their freedom to pursue such practices so long as they do not threaten the security of the Empire. Privately, most Imperial officials and traders believe dark elf ancestor worship and displays of remains are barbaric or even necromantic.

Telvanni "Necromancy"

The Telvanni are adept masters of necromancy. They do not, however, practice necromancy upon the remains of dark elves. Sane Telvanni regard such practices with loathing and righteous anger. They do practice necromancy upon the remains of animals and upon the remains of humans, orcs, and argonians -- who are technically no more than animals in Morrowind.

Publisher's Note
This book was written by an unknown scholar as a guide for foreign visitors to Morrowind shortly after the Armistice was signed. Many of these practices have since fallen into disfavor. The most obvious changes are those regarding the practice of Necromancy and the Great Ghostfence. Dunmer today regard Necromancy upon any of the accepted races as an abomination. The Ghostfence has forced many changes in the practice of

ancestor worship. With the vast majority of ancestors' remains going to strengthen the Great Ghostfence around the mountain of Dagoth Ur, there are very few clan ghost fences in Morrowind. The Temple discourages such practices among the Houses as selfish. The upkeep of family tombs and private Waiting Doors has also fallen into disfavor, as very few remains have been buried in these tombs and shrines since the Armistice. In recent years most Dunmer venerate a small portion of their ancestor's remains kept at a local temple.

The Apprentice's Assistant

Advice from Valenwood's most prestigious spellcaster

No doubt you have heard tales of my adventures. Stories carried from province to province, all of Tamriel in awe of my feats of magical prowess. More than once, I am sure, you have thought "if only I had Aramril's ability. Then I too could seek fame and fortune in magic duels!"

It is true, of course. Great fame and limitless fortune await those who are successful. But to be successful, one needs to learn from the best. That is why you have purchased this book, so that I may teach you. I am, of course, the best.

Here, then, is my advice. Follow it, and you too can make a name for yourself throughout Tamriel.

1. To know your opponent is to know his weakness.

Infinitely more versatile than a simple blade of steel, a good mage has a wide array of spells at her disposal. More than that, she knows when to best use them. She knows that frost spells can stop a charging beast, or keep a savage brute from swinging his sword. She knows that shock spells can drain her opponent's magicka. She knows that illusion spells can set a group of enemies against each other (should she find herself in a less than fair fight, an all-too-common reality when her opponents know they cannot win in single combat) and that there are spells that can save her in a moment when all seems lost.

2. To know yourself is to know your limits.

Even the best mage has a finite reserve of magicka; none born yet have been graced with Magnus' infinite reserves of power. And so a good mage

does not over-extend herself. She makes sure she always has enough magicka to keep herself safe. Failing that, she makes sure she has a sizable supply of potions at the ready. Failing that, she makes sure she always has an escape route. Not that the Great Aramril has ever fled a fight, but of course you do not necessarily share her superb natural ability. That is why you must practice.

3. Wards can kill (you)

There is no question that wards are an essential tool of any aspiring mage. They can block incoming spells, negating your opponent's attack and wasting his magicka. A good mage knows, however, to not rely too heavily on her ward. Keeping a ward readied for too long will leave a caster drained of magicka, unable to retaliate, and at worst unable to maintain the ward and therefore completely defenseless.

4. Two hands are not always better than one

Any advanced spellcaster has learned to cast spells with both hands, dealing more damage. There are certainly times when this is to your advantage, such as when an opponent is already weakened, or when it is likely to draw a bigger reaction from the crowd that has no doubt gathered to watch you. It is not always the best strategy, however. Concentration spells, for example, can often be used on the ground when an opponent is especially nimble. In that instance, using both hands independently can cover more ground at the same time. A mage throwing fireballs with both hands cannot immediately raise a ward to defend herself, or heal while she continues to attack.

5. Always rise to a challenge, especially when you know you can win

Remember that your first priority is, of course, to stay alive. Following closely behind, though, is your need to please the crowd. You are, after all, depending on their generosity to fund your adventures. Here, then, more than magic comes into play. If you can gain a sense of your opponent's ability before the duel begins, you can enter into the event with confidence. Knowing that you outclass your opponent is of great importance, as it means you can confidently give the crowd a better show. Likewise,

knowing ahead of time that you could very well lose a duel, you are afforded an opportunity to suddenly find yourself engaged elsewhere, and be unable to attend the event. (By no means do I suggest that I have ever done such a thing; I simply find that my great fame occasionally means I am unable to respond to every single request for a duel)

Keep these few things in mind, keep your wits about you, and you too can make a name for yourself by putting on great displays of magical prowess. Take care, though - for if you become successful enough, you may find yourself facing a challenge from me!

Arcana Restored: A Handbook

by Wapna Neustra
Praceptor Emeritus

FORM THE FIRST: Makest thou the Mana Fountain to be Primed with Pure Gold, for from Pure Gold only may the Humors be rectified, and the Pure Principles coaxed from the chaos of Pure Power. Droppest thou then the Pure Gold upon the surface of the Mana Fountain. Takest thou exceeding great care to safeguard yourself from the insalubrious tempests of the Mana Fountain, for through such Assaults may one's health be utterly Blighted.

FORM THE SECOND: Make sure that thou havest with you this Excellent Manual, so that thou might speak the necessary Words straightaway, and without error, so that thou not in carelessness cause thyself and much else to discorporate and disorder the World with your component humors.

FORM THE THIRD: Take in hand the item to be Restored, and hold it forth within the Primed Fountain, murmuring all the while the appropriate phrases, which are to be learned most expeditiously and faultlessly from this Manual, and this Manual alone, notwithstanding the vile calumnies of Kharneson and Rattor, whose bowels are consumed by envy of my great learning, and who do falsely give testament to the efficacies of their own Manuals, which are in every way inferior and steeped in error.

FORM THE FOURTH: Proceed instantly to Heal thyself of all injuries, or to avail yourself of the Healing powers of the Temples and Healers, for though the agonies of manacaust must be borne by any who would Restore a prized Arcana to full Potency, yet it is not wise that suffering be endured unduly, nor does the suffering in any way render the Potency more Sublime, notwithstanding the foolish speculations of Kharneson and Rattor, whose faults and wickednesses are manifest even to the least learned of critics.

The Arcturian Heresy

by The Underking
Ysmir Kingmaker

With his god destroyed, Wulfharth finds it hard to keep his form. He staggers out of Red Mountain to the battlefield beyond. The world has shaken and all of Morrowind is made of fire. A strong gale picks up, and blows his ashes back to Skyrim.

Wulfharth adopts and is adopted by the Nords then. Ysmir the Grey Wind, the Storm of Kyne. But through Lorkhan he lost his national identity. All he wants the Nords for is to kill the Tribunal. He raises a storm, sends in his people, and is driven back by Tribunal forces. The Dunmer are too strong now. Wulfharth goes underground to wait and strengthen and reform his body anew. Oddly enough, it is Almalexia who disturbs his rest, summoning the Underking to fight alongside the Tribunal against Ada'Soom Dir-Kamal, the Akaviri demon. Wulfharth disappears after Ada'Soom is defeated, and does not return for three hundred years.

It is the rumbling of the Greybeards that wake him. Though the Empire has crumbled, there are rumors that a chosen one will come to restore it. This new Emperor will defeat the Elves and rule a united Tamriel. Naturally, Wulfharth thinks he is the figure of prophecy. He goes directly to High Hrothgar to hear the Greybeards speak. When they do, Ysmir is blasted to ash again. He is not the chosen one. It is a warrior youth from High Rock. As the Grey Wind goes to find this boy, he hears the Greybeards' warning: remember the color of betrayal, King Wulfharth.

The Western Reach was at war. Cuhlecain, the King of Falkreath in West Cyrodiil, was in a bad situation. To make any bid at unifying the Colovian Estates, he needed to secure his northern border, where the Nords and Reachmen had been fighting for centuries. He allies with Skyrim at the Battle of Old Hrol'dan. Leading his forces was Hjalti Early-Beard. Hjalti was from the island kingdom of Alcaire, in High Rock, and would become

Tiber Septim, the First Emperor of Tamriel.

Hjalti was a shrewd tactician, and his small band of Colovian troops and Nord berserkers broke the Reachman line, forcing them back beyond the gates of Old Hrol'dan. A siege seemed impossible, as Hjalti could expect no reinforcements from Falkreath. That night a storm came and visited Hjalti's camp. It spoke with him in his tent. At dawn, Hjalti went up to the gates, and the storm followed just above his head. Arrows could not penetrate the winds around him. He shouted down the walls of Old Hrol'dan, and his men poured in. After their victory, the Nords called Hjalti Talos, or Stormcrown.

Cuhlecain, with his new invincible general, unifies West Cyrodiil in under a year. No one can stand before Hjalti's storms. The Underking knows that if Hjalti is to become Emperor of Tamriel, he must first capture the Eastern Heartland. Hjalti uses them both. He needs Cuhlecain in the Colovian Estates, where foreigners are mistrusted. It is obvious why he needs Ysmir. They march on the East, the battlemages surrender before their armies, and they take the Citadel. Before Cuhlecain can be crowned, Hjalti secretly murders him and his loyalist contingent. These assassinations are blamed on the enemies of Cuhlecain, which, for political reasons, are still the Western Reach. Zurin Arctus, the Grand Battlemage (not the Underking), then crowns Hjalti as Tiber Septim, new Emperor of All Cyrodiil. After he captures the Imperial Throne, Septim finds the initial administration of a fully united Cyrodiil a time-consuming task. He sends the Underking to deal with Imperial expansion into Skyrim and High Rock. Ysmir, mindful that it might seem as if Tiber Septim is in two places at once, works behind the scenes. This period of levelheaded statesmanship and diplomacy, this sudden silence, heretofore unknown in the roaring tales of Talosian conquest, are explained away later. (The assassination story is embroidered -- now it is popularly Talos' own throat that was cut.)

The human kingdoms are conquered, even Hammerfell, whose capture was figured to be an arduous task. The Underking wants a complete invasion, a chance to battle their foreign wind spirits himself, but Tiber Septim refutes him. He has already made a better plan, one that will seem to legitimize his rule. Cyrodiil supports the losing side of a civil war and are invited in. Finally, the Empire can turn its eyes onto the Elves.

The Underking continues to press on Tiber Septim the need to conquer Morrowind. The Emperor is not sure that it is a wise idea. He has heard of the Tribunal's power. The Underking wants his vengeance, and reminds Tiber Septim that he is fated to conquer the Elves, even the Tribunal. Arctus advises against the move but Septim covets the Ebony in Morrowind, as he sorely needs a source of capital to rebuild Cyrodiil after 400 years of war. The Underking tells him that, with the Tribunal dead, Septim might steal the Tribunal's power and use it against the High Elves (certainly the oldest enemies of Lorkhan, predating even the Tribunal). Summerset Isle is the farthest thing from Tiber Septim's mind. Even then, he was planning to send Zurin Arctus to the King of Alinor to make peace. The Ebony need wins out in the end. The Empire invades Morrowind, and the Tribunal give up. When certain conditions of the Armistice include not only a policy of noninterference with the Tribunal, but also, in the Underking's eyes, a validation of their religious beliefs, Ysmir is furious. He abandons the Empire completely. This was the betrayal the Greybeards spoke of. Or so he thinks.

Without the Underking's power, all ideas of conquering Tamriel vanish. Would've been nice, Septim thinks, but let's just worry about Cyrodiil and the human nations. Already there is a rebellion in Hammerfell.

Pieces of Numidium trickle in, though. Tiber Septim, always fascinated by the Dwarves, has Zurin Arctus research this grand artifact. In doing so, Arctus stumbles upon some of the stories of the war at Red Mountain. He discovers the reason the Numidium was made and some of it's potential. Most importantly, he learns the Underking's place in the War. But Zurin Arctus was working from incomplete plans. He thinks it is the heart of Lorkhan's body that is needed to power the Numidium.

While Zurin Arctus is raving about his discovery, the prophecy finally becomes clear to Tiber Septim. This Numidium is what he needs to conquer the world. It is his destiny to have it. He contacts the Underking and says he was right all along. They should kill the Tribunal, and they need to get together and make a plan. While the Underking was away he realized the true danger of Dagoth-Ur. Something must to be done. But he needs an

army, and his old one is available again. The trap is set.

The Underking arrives and is ambushed by Imperial guards. As he takes them on, Zurin Arctus uses a soulgem on him. With his last breath, the Underking's Heart roars a hole through the Battlemage's chest. In the end, everyone is dead, the Underking has reverted back to ash, and Tiber Septim strolls in to take the soulgem. When the Elder Council arrives, he tells them about the second attempt on his life, this time by his trusted battle mage, Zurin Arctus, who was attempting a coup. He has the dead guards celebrated as heroes, even the one who was blasted to ash... He warns Cyrodiil about the dangers within, but says he has a solution to the dangers without. The Mantella.

The Numidium, while not the god Tiber Septim and the Dwemer hoped for (the Underking was not exactly Lorkhan, after all), it does the job. After its work on Summerset Isle a new threat appears -- a rotting undead wizard who controls the skies. He blows the Numidium apart. But it pounds him into the ground with its last flailings, leaving only a black splotch. The Mantella falls into the sea, seemingly forever.

Meanwhile, Tiber Septim crowns himself the First Emperor of Tamriel. He lives until he is 108, the richest man in history. All aspects of his early reign are rewritten. Still, there are conflicting reports of what really happened, and this is why there is such confusion over such questions as: Why does Alcaire claim to be the birthplace of Talos, while other sources say he came from Atmora? Why does Tiber Septim seem to be a different person after his first roaring conquests? Why does Tiber Septim betray his battlemage? Is the Mantella the heart of the battlemage or is it the heart of Tiber Septim?

Tiber Septim is succeeded by his grandson, Pelagius I. Pelagius is just not of the same caliber. In truth, he's a little nervous with all these provinces. Then an advisor shows up.

"I was friends with your grandfather," the Underking says, "He sent me to help you run the Empire."

The Argonian Account

Book One

by Waughin Jarth

On a minor but respectable plaza in the Imperial City sat, or perhaps lounged, Lord Vanech's Building Commission. It was an unimaginative, austere building not noted so much for its aesthetic or architectural design as for its prodigious length. If any critics wondered why such an unornamented, extended erection held such fascination for Lord Vanech, they kept it to themselves.

In the 398th year of the 3rd Era, Decumus Scotti was a senior clerk at the Commission.

It had been a few months since the shy, middle-aged man had brought Lord Vanech the most lucrative of all contracts, granting the Commission the exclusive right to rebuild the roads of Valenwood which had been destroyed in the Five Year War. For this, he had become the darling of the managers and the clerks, spending his days recounting his adventures, more or less faithfully... although he did omit the ending of the tale, since many of them had partaken in the celebratory Unthrappa roast provided by the Silenstri. Informing one's listeners that they've gorged on human flesh improves very few stories of any good taste.

Scotti was neither particularly ambitious nor hard-working, so he did not mind that Lord Vanech had not given him anything to actually do.

Whenever the squat little gnomish man would happen upon Decumus Scotti in the offices, Lord Vanech would always say, "You're a credit to the Commission. Keep up the good work."

In the beginning, Scotti had worried that he was supposed to be doing something, but as the months went on, he merely replied, "Thank you. I will."

There was, on the other hand, the future to consider. He was not a young man, and though he was receiving a respectable salary for someone not doing actual work, Scotti considered that soon he might have to retire and not get paid for not doing work. It would be nice, he decided, if Lord Vanech, out of gratitude for the millions of gold the Valenwood contract was generating, might deign to make Scotti a partner. Or at least give him a small percentage of the bounty.

Decumus Scotti was no good at asking for things like that, which was one of the reasons why, previous to his signal successes in Valenwood as a senior clerk for Lord Atrius, he was a lousy agent. He had just about made up his mind to say something to Lord Vanech, when his lordship unexpectedly pushed things along.

"You're a credit to the Commission," the waddling little thing said, and then paused. "Do you have a moment free on your schedule?"

Scotti nodded eagerly, and followed his lordship to his hideously decorated and very enviable hectare of office space.

"Zenithar blesses us for your presence at the Commission," the little fellow squeaked grandly. "I don't know whether you know this, but we were having a bad time before you came along. We had impressive projects, for certain, but they were not successful. In Black Marsh, for example, for years we've been trying to improve the roads and other routes of travel for commerce. I put my best man, Flesus Tijjo, on it, but every year, despite staggering investments of time and money, the trade along those routes only gets slower and slower. Now, we have your very clean, very, very profitable Valenwood contract to boost the Commission's profits. I think it's time you were rewarded."

Scotti grinned a grin of great modesty and subtle avarice.

"I want you to take over the Black Marsh account from Flesus Tijjo."

Scotti shook as if awaking from a pleasant dream to hideous reality, "My

Lord, I - I couldn't -"

"Nonsense," chirped Lord Vanech. "Don't worry about Tijjo. He will be happy to retire on the money I give him, particularly as soul-wrenchingly difficult as this Black Marsh business has been. Just your sort of a challenge, my dear Decumus."

Scotti couldn't utter a sound, though his mouth feebly formed the word "No" as Lord Vanech brought out the box of documentation on Black Marsh.

"You're a fast reader," Lord Vanech guessed. "You can read it all en route."

"En route to ..."

"Black Marsh, of course," the tiny fellow giggled. "You are a funny chap. Where else would you go to learn about the work that's being done, and how to improve it?"

The next morning, the stack of documentation hardly touched, Decumus Scotti began the journey south-east to Black Marsh. Lord Vanech had hired an able-bodied guard, a rather taciturn Redguard named Mailic, to protect his best agent. They rode south along the Niben, and then south-east along the Silverfish, continuing on into the wilds of Cyrodiil, where the river tributaries had no names and the very vegetation seemed to come from another world than the nice, civilized gardens of the northern Imperial Province.

Scotti's horse was tied to Mailic's, so the clerk was able to read. It made it difficult to pay attention to the path they were taking, but Scotti knew he needed at least a cursory familiarity with the Commission's business dealings in Black Marsh.

It was a huge box of paperwork going back forty years, when the Commission had first been given several million in gold by a wealthy trader, Lord Xellicles Pinos-Revina, to improve the condition of the road from Gideon to Cyrodiil. At that time, it took three weeks, a preposterously

long time, for the rice and root he was importing to arrive, half-rotten, in the Imperial Province. Pinos-Revina was long dead, but many other investors over the decades, including Pelagius IV himself, had hired the Commission to build roads, drain swamps, construct bridges, devise anti-smuggling systems, hire mercenaries, and, in short, do everything that the greatest Empire in history knew would work to aid trade with Black Marsh. According to the latest figures, the result of this was that it took two and a half months for goods, now thoroughly rotten, to arrive.

Scotti found that when he looked up after concentrating on what he was reading, the landscape had always changed. Always dramatically. Always for the worse.

"This is Blackwood, sir," said Mailic to Scotti's unspoken question. It was dark and woodsy, so Decumus Scotti thought that a very appropriate name.

The question he longed to ask, which in due course he did ask, was, "What's that terrible smell?"

"Slough Point, sir," Mailic replied as they turned the next bend, where the umbrageous tunnel of tangled tree and vine opened to a clearing. There squatted a cluster of formal buildings in the dreary Imperial design favored by Lord Vanech's Commission and every Emperor since Tiber, together with a stench so eye-blindingly, stomach-wrenchingly awful that Scotti wondered, suddenly, if it were deadly poisonous. The swarms of blood-colored, sand-grain-sized insects obscuring the air did not improve the view.

Scotti and Mailic batted at the buzzing clouds as they rode their horses towards the largest of the buildings, which on approach revealed itself to be perched at the edge of a thick, black river. From its size and serious aspect, Scotti guessed it to be the census and excise office for the wide, white bridge that stretched across the burbling dark water to the reeds on the other side. It was a very nice, bright, sturdy-looking bridge, built, Scotti knew, by his Commission.

A poxy, irritable official opened the door quickly on Scotti's first knock.

"Come in, come in, quickly! Don't let the fleshflies in!"

"Fleshflies?" Decumus Scotti trembled. "You mean, they eat human flesh?"

"If you're fool enough to stand around and let them," the soldier said, rolling his eyes. He had half an ear, and Scotti, looking around at the other soldiers in the fort noted that they all were well-chewed. One of them had no nose at all to speak of. "Now, what's your business?"

Scotti told them, and added that if they stood outside the fortress instead of inside, they might catch more smugglers.

"You better be more concerned with getting across that bridge," the soldier sneered. "Tide's coming up, and if you don't get a move on, you won't get to Black Marsh for four days."

That was absurd. A bridge swamped by a rising tide on a river? Only the look in the soldier's eyes told Scotti he wasn't joking.

Upon stepping out of the fort, he saw that the horses, evidently tired of being tortured by the fleshflies, had ripped free of their restraints and were bounding off into the woods. The oily water of the river was already lapping on the planks, oozing between the crevices. Scotti reflected that perhaps he would be more than willing to endure a wait of four days before going to Black Marsh, but Mailic was already running across.

Scotti followed him, wheezing. He was not in excellent shape, and never had been. The box of Commission materials was heavy. Halfway across, he paused to catch his breath, and then discovered he could not move. His feet were stuck.

The black mud that ran through the river was a thick gluey paste, and having washed over the plank Scotti was on, it held his feet fast. Panic seized him. Scotti looked up from his trap and saw Mailic leaping from plank to plank ahead of him, closing fast on the reeds on the other side.

"Help!" Scotti cried. "I'm stuck!"

Mailic did not even turn around, but kept jumping. "I know, sir. You need to lose weight."

Decumus Scotti knew he was a few pounds over, and had meant to start eating less and exercising more, but embarking on a diet hardly seemed to promise timely aid in his current predicament. No diet on Nirn would have helped him just then. However, on reflection, Scotti realized that the Redguard intended that he drop the box of documents, for Mailic was no longer carrying any of the essential supplies he had had with him previously.

With a sigh, Scotti threw the box of Commission notes into the glop, and felt the plank under him rise a quarter of an inch, just enough to free him from the mud's clutches. With an agility born of extreme fear, Scotti began leaping after Mailic, dropping onto every third plank, and springing up before the river gripped him.

In forty-six leaps, Decumus Scotti crashed through the reeds onto the solid ground behind Mailic, and found himself in Black Marsh. He could hear behind him a slurping sound as the bridge, and his container of important and official records of Commission affairs, was consumed by the rising flood of dark filth, never to be seen again.

Book Two

By Waughin Jarth

Decumus Scotti emerged from the dirt and reeds, exhausted from running, his face and arms sheathed in red fleshflies. Looking back towards Cyrodiil, he saw the bridge disappear beneath the thick black river, and he knew he was not getting back until the tide went down in a few days' time. The river also held in its adhesive depths his files on the Black Marsh account. He would have to rely on his memory for his contacts in Gideon.

Mailic was purposefully striding through the reeds ahead. Flailing ineffectually at the fleshflies, Scotti hurried after him.

"We're lucky, sir," said the Redguard, which struck Scotti as an extraordinarily odd thing to say, until his eyes followed where the man's finger was pointing. "The caravan is here."

Twenty-one rusted, mud-spattered wagons with rotting wood and wobbly wheels sat half-sunk in the soft earth ahead. A crowd of Argonians, gray-scaled and gray-eyed, the sort of sullen manual laborers that were common in Cyrodiil, pulled at one of the wagons which had been detached from the others. As Scotti and Mailic came closer, they saw it was filled with a cargo of black berries so decayed that they had become hardly recognizable... more a festering jelly than a wagonload of fruit.

Yes, they were going to the city of Gideon, and, yes, they said, Scotti could get a ride with them after they were finished unloading this shipment of lumberries.

"How long ago were they picked?" Scotti asked, looking at the wagon's rotten produce.

"The harvest was in Last Seed, of course," said the Argonian who seemed to be in charge of the wagon. It was now Sun's Dusk, so they had been en

route from the fields for a little over two months.

Clearly, Scotti thought, there were problems with transportation. But fixing that, after all, was what he was doing here as a representative of Lord Vanech's Building Commission.

It took close to an hour of the berries rotting even more in the sun for the wagon to be pushed to the side, the wagons in front of it and behind it to be attached to one another, and one of the eight horses from the front of the caravan to be brought around to the now independent wagon. The laborers moved with dispirited lethargy, and Scotti took the opportunity to inspect the rest of the caravan and talk to his fellow travellers.

Four of the wagons had benches in them, fit for uncomfortable riders. All the rest were filled with grain, meat, and vegetation in various stages of corruption.

The travellers consisted of the six Argonian laborers, three Imperial merchants so bug-bitten that their skin looked as scaly as the Argonians themselves, and three cloaked fellows who were evidently Dunmer, judging by the red eyes that gleamed in the shadows under their hoods. All were transporting their goods along this, the Imperial Commerce Road.

"This is a road?" Scotti exclaimed, looking at the endless field of reeds that reached up to his chin or higher.

"It's solid ground, of a sort," one of the hooded Dunmer shrugged. "The horses eat some of the reed, and sometimes we set fire to it, but it just grows right back up."

Finally, the wagonmaster signalled that the caravan was ready to go, and Scotti took a seat in the third wagon with the other Imperials. He looked around, but Mailic was not on board.

"I agreed to get to you to Black Marsh and take you back out," said the Redguard, who had plumped down a rock in the sea of reeds and was munching on a hairy carrot. "I'll be here when you get back."

Scotti frowned, and not only because Mailic had dropped the deferential title "sir" while addressing him. Now he truly knew no one in Black Marsh, but the caravan slowly grinded and bumped forward, so there was no time to argue.

A noxious wind blew across the Commerce Road, casting patterns in the endless featureless expanse of reeds. In the distance, there seemed to be mountains, but they constantly shifted, and Scotti realized they were banks of mist and fog. Shadows flitted across the landscape, and when Scotti looked up, he saw they were being cast by giant birds with long, saw-like beaks nearly the size of the rest of their bodies.

"Hackwings," Chaero Gemullus, an Imperial on Scotti's left, who might have been young but looked old and beaten, muttered. "Like everything else in this damnable place, they'll eat you if you don't keep moving. Beggars pounce down and give you a nasty chop, and then fly off and come back when you're mostly dead from blood loss."

Scotti shivered. He hoped they'd be in Gideon before nightfall. It was then it occurred to him that the sun was on the wrong side of the caravan.

"Excuse me, sir," Scotti called to the wagonmaster. "I thought you said we were going to Gideon?"

The wagonmaster nodded.

"Why are we going north then, when we should be going south?"

There was no reply but a sigh.

Scotti confirmed with his fellow travellers that they too were going to Gideon, and none of them seemed very concerned about the circuitous route to getting there. The seats were hard on his middle-aged back and buttocks, but the bumping rhythm of the caravan, and the hypnotic waving reeds gradually had an effect on him, and Scotti drifted off to sleep.

He awoke in the dark some hours later, not sure where he was. The caravan was no longer moving, and he was on the floor, under the bench, next to some small boxes. There were voices, speaking a hissing, clicking language Scotti didn't understand, and he peeked out between someone's legs to see what was happening.

The moons barely pierced the thick mist surrounding the caravan, and Scotti did not have the best angle to see who was talking. For a moment, it looked like the gray wagonmaster was talking to himself, but the darkness had movement and moisture, in fact, glistening scales. It was hard to tell how many of these things there were, but they were big, black, and the more Scotti looked at them, the more details he could see.

When one particular detail emerged, huge mouths filled with dripping needle-like fangs, Scotti slipped back under the bench. Their black little eyes had not fallen on him yet.

The legs in front of Scotti moved and then began to thrash, as their owner was grabbed and pulled out of the wagon. Scotti crouched further back, getting behind the little boxes. He didn't know much about concealment, but had some experience with shields. He knew that having something, anything, in between you and bad things was always good.

A few seconds after the legs had disappeared from sight, there was a horrible scream. And then a second and a third. Different timbres, different accents, but the same inarticulate message... terror, and pain, horrible pain. Scotti remembered a long forgotten prayer to the god Stendarr and whispered it to himself.

Then there was silence... ghastly silence that lasted only a few minutes, but which seemed like hours... years.

And then the carriage started rolling forward again.

Scotti cautiously crawled out from under the carriage. Chaero Gemullus gave him a bemused grin.

"There you are," he said. "I thought the Nagas took you."

"Nagas?"

"Nasty characters," Gemullus said, frowning. "Puff adders with legs and arms, seven feet tall, eight when they're mad. Come from the inner swamp, and they don't like it here much so they're particularly peevish. You're the kind of posh Imperial they're looking for."

Scotti had never in his life thought of himself as posh. His mud and fleshfly-bespeckled clothing seemed eminently middle-class, at best, to him. "What would they want me for?"

"To rob, of course," the Imperial smiled. "And to kill. You didn't notice what happened to the others?" The Imperial frowned, as if struck by a thought. "You didn't sample from those boxes down below, did you? Like the sugar, do you?"

"Gods, no," Scotti grimaced.

The Imperial nodded, relieved. "You just seem a little slow. First time to Black Marsh, I gather? Oh! Heigh ho, Hist piss!"

Scotti was just about to ask Gemullus what that vulgar term meant when the rain began. It was an inferno of foul-smelling, yellow-brown rain that washed over the caravan, accompanied by the growl of thunder in the distance. Gemullus worked to pull the roof up over the wagon, glaring at Scotti until he helped with the laborious process.

He shuddered, not only from the cold damp, but from contemplation of the disgusting precipitation pouring down on the already nasty produce in the uncovered wagon.

"We'll be dry soon enough," Gemullus smiled, pointing out into the fog.

Scotti had never been to Gideon, but he knew what to expect. A large settlement more or less laid out like a Imperial city, with more or less

Imperial style architecture, and all the Imperial comforts and traditions, more or less.

The jumble of huts half-sunk in mud was decidedly less.

"Where are we?" asked Scotti, bewildered.

"Hixinoag," replied Gemullus, pronouncing the queer name with confidence. "You were right. We were going north when we should have been going south."

Book Three

by Waughin Jarth

Decumus Scotti was supposed to be in Gideon, a thoroughly Imperialized city in southern Black Marsh, arranging business dealings to improve commerce in the province on behalf of Lord Vanech's Building Commission and its clients. Instead, he was in a half-submerged, rotten little village called Hixinoag, where he knew no one. Except for a drug smuggler named Chaero Gemullus.

Gemullus was not at all perturbed that the merchant caravan had gone north instead of south. He even let Scotti share his bucket of trodh, tiny little crunchy fish, he had bought from the villagers. Scotti would have preferred them cooked, or at any rate, dead, but Gemullus blithely explained that dead, cooked trodh are deadly poison.

"If I were where I was supposed to be," Scotti pouted, putting one of the wriggling little creatures in his mouth. "I could be having a roast, and some cheese, and a glass of wine."

"I sell moon sugar in the north, and buy it in the south," he shrugged. "You have to be more flexible, my friend."

"My only business is in Gideon," Scotti frowned.

"Well, you have a couple choices," replied the smuggler. "You could just stay here. Most villages in Argonia don't stay put for very long, and there's a good chance Hixinoag will drift right down to the gates of Gideon. Might take you a month or two. Probably the easiest way."

"That'd put me far behind schedule."

"Next option, you could join up with the caravan again," said Gemullus. "They might be going in the right direction this time, and they might not get

stuck in the mud, and they might not be all murdered by Naga highwaymen."

"Not tempting," Scotti frowned. "Any other ideas?"

"Ride the roots. The underground express," Gemullus grinned. "Follow me."

Scotti followed Gemullus out of the village and into a copse of trees shrouded by veils of wispy moss. The smuggler kept his eye on the ground, poking at the viscuous mud intermittently. Finally he found a spot which triggered a mass of big oily bubbles to rise to the surface.

"Perfect," he said. "Now, the important thing is not to panic. The express will take you due south, that's the wintertide migration, and you'll know you're near Gideon when you see a lot of red clay. Just don't panic, and when you see a mass of bubbles, that's a breathing hole you can use to get out."

Scotti looked at Gemullus blankly. The man was talking perfect gibberish. "What?"

Gemullus took Scotti by the shoulder and positioning him on top of the mass of bubbles. "You stand right here..."

Scotti sank quickly into the mud, staring at the smuggler, horror-struck.

"And remember to wait 'til you see the red clay, and then the next time you see bubbles, push up..."

The more Scotti wriggled to get free, the faster he sunk. The mud enveloped Scotti to his neck, and he continued staring, unable to articulate anything but a noise like "Oog."

"And don't panic at the idea that you're being digested. You could live in a rootworm's belly for months."

Scotti took one last panicked gasp of air and closed his eyes before he disappeared into the mud.

The clerk felt a warmth he hadn't expected all around him. When he opened his eyes, he found that he was entirely surrounded by a translucent goo, and was traveling rapidly forward, southward, gliding through the mud as if it were air, skipping along an intricate network of roots. Scotti felt confusion and euphoria in equal measures, madly rushing forward through an alien environment of darkness, spinning around and over the thick fibrous tentacles of the trees. It was if he were high in the sky at midnight, not deep beneath the swamp in the Underground Express.

Looking up slightly at the massive root structure above, Scotti saw something wriggle past. A eight-foot-long, armless, legless, colorless, boneless, eyeless, nearly shapeless creature, riding the roots. Something dark was inside of it, and as it came closer, Scotti could see it was an Argonian man. He waved, and the disgusting creature the Argonian was in flattened slightly and rushed onward.

Gemullus's words began to reappear in Scotti's mind at this sight. "The wintertide migration," "air hole," "you're being digested," -- these were the phrases that danced around as if trying to find some place to live in a brain which was highly resistant to them coming in. But there was no other way to look at the situation. Scotti had gone from eating living fish to being eaten alive as a way of transport. He was in one of those worms.

Scotti made an executive decision to faint.

He awoke in stages, having a beautiful dream of being held in a woman's warm embrace. Smiling and opening his eyes, the reality of where he really was rushed over him.

The creature was still rushing madly, blindly forward, gliding over roots, but it was no longer like a flight through the night sky. Now it was like the sky at sunrise, in pinks and reds. Scotti remembered Gemullus telling him to look for the red clay, and he would be near Gideon. The next thing he had to find was the bubbles.

There were no bubbles anywhere. Though the inside of the worm was still warm and comfortable, Scotti felt the weight of the earth all around him. "Just don't panic" Gemullus had said, but it was one thing to hear that advice, and quite another to take it. He began to squirm, and the creature began to move faster at the increased pressure from within.

Suddenly, Scotti saw it ahead of him, a slim spire of bubbles rising up through the mud from some underground stream, straight up, through the roots to the surface above him. The moment the rootworm went through it, Scotti pushed with all of his might upward, bursting through the creature's thin skin. The bubbles pushed Scotti up quickly, and before he could blink, he was popping out of the red slushy mud.

Two gray Argonians were standing under a tree nearby, holding a net. They looked in Scotti's direction with polite curiosity. In their net, Scotti noticed, were several squirming furry rat-like creatures. While he addressed them, another fell out of the tree. Though Scotti had not been educated in this practice, he recognized fishing when he saw it.

"Excuse me, lads," Scotti said jovially. "I was wondering if you'd point me in the direction of Gideon?"

The Argonians introduced themselves as Drawing-Flame and Furl-Of-Fresh-Leaves, and looked at one another, puzzling over the question.

"Who you seek?" asked Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves.

"I believe his name is," said Scotti, trying to remember the contents of his long gone file of Black Marsh contacts in Gideon. "Archein Right-Foot ...Rock?"

Drawing-Flame nodded, "For five gold, show you way. Just east. Is plantation east of Gideon. Very nice."

Scotti thought that the best business he had heard of in two days, and handed Drawing-Flames the five septims.

The Argonians led Scotti onto a muddy ribbon of road that passed through the reeds, and soon revealed the bright blue expanse of Topal Bay far to the west. Scotti looked around at the magnificent walled estates, where bright crimson blossoms sprang forth from the very dirt of the walls, and surprised himself by thinking, "This is very pretty."

The road ran parallel to a fast-moving stream, running eastward from Topal Bay. It was called the Onkobra River, he was told. It ran deep into Black Marsh, to the very dark heart of the province.

Peeking past the gates to the plantations east of Gideon, Scotti saw that few of the fields were tended. Most had rotten crops from harvests past still clinging to wilted vines, orchards of desolate, leafless trees. The Argonian serfs who worked the fields were thin, weak, near death, more like haunting spirits than creatures of life and reason.

Two hours later, as the three continued their trudge east, the estates were still impressive at least from a distance, the road was still solid if weedy, but Scotti was irritated, horrified by the field workers and the agricultural state, and no longer charitable towards the area. "How much further?"

Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves and Drawing-Flame looked at one another, as if that question was something that hadn't occurred to them.

"Archein is east?" Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves pondered. "Near or far?"

Drawing-Flame shrugged noncommittally, and said to Scotti, "For five gold, show you way. Just east. Is plantation. Very nice."

"You don't have any idea, do you?" Scotti cried. "Why couldn't you tell me that in the first place when I might have asked someone else?"

Around the bend up ahead, there was the sound of hoofbeats. A horse coming closer.

Scotti began to walk towards the sound to hail the rider, and didn't see

Drawing-Flame's taloned claws flash out and cast the spell at him. He felt it though. A kiss of ice along his spine, the muscles along his arms and legs suddenly immobile as if wrapped in rigid steel. He was paralyzed.

The great curse of paralysis, as the reader may be unfortunate enough to know, is that you continue to see and think even though your body does not respond. The thought that went through Scotti's mind was, "Damn."

For Drawing-Flame and Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves were, of course, like most simple day laborers in Black Marsh, accomplished Illusionists. And no friend of the Imperial.

The Argonians shoved Decumus Scotti to the side of the road, just as the horse and rider came around the corner. He was an impressive figure, a nobleman in a flashing dark green cloak the exact same color as his scaled skin, and a frilled hood that was part of his flesh and sat upon his head like a horned crown.

"Greetings, brothers!" the rider said to the two.

"Greetings, Archein Right-Foot-Rock," they responded, and then Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves added. "What is milord's business on this fine day?"

"No rest, no rest," the Archein sighed regally. "One of my she-workers gave birth to twins. Twins! Fortunately, there's a good trader in town for those, and she didn't put up too much of a fuss. And then there's a fool of an Imperial from Lord Vanech's Building Commission I am supposed to meet with in Gideon. I'm sure he'll want the grand tour before he opens up the treasury for me. Such a lot of fuss."

Drawing-Flame and Furl-of-Fresh-Leaves sympathesized, and then, as Archein Right-Foot-Rock rode off, they went to look for their hostage.

Unfortunately for them, gravity being the same in Black Marsh as elsewhere in Tamriel, their hostage, Decumus Scotti, had continued to roll down from where they left him, and was, at that moment, in the Onkobra River, drowning.

Book Four

By Waughin Jarth

Decumus Scotti was drowning, and he didn't think much of it. He couldn't move his arms or his legs to swim because of the paralysis spell the Argonian peasant had lobbed at him, but he wasn't quite sinking. The Onkobra River was a crashing force of white water and currents that could carry along large rocks with ease, so Scotti tumbled head over heels, spinning, bumping, bouncing along.

He figured that soon enough he would be dead, and that would be better than being in Black Marsh. He wasn't too panicked about it all when he felt his lungs fill with water and cold blackness fell upon him.

For a while, for the first time in some time, Decumus Scotti felt peace. Blessed darkness. And then pain came to him, and he felt himself coughing, spewing water up from his belly and his lungs.

A voice said, "Oh bother, he's alive, ain't he, now?"

Scotti wasn't quite sure if that were true, even when he opened his eyes and looked at the face above him. It was an Argonian, but unlike any he had seen anywhere. The face was thin and long like a thick lance; the scales were ruby-red, brilliant in the sunlight. It blinked at him, its eyelids opening and closing in vertical slits.

"I don't suppose we should eat you, should we now?" the creature smiled, and Scotti could tell from its teeth that it was no idle suggestion.

"Thank you," said Scotti weakly. He craned his head slightly to find out who the "we" were, and discovered he was on the muddy bank of the still, sludgy river, surrounded by a group of Argonians with similarly needle-like faces and a whole rainbow of scales. Bright greens and gem-like purples, blues, and oranges.

"Can you tell me, am I near - well, anywhere?"

The ruby-colored Argonian laughed. "No. You're in the middle of everywhere, and near nowhere."

"Oh," said Scotti, who grasped the idea that space did not mean much in Black Marsh. "And what are you?"

"We are Agacephs," the ruby-colored Argonian replied. "My name is Nomu."
Scotti introduced himself. "I'm a senior clerk in Lord Vanech's Building Commission in the Imperial City. My job was to come here to try to fix the problems with commerce, but I've lost my agenda, haven't met with any of my contacts, the Archeins of Gideon..."

"Pompous, assimiliated, slaver kleptocrats," a small lemon-colored Agaceph murmured with some feeling.

"...And now I just want to go home."

Nomu smiled, his long mouth arching up like a host happy to see an unwanted guest leave a party. "Shehs will guide you."

Shehs, it seemed, was the bitter little yellow creature, and he was not at all pleased at the assignment. With surprising strength, he hoisted Scotti up, and for a moment, the clerk was reminded of Gemullus dropping him into the bubbling muck that led to the Underground Express. Instead, Shehs shoved Scotti toward a tiny little raft, razor-thin, that bobbed on the surface of the water.

"This is how you travel?"

"We don't have the broken wagons and dying horses of our brothers on the outside," Shehs replied, rolling his tiny eyes. "We don't know better."

The Argonian sat at the back of the craft and used his whip-like tail to

propel and navigate the craft. They traveled quickly around swirling pools of slime that stank of centuries of putrefaction, past pinnacled mountains that seemed sturdy but suddenly fell apart at the slightest ripple in the still water, under bridges that might have once been metal but were now purely rust.

"Everything in Tamriel flows down to Black Marsh," Shehs said.

As they slid through the water, Shehs explained to Scotti that the Agacephs were one of the many Argonian tribes that lived in the interior of the province, near the Hist, finding little in the outside world worth seeing. He was fortunate to have been found by them. The Nagas, the toad-like Paatru, and the winged Sarpa would have killed him on the spot.

There were other creatures too to be avoided. Though there were few natural predators in inner Black Marsh, the scavengers that rooted in the garbage seldom shied away from a living meal. Hackwings circled overhead, like the ones Scotti had seen in the west.

Shehs fell silent and stopped the raft completely, waiting for something.

Scotti looked in the direction Shehs was watching, and saw nothing unusual in the filthy water. Then, he realized that the pool of green slime in front of them was actually moving, and fairly quickly, from one bank to the other. It deposited small bones behind it as it oozed up into the reeds, and disappeared.

"Voriplasm," Shehs explained, moving the boat forward again. "Big word. It'll strip you to the bone by the second syllable."

Scotti, desirous to distract himself from the sights and smells that surrounded him, thought it a good time to compliment his pilot on his excellent vocabulary. It was particularly impressive, given how far from civilization they were. The Argonians in the east did, in fact, speak so well.

"They tried to erect a Temple of Mara near here, in Umpholo, twenty years ago," Shehs explained, and Scotti nodded, remembering reading about it in

the files before they were lost. "They all perished quite dreadfully of swamp rot in the first month, but they left behind some excellent books."

Scotti was going to inquire further when he saw something so huge, so horrifying, it made him stop, frozen.

Half submerged in the water ahead was a mountain of spines, lying on nine-foot-long claws. White eyes stared blindly forward, and then suddenly the whole creature spasmed and lurched, the jaw of its mouth jutting out, exposing tusks clotted with gore.

"Swamp Leviathan," Shehs whistled, impressed. "Very, very dangerous."

Scotti gasped, wondering why the Agaceph was so calm, and more, why he was continuing to steer the raft forward towards the beast..

"Of all the creatures in the world, the rats are sometimes the worst," said Shehs, and Scotti noticed that the huge creature was only a husk. Its movement was from the hundreds of rats that had burrowed into it, rapidly eating their way from the inside out, bursting from the skin in spots.

"They are indeed," Scotti said, and his mind went to the Black Marsh files, buried deep in the mud, and four decades of Imperial work in Black Marsh.

The two continued westward through the heart of Black Marsh.

Shehs showed Scotti the vast complicated ruins of the Kothringi capitals, fields of ferns and flowered grasses, quiet streams under canopies of blue moss, and the most astonishing sight of Scotti's life -- the great forest of full-grown Hist trees. They never saw a living soul until they arrived at the edge of the Imperial Commerce Road just east of Slough Point, where Mailic, Scotti's Redguard guide, was waiting patiently.

"I was going to give you two more minutes," the Redguard scowled, dropping the last of his food onto the pile at his feet. "No more, sir."

The sun was shining bright when Decumus Scotti rode into the Imperial

City, and as it caught the morning dew, it lent a glisten to every building as if they had been newly polished for his arrival. It astonished him how clean the city was. And how few beggars there were.

The protracted edifice of Lord Vanech's Building Commission was the same as it had always been, but still the very sight of it seemed exotic and strange. It was not covered in mud. The people within actually, generally, worked.

Lord Vanech himself, though singularly squat and squinty, seemed immaculate, not only relatively clean of dirt and scabs, but also relatively uncorrupt. Scotti couldn't help but stare at him when he first caught sight of his boss. Vanech stared right back.

"You are a sight," the little fellow frowned. "Did your horse drag you to Black Marsh and back? I would say go home and fix yourself, but there are a dozen people here to see you. I hope you have solutions for them."

It was no exaggeration. Nearly twenty of Cyrodiil's most powerful and wealthiest people were waiting for him. Scotti was given an office even larger than Lord Vanech's, and he met with each.

First among the Commission's clients were five independent traders, blustering and loaded with gold, demanding to know what Scotti intended to do about improving the trade routes. Scotti summarized for them the conditions of the main roads, the state of the merchants' caravans, the sunken bridges, and all the other impediments between the frontier and the marketplace. They told him to have everything replaced and repaired, and gave him the gold necessary to do it.

Within three months, the bridge at Slough Point had disappeared into the muck; the great caravan had collapsed into decrepitude; and the main road from Gideon had been utterly swallowed up by swamp water. The Argonians began once again to use the old ways, their personal rafts and sometimes the Underground Express to transport the grain in small quantities. It took a third of the time, two weeks, to arrive in Cyrodiil, none of it rotten.

The Archbishop of Mara was the next client Scotti met with. A kindhearted man, horrified by the tales of Argonian mothers selling their children into slavery, he pointedly asked Scotti if it were true.

"Sadly, yes," Scotti replied, and the Archbishop showered him with septims, telling the clerk that food must be brought to the province to ease their suffering, and the schools must be improved so they could learn to help themselves.

Within five months, the last book had been stolen from the deserted Maran monastery in Umphollo. As the Archeins went bankrupt, their slaves returned to his parents' tiny farms. The backwater Argonians found that they could grow enough to feed their families provided they had enough hard workers in their enclave, and the buyers market for slaves sharply declined.

Ambassador Tsleeixth, concerned about the rising crime in northern Black Marsh, brought with him the contributions of many other expatriate Argonians like himself. They wanted more Imperial guards on the border at Slough Point, more magically lit lanterns posted along the main roads at regular intervals, more patrol stations, and more schools built to allow young Argonians to better themselves and not turn to crime.

Within six months, there were no more Nagas roaming the roads, as there were no merchants traveling them to rob. The thugs returned to the fetid inner swamp, where they felt much happier, their constitutions enriched by the rot and pestilence that they loved. Tsleeixth and his constituency were so pleased by the crime rate dropping, they brought even more gold to Decumus Scotti, telling him to keep up the good work.

Black Marsh simply was, is, and always shall be unable to sustain a large-scale, cash-crop plantation economy. The Argonians, and anyone else, the whole of Tamriel, could live in Black Marsh on subsistence farming, just raising what they needed. That was not sad, Scotti thought; that was hopeful.

Scotti's solution to each of their dilemmas had been the same. Ten percent

of the gold they gave him went to Lord Vanech's Building Commission. The rest Scotti kept for himself, and did exactly nothing about the requests.

Within a year, Decumus Scotti had embezzled enough to retire very comfortably, and Black Marsh was better off than it had been in forty years.

The Armorers' Challenge

By Mymophonus

Three hundred years ago, when Katariah became Empress, the first and only Dunmer to rule all of Tamriel, she faced opposition from the Imperial Council. Even after she convinced them that she would be the best regent to rule the Empire while her husband Pelagius sought treatment for his madness, there was still conflict. In particular from the Duke of Vengheto, Thane Minglumire, who took a particular delight in exposing all of the Empress's lack of practical knowledge.

In this particular instance, Katariah and the Council were discussing the unrest in Black Marsh and the massacre of Imperial troops outside the village of Armanias. The sodden swampland and the sweltering climate, particular in summertide, would endanger the troops if they wore their usual armor.

"I know a very clever armorer," said Katariah, "His name is Hazadir, an Argonian who knows the environments our army will be facing. I knew him in Vivec where he was a slave to the master armorer there, before he moved to the Imperial City as a freedman. We should have him design armor and weaponry for the campaign."

Minglumire gave a short, barking laugh: "She wants a slave to design the armor and weaponry for our troops! Sirollus Saccus is the finest armorer in the Imperial City. Everyone knows that."

After much debate, it was finally decided to have both armorers contend for the commission. The Council also elected two champions of equal power and prowess, Nandor Beraid and Raphalas Eul, to battle using the arms and armaments of the real competitors in the struggle. Whichever champion won, the armorer who supplied him would earn the Imperial commission. It was decided that Beraid would be outfitted by Hazadir, and Eul by Saccus.

The fight was scheduled to commence in seven days.

Sirollus Saccus began work immediately. He would have preferred more time, but he recognized the nature of the test. The situation in Armanias was urgent. The Empire had to select their armorer quickly, and once selected, the preferred armorer had to act swiftly and produce the finest armor and weaponry for the Imperial army in Black Marsh. It wasn't just the best armorer they were looking for. It was the most efficient.

Saccus had only begun steaming the half-inch strips of black virgin oak to bend into bands for the flanges of the armor joints when there was a knock at his door. His assistant Phandius ushered in the visitor. It was a tall reptilian of common markings, a dull, green-fringed hood, bright black eyes, and a dull brown cloak. It was Hazadir, Katariah's preferred armorer.

"I wanted to wish you the best of luck on the -- is that ebony?"

It was indeed. Saccus had bought the finest quality ebony weave available in the Imperial City as soon as he heard of the competition and had begun the process of smelting it. Normally it was a six-month procedure refining the ore, but he hoped that a massive convection oven stoked by white flames born of magicka would shorten the operation to three days. Saccus proudly pointed out the other advancements in his armory. The acidic lime pools to sharpen the blade of the dai-katana to an unimaginable degree of sharpness. The Akaviri forge and tongs he would use to fold the ebony back and forth upon itself. Hazadir laughed.

"Have you been to my armory? It's two tiny smoke-filled rooms. The front is a shop. The back is filled with broken armor, some hammers, and a forge. That's it. That's your competition for the millions of gold pieces in Imperial commission."

"I'm sure the Empress has some reason to trust you to outfit her troops," said Sirollus Saccus, kindly. He had, after all, seen the shop and knew that what Hazadir said was true. It was a pathetic workshop in the slums, fit only for the lowliest of adventurers to get their iron daggers and cuirasses repaired. Saccus had decided to make the best quality regardless of the

inferiority of his rival. It was his way and how he became the best armorer in the Imperial City.

Out of kindness, and more than a bit of pride, Saccus showed Hazadir how, by contrast, things should be done in a real professional armory. The Argonian acted as an apprentice to Saccus, helping him refine the ebony ore, and to pound it and fold it when it cooled. Over the next several days, they worked together to create a beautiful dai-katana with an edge honed sharp enough to trim a mosquito's eyebrows, enchanted with flames along its length by one of the Imperial Battlemages, as well as a suit of armor of bound wood, leather, silver, and ebony to resist the winds of Oblivion.

On the day of the battle, Saccus, Hazadir, and Phandius finished polishing the armor and brought in Raphalas Eul for the fitting. Hazadir left only then, realizing that Nandor Beraid would be at his shop shortly to be outfitted.

The two warriors met before the Empress and Imperial Council in the arena, which had been flooded slightly to simulate the swampy conditions of Black Marsh. From the moment Saccus saw Eul in his suit of heavy ebony and blazing dai-katana and Beraid in his collection of dusty, rusted lizard-scales and spear from Hazadir's shop, he knew who would win. And he was right.

The first blow from the dai-katana lodged in Beraid's soft shield, as there was no metal trim to deflect it. Before Eul could pull his sword back, Beraid let go of the now-flaming shield, still stuck on the sword, and poked at the joints of Eul's ebony armor with his spear. Eul finally retrieved his sword from the ruined shield and slashed at Beraid, but his light armor was scaled and angled, and the attacks rolled off into the water, extinguishing the dai-katana's flames. When Beraid struck at Eul's feet, he fell into the churned mud and was unable to move. The Empress, out of mercy, called a victor.

Hazadir received the commission and thanks to his knowledge of Argonian battle tactics and weaponry and how best to combat them, he designed implements of war that brought down the insurrection in Armanias.

Katariah won the respect of Council, and even, grudgingly, that of Thane Minglumire. Sirollus Saccus went to Morrowind to learn what Hazadir learned there, and was never heard from again.

The Art of War Magic

by Zurin Arctus

with Commentary By Other Learned Masters

Chapter 3: Dispositions

Master Arctus said:

1. The moment to prepare your offense is the moment the enemy becomes vulnerable to attack.

Leros Chael: Knowledge of the enemy mage's mind is of the foremost importance. Once you know his mind, you will know his weaknesses.

Sedd Mar: Master Arctus advised Tiber Septim before the battle of Five Bridges not to commit his reserves until the enemy was victorious. Tiber Septim said, "If the enemy is already victorious, what use committing the reserve?" To which Master Arctus replied, "Only in victory will the enemy be vulnerable to defeat." Tiber Septim went on to rout an enemy army twice the size of his.

2. The enemy's vulnerability may be his strongest point; your weakness may enable you to strike the decisive blow.

Marandro Ur: In the wars between the Nords and the Chimer, the Nord shamans invariably used their mastery of the winds to call down storms before battle to confuse and dismay the Chimer warriors. One day, a clever Chimer sorcerer conjured up an ice demon and commanded him to hide in the rocks near the rear of the Chimer army. When the Nords called down the storms as usual, the Chimer warriors began to waver. But the ice demon rose up as the storm struck, and the Chimer turned in fear from what they believed was a Nord demon and charged into the enemy line, less afraid of the storm than of the demon. The Nords, expecting the Chimer to flee as

usual, were caught off guard when the Chimer attacked out of the midst of the storm. The Chimer were victorious that day.

3. When planning a campaign, take account of both the arcane and the mundane. The skillful battlemage ensures that they are in balance; a weight lifted by one hand is heavier than two weights lifted by both hands.

4. When the arcane and mundane are in balance, the army will move effortlessly, like a swinging door on well-oiled hinges. When they are out of balance, the army will be like a three-legged dog, with one leg always dragging in the dust.

5. Thus when the army strikes a blow, it will be like a thunderclap out of a cloudless sky. The best victories are those unforeseen by the enemy, but obvious to everyone afterwards.

6. The skillful battlemage ensures that the enemy is already defeated before the battle begins. A close-fought battle is to be avoided; the fortunes of war may turn aside the most powerful sorcery, and courage may undo the best-laid plans. Instead, win your victory ahead of time. When the enemy knows he is defeated before the battle begins, you may not need to fight.

7. Victory in battle is only the least kind of victory. Victory without battle is the acme of skill.

8. Conserving your power is another key to victory. Putting forth your strength to win a battle is no demonstration of skill. This is what we call tactics, the least form of the art of war magic.

Thulidden dir'Tharkun: By 'tactics', Master Arctus includes all the common battle magics. These are only the first steps in an understanding of war magic. Any hedge mage can burn up his enemies with fire. Destroying the enemy is the last resort of the skillful battlemage.

9. The battle is only a leaf on the tree; if a leaf falls, does the tree die? But when a branch is lopped off, the tree is weakened; when the trunk is girdled, the tree is doomed.

10. If you plan your dispositions well, your victories will seem easy and you will win no acclaim. If you plan your dispositions poorly, your victories will seem difficult, and your fame will be widespread.

Marandro Sul: Those commonly believed to be the greatest practitioners of war magic are almost always those with the least skill. The true masters are not known to the multitude.

The Battle of Red Mountain and the Rise and Fall of the Tribunal

[The following is a transcript of the words of Lord Vivec, addressed to a Dissident Priest, Malur Omayn, who confronted Vivec with the Ashlander traditions surrounding the Battle of Red Mountain and with prophecies of the Nerevarine, and to unnamed magistrates of the Inquisition who joined Vivec in interrogating the Dissident Priest.]

Who can clearly recall the events of the distant past. But you have asked me to tell you, in my own words, the events surrounding the Battle of Red Mountain, the birth of the Tribunal, and the prophecies of a Nerevar reborn. Here is what I can tell you.

When the Chimer first abandoned the herds and tents of their nomadic ancestors, and built the first Great Houses, we loved the Daedra, and worshipped them as gods. But our brethren, the Dwemer, scorned the Daedra, and mocked our foolish rituals, and preferred instead their gods of Reason and Logic. So the Chimer and Dwemer were always at bitter war, until the Nords came and invaded Resdayn. Only then did the Chimer and Dwemer put away their strife and join together to cast out the invaders.

Once the Nords were driven out, General Nerevar of the Chimer and General Dumac of the Dwemer, who had come to love and respect one another, resolved to make peace between their peoples. In that time I was but a junior counselor to Nerevar, and Nerevar's queen, Almalexia, and his other favorite counselor, Sotha Sil, always doubted that such a peace might long survive, given the bitter disputes between Chimer and Dwemer, but by negotiation and compromise, Nerevar and Dumac somehow managed to preserve a fragile peace.

But when Dagoth Ur, Lord of House Dagoth, and trusted as a friend by both Nerevar and the Dwemer, brought us proof that High Engineer Kagrenac of the Dwemer had discovered the Heart of Lorkhan, and that he had learned

how to tap its powers, and was building a new god, a mockery of Chimer faith and a fearsome weapon, we all urged Nerevar to make war on the Dwarves and to destroy this threat to Chimer beliefs and security. Nerevar was troubled. He went to Dumac and asked if what Dagoth Ur said was true. But Kagrenac took great offense, and asked whom Nerevar thought he was, that he might presume to judge the affairs of the Dwemer.

Nerevar was further troubled, and made pilgrimage to Holamayan, the sacred temple of Azura, and Azura confirmed that all that Dagoth Ur said was indeed true and that the creation of a New God of the Dwemer should be prevented at all costs. When Nerevar came back and told us what the goddess had said, we felt our judgements confirmed, and again counseled him to war, chiding Nerevar for his naive trust in friendship, and reminding Nerevar of his duty to protect the faith and security of the Chimer against the impiety and dangerous ambitious of the Dwemer.

Then Nerevar went back to Vvardenfell one last time, hoping that negotiations and compromise might once again preserve the peace. But this time the friends Nerevar and Dumac quarreled bitterly, and as a result, the Chimer and Dwemer went to war.

The Dwemer were well-defended by their fortress at Red Mountain, but Nerevar's cunning drew most of Dumac's armies out into the field and pinned them there, while Nerevar, Dagoth Ur, and a small group of companions could make their way into the Heart Chamber by secret means. There, Nerevar the Chimer King met Dumac the Dwarf King and they both collapsed from grievous wounds and draining magics. With Dumac fallen, and threatened by Dagoth Ur and others, Kagrenac turned his tools upon the Heart, and Nerevar said he saw Kagrenac and all his Dwemer companions at once disappear from the world. In that instant, Dwemer everywhere disappeared without a trace. But Kagrenac's tools remained, and Dagoth Ur seized them, and he carried them to Nerever, saying, "That fool Kagrenac has destroyed his own people with these things. We should destroy them, right away, lest they fall into the wrong hands."

But Nerevar was resolved to confer with his queen and his generals, who had foreseen that this war would come and whose counsel he would not

ignore again. "I will ask the Tribunal what we shall do with them, for they have had wisdom in the past that I had not. Stay here, loyal Dagoth Ur, until I return." So Nerevar told Dagoth Ur to protect the tools and the Heart Chamber until he returned.

Then Nerevar was carried to us where we waited on the slopes of Red Mountain, and he told us all that had transpired under Red Mountain. What Nerevar had said was that the Dwemer had used special tools to turn their people into immortals and that the Heart of Lorkhan held wondrous powers. [Only later did we hear from others present that Dagoth Ur had thought the Dwemer destroyed, not made immortal. And no one knows for sure what really happened there.]

After hearing Nerevar, we gave our counsel as he requested, proposing, "We should preserve these tools in trust for the welfare of the Chimer people. And who knows, perhaps the Dwemer are not gone forever, but merely transported to some distant realm, from which they may some day return to threaten our security once again. Therefore, we need to keep these tools, to study them and their principles, so that we may be safe in future generations."

And though Nerevar voiced his grave misgivings, he was willing to be ruled by our counsel, under one condition: that we all together should swear a solemn oath upon Azura that the tools would never be used in the profane manner that the Dwemer had intended. We all readily agreed, and swore solemn oaths at Nerevar's dictation.

So then we went with Nerevar back into Red Mountain and met with Dagoth Ur. Dagoth Ur refused to deliver the tools to us, saying they were dangerous, and we could not touch them. Dagoth Ur seemed to be irrational, insisting that only he could be trusted with the tools, and then we guessed that he had somehow been affected by his handling of the tools, but now I feel sure that he had privately learned the powers of the tools, and had in some confused way decided he must have them for himself. Then Nerevar and our guard resorted to force to secure the tools. Somehow Dagoth Ur and his retainers escaped, but we gained the tools, and delivered them to Sotha Sil for study and safe-keeping.

For some years we kept the oaths we swore to Azura with Nerevar, but during that time, in secret, Sotha Sil must have studied the tools and divined their mysteries. And at last he came to us with a vision of a new world of peace, with justice and honor for nobles, and health and prosperity for the commoners, with the Tribunal as immortal patrons and guides. And dedicating ourselves to this vision of a better world, we made a pilgrimage to Red Mountain and transformed ourselves with the power of Kagrenac's tools.

And no sooner than we had completed our rituals and begun to discover our new-found powers, the Daedra Lord Azura appeared and cursed us for our foresworn oaths. By her powers of prophecy, she assured us that her champion, Nerevar, true to his oath, would return to punish us for our perfidy, and to make sure such profane knowledge might never again be used to mock and defy the will of the gods. But Sotha Sil said to her, "The old gods are cruel and arbitrary, and distant from the hopes and fears of mer. Your age is past. We are the new gods, born of the flesh, and wise and caring of the needs of our people. Spare us your threats and chiding, inconstant spirit. We are bold and fresh, and will not fear you."

And then, in that moment, all Chimer were changed into Dunmer, and our skins turned ashen and our eyes into fire. Of course, we only knew at that time that this had happened to us, but Azura said, "This is not my act, but your act. You have chosen your fate, and the fate of your people, and all the Dunmer shall share your fate, from now to the end of time. You think yourselves gods, but you are blind, and all is darkness." And Azura left us alone, in darkness, and we were all afraid, but we put on brave faces, and went forth from Red Mountain to build the new world of our dreams.

And the new world we shaped was glorious and generous, and the worship of the Dunmer fervent and grateful. The Dunmer were at first afraid of their new faces, but Sotha Sil spoke to them, saying that it was not a curse but a blessing, a sign of their changed natures, and sign of the special favor they might enjoy as New Mer, no longer barbarians trembling before ghosts and spirits, but civilized mer, speaking directly to their immortal friends and patrons, the three faces of the Tribunal. And we were all inspired by Sotha

Sil's speech and vision, and took heart. And over time, we crafted the customs and institutions of a just and honorable society, and the land of Resdayn knew millennia of peace, equity, and prosperity unknown to other savage races.

But beneath Red Mountain, Dagoth Ur had survived. And even as the light of our bold new world shined ever more brightly, beneath Red Mountain, the darkness gathered, a darkness that was close kin to the bright light that Sotha Sil coaxed from the Heart of Lorkhan with the Tools of Kagrenac. As the darkness grew, we fought it, and crafted walls to confine it, but we never could destroy it, for the source of the darkness was the same source as the source of our own divine inspiration.

And in these latter days of Morrowind, reduced to a subjugated province of the Western Empire, as the glory of the Temple fades, and the dark tide rises from Red Mountain, we are reminded of Azura and her promised champion's return. We have waited, blind, and in darkness, mere shadows, drained of our ardent vision, in shame of our folly, in fear of our judgement, and in hope of our deliverance. We do not know if the outlander claiming to fulfill the prophecies of the Nerevarine is our old companion Nerevar reborn, or a pawn of the Emperor, or a catspaw of Azura, or some simple twist of fate. But we insist you adhere to Temple doctrine, and conform to the strictures dividing the Hierographa from the Apographa, and that you not speak that which must not be spoken openly. Act as a dutiful priest should, in accordance with your vows of obedience to the canons and archcanons, and all will be forgiven. Defy me, and you will know what it is to stand against a god.

-- Vivec

The Battle of Sancre Tor

In 2E852, allied Nord and Breton forces crossed the borders into Cyrodiil and occupied the major passes and settlements in the Jerall Mountains. Making their headquarters for the winter at Sancre Tor, the Nord-Breton allies dared King Cuhlecain's new general, Talos, to assault them in their mountain fastnesses.

When they learned that General Talos had mustered an army in the dead of winter and was marching to assault Sancre Tor, they were elated. Sancre Tor was impregnable, its citadel on high cliffs overlooking the lower city, nestled in a high mountain basin with steep, unscalable cliffs in their rear.

The Cyrodilic army was small, poorly trained and outfitted, short on rations, and unprepared for winter campaigning. As their ragged units assembled in the lowlands beneath the citadel, the Nord-Breton allies confidently assumed that their enemy had delivered himself into their trap.

The citadel was not only protected by an unscalable cliff in front and unscalable heights in their rear, but the entrance to the citadel was magically concealed under the appearance of a large mountain lake in the basin beneath the heights. Accordingly, the Nord-Breton allies left on a small force to defend the citadel, descending through lower passages to attack and overwhelm the cold, hungry Cyrodilic forces before them. They expected to defeat, overrun, and annihilate General Talos' army, leaving no one to oppose their springtime descent into the Cyrodilic Heartlands.

Thus did General Talos lure the Nord-Breton allies to their doom.

Leaving a weak force in the lowlands to draw out the defenders, General Talos approached the citadel of Sancre Tor from the rear, descending the supposedly unscalable heights behind the citadel, and sneaking into the supposedly magically concealed entrance to the inner citadel. This remarkable feat is attributed to the agency of a single unnamed traitor, by tradition a Breton turncoat sorcerer, who revealed both the existence of an

obscure mountain trail down the heights behind the citadel and the secret of the citadel entrance concealed beneath its illusory lake surface.

While the Cyrodilic army in the lowlands fought a desperate defense against the Nord-Breton sortie, General Talos and his men entered the citadel, swept aside the sparse defense, captured the Nord-Breton nobles and generals, and compelled them to surrender the citadel and their armies. The confused and demoralized Nord captives, already suspicious of the scheming High Rock sorcerer aristocracy and their overreaching dreams of Heartlands conquests, deserted the alliance and swore loyalty to Tiber Septim. The Skyrim generals joined their rank and file in Tiber Septim's army; the High Rock battlemage command was summarily executed and the captive Bretons imprisoned or sold into slavery.

Thus was the concerted allied invasion of Cyrodiil foiled, and General Talos' army swelled by the hardened Nord veteran troops that played so crucial a role in General Talos' succeeding campaigns which consolidated the Colovian and Nibenean into the core of the Cyrodilic Empire, and which resulting in the crowning of General Talos as Emperor Tiber Septim.

Historians marvel at Tiber Septim's tactical daring in assaulting a fortified mountain citadel in the dead of winter against vastly superior numbers. Later Tiber Septim attributed his unwavering resolve against overwhelming obstacles to have been inspired by his divine vision of the Amulet of Kings in the Tomb of Reman III.

The young Talos may indeed have been inspired by his belief that he was fated to recover this ancient sacred symbol of the Covenant and to lead Tamriel to the high civilization of the Third Empire. Nonetheless, this should in no way reduce our admiration for the dash and genius of this defining military triumph against impossible odds.

The Bear of Markarth: The Crimes of Ulfric Stormcloak

by Arrianus Arius
Imperial Scholar

Ulfric Stormcloak is considered a hero by many for his part in quelling the Forsworn Uprising. It is said that when the Empire abandoned Skyrim, and the natives of the Reach rebelled (undoubtedly due to the Nords poor treatment of them), Ulfric Stormcloak and his militia was there to retake "their" land from the Forsworn. In all the bravado and epic yarns the skalds compose of his exploits, you would think Ulfric to be a giant of a man, equal to that of Tiber Septim in his cunning, leadership, and decisive actions.

But the truth is far more revealing. Yes, from 4E 174-176, the Forsworn did in fact rule over the Reach as an independent kingdom from Skyrim. Yes, this was accomplished while the Empire was beset by Aldmeri Dominion forces and could not send the Legion to re-establish order. And yes, Ulfric Stormcloak did quell the rebellion without Imperial assistance. That much is true, but what the bards often fail to tell in their stories is that the Forsworn Kingdom was quite peaceful for those 2 years they were in power.

True, some crimes were committed against former Nord landowners (often those accused of being the harshest towards their native workers), but on the whole the Forsworn ruled their lands fairly, and were making overtures to be recognized by the Empire as a legitimate kingdom.

In the wake of the aftermath of the Great War, you can imagine the backlog on stately matters the Empire had. Before a peace treaty could be resolved with the Forsworn, a militia led by Ulfric Stormcloak sieged the gates of their capital, Markarth. What happened during that battle was war, but what happened after the battle was over is nothing short of war crimes.

Every official who worked for the Forsworn was put to the sword, even after they had surrendered. Native women were tortured to give up names of Forsworn fighters who had fled the city or were in the hills of the Reach. Anyone who lived in the city, Forsworn and Nord alike, were executed if they had not fought with Ulfric and his men when they breached the gates. "You are with us, or you are against Skyrim" was the message on Ulfric's lips as he ordered the deaths of shopkeepers, farmers, the elderly, and any child old enough to lift a sword that had failed in the call to fight with him.

So when a "grateful" Empire accepted Ulfric's victory and sent soldiers to re-establish the rule of law in the Reach, it was no surprise that he would demand to be allowed to worship Talos freely before the Legion could enter. With chaos running through the streets of Markarth and the reports of deaths rising every day, the Empire had no choice but to grant Ulfric and his men their worship.

We allowed them to worship Talos, in full violation of the White-Gold Concordat with the Aldmeri Dominion (which recognizes the elven belief that Talos, as a human, cannot be one of the Divines). In jeopardizing the treaty that so many sacrificed for during the Great War, the Empire was wrong. But what choice did they have, I ask you? Against the Bear of Markarth, Ulfric Stormcloak, "no" is not an answer.

Beggar Prince

The story of Wheedle
and his gifts from the Daedric Lord Namira

We look down upon the beggars of the Empire. These lost souls are the poor and wretched of the land. Every city has its beggars. Most are so poor they have only the clothes on their backs. They eat the scraps the rest of us throw out. We toss them a coin so that we don't have to think too long about their plight.

Imagine my surprise when I heard the tale of the Beggar Prince. I could not imagine what a Prince of Beggars would be. Here is the tale I heard. It takes place in the first age, when gods walked like men and daedra stalking the wilderness with impunity. It is a time before they were all confined to Oblivion.

There once was a man named Wheedle. Or maybe it was a woman. The story goes to great lengths to avoid declaring Wheedle's gender. Wheedle was the 13th child of a king in Valenwood. As such Wheedle was in no position to take the throne or even inherit much property or wealth.

Wheedle had left the palace to find independent fortune and glory. After many days of endless forest roads and tiny villages, Wheedle came upon a three men surrounding a beggar. The beggar was swaddled in rags from head to toe. No portion of the vagabond's body was visible. The men were intent on slaying the beggar.

With a cry of rage and indignation, Wheedle charged the men with sword drawn. Being simple townsfolk, armed only with pitchforks and scythes, they immediately fled from the armored figure with the shining sword.

"Many thanks for saving me," wheezed the beggar from beneath the heap of foul rags. Wheedle could barely stand the stench.

"What is your name, wretch?" Wheedle asked.

"I am Namira."

Unlike the townsfolk, Wheedle was well learned. That name meant nothing to them, but to Wheedle it was an opportunity.

"You are the Daedric lord!" Wheedle exclaimed. "Why did you allow those men to harass you? You could have slain them all with a whisper."

"I am please you recognized me," Namira rasped. "I am frequently reviled by townsfolk. It pleases me to be recognized for my attribute, if not for my name."

Wheedle knew that Namira was the Daedric lord of all thing gross and repulsive. Diseases such as leprosy and gangrene were her domain. Where others might have seen danger, Wheedle saw opportunity.

"Oh, great Namira, let me apprentice myself to you. I ask only that you grant me powers to make my fortune and forge a name for myself that will live through the ages."

"Nay. I make my way alone in the world. I have no need for an apprentice."

Namira shambled off down the road. Wheedle would not be put off. With a bound, Wheedle was at Namira's heel, pressing the case for an apprenticeship. For 33 days and nights, Wheedle kept up the debate. Namira said nothing, but Wheedle's voice was ceaseless. Finally, on the 33rd day, Wheedle was too hoarse to talk.

Namira looked back on the suddenly silent figure. Wheedle knelt in the mud at her feet, open hands raised in supplication.

"It would seem you have completed your apprenticeship to me after all," Namira declared. "I shall grant your request."

Wheedle was overjoyed.

"I grant you the power of disease. You may choose to be afflicted with any disease you choose, changing them at will, so long as it has visible symptoms. However, you must always bear at least one.

"I grant you the power of pity. You may evoke pity in anyone that sees you.

"Finally, I grant you the power of disregard. You may cause others to disregard your presence."

Wheedle was aghast. These were not boons from which a fortune could be made. They were curses, each awful in its own right, but together they were unthinkable.

"How am I to make my fortune and forge a name for myself with these terrible gifts?"

"As you begged at my feet for 33 days and 33 nights, so shall you now beg for your fortune in the cities of men. Your name will become legendary among the beggars of Tamriel. The story of Wheedle, the Prince of Beggars, shall be handed down throughout the generations.

It was as Namira predicted. Wheedle was an irresistible beggar. None could see the wretch without desperately wanting to toss a coin at the huddled form. However, Wheedle also discovered that the power of disregard gave great access to the secrets of the realms. People unknowingly said important things where Wheedle could hear them. Wheedle grew to know the comings and goings of every citizen in the city.

To this day, it is said that if you really want to know something, go ask the beggars. They have eyes and ears throughout the cities. They know all the little secrets of the daily lives of its citizens.

Biography of Barenziah

Volume One

by Stern Gamboge
Imperial Scribe

Late in the Second Era, a girl-child, Barenziah, was born to the rulers of the kingdom of Mournhold in what is now the Imperial Province of Morrowind. She was reared in all the luxury and security befitting a royal Dark Elven child until she reached five years of age. At that time, His Excellency Tiber Septim I, the first Emperor of Tamriel, demanded that the decadent rulers of Morrowind yield to him and institute imperial reforms. Trusting to their vaunted magic, the Dark Elves impudently refused until Tiber Septim's army was on the borders. An Armistice was hastily signed by the now-eager Dunmer, but not before there were several battles, one of which laid waste to Mournhold, now called Almalexia.

Little Princess Barenziah and her nurse were found among the wreckage. The Imperial General Symmachus, himself a Dark Elf, suggested to Tiber Septim that the child might someday be valuable, and she was therefore placed with a loyal supporter who had recently retired from the Imperial Army.

Sven Advensen had been granted the title of Count upon his retirement; his fiefdom, Darkmoor, was a small town in central Skyrim. Count Sven and his wife reared the princess as their own daughter, seeing to it that she was educated appropriately-and more importantly, that the imperial virtues of obedience, discretion, loyalty, and piety were instilled in the child. In short, she was made fit to take her place as a member of the new ruling class of Morrowind.

The girl Barenziah grew in beauty, grace, and intelligence. She was sweet-tempered, a joy to her adoptive parents and their five young sons, who loved her as their elder sister. Other than her appearance, she differed from young girls of her class only in that she had a strong empathy for the woods and fields, and was wont to escape her household duties to wander there at

times.

Barenziah was happy and content until her sixteenth year, when a wicked orphan stable-boy, whom she had befriended out of pity, told her he had overheard a conspiracy between her guardian, Count Sven, and a Redguard visitor to sell her as a concubine in Rihad, as no Nord or Breton would marry her on account of her black skin, and no Dark Elf would have her because of her foreign upbringing.

"Whatever shall I do?" the poor girl said, weeping and trembling, for she had been brought up in innocence and trust, and it never occurred to her that her friend the stable-boy would lie to her.

The wicked boy, who was called Straw, said that she must run away if she valued her virtue, but that he would come with her as her protector. Sorrowfully, Barenziah agreed to this plan; and that very night, she disguised herself as a boy and the pair escaped to the nearby city of Whiterun. After a few days there, they managed to get jobs as guards for a disreputable merchant caravan. The caravan was heading east by side roads in a mendacious attempt to elude the lawful tolls charged on the imperial highways. Thus the pair eluded pursuit until they reached the city of Rifton, where they ceased their travels for a time. They felt safe in Rifton, close as it was to the Morrowind border so that Dark Elves were enough of a common sight.

Volume Two

by Stern Gamboge
Imperial Scribe

The first volume of this series told the story of Barenziah's origin-heiress to the throne of Mournhold until her father rebelled against His Excellency Tiber Septim I and brought ruin to the province of Morrowind. Thanks largely to the benevolence of the Emperor, the child Barenziah was not destroyed with her parents, but reared by Count Sven of Darkmoor, a loyal Imperial trustee. She grew up into a beautiful and pious child, trustful of her guardian's care. This trust, however, was exploited by a wicked orphan stable boy at Count Sven's estate, who with lies and fabrications tricked her into fleeing Darkmoor with him when she turned sixteen. After many adventures on the road, they settled in Riften, a Skyrim city near the Morrowind borders.

The stable boy, Straw, was not altogether evil. He loved Barenziah in his own selfish fashion, and deception was the only way he could think of that would cement possession of her. She, of course, felt only friendship toward him, but he was hopeful that she would gradually change her mind. He wanted to buy a small farm and settle down into a comfortable marriage, but at the time his earnings were barely enough to feed and shelter them.

After only a short time in Riften, Straw fell in with a bold, villainous Khajiit thief named Therris, who proposed that they rob the Imperial Commandant's house in the central part of the city. Therris said that he had a client, a traitor to the Empire, who would pay well for any information they could gather there. Barenziah happened to overhear this plan and was appalled. She stole away from their rooms and walked the streets of Riften in desperation, torn between her loyalty to the Empire and her love for her friends.

In the end, loyalty to the Empire prevailed over personal friendship, and she approached the Commandant's house, revealed her true identity, and warned

him of her friends' plan. The Commandant listened to her tale, praised her courage, and assured her that no harm would come to her. He was none other than General Symmachus, who had been scouring the countryside in search of her since her disappearance, and had just arrived in Riften, hot in pursuit. He took her into his custody, and informed her that, far from being sent away to be sold, she was to be reinstated as the Queen of Mournhold as soon as she turned eighteen. Until that time, she was to live with the Septim family in the newly built Imperial City, where she would learn something of government and be presented at the Imperial Court.

At the Imperial City, Barenziah befriended the Emperor Tiber Septim during the middle years of his reign. Tiber's children, particularly his eldest son and heir Pelagius, came to love her as a sister. The ballads of the day praised her beauty, chastity, wit, and learning. On her eighteenth birthday, the entire Imperial City turned out to watch her farewell procession preliminary to her return to her native land. Sorrowful as they were at her departure, all knew that she was ready for her glorious destiny as sovereign of the kingdom of Mournhold.

Volume Three

by Stern Gamboge
Imperial Scribe

In the second volume of this series, it was told how Barenziah was kindly welcomed to the newly constructed Imperial City by the Emperor Tiber Septim and his family, who treated her like a long-lost daughter during her almost one-year stay. After several happy months there learning her duties as vassal queen under the Empire, the Imperial General Symmachus escorted her to Mournhold where she took up her duties as Queen of her people under his wise guidance. Gradually they came to love one another and were married and crowned in a splendid ceremony at which the Emperor himself officiated.

After several hundred years of marriage, a son, Helseth, was born to the royal couple amid celebration and joyous prayer. Although it was not publicly known at the time, it was shortly before this blessed event that the Staff of Chaos had been stolen from its hiding place deep in the Mournhold mines by a clever, enigmatic bard known only as the Nightingale.

Eight years after Helseth's birth, Barenziah bore a daughter, Morgiah, named after Symmachus' mother, and the royal couple's joy seemed complete. Alas, shortly after that, relations with the Empire mysteriously deteriorated, leading to much civil unrest in Mournhold. After fruitless investigations and attempts at reconciliation, in despair Barenziah took her young children and travelled to the Imperial City herself to seek the ear of then Emperor Uriel Septim VII. Symmachus remained in Mournhold to deal with the grumbling peasants and annoyed nobility, and do what he could to stave off an impending insurrection.

During her audience with the Emperor, Barenziah, through her magical arts, came to realize to her horror and dismay that the so-called Emperor was an impostor, none other than the bard Nightingale who had stolen the Staff of Chaos. Exercising great self-control she concealed this realization from

him. That evening, news came that Symmachus had fallen in battle with the revolting peasants of Mournhold, and that the kingdom had been taken over by the rebels. Barenziah, at this point, did not know where to seek help, or from whom.

The gods, that fateful night, were evidently looking out for her as if in redress of her loss. King Eadwyre of High Rock, an old friend of Uriel Septim and Symmachus, came by on a social call. He comforted her, pledged his friendship-and furthermore, confirmed her suspicions that the Emperor was indeed a fraud, and none other than Jagar Tharn, the Imperial Battlemage, and one of the Nightingale's many alter egos. Tharn had supposedly retired into seclusion from public work and installed his assistant, Ria Silmane, in his stead. The hapless assistant was later put to death under mysterious circumstances-supposedly a plot implicating her had been uncovered, and she had been summarily executed. However, her ghost had appeared to Eadwyre in a dream and revealed to him that the true Emperor had been kidnapped by Tharn and imprisoned in an alternate dimension. Tharn had then used the Staff of Chaos to kill her when she attempted to warn the Elder Council of his nefarious plot.

Together, Eadwyre and Barenziah plotted to gain the false Emperor's confidence. Meanwhile, another friend of Ria's, known only as the Champion, who apparently possessed great, albeit then untapped, potential, was incarcerated at the Imperial Dungeons. However, she had access to his dreams, and she told him to bide his time until she could devise a plan that would effect his escape. Then he could begin on his mission to unmask the impostor.

Barenziah continued to charm, and eventually befriended, the ersatz Emperor. By contriving to read his secret diary, she learned that he had broken the Staff of Chaos into eight pieces and hidden them in far-flung locations scattered across Tamriel. She managed to obtain a copy of the key to Ria's friend's cell and bribed a guard to leave it there as if by accident. Their Champion, whose name was unknown even to Barenziah and Eadwyre, made his escape through a shift gate Ria had opened in an obscure corner of the Imperial Dungeons using her already failing powers. The Champion was free at last, and almost immediately went to work.

It took Barenziah several more months to learn the hiding places of all eight Staff pieces through snatches of overheard conversation and rare glances at Tharn's diary. Once she had the vital information, however -- which she communicated to Ria forthwith, who in turn passed it on to the Champion- she and Eadwyre lost no time. They fled to Wayrest, his ancestral kingdom in the province of High Rock, where they managed to fend off the sporadic efforts of Tharn's henchmen to haul them back to the Imperial City, or at the very least obtain revenge. Tharn, whatever else might be said of him, was no one's fool-save perhaps Barenziah's -- and he concentrated most of his efforts toward tracking down and destroying the Champion.

As all now know, the courageous, indefatigable, and forever nameless Champion was successful in reuniting the eight sundered pieces of the Staff of Chaos. With it, he destroyed Tharn and rescued the true Emperor, Uriel Septim VII. Following what has come to be known as the Restoration, a grand state memorial service was held for Symmachus at the Imperial City, befitting the man who had served the Septim Dynasty for so long and so well.

Barenziah and good King Eadwyre had come to care deeply for one another during their trials and adventures, and were married in the same year shortly after their flight from the Imperial City. Her two children from her previous marriage with Symmachus remained with her, and a regent was appointed to rule Mournhold in her absence.

Up to the present time, Queen Barenziah has been in Wayrest with Prince Helseth and Princess Morgiah. She plans to return to Mournhold after Eadwyre's death. Since he was already elderly when they wed, she knows that that event, alas, could not be far off as the Elves reckon time. Until then, she shares in the government of the kingdom of Wayrest with her husband, and seems glad and content with her finally quiet, and happily unremarkable, life.

Biography of the Wolf Queen

By Katar Eriphanes

Few historic figures are viewed as unambiguously evil, but Potema, the so-called Wolf Queen of Solitude, surely qualifies for that dishonor. Born to the Imperial Family in the sixty-seventh year of the third era, Potema was immediately presented to her grandfather, the Emperor Uriel Septim II, a famously kindhearted man, who viewed the solemn, intense babe and whispered, "She looks like a she-wolf about ready to pounce."

Potema's childhood in the Imperial City was certainly difficult from the start. Her father, Prince Pelagius Septim, and her mother, Qizara, showed little affection for their brood. Her eldest brother Antiochus, sixteen at Potema's birth, was already a drunkard and womanizer, infamous in the empire. Her younger brothers Cephorus and Magnus were born much later, so for years she was the only child in the Imperial Court.

By the age of 14, Potema was a famous beauty with many suitors, but she was married to cement relations with King Mantiarco of the Nordic kingdom of Solitude. She entered the court, it was said, as a pawn, but she quickly became a queen. The elderly King Mantiarco loved her and allowed her all the power she wished, which was total.

When Uriel Septim II died the following year, her father was made emperor, and he faced a greatly depleted treasury, thanks to his father's poor management. Pelagius II dismissed the Elder Council, forcing them to buy back their positions. In 3E 97, after many miscarriages, the Queen of Solitude gave birth to a son, who she named Uriel after her grandfather. Mantiarco quickly made Uriel his heir, but the Queen had much larger ambitions for her child.

Two years later, Pelagius II died -- many say poisoned by a vengeful former Council member -- and his son, Potema's brother Antiochus took the throne. At age forty-eight, it could be said that Antiochus's wild seeds had yet to be

sown, and the history books are nearly pornographic in their depictions of life at the Imperial court during the years of his reign. Potema, whose passion was for power not fornication, was scandalized every time she visited the Imperial City.

Mantiarco, King of Solitude, died the springtide after Pelagius II. Uriel ascended to the throne, ruling jointly with his mother. Doubtless, Uriel had the right and would have preferred to rule alone, but Potema convinced him that his position was only temporary. He would have the Empire, not merely the kingdom. In Castle Solitude, she entertained dozens of diplomats from other kingdoms of Skyrim, sowing seeds of discontent. Her guest list over the years expanded to include kings and queens of High Rock and Morrowind as well.

For thirteen years, Antiochus ruled Tamriel, and proved an able leader despite his moral laxity. Several historians point to proof that Potema cast the spell that ended her brother's life, but evidence one way or another is lost in the sands of time. In any event, both she and her son Uriel were visiting the Imperial court in 3E 112 when Antiochus died, and immediately challenged the rule of his daughter and heir, Kintyra.

Potema's speech to the Elder Council is perhaps helpful to students of public speaking.

She began with flattery and self-abasement: "My most august and wise friends, members of the Elder Council, I am but a provincial queen, and I can only assume to bring to issue what you yourselves must have already pondered."

She continued on to praise the late Emperor, who was a popular ruler in spite of his flaws: "He was a true Septim and a great warrior, destroying -- with your counsel -- the near invincible armada of Pyandonea."

But little time was wasted, before she came to her point: "The Empress Magna unfortunately did nothing to temper my brother's lustful spirits. In point of fact, no whore in the slums of the city spread out on more beds than she. Had she attended to her duties in the Imperial bedchamber more

faithfully, we would have a true heir to the Empire, not the halfwit, milksop bastards who call themselves the Emperor's children. The girl called Kintyra is popularly believed to be the daughter of Magna and the Captain of the Guard. It may be that she is the daughter of Magna and the boy who cleans the cistern. We can never know for certain. Not as certainly as we can know the lineage of my son, Uriel. The last of the Septim Dynasty."

Despite Potema's eloquence, the Elder Council allowed Kintyra to assume the throne as the Empress Kintyra II. Potema and Uriel angrily returned to Skyrim and began assembling the rebellion.

Details of the War of the Red Diamond are included in other histories: we need not recount the Empress Kintyra II's capture and eventual execution in High Rock in the year 3E 114, nor the ascension of Potema's son, Uriel III, seven years later. Her surviving brothers, Cephorus and Magnus, fought the Emperor and his mother for years, tearing the Empire apart in a civil war.

When Uriel III fought his uncle Cephorus in Hammerfell at the Battle of Ichidag in 3E 127, Potema was fighting her other brother, Uriel's uncle Magnus in Skyrim at the Battle of Falconstar. She received word of her son's defeat and capture just as she was preparing to mount an attack on Magnus's weakest flank. The sixty-one-year-old Wolf Queen flew into a rage and led the assault herself. It was a success, and Magnus and his army fled. In the midst the victory celebration, Potema heard the news that her son the Emperor had been killed by an angry mob before he had even made it for trial in the Imperial City. He had been burned to death within his carriage.

When Cephorus was proclaimed Emperor, Potema's fury was terrible to behold. She summoned daedra to fight for her, had her necromancers resurrect her fallen enemies as undead warriors, and mounted attack after attack on the forces of the Emperor Cephorus I. Her allies began leaving her as her madness grew, and her only companions were the zombies and skeletons she had amassed over the years. The kingdom of Solitude became a land of death. Stories of the ancient Wolf Queen being waited on by rotting skeletal chambermaids and holding war plans with vampiric generals terrified her subjects.

Potema died after a month long siege on her castle in the year 3E 137 at the age of 90. While she lived, she had been the Wolf Queen of Solitude, Daughter of the Emperor Pelagius II, Wife of King Mantiarco, Aunt of the Empress Kintyra II, Mother of Emperor Uriel III, and Sister of the Emperors Antiochus and Cephorus. Three years after her death, Antiochus died, and his -- and Potema's -- brother Magnus took the throne.

Her death has hardly diminished her notoriety. Though there is little direct evidence of this, some theologians maintain that her spirit was so strong, she became a daedra after her death, inspiring mortals to mad ambition and treason. It is also said that her madness so infused Castle Solitude that it infected the next king to rule there. Ironically, that was her 18-year-old nephew Pelagius, the son of Magnus. Whatever the truth of the legend, it is undeniable that when Pelagius left Solitude in 3E 145 to assume the title of the Emperor Pelagius III, he quickly became known as Pelagius The Mad. It is even widely rumored that he murdered his father Magnus.

The Wolf Queen must surely have had the last laugh.

The Black Arrow

Part I

by Gorgic Guine

I was young when the Duchess of Woda hired me as an assistant footman at her summer palace. My experience with the ways of the titled aristocracy was very limited before that day. There were wealthy merchants, traders, diplomats, and officials who had large operations in Eldenroot, and ostentatious palaces for entertaining, but my relatives were all far from those social circles.

There was no family business for me to enter when I reached adulthood, but my cousin heard that an estate far from the city required servants. It was so remotely located that there were unlikely to be many applicants for the positions. I walked for five days into the jungles of Valenwood before I met a group of riders going my direction. They were three Bosmer men, one Bosmer woman, two Breton women, and a Dunmer man, adventurers from the look of them.

"Are you also going to Moliva?" asked Prolyssa, one of the Breton women, after we had made our introductions.

"I don't know what that is," I replied. "I'm seeking a domestic position with the Duchess of Woda."

"We'll take you to her gate," said the Dunmer Missun Akin, pulling me up to his horse. "But you would be wise not to tell Her Grace that students from Moliva escorted you. Not unless you don't really want the position in her service."

Akin explained himself as we rode on. Moliva was the closest village to the Duchess's estate, where a great and renowned archer had retired after a long life of military service. His name was Hiomaste, and though he was retired, he had begun to accept students who wished to learn the art of the bow. In time, when word spread of the great teacher, more and more students

arrived to learn from the Master. The Breton women had come down all the way from the Western Reach of High Rock. Akin himself had journeyed across the continent from his home near the great volcano in Morrowind. He showed me the ebony arrows he had brought from his homeland. I had never seen anything so black.

"From what we've heard," said Kopale, one of the Bosmer men. "The Duchess is an Imperial whose family has been here even before the Empire was formed, so you might think that she was accustomed to the common people of Valenwood. Nothing could be further from the truth. She despises the village, and the school most of all."

"I suppose she wants to control all the traffic in her jungle," laughed Prolyssa.

I accepted the information with gratitude, and found myself dreading more and more my first meeting with the intolerant Duchess. My first sight of the palace through the trees did nothing to assuage my fears.

It was nothing like any building I had ever seen in Valenwood. A vast edifice of stone and iron, with a jagged row of battlements like the jaws of a great beast. Most of the trees near the palace had been hewn away long ago: I could only imagine the scandal that must have caused, and what fear the Bosmer peasants must have had of the Duchy of Woda to have allowed it. In their stead was a wide gray-green moat circling in a ring around the palace, so it seemed to be on a perfect if artificial island. I had seen such sights in tapestries from High Rock and the Imperial Province, but never in my homeland.

"There'll be a guard at the gate, so we'll leave you here," said Akin, stopping his horse in the road. "It'd be best for you if you weren't damned by association with us."

I thanked my companions, and wished them good luck with their schooling. They rode on and I followed on foot. In a few minutes' time, I was at the front gate, which I noticed was linked to tall and ornate railings to keep the compound secure. When the gate-keeper understood that I was there to

inquire about a domestic position, he allowed me past and signaled to another guard across the open lawn to extend the drawbridge and allow me to cross the moat.

There was one last security measure: the front door. An iron monstrosity with the Woda Coat of Arms across the top, reinforced by more strips of iron, and a single golden keyhole. The man standing guard unlocked the door and gave me passage into the huge gloomy gray stone palace.

Her Grace greeted me in her drawing room. She was thin and wrinkled like a reptile, cloaked in a simple red gown. It was obviously that she never smiled. Our interview consisted of a single question.

"Do you know anything about being a junior footman in the employment of an Imperial noblewoman?" Her voice was like ancient leather.

"No, Your Grace."

"Good. No servant ever understands what needs to be done, and I particularly dislike those who think they do. You're engaged."

Life at the palace was joyless, but the position of junior footman was very undemanding. I had nothing to do on most days except to stay out of the Duchess's sight. At such times, I usually walked two miles down the road to Moliva. In some ways, there was nothing special or unusual about the village - there are thousands of identical places in Valenwood. But on the hillside nearby was Master Hiomaste's archery academy, and I would often take my luncheon and watch the practice.

Prolyssa and Akin would sometimes meet me afterwards. With Akin, the subjects of conversation very seldom strayed far from archery. Though I was very fond of him, I found Prolyssa a more enchanting companion, not only because she was pretty for a Breton, but also because she seemed to have interests outside the realm of marksmanship.

"There's a circus in High Rock I saw when I was a little girl called the Quill Circus," she said during one of our walks through the woods. "They've been

around for as long as anyone can remember. You have to see them if you ever can. They have plays, and sideshows, and the most amazing acrobats and archers you've ever seen. That's my dream, to join them some day when I'm good enough."

"How will you know when you're a good enough archer?" I asked.

She didn't answer, and when I turned, I realized that she had disappeared. I looked around, bewildered, until I heard laughter from the tree above me. She was perched on a branch, grinning.

"I may not join as an archer, maybe I'll join as an acrobat," she said. "Or maybe as both. I figured that Valenwood would be the place to go to see what I could learn. You've got all those great teachers to imitate in the trees here. Those ape men."

She coiled up, bracing her left leg before springing forward on her right. In a second, she had leapt across to a neighboring branch. I found it difficult to keep talking to her.

"The Imga, you mean?" I stammered. "Aren't you nervous up at that height?"

"It's a cliche, I know," she said, jumping to an even higher branch, "But the secret is not to ever look down."

"Would you mind coming down?"

"I probably should anyhow," she said. She was a good thirty feet up now, balancing herself, arms outstretched, on a very narrow branch. She gestured toward the gate just barely visible on the other side of the road. "This tree is actually as close as I want to get to your Duchess's palace."

I held back a gasp as she dove off the branch, somersaulting until she landed on the ground, knees slightly bent. That was the trick, she explained. Anticipating the blow before it happened. I expressed to her my confidence that she would be a great attraction at the Quill Circus. Of course, I know

now that never was to be.

On that day, as I recall, I had to return early. It was one of the rare occasions when I had work, of a sort, to do. Whenever the Duchess had guests, I was to be at the palace. That is not to say that I had any particular duties, except to be seen standing at attention in the dining room. The stewards and maids worked hard to bring in the food and clear the plates afterwards, but the footmen were purely decorative, a formality.

But at least I was an audience for the drama to come.

Part II

By Gorgic Guine

On the last dinner in my employ at the palace, the Duchess, quite surprisingly, had invited the mayor of Moliva and Master Hiomaste himself among her other guests. The servants' gossip was manic. The mayor had been there before, albeit very irregularly, but Hiomaste's presence was unthinkable. What could she mean by such a conciliatory gesture?

The dinner itself progressed along with perfect if slightly cool civility among all parties. Hiomaste and the Duchess were both very quiet. The Mayor tried to engage the group in a discussion of the Emperor Pelagius IV's new son and heir Uriel, but it failed to spark much interest. Lady Villea, elderly but much more vivacious than her sister the Duchess, led most of the talk about crime and scandal in Eldenroot.

"I have been encouraging her to move out to the country, away from all that unpleasantness for years now," the Duchess said, meeting the eyes of the Mayor. "We've been discussing more recently the possibility of her building a palace on Moliva Hill, but there's so little space there as you know. Fortunately, we've come to a discovery. There is a wide field just a few days west, on the edge of the river, ideally suited."

"It sounds perfect," the Mayor smiled and turned to Lady Villea: "When will your ladyship begin building?"

"The very day you move your village to the site," replied the Duchess of Woda.

The Mayor turned to her to see if she was joking. She obviously was not.

"Think of how much more commerce you could bring to your village if you were close to the river," said Lady Villea jovially. "And Master Hiomaste's

students could have easier access to his fine school. Everyone would benefit. I know it would put my sister's heart to ease if there was less trespassing and poaching on her lands."

"There is no poaching or trespassing on your lands now, Your Grace," frowned Hiomaste. "You do not own the jungle, nor will you. The villagers may be persuaded to leave, that I don't know. But my school will stay where it is."

The dinner party never really recovered happily. Hiomaste and the Mayor excused themselves, and my services, such as they were, were not needed in the drawing room where the group went to have their drinks. There was no laughter to be heard through the walls that evening.

The next day, even though there was a dinner planned for the evening, I left on my usual walk to Moliva. Before I had even reached the drawbridge, the guard held me back: "Where are you going, Gorgic? Not to the village, are you?"

"Why not?"

He pointed to the plume of smoke in the distance: "A fire broke out very early this morning, and it's still going. Apparently, it started at Master Hiomaste's school. It looks like the work of some traveling brigands."

"Blessed Stendarr!" I cried. "Are the students alive?"

"No one knows, but it'd be a miracle if any survived. It was late and most everyone was sleeping. I know they've already found the Master's body, or what was left of it. And they also found that girl, your friend, Prolyssa."

I spent the day in a state of shock. It seemed inconceivable what my instinct told me: that the two noble old ladies, Lady Villea and the Duchess of Woda, had arranged for a village and school that irritated them to be reduced to ashes. At dinner, they mentioned the fire in Moliva only very briefly, as if it were not news at all. But I did see the Duchess smile for the first time ever. It was a smile I will never forget until the day I die.

The next morning, I had resolved to go to the village and see if I could be of any assistance to the survivors. I was passing through the servants' hall to the grand foyer when I heard the sound of a group of people ahead. The guards and most of the servants were there, pointing at the portrait of the Duchess that hung in the center of the hall.

There was a single black bolt of ebony piercing the painting, right at the Duchess's heart.

I recognized it at once. It was one of Missun Akin's arrows I had seen in his quiver, forged, he said, in the bowels of Dagoth-Ur itself. My first reaction was relief: the Dunmer who had been kind enough to give me a ride to the palace had survived the fire. My second reaction was echoed by all present in the hall. How had the vandal gotten past the guards, the gate, the moat, and the massive iron door?

The Duchess, arriving shortly after I, was clearly furious, though she was too well bred to show it but by raising her web-thin eyebrows. She wasted no time in assigning all her servants to new duties to keep the palace grounds guarded at all times. We were given regular shifts and precise, narrow patrols.

The next morning, despite all precautions, there was another black arrow piercing the Duchess's portrait.

So it continued for a week's time. The Duchess saw to it that at least one person was always present in the foyer, but somehow the arrow always found its way to her painting whenever the guard's eyes were momentarily averted.

A complex series of signals were devised, so each patrol could report back any sounds or disturbances they encountered during their vigil. At first, the Duchess arranged them so her castellan would receive record of any disturbances during the day, and the chief of the guard during the night. But when she found that she could not sleep, she made certain that the information came to her directly.

The atmosphere in the palace had shifted from gloomy to nightmarish. A snake would slither across the moat, and suddenly Her Grace would be tearing through the east wing to investigate. A strong gust of wind ruffling the leaves on one of the few trees in the lawn was a similar emergency. An unfortunate lone traveler on the road in front of the palace, a completely innocent man at it turned out, brought such a violent reaction that he must have thought that he had stumbled on a war. In a way, he had.

And every morning, there was a new arrow in the front hall, mocking her.

I was given the terrible assignment of guarding the portrait for a few hours in the early morning. Not wanting to be the one to discover the arrow, I seated myself in a chair opposite, never letting my eyes move away for even a second. I don't know if you've had the experience of watching one object relentlessly, but it has a strange effect. All other senses vanish. That was why I was particularly startled when the Duchess rushed into the room, blurring the gulf for me between her portrait and herself.

"There's something moving behind the tree across the road from the gate!" she roared, pushing me aside, and fumbling with her key in the gold lock.

She was shaking with madness and excitement, and the key did not seem to want to go in. I reached out to help her, but the Duchess was already kneeling, her eye to the keyhole, to be certain that the key went through.

It was precisely in that second that the arrow arrived, but this one never made it as far as the portrait.

I actually met Missun Akin years later, while I was in Morrowind to entertain some nobles. He was impressed that I had risen from being a humble domestic servant to being a bard of some renown. He himself had returned to the ashlands, and, like his old master Hiomaste, was retired to the simple life of teaching and hunting.

I told him that I had heard that Lady Villea had decided not to leave the city, and that the village of Modiva had been rebuilt. He was happy to hear that,

but I could not find a way to ask him what I really wanted to know. I felt like a fool just wondering if what I thought were true, that he had been behind Prolyssa's tree across the road from the gate every morning that summer, firing an arrow through the gate, across the lawn, across the moat, through a keyhole, and into a portrait of the Duchess of Woda until he struck the Duchess herself. It was clearly an impossibility. I chose not to ask.

As we left one another that day, and he was waving good-bye, he said, "I am pleased to see you doing so well, my friend. I am happy you moved that chair."

The Black Arts On Trial

By Hannibal Traven
Archmagister of the Arcane University, Imperial City

HISTORY

Necromancy, commonly called the Black Arts, has a history that dates back before recorded time. Virtually all the earliest laws of the land make mention of it as expressly forbidden on pain of death. Independent practitioners of the arts of sorcery, however, continued its study.

The Psijic Order of the Isle of Artaeum, precursor to our own Mages Guild, also forbade its use, not only because it was dangerous, but their belief in the holy and unholy ancestor spirits made it heretical. Again, despite this, we hear many stories of students and masters who ignored this stricture. When Vanus Galerion left Artaeum, he may have disagreed with the Psijics on much, but he also refused to allow Necromancy to be taught in the Guild.

Almost 1100 years have passed since the time of Vanus Galerion, and there have been many archmagisters to lead his guild. The question of Necromancy has continued to be asked. The strictures against it in the Guild have never been lifted, but attitudes about it have shifted back and forth over the years. Some archmagisters have been inclined to ignore it entirely, some have fought very actively against it, and still other archmagisters have been rumored to be Necromancers themselves.

In my new role as Archmagister of the Mages Guild, it is my duty to set policy on this matter. Though I have my own opinions on the Black Arts, I took counsel with two of the most learned mages in the Empire, Magister Voth Karlyss of Corinth and Magister Ulliceta gra-Kogg of Orsinium, and we debated for two days.

What follows are summaries of the salient points of the debate, arguments

and counter-arguments, which led to the resolution of the Mages Guild on the subject of Necromancy.

ARGUMENT

Argument by Master gra-Kogg: Necromancy is poorly understood. We will not make it disappear by ignoring it. As an intellectual institution dedicated to the study of the magickal arts and sciences, we have obligations to the truth. Censoring ourselves in our scholarship is antithetical to our mission of neutrality and objectivity.

Counter-Argument by Master Karlyss: The Mages Guild must balance its quest for knowledge with responsible caution and ethical standards. It is not 'censoring' a student's course of study to have him proceed cautiously and with purity of purpose. It is not limiting a student's freedom to set rules and boundaries - indeed, it is essential.

Argument by Master Karlyss: Necromancy is an anathema throughout the civilized world. To embrace it publicly, the Mages Guild would inspire fear and hostility in the populace at large. Vanus Galerion wanted this institution to be unlike the Psijic Order, which was elitist and separatist. We ignore public opinion at our own risk. We will certainly lose our charters in many places including, very likely, the whole of Morrowind, where sentiment against Necromancy is very strong.

Counter-Argument by Master gra-Kogg: Yes, we should be sensitive to the concerns of the community, but they should not and must not dictate our scholarship. 'Necromancer' to many uneducated persons simply means an evil mage. It is madness to limit our work because of prejudices and half-formed understanding. It is an affront to the purpose of objective study to turn our back on a subject merely because of public opinion.

Argument by Master gra-Kogg: Necromancers are the scourge of Tamriel. Whether operating independently or in concert with the sloads or King of Worms, Mannimarco, they are responsible for many horrors, animated zombies and skeletons and other forms of the undead. To best combat this menace, we must understand the powers of the Necromancer, and we

cannot do that by restricting our study of the Black Arts.

Counter-Argument by Master Karlyss: No one is disputing the threat of the Black Arts - in fact, that is the very essence of my argument against the Mages Guild making it a School to be taught to our initiates. We can and should know what our enemy is capable of, but we must be careful not to step into a trap of looking too deep into his ways, and making those ways our own. We do no one any good if by studying the evil ways, we become evil ourselves.

Argument by Master Karlyss: Necromancy is inherently dangerous. One cannot 'dabble' in it. The simplest spell requires the spilling of blood, and immediately begins to corrupt the caster's soul. This is not conjecture, but simple fact. It is irresponsible of the Guild to teach and thereby encourage a sort of magickal study which has proven itself, time and time again, to bring nothing but terror and misery on the practitioner and world.

Counter-Argument by Master gra-Kogg: All Schools of magicka are dangerous to the uninitiated. A simple fireball spell from the School of Destruction can cause great harm when cast by a novice, not only to others but to the mage himself. The School of Mysticism by its very nature forces the practitioner to divorce his mind from logic, to embrace a temporary sort of insanity, which one might argue is very like corrupting one's soul.

Argument by Master gra-Kogg: The Guild already permits some forms of Necromancy. The 'Schools' of magicka are, as we know, artificial constructs, originally formulated by Vanus Galerion to divide and thereby simplify study. They have changed many times throughout the years, but at their heart, every Master knows, they are all linked together. When a student of Conjuration summons a guardian ghost, he is touching on the School of Necromancy. When a student of Enchantment uses a trapped soul, he too may be considered guilty of a Black Art. The School of Mysticism, as I have stated before, has some kinship with Necromancy as well. To state that students may not learn the ways of Necromancy is to stifle common skills in the other, more historically legitimate Schools of the Guild.

Counter-Argument by Master Karlyss: Yes, the Schools are intertwined, but the standard spells of each School have passed the proof of time. We know that a student of Mysticism, properly instructed, will not be permanently harmed by his experience. In many ways, it is a question of extremes - how far we would permit our studies to take us. Necromancy by its nature relies on the practitioner going further into the darkness than is wise, virtually guaranteeing his destruction. It has no place in the Mages Guild.

CONCLUSION

The risks of studying Necromancy outweigh its usefulness. The Guild does not wish to censor the study of any of its members, but it will not tolerate studies in the Black Arts, except in limited form for the purpose of combating its evil adherents. This may only been done by rare individuals who have proven themselves both highly skilled and highly cautious, and then only with my express permission and supervision.

AFTERWORD

I regret to acknowledge the truth behind the rumor that Master Ulliceta gra-Kogg was more than an apologist for Necromancy, she was a Necromancer herself. Upon this revelation, the Knights of the Lamp attempted to arrest her at the Guildhouse in Orsinium, but she made good her escape. We have every confidence in the replacement Magister in Orsinium.

Though I disagreed, I respected her logical reasoning enough to include her arguments in this book, and I see no reason to remove them. It is disappointing, however, to see that her interest in 'the truth' was nothing more than a euphemism for her slavery to the Black Arts.

This unfortunate situation merely illustrates how essential it is for Guildmembers to be wary of the lure of Necromancy, and be vigilant to its practitioners' infiltration in our Mages Guild.

The Black Star

An Achievement of Magic over Daedra

by
Malyn Varen
Master Enchanter

Though some scoffed, some scorned, at the very notion of experimenting on a daedric artifact, I have succeeded where the ignorant and superstitious would not even dare to try. The Black Star. My achievement over the Daedric Lord Azura, a re-envisioning, a remastering of the ultimate soul gem. It shall become the vessel of my immortality. Final proof that mortals can live as indefinitely as the denizens of Oblivion.

The visions, the voices that Azura has sent to taunt me. While some called me mad, I knew the truth. Nothing can be held sacred in the pursuit of advancing the very nature of magic itself. Let the daedra send their foul images into my mind. They have given me the burning desire and unrelenting discipline to shut out all influence, all morality.

My disciples and I have built a new site, free of the prying eyes of those primitive minds in Winterhold. Fort Ilinalta. We had been conducting a few minor experiments before our exile, some of which led to the disruption of the island, but a few enchantments have kept the ruins intact, and beneath the waters of Lake Ilinalta has been the perfect place for the final phase of the Black Star.

Boethiah's Glory

Look upon the face of Boethiah and wonder. Raise your arms that Boethiah may look on them and bestow a blessing. Know that battle is a blessing. Know that death is an eventuality. Know that you are dust in the eyes of Boethiah.

Long is the arm of Boethiah, and swift is the blade.

Deep is the cut, and subtle is the poison.

Worship, o faithful. Pray your death is short.

Worship, o faithful. Pray your death is quiet.

Worship, o faithful. Worship the glory that is Boethiah.

The Book of Daedra

Azura, whose sphere is dusk and dawn, the magic in-between realms of twilight, known as Moonshadow, Mother of the Rose, and Queen of the Night Sky.

Boethiah, whose sphere is deceit and conspiracy, and the secret plots of murder, assassination, treason, and unlawful overthrow of authority.

Clavicus Vile, whose sphere is the granting of power and wishes through ritual invocations and pact.

Hermaeus Mora, whose sphere is scrying of the tides of Fate, of the past and future as read in the stars and heavens, and in whose dominion are the treasures of knowledge and memory.

Hircine, whose sphere is the Hunt, the Sport of Daedra, the Great Game, the Chase, known as the Huntsman and the Father of Manbeasts.

Malacath, whose sphere is the patronage of the spurned and ostracized, the keeper of the Sworn Oath, and the Bloody Curse.

Mehrunes Dagon, whose sphere is Destruction, Change, Revolution, Energy, and Ambition.

Mephala, whose sphere is obscured to mortals; known by the names Webspinner, Spinner, and Spider; whose only consistent theme seems to be

interference in the affairs of mortals for her amusement.

Meridia, whose sphere is obscured to mortals; who is associated with the energies of living things.

Molag Bal, whose sphere is the domination and enslavement of mortals; whose desire is to harvest the souls of mortals and to bring mortal souls within his sway by spreading seeds of strife and discord in the mortal realms.

Namira, whose sphere is the ancient Darkness; known as the Spirit Daedra, ruler of sundry dark and shadowy spirits; associated with spiders, insects, slugs, and other repulsive creatures which inspire mortals with an instinctive revulsion.

Nocturnal, whose sphere is the night and darkness; who is known as the Night Mistress.

Peryite, whose sphere is the ordering of the lowest orders of Oblivion, known as the Taskmaster.

Sanguine, whose sphere is hedonistic revelry and debauchery, and passionate indulgences of darker natures.

Sheogorath, whose sphere is Madness, and whose motives are unknowable.

Vaernima, whose sphere is the realm of dreams and nightmares, and from whose realm issues forth evil omens.

[Especially marked for special interest under the heading "Malacath" you find a reference to SCOURGE, blessed by Malacath, and dedicated to the use of mortals. In short, the reference suggests that any Daedra attempting to invoke the weapon's powers will be expelled into the voidstreams of Oblivion.]

"Of the legendary artifacts of the Daedra, many are well known, like Azura's Star, and Sheogorath's Wabbajack. Others are less well known, like Scourge, Mackkan's Hammer, Bane of Daedra...."

"...yet though Malacath blessed Scourge to be potent against his Daedra kin, he thought not that it should fall into Daedric hands, then to serve as a tool for private war among caitiff and forsaken. Thus did Malacath curse the device such that, should any dark kin seek to invoke its powers, that a void should open and swallow that Daedra, and purge him into Oblivion's voidstreams, from thence to pathfind back to the Real and Unreal Worlds in the full order of time."

The Book of the Dragonborn

by Prior Emelene Madrine
Order of Talos
Weynon Priory

Year 360 of the Third Era,
Twenty-First of the Reign of
His Majesty Pelagius IV

Many people have heard the term "Dragonborn" - we are of course ruled by the "Dragonborn Emperors" - but the true meaning of the term is not commonly understood. For those of us in the Order of Talos, this is a subject near and dear to our hearts, and in this book I will attempt to illuminate the history and significance of those known as Dragonborn down through the ages.

Most scholars agree that the term was first used in connection with the Covenant of Akatosh, when the blessed St. Alessia was given the Amulet of Kings and the Dragonfires in the Temple of the One were first lit. "Akatosh, looking with pity upon the plight of men, drew precious blood from his own heart, and blessed St. Alessia with this blood of Dragons, and made a Covenant that so long as Alessia's generations were true to the dragon blood, Akatosh would endeavor to seal tight the Gates of Oblivion, and to deny the armies of daedra and undead to their enemies, the Daedra-loving Ayleids." Those blessed by Akatosh with "the dragon blood" became known more simply as Dragonborn.

The connection with the rulers of the Empire was thus there from the beginning - only those of the dragon blood were able to wear the Amulet of Kings and light the Dragonfires. All the legitimate rulers of the Empire have been Dragonborn - the Emperors and Empresses of the first Cyrodilic Empire founded by Alessia; Reman Cyrodiil and his heirs; and of course

Tiber Septim and his heirs, down to our current Emperor, His Majesty Pelagius Septim IV.

Because of this connection with the Emperors, however, the other significance of the Dragonborn has been obscured and largely forgotten by all but scholars and those of us dedicated to the service of the blessed Talos, Who Was Tiber Septim. Very few realize that being Dragonborn is not a simple matter of heredity - being the blessing of Akatosh Himself, it is beyond our understanding exactly how and why it is bestowed. Those who become Emperor and light the Dragonfires are surely Dragonborn - the proof is in the wearing of the Amulet and the lighting of the Fires. But were they Dragonborn and thus able to do these things - or was the doing the sign of the blessing of Akatosh descending upon them? All that we can say is that it is both, and neither - a divine mystery.

The line of Septims have all been Dragonborn, of course, which is one reason the simplistic notion of it being hereditary has become so commonplace. But we know for certain that the early Cyrodilic rulers were not all related. There is also no evidence that Reman Cyrodiil was descended from Alessia, although there are many legends that would make it so, most of them dating from the time of Reman and likely attempts to legitimize his rule. We know that the Blades, usually thought of as the Emperor's bodyguards, originated in Akaviri crusaders who invaded Tamriel for obscure reasons in the late First Era. They appear to have been searching for a Dragonborn - the events at Pale Pass bear this out - and the Akaviri were the first to proclaim Reman Cyrodiil as Dragonborn. In fact it was the Akaviri who did the most to promote his standing as Emperor (although Reman himself never took that title in his lifetime). And of course there is no known hereditary connection between Tiber Septim and any of the previous Dragonborn rulers of Tamriel.

Whether there can be more than one Dragonborn at any time is another mystery. The Emperors have done their best to dismiss this notion, but of course the Imperial succession itself means that at the very least there are

two or more potential Dragonborn at any time: the current ruler and his or her heirs. The history of the Blades also hints at this - although little is known of their activities during the Interregnum between Reman's Empire and the rise of Tiber Septim, many believe that the Blades continued to search out and guard those they believed were (or might be) Dragonborn during this time.

Lastly, we come to the question of the true meaning of being Dragonborn. The connection with dragons is so obvious that it has almost been forgotten - in these days when dragons are a distant memory, we forget that in the early days being Dragonborn meant having "the dragon blood". Some scholars believe that was meant quite literally, although the exact significance is not known. The Nords tell tales of Dragonborn heroes who were great dragonslayers, able to steal the power of the dragons they killed. Indeed, it is well known that the Akaviri sought out and killed many dragons during their invasion, and there is some evidence that this continued after they became Reman Cyrodiil's Dragonguard (again, the connection to dragons) - the direct predecessor to the Blades of today.

I leave you with what is known as "The Prophecy of the Dragonborn". It often said to originate in an Elder Scroll, although it is sometimes also attributed to the ancient Akaviri. Many have attempted to decipher it, and many have also believed that its omens had been fulfilled and that the advent of the "Last Dragonborn" was at hand. I make no claims as an interpreter of prophecy, but it does suggest that the true significance of Akatosh's gift to mortalkind has yet to be fully understood.

When misrule takes its place at the eight corners of the world

When the Brass Tower walks and Time is reshaped

When the thrice-blessed fail and the Red Tower trembles

When the Dragonborn Ruler loses his throne, and the White Tower falls

When the Snow Tower lies sundered, kingless, bleeding

The World-Eater wakes, and the Wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn.

Bravil: Daughter of the Niben

By Sathyr Longleat

Bravil is one of the most charming towns in Cyrodiil, sparkling in her simple beauty, illustrious by her past. No visit to the southern part of the Imperial Province is complete without a walk along Bravil's exciting river port, a talk with her friendly native children, and, of course, in the tradition of the village, a whispered word to the famous statue of the Lucky Old Lady.

Many thousands of years before the arrival of the Atmorans, the native Ayleid people had long lived in the vicinity of modern day Bravil. The Niben then, as now, provided food and transportation, and the village was even more populous than it is today. We are not certain what they called their region: as insular as they were, the word they used would be translated to simply mean "home." These savage Ayleids were so firmly entrenched that the Bravil region was one of the very last areas to be liberated by the Alessian army in the second century of the 1st era. Though little remains of that era culturally or archeologically, thank Mara, the tales of debauchery and depravity have entered into the realm of legends.

How the Ayleids were able to survive such a long siege is debated by scholars to this day. All, however, grant the honor of the victory to one of the Empress Alessia's centurions, a man called Teo Bravillius Tasus, the man for whom the modern town is named.

It was said he invaded the village no less than four times, after heavy resistance, but each time upon the morning dawning, all his soldiers within would be dead, murdered. By the time more centuria had arrived, the fortified town was repopulated with Ayleids. After the second successful invasion, secret underground tunnels were found and filled in, but once again, come morning, the soldiers were again dead, and the citizens had returned. After the third successful siege, legions were posted outside of the town, watching the roads and riverway for signs of attacks, but no one

came. The next morning, the bodies of the invading soldiers were thrown from the parapets of town's walls.

Teo Bravillius Tasus knew that the Ayleids must be hiding themselves somewhere in the town, waiting until nightfall, and then murdering the soldiers while they slept. The question was where. After the fourth invasion, he himself led the soldiers in a thorough inspection of every corner, every shadow. Just as they were ready to give up, the great centurion noticed two curious things. High in the sheer walls of the town, beyond anyone's ability to climb, there were indentations, narrow platforms. And by the river just inside the town, he discovered a single footprint from someone clearly not wearing the Imperial boot.

The Ayleids, it seemed, had taken two routes to hide themselves. Some had levitated up to the walls and hidden themselves high above, and others had slipped into the river, where they were able to breathe underwater. It was a relatively easy task once the strange elves' even stranger hiding holes had been discovered to rout them out, and see to it that there were no more midnight assassinations of the Empress's troops.

It may seem beyond belief that an entire community could be so skilled in these spells hundreds and hundreds of years before the Mages Guild was formed to teach the ways of magicka to the common folk. There does, however, appear to be evidence that, just as the Psijics on the Isle of Artaeum developed Mysticism long before there was a name for it, the even more obscure Ayleids of southern Cyrodiil had developed what was to be known as the school of Alteration. It is not, after all, much of a stretch when one considers that other Ayleids at the time of Bravil's conquering and even later were shapeshifters. The community of pre-Bravil could not turn into beasts and monsters, but they could alter their bodies to hide themselves away. A related and useful skill, to be sure. But not so effective to save themselves in the end.

Very little is left of the Ayleid presence in Bravil of today, though archetectural marvels of other kinds are very evident. As beautiful and arresting as the Benevolence of Mara cathedral and the lord's palace are, no manmade structure in Bravil is as famous as the statue called The Lucky

Old Lady.

The tales about the Lady and who she was are too numerous to list.

It was said she was born the illegitimate daughter of a prostitute in Bravil, certainly an inauspicious beginning to a lucky life. She was teased by the other children, who forever asked her who her father was. Every day, she would run back to her little shack in tears from their cruelty.

One day, a priest of Stendarr came to Bravil to do charitable work. He saw the weeping little girl, and when asked, she told him the cause of her misery: she didn't know who her father was.

"You have kind eyes and a mouth that tells no lies," replied the priest after a moment, smiling. "You are clearly a child of Stendarr, the God of Mercy, Charity, and Well-Earned Luck."

The priest's thoughtful words changed the girl forever. Whenever she was asked who her father was, she would cheerfully reply, "I am a child of Luck."

She grew up to be a barmaid, it was said, kind and generous to her customers, frequently allowing them to pay when they were able to. On a particularly rainy night, she gave shelter to a young man dressed in rags, who not only had no money to pay, but was belligerent and rude to her as she fed him and gave him a room. The next morning, he left without so much as a thank you. Her friends and family admonished her, saying that she had to be careful, he might have even been dangerous.

A week later, a royal carriage arrived in Bravil, with an Imperial prince within. Though he was scarcely reconizable, it was the same young man the Lady had helped. He apologized profusely for his appearance and behavior, explaining that he had been kidnapped and cursed by a band of witches, and it wasn't until later he had returned to his senses. The Lady was showered with riches, which she, of course, generously shared with all the people of Bravil, where she lived to a content old age.

No one knows when the statue to her was erected in the town square, or who the artist was, but it has stood there for thousands of years, since the first era. To this day, visitors and Bravillians alike go to the Lucky Old Lady to ask for her to bless them with luck in their travails.

Just one more charming aspect of the charming, and very lucky village of Bravil.

Breathing Water

by Haliel Myrm

He walked through the dry, crowded streets of Bal Fell, glad to be among so many strangers. In the wharfs of Vivec, he had no such anonymity. They knew him to be a smuggler, but here, he could be anyone. A lower-class peddler perhaps. A student even. Some people even pushed against him as he walked past as if to say, "We would not dream of being so rude as to acknowledge that you don't belong here."

Seryne Relas was not in any of the taverns, but he knew she was somewhere, perhaps behind a tenement window or poking around in a dunghill for an exotic ingredient for some spell or another. He knew little of the ways of sorceresses, but that they always seemed to be doing something eccentric. Because of this prejudice, he nearly passed by the old Dunmer woman having a drink from a well. It was too prosaic, but he knew from the look of her that she was Seryne Relas, the great sorceress.

"I have gold for you," he said to her back. "If you will teach me the secret of breathing water."

She turned around, a wide wet grin stretched across her weathered features. "I ain't breathing it, boy. I'm just having a drink."

"Don't mock me," he said, stiffly. "Either you're Seryne Relas and you will teach me the spell of breathing water, or you aren't. Those are the only possibilities."

"If you're going to learn to breath water, you're going to have to learn there are more possibilities than that, boy. The School of Alteration is all about possibilities, changing patterns, making things be what they could be. Maybe I ain't Seryne Relas, but I can teach how to breathe water," she wiped her mouth dry. "Or maybe I am Seryne Relas and I won't. Or maybe even I can teach you to breath water, but you can't learn."

"I'll learn," he said, simply.

"Why don't you just buy yourself a spell of water breathing or a potion over at the Mages Guild?" she asked. "That's how it's generally done."

"They're not powerful enough," he said. "I need to be underwater for a long time. I'm willing to pay whatever you ask, but I don't want any questions. I was told you could teach me."

"What's your name, boy?"

"That's a question," he replied. His name was Tharien Winloth, but in Vivec, they called him the Tollman. His job, such as it was, was collecting a percentage of the loot from the smugglers when they came into harbor to bring to his boss in the Camonna Tong. Of the value of that percentage, he earned another percentage. In the end it was very small indeed. He had scarcely any gold of his own, and what he had, he gave to Seryne Relas.

The lessons began that very day. The sorceress brought her pupil, who she simply called "boy," out to a low sandbank along the sea.

"I will teach you a powerful spell for breathing water," she said. "But you must become a master of it. As with all spells and all skills, you more you practice, the better you get. Even that ain't enough. To achieve true mastery, you must understand what it is you're doing. It ain't simply enough to perform a perfect thrust of a blade -- you must also know what you are doing and why."

"That's common sense," said Tharien

"Yes, it is," said Seryne, closing her eyes. "But the spells of Alteration are all about uncommon sense. The infinite possibilities, breaking the sky, swallowing space, dancing with time, setting ice on fire, believing that the unreal may become real. You must learn the rules of the cosmos and then break them."

"That sounds ... very difficult," replied Tharien, trying to keep a straight face.

Seryne pointed to the small silver fish darting along the water's edge: "They don't find it so. They breath water just fine."

"But that's not magic."

"What I'm saying to you, boy, is that it is."

For several weeks, Seryne drilled her student, and the more he understood about what he was doing and the more he practiced, the longer he could breath underwater. When he found that he could cast the spell for as long as he needed, he thanked the sorceress and bade her farewell.

"There is one last lesson I have to teach you," she said. "You must learn that desire is not enough. The world will end your spell no matter how good you are, and no matter how much you want it."

"That's a lesson I'm happy not to learn," he said, and left at once for the short journey back to Vivec.

The wharfs were much the same, with all the same smells, the same sounds, and the same characters. His boss had found a new Tollman, he learned from his mates. They were still looking out for the smuggler ship Morodrung, but they had given up hope of ever seeing it. Tharien knew they would not. He had seen it sink from the wharf a long time ago.

On a moonless night, he cast his spell and dove into the thrashing purple waves. He kept his mind on the world of possibilities, that books could sing, that green was blue, that that water was air, that every stroke and kick brought him closer to a sunken ship filled with treasure. He felt magicka surge all around him as he pushed his way deeper down. Ahead he saw a ghostly shadow of the Morodrung, its mast billowing in a wind of deep water currents. He also felt his spell begin to fade. He could break reality long enough to breath water all the way back up to the surface, but not enough to reach the ship.

The next night, he dove again, and this time, the spell was stronger. He could see the vessel in detail, clouded over and dusted in sediment. The wound in its hull where it had struck the reef. A glint of gold beckoning from within. But still he felt reality closing in, and he had to surface.

The third night, he made it into the steerage, past the bloated corpses of the sailors, nibbled and picked apart by fish. Their glassy eyes bulging, their mouths stretched open. Had they only known the spell, he thought briefly, but his mind was more occupied by the gold scattered along the floor, the boxes that contained them shattered. He considered scooping as much he could carry into his pockets, but a sturdy iron box seemed to bespeak more treasures.

On the wall was a row of keys. He took each down and tried it on the locked box, but none opened it. One key, however, was missing. Thalien looked around the room. Where could it be? His eyes went to the corpse of one of the sailors, floating in a dance of death not far from the box, his hands tightly clutching something. It was a key. When the ship had begun to sink, this sailor had evidently gone for the iron box. Whatever was in it had to be very valuable.

Thalien took the sailor's key and opened the box. It was filled with broken glass. He rummaged around until he felt something solid, and pulled out two flasks of some kind of wine. He smiled as he considered the foolishness of the poor alcoholic. This was what was important to the sailor, out of all the treasure in the Morodrung.

Then, suddenly, Thalien Winloth felt reality.

He had not been paying attention to the grim, tireless advance of the world on his spell. It was fading away, his ability to breath water. There was no time to surface. There was no time to do anything. As he sucked in, his lungs filled with cold, briny water.

A few days later, the smugglers working on the wharf came upon the drowned body of the former Tollman. Finding a body in the water in Vivec

was not in itself noteworthy, but the subject that they discussed over many bottles of flin was how did it happen that he drowned with two potions of water breathing in his hands.

A Brief History of the Empire

Part One

by Stronach k'Thojj III
Imperial Historian

Before the rule of Tiber Septim, all Tamriel was in chaos. The poet Tracizis called that period of continuous unrest "days and nights of blood and venom." The kings were a petty lot of grasping tyrants, who fought Tiber's attempts to bring order to the land. But they were as disorganized as they were dissolute, and the strong hand of Septim brought peace forcibly to Tamriel. The year was 2E 896. The following year, the Emperor declared the beginning of a new Era-thus began the Third Era, Year Aught.

For thirty-eight years, the Emperor Tiber reigned supreme. It was a lawful, pious, and glorious age, when justice was known to one and all, from serf to sovereign. On Tiber's death, it rained for an entire fortnight as if the land of Tamriel itself was weeping.

The Emperor's grandson, Pelagius, came to the throne. Though his reign was short, he was as strong and resolute as his father had been, and Tamriel could have enjoyed a continuation of the Golden Age. Alas, an unknown enemy of the Septim Family hired that accursed organization of cutthroats, the Dark Brotherhood, to kill the Emperor Pelagius I as he knelt at prayer at the Temple of the One in the Imperial City. Pelagius I's reign lasted less than three years.

Pelagius had no living children, so the Crown Imperial passed to his first cousin, the daughter of Tiber's brother Agnorith. Kintyra, former Queen of Silvenar, assumed the throne as Kintyra I. Her reign was blessed with prosperity and good harvests, and she herself was an avid patroness of art, music, and dance.

Kintyra's son was crowned after her death, the first Emperor of Tamriel to use the imperial name Uriel. Uriel I was the great lawmaker of the Septim Dynasty, and a promoter of independent organizations and guilds. Under his

kind but firm hand, the Fighters Guild and the Mages Guild increased in prominence throughout Tamriel. His son and successor Uriel II reigned for eighteen years, from the death of Uriel I in 3E64 to Pelagius II's accession in 3E82. Tragically, the rule of Uriel II was cursed with blights, plagues, and insurrections. The tenderness he inherited from his father did not serve Tamriel well, and little justice was done.

Pelagius II inherited not only the throne from his father, but the debt from the latter's poor financial and judicial management. Pelagius dismissed all of the Elder Council, and allowed only those willing to pay great sums to resume their seats. He encouraged similar acts among his vassals, the kings of Tamriel, and by the end of his seventeen year reign, Tamriel had returned to prosperity. His critics, however, have suggested that any advisor possessed of wisdom but not of gold had been summarily ousted by Pelagius. This may have led to some of the troubles his son Antiochus faced when he in turn became Emperor.

Antiochus was certainly one of the more flamboyant members of the usually austere Septim Family. He had numerous mistresses and nearly as many wives, and was renowned for the grandeur of his dress and his high good humor. Unfortunately, his reign was rife with civil war, surpassing even that of his grandfather Uriel II. The War of the Isle in 3E110, twelve years after Antiochus assumed the throne, nearly took the province of Summurset Isle away from Tamriel. The united alliance of the kings of Summurset and Antiochus only managed to defeat King Orghum of the island-kingdom of Pyandonea due to a freak storm. Legend credits the Psijic Order of the Isle of Artaeum with the sorcery behind the tempest.

The story of Kintyra II, heiress to her father Antiochus' throne, is certainly one of the saddest tales in imperial history. Her first cousin Uriel, son of Queen Potema of Solitude, accused Kintyra of being a bastard, alluding to the infamous decadence of the Imperial City during her father's reign. When this accusation failed to stop her coronation, Uriel bought the support of several disgruntled kings of High Rock, Skyrim, and Morrowind, and with Queen Potema's assistance, he coordinated three attacks on the Septim Empire.

The first attack occurred in the Iliac Bay region, which separates High Rock and Hammerfell. Kintyra's entourage was massacred and the Empress taken captive. For two years, Kintyra II languished in an Imperial prison believed to be somewhere in Glenpoint or Glenmoril before she was slain in her cell under mysterious circumstances. The second attack was on a series of Imperial garrisons along the coastal Morrowind islands. The Empress' consort Kontin Arynx fell defending the forts. The third and final attack was a siege of the Imperial City itself, occurring after the Elder Council had split up the army to attack western High Rock and eastern Morrowind. The weakened government had little defence against Uriel's determined aggression, and capitulated after only a fortnight of resistance. Uriel took the throne that same evening and proclaimed himself Uriel III, Emperor of Tamriel. The year was 3E 121. Thus began the War of the Red Diamond, described in Volume II of this series.

Part Two

by Stronach k'Thojj III
Imperial Historian

Volume I of this series described in brief the lives of the first eight Emperors of the Septim Dynasty, beginning with the glorious Tiber Septim and ending with his great, great, great, great, grandniece Kintyra II. Kintyra's murder in Glenpoint while in captivity is considered by some to be the end of the pure strain of Septim blood in the imperial family. Certainly it marks the end of something significant.

Uriel III not only proclaimed himself Emperor of Tamriel, but also Uriel Septim III, taking the eminent surname as a title. In truth, his surname was Mantiarco from his father's line. In time, Uriel III was deposed and his crimes reviled, but the tradition of taking the name Septim as a title for the Emperor of Tamriel did not die with him.

For six years, the War of the Red Diamond (which takes its name from the Septim Family's famous badge) tore the Empire apart. The combatants were the three surviving children of Pelagius II-Potema, Cephorus, and Magnus-and their various offspring. Potema, of course, supported her son Uriel III, and had the combined support of all of Skyrim and northern Morrowind. With the efforts of Cephorus and Magnus, however, the province of High Rock turned coat. The provinces of Hammerfell, Summurset Isle, Valenwood, Elsweyr, and Black Marsh were divided in their loyalty, but most kings supported Cephorus and Magnus.

In 3E127, Uriel III was captured at the Battle of Ichidag in Hammerfell. En route to his trial in the Imperial City, a mob overtook his prisoner's carriage and burned him alive within it. His captor and uncle continued on to the Imperial City, and by common acclaim was proclaimed Cephorus I, Emperor of Tamriel.

Cephorus' reign was marked by nothing but war. By all accounts, he was a

kind and intelligent man, but what Tamriel needed was a great warrior -- and he, fortunately, was that. It took an additional ten years of constant warfare for him to defeat his sister Potema. The so-called Wolf Queen of Solitude who died in the siege of her city-state in the year 137. Cephorus survived his sister by only three years. He never had time during the war years to marry, so it was his brother, the fourth child of Pelagius II, who assumed the throne.

The Emperor Magnus was already elderly when he took up the imperial diadem, and the business of punishing the traitorous kings of the War of the Red Diamond drained much of his remaining strength. Legend accuses Magnus' son and heir Pelagius III of patricide, but that seems highly unlikely-for no other reason than that Pelagius was King of Solitude following the death of Potema, and seldom visited the Imperial City.

Pelagius III, sometimes called Pelagius the Mad, was proclaimed Emperor in the 145th year of the Third Era. Almost from the start, his eccentricities of behaviour were noted at court. He embarrassed dignitaries, offended his vassal kings, and on one occasion marked the end of an imperial grand ball by attempting to hang himself. His long-suffering wife was finally awarded the Regency of Tamriel, and Pelagius III was sent to a series of healing institutions and asylums until his death in 3E153 at the age of thirty-four.

The Empress Regent of Tamriel was proclaimed Empress Katariah I upon the death of her husband. Some who do not mark the end of the Septim bloodline with the death of Kintyra II consider the ascendancy of this Dark Elf woman the true mark of its decline. Her defenders, on the other hand, assert that though Katariah was not descended from Tiber, the son she had with Pelagius was, so the imperial chain did continue. Despite racist assertions to the contrary, Katariah's forty-six-year reign was one of the most celebrated in Tamriel's history. Uncomfortable in the Imperial City, Katariah travelled extensively throughout the Empire such as no Emperor ever had since Tiber's day. She repaired much of the damage that previous emperor's broken alliances and bungled diplomacy created. The people of Tamriel came to love their Empress far more than the nobility did. Katariah's death in a minor skirmish in Black Marsh is a favorite subject of conspiracy minded historians. The Sage Montalius' discovery, for instance,

of a disenfranchised branch of the Septim Family and their involvement with the skirmish was a revelation indeed.

When Cassynder assumed the throne upon the death of his mother, he was already middle-aged. Only half Elven, he aged like a Breton. In fact, he had left the rule of Wayrest to his half-brother Uriel due to poor health. Nevertheless, as the only true blood relation of Pelagius and thus Tiber, he was pressed into accepting the throne. To no one's surprise, the Emperor Cassynder's reign did not last long. In two years he joined his predecessors in eternal slumber.

Uriel Lariat, Cassynder's half-brother, and the child of Katariah I and her Imperial consort Gallivere Lariat (after the death of Pelagius III), left the kingdom of Wayrest to reign as Uriel IV. Legally, Uriel IV was a Septim: Cassynder had adopted him into the royal family when he had become King of Wayrest. Nevertheless, to the Council and the people of Tamriel, he was a bastard child of Katariah. Uriel did not possess the dynamism of his mother, and his long forty-three-year reign was a hotbed of sedition.

Uriel IV's story is told in the third volume of this series.

Part Three

by Stronach k'Thojj III
Imperial Historian

The first volume of this series told in brief the story of the succession of the first eight Emperors of the Septim Dynasty, from Tiber I to Kintyra II. The second volume described the War of the Red Diamond and the six Emperors that followed its aftermath, from Uriel III to Cassynder I. At the end of that volume, it was described how the Emperor Cassynder's half-brother Uriel IV assumed the throne of the Empire of Tamriel.

It will be recalled that Uriel IV was not a Septim by birth. His mother, though she reigned as Empress for many years, was a Dark Elf married to a true Septim Emperor, Pelagius III. Uriel's father was actually Katariah I's consort after Pelagius' death, a Breton nobleman named Gallivere Lariat. Before taking the throne of Empire, Cassynder I had ruled the kingdom of Wayrest, but poor health had forced him to retire. Cassynder had no children, so he legally adopted his half-brother Uriel and abdicated the kingdom. Seven years later, Cassynder inherited the Empire at the death of his mother. Three years after that, Uriel once again found himself the recipient of Cassynder's inheritance.

Uriel IV's reign was a long and difficult one. Despite being a legally adopted member of the Septim Family, and despite the Lariat Family's high position -- indeed, they were distant cousins of the Septims -- few of the Elder Council could be persuaded to accept him fully as a blood descendant of Tiber. The Council had assumed much responsibility during Katariah I's long reign and Cassynder I's short one, and a strong-willed "alien" monarch like Uriel IV found it impossible to command their unswerving fealty. Time and again the Council and Emperor were at odds, and time and again the Council won the battles. Since the days of Pelagius II, the Elder Council had consisted of the wealthiest men and women in the Empire, and the power they wielded was conclusive.

The Council's last victory over Uriel IV was posthumous. Andorak, Uriel IV's son, was disinherited by vote of Council, and a cousin more closely related to the original Septim line was proclaimed Cephorus II in 3E247. For the first nine years of Cephorus II's reign, those loyal to Andorak battled the Imperial forces. In an act that the Sage Eraintine called "Tiber Septim's heart beating no more," the Council granted Andorak the High Rock kingdom of Shornhelm to end the war, and Andorak's descendants still rule there.

By and large, Cephorus II had foes that demanded more of his attention than Andorak. "From out of a cimmerian nightmare," in the words of Eraintine, a man who called himself the Camoran Usurper led an army of Daedra and undead warriors on a rampage through Valenwood, conquering kingdom after kingdom. Few could resist his onslaughts, and as month turned to bloody month in the year 3E249, even fewer tried. Cephorus II sent more and more mercenaries into Hammerfell to stop the Usurper's northward march, but they were bribed or slaughtered and raised as undead.

The story of the Camoran Usurper deserves a book of its own. (It is recommended that the reader find Palaux Illthre's The Fall of the Usurper for more detail.) In short, however, the destruction of the forces of the Usurper had little do with the efforts of the Emperor. The result was a great regional victory and an increase in hostility toward the seemingly inefficacious Empire.

Uriel V, Cephorus II's son and successor, swivelled opinion back toward the latent power of the Empire. Turning the attention of Tamriel away from internal strife, Uriel V embarked on a series of invasions beginning almost from the moment he took the throne in 3E268. Uriel V conquered Roscrea in 271, Cathnoquey in 276, Yneslea in 279, and Esroniet in 284. In 3E288, he embarked on his most ambitious enterprise, the invasion of the continent kingdom of Akavir. This ultimately proved a failure, for two years later Uriel V was killed in Akavir on the battlefield of Ionith. Nevertheless, Uriel V holds a reputation second only to Tiber as one of the two great Warrior Emperors of Tamriel.

The last four Emperors, beginning with Uriel V's infant son, are described in the fourth and final volume of this series.

Part Four

by Stronach k'Thojj III
Imperial Historian

The first book of this series described, in brief, the first eight Emperors of the Septim Dynasty beginning with Tiber I. The second volume described the War of the Red Diamond and the six Emperors who followed. The third volume described the troubles of the next three Emperors-the frustrated Uriel IV, the ineffectual Cephorus II, and the heroic Uriel V.

On Uriel V's death across the sea in distant, hostile Akavir, Uriel VI was but five years old. In fact, Uriel VI was born only shortly before his father left for Akavir. Uriel V's only other progeny, by a morganatic alliance, were the twins Morihatha and Eloisa, who had been born a month after Uriel V left. Uriel VI was crowned in the 290th year of the Third Era. The Imperial Consort Thonica, as the boy's mother, was given a restricted Regency until Uriel VI reached his majority. The Elder Council retained the real power, as they had ever since the days of Katariah I.

The Council so enjoyed its unlimited and unrestricted freedom to promulgate laws (and generate profits) that Uriel VI was not given full license to rule until 307, when he was already 22 years old. He had been slowly assuming positions of responsibility for years, but both the Council and his mother, who enjoyed even her limited Regency, were loath to hand over the reins. By the time he came to the throne, the mechanisms of government gave him little power except for that of the imperial veto.

This power, however, he regularly and vigorously exercised. By 313, Uriel VI could boast with conviction that he truly did rule Tamriel. He utilized defunct spy networks and guard units to bully and coerce the difficult members of the Elder Council. His half-sister Morihatha was (not surprisingly) his staunchest ally, especially after her marriage to Baron Ulfe Gersen of Winterhold brought her considerable wealth and influence. As the Sage Ugaridge said, "Uriel V conquered Esroniet, but Uriel VI conquered

the Elder Council."

When Uriel VI fell off a horse and could not be resuscitated by the finest Imperial healers, his beloved sister Morihatha took up the imperial tiara. At 25 years of age, she had been described by (admittedly self-serving) diplomats as the most beautiful creature in all of Tamriel. She was certainly well-learned, vivacious, athletic, and a well-practised politician. She brought the Archmagister of Skyrim to the Imperial City and created the second Imperial Battlemage since the days of Tiber Septim.

Morihatha finished the job her brother had begun, and made the Imperial Province a true government under the Empress (and later, the Emperor). Outside the Imperial Province, however, the Empire had been slowly disintegrating. Open revolutions and civil wars had raged unchallenged since the days of her grandfather Cephorus II. Carefully coordinating her counterattacks, Morihatha slowly claimed back her rebellious vassals, always avoiding overextending herself.

Though Morihatha's military campaigns were remarkably successful, her deliberate pace often frustrated the Council. One Councilman, an Argonian who took the Colovian name of Thoricles Romus, furious at her refusal to send troops to his troubled Black Marsh, is commonly believed to have hired the assassins who claimed her life in 3E 339. Romus was summarily tried and executed, though he protested his innocence to the last.

Morihatha had no surviving children, and Eloisa had died of a fever four years before. Eloisa's 25-year-old son Pelagius was thus crowned Pelagius IV. Pelagius IV continued his aunt's work, slowly bringing back under his wing the radical and refractory kingdoms, duchies, and baronies of the Empire. He exercised Morihatha's poise and circumspect pace in his endeavours-but alas, he did not attain her success. The kingdoms had been free of constraint for so long that even a benign Imperial presence was considered odious. Nevertheless, when Pelagius died after a notably stable and prosperous twenty-nine-year reign, Tamriel was closer to unity than it had been since the days of Uriel I.

Our current Emperor, His Awesome and Terrible Majesty, Uriel Septim VII,

son of Pelagius IV, has the diligence of his great-aunt Morihatha, the political skill of his great-uncle Uriel VI, and the military prowess of his great grand-uncle Uriel V. For twenty-one years he reigned and brought justice and order to Tamriel. In the year 3E389, however, his Imperial Battlemage, Jagar Tharn, betrayed him.

Uriel VII was imprisoned in a dimension of Tharn's creation, and Tharn used his sorcery of illusion to assume the Emperor's aspect. For the next ten years, Tharn abused imperial privilege but did not continue Uriel VII's schedule of reconquest. It is not yet entirely known what Tharn's goals and personal accomplishments were during the ten years he masqueraded as his liege lord. In 3E399, an enigmatic Champion defeated the Battlemage in the dungeons of the Imperial Palace and freed Uriel VII from his other-dimensional jail.

Since his emancipation, Uriel Septim VII has worked diligently to renew the battles that would reunite Tamriel. Tharn's interference broke the momentum, it is true -- but the years since then have proven that there is hope of the Golden Age of Tiber Septim's rule glorifying Tamriel once again.

The Brothers of Darkness

by Pellarne Assi

As their name suggests, the Dark Brotherhood has a history shrouded in obfuscation. Their ways are secret to those who are not themselves Brothers of the Order ("Brother" is a generic term; some of their deadliest assassins are female, but they are often called Brothers as well). How they continue to exist in shadow, but be easily found by those desperate enough to pay for their services, is not the least of the mysteries surrounding them.

The Dark Brotherhood sprang from a religious order, the Morag Tong, during the Second Era. The Morag Tong were worshippers of the Daedra spirit Mephala, who encouraged them to commit ritual murders. In their early years, they were as disorganized as only obscure cultists could be-there was no one to lead the band, and as a group they dared not murder anybody of any importance. This changed with the rise of the Night Mother.

All leaders of the Morag Tong, and then afterward the Dark Brotherhood, have been called the Night Mother. Whether the same woman (if it is even a woman) has commanded the Dark Brotherhood since the Second Era is unknown. What is believed is that the original Night Mother developed an important doctrine of the Morag Tong-the belief that, while Mephala does grow stronger with every murder committed in her name, certain murders were better than others. Murders that came from hate pleased Mephala more than murders committed because of greed. Murders of great men and women pleased Mephala more than murders of relative unknowns.

We can approximate the time this belief was adopted with the first known murder committed by the Morag Tong. In the year 324 of the Second Era, the Potentate Versidue-Shaie was murdered in his palace in what is today the Elsweyr kingdom of Senchal. In a brash move, the Night Mother announced the identity of the murderers by painting "MORAG TONG" on the walls in the Potentate's own blood.

Previous to that, the Morag Tong existed in relative peace, more or less like a witches' coven-occasionally persecuted but usually ignored. In remarkable synchronicity at a time when Tamriel the Arena was a fractured land, the Morag Tong was outlawed throughout the continent. Every sovereign gave the cult's elimination his highest priority. Nothing more was officially heard of them for a hundred years.

It is more difficult to date the Era when the Morag Tong re-emerged as the Dark Brotherhood, especially as other guilds of assassins have sporadically appeared throughout the history of Tamriel. The first mention of the Dark Brotherhood that I have found is from the journals of the Blood Queen Arlimahera of Hegathe. She spoke of slaying her enemies by her own hand, or if necessary "with the help of the Night Mother and her Dark Brotherhood, the secret arsenal my family has employed since my grandfather's time." Arlimahera wrote this in 2E412, so one can surmise that the Dark Brotherhood had been in existence since at least 360 if her grandfather had truly made use of them.

The important distinction between the Dark Brotherhood and the Morag Tong was that the Brotherhood was a business as much as it was a cult. Rulers and wealthy merchants used the order as an assassin's guild. The Brotherhood gained the obvious rewards of a profitable enterprise, as well as the secondary benefit that rulers could no longer actively persecute them: They were needed. They were purveyors of an essential commodity. Even an extremely virtuous leader would be unwise to mistreat the Brotherhood.

Not long after Alimahera's journal entry came perhaps the most famous series of executions in the history of the Dark Brotherhood. The Colovian Emperor-Potentate Savirien-Chorak and every one of his heirs were murdered on one bloody night in Sun's Dawn in 430. Within a fortnight, the Colovian Dynasty crumbled, to the delight of its enemies. For over four hundred years, until the advent of the Warrior Emperor Tiber Septim, chaos reigned over Tamriel. Though no comparably impressive executions have been recorded, the Brotherhood must have grown fat with gold during that interregnum.

The Buying Game

By Ababael Timsar-Dadisun

So many people simply buy the items they need at the price they are given. It's a very sad state of affairs, when the game is really open to all, you don't need an invitation. And it is a game, the game of bargaining, to be played seriously and, I hasten to add, politely. In Elsweyr, it is common for the shop-owner to offer the prospective buyer tea or sweetmeats and engage in polite conversation before commencing the business. This eminently civilized tradition has a practical purpose, allowing the buyer to observe the wares for sale. It is considered impolite not to accept, though it does not imply obligation on the part of the buyer.

Whether this particular custom is part of the culture or not, it's wise for the buyer and seller to greet one another with smiles and warm salutations, like gladiators honoring one another before the battle.

Bargaining is expected all over Tamriel, but the game can be broken if one's offer is so preposterously low that it insults the shop-keeper. If you are offered something for ten gold pieces, try offering six and see where that takes you.

Do not look like you're very interested, but do not mock the quality of the goods, even if they deserve it. Much better to admire the quality of workmanship, but comment that, regretfully, you simply cannot afford such a price. When the shop-keeper compliments your taste, smile, but try to resist the flattery.

A lot of the game depends on recognizing the types of shop-keepers and not automatically assuming that the rural merchant is ignorant and easily fooled, or the rapacious city merchant is selling shoddy merchandise. Caravans, it should be mentioned, are always good places to go to buy or trade.

Knowing what you're buying and from whom is a talent bought only after years of practice. Know the specialties of certain regions and merchants before you even step foot in a shop. Recognize too the prejudices of the region. In Morrowind where I hail from, for example, Argonians are viewed with a certain amount of suspicion. Don't be surprised or insulted if the shopkeepers follow you around the shop, assuming you're going to steal something. Similarly, Nords, Bretons, and Cyrodiils are sometimes treated coolly by merchants in the Summurset Isles. Of course, I don't know any shopkeepers anywhere, no matter their open- mindedness, who aren't alerted when a Khajiit or a Bosmer enters their shop. Even Khajiiti and Bosmeri shopkeepers.

If you see something you really like or need, buy it then and there at the best price you can get. I cannot tell you how many times I passed up a rare and interesting relic, assuming that I could find it elsewhere in the region, perhaps at a larger town at a better price. Too late, I discovered I was wrong, and when I returned to the shop weeks later, the item I wanted was gone. Better to get a great purchase at a decent price and discover it again at a worse price than to miss out on your opportunities for ownership. Occasionally impulsiveness is the best buying strategy.

Sense the moves of the game, and everyone can win.

The Cabin in the Woods

Volume II

As Told By Mogen Son of Molag

Late one night a few seasons ago, a soldier was returning home after several bloody battles. He decided he would save some gold and decided to cross the pine forest on foot.

The first day of his journey was rather uneventful, the soldier stuck to the main path and kept a brisk pace. When it started getting dark he setup his bedroll, built a small fire and cooked up some rabbit he had caught. "A fine day indeed" he thought to himself as he fell asleep.

Partway through the evening the soldier was woken up by soft sobbing in the distance. He grabbed his sword assuming it to be a bandit trick, but pretended to sleep so he could get the jump on them. After a few minutes the sobbing started moving away from his camp until he could no longer hear it. For the rest of the night slept with one eye open.

Day two the soldier awoke from what rotten sleep he could catch and started off through the forest at a quicker pace, intending to put distance between himself and whatever he had heard last night. As the day went on it began to rain heavy so the soldier built himself a little shelter for the evening so he could remain dry while he slept.

It took him a little longer to fall asleep with thoughts of the previous night fresh in his mind but he eventually slept.

This time he awoke to sobbing that sounded like it was right outside his shelter. The soldier grabbed his sword and crawled out of the shelter. In front of the fire he saw the back of a ghostly woman sobbing into her hands.

The soldier mustered his courage and asked her what was wrong.

No answer.

He began to slowly approach but before he could reach her she turned and screamed at him. The ghostly woman raised an axe and began to run at the soldier, disappearing before she made contact.

The soldier took off into the night with just his sword in hand. He ran until the first light of dawn where he started down the road again, as fast as he could move.

The third day was bright and sunny, but the soldier, rattled and sleepless, didn't even notice. He moved as fast as he could trying to get through the forest before nightfall.

As darkness began to fall he saw a cabin just off the road and thought to himself it would be a good place to hunker down for the night. After arriving at the cabin he spent some time blocking the doors and windows, nothing would get in.

Despite his preparations, he could not sleep. He sat in what used to be the cabin's bedroom staring at the barricaded door shaking. Eventually he could keep his eyes open no longer and fell asleep.

This time he awoke to laughing on the other side of the barricaded door. It sounded like the woman from before, but he refused to believe it was her.

The soldier burst through the barricaded door into the main room to find the ghostly woman from the night before staring at the ground laughing hysterically with axe in hand.

He began to relentlessly attack the ghostly woman but he could feel his strikes were less effective. He used a scroll of firebolt which drew a scream from her and she exploded, disappearing.

The ordeal was over, the ghost was gone.

The soldier slept well that night and the next day made excellent distance through the woods. As the sun began to set he came out on the other side of

the forest and looked back, remembering the days before.

As he turned and started walking away from the woods he could swear he heard the sobbing again.

The Cake and The Diamond

by Athyn Muendil

I was in the Rat and the Pot, a foreigner cornerclub in Ald'ruhn, talking to my fellow Rats when I first saw the woman. Now, Breton women are fairly common in the Rat and the Pot. As a breed, they seem inclined to wander far from their perches in High Rock. Old Breton women, however, are not so migratory, and the wizened old biddy drew attention to herself, wandering about the room, talking to everyone.

Nimloth and Oediad were at their usual places, drinking their usual stuff. Oediad was showing off a prize he had picked up in some illicit manner -- a colossal diamond, large as a baby's hand, and clear as spring water. I was admiring it when I heard the creaking of old bones behind me.

"Good day to you, friends," said the old woman. "My name is Abelle Chriditte, and I am in need of financial assistance to facilitate my transportation to Ald Redaynia."

"You'll want to see the Temple for charity," said Nimloth curtly.

"I am not looking for charity," said Abelle. "I'm looking to barter services."

"Don't make me sick, old woman," laughed Oediad.

"Did you say your name was Abelle Chriditte?" I asked, "Are you related to Abelle Chriditte, the High Rock alchemist?"

"Closely related," she said, with a cackle. "We are the same person. Perhaps I could prepare you a potion in exchange for gold? I noticed that you have in your possession a very fine diamond. The magical qualities of diamonds are boundless."

"Sorry, old woman, I ain't giving it up for magic. It was trouble enough

stealing this one," said Oediad. "I've got a fence who'll trade it for gold."

"But your fence will demand a certain percentage, will he not? What if I could give you a potion of invisibility in exchange? In return for that diamond, you could have the means to steal many more. A very fair exchange of services, I would say."

"It would be, but I have no gold to give you," said Oediad.

"I'll take what remains of the diamond after I've made the potion," said Abelle. "If you took it to the Mages Guild, you'd have to supply all the other ingredients and pay for it as well. But I learned my craft in the wild, where no Potion-makers existed to dissolve diamonds into dust. When you must do it all by hand, by simple skill, you are blessed with remnants those fool potion-makers at the Guild simply swallow up."

"That sounds all very nice," said Nimloth, "But how do we know your potion is going to work? If you make one potion, take the rest of Oediad's diamond, and leave, we won't know until you've gone whether the potion works or not."

"Ah, trust is so rare these days," sighed Abelle. "I suppose I could make two potions for you, and there'd still be a little bit of the diamond left for me. Not a lot, but perhaps enough to get me to Ald Redaynia. Then you could try the first potion right here and now, and see if you're satisfied or not."

"But," I interjected. "You could make one potion that works and one that doesn't, and take more of the diamond. She could even give you a slow-acting poison, and by the time she got to Ald Redaynia, you'd be dead."

"Bleedin' Kynareth, you Dunmer are suspicious! I will hardly have any diamond left, but I could make two potions of two doses each, so you can satisfy yourself that the potion works and has no negative effects. If you still don't trust me, come along with me to my table and witness my craft if you'd like."

So it was decided that I would accompany Abelle back to her table where

she had all her traveling bags full of herbs and minerals, to make certain that she was not making two different potions. It took nearly an hour of preparation, but she kindly allowed me to finish her half-filled flagon of wine while I watched her work. Splintering the diamond and powdering the pieces required the bulk of the time; over and over again, she waved her gnarled hands over the gem, intoning ancient enchantments, breaking the facets of the stone into smaller and smaller pieces. Separately she made pastes of minced bittergreen, crushed red bulbs of dell'arco spae, and driblets of ciciliani oil. I finished the wine.

"Old woman," I finally said with a sigh. "How much longer is this going to take? I'm getting tired of watching you work."

"The Mages Guild has fooled the populace into thinking alchemy is a science," she said. "But if you're tired, rest your eyes."

My eyes closed, seemingly of their own volition. But there had been something in that wine. Something that made me do what she asked.

"I think I'll make up the potion as cakes. It's much more potent that way. Now, tell me, young man, what will your friends do once I give them the potion?"

"Mug you in the street afterwards to retrieve the rest of the diamond," I said simply. I didn't want to tell the truth, but there it was.

"I thought so, but I wanted to be certain. You may open your eyes now."

I opened my eyes. Abelle had made a small presentation on a wooden platter: two small cakes and a silver cutting knife.

"Pick up the cakes and bring them to the table," said Abelle. "And don't say anything, except to agree with whatever I say."

I did as I was told. It was a curious sensation. I didn't really mind being her puppet. Of course, in retrospect, I resent it, but it seemed perfectly natural at the time to obey without question.

Abelle handed the cakes to Oediad and I dutifully verified that both cakes were made the same way. She suggested that he cut one of the cakes in half, and she would take one piece and he'd take the other, just so he would know that they worked and weren't poisoned. Oediad thought it was a good idea, and used Abelle's knife to cut the cake. Abelle took the piece on the left and popped into her mouth. Oediad took the piece on the right and swallowed it more cautiously.

Abelle and all the bags she was carrying vanished from sight almost instantly. Nothing happened to Oediad.

"Why did it work for the witch and not for me?" cried Oediad.

"Because the diamond dust was only on the left-hand side of the blade," said the old alchemist through me. I felt her control lessening as the distance grew and she hurried invisibly down the dark Ald'ruhn street away from the Rat and the Pot.

We never found Abelle Chriditte or the diamond. Whether she completed her pilgrimage to Ald Redaynia is anyone's guess. The cakes had no effect, except to give Oediad a bad case of droops that lasted for nearly a week.

Cats Of Skyrim

A Report By Aldetuile

I have been sent to this frigid wasteland to catalogue and study any of its indigenous cats, which has so far been uneventful. After months of wandering I have so far only encountered some variations of the same basic species.

In my travels I have encountered several khajiit outcast from their clans that have taken up residence in Skyrim. They have been most unhelpful, probably for fear I'd expose their locations. I can't say I'm surprised that there are few khajiit here, it's cold and unwelcoming.

Sabrecats are basic giant cats that have evolved two dangerously sharp front teeth.

The average sabrecat has a reddish brown fur which it uses to blend into grassy regions, but I have observed them skulking and sleeping on rocks so I don't believe the fur is for camouflage.

The primary attacks of the sabrecat are its biting attack, but it can also briefly rear up to attack with its front claws. I have also seen it pounce forward on its prey in a particularly powerful attack.

The snowy version of the sabrecat has spotted white fur which I believe it uses more for stalking more than its cousin in the plains.

The tooth of the cat is rumored to be useful in potions that restore the imbibers stamina as well as a potion that will temporarily give a more keen eye for smithing.

An skillful hunter can usually salvage the pelts and teeth of their kill, but report that the meat is tasteless and not fit to eat.

Chance's Folly

by Zylmoc Golge

By the time she was sixteen, Minevah Iolos had been an unwelcome guest in every shop and manor in Balmora. Sometimes, she would take everything of value within; other times, it was enough to experience the pure pleasure of finding a way past the locks and traps. In either situation, she would leave a pair of dice in a prominent location as her calling card to let the owners know who had burgled them. The mysterious ghost became known to the locals as Chance.

A typical conversation in Balmora at this time:

"My dear, whatever happened to that marvelous necklace of yours?"

"My dear, it was taken by Chance."

The only time when Chance disliked her hobby was when she miscalculated, and she came upon an owner or a guard. So far, she had never been caught, or even seen, but dozens of times she had uncomfortably close encounters. There came a day when she felt it was time to expand her reach. She considered going to Vivec or Gnisis, but one night at the Eight Plates, she heard a tale of the Heran Ancestral Tomb, an ancient tomb filled with traps and possessing hundreds of years of the Heran family treasures.

The idea of breaking the spell of the Heran Tomb and gaining the fortune within appealed to Chance, but facing the guardians was outside of her experience. While she was considering her options, she saw Ulstyr Moresby sitting at a table nearby, by himself as usual. He was huge brute of a Breton who had a reputation as a gentle eccentric, a great warrior who had gone mad and paid more attention to the voices in his head than to the world around him.

If she must have a partner in this enterprise, Chance decided, this man

would be perfect. He would not demand or understand the concept of getting an equal share of the booty. If worse came to worse, he would not be missed if the inhabitants of the Heran Tomb were too much for him. Or if Chance found his company tiresome and elected to leave him behind.

"Ulstyr, I don't think we've ever met, but my name is Minevah," she said, approaching the table. "I'm fancying a trip to the Heran Ancestral Tomb. If you think you could handle the monsters, I could take care of unlocking doors and popping traps. What do you think?"

The Breton took a moment to reply, as if considering the counsel of the voices in his head. Finally he nodded his head in the affirmative, mumbling, "Yes, yes, yes, prop a rock, hot steel. Chitin. Walls beyond doors. Fifty-three. Two months and back."

"Splendid," said Chance, not the least put off by his rambling. "We'll leave early tomorrow."

When Chance met Ulstyr the next morning, he was wearing chitin armor and had armed himself with an unusual blade that glowed faintly of enchantment. As they began their trek, she tried to engage him in conversation, but his responses were so nonsensical that she quickly abandoned the attempts. A sudden rainstorm swelled over the plain, dousing them, but as she was wearing no armor and Ulstyr was wearing slick chitin, their progress was not impeded.

Into the dark recesses of the Heran Tomb, they delved. Her instincts had been correct -- they made very good partners.

She recognized the ancient snap-wire traps, deadfalls, and brittle backs before they were triggered, and cracked all manners of lock: simple tumbler, combination, twisted hasp, double catch, varieties from antiquity with no modern names, rusted heaps that would have been dangerous to open even if one possessed the actual key.

Ulstyr for his part slew scores of bizarre fiends, the likes of which Chance, a city girl, had never seen before. His enchanted blade's spell of fire was

particularly effective against the Frost Atronachs. He even saved her when she lost her footing and nearly plummeted into a shadowy crack in the floor.

"Not to hurt thyself," he said, his face showing genuine concern. "There are walls beyond doors and fifty-three. Drain ring. Two months and back. Prop a rock. Come, Mother Chance."

Chance had not been listening to much of Ulstyr's babbling, but when he said "Chance," she was startled. She had introduced herself to him as Minevah. Could it be that the peasants were right, and that when mad men spoke, they were talking to the daedra prince Sheogorath who gave them advice and information beyond their ken? Or was it rather, more sensibly, that Ulstyr was merely repeating what he heard tell of in Balmora where in recent years "Chance" had become synonymous with lockpicking?

As the two continued on, Chance thought of Ulstyr's mumblings. He had said "chitin" when they met as if it had just occurred to him, and the chitin armor that he wore had proven useful. Likewise, "hot steel." What could "walls beyond doors" mean? Or "two months and back"? What numbered "fifty-three"?

The notion that Ulstyr possessed secret knowledge about her and the tomb they were in began to unnerve Chance. She made up her mind then to abandon her companion once the treasure had been found. He had cut through the living and undead guardians of the dungeon: if she merely left by the path they had entered, she would be safe without a defender.

One phrase he said made perfect sense to her: "drain ring." At one of the manors in Balmora, she had picked up a ring purely because she thought it was pretty. It was not until later that she discovered that it could be used to sap other people's vitality. Could Ulstyr be aware of this? Would he be taken by surprise if she used it on him?

She formulated her plan on how best to desert the Breton as they continued down the hall. Abruptly the passage ended with a large metal door, secured by a golden lock. Using her pick, Chance snapped away the two tumblers and bolt, and swung the door open. The treasure of the Heran Tomb was

within.

Chance quietly slipped her glove off her hand, exposing the ring as she stepped into the room. There were fifty-three bags of gold within. As she turned, the door closed between her and the Breton. On her side, it did not resemble a door anymore, but a wall. Walls beyond doors.

For many days, Chance screamed and screamed, as she tried to find a way out of the room. For some days after that, she listened dully to the laughter of Sheogorath within her own head. Two months later, when Ulstyr returned, she was dead. He used a rock to prop open the door and remove the gold.

The Charwich-Koniinge Letters

Book I

6 Suns Height, 3E 411
Kambria, High Rock

My Dear Koniinge,

I hope this letter reaches you in Sadrith Mora. It's been many weeks since I've heard from you, and I hope that the address that I have for you is still up-to-date. I gave the courier some extra gold, so if he doesn't find you, he is to make inquiries to your whereabouts. As you can see, after a rather tedious crossing, I've at long last made my way from Bhoriane to my favorite principality in High Rock, surprisingly literate and always fascinating Kambria. I at once ensconced myself in one of the better libraries here, becoming reacquainted with the locals and the lore. At the risk of being overly optimistic, I think I might have struck on something very interesting about this mysterious fellow, Hadwaf Neithwyr.

Many here in town remember him, though few very fondly. When Hadwaf Neithwyr left, so too did a great plague. No one thinks it a coincidence.

According to my contacts here, Azura is not his only master. It may be that when he summoned forth the Daedra and accepted her Star, he was doing so for someone named Baliasir. Apparently, Neithwyr worked for this Baliasir in some capacity, but I never could find out from anyone exactly what Baliasir's line of business was, nor what Neithwyr did for him. Zenithar, the God of Work and Commerce, is the most revered deity in Kambria, which served my (that is to say our) purposes well, as the people are naturally receptive to bribery. Still, it did me little good. I could find nothing specific about our quarry. After days of inquiry, an old crone recommended that I go to a nearby village called Grimtry Garden, and find the cemetery caretaker there. I set off at once.

I know you are impatient when it comes to details, and have little taste for Breton architecture, but if you ever find yourself in mid-High Rock, you owe it to yourself to visit this quaint village. Like a number of other similar towns in High Rock, there is a high wall surrounded it. As well as being picturesque, it's a remnant of the region's turbulent past and a useful barrier against the supernatural creatures that sometimes stalk the countryside. More about that in a moment.

The cemetery is actually outside of the city gates, I discovered. The locals warned me to wait until morning to speak to the caretaker, but I was impatient for information, and did not want to waste a moment. I trekked through the woods to the lonely graveyard, and immediately found the shuffling, elderly man who was the caretaker. He bade me leave, that the land was haunted and if I chose to stay I would be in the greatest danger. I told him that I would not go until he told me what he knew about Hadwaf Neithwyr and his patron Baliasir. On hearing their names, he fled deeper into the jumble of broken tombstones and decrepit mausoleums. I naturally pursued.

I saw him scramble down into an enormous crypt and gave chase. There was no light within, but I had planned enough to bring with me a torch. The minute I lit it, I heard a long, savage howl pierce the silence, and I knew that the caretaker had left quickly not merely because he feared speaking of Neithwyr and Baliasir. Before I saw the creature, I heard its heavy breath and the clack of its clawed feet on stone moving closer to me. The werewolf emerged from the gloom, brown and black, with slavering jaws, looking at me with the eyes of the cemetery caretaker, now given only to animal hunger.

I instantly had three different instinctive reactions. The first was, of course, flight. The second was to fight. But if I fled, I might never find the caretaker again, and learn what he knew. If I fought, I might injure or even kill the creature and be even worse off. So I elected to go with my third option: to hold my ground and keep the creature within its tomb until the night became morning, and the caretaker resumed his humanity.

I've sparred often enough unarmored, but surely never with so much at

stake, and never with so savage an opponent. My mind was always on danger not only of injury but the dread disease of lycanthropy. Every rake of its claw I parried, every snap of its foaming jaws I ducked. I sidestepped when it tried to rush me, but closed the distance to keep it from escaping into the night. For hours we fought, I always on the defense, it always trying to free itself, or slay me, or both. I have no doubt that a werewolf has greater energy reserves than a man, but it is a beast and does not know how to save and temper its movements. As the dawn rose, we were both nearly unconscious from fatigue, but I received my reward. The creature became a man once again.

He was quite considerably friendlier than he had been before. In fact, when he realized that I had prevented him from going on his nocturnal rampage through the countryside, he became positively affable.

Here's what I learned: Neithwyr never returned to High Rock. As far as the old man knows, he is still in Morrowind. I visited the gravesite of his sister Peryra, and learned that it was probably through her that Neithwyr first met his patron. It would seem that she was quite a well-known courtesan in her day, and very well traveled, though she chose to return home to die. Unlike Neithwyr, Baliasir is not far away from me. He is a shadowy character, but lately, according to the caretaker, he has been paying court to Queen Elysana in Wayrest. I leave at once.

Please write to me as soon as possible to tell me of your progress. I should be in Wayrest at the home of my friend Lady Elysbetta Moorling in a week's time. If Baliasir is at court, Lady Moorling will be able to arrange an introduction.

I feel confident in saying that we are very close to Azura's Star.

Your Friend,
Charwich

Book II

3 Last Seed, 3E 411
Tel Aruhn, Morrowind

My Good Friend Charwich,

I only just last week received your letter dated 6 Sun's Height, addressed to me in Sadrith Mora. I did not know how to reach you before to tell you of my progress finding Hadwaf Neithwyr, so I send this to you now care of the lady you mentioned in your letter, the Lady Elysbetta Moorling of Wayrest. I hope that if you have left her palace, she will know where you've gone and can send this to you. And I hope further that you receive it in a timelier manner that I received your letter. It is essential that I hear from you soon so we may coordinate our next course of action.

My adventures here have two acts, one before I received your letter, and one immediately after. While you searched for the elusive possessor of Azura's Star in his homeland to the west, I searched for him here where we understood he conjured up the Daedra Prince and received from her the artifact.

Like you, I had little difficulty finding people who had heard of or even knew Neithwyr. In fact, not long after we parted company and you left for the Iliac Bay, I met someone who knew where he went to perform the ceremony, so I left at once to come here to Tel Aruhn. It took some time to locate my contact, for he is a Dissident Priest named Minerath. The Temple and Tribunal, the real powers of Morrowind, tend to frown on his Order, and while they haven't begun so much of crusade to stamp them out, there are certainly rumors that they will soon. This tends to make priests like Minerath skittish and paranoid. Difficult people to set appointments with.

Finally I was told that he would be willing to talk to me at the Plot and Plaster, a tiny tavern without even a room to rent. Downstairs, there were several cloaked men crammed around the tavern's only table, and they

searched me to see if I had any weaponry. Of course, I hadn't. You know that isn't my preferred method of doing business.

When it decided that I was harmless, one of the cloaked figures revealed himself to be Minerath. I paid him the gold I promised and asked him what he knew about Hadwaf Neithwyr. He remembered him well enough, saying that after he received the Star, the lad intended to return to High Rock. It seemed he had unfinished business there, presumably of a violent nature, which Azura's Star would facilitate. He had no other information, and I did not know what else to ask.

We parted company and I waited for your letter, hoping you had found Neithwyr and perhaps even the Star. I confess that as I lingered in Morrowind and never heard from you, I began to have doubts about your character. You'll forgive me for saying so, but I began to fear that you had taken the artifact for yourself. In fact, I was making plans to come to High Rock myself when your letter came at last.

The tale of your adventure in the cemetery at Grimtry Garden, and the information you gathered from the lycanthropic caretaker inspired me to have another meeting with Minerath. Thus began the second act of my story.

I returned to the Pot and Plaster, reasoning that the priest must frequent that area of the city to feel so comfortable setting clandestine meetings there. It took some time searching, but I finally found him, and as luck would have it, he was alone. I called his name, and he quickly drew me to a dark alleyway, nervous that we would be seen by a Temple ordinator.

It is a rare and beautiful thing when a victim insists on dragging his killer to a remote location.

I began at once asking about this fellow you mentioned, Neithwyr's mysterious patron Baliasir. He denied ever having heard the name. We were still in that easy, fairly conversational state when I attacked the priest. Of course, he was completely taken by surprise. In some ways, that can be more effective than an ambush from behind. No matter how many times

I've done it, no one ever expected the friendly man they're talking to grip them by the neck.

I pressed hard against my favorite spot in the soft part of the throat, just below the thyroid cartilage, and it took him too long to react to my lunge and try pushing back. He began to lose consciousness, and I whispered that if I released my grip a little so he could talk and breath, but he tried to call for help, I would snap his neck. He nodded, and I relaxed the pressure, just a bit.

I asked him again about Baliasir, and he shook his head, insisting that he had never heard the name. As frightened as he was, it seemed most likely that he was telling the truth, so I asked him more generally if he knew anyone else who might know something about Hadwaf Neithwyr. He told me that there was a woman present also during the ceremony, someone he introduced as his sister.

I remembered then the part of your letter about seeing the grave of Neithwyr's sister, Peryra. When I mentioned the name to the priest he nodded frantically, but I could see that the interrogation had reached an ending. There is, after all, something about being throttled that causes a man to answer yes to every question. I snapped Minerath's neck, and returned home.

So now I'm again unsure how to proceed. I've made several more inquiries and several of the same people who met Neithwyr remember him being with a woman. A few recall him saying that she was his sister. One or two believe they remember her name as being Peryra, though they're not certain. No one, however, has heard of anyone named Baliasir.

If I do not hear word from you in response to this in the next couple of weeks, I will come to High Rock, because it's there that most people believe Neithwyr returned. I will only stay here long enough to see if there are other inquiries I can make only in Morrowind to bring us closer to our goal of recovering Azura's Star.

Your Friend,

Koniinge

Book III

13 Last Seed, 3E 411
Wayrest, High Rock

My Dear Koniinge,

Please forgive the quality of the handwriting on this note, but I have not long to live. I can only reply in detail to one part of your letter, and that is that I fear Baliasir, contrary to what you've heard, is very much real. Had he been but a figment of that caretaker's imagination, I would not be feeling life ebb from me as I write this.

Lady Moorling has sent for healers, but I know they won't arrive in time. I just need to explain what happened so that you'll understand, and then all my affairs in this world will be ended. The one advantage of my condition is that I must be brief, without my habitually ornamental descriptions of people and places. I know that you will appreciate that at least.

It started when I came to Wayrest, and through my friend Lady Moorling and her court connections was introduced to Baliasir himself. I had to proceed carefully, not wanting him to know of our designs on Azura's Star which I presumed he possessed, given to him by his servant Hadwaf Neithwyr. His function in Queen Elysana's court seemed to be decorative, like so many of her courtiers, and it was not hard to differentiate myself from the others when we began conversing on the school of mysticism. Many of the other hangers-on at the palace can speak eloquently on the subject of the magickal arts, but it seemed that only he and I had deep knowledge of the craft.

Many a nobleman or adventurer who aren't mages by profession learn a spell or two from the useful schools of restoration or destruction. I told Baliasir quite truthfully that I had never learned any of that (oh, but I wish I knew some healing spells of the school of restoration now), but that I had

developed some small skill in mysticism. Not enough to be a Psijic, of course, but in telekinesis, password, and spell reflection I had some amateur ability. He responded with compliments, which allowed me to segue into the topic of another spell of mysticism, the soul trap.

I told him I was unlearned but curious about that spell. And very naturally and comfortably, I was able to bring up the subject of Azura's Star, the endless well of souls.

Imagine how I had to hold back my excitement when he leaned in and whispered to me, "If that interests you, come to Klythic's Cairn west of the city tomorrow night."

I couldn't sleep at all. The only thing I could think of was how I would get the Star when he showed it to me. I still knew so little about Baliasir, his past and his power, but the opportunity was too great to let pass. Still, I must admit that I held hopes that you would arrive, as you threatened you might in your letter, so I might have someone of physical strength to aid me in my adventure.

I am growing weaker and weaker as I write this, so I must proceed with the basic facts. I went to the crypt the following night, and Baliasir led me through the maze of it to the repository where he kept the Star. We were talking quite casually, and as you've so often said, it seemed an excellent time for an ambush. I grabbed the Star and unsheathed my blade in what I felt was amazing speed.

He turned to me and I suddenly felt that I was moving like a snail. In a flash, Baliasir changed his form and became his true self, not man or mer, but daedra. A colossal daedra lord who swiped back the Star from my grasp and laughed at my sword as it thudded against his impenetrable hide.

I knew I had been beaten, and I threw myself towards the corridor. A blue flash of energy coursed through me, flung by Baliasir's claws. At once, I began to feel death. He could have smote me with a thousand spells, but he chose the one where I could lie down, and suffer, and hear him laugh. At the very least, I did not give him that pleasure.

Already struck, it was too late for me to cast a counterspell of mysticism, one to dispel the magicka, reflect it or absorb it as my own. But I did still know how to teleport myself, what mystics term 'Recall,' to whatever place I'd last set a spiritual anchor. I confess that at the time, I didn't remember where that would be. Perhaps in Bhoriane when I arrived in the Iliac Bay, or in Kambria, or in Grimtry Garden where I met the caretaker, or my hostess's palace in Wayrest. I prayed that I had not set the anchor last when I was with you in Morrowind, for it said that if the distance is too great, one can be caught between dimensions. Still, I was willing to take that chance, rather than being the plaything of Baliasir.

I cast the spell and found myself back on the doorstep of Lady Moorling's palace. To be out of the crypt and away from the daedra was a relief, but I had so hoped that I had been smart enough to cast an anchor near a Mages Guild or a temple where I could find a healer. Instead, knowing I was too weak to walk far, I beat on the door and was taken here, where I write this letter, lying in my bed.

As I wrote those words, dear Elysbetta, Lady Moorling, came in, quite tearfully and frantic, to tell me the healers should be hre withn but a few minute. But I wil be ded ere they arrve. I know thes are m last wors. Der frend, stay away frm this cursd place.

Yr Frend,

Charwich

Book IV

8 Sun's Dawn, 3E 412
Amiglith, Summurset Isle

My Good Friend, Lord Gemyn,

You must forgive me for not meeting you at the palace personally, but I've been unavoidably, tragically detained. I've left the front gate and door unlocked, and if you're reading this, you must have made it at least as far the antechamber to the east drawing room. Perhaps you've already wandered the estate and seen some of its delights before coming to this chamber: the seven fountains of marble and porphyry, the reflecting pool, the various groves, the colonnades and quincunx. I don't think you would have already gone to the second floor suites and the west wing as you would have had to pass this room first, and picked up this letter. But believe me, they're beautifully appointed with magnificent balustrades, winding staircases, intimate salons, and bedchambers worthy of your affluence.

The price of this property is exorbitant, certainly, but for a man like you who seeks only the best, this is the villa you must have. As you undoubtedly noticed as you arrived through the gates, there are several smaller buildings ideally suited to be guard stations. I know you are concerned with security.

I am an intensely greedy man, and there is nothing I would have liked more than to meet you here today, show you the grounds, fawn on you obsequiously, and collect a fat percentage of the cost of the sale when you bought this marvelous palace, as I'm sure you would have. My dilemma that caused my inexcusable absence began shortly after I arrived here early to make certain the villa was well-cleaned for your inspection. A man named Koniinge crept up behind me, and gripped me by the throat. Clamping his left hand over my mouth and nose, and throttling me with his right hand, crushing the soft spot on my throat just below the thyroidal cartilage, he effectively strangled me in a few quick but very painful minutes.

I am currently buried in a pile of leaves in the north statuary parterre, close to the exceptional sculptural representation of the Transformation of Trinimac. It should not be too long before I am discovered: someone at my bank will surely notice my absence in due time. Koniinge might have buried me deeper, but he wanted to be ready for the arrival of his old partner, Charwich.

Perhaps part of you thinks it best to stop reading now, Lord Gemyn. You are looking around the antechamber and seeing nothing but doors. The large one you took to come in from the garden is locked now behind you, and without a better knowledge of the layout of the estate, I could not recommend you attempt to flee down a corridor that might easily come to a dead end. No. Much better to keep reading, and see where this is going.

Koniinge, it seems, was in a partnership with his friend Charwich to try to recover Azura's Star. They understood it to be in the possession of someone named Hadwaf Neithwyr, a man who conjured up the Daedra Prince Azura herself to acquire it. As Neithwyr originally haled from High Rock, Charwich went there to look for him, while his partner searched Morrowind. They planned to communicate their findings by letters sent through couriers.

Charwich's first letter stated that he had found information that Neithwyr had a mysterious patron named Baliasir, a fact he had learned at a cemetery with a gravestone of Neithwyr's sister Peryra and a lycanthropic caretaker. Koniinge replied back that he could find nothing about Baliasir, but believed that Neithwyr had returned to High Rock with Peryra after getting the Star. Charwich's last letter was a written on his deathbed, having sustained mortal wounds from his battle with Baliasir, who it seemed had been a mighty daedra lord.

Koniinge grieved for his friend, and traveled the span of the Empire to Wayrest, to pay his call of condolences on Lady Moorling, the woman at whose house Charwich had been staying. After making some inquiries, Koniinge learned that her ladyship had left the city, quite suddenly. She had been entertaining a guest named Charwich, and it was understood that he

had died, though no one ever saw the body. Certainly no healers had been sent to her house on the 13th of Last Seed of last year. And no one in Wayrest, just like no one in Tel Aruhn, had ever heard of Baliasir.

Poor Koniinge was suddenly unsure of everything. He retraced his late partner's path through Boriane and Grimtry Gardens, but found that the Neithwyr family crypt was elsewhere, in a small town in the barony of Dwynnen. There was indeed a lycanthropic caretaker, fortunately in human form at the time. When questioned (using the technique of strangulation, release, strangulation, release), he told Koniinge the story that he had told Charwich many months before.

Hadwaf and Peryra Neithwyr had returned to Dwynnen, intent on settling old business. As the Star requires potent spirits for power, they thought they would begin small by capturing the spirit of the werewolf they knew of in the family graveyard. Sadly, for them, their grasp exceeded their reach. When the poor caretaker resumed his human form one morning, he found himself lying next to the shredded, bloody bodies of the Neithwyr siblings. Distressed and fearful, he brought the corpses and all their possessions down into the crypt. They were still there when Charwich came, and so too was Azura's Star.

Koniinge now saw things clearly. The letters he had received from Charwich were lies, intended to keep him away. Undoubtedly with the assistance of Lady Moorling, his new partner, he had concocted stories, including one of his own demise, to trick Koniinge into abandoning the quest for the Star. It was clearly a sad statement on the nature of friendship, and one that needed immediate correction.

It took the better part of six months for Koniinge to find his old partner. Charwich and Lady Moorling had used the power of the Star to make themselves very wealthy and powerful. They assumed a number of different identities in their travels through High Rock and Skyrim, and then down to Valenwood and the Summurset Isle. Along the way, of course, the Star itself disappeared, as great daedric artifacts always do. The couple still had much wealth, but their love sadly fell on troubled times. When they reached Alinor, they parted ways.

One must assume that during their months together, Charwich must have told Lady Moorling about Koniinge. It's pleasant to think of the loving couple laughing over the stories they were telling him about the mythical and dangerous Baliasir. Charwich must not have given his former beloved a very accurate physical description, however, because when Lady Moorling (then under the identity of the Countess Zyliana) met Koniinge, she had no idea who he was. It came as quite a surprise to her when he began strangling her and requesting information about her former paramour.

Before she died, she told Koniinge what Charwich's new name and title was, and where he was looking for a new palace. She even told him about me. Given all the twists and bends the last months' chase took him on, it was not difficult to find which palace Charwich was looking to buy, and what time his appointment was to view it. Then he had merely to arrive early, dispose of me, and wait.

There our story must sadly end. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Yours,

Syrix Goinithi,
Former Estate Banker

P.S.: Charwich -- Turn around now, or don't. Your choice. Your friend, Koniinge.

Chaurus Pie: A Recipe

If I have to hear one more time about that famous gourmet who wrote that recipe book, I'll hack off my own ears with a blunt axe.

Sure, he can cook up some dishes fit for them stodgy Imperials and them poncy Bretons, but real Nords want real Nord food, and my chaurus pie is just that.

I guess I been complaining a lot about it, cause Susanna was yelling at me. Nils, she says, if your chaurus pie is so good, you should write down the recipe.

Well, I ain't good with my letters and I got no talent for writing, but I thought why not give it a go? So this here's my first ever recipe that I wrote down and I hope you like it.

First thing you'll need is some chaurus meat and that ain't easy to come by. Chauruses mostly live in caves, and as like as not they share them caves with other nasty things.

If you go hunting for chaurus meat to make some dinner with, make sure you don't end up as dinner yourself. Haha.

Anyway, like I was saying, get yourself some good armor and a nice big sword, and if you've got some stout men who won't run off at the first sign of trouble - in other words, not like one of them poncy Bretons - then go looking in caves and you'll find a chaurus sooner or later.

They look like big bugs the size of really big dogs, and mind you watch out for that acid they spit. That'll ruin your armor pretty quick.

Now once you got some chaurus meat, you got to put it on a spit. Make sure you get that white, thick meat from the midsection. Don't use that yellow meat from the head or legs, because that's got poisonous acid in it and if

you eat it, you'll probably die.

So you cook up your chaurus on the spit. And you want to baste it with sauce. To make that, grind up some tomatoes into pulp and then mix that with water, peppers, honey and salt. And then you have to boil it all together.

I wouldn't use too many peppers, but you want a few spoons of salt. How much honey you use is up to you. Depends on how sweet you want it.

When the chaurus is done and you've basted it enough, then you want to bake it in a pie with some potatoes, carrots and apples. And put the rest of that sauce you made in there, too.

If you want turnips, sometimes those are good. Depends on what you're in the mood for.

Then you cook that for awhile. Look for the top to be light brown, that's when you know it's done.

And that's it. Easy as pie. Haha.

Children of the Sky

Nords consider themselves to be the children of the sky. They call Skyrim the Throat of the World, because it is where the sky exhaled on the land and formed them. They see themselves as eternal outsiders and invaders, and even when they conquer and rule another people; they feel no kinship with them.

The breath and the voice are the vital essence of a Nord. When they defeat great enemies they take their tongues as trophies. These are woven into ropes and can hold speech like an enchantment. The power of a Nord can be articulated into a shout, like the kiai of an Akaviri swordsman. The strongest of their warriors are called "Tongues." When the Nords attack a city, they take no siege engines or cavalry; the Tongues form in a wedge in front of the gatehouse, and draw in breath. When the leader lets it out in a kiai, the doors are blown in, and the axemen rush into the city. Shouts can be used to sharpen blades or to strike enemies. A common effect is the shout that knocks an enemy back, or the power of command. A strong Nord can instill bravery in men with his battle-cry, or stop a charging warrior with a roar. The greatest of the Nords can call to specific people over hundreds of miles, and can move by casting a shout, appearing where it lands.

The most powerful Nords cannot speak without causing destruction. They must go gagged, and communicate through a sign language and through scribing runes.

The further north you go into Skyrim, the more powerful and elemental the people become, and the less they require dwellings and shelters. Wind is fundamental to Skyrim and the Nords; those that live in the far wastes always carry a wind with them.

A Children's Anuad: The Anuad Paraphrased

The first ones were brothers: Anu and Padomay. They came into the Void, and Time began.

As Anu and Padomay wandered the Void, the interplay of Light and Darkness created Nir. Both Anu and Padomay were amazed and delighted with her appearance, but she loved Anu, and Padomay retreated from them in bitterness.

Nir became pregnant, but before she gave birth, Padomay returned, professing his love for Nir. She told him that she loved only Anu, and Padomay beat her in rage. Anu returned, fought Padomay, and cast him outside Time. Nir gave birth to Creation, but died from her injuries soon after. Anu, grieving, hid himself in the sun and slept.

Meanwhile, life sprang up on the twelve worlds of creation and flourished. After many ages, Padomay was able to return to Time. He saw Creation and hated it. He swung his sword, shattering the twelve worlds in their alignment. Anu awoke, and fought Padomay again. The long and furious battle ended with Anu the victor. He cast aside the body of his brother, who he believed was dead, and attempted to save Creation by forming the remnants of the 12 worlds into one -- Nirn, the world of Tamriel. As he was doing so, Padomay struck him through the chest with one last blow. Anu grappled with his brother and pulled them both outside of Time forever.

The blood of Padomay became the Daedra. The blood of Anu became the stars. The mingled blood of both became the Aedra (hence their capacity for good and evil, and their greater affinity for earthly affairs than the Daedra, who have no connection to Creation).

On the world of Nirn, all was chaos. The only survivors of the twelve worlds of Creation were the Ehlnofey and the Hist. The Ehlnofey are the

ancestors of Mer and Men. The Hist are the trees of Argonia. Nirn originally was all land, with interspersed seas, but no oceans.

A large fragment of the Ehlnofey world landed on Nirn relatively intact, and the Ehlnofey living there were the ancestors of the Mer. These Ehlnofey fortified their borders from the chaos outside, hid their pocket of calm, and attempted to live on as before. Other Ehlnofey arrived on Nirn scattered amid the confused jumble of the shattered worlds, wandering and finding each other over the years. Eventually, the wandering Ehlnofey found the hidden land of Old Ehlnofey, and were amazed and joyful to find their kin living amid the splendor of ages past. The wandering Ehlnofey expected to be welcomed into the peaceful realm, but the Old Ehlnofey looked on them as degenerates, fallen from their former glory. For whatever reason, war broke out, and raged across the whole of Nirn. The Old Ehlnofey retained their ancient power and knowledge, but the Wanderers were more numerous, and toughened by their long struggle to survive on Nirn. This war reshaped the face of Nirn, sinking much of the land beneath new oceans, and leaving the lands as we know them (Tamriel, Akavir, Atmora, and Yokuda). The Old Ehlnofey realm, although ruined, became Tamriel. The remnants of the Wanderers were left divided on the other 3 continents.

Over many years, the Ehlnofey of Tamriel became:
- the Mer (elves),
- the Dwemer (the Deep Ones, sometimes called dwarves),
- the Chimer (the Changed Ones, who later became the Dunmer),
- the Dunmer (the Dark or Cursed Ones, the dark elves),
- the Bosmer (the Green or Forest Ones, the wood elves), and
- the Altmer (The Elder or High Ones, the high elves).

On the other continents, the Wandering Ehlnofey became the Men -- the Nords of Atmora, the Redguards of Yokuda, and the Tsaesci of Akavir.

The Hist were bystanders in the Ehlnofey war, but most of their realm was destroyed as the war passed over it. A small corner of it survived to become Black Marsh in Tamriel, but most of their realm was sunk beneath the sea.

Eventually, Men returned to Tamriel. The Nords were the first, colonizing

the northern coast of Tamriel before recorded history, led by the legendary Ysgramor. The thirteenth of his line, King Harald, was the first to appear in written history. And so the Mythic Era ended.

The Chronicles of the Holy Brothers of Marukh

Volume IV

Or, The Cleansing of the Fane

Editor's Note: This is the only surviving fragment of the chronicle of this First Era sect of the Alessian Order. It seems to have been kept at their great monastic complex at Lake Canulus, which was razed during the War of Righteousness (1E 2321) and its archives destroyed or dispersed.

Note also that Alessian scribes of this time customarily dated events from the Apotheosis of Alessia (1E 266).

Here is recorded the events of the Year 127 of the Blessed Alessia.

In this year was the day darkened over all lands, and the sun was all as it were Masser but three days old, and the stars about him at midday. This was on the fifth of First Seed. All who saw it were dismayed, and said that a great event should come hereafter. So it did, for that same year issued forth a great concourse of devils from the ancient Elvish temple Malada, such had not been seen since the days of King Belharza. These devils greatly afflicted the land such that no man could plow, or reap, or seed, and the people appealed to the brothers of Marukh for succour. And then Abbot Cosmas gathered all the brothers and led them to Malada, also known as the High Fane in the Elvish tongue, and came against it with holy fire, and the foul demons were destroyed, and many devilish relics and books found therein were burned. And the land had peace for many years.

Chronicles of Nchuleft

This is a chronicle of events of historical significance to the Dwemer Freehold Colony of Nchuleft. The text was probably recorded by an Altmer, for it is written in Aldmeris.

23. The Death of Lord Ihlendam

It happened in Second Planting (P.D. 1220) that Lord Ihlendam, on a journey in the Western Uplands, came to Nchuleft; and Protector Anchard and General Rkungthunch met him there, and Dalen-Zanchu also came to the meeting. They talked together long by themselves; but this only was known of their business, that they were to be friends of each other. They parted, and each went home to his own colony.

Bluthanch and her sons came to hear of this meeting, and saw in this secret meeting a treasonable plot against the Councils; and they often talked of this among themselves. When spring came, the Councils proclaimed, as usual, a Council Meet, in the halls of Bamz-Amschend. The people accordingly assembled, handfasted with ale and song, drinking bravely, and much and many things were talked over at the drink-table, and, among other things, were comparisons between different dwemer, and at last among the Councilors themselves.

One said that Lord Ihlendam excelled his fellow Councilors by far, and in every way. At this Councilor Bluthanch was very angry, and said that she was in no way less than Lord Ihlendam, and that she was eager to prove it. Instantly both parties were so inflamed that they challenged each other to battle, and ran to their arms. But some citizens who were less drunk, and more understanding, came between them, and quieted them; and each went back to his colony, but nobody expected that they would ever meet in peace again together.

But then, in the fall, Lord Ihlendam received a message from Councilor Bluthanch, inviting him to a parlay at Hendor-Stardumz. And all Ihlendam's

kin and citizens strongly urged him not to come, fearing treachery, but Lord Ihlendam would not listen to counsel, not even to carrying with him his honor guard. And sadly, it came to pass that, while traveling to Hendor-Stardumz, in Chinzinch Pass, a host of foul creatures set upon Lord Ihlendam and killed him, and all of his party. And many citizens said thereafter that Bluthanch and her sons had conjured these beasts and set them upon Lord Ihlendam, but nothing was proven. Lord Ihlendam lies buried at a place called Leftunch.

The City of Stone: A Sellsword's Guide to Markarth

by Amanda Alleia
Mercenary

If you're cutting your coins across Skyrim, you'll want to point your blade towards Markarth, the capital city of the Reach. There's no end of trouble in the City of Stone, and that means plenty of ways for you to earn your supper. Your sellsword instincts should point you towards the wealthiest patrons with the fattest purses to work for, but you need to mind yourself during your resting hours.

Markarth isn't like your Whiterun, where mercenary companies like the Companions make a sellsword an honored professional. No, Markarth has its own rules, rules the natives aren't going to just tell you. Lucky for you, old Ms. Alleia is here to shine the torchlight over your thick skulls.

First thing you'll notice in the City of Stone is... the stone. They say dwarves cut out the city from the mountain, and maybe they did by the look of it. But what it really means is that the whole place is vertical, and the streets are really cliffs. Long story short, be careful when you've got a bellyful of mead.

When you enter the city proper, you'll immediately hit the market. The merchants usually sell food and jewelry on the streets. Meat is the preferred ration, the craggy rocks in the area make for poor farming land, and silver is what's used to make most all the rings and necklaces you might by, thanks to the large silver mine in the city (we'll get to that in a bit).

Whatever you do, don't ask the Markarth city guard about anything. They're about as helpful as an angry Frostbite Spider while you're caught in its web, and if you mention anything about the Forsworn to them they might spit in your eye. Speaking of the Forsworn, these wildmen and women will be

your main source of income while you're in Markarth. The Jarl almost always has a bounty on some Forsworn leader or another, and if you don't mind going blade-to-axe with someone two septims short of a pint of ale, it's steady work.

The Silver-Blood Inn is where you want to head into after seeing the market. The drinks are, as usual, watered down (and judging by the metallic taste, with water from the rivers that run through the city's smelter district). What's important here is getting a room to stay in. You won't find any friendly faces to con your way into a cheap place to stay in Markarth. The natives don't trust strangers, so save yourself the trouble and put down your coin to rent a real room.

After you've spent a day recovering from travel, you'll see that Markarth is divided in two sides by the big crag in the center. The part with the big river running through it is called the Riverside, and the other is called the Dryside. The Riverside is where the smelter and native workers live, so don't bother going there. Instead, head directly to Dryside and talk to the local Nord nobles and see what problems you can start solving (at the highest rate).

Two major places to see are the Temple of Dibella and Cidhna Mine. The temple rests on the top of the central crag. A good place to go if you're on good terms with the Divines, but be warned, the Priestesses of Dibella don't allow men into their Inner Sanctums, so don't go crashing down in there uninvited unless you want a short trip to a long fall.

Cidhna Mine is the place where all the silver comes from that I mentioned before. But it's also the jail. Markarth uses prisoners to mine the ore, and there's a lot of it, so don't get caught doing something illegal in the city or you'll be hauled down there to dig. Apparently, the whole place is owned by one of the big families in the city, the Silver-Bloods (notice the inn is named after them? Always keep your sellsword eye open for hints like that). I tried meeting with the head of the Silver-Blood family to see if they had any work, but guarding their mines isn't the blood-rush I become a mercenary for. Something to keep in mind for yourself if you're thinking of staying a few months.

The final place I'll talk about here is Understone Keep, the home of the Jarl in Markarth. It's a fancy palace like any other (assuming your palace is built underground), but what you need to know is the city underneath the keep. That's right, there's another city below Markarth. One of those old dwarven ruins. They sometimes have expeditions in the ruins that makes for a good job, guarding the scholars and maybe lifting a few stones here and there. If you're lucky, you might come across one of those old dwarven machines, and you can bring back a souvenir after you're done breaking it apart.

All right, Ms. Alleia's hand is getting tired and that means this guide is done. Last piece of advice, don't cause trouble in Markarth. Don't start fights. Don't stop fights. Don't stick your head anywhere without someone from the city paying you for it, because believe me, no one in Markarth wants you there. Make your gold, drink your mead, see what's there to see, and move on. Nothing changes in the City of Stone, and that's just fine.

The Code of Malacath: A Sellsword's Guide to the Orc Strongholds

by Amanda Alleia
Mercenary

"No one bests an Orc."

I don't need you to guess how many times I've heard that boast in some dingy tavern or screamed at the top of the lungs by some fellow sellsword with too much fire in him. But I'd be lying if I said the Orc Strongholds don't take those words as law. There are few places where Ms. Alleia would tell you that "tradition" and the "old ways" makes for a better fighter, but with Orcs it seems like staying true to your ancestors is the path to victory.

Let me start a few steps back. The Orc Strongholds have existed as long as the Orc race has, according to them. They're armored camps in the least, and fortresses at the most. Every man, woman, and child inside the walls is trained from birth to defend it. All their weapons and armor are smithed right there in the stronghold, all the food is hunted down by Orc warriors and brought back to be eaten by everyone who lives there.

They follow no laws, save their own, an unwritten set of rules called "The Code of Malacath," named after one of their gods, who is sometimes called Mauloch. Most of it's pretty simple, don't steal, don't kill, don't attack people for no reason (although there seems to be a big list of exceptions). But Orcs in the stronghold don't have jails for their criminals. They have Blood Price. You either pay enough in goods for your crimes, or you bleed enough that the victim is satisfied. And Orcs, I don't need to tell you, have a lot of blood.

The Code also sets up who runs the stronghold. The toughest male is usually the Chief and makes decisions and decides when the Code of Malacath has been satisfied. All the women are either the Chief's wives or

his daughters, with the exception of the wise woman, who handles all the spiritual matters and healing needs. Matters of grave dispute are handled with short but violent fights, and those who don't get along with the Chief are usually forced out of the stronghold to live among the rest of us. An Orc grows up being told to fight for everything, that if something is not worth fighting for it is beneath the Code.

Orc Strongholds don't like strangers, used to living on their own like they do. Ms. Alleia knows what she does because so many Orcs leave the strongholds to become sellswords or soldiers, and a few pints of mead gets them talking about home. I hear that sometimes an Orc will make a non-Orc a "Blood-Kin" and that person is then allowed to live in the stronghold as one of the clan, but I've never heard of that actually happening.

For all their strange rules and traditions, the Code of Malacath does breed a culture of determined warriors. They're focused in ways that the average sellsword isn't. They don't hesitate to draw weapons and settle matters openly, and I think that's the real difference between the stronghold Orcs and the city Orcs. Imperial Law allows you to settle fights through the Emperor's men, but the Code of Malacath demands you settle your problems yourself, a fine way of thinking if you're leading the mercenary's life.

Commentaries on the Mysterium Xarxes

Book One

By Mankar Camoran

DAGON

Greetings, novitiate, and know first a reassurance: Mankar Camoran was once like you, asleep, unwise, protonymic. We mortals leave the dreaming-sleeve of birth the same, unmantled save for the symbiosis with our mothers, thus to practice and thus to rapprochement, until finally we might through new eyes leave our hearths without need or fear that she remains behind. In this moment we destroy her forever and enter the demesne of Lord Dagon.

Reader, this book is your door to that demesne, and though you be a destroyer you must still submit to locks. Lord Dagon would only have those clever enough to pause; all else the Aurbis claims in their fool running. Walk first. Heed. The impatience you feel is your first slave to behead.

Enter as Lord Dagon has written: come slow and bring four keys. Know that then you are royalty, a new breed of destroyer, whose garden shall flood with flowers known and unknown, as it was in the mythic dawn. Thus shall you return to your first primal wail and yet come out different. It shall this time be neonymbiosis, master akin to Master, whose Mother is miasma.

Every quarter has known us, and none bore our passing except with trembling. Perhaps you came to us through war, or study, or shadow, or the alignment of certain snakes. Though each path matters in its kind, the prize is always thus: welcome, novitiate, that you are here at all means that you have the worthiness of kings. Seek thy pocket now, and look! There is the first key, glinting with the light of a new dawn.

Night follows day, and so know that this primary insight shall fall alike unto the turbulent evening sea where all faiths are tested. Again, a reassurance: even the Usurper went under the Iliac before he rose up to claim his fleet.

Fear only for a second. Shaken belief is like water for a purpose: in the garden of the Dawn we shall breathe whole realities.

Enter as Lord Dagon has written: come slow and bring four keys. Our Order is based on the principles of his mighty razor: Novitiate, Questing Knight, Chaplain, and Master. Let the evil ones burn in its light as if by the excess of our vision. Then shalt our Knowledge go aright. However, recall that your sight is yet narrow, and while you have the invitation, you have not the address.

My own summons came through a book Lord Dagon wrote himself in the deserts of rust and wounds. Its name is the 'Mysterium Xarxes', Aldmeretada aggregate, forefather to the wife of all enigma. Each word is razor-fed and secret, thinner than cataclysms, tarnished like red-drink. That I mention it at all is testament to your new rank, my child. Your name is now cut into its weight.

Palace, hut, or cave, you have left all the fog worlds of conception behind. Nu-mantia! Liberty! Rejoice in the promise of paradise!

Endlessly it shall form and reform around you, deeds as entities, all-systems only an hour before they bloom to zero sums, flowering like vestments, divine raiment worn to dance at Lord Dagon's golden feet. In his first arm, a storm, his second the rush of plagued rain, the third all the tinder of Anu, and the fourth the very eyes of Padhome. Feel uplifted in thine heart that you have this first key, for it shall strike high and low into the wormrot of false heavens.

Roaring I wandered until I grew hoarse with the gospel. I had read the mysteries of Lord Dagon and feeling anew went mad with the overflow. My words found no purchase until I became hidden. These were not words for the common of Tamriel, whose clergy long ago feigned the very existence of the Dawn. Learn from my mistake; know that humility was Mankar Camoran's original wisdom. Come slow, and bring four keys.

Offering myself to that daybreak allowed the girdle of grace to contain me. When my voice returned, it spoke with another tongue. After three nights I

could speak fire.

Red-drink, razor-fed, I had glimpsed the path unto the garden, and knew that to inform others of its harbor I had to first drown myself in search's sea. Know ye that I have found my fleet, and that you are the flagship of my hope. Greetings, novitiate, Mankar Camoran was once you, asleep, unwise, protonymic, but Am No More. Now I sit and wait to feast with thee on all the worlds of this cosmos. Nu-mantia! Liberty!

Book Two

By Mankar Camoran

ALTADOON

Whosoever findeth this document, I call him brother.

Answers are liberations, where the slaves of Malbioge that came to know Numantia cast down their jailer king, Maztiak, which the Xarxes Mysterium calls the Arkayn. Maztiak, whose carcass was dragged through the streets by his own bone-walkers and whose flesh was opened on rocks thereon and those angels who loved him no longer did drink from his honeyed ichors screaming "Let all know free will and do as they will!"

Your coming was foretold, my brother, by the Lord Dagon in his book of razors. You are to come as Idols drop away from you one by one. You are exalted in eyes that have not yet set on you; you, swain to well-travelled to shatterer of mantles. You, brother, are to sit with me in Paradise and be released of all unknowns. Indeed, I shall show you His book and its foul-and-many-feathered rubric so that you can put into symbols what you already know: the sphere of destruction is but the milk of the unenslaved. I fault not your stumbling, for they are expected and given grace by the Oils. I crave not your downfalls, though without them you might surpass me even in the coming Earth of all infinities. Lord Dagon wishes you no ills but the momentous. And as He wants, you must want, and so learn from the pages of God this: the Ritual of Want:

Whisper to earth and earth, where the meddlers take no stones except to blood, as blood IS blood, and to the cracking of bone, as bone IS bone, and so to crack and answer and fall before the one and one, I call you Dragon as brother and king.

Tides of dreugh: 7 and 7, draught of Oil, 1 and 1, circles drawn by wet Dibellites: three concentric and let their lower blood fall where it may, a birth watched by blackbirds: Hearthfire 1st. Incant the following when your hearing becomes blurred:

Enraptured, he who finally goes unrecorded.

Recorded, the slaves that without knowing turn the Wheel.

Enslaved, all the children of the Aurbis As It Is."

Book Three

By Mankar Camoran

CHIM

The Tower touches all the mantles of Heaven, brother-noviates, and by its apex one can be as he will. More: be as he was and yet changed for all else on that path for those that walk after. This is the third key of Nu-mantia and the secret of how mortals become makers, and makers back to mortals. The Bones of the Wheel need their flesh, and that is mankind's heirloom.

Oath-breakers beware, for their traitors run through the nymic-paths, runner dogs of prolix gods. The Dragon's Blood have hidden ascension in six-thousands years of aetherial labyrinth, which is Arena, which they yet deny is Oathbound. By the Book, take this key and pierce the divine shell that encloses the mantle-takers! The skin of gold! SCARAB AE AURBEX!

Woe to the Oath-breakers! Of the skin of gold, the Xarxes Mysteriuum says "Be fooled not by the forlorn that ride astray the roadway, for they lost faith and this losing was caused by the Aedra who would know no other planets." Whereby the words of Lord Dagon instructs us to destroy these faithless. "Eat or bleed dry the gone-forlorn and gain that small will that led them to walk the path of Godhead at the first. Spit out or burn to the side that which made them delay. Know them as the Mnemoli."

Every new limb is paid for by the under-known. See, brother, and give not more to the hydra.

Reader, you will sense a shadow-choir soon. The room you are in right now will grow eyes and voices. The candle or spell-light you read this by will become gateways for the traitors I have mentioned. Scorn them and fear not. Call them names, call out their base natures. I, the Mankar of stars, am with you, and I come to take you to my Paradise where the Tower-traitors shall hang on glass wracks until they smile with the new revolution.

That is your ward against the Mnemoli. They run blue, through noise, and shine only when the earth trembles with the eruption of the newly-mantled. Tell them "Go! GHARTOK AL MNEM! God is come! NUMI MORA! NUM DALAE MNEM!"

Once you walk in the Mythic it surrenders its power to you. Myth is nothing more than first wants. Unutterable truth. Ponder this while searching for the fourth key.

Understood laws of the arcanature will fall away like heat. "First Tower Dictate: render the mutant bound where he may do no more harm. As God of the Mundus, alike shall be his progeny, split from their divine sparks. We are Eight time eight Exarchs. Let the home of Padomay see us as sole exit."

CHIM. Those who know it can reshape the land. Witness the home of the Red King Once Jungled.

He that enters Paradise enters his own Mother. AE ALMA RUMA! The Aurbis endeth in all ways.

Endeth we seek through our Dawn, all endeth. Falter now and become one with the wayside orphans that feed me. Follow and I shall adore you from inside. My first daughter ran from the Dagonite road. Her name was Ruma and I ate her with no bread, and made another, which learned, and I loved that one and blackbirds formed her twin behind all time.

Starlight is your mantle, brother. Wear it to see by and add its light to Paradise.

Book Four

By Mankar Camoran

GHARTOK

May the holder of the fourth key know the heart thereby: the Mundex Terrene was once ruled over solely by the tyrant dreugh-kings, each to their own dominion, and borderwars fought between their slave oceans. They were akin to the time-totems of old, yet evil, and full of mockery and profane powers. No one that lived did so outside of the sufferance of the dreughs.

I give my soul to the Magna Ge, sayeth the joyous in Paradise, for they created Mehrunes the Razor in secret, in the very bowels of Lyg, the domain of the Upstart who vanishes. Though they came from diverse waters, each Get shared sole purpose: to artifice a prince of good, spinning his likeness in random swath, and imbuing him with Oblivion's most precious and scarce asset: hope.

Deathlessly I intone from Paradise: Mehrunes the Thieftaker, Mehrunes Godsbody, Mehrunes the Red Arms That Went Up! Nu-Mantia! Liberty!

Deny not that these days shall come again, my novitiates! For as Mehrunes threw down Lyg and cracked his face, declaring each of the nineteen and nine and nine oceans Free, so shall he crack the serpent crown of the Cyrodiils and make federation!

All will change in these days as it was changed in those, for with by the magic word Nu-Mantia a great rebellion rose up and pulled down the towers of CHIM-EL GHARJYG, and the templars of the Upstart were slaughtered, and blood fell like dew from the upper wards down to the

lowest pits, where the slaves with maniacal faces took chains and teeth to their jailers and all hope was brush-fire.

Your Dawn listens, my Lord! Let all the Aurbis know itself to be Free! Mehrunes is come! There is no dominion save free will!

Suns were riven as your red legions moved from Lyg to the hinterlands of chill, a legion for each Get, and Kuri was thrown down and Djaf was thrown down and Horma-Gile was crushed with coldsalt and forevermore called Hor and so shall it be again under the time of Gates.

Under the mires, Malbioge was thrown down, that old City of Chains, slaked in newbone-warmth and set Free. Galg and Mor-Galg were thrown down together in a single night of day and shall it be again under the time of Gates.

Nothing but woe for NRN which has become The Pit and seven curses on its Dreugh, the Vermae NI-MOHK! But for it the Crusades would be as my lord's Creation, Get by the Ge and do as thou wilt, of no fetters but your own conscience! Know that your Hell is Broken, people of the Aurbis, and praise the Nu-Mantia which is Liberty!

Complete Catalogue of Enchantments for Armor

by Yvonne Bienne
Synod researcher

Within this catalogue are all the known varieties of armor enchantments the modern mages can cast. No pretense is made that this list is complete. New discoveries are made and new enchantments are revealed often enough that this work will eventually become outdated. Those who follow may choose to revise this work as needed.

The most common enchantments for armor and other garb are those that improve health, magick or stamina. Fortifying the wearers health is popular with warriors. It actually makes the wearer harder to kill, binding his life force a bit tighter to his body. Fortifying magicka is more commonly seen in clothing because wizards tend to avoid bulky, restrictive armor. It allows the wizard to cast more spells before becoming magically exhausted. Fortifying stamina is a secondary choice for fighters. They tire less quickly, but do not survive their wounds any better.

There is a wide range of physical and mental attributes or skills that can be fortified by enchantments. There are as many of these as there are wizards with imagination. A few choice examples are archery, sneaking, conjuration, and carrying strength. The focus is always quite narrow. There are even examples of gauntlets that are enchanted to improve the wearers ability to enchant things.

Another common form of armor enchantment are the resistances. The elemental resistances are marginally easier to find and make. The make the wearer less susceptible to burning, freezing and shocks. There are also poison resistances and enchantments that will resist all forms of magic.

An uncommon pair of enchantments are waterbreathing and muffle. The former allows the wearing to swim underwater indefinitely. The later totally silences the clinking and clanking of the armor so the wearer moves more quietly. It's been speculated that muffle is a wizard's lazy solution to a problem that could be solved with cloth and wrappings.

The rarest of enchantments increase the recovery rate of health, magicka or stamina. The wearer actually heals from his wounds while you watch, even if he is in the midst of a battle. Wizards normally recover their magical energy at a moderate pace. Wearing this armor makes that recovery much faster. The same is true for stamina recovery enchantments. The wearer tires just as quickly as always, but seems to get his wind back much faster.

Complete Catalogue of Enchantments for Weaponry

by Yvonne Bienne
Synod researcher

Within this catalogue are all the known varieties of weapon enchantments the modern mages can cast. No pretense is made that this list is complete. New discoveries are made and new enchantments are revealed often enough that this work will eventually become outdated. Those who follow may choose to revise this work as needed.

Weapon such as axes and bows can hold a wide variety of enchantments. The most common are fire, frost and lightning. The simple, yet effective enchantments burn, freeze or shock when they draw blood.

Only slightly less common are weapon enchantments that drain magicka or stamina. These drain off a wizards reserve of power, tiring him magically just as the weapons that strain stamina tire their victims physically. Unlike the elemental enchantments, the enchantment along cannot kill, although the weapon itself can still take a life.

Equally less common are the enchantments of fear. There are two varieties, one for the living, and one for the undead. The former will only affect living creatures, not undead, or magical constructs such as atronachs and dwarven automatons. The latter cause draugr, skeletons, vampires and the like to flee. There is no known fear enchantment that will affect dwarven machines.

A particularly insidious, but somewhat common enchantment, is soul trap. Upon entering the blood, the victim's soul is bound. Should he die shortly thereafter, he soul is siphoned off to a nearby soul gem. This form of magic should only be used against beasts and monsters. To use it against men or elves is abhorrent.

Noticablely more rare are the absorb enchantments. There are three known types that drain the victims health, magicka, or stamina. The weapon becomes a conduit, transferring the stolen energy from the victim to the wielder. These are sometime referred to as vampiric enchantments. As discussed above, absorbing magicka and stamina is not in itself deadly. Absorbing health can actual steal the life from a creature.

The rarest of enchantments are those of banishment and paralyzation. Banishment only affects summoned atronachs or undead raised by wizards. The banishment breaks the link between the caster and the creature. Summoned atronach return to the Oblivion plane from whence they came. Raised undead are released. It is important to note that self-willed undead are not affected by banishment.

Paralyzation is simple, yet deadly. The affected creature becomes rigid and unable to move for a short time. This is one of the most prized enchantments among warriors. A paralyzed opponent can be dispatched with ease. It is important to note that many creature are immune to paralysis, such as Atronachs, skeletons, ice wraiths, and dwarven automatons.

A Concise Account of the Great War Between the Empire and the Aldmeri Dominion

by Legate Justianus Quintius

Author's Note: Much of what is written in this book is pieced together from documents captured from the enemy during the war, interrogation of prisoners, and eyewitness accounts from surviving soldiers and Imperial officers. I myself commanded the Tenth Legion in Hammerfell and Cyrodiil until I was wounded in 175 during the assault on the Imperial City. That said, the full truth of some events may never be known. I have done my best to fill in the gaps with educated conjectures based on my experience as well as my hard-earned knowledge of the enemy.

The Rise of the Thalmor

Although it is not well known, Summerset Isle suffered from the Oblivion Crisis as much as Cyrodiil did. The elves made war upon the Oblivion invaders, occasionally even crossing over to close down Oblivion gates. As a nation they had more successes than Cyrodiil did, although the limitless daedric hordes made the outcome a foregone conclusion.

The Thalmor had always been a powerful faction within Summerset Isle, but had also always been a minority voice. During the crisis, the Crystal Tower was forced to give the Thalmor greater power and authority. Their efforts almost certainly saved Summerset Isle from being overrun. They capitalized on their success to seize total control in 4E 22. They renamed the nation Alinor, which hearkens back to an earlier age before the ascendency of man. Most people outside of the Aldmeri Dominion still call it Summerset Isle, either out of peevishness or ignorance.

In 4E 29, the government of Valenwood was overthrown by Thalmor

collaborators and a union with Alinor proclaimed. It appears that Thalmor agents had formed close ties to certain Bosmeri factions even before the Oblivion Crisis. The Empire and its Bosmer allies, caught completely off guard, were quickly defeated by the much-better prepared Altmer forces that invaded Valenwood on the heels of the coup. Thus was the Aldmeri Dominion reborn.

Shortly afterward the Aldmeri Dominion severed all contact with the Empire. For seventy years they were silent. Most scholars believe there was some sort of internal strife in Alinor, but very little is known of the factional struggles that went on inside the Dominion while the Thalmor consolidated its power in Summerset and Valenwood.

In 4E 98, the two moons, Masser and Secunda vanished. Within most of the Empire, this was viewed with trepidation and fear. In Elsweyr it was far worse. Culturally the moons are much more influential to the Khajiit. After two years of the Void Nights, the moons returned. The Thalmor announced that they had restored the moons using previously unknown Dawn Magicks, but it is unclear if they truly restored the moons or just took advantage of foreknowledge that they would return.

Regardless of the truth of the matter, the Khajiit credited the Thalmor as their saviors. Within fifteen years, Imperial influence in Elsweyr had so diminished that the Empire was unable to respond effectively to the coup of 4E 115 which dissolved the Elsweyr Confederacy and recreated the ancient kingdoms of Anequina and Pelletine as client states of the Aldmeri Dominion. Once more the Empire failed to stop the advance of Thamor power.

When Titus Mede II ascended the throne in 4E 168, he inherited a weakened empire. The glory days of the Septims were a distant memory. Valenwood and Elsweyr were gone, ceded to the Thalmor enemy. Black Marsh had been lost to Imperial rule since the aftermath of the Oblivion Crisis. Morrowind had never recovered fully from the eruption of Mount Vvardenfell. Hammerfell was plagued by infighting between Crowns and Forebears. Only High Rock, Cyrodiil and Skyrim remained prosperous and peaceful.

Emperor Titus Mede had only a few short years to consolidate his rule before his leadership was put to the ultimate test.

The War Begins

On the 30th of Frostfall, 4E 171, the Aldmeri Dominion sent an ambassador to the Imperial City with a gift in a covered cart and an ultimatum for the new Emperor. The long list of demands included staggering tributes, disbandment of the Blades, outlawing the worship of Talos, and ceding large sections of Hammerfell to the Dominion. Despite the warnings of his generals of the Empire's military weakness, Emperor Titus Mede II rejected the ultimatum. The Thalmor ambassador upended the cart, spilling over a hundred heads on the floor: every Blades agent in Summerset and Valenwood. And so began the Great War which would consume the Empire and the Aldmeri Dominion for the next five years.

Within days, Aldmeri armies invaded Hammerfell and Cyrodiil simultaneously. A strong force commanded by the Thalmor general Lord Naarifin attacked Cyrodiil from the south, marching out of hidden camps in northern Elsweyr and flanking the Imperial defenses along the Valenwood border. Leyawiin soon fell to the invaders, while Bravil was cut off and besieged.

At the same time, an Aldmeri army under Lady Arannelya crossed into western Cyrodiil from Valenwood, bypassing Anvil and Kvatch and crossing into Hammerfell. Smaller Aldmeri forces landed along the southern coastline of Hammerfell. The disunited Redguard forces offered only scattered resistance to the invaders, and much of the southern coastline was quickly overrun. The greatly outnumbered Imperial legions retreated across the Alik'r Desert in the now-famous March of Thirst.

4E 172-173: The Aldmeri Advance Into Cyrodiil

It appears now that the initial Aldmeri objective was in fact the conquest of

Hammerfell, and that the invasion of Cyrodiil was intended only to pin down the Imperial legions while Hammerfell was overrun. However, the surprising initial success of Lord Naarifin's attack led the Thalmor to believe that the Empire was weaker than they had thought. The capture of the Imperial City itself and the complete overthrow of the Empire thus became their primary objective of the next two years. As we know, the Thalmor nearly achieved their objective. It was only because of our Emperor's determined leadership during the Empire's darkest hour that this disaster was averted.

During 4E 172, the Aldmeri advanced deeper into Cyrodiil. Bravil and Anvil both fell to the invaders. By the end of the year, Lord Naarifin had advanced to the very walls of the Imperial City. There were fierce naval clashes in Lake Rumare and along the Niben as the Imperial forces attempted to hold the eastern bank.

In Hammerfell, the Thalmor were content to consolidate their gains as they took control of the whole southern coastline, which was in fact their stated objective in the ultimatum delivered to the Emperor. Of the southern cities, only Hegathe still held out. The survivors of the March of Thirst regrouped in northern Hammerfell, joined by reinforcements from High Rock.

The year 4E 173 saw stiffening Imperial resistance in Cyrodiil, but the seemingly inexorable Aldmeri advance continued. Fresh legions from Skyrim bolstered the Emperor's main army in the Imperial City, but the Aldmeri forced the crossing of the Niben and began advancing in force up the eastern bank. By the end of the year, the Imperial City was surrounded on three sides - only the northern supply route to Bruma remained open.

In Hammerfell, Imperial fortunes took a turn for the better. In early 4E 173, a Forebear army from Sentinel broke the siege of Hegathe (a Crown city), leading to the reconciliation of the two factions. Despite this, Lady Arannelya's main army succeeded in crossing the Alik'r Desert. The Imperial Legions under General Decianus met them outside Skaven in a bloody and indecisive clash. Decianus withdrew and left Arannelya in possession of Skaven, but the Aldmeri were too weakened to continue their advance.

4E 174: The Sack of the Imperial City

In 4E 174, the Thalmor leadership committed all available forces to the campaign in Cyrodiil, gambling on a decisive victory to end the war once and for all. During the spring, Aldmeri reinforcements gathered in southern Cyrodiil, and on 12th of Second Seed, they launched a massive assault on the Imperial City itself. One army drove north to completely surround the city, while Lord Naarifin's main force attacked the walls from the south, east, and west. The Emperor's decision to fight his way out of the city rather than make a last stand was a bold one. No general dared advise him to abandon the capital, but Titus II was proven right in the end.

While the Eighth Legion fought a desperate (and doomed) rearguard action on the walls of the city, Titus II broke out of the city to the north with his main army, smashing through the surrounding the Aldmeri forces and linking up with reinforcements marching south from Skyrim under General Jonna. Meanwhile, however, the capital fell to the invaders and the infamous Sack of the Imperial City began. The Imperial Palace was burned, the White-Gold Tower itself looted, and all manner of atrocities carried out by the vengeful elves on the innocent populace.

In Hammerfell, General Decianus was preparing to drive the Aldmeri back from Skaven when he was ordered to march for Cyrodiil. Unwilling to abandon Hammerfell completely, he allowed a great number of "invalids" to be discharged from the Legions before they marched east. These veterans formed the core of the army that eventually drove Lady Arannelya's forces back across the Alik'r late in 174, taking heavy losses on their retreat from harassing attacks by the Alik'r warriors.

4E 175: The Battle of the Red Ring

During the winter of 4E 174-175, the Thalmor seem to have believed that the war in Cyrodiil was all but over. They made several attempts to negotiate with Titus II. The Emperor encouraged them in their belief that he

was preparing to surrender; meanwhile, he gathered his forces to retake the Imperial City.

In what is now known as the Battle of the Red Ring, a battle that will serve as a model for Imperial strategists for generations to come, Titus II divided his forces into three. One army, with the legions from Hammerfell under General Decianus, was hidden in the Colovian Highlands near Chorrol. The Aldmeri were unaware that he was no longer in Hammerfell, possibly because the Imperial veterans Decianus had left behind led Lady Arannelya to believe that she still faced an Imperial army. The second army, largely of Nord legions under General Jonna, took up position near Cheydinhal. The main army was commanded by the Emperor himself, and would undertake the main assault of the Imperial City from the north.

On the 30th of Rain's Hand, the bloody Battle of the Red Ring began as General Decianus swept down on the city from the west, while General Jonna's legionnaires drove south along the Red Ring Road. In a two-day assault, Jonna's army crossed the Niben and advanced west, attempting to link up with Decianus's legions and thus surround the Imperial City. Lord Naarifin was taken by surprise by Decianus's assault, but Jonna's troops faced bitter resistance as the Aldmeri counterattacked from Bravil and Skingrad. The heroic Nord legionnaires held firm, however, beating off the piecemeal Aldmeri attacks. By the fifth day of the battle, the Aldmeri army in the Imperial City was surrounded.

Titus II led the assault from the north, personally capturing Lord Naarifin. It is rumored the Emperor wielded the famed sword Goldbrand, although this has never been officially confirmed by the Imperial government. An attempt by the Aldmeri to break out of the city to the south was blocked by the unbreakable shieldwall of General Jonna's battered legions.

In the end, the main Aldmeri army in Cyrodiil was completely destroyed. The Emperor's decision to withdraw from the Imperial City in 4E 174 was bloodily vindicated.

Lord Naarifin was kept alive for thirty-three days, hanging from the White-Gold tower. It is not recorded where his body was buried, if it was buried at

all. Once source claims he was carried off by a winged daedra on the thirty-fourth day.

The White-Gold Concordat and the End of the War

Although victorious, the Imperial armies were in no shape to continue the war. The entire remaining Imperial force was gathered in Cyrodiil, exhausted and decimated by the Battle of the Red Ring. Not a single legion had more than half its soldiers fit for duty. Two legions had been effectively annihilated, not counting the loss of the Eighth during the retreat from the Imperial City the previous year. Titus II knew that there would be no better time to negotiate peace, and late in 4E 175 the Empire and the Aldmeri Dominion signed the White-Gold Concordat, ending the Great War.

The terms were harsh, but Titus II believed that it was necessary to secure peace and give the Empire a chance to regain its strength. The two most controversial terms of the Concordat were the banning of the worship of Talos and the cession of a large section of southern Hammerfell (most of what was already occupied by Aldmeri forces). Critics have pointed out that the Concordat is almost identical to the ultimatum the Emperor rejected five years earlier. However, there is a great difference between agreeing to such terms under the mere threat of war, and agreeing to them at the end of a long and destructive war. No part of the Empire would have accepted these terms in 4E 171, dictated by the Thalmor at swords-point. Titus II would have faced civil war. By 4E 175, most of the Empire welcomed peace at almost any price.

Epilogue: Hammerfell Fights On Alone

Hammerfell, however, refused to accept the White-Gold Concordat, being unwilling to concede defeat and the loss of so much of their territory. Titus II was forced to officially renounce Hammerfell as an Imperial province in order to preserve the hard-won peace treaty. The Redguards, understandably, looked on this as a betrayal. In this, the Thalmor certainly achieved one of their long-term goals by sowing lasting bitterness between

Hammerfell and the Empire.

In the end, the heroic Redguards fought the Aldmeri Dominion to a standstill, although the war lasted for five more years and left southern Hammerfell devastated. The Redguards say that this proves that the White-Gold Concordat was unnecessary, and that if Titus II had kept his nerve, the Aldmeri could have been truly defeated by the combined forces of Hammerfell and the rest of the Empire. The truth of that assertion can, of course, never be known. But the Redguards should not forget the great sacrifice of Imperial blood - Breton, Nord, and Cyrodilic - at the Battle of the Red Ring that weakened the Dominion enough to allow the eventual Second Treaty of Stros M'kai in 4E 180 and the withdrawal of Aldmeri forces from Hammerfell.

There can be no doubt that the current peace cannot last forever. The Thalmor take the long view, as is proved by the sequence of events leading up to the Great War. All those who value freedom over tyranny can only hope that before it is too late, Hammerfell and the Empire will be reconciled and stand united against the Thalmor threat. Otherwise, any hope to stem the tide of Thalmor rule over all of Tamriel is dimmed.

A Dance in Fire

Chapter 1

by Waughin Jarth

Scene: The Imperial City, Cyrodiil
Date: 7 Frost Fall, 3E 397

It seemed as if the palace had always housed the Atrius Building Commission, the company of clerks and estate agents who authored and notarized nearly every construction of any note in the Empire. It had stood for two hundred and fifty years, since the reign of the Emperor Magnus, a plain-fronted and austere hall on a minor but respectable plaza in the Imperial City. Energetic and ambitious middle-class lads and ladies worked there, as well as complacent middle-aged ones like Decumus Scotti. No one could imagine a world without the Commission, least of all Scotti. To be accurate, he could not imagine a world without himself in the Commission.

"Lord Atrius is perfectly aware of your contributions," said the managing clerk, closing the shutter that demarcated Scotti's office behind him. "But you know that things have been difficult."

"Yes," said Scotti, stiffly.

"Lord Vanech's men have been giving us a lot of competition lately, and we must be more efficient if we are to survive. Unfortunately, that means releasing some of our historically best but presently underachieving senior clerks."

"I understand. Can't be helped."

"I'm glad that you understand," smiled the managing clerk, smiling thinly and withdrawing. "Please have your room cleared immediately."

Scotti began the task of organizing all his work to pass on to his successor. It would probably be young Imbrallius who would take most of it on, which was as it should be, he considered philosophically. The lad knew how to find business. Scotti wondered idly what the fellow would do with the contracts for the new statue of St Alessia for which the Temple of the One had applied. Probably invent a clerical error, blame it on his old predecessor Decumus Scotti, and require an additional cost to rectify.

"I have correspondence for Decumus Scotti of the Atrius Building Commission."

Scotti looked up. A fat-faced courier had entered his office and was thrusting forth a sealed scroll. He handed the boy a gold piece, and opened it up. By the poor penmanship, atrocious spelling and grammar, and overall unprofessional tone, it was manifestly evident who the writer was. Liodes Jurus, a fellow clerk some years before, who had left the Commission after being accused of unethical business practices.

"Dear Sckotti,

I emagine you alway wondered what happened to me, and the last plase you would have expected to find me is out in the woods. But thats exactly where I am. Ha ha. If your'e smart and want to make lot of extra gold for Lord Atrius (and yourself, ha ha), youll come down to Vallinwood too. If you have'nt or have been following the politics hear lately, you may or may not know that ther's bin a war between the Boshmer and there neighbors Elswere over the past two years. Things have only just calm down, and ther's a lot that needs to be rebuilt.

Now Ive got more business than I can handel, but I need somone with some clout, someone representing a respected agencie to get the quill in the ink. That somone is you, my fiend. Come & meat me at the M'ther Paskos Tavern in Falinnesti, Vallinwood. Ill be here 2 weeks and you wont be sorrie.

-- Jurus

P.S.: Bring a wagenload of timber if you can."

"What do you have there, Scotti?" asked a voice.

Scotti started. It was Imbrallius, his damnably handsome face peeking through the shutters, smiling in that way that melted the hearts of the stingiest of patrons and the roughest of stonemasons. Scotti shoved the letter in his jacket pocket.

"Personal correspondence," he sniffed. "I'll be cleared up here in a just a moment."

"I don't want to hurry you," said Imbrallius, grabbing a few sheets of blank contracts from Scotti's desk. "I've just gone through a stack, and the junior scribes hands are all cramping up, so I thought you wouldn't miss a few."

The lad vanished. Scotti retrieved the letter and read it again. He thought about his life, something he rarely did. It seemed a sea of gray with a black insurmountable wall looming. There was only one narrow passage he could see in that wall. Quickly, before he had a moment to reconsider it, he grabbed a dozen of the blank contracts with the shimmering gold leaf ATRIUS BUILDING COMMISSION BY APPOINTMENT OF HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY and hid them in the satchel with his personal effects.

The next day he began his adventure with a giddy lack of hesitation. He arranged for a seat in a caravan bound for Valenwood, the single escorted conveyance to the southeast leaving the Imperial City that week. He had scarcely hours to pack, but he remembered to purchase a wagonload of timber.

"It will be extra gold to pay for a horse to pull that," frowned the convoy head.

"So I anticipated," smiled Scotti with his best Imbrallius grin.

Ten wagons in all set off that afternoon through the familiar Cyrodilic countryside. Past fields of wildflowers, gently rolling woodlands, friendly hamlets. The clop of the horses' hooves against the sound stone road reminded Scotti that the Atrius Building Commission constructed it. Five of the eighteen necessary contracts for its completion were drafted by his own hand.

"Very smart of you to bring that wood along," said a gray-whiskered Breton man next to him on his wagon. "You must be in Commerce."

"Of a sort," said Scotti, in a way he hoped was mysterious, before introducing himself: "Decumus Scotti."

"Gryf Mallon," said the man. "I'm a poet, actually a translator of old Bosmer literature. I was researching some newly discovered tracts of the Mnoriad Pley Bar two years ago when the war broke out and I had to leave. You are no doubt familiar with the Mnoriad, if you're aware of the Green Pact."

Scotti thought the man might be speaking perfect gibberish, but he nodded his head.

"Naturally, I don't pretend that the Mnoriad is as renowned as the Meh Ayleidion, or as ancient as the Dansir Gol, but I think it has a remarkable significance to understanding the nature of the merelithic Bosmer mind. The origin of the Wood Elf aversion to cutting their own wood or eating any plant material at all, yet paradoxically their willingness to import plantstuff from other cultures, I feel can be linked to a passage in the Mnoriad," Mallon shuffled through some of his papers, searching for the appropriate text.

To Scotti's vast relief, the carriage soon stopped to camp for the night. They were high on a bluff over a gray stream, and before them was the great valley of Valenwood. Only the cry of seabirds declared the presence of the ocean to the bay to the west: here the timber was so tall and wide, twisting around itself like an impossible knot begun eons ago, to be impenetrable. A

few more modest trees, only fifty feet to the lowest branches, stood on the cliff at the edge of camp. The sight was so alien to Scotti and he found himself so anxious about the proposition of entering the wilderness that he could not imagine sleeping.

Fortunately, Mallon had supposed he had found another academic with a passion for the riddles of ancient cultures. Long into the night, he recited Bosmer verse in the original and in his own translation, sobbing and bellowing and whispering wherever appropriate. Gradually, Scotti began to feel drowsy, but a sudden crack of wood snapping made him sit straight up.

"What was that?"

Mallon smiled: "I like it too. 'Convocation in the malignity of the moonless speculum, a dance of fire --'"

"There are some enormous birds up in the trees moving around," whispered Scotti, pointing in the direction of the dark shapes above.

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Mallon, irritated with his audience. "Now listen to how the poet characterizes Herma-Mora's invocation in the eighteenth stanza of the fourth book."

The dark shapes in the trees were some of them perched like birds, others slithered like snakes, and still others stood up straight like men. As Mallon recited his verse, Scotti watched the figures softly leap from branch to branch, half-gliding across impossible distances for anything without wings. They gathered in groups and then reorganized until they had spread to every tree around the camp. Suddenly they plummeted from the heights.

"Mara!" cried Scotti. "They're falling like rain!"

"Probably seed pods," Mallon shrugged, not turning around. "Some of the trees have remarkable --"

The camp erupted into chaos. Fires burst out in the wagons, the horses wailed from mortal blows, casks of wine, fresh water, and liquor gushed

their contents to the ground. A nimble shadow dashed past Scotti and Mallon, gathering sacks of grain and gold with impossible agility and grace. Scotti had only one glance at it, lit up by a sudden nearby burst of flame. It was a sleek creature with pointed ears, wide yellow eyes, mottled pied fur and a tail like a whip.

"Werewolf," he whimpered, shrinking back.

"Cathay-raht," groaned Mallon. "Much worse. Khajiti cousins or some such thing, come to plunder."

"Are you sure?"

As quickly as they struck, the creatures retreated, diving off the bluff before the battlemage and knight, the caravan's escorts, had fully opened their eyes. Mallon and Scotti ran to the precipice and saw a hundred feet below the tiny figures dash out of the water, shake themselves, and disappear into the wood.

"Werewolves aren't acrobats like that," said Mallon. "They were definitely Cathay-raht. Bastard thieves. Thank Stendarr they didn't realize the value of my notebooks. It wasn't a complete loss."

Chapter 2

by Waughin Jarth

It was a complete loss. The Cathay-Raht had stolen or destroyed almost every item of value in the caravan in just a few minutes' time. Decumus Scotti's wagonload of wood he had hoped to trade with the Bosmer had been set on fire and then toppled off the bluff. His clothing and contracts were tattered and ground into the mud of dirt mixed with spilt wine. All the pilgrims, merchants, and adventurers in the group moaned and wept as they gathered the remnants of their belongings by the rising sun of the dawn.

"I best not tell anyone that I managed to hold onto my notes for my translation of the Mnoriad Pley Bar," whispered the poet Gryf Mallon."They'd probably turn on me."

Scotti politely declined the opportunity of telling Mallon just how little value he himself placed on the man's property. Instead, he counted the coins in his purse. Thirty-four gold pieces. Very little indeed for an entrepreneur beginning a new business.

"Hoy!" came a cry from the wood. A small party of Bosmer emerged from the thicket, clad in leather mail and bearing arms. "Friend or foe?"

"Neither," growled the convoy head.

"You must be the Cyrodiils," laughed the leader of the group, a tall skeleton-thin youth with a sharp vulpine face. "We heard you were en route. Evidently, so did our enemies."

"I thought the war was over," muttered one of the caravan's now ruined merchants.

The Bosmer laughed again: "No act of war. Just a little border enterprise. You are going on to Falinesti?"

"I'm not," the convoy head shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, my duty is done. No more horses, no more caravan. Just a fat profit loss to me."

The men and women crowded around the man, protesting, threatening, begging, but he refused to step foot in Valenwood. If these were the new times of peace, he said, he'd rather come back for the next war.

Scotti tried a different route and approached the Bosmer. He spoke with an authoritative but friendly voice, the kind he used in negotiations with peevish carpenters: "I don't suppose you'd consider escorting me to Falinesti. I'm a representative for an important Imperial agency, the Atrius Building Commission, here to help repair and alleviate some of the problems the war with the Khajiit brought to your province. Patriotism --"

"Twenty gold pieces, and you must carry your own gear if you have any left," replied the Bosmer.

Scotti reflected that negotiations with peevish carpenters rarely went his way either.

Six eager people had enough gold on them for payment. Among those without funds was the poet, who appealed to Scotti for assistance.

"I'm sorry, Gryf, I only have fourteen gold left over. Not even enough for a decent room when I get to Falinesti. I really would help you if I could," said Scotti, persuading himself that it was true.

The band of six and their Bosmer escorts began the descent down a rocky path along the bluff. Within an hour's time, they were deep in the jungles of Valenwood. A never-ending canopy of hues of browns and greens obscured the sky. A millennia's worth of fallen leaves formed a deep, wormy sea of putrefaction beneath their feet. Several miles were crossed wading through the slime. For several more, they took a labyrinthian path across fallen branches and the low-hanging boughs of giant trees.

All the while, hour after hour, the inexhaustible Bosmer host moved so fast,

the Cyrodiils struggled to keep from being left behind. A red-faced little merchant with short legs took a bad step on a rotten branch and nearly fell. His fellow provincials had to help him up. The Bosmer paused only a moment, their eyes continually darting to the shadows in the trees above before moving on at their usual expeditious pace.

"What are they so nervous about?" wheezed the merchant irritably. "More Cathay-Raht?"

"Don't be ridiculous," laughed the Bosmer unconvincingly. "Khajiit this far into Valenwood? In times of peace? They'd never dare."

When the group passed high enough above the swamp that the smell was somewhat dissipated, Scotti felt a sudden pang of hunger. He was used to four meals a day in the Cyrodilic custom. Hours of nonstop exertion without food was not part of his regimen as a comfortably paid clerk. He pondered, feeling somewhat delirious, how long they had been trotting through the jungle. Twelve hours? Twenty? A week? Time was meaningless. Sunlight was only sporadic through the vegetative ceiling. Phosphorescent molds on the trees and in the muck below provided the only regular illumination.

"Is it at all possible for us to rest and eat?" he hollered to his host up ahead.

"We're near to Falinesti," came the echoing reply. "Lots of food there."

The path continued upward for several hours more across a clot of fallen logs, rising up to the first and then the second boughs of the tree line. As they rounded a long corner, the travelers found themselves midway up a waterfall that fell a hundred feet or more. No one had the energy to complain as they began pulling up the stacks of rock, agonizing foot by foot. The Bosmer escorts disappeared into the mist, but Scotti kept climbing until there was no more rock left. He wiped the sweat and river water from his eyes.

Falinesti spread across the horizon before him. Sprawling across both banks of the river stood the mighty graht-oak city, with groves and orchards of

lesser trees crowding it like supplicants before their king. At a lesser scale, the tree that formed the moving city would have been extraordinary: gnarled and twisted with a gorgeous crown of gold and green, dripping with vines and shining with sap. At a mile tall and half as wide, it was the most magnificent thing Scotti had ever seen. If he had not been a starving man with the soul of a clerk, he would have sung.

"There you are," said the leader of the escorts. "Not too far a walk. You should be glad it's wintertide. In summertide, the city's on the far south end of the province."

Scotti was lost as to how to proceed. The sight of the vertical metropolis where people moved about like ants disoriented all his sensibilities.

"You wouldn't know of an inn called," he paused for a moment, and then pulled Jurus's letter from his pocket. "Something like 'Mother Paskos Tavern'?"

"Mother Pascost?" the lead Bosmer laughed his familiar contemptuous laugh. "You won't want to stay there? Visitors always prefer the Aysia Hall in the top boughs. It's expensive, but very nice."

"I'm meeting someone at Mother Pascost's Tavern."

"If you've made up your mind to go, take a lift to Havel Slump and ask for directions there. Just don't get lost and fall asleep in the western cross."

This apparently struck the youth's friends as a very witty jest, and so it was with their laughter echoing behind him that Scotti crossed the writhing root system to the base of Falinesti. The ground was littered with leaves and refuse, and from moment to moment a glass or a bone would plummet from far above, so he walked with his neck crooked to have warning. An intricate network of platforms anchored to thick vines slipped up and down the slick trunk of the city with perfect grace, manned by operators with arms as thick as an ox's belly. Scotti approaches the nearest fellow at one of the platforms, who was idly smoking from a glass pipe.

"I was wondering if you might take me to Havel Slump."

The mer nodded and within a few minutes time, Scotti was two hundred feet in the air at a crook between two mighty branches. Curled webs of moss stretched unevenly across the fork, forming a sharing roof for several dozen small buildings. There were only a few souls in the alley, but around the bend ahead, he could hear the sound of music and people. Scotti tipped the Falinesti Platform Ferryman a gold piece and asked for the location of Mother Pascost's Tavern.

"Straight ahead of you, sir, but you won't find anyone there," the Ferryman explained, pointing in the direction of the noise. "Morndas everyone in Havel Slump has revelry."

Scotti walked carefully along the narrow street. Though the ground felt as solid as the marble avenues of the Imperial City, there were slick cracks in the bark that exposed fatal drops into the river. He took a moment to sit down, to rest and get used to the view from the heights. It was a beautiful day for certain, but it took Scotti only a few minutes of contemplation to rise up in alarm. A jolly little raft anchored down stream below him had distinctly moved several inches while he watched it. But it hadn't moved at all. He had. Together with everything around him. It was no metaphor: the city of Falinesti walked. And, considering its size, it moved quickly.

Scotti rose to his feet and into a cloud of smoke that drifted out from around the bend. It was the most delicious roast he had ever smelled. The clerk forgot his fear and ran.

The "revelry" as the Ferryman had termed it took place on an enormous platform tied to the tree, wide enough to be a plaza in any other city. A fantastic assortment of the most amazing people Scotti had ever seen were jammed shoulder-to-shoulder together, many eating, many more drinking, and some dancing to a lutist and singer perched on an offshoot above the crowd. They were largely Bosmer, true natives clad in colorful leather and bones, with a close minority of orcs. Whirling through the throng, dancing and bellowing at one another were a hideous ape people. A few heads bobbing over the tops of the crowd belonged not, as Scotti first assumed, to

very tall people, but to a family of centaurs.

"Care for some mutton?" queried a wizened old mer who roasted an enormous beast on some red-hot rocks.

Scotti quickly paid him a gold piece and devoured the leg he was given. And then another gold piece and another leg. The fellow chuckled when Scotti began choking on a piece of gristle, and handed him a mug of a frothing white drink. He drank it and felt a quiver run through his body as if he were being tickled.

"What is that?" Scotti asked.

"Jagga. Fermented pig's milk. I can let you have a flagon of it and a bit more mutton for another gold."

Scotti agreed, paid, gobbled down the meat, and took the flagon with him as he slipped into the crowd. His co-worker Liodes Jurus, the man who had told him to come to Valenwood, was nowhere to be seen. When the flagon was a quarter empty, Scotti stopped looking for Jurus. When it was half empty, he was dancing with the group, oblivious to the broken planks and gaps in the fencework. At three quarters empty, he was trading jokes with a group of creatures whose language was completely alien to him. By the time the flagon was completely drained, he was asleep, snoring, while the revelry continued on all around his supine body.

The next morning, still asleep, Scotti had the sensation of someone kissing him. He made a face to return the favor, but a pain like fire spread through his chest and forced him to open his eyes. There was an insect the size of a large calf sitting on him, crushing him, its spiky legs holding him down while a central spiral-bladed vortex of a mouth tore through his shirt. He screamed and thrashed but the beast was too strong. It had found its meal and it was going to finish it.

It's over, thought Scotti wildly, I should have never left home. I could have stayed in the City, and perhaps found work with Lord Vanech. I could have begun again as a junior clerk and worked my way back up.

Suddenly the mouth released itself. The creature shivered once, expelled a burst of yellow bile, and died.

"Got one!" cried a voice, not too distantly.

For a moment, Scotti lay still. His head throbbed and his chest burned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. Another of the horrible monsters was scurried towards him. He scrambled, trying to push himself free, but before he could come out, there was a sound of a bow cracking and an arrow pierced the second insect.

"Good shot!" cried another voice. "Get the first one again! I just saw it move a little!"

This time, Scotti felt the impact of the bolt hit the carcass. He cried out, but he could hear how muffled his voice was by the beetle's body. Cautiously, he tried sliding a foot out and rolling under, but the movement apparently had the effect of convincing the archers that the creature still lived. A volley of arrows was launched forth. Now the beast was sufficiently perforated so pools of its blood, and likely the blood of its victims, began to seep out onto Scotti's body.

When Scotti was a lad, before he grew too sophisticated for such sports, he had often gone to the Imperial Arena for the competitions of war. He recalled a great veteran of the fights, when asked, telling him his secret, "Whenever I'm in doubt of what to do, and I have a shield, I stay behind it."

Scotti followed that advice. After an hour, when he no longer heard arrows being fired, he threw aside the remains of the bug and leapt as quickly as he could to a stand. It was not a moment too soon. A gang of eight archers had their bows pointing his direction, ready to fire. When they saw him, they laughed.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you not to sleep in the western cross? How're we going to exterminate all the hoarvors if you drunks keep feeding 'em?"

Scotti shook his head and walked back along the platform, round the bend, to Havel Slump. He was bloodied and torn and tired and he had far too much fermented pig's milk. All he wanted was a proper place to lie down. He stepped into Mother Pascost's Tavern, a dank place, wet with sap, smelling of mildew.

"My name is Decumus Scotti," he said. "I was hoping you have someone named Jurus staying here."

"Decumus Scotti?" pondered the fleshy proprietress, Mother Pascost herself. "I've heard that name. Oh, you must be the fellow he left the note for. Let me go see if I can find it."

Chapter 3

by Waughin Jarth

Mother Pascost disappeared into the sordid hole that was her tavern, and emerged a moment later with a scrap of paper with Liodes Jurus's familiar scrawl. Decumus Scotti held it up before a patch of sunlight that had found its way through the massive boughs of the tree city, and read.

Sckotti,
So you made it to Falinnesti, Vallinwood! Congradulatens! Im sure you had quit a adventure getting here. Unfortonitly, Im not here anymore as you probaby guess. Theres a town down rivver called Athie Im at. Git a bote and join me! Its ideal! I hope you brot a lot of contracks, cause these peple need a lot of building done. They wer close to the war, you see, but not so close they dont have any mony left to pay. Ha ha. Meat me down here as son as you can.
Jurus

So, Scotti pondered, Jurus had left Falinesti and gone to some place called Athie. Given his poor penmanship and ghastly spelling, it could equally well be Athy, Aphy, Othry, Imthri, Urtha, or Krakamaka. The sensible thing to do, Scotti knew, was to call this adventure over and try to find some way to get back home to the Imperial City. He was no mercenary devoted to a life of thrills: he was, or at least had been, a senior clerk at a successful private building commission. Over the last few weeks, he had been robbed by the Cathay-Raht, taken on a death march through the jungle by a gang of giggling Bosmeri, half-starved to death, drugged with fermented pig's milk, nearly slain by some kind of giant tick, and attacked by archers. He was filthy, exhausted, and had, he counted, ten gold pieces to his name. Now the man whose proposal brought him to the depths of misery was not even there. It was both judicious and seemly to abandon the enterprise entirely.

And yet, a small but distinct voice in his head told him: You have been chosen. You have no other choice but to see this through.

Scotti turned to the stout old woman, Mother Pascost, who had been watching him curiously: "I was wondering if you knew of a village that was at the edge of the recent conflict with Elsweyr. It's called something like Ath-ie?"

"You must mean Athay," she grinned. "My middle lad, Viglil, he manages a dairy down there. Beautiful country, right on the river. Is that where your friend went?"

"Yes," said Scotti. "Do you know the fastest way to get there?"

After a short conversation, an even shorter ride to Falinesti's roots by way of the platforms, and a jog to the river bank, Scotti was negotiating transport with a huge fair-haired Bosmer with a face like a pickled carp. He called himself Captain Balfix, but even Scotti with his sheltered life could recognize him for what he was. A retired pirate for hire, a smuggler for certain, and probably much worse. His ship, which had clearly been stolen in the distant past, was a bent old Imperial sloop.

"Fifty gold and we'll be in Athay in two days time," boomed Captain Balfix expansively.

"I have ten, no, sorry, nine gold pieces," replied Scotti, and feeling the need for explanation, added, "I had ten, but I gave one to the Platform Ferryman to get me down here."

"Nine is just as fine," said the captain agreeably. "Truth be told, I was going to Athay whether you paid me or not. Make yourself comfortable on the boat, we'll be leaving in just a few minutes."

Decumus Scotti boarded the vessel, which sat low in the water of the river, stacked high with crates and sacks that spilled out of the hold and galley and onto the deck. Each was marked with stamps advertising the most innocuous substances: copper scraps, lard, ink, High Rock meal (marked "For Cattle"), tar, fish jelly. Scotti's imagination reeled picturing what sorts of illicit imports were truly aboard.

It took more than those few minutes for Captain Balfix to haul in the rest of his cargo, but in an hour, the anchor was up and they were sailing downriver towards Athay. The green gray water barely rippled, only touched by the fingers of the breeze. Lush plant life crowded the banks, obscuring from sight all the animals that sang and roared at one another. Lulled by the serene surroundings, Scotti drifted to sleep.

At night, he awoke and gratefully accepted some clean clothes and food from Captain Balfix.

"Why are you going to Athay, if I may ask?" queried the Bosmer.

"I'm meeting a former colleague there. He asked me to come down from the Imperial City where I worked for the Atrius Building Commission to negotiate some contracts," Scotti took another bite of the dried sausages they were sharing for dinner. "We're going to try to repair and refurbish whatever bridges, roads, and other structures that got damaged in the recent war with the Khajiiti."

"It's been a hard two years," the captain nodded his head. "Though I suppose good for me and the likes of you and your friend. Trade routes cut off. Now they think there's going to be war with the Summurset Isles, you heard that?"

Scotti shook his head.

"I've done my share of smuggling skooma down the coast, even helping some revolutionary types escape the Mane's wrath, but now the wars've made me a legitimate trader, a business-man. The first casualties of war is always the corrupted."

Scotti said he was sorry to hear that, and they lapsed into silence, watching the stars and moons' reflection on the still water. The next day, Scotti awoke to find the captain wrapped up in his sail, torpid from alcohol, singing in a low, slurred voice. When he saw Scotti rise, he offered his flagon of jagga.

"I learned my lesson during revelry at western cross."

The captain laughed, and then burst into tears, "I don't want to be legitimate. Other pirates I used to know are still raping and stealing and smuggling and selling nice folk like you into slavery. I swear to you, I never thought the first time that I ran a real shipment of legal goods that my life would turn out like this. Oh, I know, I could go back to it, but Baan Dar knows not after all I've seen. I'm a ruined man."

Scotti helped the weeping mer out of the sail, murmuring words of reassurance. Then he added, "Forgive me for changing the subject, but where are we?"

"Oh," moaned Captain Balfix miserably. "We made good time. Athay's right around the bend in the river."

"Then it looks like Athay's on fire," said Scotti, pointing.

A great plume of smoke black as pitch was rising above the trees. As they drifted around the bend, they next saw the flames, and then the blackened skeletal remains of the village. Dying, blazing villagers leapt from rocks into the river. A cacophony of wailing met their ears, and they could see, roaming along the edges of the town, the figures of Khajiiti soldiers bearing torches.

"Baan Dar bless me!" slurred the captain. "The war's back on!"

"Oh, no," whimpered Scotti.

The sloop drifted with the current toward the opposite shore away from the fiery town. Scotti turned his attention there, and the sanctuary it offered. Just a peaceful arbor, away from the horror. There was a shudder of leaves in two of the trees and a dozen lithe Khajiit dropped to the ground, armed with bows.

"They see us," hissed Scotti. "And they've got bows!"

"Well, of course they have bows," snarled Captain Balfix. "We Bosmer may have invented the bloody things, but we didn't think to keep them secret, you bloody bureaucrat."

"Now, they're setting their arrows on fire!"

"Yes, they do that sometimes."

"Captain, they're shooting at us! They're shooting at us with flaming arrows!"

"Ah, so they are," the captain agreed. "The aim here is to avoid being hit."

But hit they were, and very shortly thereafter. Even worse, the second volley of arrows hit the supply of pitch, which ignited in a tremendous blue blaze. Scotti grabbed Captain Balfix and they leapt overboard just before the ship and all its cargo disintegrated. The shock of the cold water brought the Bosmer into temporary sobriety. He called to Scotti, who was already swimming as fast as he could toward the bend.

"Master Decumus, where do you think you're swimming to?"

"Back to Falinesti!" cried Scotti.

"It will take you days, and by the time you get there, everyone will know about the attack on Athay! They'll never let anyone they don't know in! The closest village downriver is Grenos, maybe they'll give us shelter!"

Scotti swam back to the captain and side-by-side they began paddling in the middle of the river, past the burning residuum of the village. He thanked Mara that he had learned to swim. Many a Cyrodiil did not, as largely land-locked as the Imperial Province was. Had he been raised in Mir Corrup or Artemon, he might have been doomed, but the Imperial City itself was encircled by water, and every lad and lass there knew how to cross without a boat. Even those who grew up to be clerks and not adventurers.

Captain Balfix's sobriety faded as he grew used to the water's temperature.

Even in wintertide, the Xylo River was fairly temperate and after a fashion, even comfortable. The Bosmer's strokes were uneven, and he'd stray closer to Scotti and then further away, pushing ahead and then falling behind.

Scotti looked to the shore to his right: the flames had caught the trees like tinder. Behind them was an inferno, with which they were barely keeping pace. To the shore on their left, all looked fair, until he saw a tremble in the river-reeds, and then what caused it. A pride of the largest cats he had ever seen. They were auburn-haired, green-eyed beasts with jaws and teeth to match his wildest nightmares. And they were watching the two swimmers, and keeping pace.

"Captain Balfix, we can't go to either that shore or the other one, or we'll be parboiled or eaten," Scotti whispered. "Try to even your kicking and your strokes. Breath like you would normally. If you're feeling tired, tell me, and we'll float on our backs for a while."

Anyone who has had the experience of giving rational advice to a drunkard would understand the hopelessness. Scotti kept pace with the captain, slowing himself, quickening, drifting left and right, while the Bosmer moaned old ditties from his pirate days. When he wasn't watching his companion, he watched the cats on the shore. After a stretch, he turned to his right. Another village had caught fire. Undoubtedly, it was Grenos. Scotti stared at the blazing fury, awed by the sight of the destruction, and did not hear that the captain had ceased to sing.

When he turned back, Captain Balfix was gone.

Scotti dove into the murky depths of the river over and over again. There was nothing to be done. When he surfaced after his final search, he saw that the giant cats had moved on, perhaps assuming that he too had drowned. He continued his lonely swim downriver. A tributary, he noted, had formed a final barrier, keeping the flames from spreading further. But there were no more towns. After several hours, he began to ponder the wisdom of going ashore. Which shore was the question.

He was spared the decision. Ahead of him was a rocky island with a

bonfire. He did not know if he were intruding on a party of Bosmeri or Khajiiti, only that he could swim no more. With straining, aching muscles, he pulled himself onto the rocks.

They were Bosmer refugees he gathered, even before they told him. Roasting over the fire was the remains of one of the giant cats that had been stalking him through the jungle on the opposite shore.

"Senche-Tiger," said one of the young warriors ravenously. "It's no animal -- it's as smart as any Cathay-Raht or Ohmes or any other bleeding Khajiiti. Pity this one drowned. I would have gladly killed it. You'll like the meat, though. Sweet, from all the sugar these asses eat."

Scotti did not know if he was capable of eating a creature as intelligent as a man or mer, but he surprised himself, as he had done several times over the last days. It was rich, succulent, and sweet, like sugared pork, but no seasonings had been added. He surveyed the crowd as he ate. A sad lot, some still weeping for lost family members. They were the survivors of both the villages of Grenos and Athay, and war was on every person's lips. Why had the Khajiiti attacked again? Why -- specifically directed at Scotti, as a Cyrodiil -- why was the Emperor not enforcing peace in his provinces?

"I was to meet another Cyrodiil," he said to a Bosmer maiden who he understood to be from Athay. "His name was Liodes Jurus. I don't suppose you know what might have happened to him."

"I don't know your friend, but there were many Cyrodiils in Athay when the fire came," said the girl. "Some of them, I think, left quickly. They were going to Vindisi, inland, in the jungle. I am going there tomorrow, so are many of us. If you wish, you may come as well."

Decumus Scotti nodded solemnly. He made himself as comfortable as he could in the stony ground of the river island, and somehow, after much effort, he fell asleep. But he did not sleep well.

Chapter 4

by Waughin Jarth

Eighteen Bosmeri and one Cyrodilic former senior clerk for an Imperial building commission trudged through the jungle westward from the Xylo River to the ancient village of Vindisi. For Decumus Scotti, the jungle was hostile, unfamiliar ground. The enormous vermiculated trees filled the bright morning with darkness, and resembled nothing so much as grasping claws, bent on impeding their progress. Even the fronds of the low plants quivered with malevolent energy. What was worse, he was not alone in his anxiety. His fellow travelers, the natives who had survived the Khajiit attacks on the villages of Grenos and Athay, wore faces of undisguised fear.

There was something sentient in the jungle, and not merely the mad but benevolent indigenous spirits. In his peripheral vision, Scotti could see the shadows of the Khajiiti following the refugees, leaping from tree to tree. When he turned to face them, the lithe forms vanished into the gloom as if they had never been there. But he knew he had seen them. And the Bosmeri saw them too, and quickened their pace.

After eighteen hours, bitten raw by insects, scratched by a thousand thorns, they emerged into a valley clearing. It was night, but a row of blazing torches greeted them, illuminating the leather-wrought tents and jumbled stones of the hamlet of Vindisi. At the end of the valley, the torches marked a sacred site, a gnarled bower of trees pressed closed together to form a temple. Wordlessly, the Bosmeri walked the torch arcade toward the trees. Scotti followed them. When they reached the solid mass of living wood with only one gaping portal, Scotti could see a dim blue light glowing within. A low sonorous moan from a hundred voices echoed within. The Bosmeri maiden he had been following held out her hand, stopping him.

"You do not understand, but no outsider, not even a friend may enter," she said. "This is a holy place."

Scotti nodded, and watched the refugees march into the temple, heads bowed. Their voices joined with the ones within. When the last wood elf had gone inside, Scotti turned his attention back to the village. There must be food to be had somewhere. A tendril of smoke and a faint whiff of roasting venison beyond the torchlight led him.

They were five Cyrodiils, two Bretons, and a Nord, the group gathered around a campfire of glowing white stones, pulling steaming strips of meat from the cadaver of a great stag. At Scotti's approach, they rose up, all but the Nord who was distracted by his hunk of animal flesh.

"Good evening, sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if I might have a little something to eat. I'm afraid I'm rather hungry, after walking all day with some refugees from Grenos and Athay."

They bade him to sit down and eat, and introduced themselves.

"So the war's back on, it seems," said Scotti amiably.

"Best thing for these effete do-nothings," replied the Nord in between bites. "I've never seen such a lazy culture. Now they've got the Khajiiti striking them on land, and the high elves at sea. If there's any province that deserves a little distress, it's damnable Valenwood."

"I don't see how they're so offensive to you," laughed one of the Bretons.

"They're congenital thieves, even worse than the Khajiiti because they are so blessed meek in their aggression," the Nord spat out a gob of fat which sizzled on the hot stones of the fire. "They spread their forests into territory that doesn't belong to them, slowly infiltrating their neighbors, and they're puzzled when Elsweyr shoves back at them. They're all villains of the worst order."

"What are you doing here?" asked Scotti.

"I'm a diplomat from the court of Jehenna," muttered the Nord, returning to his food.

"What about you, what are you doing here?" asked one of the Cyrodiils.

"I work for Lord Atrius's building commission in the Imperial City," said Scotti. "One of my former colleagues suggested that I come down to Valenwood. He said the war was over, and I could contract a great deal of business for my firm rebuilding what was lost. One disaster after another, and I've lost all my money, I'm in the middle of a rekindling of war, and I cannot find my former colleague."

"Your former colleague," murmured another of the Cyrodiils, who had introduced himself as Reglius. "He wasn't by any chance named Liodes Jurus, was he?"

"You know him?"

"He lured me down to Valenwood in nearly the exact same circumstances," smiled Reglius, grimly. "I worked for your employer's competitor, Lord Vanech's men, where Liodes Jurus also formerly worked. He wrote to me, asking that I represent an Imperial building commission and contract some post-war construction. I had just been released from my employment, and I thought that if I brought some new business, I could have my job back. Jurus and I met in Athay, and he said he was going to arrange a very lucrative meeting with the Silvenar."

Scotti was stunned: "Where is he now?"

"I'm no theologian, so I couldn't say," Reglius shrugged. "He's dead. When the Khajiiti attacked Athay, they began by torching the harbor where Jurus was readying his boat. Or, I should say, my boat since it was purchased with the gold I brought. By the time we were even aware of what was happening enough to flee, everything by the water was ash. The Khajiiti may be animals, but they know how to arrange an attack."

"I think they followed us through the jungle to Vindisi," said Scotti nervously. "There was definitely a group of something jumping along the treetops."

"Probably one of the monkey folk," snorted the Nord. "Nothing to be concerned about."

"When we first came to Vindisi and the Bosmeri all entered that tree, they were furious, whispering something about unleashing an ancient terror on their enemies," the Breton shivered, remembering. "They've been there ever since, for over a day and a half now. If you want something to be afraid of, that's the direction to look."

The other Breton, who was a representative of the Daggerfall Mages Guild, was staring off into the darkness while his fellow provincial spoke. "Maybe. But there's something in the jungle too, right on the edge of the village, looking in."

"More refugees maybe?" asked Scotti, trying to keep the alarm out his voice.

"Not unless they're traveling through the trees now," whispered the wizard. The Nord and one of the Cyrodiils grabbed a long tarp of wet leather and pulled it across the fire, instantly extinguishing it without so much as a sizzle. Now Scotti could see the intruders, their elliptical yellow eyes and long cruel blades catching the torchlight. He froze with fear, praying that he too was not so visible to them.

He felt something bump against his back, and gasped.

Reglius's voice hissed from up above: "Be quiet for Mara's sake and climb up here."

Scotti grabbed hold of the knotted double-vine that hung down from a tall tree at the edge of the dead campfire. He scrambled up it as quickly as he could, holding his breath lest any grunt of exertion escape him. At the top of the vine, high above the village, was an abandoned nest from some great bird in a trident-shaped branch. As soon as Scotti had pulled himself into the soft, fragrant straw, Reglius pulled up the vine. No one else was there, and when Scotti looked down, he could see no one below. No one, that is

except the Khajiiti, slowly moving toward the glow of the temple tree.

"Thank you," whispered Scotti, deeply touched that a competitor had helped him. He turned away from the village, and saw that the tree's upper branches brushed against the mossy rock walls that surrounded the valley below. "How are you at climbing?"

"You're mad," said Reglius under his breath. "We should stay here until they leave."

"If they burn Vindisi like they did Athay and Grenos, we'll be dead sure as if we were on the ground," Scotti began the slow careful climb up the tree, testing each branch. "Can you see what they're doing?"

"I can't really tell," Reglius stared down into the gloom. "They're at the front of the temple. I think they also have ... it looks like long ropes, trailing off behind them, off into the pass."

Scotti crawled onto the strongest branch that pointed toward the wet, rocky face of the cliff. It was not a far jump at all. So close, in fact, that he could smell the moisture and feel the coolness of the stone. But it was a jump nevertheless, and in his history as a clerk, he had never before leapt from a tree a hundred feet off the ground to a sheer rock. He pictured in his mind's eye the shadows that had pursued him through the jungle from the heights above. How their legs coiled to spring, how their arms snapped forward in an elegant fluid motion to grasp. He leapt.

His hands grappled for rock, but long thick cords of moss were more accessible. He held hard, but when he tried to plant his feet forward, they slipped up skyward. For a few seconds, he found himself upside down before he managed to pull himself into a more conventional position. There was a narrow outcropping jutting out of the cliff where he could stand and finally exhale.

"Reglius. Reglius. Reglius," Scotti did not dare to call out. In a minute, there was a shaking of branches, and Lord Vanech's man emerged. First his satchel, then his head, then the rest of him. Scotti started to whisper

something, but Reglius shook his head violently and pointed downward. One of the Khajiiti was at the base of the tree, peering at the remains of the campfire.

Reglius awkwardly tried to balance himself on the branch, but as strong as it was it was exceedingly difficult with only one free hand. Scotti cupped his palms and then pointed at the satchel. It seemed to pain Reglius to let it out of his grasp, but he relented and tossed it to Scotti.

There was a small, almost invisible hole in the bag, and when Scotti caught it, a single gold coin dropped out. It rang as it bounced against the rock wall on the descent, a high soft sound that seemed like the loudest alarm Scotti had ever heard.

Then many things happened very quickly.

The Cathay-Raht at the base of the tree looked up and gave a loud wail. The other Khajiiti followed in chorus, as the cat below crouched down and then sprung up into the lower branches. Reglius saw it below him, climbing up with impossible dexterity, and panicked. Even before he jumped, Scotti could tell that he was going to fall. With a cry, Reglius the Clerk plunged to the ground, breaking his neck on impact.

A flash of white fire erupted from every crevice of the temple, and the moan of the Bosmeri prayer changed into something terrible and otherworldly. The climbing Cathay-Raht stopped and stared.

"Keirgo," it gasped. "The Wild Hunt."

It was as if a crack in reality had opened wide. A flood of horrific beasts, tentacled toads, insects of armor and spine, gelatinous serpents, vaporous beings with the face of gods, all poured forth from the great hollow tree, blind with fury. They tore the Khajiiti in front of the temple to pieces. All the other cats fled for the jungle, but as they did so, they began pulling on the ropes they carried. In a few seconds time, the entire village of Vindisi was boiling with the lunatic apparitions of the Wild Hunt.

Over the babbling, barking, howling horde, Scotti heard the Cyrodiils in hiding cry out as they were devoured. The Nord too was found and eaten, and both Bretons. The wizard had turned himself invisible, but the swarm did not rely on their sight. The tree the Cathay-Raht was in began to sway and rock from the impossible violence beneath it. Scotti looked at the Khajiiti's fear-struck eyes, and held out one of the cords of moss.

The cat's face showed its pitiful gratitude as it leapt for the vine. It didn't have time to entirely replace that expression when Scotti pulled back the cord, and watched it fall. The Hunt consumed it to the bone before it struck the ground.

Scotti's own jump up to the next outcropping of rock was immeasurably more successful. From there, he pulled himself to the top of the cliff and was able to look down into the chaos that had been the village of Vindisi. The Hunt's mass had grown and began to spill out through the pass out of the valley, pursuing the fleeing Khajiiti. It was then that the madness truly began.

In the moons' light, from Scotti's vantage, he could see where the Khajiiti had attached their ropes. With a thunderous boom, an avalanche of boulders poured over the pass. When the dust cleared, he saw that the valley had been sealed. The Wild Hunt had nowhere to turn but on itself.

Scotti turned his head, unable to bear to look at the cannibalistic orgy. The night jungle stood before him, a web of wood. He slung Reglius's satchel over his shoulder, and entered.

Chapter 5

by Waughin Jarth

"Soap! The forest will eat love! Straight ahead! Stupid and a stupid cow!"

The voice boomed out so suddenly that Decumus Scotti jumped. He stared off into the dim jungle glade from which he only heard animal and insect calls, and the low whistling of wind moments before. It was a queer, oddly accented voice of indiscriminate gender, tremulous in its modulations, but unmistakably human. Or, at very least, elven. An isolated Bosmer perhaps with a poor grasp of the Cyrodilic language. After countless hours of plodding through the dense knot of Valenwood jungle, any voice of slight familiarity sounded wondrous.

"Hello?" he cried.

"Beetles on any names? Certainly yesterday yes!" the voice called back. "Who, what, and when, and mice!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," replied Scotti, turning toward the brambled tree, thick as a wagon, where the voice had issued. "But you needn't be afraid of me. My name is Decumus Scotti. I'm a Cyrodiil from the Imperial City. I came here to help rebuild Valenwood after the war, you see, and now I'm rather lost."

"Gemstones and grilled slaves ... The war," moaned the voice and broke down into sobs.

"You know about the war? I wasn't sure, I wasn't even sure how far away from the border I am now," Scotti began slowly walking toward the tree. He dropped Reglius's satchel to the ground, and held out his empty hands. "I'm unarmed. I only want to know the way to the closest town. I'm trying to meet my friend, Liodes Jurus, in Silvenar."

"Silvenar!" the voice laughed. It laughed even louder as Scotti circled the tree. "Worms and wine! Worms and wine! Silvenar sings for worms and wine!"

There was nothing to be found anywhere around the tree. "I don't see you. Why are you hiding?"

In frustration born of hunger and exhaustion, he struck the tree trunk. A sudden shiver of gold and red erupted from a hollow nook above, and Scotti was surrounded by six winged creatures scarcely more than a few inches long. Bright crimson eyes were set on either side of tunnel-like protuberances, the animals' always open mouths. They were legless, and their thin, rapidly beating, aureate wings seemed poorly constructed to transport their fat, swollen bellies. And yet, they darted through the air like sparks from a fire. Whirling about the poor clerk, they began chattering what he now understood to be perfect nonsense.

"Wines and worms, how far from the border am I! Academic garnishments, and alas, Liodes Jurus!"

"Hello, I'm afraid I'm unarmed? Smoken flames and the closest town is dear Oblivion."

"Swollen on bad meat, an indigo nimbus, but you needn't be afraid of me!"

"Why are you hiding? Why are you hiding? Before I begin to friend, love me, Lady Zuleika!"

Furious with the mimics, Scotti swung his arms, driving them up into the treetops. He stomped back to the clearing and opened up the satchel again, as he had done some hours before. There was still, unsurprisingly, nothing useful in the bag, and nothing to eat in any corner or pocket. A goodly amount of gold (he smiled grimly, as he had done before, at the irony of being financially solvent in the jungle), a stack of neat blank contracts from Lord Vanech's building commission, some thin cord, and an oiled leather cloak for bad weather. At least, Scotti considered, he had not suffered rain.

A rolling moan of thunder reminded Scotti of what he had suspected for some weeks now. He was cursed.

Within an hour's time, he was wearing the cloak and clawing his way through mud. The trees, which had earlier allowed no sunlight in, provided no shelter against the pounding storm and wind. The only sounds that pierced the pelting of the rain were the mocking calls of the flying creatures, flitting just above, babbling their nonsense. Scotti bellowed at them, threw rocks, but they seemed enamored of his company.

While he was reaching to grab a promising looking stone to hurl at his tormentors, Scotti felt something shift beneath his feet. Wet but solid ground suddenly liquefied and became a rolling tide, rushing him forward. Light as a leaf, he flew head over feet over head, until the mudflow dropped and he continued forward, plunging down into a river twenty-five feet below.

The storm passed quite as instantly as it had arrived. The sun melted the dark clouds and warmed Scotti as he swam for the shore. There, another sign of the Khajiiti incursion into Valenwood greeted him. A small fishing village had stood there once, so recently extinct that it smoldered like a still-warm corpse. Dirt cairns that had once housed fish by the smell of them had been ravaged, their bounty turned to ash. Rafts and skiffs lay broken, scuttled, half-submerged. All the villagers were no more, either dead or refugees far away. Or so he presumed. Something banged against the wall of one of the ruins. Scotti ran to investigate.

"My name is Decumus Scotti?" sang the first winged beast. "I'm a Cyrodiil from? The Imperial City? I came here to help rebuild Valenwood after the war, you see, and now I'm rather lost?"

"I swell to maculate, apeneck!" agreed one of its companions. "I don't see you. Why are you hiding?"

As they fell into chattering, Scotti began to search the rest of the village. Surely the cats had left something behind, a scrap of dried meat, a morsel of fish sausage, anything. But they had been immaculate in their complete

annihilation. There was nothing to eat anywhere. Scotti did find one item of possible use under the tumbled remains of a stone hut. A bow and two arrows made of bone. The string had been lost, likely burned away in the heat of the fire, but he pulled the cord from Reglius's satchel and restrung it.

The creatures flew over and hovered nearby as he worked: "The convent of the sacred Liodes Jurus?"

"You know about the war! Worms and wine, circumscribe a golden host, apeneck!"

The moment the cord was taut, Scotti nocked an arrow and swung around, pulling the string tight against his chest. The winged beasts, having had experience with archers before, shot off in all directions in a blur. They needn't have bothered. Scotti's first arrow dove into the ground three feet in front of him. He swore and retrieved it. The mimics, having likewise had experience with poor archers before, returned at once to hovering nearby and mocking Scotti.

On his second shot, Scotti did much better, in purely technical terms. He remembered how the archers in Falinesti looked when he pulled himself out from under the hoarvor tick, and they were all taking aim at him. He extended his left hand, right hand, and right elbow in a symmetrical line, drawing the bow so his hand touched his jawline, and he could see the creature in his sight like the arrow was a finger he was pointing with. The bolt missed the target by only two feet, but it continued on its trajectory, snapping when it struck a rock wall.

Scotti walked to the river's edge. He had only one arrow left, and perhaps, he considered, it would be most practical to find a slow-moving fish and fire it on that. If he missed, at least there was less of a chance of breaking the shaft, and he could always retrieve it from the water. A rather torpid, whiskered fish rolled by, and he took aim at it.

"My name is Decumus Scotti!" one of the creatures howled, frightening the fish away. "Stupid and a stupid cow! Will you dance a dance in fire!"

Scotti turned and aimed the arrow as he had done before. This time, however, he remembered to plant his feet as the archers had done, seven inches apart, knees straight, left leg slightly forward to meet the angle of his right shoulder. He released the last arrow.

The arrow also proved a serviceable prong for roasting the creature against the smoking hot stones of one of the ruins. Its other companions had disappeared instantly after the beast was slain, and Scotti was able to dine in peace. The meat proved to be delicious, if scarcely more than a first course. He was picking the last of it from the bones, when a boat sailed into view from around the bend of the river. At the helm were Bosmer sailors. Scotti ran to the bank and waved his arms. They averted their eyes and continued past.

"You bloody, callous bastards!" Scotti howled. "Knaves! Hooligans! Apenecks! Scoundrels!"

A gray-whiskered form came out from a hatch, and Scotti immediately recognized him as Gryf Mallon, the poet translator he had met in the caravan from Cyrodiil.

He peered Scotti's direction, and his eyes lit up with delight, "Decumus Scotti! Precisely the man I hoped to see! I want to get your thoughts on a rather puzzling passage in the Mnoriad Pley Bar! It begins 'I went weeping into the world, searching for wonders,' perhaps you're familiar with it?"

"I'd like nothing better than to discuss the Mnoriad Pley Bar with you, Gryf!" Scotti called back. "Would you let me come aboard though first?"

Overjoyed at being on a ship bound for any port at all, Scotti was true to his word. For over an hour as the boat rolled down the river past the blackened remnants of Bosmeri villages, he asked no questions and spoke nothing of his life over the past weeks: he merely listened to Mallon's theories of merethic Aldmeri esoterica. The translator was undemanding of his guest's scholarship, accepting nods and shrugs as civilized conversation. He even produced some wine and fish jelly, which he shared with Scotti absent-mindedly, as he expounded on his various theses.

Finally, while Mallon was searching for a reference to some minor point in his notes, Scotti asked, "Rather off subject, but I was wondering where we're bound."

"The very heart of the province, Silvenar," Mallon said, not looking up from the passage he was reading. "It's somewhat bothersome, actually, as I wanted to go to Woodhearth first to talk to a Bosmer there who claims to have an original copy of Dirith Yalmillhiad, if you can believe it. But for the time being, that has to wait. Summurset Isle has surrounded the city, and is in the process of starving the citizenry until they surrender. It's a tiresome prospect, since the Bosmeri are happy to eat one another, so there's a risk that at the end, only one fat wood elf will remain to wave the flag."

"That is vexing," agreed Scotti, sympathetically. "To the east, the Khajiiti are burning everything, and to the west, the High Elves are waging war. I don't suppose the borders to the north are clear?"

"They're even worse," replied Mallon, finger on the page, still distracted. "The Cyrodiils and Redguards don't want Bosmer refugees streaming into their provinces. It only stands to reason. Imagine how much more criminally inclined they'd be now that they're homeless and hungry."

"So," murmured Scotti, feeling a shiver. "We're trapped in Valenwood."

"Not at all. I need to leave fairly shortly myself, as my publisher has set a very definite deadline for my new book of translations. From what I understand, one merely petitions to the Silvenar for special border protection and one can cross into Cyrodiil with impunity."

"Petition the Silvenar, or petition at Silvenar?"

"Petition the Silvenar at Silvenar. It's an odd nomenclature that is typical of this place, the sort of thing that makes my job as a translator that much more challenging. The Silvenar, he, or rather they are the closest the Bosmeri have to a great leader. The essential thing to remember about the Silvenar --" Mallon smiled, finding the passage he was looking for, "Here!

'A fortnight, inexplicable, the world burns into a dance.' There's that metaphor again."

"What were you saying about the Silvenar?" asked Scotti. "The essential thing to remember?"

"I don't remember what I was saying," replied Mallon, turning back to his oration.

In a week's time, the little boat bumped along the shallow, calmer waters of the foaming current the Xylo had become, and Decumus Scotti first saw the city of Silvenar. If Falinesti was a tree, then Silvenar was a flower. A magnificent pile of faded shades of green, red, blue, and white, shining with crystalline residue. Mallon had mentioned off-hand, when not otherwise explaining Aldmeri prosody, that Silvenar had once been a blossoming glade in the forest, but owing to some spell or natural cause, the trees' sap began flowing with translucent liqueur. The process of the sap flowing and hardening over the colorful trees had formed the web of the city. Mallon's description was intriguing, but it hardly prepared him for the city's beauty.

"What is the finest, most luxurious tavern here?" Scotti asked one of the Bosmer boatmen.

"Prithala Hall," Mallon answered. "But why don't you stay with me? I'm visiting an acquaintance of mine, a scholar I think you'll find fascinating. His hovel isn't much, but he has the most extraordinary ideas about the principles of a Merethic Aldmeri tribe the Sarmathi --"

"Under any other circumstances, I would happily accept," said Scotti graciously. "But after weeks of sleeping on the ground or on a raft, and eating whatever I could scrounge, I feel the need for some indulgent creature comforts. And then, after a day or two, I'll petition the Silvenar for safe passage to Cyrodiil."

The men bade each other goodbye. Gryf Mallon gave him the address of his publisher in the Imperial City, which Scotti accepted and quickly forgot. The clerk wandered the streets of Silvenar, crossing bridges of amber,

admiring the petrified forest architecture. In front of a particularly estimable palace of silvery reflective crystal, he found Prithala Hall.

He took the finest room, and ordered a gluttonous meal of the finest quality. At a nearby table, he saw two very fat fellows, a man and a Bosmer, remarking how much finer the food was there than at the Silvenar's palace. They began to discuss the war and some issues of finances and rebuilding provincial bridges. The man noticed Scotti looking at them, and his eyes flashed recognition.

"Scotti, is that you? Kynareth, where have you been? I've had to make all the contacts here on my own!"

At the sound of his voice, Scotti recognized him. The fat man was Liodes Jurus, vastly engorged.

Chapter 6

by Waughin Jarth

Decumus Scotti sat down, listening to Liodes Jurus. The clerk could hardly believe how fat his former colleague at Lord Atrius's Building Commission had become. The piquant aroma of the roasted meat dish before Scotti melted away. All the other sounds and textures of Prithala Hall vanished all around him, as if nothing else existed but the vast form of Jurus. Scotti did not consider himself an emotional man, but he felt a tide flow over him at the sight and sound of the man whose badly written letters had been the guideposts that carried him from the Imperial City back in early Frost Fall.

"Where have you been?" Jurus demanded again. "I told you to meet me in Falinesti weeks ago."

"I was there weeks ago," Scotti stammered, too surprised to be indignant. "I got your note to meet you in Athay, and so I went there, but the Khajiiti had burned it to the ground. Somehow, I found my way with the refugees in another village, and someone there told me that you had been killed."

"And you believed that right away?" Jurus sneered.

"The fellow seemed very well-informed about you. He was a clerk from Lord Vanech's Building Commission named Reglius, and he said that you had also suggested that he come down to Valenwood to profit from the war."

"Oh, yes," said Jurus, after thinking a moment. "I recall the name now. Well, it's good for business to have two representatives from Imperial building commissions here. We just need to all coordinate our bids, and all should be well."

"Reglius is dead," said Scotti. "But I have his contracts from Lord Vanech's

Commission."

"Even better," gasped Jurus, impressed. "I never knew you were such a ruthless competitor, Decumus Scotti. Yes, this could certainly improve our position with the Silvenar. Have I introduced you to Basth here?"

Scotti had only been dimly aware of the Bosmer's presence at the table with Jurus, which was surprising given that the mer's girth nearly equaled his dining companion. The clerk nodded to Basth coldly, still numb and confused. It had not left his mind that only any hour earlier, Scotti had intended to petition the Silvenar for safe passage through the border back to Cyrodiil. The thought of doing business with Jurus after all, of profiting from Valenwood war with Elsweyr, and now the second one with the Summurset Isle, seemed like something happening to another person.

"Your colleague and I were talking about the Silvenar," said Basth, putting down the leg of mutton he had been gnawing on. "I don't suppose you've heard about his nature?"

"A little, but nothing very specific. I got the impression that he's very important and very peculiar."

"He's the representative of the People, legally, physically, and emotionally," explained Jurus, a little annoyed at his new partner's lack of common knowledge. "When they're healthy, so is he. When they're mostly female, so is he. When they cry for food or trade or an absence of foreign interference, he feels it too, and makes laws accordingly. In a way, he's a despot, but he's the people's despot."

"That sounds," said Scotti, searching for the appropriate word. "Like ... bunk."

"Perhaps it is," shrugged Basth. "But he has many rights as the Voice of the People, including the granting of foreign building and trade contracts. It's not important whether you believe us. Just think of the Silvenar as being like one of your mad Emperors, like Pelagius. The problem facing us now is that since Valenwood is being attacked on all sides, the Silvenar's aspect is

now one of distrust and fear of foreigners. The one hope of his people, and thus of the Silvenar himself, is that the Emperor will intervene and stop the war."

"Will he?" asked Scotti.

"You know as well as we do that the Emperor has not been himself lately," Jurus helped himself to Reglius's satchel and pulled out the blank contracts. "Who knows what he'll choose to do or not do? That reality is not our concern, but these blessings from the late good sir Reglius make our job much simpler."

They discussed how they would represent themselves to the Silvenar into the evening. Scotti ate continuously, but not nearly so much as Jurus and Basth. When the sun had begun to rise in the hills, its light reddening through the crystal walls of the tavern, Jurus and Basth left to their rooms at the palace, granted to them diplomatically in lieu of an actual immediate audience with the Silvenar. Scotti went to his room. He thought about staying up a little longer to ruminate over Jurus's plans and see what might be the flaw in them, but upon touching the cool, soft bed, he immediately fell asleep.

The next afternoon, Scotti awoke, feeling himself again. In other words, timid. For several weeks now, he had been a creature bent on mere survival. He had been driven to exhaustion, attacked by several jungle beasts, starved, nearly drowned, and forced into discussions of ancient Aldmeri poetical works. The discussion he had with Jurus and Basth about how to dupe the Silvenar into signing their contracts seemed perfectly reasonable then. Scotti dressed himself in his old battered clothes and went downstairs in search of food and a peaceful place to think.

"You're up," cried Basth upon seeing him. "We should go to the palace now."

"Now?" whined Scotti. "Look at me. I need new clothes. This isn't the way one should dress to pay a call on a prostitute, let alone the Voice of the People of Valenwood. I haven't even bathed."

"You must cease from this moment forward being a clerk, and become a student of mercantile trade," said Liodes Jurus grandly, taking Scotti by the arm and leading him into the sunlit boulevard outside. "The first rule is to recognize what you represent to the prospective client, and what angle best suits you. You cannot dazzle him with opulent fashion and professional bearing, my dear boy, and it would be fatal if you attempted to. Trust me on this. Several others besides Basth and I are guests at the palace, and they have made the error of appearing too eager, too formal, too ready for business. They will never be granted audience with the Silvenar, but we have remained aloof ever since the initial rejection. I've dallied about the court, spread my knowledge of life in the Imperial City, had my ears pierced, attended promenades, eaten and drunk of all that was given to me. I dare say I've put on a pound or two. The message we've sent is clear: it is in his, not our, best interest to meet."

"Our plan worked," added Basth. "When I told his minister that our Imperial representative had arrived, and that we were at last willing to meet with the Silvenar this morning, we were told to bring you there straightaway."

"Aren't we late then?" asked Scotti.

"Very," laughed Jurus. "But that's again part of the angle we're representing. Benevolent disinterest. Remember not to confuse the Silvenar with conventional nobility. His is the mind of the common people. When you grasp that, you'll understand how to manipulate him."

Jurus spent the last several minutes of the walk through the city expounding on his theories about what Valenwood needed, how much, and at what price. They were staggering figures, far more construction and far higher costs than anything Scotti had been used to dealing with. He listened carefully. All around them, the city of Silvenar revealed itself, glass and flower, roaring winds and beautiful inertia. When they reached the palace of the Silvenar, Decumus Scotti stopped, stunned. Jurus looked at him for a moment and then laughed.

"It's quite bizarre, isn't it?"

That it was. A frozen scarlet burst of twisted, uneven spires as if a rival sun rising. A blossom the size of a village, where courtiers and servants resembled nothing so much as insects walked about it sucking its ichor. Entering over a bent petal-like bridge, the three walked through the palace of unbalanced walls. Where the partitions bent close together and touched, there was a shaded hall or a small chamber. Where they warped away from one another, there was a courtyard. There were no doors anywhere, no any way to get to the Silvenar but by crossing through the entire spiral of the palace, through meetings and bedrooms and dining halls, past dignitaries, consorts, musicians, and many guards.

"It's an interesting place," said Basth. "But not very much privacy. Of course, that suits the Silvenar well."

When they reached the inner corridors, two hours after they first entered the palace, guards, brandishing blades and bows, stopped them.

"We have an audience with the Silvenar," said Jurus, patiently. "This is Lord Decumus Scotti, the Imperial representative."

One of the guards disappeared down the winding corridor, and returned moments later with a tall, proud Bosmer clad in a loose robe of patchwork leather. He was the Minister of Trade: "The Silvenar wishes to speak with Lord Decumus Scotti alone."

It was not the place to argue or show fear, so Scotti stepped forward, not even looking toward Jurus and Basth. He was certain they were showing their masks of benevolent indifference. Following the Minister into the audience chamber, Scotti recited to himself all the facts and figures Jurus had presented to him. He willed himself to remember the Angle and the Image he must project.

The audience chamber of the Silvenar was an enormous dome where the walls bent from bowl-shaped at the base inward to almost meet at the top. A thin ray of sunlight streamed through the fissure hundreds of feet above,

and directly upon the Silvenar, who stood upon a puff of shimmering gray powder. For all the wonder of the city and the palace, the Silvenar himself looked perfectly ordinary. An average, blandly handsome, slightly tired-looking, extra-ordinary Wood Elf of the type one might see in any capitol in the Empire. It was only when he stepped from the dais that Scotti noticed an eccentricity in his appearance. He was very short.

"I had to speak with you alone," said the Silvenar in a voice common and unrefined. "May I see your papers?"

Scotti handed him the blank contracts from Lord Vanech's Building Commission. The Silvenar studied them, running his finger over the embossed seal of the Emperor, before handing them back. He suddenly seemed shy, looking to the floor. "There are many charlatans at my court who wish to benefit from the wars. I thought you and your colleagues were among them, but those contracts are genuine."

"Yes, they are," said Scotti calmly. The Silvenar's conventional aspect made it easy for Scotti to speak, with no formal greetings, no deference, exactly as Jurus had instructed: "It seems most sensible to begin straightaway talking about the roads which need to be rebuilt, and then the harbors that the Altmeri have destroyed, and then I can give you my estimates on the cost of resupplying and renovating the trade routes."

"Why hasn't the Emperor seen fit to send a representative when the war with Elsweyr began, two years ago?" asked the Silvenar glumly.

Scotti thought a moment before replying of all the common Bosmeri he had met in Valenwood. The greedy, frightened mercenaries who had escorted him from the border. The hard-drinking revelers and expert pest exterminating archers in the Western Cross of Falinesti. Nosy old Mother Pascost in Havel Slump. Captain Balfix, the poor sadly reformed pirate. The terrified but hopeful refugees of Athay and Grenos. The mad, murderous, self-devouring Wild Hunt of Vindisi. The silent, dour boatmen hired by Gryf Mallon. The degenerate, grasping Basth. If one creature represented their total disposition, and that of many more throughout the province, what would be his personality? Scotti was a clerk by occupation and nature,

instinctively comfortable cataloging and filing, making things fit in a system. If the soul of Valenwood were to be filed, where would it be put?

The answer came upon him almost before he posed himself the question. Denial.

"I'm afraid that question doesn't interest me," said Scotti. "Now, can we get back to the business at hand?"

All afternoon, Scotti and the Silvenar discussed the pressing needs of Valenwood. Every contract was filled and signed. So much was required and there were so many costs associated that addendums and codicils had to be scribbled into the margins of the papers, and those had to be resigned. Scotti maintained his benevolent indifference, but he found that dealing with the Silvenar was not quite the same as dealing with a simple, sullen child. The Voice of the People knew certain practical, everyday things very well: the yields of fish, the benefits of trade, the condition of every township and forest in his province.

"We will have a banquet tomorrow night to celebrate this commission," said the Silvenar at last.

"Best make it tonight," replied Scotti. "We should leave for Cyrodiil with the contracts tomorrow, so I'll need a safe passage to the border. We best not waste any more time."

"Agreed," said the Silvenar, and called for his Minister of Trade to put his seal on the contracts and arrange for the feast.

Scotti left the chamber, and was greeted by Basth and Jurus. Their faces showed the strain of maintaining the illusion of unconcern for too many hours. As soon as they were out of sight of the guards, they begged Scotti to tell them all. When he showed them the contract, Basth began weeping with delight.

"Anything about the Silvenar that surprised you?" asked Jurus.

"I hadn't expected him to be half my height."

"Was he?" Jurus looked mildly surprised. "He must have shrunk since I tried to have an audience with him earlier. Maybe there is something to all that nonsense about him being affected by the plight of his people."

Chapter 7

By Waughin Jarth

Scene: Silvenar, Valenwood
Date: 13 Sun's Dusk, 3E 397

The banquet at the palace of the Silvenar was well attended by every jealous bureaucrat and trader who had attempted to contract the rebuilding of Valenwood. They looked on Decumus Scotti, Liodes Jurus, and Basth with undisguised hatred. It made Scotti very uncomfortable, but Jurus delighted in it. As the servants brought in platter after platter of roasted meats, Jurus poured himself a cup of Jagga and toasted the clerk.

"I can confess it now," said Jurus. "I had grave doubts about inviting you to join me on this adventure. All the other clerks and agents of building commissions I contacted were more outwardly aggressive, but none of them made it through, let alone to the audience chamber of the Silvenar, let alone brokered the deals on their own like you did. Come, have a cup of Jagga with me."

"No thank you," said Scotti. "I had too much of that drug in Falinesti, and nearly got sucked dry by a giant tick because of it. I'll find something else to drink."

Scotti wandered about the hall until he saw some diplomats drinking mugs of a steaming brown liquid, poured from a large silver urn. He asked them if it was tea.

"Tea made from leaves?" scoffed the first diplomat. "Not in Valenwood. This is Rotmeth."

Scotti poured himself a mug and took a tentative sip. It was gamy, bitter and sugared, and very salty. At first it seemed very disagreeable to his palate,

but a moment later he found he had drained the mug and was pouring another. His body tingled. All the sounds in the chamber seemed oddly disjointed, but not frighteningly so.

"So you're the fellow who got the Silvenar to sign all those contracts," said the second diplomat. "That must have required some deep negotiation."

"Not at all, not at all, just a little basic understand of mercantile trading," grinned Scotti, pouring himself a third mug of Rotmeth. "The Silvenar was very eager to involve the Imperial state with the affairs of Valenwood. I was very eager to take a percentage of the commission. With all that blessed eagerness, it was merely a matter of putting quill to contract, bless you."

"You have been in the employ of his Imperial Majesty very long?" asked the first diplomat.

"It's a bite, or rather, a bit more complicated than that in the Imperial City. Between you and me, I don't really have a job. I used to work for Lord Atrius and his Building Commission, but I got sacked. And then, the contracts are from Lord Vanech and his Building Commission, 'cause I got em from this fellow Reglius who is a competitor but still a very fine fellow until he was made dead by those Khajiiti," Scotti drained his fifth mug. "When I go back to the Imperial City, then the real negotiations can begin, bless you. I can go to my old employer and to Lord Vanech, and say, look here you, which one of you wants these commissions? And they'll fall over each other to take them from me. It will be bidding war for my percentage the likes of which no one nowhere has never seen."

"So you're not a representative of his Imperial Majesty, the Emperor?" asked the first diplomat.

"Didn't you hear what I'm said? You stupid?" Scotti felt a surge of rage, which quickly subsided. He chuckled, and poured himself a seventh mug. "The Building Commissions are privately owned, but they're still representatives of the Emperor. So I'm a representative of the Emperor. Or I will be. When I get these contracts in. It's very complicated. I can understand why you're not following me. Bless you, it's all like the poet

said, a dance in fire, if you follow the illusion, that is to say, allusion."

"And your colleagues? Are they representatives of the Emperor?" asked the second diplomat.

Scotti burst into laughter, shaking his head. The diplomats bade him their respects and went to talk to the Minister. Scotti stumbled out of the palace, and reeled through the strange, organic avenues and boulevards of the city. It took him several hours to find his way to Prithala Hall and his room. Once there, he slept, very nearly on his bed.

The next morning, he woke to Jurus and Basth in his room, shaking him. He felt half-asleep and unable to open his eyes fully, but otherwise fine. The conversation with the diplomats floated in his mind in a haze, like an obscure childhood memory.

"What in Mara's name is Rotmeth?" he asked quickly.

"Rancid, strongly fermented meat juices with lots of spices to kill the poisons," smiled Basth. "I should have warned you to stay with Jagga."

"You must understand the Meat Mandate by now," laughed Jurus. "These Bosmeri would rather eat each other than touch the fruit of the vine or the field."

"What did I say to those diplomats?" cried Scotti, panicking.

"Nothing bad apparently," said Jurus, pulling out some papers. "Your escorts are downstairs to bring you to the Imperial Province. Here are your papers of safe passage. The Silvenar seems very impatient about business proceeding forward rapidly. He promises to send you some sort of rare treasure when the contracts are fulfilled. See, he's already given me something."

Jurus showed off his new, bejeweled earring, a beautiful large faceted ruby. Basth showed that he had a similar one. The two fat fellows left the room so Scotti could dress and pack.

A full regiment of the Silvenar's guards was on the street in front of the tavern. They surrounded a carriage crested with the official arms of Valenwood. Still dazed, Scotti climbed in, and the captain of the guard gave the signal. They began a quick gallop. Scotti shook himself, and then peered behind. Basth and Jurus were waving him goodbye.

"Wait!" Scotti cried. "Aren't you coming back to the Imperial Province too?"

"The Silvenar asked that we stay behind as Imperial representatives!" yelled Liodes Jurus. "In case there's a need for more contracts and negotiations! He's appointed us Undrape, some sort of special honor for foreigners at court! Don't worry! Lots of banquets to attend! You can handle the negotiations with Vanech and Atrius yourself and we'll keep things settled here!"

Jurus continued to yell advice about business, but his voice became indistinct with distance. Soon it disappeared altogether as the convoy rounded the streets of Silvenar. The jungle loomed suddenly and then they were in it. Scotti had only gone through it by foot or along the rivers by slow-moving boats. Now it flashed all around him in profusions of greens. The horses seemed even faster moving through underbrush than on the smooth paths of the city. None of the weird sounds or dank smells of the jungle penetrated the escort. It felt to Scotti as if he were watching a play about the jungle with a background of a quickly moving scrim, which offered only the merest suggestion of the place.

So it went for two weeks. There was lots of food and water in the carriage with the clerk, so he merely ate and slept as the caravan pressed endlessly on. From time to time, he'd hear the sound of blades clashing, but when he looked around whatever had attacked the caravan had long since been left behind. At last, they reached the border, where an Imperial garrison was stationed.

Scotti presented the soldiers who met the carriage with the papers. They asked him a barrage of questions that he answered monosyllabically, and

then let him pass. It took several more days to arrive at the gates of the Imperial City. The horses that had flown so fast through the jungle now slowed down in the unfamiliar territory of the wooded Colovian Estates. By contrast, the cries of his province's birds and smells of his province's plant life brought Decumus Scotti alive. It was if he had been dreaming all the past months.

At the gates of the City, Scotti's carriage door was opened for him and he stepped out on uncertain legs. Before he had a moment to say something to the escort, they had vanished, galloping back south through the forest. The first thing he did now that he was home was go to the closest tavern and have tea and fruit and bread. If he never ate meat again, he told himself, that would suit him very nicely.

Negotiations with Lord Atrius and Lord Vanech proceeded immediately thereafter. It was most agreeable. Both commissions recognized how lucrative the rebuilding of Valenwood would be for their agency. Lord Vanech claimed, quite justifiably, that as the contracts had been written on forms notarized by his commission, he had the legal right to them. Lord Atrius claimed that Decumus Scotti was his agent and representative, and that he had never been released from employment. The Emperor was called to arbitrate, but he claimed to be unavailable. His advisor, the Imperial Battlemage Jagar Tharn, had disappeared long ago and could not be called on for his wisdom and impartial mediation.

Scotti lived very comfortably off the bribes from Lord Atrius and Lord Vanech. Every week, a letter would arrive from Jurus or Basth asking about the status of negotiations. Gradually, these letters ceased coming, and more urgent ones came from the Minister of Trade and the Silvenar himself. The War of the Blue Divide with Summurset Isle ended with the Altmeri winning several new coastal islands from the Wood Elves. The war with Elsweyr continued, ravaging the eastern borders of Valenwood. Still, Vanech and Atrius fought over who would help.

One fine morning in the early spring of the year 3E 398, a courier arrived at Decumus Scotti's door.

"Lord Vanech has won the Valenwood commission, and requests that you and the contracts come to his hall at your earliest convenience."

"Has Lord Atrius decided not to challenge further?" asked Scotti.

"He's been unable to, having died very suddenly, just now, from a terribly unfortunate accident," said the courier.

Scotti had wondered how long it would be before the Dark Brotherhood was brought in for final negotiations. As he walked toward Lord Vanech's Building Commission, a long, severe piece of architecture on a minor but respectable plaza, he wondered if he had played the game, as he ought to have. Could Vanech be so rapacious as to offer him a lower percentage of the commission now that his chief competitor was dead? Thankfully, he discovered, Lord Vanech had already decided to pay Scotti what he had proposed during the heat of the winter negotiations. His advisors had explained to him that other, lesser building commissions might come forward unless the matter were handled quickly and fairly.

"Glad we have all the legal issues done with," said Lord Vanech, fondly. "Now we can get to the business of helping the poor Bosmeri, and collecting the profits. It's a pity you weren't our representative for all the troubles with Bend'r-mahk and the Arnesian business. But there will be plenty more wars, I'm sure of that."

Scotti and Lord Vanech sent word to the Silvenar that at last they were prepared to honor the contracts. A few weeks later, they held a banquet in honor of the profitable enterprise. Decumus Scotti was the darling of the Imperial City, and no expense was spared to make it an unforgettable evening.

As Scotti met the nobles and wealthy merchants who would be benefiting from his business dealings, an exotic but somehow faintly familiar smell rose in the ballroom. He traced it to its source: a thick roasted slab of meat, so long and thick it covered several platters. The Cyrodilic revelers were eating it ravenously, unable to find the words to express their delight at its taste and texture.

"It's like nothing I've ever had before!"

"It's like pig-fed venison!"

"Do you see the marbling of fat and meat? It's a masterpiece!"

Scotti went to take a slice, but then he saw something imbedded deep in the dried and rendered roast. He nearly collided with his new employer Lord Vanech as he stumbled back.

"Where did this come from?" Scotti stammered.

"From our client, the Silvenar," beamed his lordship. "It's some kind of local delicacy they call Unthrappa."

Scotti vomited, and didn't stop for some time. It cast rather a temporary pall on the evening, but when Decumus Scotti was carried off to his manor house, the guests continued to dine. The Unthrappa was the delight of all. Even more so when Lord Vanech himself took a slice and found the first of two rubies buried within. How very clever of the Bosmer to invent such a dish, the Cyrodiils agreed.

Darkest Darkness

by Anonymous

In Morrowind, both worshippers and sorcerers summon lesser Daedra and bound Daedra as servants and instruments.

Most Daedric servants can be summoned by sorcerers only for very brief periods, within the most fragile and tenuous frameworks of command and binding. This fortunately limits their capacity for mischief, though in only a few minutes, most of these servants can do terrible harm to their summoners as well as their enemies.

Worshippers may bind other Daedric servants to this plane through rituals and pacts. Such arrangements result in the Daedric servant remaining on this plane indefinitely -- or at least until their bodily manifestations on this plane are destroyed, precipitating their supernatural essences back to Oblivion. Whenever Daedra are encountered at Daedric ruins or in tombs, they are almost invariably long-term visitors to our plane.

Likewise, lesser entities bound by their Daedra Lords into weapons and armor may be summoned for brief periods, or may persist indefinitely, so long as they are not destroyed and banished. The class of bound weapons and bound armors summoned by Temple followers and conjurors are examples of short-term bindings; Daedric artifacts like Mehrunes Razor and the Mask of Clavicus Vile are examples of long-term bindings.

The Tribunal Temple of Morrowind has incorporated the veneration of Daedra as lesser spirits subservient to the immortal Almsivi, the Triune godhead of Almalexia, Sotha Sil, and Vivec. These subordinate Daedra are divided into the Good Daedra and the Bad Daedra. The Good Daedra have willingly submitted to the authority of Almsivi; the Bad Daedra are rebels who defy Almsivi -- treacherous kin who are more often adversaries than allies.

The Good Daedra are Boethiah, Azura, and Mephala. The hunger is a powerful and violent lesser Daedra associated with Boethiah, Father of Plots -- a sinuous, long-limbed, long-tailed creature with a beast-skulled head, noted for its paralyzing touch and its ability to disintegrate weapons and armor. The winged twilight is a messenger of Azura, Goddess of Dusk and Dawn. Winged twilights resemble the feral harpies of the West, though the feminine aspects of the winged twilights are more ravishing, and their long, sharp, hooked tails are immeasurably more deadly. Spider Daedra are the servants of Mephala, taking the form of spider-humanoid centaurs, with a naked upper head, torso, and arms of human proportions, mounted on the eight legs and armored carapace of a giant spider. Unfortunately, these Daedra are so fierce and irrational that they cannot be trusted to heed the commands of the Spinner. As a consequence, few sorcerers are willing to either summon or bind such creatures in Morrowind.

The Bad Daedra are Mehrunes Dagon, Malacath, Sheogorath, and Molag Bal. Three lesser Daedra are associated with Mehrunes Dagon: the agile and pesky scamp, the ferocious and beast-like clannfear, and the noble and deadly dremora. The crocodile-headed humanoid Daedra called the daedroth is a servant of Molag Bal, while the giant but dim-witted ogrim is a servant of Malacath. Sheogorath's lesser Daedra, the golden saint, a half-clothed human female in appearance, is highly resistant to magic and a dangerous spellcaster.

Another type of lesser Daedra often encountered in Morrowind is the Atronach, or Elemental Daedra. Atronachs have no binding kinship or alignments with the Daedra Lords, serving one realm or another at whim, shifting sides according to seduction, compulsion, or opportunity.

The Death Blow of Abernanit

With Explains by the sage
Geocrates Varnus

Broken battlements and wrecked walls
Where worship of the Horror (1) once embraced.
The bites of fifty winters (2) frost and wind
Have cracked and pitted the unholy gates,
And brought down the cruel, obscene spire.
All is dust, all is nothing more than dust.
The blood has dried and screams have echoed out.
Framed by hills in the wildest, forlorn place
Of Morrowind
Sits the barren bones of Abernanit.

When thrice-blessed Rangidil (3) first saw Abernanit,
It burnished silver bright with power and permanence.
A dreadful place with dreadful men to guard it
With fever glassed eyes and strength through the Horror.
Rangidil saw the foes' number was far greater
Than the few Ordinators and Buoyant Armigers he led,
Watching from the hills above, the field and castle of death
While it stood, it damned the souls of the people
Of Morrowind.
Accursed, iniquitous castle Abernanit.

The alarum was sounded calling the holy warriors to battle
To answer villiany's shield with justice's spear,
To steel themselves to fight at the front and be brave.
Rangidil too grasped his shield and his thin ebon spear
And the clamor of battle began with a resounding crash
To shake the clouds down from the sky.
The shield wall was smashed and blood staunched
The ground of the field, a battle like no other

Of Morrowind
To destroy the evil of Abernanit.

The maniacal horde were skilled at arms, for certes,
But the three holy fists of Mother, Lord, and Wizard (4) pushed
The monster's army back in charge after charge.
Rangidil saw from above, urging the army to defend,
Dagoth Thras (5) himself in his pernicious tower spire,
And knew that only when the heart of evil was caught
Would the land e'er be truly saved.
He pledge then by the Temple and the Holy Tribunal
Of Morrowind
To take the tower of Abernanit.

In a violent push, the tower base was pierced,
But all efforts to fell the spire came to naught
As if all the strength of the Horror held that one tower.
The stairwell up was steep and so tight
That two warriors could not ascend it side by side.
So single-file the army clambered up and up
To take the tower room and end the reign
Of one of the cruellest petty tyrants in the annals
Of Morrowind,
Dagoth Thras of Abernanit.

They awaited a victory cry from the first to scale the tower
But silence only returned, and then the blood,
First only a rivulet and then a scarlet course
Poured down the steep stairwell, with the cry from above,
"Dagoth Thras is besting our army one by one!"
Rangidil called his army back, every Ordinator and
Buoyant Armiger, and he himself ascended the stairs,
Passing the bloody remains of the best warriors
Of Morrowind
To the tower room of Abernanit.

Like a raven of death on its aerie was Dagoth Thras

Holding bloody shield and bloody blade at the tower room door.
Every thrust of Rangidil's spear was blocked with ease;
Every slash of Rangidil's blade was deflected away;
Every blow of Rangidil's mace was met by the shield;
Every quick arrow shot could find no purchase
For the Monster's greatest power was in his dread blessing
That no weapon from no warrior found in all
Of Morrowind
Could pass the shield of Abernanit.

As hour passed hour, Rangidil came to understand
How his greatest warriors met their end with Dagoth Thras.
For he could exhaust them by blocking their attacks
And then, thus weakened, they were simply cut down.
The villain was patient and skilled with the shield
And Rangidil felt even his own mighty arms growing numb
While Dagoth Thras anticipated and blocked each cut
And Rangidil feared that without the blessing of the Divine Three
Of Morrowind
He'd die in the tower of Abernanit.

But he still poured down blows as he yelled,
"Foe! I am Rangidil, a prince of the True Temple,
And I've fought in many a battle, and many a warrior
Has tried to stop my blade and has failed.
Very few can anticipate which blow I'm planning,
And fewer, knowing that, know how to arrest the design,
Or have the the strength to absord all of my strikes.
There is no greater master of shield blocking in all
Of Morrowind
Than here in the castle Abernanit.

My foe, dark lord Dagoth Thras, before you slay me,
I beg you, tell me how you know how to block."
Wickedly proud, Dagoth Thras heard Rangidil's plea,
And decided that before he gutted the Temple champion,
He would deign to give him some knowledge for the afterlife,

How his instinct and reflexes worked, and as he started
To explain, he realized that he did not how he did it,
And watched, puzzled, as Rangidil delivered what the tales
Of Morrowind
Called "The death blow of Abernanit."

Geocrates Varnus explains:
(1) "The Horror" refers to the daedra prince Mehrunes Dagon.
(2) "Fifty winters" suggests that the epic was written fifty years after the Siege of Abernanit, which took place in 3E 150.
(3) "Thrice-blessed Rangidil" is Rangidil Ketil, born 2E 803, died 3E 195. He was the commander of the Temple Ordinators, and "thrice-blessed" by being blessed by the Tribunal of Gods.
(4) "Mother, Lord, and Wizard" refers to the Tribunal of Almalexia, Vivec, and Sotha Sil.
(5) "Dagoth Thras" was a powerful daedra-worshipper of unknown origin who declared himself the heir of the Sixth House, though there is little evidence he descended from the vanished family.

The Death of a Wanderer

The last time I saw the old Argonian, I was taken by how alive he seemed, even though he was in the throes of death.

"The secret," he said, "of staying alive... is not in running away, but swimming directly at danger. Catches it off-guard."

"Is that how you managed to find this claw?" I asked, brandishing the small carving as if it were a weapon. I had found it among his possessions, which I was helping him to divvy amongst his beneficiaries. "Should it also go to your cousin? Dives-From-Below?"

At this, his mouth widened, exposing his fangs. If I hadn't known him as long as I had I would think he was snarling, but I knew that to be a smile. He croaked a few times to attempt laughter, but ended up wheezing and coughing, his rancid blood spraying across the bedsheets.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked between coughing fits.

"I've heard stories," I answered, "the same as you. Looks like one of the claws, for opening the sealing-doors in the ancient crypts. I've never seen one myself, before."

"Then you know I would only wish that thing upon a mortal enemy. Giving it to my cousin would just be encouraging him to run into one of those barrows and get split by a Draugr blade."

"So you want me to have it, then?" I joked. "Where did you even get this?"

"My kind can find things that your people assumed were gone. Drop something to the bottom of a lake, and a Nord will never see it again. Amazing what you can find along the bottoms."

He was staring at the ceiling now, and but the way his fogged eyes darted

around, I could tell he was seeing his memories instead of the cracked stone above us.

"Did you ever try to use it?" I whispered to him, hoping he could hear me through his fog.

"Of course!" he snapped, suddenly lucid. His eyes widened and fixed on me. "Where do you think I got this?" he barked, tearing his tunic open to show a white scar forming a large star-shaped knot in the scales beneath his right shoulder. "Blasted Draugr got the drop on me. Just too many of them."

I felt awful, since I knew how much he hated talking about the battles he had been in. To him, it was enough that he had survived, and any stories would amount to boasting. We both sat quietly for several minutes, his labored breathing the only sound.

He was the one to break the silence. "You know what always bothered me?" he asked. "Why they even bothered with the symbols."

"The what?"

"The symbols, you fool, look at the claw."

I turned it over in my hand. Sure enough, etched into the face were three animals. A bear, an owl, and some kind of insect.

"What do the symbols mean, Deerkaza?"

"The sealing-doors. It's not enough to just have the claw. They're made of massive stone wheels that must align with the claw's symbols before they'll open. It's a sort of lock, I suppose. But I didn't know why they bothered with them. If you had the claw, you also had the symbols to open the door. So why..."

He was broken up by a coughing fit. It was the most I had heard him speak in months, but I could tell how much of a struggle it was. I knew his mind, though, and helped the thought along.

"Why even have a combination if you're going to write it on the key?"

"Exactly. But as I lay bleeding on that floor, I figured it out. The Draugr are relentless, but far from clever. Once I was downed, they continued shuffling about. To no aim. No direction. Bumping against one another, the walls."

"So?"

"So the symbols on the doors weren't meant to be another lock. Just a way of ensuring the person entering was actually alive and had a functioning mind."

"Then the doors..."

"Were never meant to keep people out. They were meant to keep the Draugr in."

And with that, he fell back asleep. When he awoke several days later, he refused to talk about the Draugr at all, and would only wince and clutch his shoulder if I tried to bring them up.

Decorating Guides

Markarth

Welcome to your new home!

This decorating guide provides a list of packages that you can purchase from the Steward of the hold. Each package contains furnishings and decor for a specific part of your house, and these will be delivered and placed for you upon purchase.

All you need to do is provide the gold, and the Steward will take care of the rest. The next time that you visit your home after making your purchases, you will see your new decorations and furnishings in place.

Entrance Hall
When you purchase this package, floor mats and decorative planters will be added to the hallway just beyond the front door.

Living Room
This package fills out the home's large, central room with a large dining table, several smaller tables, shelves, a display case and other decor.

Sleeping Quarters
In addition to improved furnishings and decor for your master bedroom, this package also adds a small dining area between the guest and master bedroom, near the rear of the house.

Alchemy Laboratory
This package will furnish one the small rooms that adjoin the living room with the implements of an alchemist's laboratory. This includes an alchemy table, several shelves and added decor.

Enchanting Laboratory
This package adds furniture and decor for a small enchanting laboratory

adjoining the living room. This includes an enchanting table, shelves and decor.

Riften

Welcome to your new home!

This decorating guide provides a list of packages that you can purchase from the Steward of the hold. Each package contains furnishings and decor for a specific part of your house, and these will be delivered and placed for you upon purchase.

All you need to do is provide the gold, and the Steward will take care of the rest. The next time that you visit your home after making your purchases, you will see your new decorations and furnishings in place.

Kitchen
This package will provide furnishings and decor for your kitchen, which is the room immediately beyond your home's front door. This includes the lighting of the fire.

Bedroom
Adds bedside tables, a dresser and a small table with two chairs to the master bedroom. This also includes an upgrade to the bed itself.

Alchemy Laboratory
This package will place an alchemy crafting table in your basement, along with some shelves and other decor.

Enchanting Laboratory
This package will place an item enchanting table in your basement, along with some shelves and other decor. Also includes a few practice dummies to test your new enchantments on.

Garden
When you purchase this package, the small patch of land adjacent to your house will be planted with a wide range of herbs, vegetables and other plants native to Skyrim.

Solitude

Welcome to your new home!

This decorating guide provides a list of packages that you can purchase from the Steward of the hold. Each package contains furnishings and decor for a specific part of your house, and these will be delivered and placed for you upon purchase.

All you need to do is provide the gold, and the Steward will take care of the rest. The next time that you visit your home after making your purchases, you will see your new decorations and furnishings in place.

Living Room
This package adds a large table, chairs and a wide range of decor to the living area located centrally on the second floor of the house.

Sleeping Quarters
When you purchase this package, the master bedroom on the second floor of the house will be decorated with several furnishings and a larger, more luxurious bed. Also, a small dining area will be added just outside the bedroom door that includes a table, chairs and other decorations.

Alchemy Laboratory
Fills out one of the ground floor rooms with implements and tools for an alchemy laboratory, including an alchemist's crafting table and related decor.

Enchanting Laboratory
Will stock one of the home's small ground-floor rooms with all of the furnshings for an enchanting laboratory, including an enchanter's crafting table. Also includes several practice dummies on which you can test out your new enchantments.

Patio

Places a small table, two chairs and other furnishings on the stone patio outside the back of the house.

Whiterun

Welcome to your new home!

This decorating guide provides a list of packages that you can purchase from the Steward of the hold. Each package contains furnishings and decor for a specific part of your house, and these will be delivered and placed for you upon purchase.

All you need to do is provide the gold, and the Steward will take care of the rest. The next time that you visit your home after making your purchases, you will see your new decorations and furnishings in place.

Kitchen
Includes a fire pit, a small table and two chairs, as well as a shelf to store cooking supplies.

Living Room
Provides Wall-mounted shelves, a few side tables and two chairs placed near the fire pit, all near the center of the ground floor.

Dining Room
Adds a long wooden table and bench, as well as several shelves loaded with cutlery, dishes and cookware.

Alchemy Laboratory
This package adds an alchemy crafting station, a reading table and chair, and a large wardrobe to the rear area of the ground floor. This also includes the addition of a wall to divide the laboratory from the dining room.

Loft
This package includes a few chairs and tables to fill out the upper-level loft.

Bedroom
Adds two bedside tables, a dresser and a small table with two chairs to the

master bedroom. This also includes the addition of a wall to give the bedroom added privacy.

Windhelm

Welcome to your new home!

This decorating guide provides a list of packages that you can purchase from the Steward of the hold. Each package contains furnishings and decor for a specific part of your house, and these will be delivered and placed for you upon purchase.

All you need to do is provide the gold, and the Steward will take care of the rest. The next time that you visit your home after making your purchases, you will see your new decorations and furnishings in place.

Kitchen
Includes a fireplace, a table for two and ample shelving to store your food and cooking supplies.

Living Room
This package fills Hjerim's spacious ground floor living room with several tables, chairs and shelves. Decorations for the floor and walls are also included.

Alchemy Laboratory
Adds an alchemy crafting station.

Enchanting Laboratory
Adds an enchanting crafting station.

Upstairs Landing
This package adds several weapon racks and display cases, and lines the walls with mounted animal heads.

Bedroom
Provides an upgrade to your bed, as well as shelving, display cases, improved lighting and other bedroom furnishings and decor.

Guest Room
Improves the furnishings and decor in your home's guest bedroom, including a finer-quality bed, a small table, and some shelves.

De Rerum Direnni

By Vorian Direnni

I am six-hundred-and-eleven years old. I have never had children of my own, but I have many nieces and nephews and cousins who have been raised with the tales and traditions of our ancient, illustrious, and occasionally notorious clan, the Direnni. Few families in Tamriel can boast so many famous figures, wielding so much power over the fate of so many. Our warriors and kings are stuff of legend, and it is not to dismiss their honor and their achievements to say you have heard quite enough about them.

I myself have never picked up a sword or written an important law, but I am part of a lesser known but still important Direnni tradition: the way of the wizard. My own autobiography would be of little interest to posterity - though my nephew, nieces, and cousins indulge me to tell wild tales of life in the chaotic Second Era of Tamriel - but I have a few ancestors whose stories should be told. They may have changed history as we know it as dramatically as my better known relatives, but their names are in danger of being forgotten.

Most recently, Lysandus, the King of Daggerfall, was able to conquer his ancient enemies of Sentinel in part thanks to his court sorceress, Medora Direnni. Her grandfather Jovron Direnni was Imperial Battlemage to the court of the Dunmer Empress of Tamriel, Katariah, assisting her in creating peace in a time of turmoil. His great great grandfather Pelladil Direnni had a similar role with the first Potentate, and encouraged the Guild Act without which we would not have all the professional organizations we have today. His ancestor, many times back, was the witch Raven Direnni, who with her better known cousins Aiden and Ryain, brought an end to the tyranny of the latter Alessian Empire. Before the Psijics of Artaeum, it is said, she created the art of enchantment, learning how to bind a soul into a gem and use that to ensorcel all manners of weaponry.

But it is the story of an ancestor even more ancient, more distant than Raven I wish to tell.

Asliel Direnni harkens back to the humble beginnings of our clan, in the tiny farming village of Tyrigel on the banks of the river Caomus which was then called the Diren, hence the family name. Like all on Summurset Isle in those days, he was a simple planter of the fields. But while others only grew enough to sustain their immediate kin, even distant cousins of the Direnni worked together. They would decide as a group which fields were best for wheat, orchard, vine, livestock, or apiary, and thereby always have the best yields of any farm which worked alone, doing the best as it could with what it had.

Asliel had a particularly poor farm for most kind of agriculture, but small herbs found its stony, loamless, acidic soil very comfortable. Out of necessity more than anything else he became an expert on all manners of herbs. For the most part, of course, they were used in flavoring cooking, but as you know, hardly any plant grows on the surface of our world without a magickal potential.

Even so long ago, witches already were in existence. It would be ridiculous for me to suggest that Asliel Direnni invented alchemy. What he did, what we can all be grateful for, is that he formulated it into an art and science.

There were no witches' covens in Tyrigel, and, of course, there would be no Mages Guild yet for thousands of years, so people would come to him for cures. He learned for himself the exact formula for combining black lichen and roobrush to create a cure for all manners of poison, and the amount of willow anther to crush and mix with chokeweed to cure diseases.

There were few much greater threats in Tyrigel in those peaceful days than disease or accidental poisonings. Yes, there were some dark forces in the wilderness, trolls, chimera, the occasional malevolent fairy folk and will-o'-the-wisp, but even the youngest, most foolish Altmer knew how to avoid them. There were, however, a few unusual threats which Asliel had a hand in defeating.

One of the tales told of him that I believe to be true is how he was brought a young niece who had been suffering from an unknown disease. Despite his ministrations, she grew weaker and weaker every morning. Finally, he gave her a bitter tasting drink, and the next morning, ashes were found all around her bed. A vampire had been feeding on the poor girl, but Asliel's potion had turned her very blood into poison, without harming her in the least.

If only this formula had not been lost in the mists of history!

This would have been enough to make him a minor but significant figure in the annals of early Summurset, but at that point in history, a barbarian tribe called the Locvar had found their way down the Diren River, and recognized Tyrigel as a rich target for raids. The Direnni, not being warriors yet but simple farmers, were helpless and could only flee and watch the Locvar take the best of their crops, raid after raid.

Asliel, however, had been experimenting with the vampire dust, and brought his cousins to him with a plan. The next time the Locvar were sighted on the Diren, the word went out and all the most able-bodied came to Asliel's laboratory. When the barbarians arrived in Tyrigel, they found the farms deserted, and assumed that all had fled as usual. As they set about stealing the bounty, they suddenly found themselves under attack by invisible forces. Believing the Direnni farms to be haunted, they ran away very quickly.

They attempted a few more raids, for their greed would always eventually overpower their fear, and each time, they were set upon by attackers who they could not see. As barbaric as they were, they were not stupid, and they changed their mind about the source of their defeat. It could not be that the farms were haunted, because the crops were still being tended and harvested, and the animals seemed to show no fear. The Locvar decided to send a scout to the farm to see if he could spy their secrets.

The scout sent word back to the Locvar that the Direnni farms were populated with flesh and blood, entirely visible Altmer. He continued to watch as his barbarian cohorts moved down the river, and he saw the elderly and children flee for the hills, while the able-bodied farmers and

their wives went to Asliel's laboratory. He saw them go in; he saw no one come out.

As usual, the Locvar were repelled by invisible forces, but their scout soon told them what he saw happening in the laboratory.

The next night, two of the Locvar approached Asliel's farm very stealthily, and managed to kidnap him without alerting the rest of the Direnni. The Locvar chieftain, knowing that the farmers could no longer count on the alchemist to make them invisible, considered an immediate attack on the farms. But he was a vengeful sort, and felt he had been humiliated by these simple farmers. A crafty plan emerged in his mind. What if the Direnni, who always saw his barbarian tribe coming, for once did not? Imagine the slaughter if no one even had a chance to flee.

The scout had told the chieftain that Asliel had used the dust of a vampire to make the farmers invisible, but he was not sure what the other ingredient had been. He described an incandescent powder that Asliel had mixed into the dust. Asliel, of course, refused to help the Locvar, but they were experts in torture as well as pillage, and he knew he would have to talk or die.

Finally after hours of torture, he agreed to tell them what the incandescent powder was. He did not know the name, but he called it "Glow Dust," the only remains of a slain will-o'-the-wisp. He told them they would need a lot of it if they wanted to turn the whole tribe invisible for the raid.

The Locvar grumbled that not only did they have to find and kill a vampire to attain his dust, but find and kill several will-o'-the-wisps to get theirs. In a few days time, they came back with the ingredients the alchemist asked for. The chieftain, not being a complete idiot, made Asliel taste the potion first. He did as he was told and turned invisible, demonstrating that it did truly work. The chieftain put him to work creating more. No one apparently noticed that while he did, he was nibbling on black lichen and roobrush.

The Locvar took the potion as he doled it out, and soon, but not too soon that they didn't suffer, they were all dead.

The scout who had seen Asliel mixing the invisibility potion had apparently mistook the glow of the candlelight in the laboratory for an incandescence which the second ingredient of the invisibility potion did not possess. The second ingredient was actually dull, simple redwort, one of the most common herbs in Tamriel. When they had insisted during torture that Asliel tell them what the incandescent powder was, Asliel remembered that he had once experimentally mixed glow dust and vampire dust together once and created a powerful poison. It was simple enough to steal a little redwort from the barbarian's camp, mix that with the vampire and glow dust mixture, and create a potion that was in fact an invisibility poison. After curing himself, he gave the poison to the barbarians.

The Locvar, being dead, never again raided the Direnni farms, and having no other enemies, they were able to grow more and more prosperous and powerful. Generations later, they left Summurset and began their historic adventures on the Tamriel mainland. Asliel Direnni, because of his excellence as an alchemist, was invited to Artaeum and became a Psijic. It is not known how many more of the common formulas we know today were invented by him there, but I have no doubt, the science and art of alchemy as we know it today would not exist without him.

But that is all in the distant past. Asliel's innovations, like my modest ones, like the achievements of the Direnni throughout history, are but a stepping stone to the wonders which will come in the future. I wish I could be there to witness them, but if I can only share some of the past with the children of Direnni and the children of Tamriel, then I will consider my life well spent.

Report of the Imperial Commission on the Disaster at Ionith

by Lord Pottreid, Chairman

Part I: Preparations

The Emperor's plans for the invasion of Akavir were laid in the 270s, when he began the conquest of the small island kingdoms that lie between Tamriel and Akavir. With the fall of Black Harbor in Esroniet in 282, Uriel V was already looking ahead to the ultimate prize. He immediately ordered extensive renovations to the port, which would serve as the marshalling point for the invasion force and as the main supply source throughout the campaign. At this time he also began the construction of the many large, ocean-going transports that would be needed for the final crossing to Akavir, in which the Navy was previously deficient. Thus it can be seen that the Emperor's preparations for the invasion were laid well in advance, before even the conquest of Esroniet was complete, and was not a sudden whim as some have charged.

When Prince Bashomon yielded Esroniet to Imperial authority in 284, the Emperor's full attention could be devoted to planning for the Akaviri campaign. Naval expeditions were dispatched in 285 and 286 to scout the sea lanes and coastlands of Akavir; and various Imperial intelligence agents, both magical and mundane, were employed to gather information. On the basis of all this information, the kingdom of the Tsaesci, in the southwest of Akavir, was selected as the initial target for the invasion.

Meanwhile the Emperor was gathering his Expeditionary Force. A new Far East Fleet was created for the campaign, which for a time dwarfed the rest of the Navy; it is said to be the most powerful fleet ever assembled in the history of Tamriel. The Fifth, Seventh, Tenth, and Fourteenth Legions were selected for the initial landing, with the Ninth and Seventeenth to follow as reinforcements once the beachhead was secured. While this may seem to

the layman a relatively small fraction of the Army's total manpower, it must be remembered that this Expeditionary Force would have to be maintained at the end of a long and tenuous supply line; in addition, the Emperor and the Army command believed that the invasion would not be strongly opposed, at least at first. Perhaps most crucially, the Navy had only enough heavy transport capacity to move four legions at a time.

It should be noted here that the Commission does not find fault with the Emperor's preparations for the invasion. Based on the information available prior to the invasion, (which, while obviously deficient in hindsight, great effort had been made to accumulate), the Commission believes that the Emperor did not act recklessly or imprudently. Some have argued that the Expeditionary Force was too small. The Commission believes that on the contrary, even if shipping could have been found to transport and supply more legions (an impossibility without crippling the trade of the entire Empire), this would have merely added to the scale of the disaster; it would not have averted it. Neither could the rest of the Empire be denuded of legions; the memory of the Camoran Usurper was still fresh, and the Emperor believed (and this Commission agrees) that the security of the Empire precluded a larger concentration of military force outside of Tamriel. If anything, the Commission believes that the Expeditionary Force was too large. Despite the creation of two new legions during his reign (and the recreation of the Fifth), the loss of the Expeditionary Force left the Empire in a dangerously weak position relative to the provinces, as the current situation makes all too clear. This suggests that the invasion of Akavir was beyond the Empire's current strength; even if the Emperor could have fielded and maintained a larger force in Akavir, the Empire may have disintegrated behind him.

Part II: The Invasion of Akavir

The Expeditionary Force left Black Harbor on 23rd Rain's Hand, 288, and with fair weather landed in Akavir after six weeks at sea. The landing site was a small Tsaesci port at the mouth of a large river, chosen for its proximity to Tamriel as well as its location in a fertile river valley, giving easy access to the interior as well as good foraging for the army. All went well at first. The Tsaesci had abandoned the town when the Expeditionary

Force approached, so they took possession of it and renamed it Septimia, the first colony of the new Imperial Province of Akavir. While the engineers fortified the town and expanded the port facilities to serve the Far East Fleet, the Emperor marched inland with two legions. The surrounding land was reported to be rich, well-watered fields, and meeting no resistance the army took the next city upriver, also abandoned. This was refounded as Ionith, and the Emperor established his headquarters there, being much larger than Septimia and better-located to dominate the surrounding countryside.

The Expeditionary Force had yet to meet any real resistance, although the legions were constantly shadowed by mounted enemy patrols which prevented any but large scouting parties from leaving the main body of the army. One thing the Emperor sorely lacked was cavalry, due to the limited space on the transport fleet, although for the time being the battlemages made up for this with magical reconnaissance.

The Emperor now sent out envoys to try to contact the Tsaesci king or whoever ruled this land, but his messengers never returned. In retrospect, the Commission believes that valuable time was wasted in this effort while the army was stalled at Ionith, which could have been better spent in advancing quickly while the enemy was still, apparently, surprised by the invasion. However, the Emperor believed at the time that the Tsaesci could be overawed by the Empire's power and he might win a province by negotiation with no need for serious fighting.

Meanwhile, the four legions were busy building a road between Septimia and Ionith, setting up fortified guard posts along the river, and fortifying both cities' defences, activities which would serve them well later. Due to their lack of cavalry, scouting was limited, and communication between the two cities constantly threatened by enemy raiders, with which the legions were still unable to come to grips.

The original plan had been to bring the two reinforcing legions across as soon as the initial landing had secured a port, but the fateful decision was now taken to delay their arrival and instead begin using the Fleet to transport colonists. The Emperor and the Council agreed that, due to the

complete abandonment of the conquered area by its native population, colonists were needed to work the fields so that the Expeditionary Force would not have to rely entirely on the fleet for supplies. In addition, unrest had broken out in Yneslea, athwart the supply route to Akavir, and the Council believed the Ninth and Seventeenth legions would be better used in repacifying those territories and securing the Expeditionary Force's supply lines.

The civilian colonists and their supplies began arriving in Septimia in mid-Hearthfire, and they took over the preparation of the fields (which had been started by the legionnaires) for a spring crop. A number of cavalry mounts were also brought over at this time, and the raids on the two Imperial colonies subsequently fell off. Tsaesci emissaries also finally arrived in Ionith, purportedly to begin peace negotiations, and the Expeditionary Force settled in for what was expected to be a quiet winter.

At this time, the Council urged the Emperor to return to Tamriel with the Fleet, to deal with many pressing matters of the Empire while the army was in winter quarters, but the Emperor decided that it would be best to remain in Akavir. This turned out to be fortunate, because a large portion of the Fleet, including the Emperor's flagship, was destroyed by an early winter storm during the homeward voyage. The winter storm season of 288-289 was unusually prolonged and exceptionally severe, and prevented the Fleet from returning to Akavir as planned with additional supplies. This was reported to the Emperor via battlemage and it was agreed that the Expeditionary Force could survive on what supplies it had on hand until the spring.

Part III: The Destruction of the Expeditionary Force

The winter weather in Akavir was also much more severe than expected. Due to the supply problems and the addition of thousands of civilians, the Expeditionary Force was on tight rations. To make matters worse, the Tsaesci raiders returned in force and harried any foraging and scouting parties outside the walls of the two cities. Several watch forts on the road between Septimia and Ionith were captured during blizzards, and the rest

had to be abandoned as untenable. As a result, communication between the two cities had to be conducted entirely by magical means, a continuing strain on the legions' battlemages.

On 5th Sun's Dawn, a large entourage of Tsaesci arrived at Ionith claiming to bring a peace offer from the Tsaesci king. That night, these treacherous envoys murdered the guards at one of the city gates and let in a strong party of their comrades who were waiting outside the city walls. Their clear intention was to assassinate the Emperor, foiled only by the vigilance and courage of troopers of the Tenth who were guarding his palace. Once the alarm was raised, the Tsaesci inside the city were hunted down and killed to the last man. Needless to say, this was the end of negotiations between the Emperor and the Tsaesci.

The arrival of spring only brought worse troubles. Instead of the expected spring rains, a hot dry wind began to blow from the east, continuing with varying strength through the entire summer. The crops failed, and even the river (which in the previous year had been navigable by small boats far upstream of Ionith) was completely dried up by Sun's Height. It is unknown if this was due to a previously unknown weather pattern unique to Akavir, or if the Tsaesci manipulated the weather through magical means. The Commission leans towards the former conclusion, as there is no direct evidence of the Tsaesci possessing such fearsome arcane power, but the latter possibility cannot be entirely ruled out.

Due to prolonged bad weather, the supply fleet was late in setting out from Black Harbor. It finally left port in early Second Seed, but was again severely mauled by storms and limped into Septimia eight weeks later much reduced. Because of the increasingly desperate supply situation in Akavir, the Emperor dispatched most of his Battlemage Corps with the fleet to assist it in weathering the storms which seemed likely to continue all summer. At this time, the Council urged the Emperor to abandon the invasion and to return to Tamriel with the Expeditionary Force, but he again refused, noting that the fleet was no longer large enough to transport all four legions at once. The Commission agrees that leaving one or more legions behind in Akavir to await the return of the fleet would have damaged Army morale. But the Commission also notes that the loss of one legion would

have been preferable to the loss of the entire Expeditionary Force. It is the unanimous opinion of the Commission that this was the last point at which complete disaster might have been averted. Once the decision was made to send the fleet back for reinforcements and supplies, events proceeded to their inevitable conclusion.

From this point on, much less is known about what transpired in Akavir. With most of the battlemages assisting the fleet, communication between the Expeditionary Force and Tamriel was limited, especially as the situation in Akavir worsened and the remaining battlemages had their powers stretched to the limit attending to all the needs of the legions. However, it appears that the Tsaesci may also have been actively interfering with the mages in some unknown manner. Some of the mages in Akavir reported their powers being abnormally weak, and the mages of the War College in Cyrodiil (who were handling communications for the Council) reported problems linking up with their compatriots in Akavir, even between master and pupil of long training. The Commission urges that the War College make a particular study of the arcane powers of the Tsaesci, should the Empire ever come into conflict with Akavir again.

What is known is that the Emperor marched out of Ionith in mid-Sun's Height, leaving only small garrisons to hold the cities. He had learned that the Tsaesci were massing their forces on the other side of a mountain range to the north, and he intended to smash their army before it could gather full strength and capture their supplies (of which he was in desperate need). This rapid advance seems to have taken the Tsaesci by surprise, and the Expeditionary Force crossed the mountains and fell on their camp, routing the Tsaesci army and capturing its leader (a noble of some kind). But the Emperor was soon forced to retreat, and the legions suffered heavily on their retreat to Ionith. The Emperor now found himself besieged in Ionith, cut off from the small garrison at Septimia which was also besieged. By this time, it seems that the efforts of the few remaining battlemages were devoted entirely to creating water to keep the army alive, a skill not normally emphasized at the War College. The fleet had arrived safely back to Black Harbor, thanks to the Battlemage Corps, but all attempts to return to Akavir were frustrated by a series of ever more savage storms that battered Esroniet throughout the rest of 289.

The Council's last contact with the Emperor was in early Frostfall. By Evening Star, the Council was extremely worried about the situation in Akavir and ordered the fleet to sail regardless of the risk. Despite the continued storms, the fleet managed to press on to Akavir. Hope was raised when contact was made with the Emperor's battlemage, who reported that Ionith still held out. Plans were quickly laid for the Expeditionary Force to break out of Ionith and fall back on Septimia, where the fleet would meet them. This was the last direct contact with the Expeditionary Force. The fleet arrived in Septimia to find its garrison under savage assault from a large Tsaesci army. The battlemages with the fleet threw back the enemy long enough for the survivors to embark and the fleet to withdraw.

The few survivors of the Expeditionary Force who reached Septimia told how the Emperor had led the army out of Ionith by night two days earlier, succesfully breaking through the enemy lines but then being surrounded by overwhelming forces on the road to Septimia. They told of a heroic last stand by the Emperor and the Tenth Legion, which allowed a remnant of the Fourteenth to reach Septimia. Two survivors of the Tenth arrived in Septimia that night, having slipped through the enemy lines during their undisciplined victory celebration. These men confirmed having seen the Emperor die, cut down by enemy arrows as he rallied the Tenth's shield wall.

Part IV: Conclusion

The Commission believes that the invasion of Akavir was doomed from the start for several reasons, none of which could have been foreseen beforehand, unfortunately.

Despite extensive intelligence-gathering, the Expeditionary Force was clearly unprepared for the situation in Akavir. The unexpected weather which plagued the army and navy was particularly disastrous. Without the loss of a majority of the Far East Fleet during the campaign, the Expeditionary Force could have been withdrawn in 289. The weather also forced the Emperor to assign most of his Battlemage Corps to the fleet, leaving him without their valuable assistance during the fighting which

soon followed. And of course the unexpected drought which struck Ionith during 289 dashed the hopes of supplying the army locally, and left the Expeditionary Force in an untenable situation when besieged in Ionith.

The Tsaesci were also much stronger than intelligence reports had suggested. Information on the size of the army the Tsaesci were eventually able to field against the Expeditionary Force is vague, as the only serious fighting took place after regular communications were cut off between the Emperor and the Council. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the Tsaesci outnumbered the Emperor's forces by several times, as they were able to force four crack legions into retreat and then keep them under siege for several months.

As was stated previously, the Commission declines to criticize the initial decision to invade Akavir. Based on what was known at the time, the plan seemed sound. It is only with the benefit of hindsight does it become obvious that the invasion had very little chance of success. Nevertheless, the Commission believes several valuable lessons can be taken from this disaster.

First, the Tsaesci may have extremely powerful arcane forces at their command. The possibility that they may have manipulated the weather across such a vast region seems incredible (and it should be noted that three Commissioners strongly objected to this paragraph even being included in this Report), but the Commission believes that this matter deserves urgent investigation. The potential danger is such that even the slight possibility must be taken seriously.

Second, the Tsaesci appear to possess no navy to speak of. The Expeditionary Force was never threatened by sea, and the Far East Fleet fought nothing but the weather. Indeed, initial plans called for a portion of the Fleet to remain in Akavir for use in coastal operations, but in the event there were very few places where the large vessels of the Fleet could approach the land, due to the innumerable reefs, sandbars, islands, etc. that infested the coastal waters north and south from Septimia. Due to the utter lack of trees in the plain around Septimia and Ionith, the Expeditionary Force was unable to build smaller vessels which could have navigated the

shallow coastal waters. Any future military expeditions against Akavir would do well to consider some way of bringing a means for inshore naval operations in order to exploit this clear advantage over the Tsaesci, an advantage that was sadly unexploited by the Expeditionary Force.

Third, much longer-term study needs to be made of Akavir before another invasion could even be contemplated. The information gathered over the four years prior to the invasion was extensive, but clearly inadequate. The weather conditions were completely unexpected; the Tsaesci much stronger than expected; and the attempted negotiations by the Emperor with the Tsaesci a disaster. Akavir proved alien beyond expectation, and the Commission believes any future attempt to invade Akavir should not be contemplated without much greater knowledge of the conditions, politics, and peoples of that continent than presently obtains.

Finally, the Commission unanimously concludes that given what we now know, any attempt to invade Akavir is folly, at least in the present state of the Empire. The Empire's legions are needed at home. One day, a peaceful, united Empire will return to Akavir and exact severe retribution for the disaster at Ionith and for our fallen Emperor. But that day is not now, nor in the foreseeable future.

The Doors of Oblivion

By Seif-ij Hidja

When thou enterest into Oblivion, Oblivion entereth into thee.
Nai Tyrol-Llar

The greatest mage who ever lived was my master Morian Zenas. You have heard of him as the author of the book 'On Oblivion,' the standard text for all on matters Daedric. Despite many entreaties over the years, he refused to update his classic book with his new discoveries and theories because he found that the more one delves into these realms, the less certain one is. He did not want conjecture, he wanted facts.

For decades before and after the publication of 'On Oblivion,' Zenas compiled a vast personal library on the subject of Oblivion, the home of the Daedra. He divided his time between this research and personal magickal growth, on the assumption that should he succeed in finding a way into the dangerous world beyond and behind ours, he would need much power to wander its dark paths.

Twelve years before Zenas began the journey he had prepared his life to make, he hired me as his assistant. I possessed the three attributes he required for the position: I was young and eager to help without question; I could read any book once and memorize its contents; and, despite my youth, I was already a Master of Conjuration.

Zenas too was a Master of Conjuration - indeed, a Master at all the known and unknown Schools - but he did not want to rely on his ability alone in the most perilous of his research. In an underground vault, he summoned Daedra to interview them on their native land, and for that he needed another Conjurer to make certain they came, were bound, and were sent away again without incident.

I will never forget that vault, not for its look which was plain and unadorned, but for what you couldn't see. There were scents that lingered long after the summoned creatures had left, flowers and sulfur, sex and decay, power and madness. They haunt me still to this very day.

Conjuration, for the layman unacquainted with its workings, connects the caster's mind with that of the summoned. It is a tenuous link, meant only to lure, hold, and dismiss, but in the hands of a Master, it can be much stronger. The Psijics and Dwemer can (in the Dwemer's case, perhaps I should say, could) connect with the minds of others, and converse miles apart - a skill that is sometimes called telepathy.

Over the course of my employment, Zenas and I developed such a link between one another. It was accidental, a result of two powerful Conjurers working closely together, but we decided that it would be invaluable should he succeed in traveling to Oblivion. Since the denizens of that land could be touched even by the skills of an amateur Conjurer, it was possible we could continue to communicate while he was there, so I could record his discoveries.

The 'Doors to Oblivion,' to use Morian Zenas's phrase, are not easily found, and we exhausted many possibilities before we found one where we held the key.

The Psijics of Artaeum have a place they call The Dreaming Cave, where it is said one can enter into the Daedric realms and return. Iachesis, Sotha Sil, Nematigh, and many others have been recorded as using this means, but despite many entreaties to the Order, we were denied its use. Celarus, the leader of the Order, has told us it has been sealed off for the safety of all.

We had hopes of using the ruins of the Battlespire to access Oblivion. The Weir Gate still stands, though the old proving grounds of the Imperial Battlemages itself was shattered some years ago in Jagar Tharn's time. Sadly, after an exhaustive search through the detritus, we had to conclude that when it was destroyed, all access to the realms beyond, the Soul Cairn, the Shade Perilous, and the Havoc Wellhead, had been broken. It was probably for the good, but it frustrated our goal.

The reader may have heard of other Doors, and he may be assured we attempted to find them all.

Some are pure legend, or at any rate, not traceable based on the information left behind. There are references in lore to Marukh's Abyss, the Corryngton Mirror, the Mantellan Crux, the Crossroads, the Mouth, a riddle of an alchemical formula called Jacinth and Rising Sun, and many other places and objects that are said to be Doors, but we could not find.

Some exist, but cannot be entered safely. The whirlpool in the Abecean called the Maelstrom of Bal can make ships disappear, and may be a portal into Oblivion, but the trauma of riding its waters would surely slay any who tried. Likewise, we did not consider it worth the risk to leap from the Pillar of Thras, a thousand foot tall spiral of coral, though we witnessed the sacrifices the sloads made there. Some victims were killed by the fall, but some, indeed, seemed to vanish before being dashed on the rocks. Since the sload did not seem certain why some were taken and some died, we did not favor the odds of the plunge.

The simplest and most maddeningly complex way to go to Oblivion was simply to cease to be here, and begin to be there. Throughout history, there are examples of mages who seemed to travel to the realms beyond ours seemingly at will. Many of these voyagers are long dead, if they ever existed, but we were able to find one still living. In a tower off Zafirbel Bay on the island of Vvardenfell in the province of Morrowind there exists a very old, very reclusive wizard named Divayth Fyr.

He was not easy to reach, and he was reluctant to share with Morian Zenas the secret Door to Oblivion. Fortunately, my master's knowledge of lore impressed Fyr, and he taught him the way. I would be breaking my promise to Zenas and Fyr to explain the procedure here, and I would not divulge it even if I could. If there is dangerous knowledge to be had, that is it. But I do not reveal too much to say that Fyr's scheme relied on exploiting a series of portals to various realms created by a Telvanni wizard long missing and presumed dead. Against the disadvantage of this limited number of access points, we weighed the relative reliability and security of passage, and

considered ourselves fortunate in our informant.

Morian Zenas then left this world to begin his exploration. I stayed at the library to transcribe his information and help him with any research he needed.

'Dust,' he whispered to me on the first day of his voyage. Despite the inherent dreariness of the word, I could hear his excitement in his voice, echoing in my mind. 'I can see from one end of the world to the other in a million shades of gray. There is no sky or ground or air, only particles, floating, falling, whirling about me. I must levitate and breathe by magickal means...'

Zenas explored the nebulous land for some time, encountering vaporous creatures and palaces of smoke. Though he never met the Prince, we concluded that he was in Ashpit, said to be the home of Malacath, where anguish, betrayal, and broken promises like ash filled the bitter air.

'The sky is on fire,' I heard him say as he moved on to the next realm. 'The ground is sludge, but traversable. I see blackened ruins all around me, like a war was fought here in the distant past. The air is freezing. I cast blooms of warmth all around me, but it still feels like daggers of ice stabbing me in all directions.'

This was Coldharbour, where Molag Bal was Prince. It appeared to Zenas as if it were a future Nirn, under the King of Rape, desolate and barren, filled with suffering. I could hear Morian Zenas weep at the images he saw, and shiver at the sight of the Imperial Palace, spattered with blood and excrement.

'Too much beauty,' Zenas gasped when he went to the next realm. 'I am half blind. I see flowers and waterfalls, majestic trees, a city of silver, but it is all a blur. The colors run like water. It's raining now, and the wind smells like perfume. This surely is Moonshadow, where Azura dwells.'

Zenas was right, and astonishingly, he even had audience with the Queen of Dusk and Dawn in her rose palace. She listened to his tale with a smile, and

told him of the coming of the Nevevarine. My master found Moonshadow so lovely, he wished to stay there, half-blind, forever, but he knew he must move on and complete his journey of discovery.

'I am in a storm,' he told me as he entered the next realm. He described the landscape of dark twisted trees, howling spirits, and billowing mist, and I thought he might have entered the Deadlands of Mehrunes Dagon. But then he said quickly, 'No, I am no longer in a forest. There was a flash of lightning, and now I am on a ship. The mast is tattered. The crew is slaughtered. Something is coming through the waves ... oh, gods ... Wait, now, I am in a dank dungeon, in a cell ...'

He was not in the Deadlands, but Quagmire, the nightmare realm of Vaernima. Every few minutes, there was a flash of lightning and reality shifted, always to something more horrible and horrifying. A dark castle one moment, a den of ravening beasts the next, a moonlit swamp, a coffin where he was buried alive. Fear got the better of my master, and he quickly passed to the next realm.

I heard him laugh, 'I feel like I'm home now.'

Morian Zenas described to me an endless library, shelves stretching on in every direction, stacks on top of stacks. Pages floated on a mystical wind that he could not feel. Every book had a black cover with no title. He could see no one, but felt the presence of ghosts moving through the stacks, rifling through books, ever searching.

It was Apocrypha. The home of Hermaeus-Mora, where all forbidden knowledge can be found. I felt a shudder in my mind, but I could not tell if it was my master's or mine.

Morian Zenas never traveled to another realm that I know of.

Throughout his visits to the first four realms, my master spoke to me constantly. Upon entering the Apocrypha, he became quieter, as he was lured into the world of research and study, the passions that had controlled his heart while on Nirn. I would frantically try to call to him, but he closed

his mind to me.

Then he would whisper, 'This cannot be...'

'No one would ever guess the truth...'

'I must learn more...'

'I see the world, a last illusion's shimmer, it is crumbling all around us...'

I would cry back to him, begging him to tell me what was happening, what he was seeing, what he was learning. I even tried using Conjuration to summon him as if he were a Daedra himself, but he refused to leave. Morian Zenas was lost.

I last received a whisper from him six months ago. Before then, it had been five years, and three before that. His thoughts are no longer intelligible in any language. Perhaps he is still in Apocrypha, lost but happy, in a trap he refuses to escape.

Perhaps he slipped between the stacks and passed into the Madhouse of Sheogorath, losing his sanity forever.

I would save him if I could.

I would silence his whispers if I could.

The Dragon Break Reexamined

by Fal Droon

The late 3rd era was a period of remarkable religious ferment and creativity. The upheavals of the reign of Uriel VII were only the outward signs of the historical forces that would eventually lead to the fall of the Septim Dynasty. The so called "Dragon Break" was first proposed at this time, by a wide variety of cults and fringe sects across the Empire, connected only by a common obsession with the events surrounding Tiber Septim's rise to power -- the "founding myth," if you will, of the Septim Dynasty.

The basis of the Dragon Break doctrine is now known to be a rather prosaic error in the timeline printed in the otherwise authoritative "Encyclopedia Tamrielica," first published in 3E 12, during the early years of Tiber Septim's reign. At that time, the archives of Alinor were still inaccessible to human scholars, and the extant records from the Alessian period were extremely fragmentary. The Alessians had systematically burned all the libraries they could find, and their own records were largely destroyed during the War of Righteousness.

The author of the Encyclopedia Tamrielica was apparently unfamiliar with the Alessian "year," which their priesthood used to record all dates. We now know this refers to the length of the long vision-trances undertaken by the High Priestess, which might last anywhere from a few weeks to several months. Based on analysis of the surviving trance scrolls, as well as murals and friezes from Alessian temples, I estimate that the Alessian Order actually lasted only about 150 years, rather than the famous "one thousand and eight years" given by the Encyclopedia Tamrielica. The "mystery" of the millennial-plus rule of the Alessians was accepted but unexplained until the spread of the Lorkhan cults in the late 3rd era, when the doctrine of the Dragon Break took hold. Because this dating (and explanation) was so widely held at the time, and then repeated by historians down through today, it has come to have the force of tradition. Recall, however, that the 3rd era historians were already separated from the Alessians by a gulf of

more than 2,000 years. And history was still in its infancy, relying on the few archives from those early days.

Today, modern archaeology and paleonumerology have confirmed what my own research in Alessian dating first suggested: that the Dragon Break was invented in the late 3rd era, based on a scholarly error, fueled by obsession with eschatology and Numidiumism, and perpetuated by scholarly inertia.

Dragon Language: Myth No More

by Hela Thrice-Versed

Dragon.

The very word conjurs nightmare images of shadowed skies, hideous roaring, and endless fire. Indeed, the dragons were terrifying beasts that were once as numerous as they were deadly.

But what most Nords don't realize is that the dragons were in fact not simple, mindless beasts. Indeed, they were a thriving, intelligent culture, one bent on the elimination or enslavement of any non-dragon civilization in the entire world.

It therefore stands to reason that the dragons would require a way to communicate with one another. That they would need to speak. And through much research, scholars have determined that this is exactly what the dragons did. For the mighty roars of the beasts, even when those roars contained fire, or ice, or some other deadly magic, were actually much more - they were words. Words in an ancient, though decipherable, tongue.

Nonsense, you say? Sheer folly on the part of some overeager academics? I thought precisely the same thing. But then I started hearing rumors. The odd snippet of a conversation from some brave explorer or gold-coveting crypt diver. An always, always, it was the same word repeated:

Wall.

So I listened more. I began to arrange the pieces of the puzzle, and slowly unravel the mystery.

Spread throughout Skyrim, in ancient dungeons, burial grounds, and other secluded places, there are walls. Black, ominous walls on which is written a script so old, so unknown, none who had encountered it could even begin

its translation.

In my heart, I came to know the truth: this was proof of the ancient dragon language! For what else could it possibly be? It only made sense that these walls were constructed by the ancient Nords, Nords who had lived in the time of the dragons, and out of fear or respect, had somehow learned and used the language of the ancient beasts.

But at that point, all I had was my own gut instinct. What I needed was proof. Thus began the adventure of my life. One spanning 17 months and the deaths of three courageous guides and two sellsword protectors. But I choose not to dwell on those grim details, for the end result was so glorious, it made any hardship worth it.

In my travels, I found many of the ancient walls, and every suspicision proved true.

It did in fact appear as if the ancient Nords had copied the language of the dragons of old, for the characters of that language very much resemble claw marks, or scratches. One can almost envision a majestic dragon using his great, sharp talons to carve the symbols into the stone itself. And a human witness - possibly even a thrall or servant - learning, observering, so that he too could use the language for his own ends.

For as I observed the walls I found, I noticed something peculiar about some of the words. It was as if they pulsed with a kind of power, an unknown energy that, if unlocked, might be harnessed by the reader. That sounds like nonsense, I know, but if you had stood by these walls - seen their blackness, felt their power - you would understand that of which I speak.

Thankfully, although entranced, I was able to retain enough sense to actual transcribe the characters I saw. And, in doing so, I began to see patterns in the language - patterns that allowed me to decipher what it was I was reading.

For example, I transcribed the following passage:

HET NOK YNGNAVAR G1F KOD1V WO DR1 Y4 MORON AU FROD DO KROSIS NUZ SINON S3V DINOK 4RK DUK1N

Assigning those scratchings to actual Tamrielic langauge characters, I further translated what I saw into this:

Het nok Yngnavar Gaaf-Kodaav, wo drey Yah moron au Frod do Krosis, nuz sinon siiv dinok ahrk dukaan.

Which translates into the Tamrielic as follows:

Here lies Yngnavar Ghost-Bear, who did Seek glory on the Battlefield of Sorrows, but instead found death and dishonor.

Then, in another crypt, I encountered a wall with this transcription:

HET NOK KOPR1N DO IGLIF 3Z SOS WO GRIND OK OBL1N NI KO MOROK2 VUK2N NUZ 4ST MUNAX H1LVUT DO L3V KRAS1R

Which translates into:

Het nok kopraan do Iglif Iiz-Sos, wo grind ok oblaan ni ko morokei vukein, nuz ahst munax haalvut do liiv krasaar.

Which ultimately translates into the Tamrielic as:

Here lies the body of Iglif Ice-Blood, who met his end not in glorious combat, but at the cruel touch of the withering sickness.

And there you see the pattern. The repeated words "Here lies" - which could only mean one thing: those walls marked actual ancient Nord burial grounds.

You can imagine my nearly uncontainable excitement. It all started to make sense. The anicent Nords used the dragon langauge for these walls for very specific reasons. One of them was obviously to mark the grave of some

important figure. But what else? Were they all graves, or did they serve other purposes as well?

I set off to find out, and was well rewarded for my efforts. Here is what I discovered.

This passage:

HET M4 T4ROD3S TAF3R SKORJI LUN SINAK WEN KLOV GOV9 N1L RINIK H4KUN ROK TOG1T W4 G4ROT

Translates into this:

Het mah tahrodiis tafiir Skorji Lun-Sinak, wen klov govey naal rinik hahkun rok togaat wah gahrot.

Which in Tamrielic translates into this:

Here fell the treacherous thief Skorji Leech-Fingers, whose head was removed by the very axe he was attempting to steal.

So here we see a wall that marks the spot where some significant ancient Nord died.

This passage:

QETHSEGOL V4RUKIV D1NIK F4L3L K3R DO GRAV5N FROD, WO BOVUL KO M1R NOL KINZON Z4KR3 DO KRUZ3K HOKORON

Translates into this:

Qethsegol vahrukiv daanik Fahliil kiir do Gravuun Frod, wo bovul ko Maar nol kinzon zahkrii do kruziik hokoron.

Which in Tamrielic translates into this:

This stone commemorates the doomed elf children of the Autumn Field,

who fled in Terror from the sharp swords of the ancient enemy.

This wall seems to commemorate some ancient, long-forgotten event in Tamrielic history. Whether that event occurred on or near the place where the wall was erected, we will probably never know.

And finally, this passage:

AESA W4L1N QETHSEGOL BR3N43 V4RUKT THOHILD FIN T8R WEN SMOL3N AG FRIN OL S4QO H2M

Which translates into this:

Aesa wahlaan qethsegol briinahii vahrukt, Thohild fin Toor, wen smoliin ag frin ol Sahqo Heim.

Which in Tamrielic translates into this:

Aesa raised this stone for her sister, Thohild the Inferno, whose passion burned hot as the Red Forge.

This wall (and I encountered quite a few like this) was obviously commissioned or built by a specific person, to honor someone important to them. What was the significance of the location? Was it important to the person who died? Or is it the actual location of that person's death? Again, those answers are probably lost to time, and will never be know.

And so you see, the ancient dragon language is, indeed, myth no more. It existed. But better yet, it still exists, and probably will until the end of time, thanks to the ancient Nords and their construction of these many "word walls."

But don't take my word for it. For the walls are there for the discovering, in Skyrim's dangerous, secret places. They serve as a bridge between the realm of the ancient Nords, and our own. The dragons may never return to our world, but now we can return to theirs.

And someday, someday, we may even unlock the strange, unknown power hidden in their words.

The Dragon War

by Torhal Bjorik

In the Merethic Era, when Ysgramor first set foot on Tamriel, his people brought with them a faith that worshipped animal gods. Certain scholars believe these primitive people actually worshipped the divines as we know them, just in the form of these totem animals. They deified the hawk, wolf, snake, moth, owl, whale, bear, fox, and the dragon. Every now and then you can stumble across the broken stone totems in the farther reaches of Skyrim.

Foremost among all animals was the dragon. In the ancient nordic tongue it was drah-gkon. Occasionally the term dov-rha is used, but the language or derivation of that is not known. Using either name was forbidden to all except the dragon priests. Grand temples were built to honor the dragons and appease them. Many of them survive today as ancient ruins haunted by draugr and undead dragon priests.

Dragons, being dragons, embraced their role as god-kings over men. After all, were they not fashioned in Akatosh's own image? Were they not superior in every way to the hordes of small, soft creatures that worshipped them? For dragons, power equals truth. They had the power, so therefore it must be truth. Dragons granted small amounts of power to the dragon priests in exchange for absolute obedience. In turn, the dragon priests ruled men as equals to the kings. Dragons, of course, could not be bothered with actually ruling.

In Atmora, where Ysgramor and his people came from, the dragon priests demanded tribute and set down laws and codes of living that kept peace between dragons and men. In Tamriel, they were not nearly as benevolent. It's unclear if this was due to an ambitious dragon priest, or a particular dragon, or a series of weak kings. Whatever the cause, the dragon priests began to rule with an iron fist, making virtual slaves of the rest of the population.

When the populace rebelled, the dragon priests retaliated. When the dragon priests could not collect the tribute or control the masses, the dragons' response was swift and brutal. So it was the Dragon War began.

At first, men died by the thousands. The ancient texts reveal that a few dragons took the side of men. Why they did this is not known. The priests of the Nine Divines claim it was Akatosh himself that intervened. From these dragons men learned magics to use against dragons. The tide began to turn and dragons began to die too.

The war was long and bloody. The dragon priests were overthrown and dragons were slaughtered in large numbers. The surviving dragons scattered, choosing to live in remote places away from men. The dragon cult itself adapted and survived. They built the dragon mounds, entombing the remains of dragons that fell in the war. They believed that one day the dragons would rise again and reward the faithful.

A Dream of Sovngarde

In a few hours, I will likely be dead.

My men and I, Nords of Skyrim all, will soon join with the Emperor's legions to attack the Imperial City. The Aldmeri are entrenched within and our losses will be severe. It is a desperate gambit, for if we do not reclaim the city, we will lose the war.

Last night I prayed to mighty Talos for courage and strength in the battle to come. In these last cold hours before the sun rises, I sit down to write this account of a dream I had not long after.

I believe this dream was the answer to my prayers, and I would pass along the wisdom it contained to my kinsmen, for the battles they will fight in the years after my passing.

In the dream, I walked through mists toward the sound of laughter, merriment and the songs of the north. The mists soon cleared, and before me lay a great chasm. Waters thundered over its brim, and so deep it was, I could not see the bottom.

A great bridge made all of whale-bone was the only means to cross, and so I took it.

It was only a few steps onto the bridge that I encountered a warrior, grim and strong. "I am Tsun, master of trials," he said to me, his voice booming and echoing upon the walls of the high mountains all around us.

With a wave, he bade me pass on. I knew in my heart that I was granted passage only because I was a visitor. Should the hour come when I return here after my mortal life, the legends say that I must best this dread warrior in single combat.

Beyond the bridge, a great stone longhouse rose up before me, so tall as to

nearly touch the clouds. Though it took all my strength, I pushed open the towering oaken door and beheld the torch-lit feast hall.

Here were assembled the greatest heroes of the Nords, all drinking mead poured from great kegs and singing battle-songs. Suckling pigs turned on a long iron spit over a roaring fire. My mouth watered at the smell of roast meat, and my heart was glad to hear the songs of old.

"Come forth!" cried out a hoary man who sat upon a high wooden chair. This I knew to be Ysgramor, father of Skyrim and the Nords. I approached and knelt before him.

"You find yourself in Sovngarde, hall of the honored dead. Now, what would you have of me, son of the north?" he bellowed.

"I seek counsel," said I, "for tomorrow we fight a desperate battle and my heart is full of fear."

Ysgramor raised his tankard to his lips and drank until the cup was empty. Then he spoke once more.

"Remember this always, son of the north - a Nord is judged not by the manner in which he lived, but the manner in which he died."

With that, he cast aside his flagon, raised his fist in the air and roared a great cheer. The other heroes rose to their feet and cheered in answer.

The sound still rang in my ears when I awoke. I gathered my men and told them of my vision. The words seemed to fill their hearts with courage.

The horns are blowing, and the banners are raised. The time has come to muster. May Talos grant us victory this day, and if I am found worthy, may I once again look upon that great feast hall.

- Skardan Free-Winter

The Dreamstride

The Mysterious Alchemists
of Vaermina

For over a thousand years, the Priests of Vaermina have been masters of the art of alchemy. The complexity and potency of their mixtures are nothing short of legendary. These alchemical treasures are so highly sought-after, that a single draught showing up on the black market can command sums in the tens of thousands of septims.

Of the numerous potions that have surfaced to date, Vaermina's Torpor is perhaps the most impressive. A single sip of this viscous liquid places the imbiber in a state known as "The Dreamstride." This condition allows the subject to experience the dreams of another as if they were actually there. The subject becomes an integral part of the dream, behaving as if they belong. To any other entities in this dream state, the subject will be mistaken for the dreamer; the subject will even find his mannerisms, speech patterns and knowledge expanded appropriately.

To an observer, after the subject has imbibed the potion, they will appear to vanish. As the subject traverses distances within the dream, they will also be traversing distances in the actual world. When the Torpor's effect has expired, the subject will fade back into reality in the exact location projected within the Dreamstride. Some Dreamstrides have transported their subjects a few feet, and some have appeared thousands of miles from their origin in a matter of minutes.

It's to be noted that the Dreamstride is highly dangerous and presents the subject with numerous pitfalls. In certain dreams, subjects have been exposed to life-threatening scenarios such as sicknesses, violence and even death. In most cases, the subject simply fades back to our world without harm, but in some instances, the subject never reappeared and was assumed to have expired or the subject reappeared deceased. It's also quite possible that the subject could reappear in a precarious or hazardous location in

reality, even though that location appeared safe within the Dreamstride.

Vaermina's Torpor is as mysterious and elusive as the priests that created it. It's unknown whether this unique transport mechanism is a result of the Torpor itself or simply the odd machinations of Vaermina, but the potential for using the Dreamstride to penetrate seemingly impassible obstacles certainly outweighs its mysterious nature.

The Dunmer of Skyrim

by Athal Sarys

Dunmer.

That is our name. Yet you deny us even this courtesy. You, the white-skinned, jaundice-haired apes of this godsforsaken frozen wilderness. To you Nords, we are the gray ones, the ashen-skinned, the "dark elves" of Morrowind who have as much place in your land as an infection in an open wound.

Oh yes, we have read your great cultural work, "Nords of Skyrim," in which you extol the many virtues of your people and province, and invite any visitors to come experience your homeland for themselves. Well come we did, Nords, and the reception was less than was promised - but exactly what we expected.

So I, Atal Sarys, Dunmer and immigrant to Skyrim, have decided to answer your beloved book with a work of my own. And let all who read it know that Nords are not the only race to reside in this cold and inhospitable realm. For we dark elves have come, and little by little, shall claim Skyrim as our own.

But where, you may ask, have we taken up residence? Why none other than the ancient city of Windhelm, once the capital of the First Empire. Yes, Nords, in the shadow of your own Palace of the Kings, where the Nord hero Ysgramor once held court, we now thrive. Oh yes. Your beloved Five Hundred Companions may have driven our ancestors from Skyrim, but that was then. This is now.

Indeed, one might be surprised as to just how well we've settled into Windhelm. The district once known as the Snow Quarter is thus named no more. Now, they call it the Gray Quarter, for such is the reality of the Dunmer occupation. The district is now populated entirely by my kind, a

victory not lost on its residents.

Oh, but the peaceful occupation goes even further. Thirsty? You'll find no Nord mead hall in the Gray Quarter. But the spirits flow well enough in the New Gnisis Cornerclub. Seeking a respected family? You'll find no Gray-Manes within these walls. But perhaps you'd like to pay a visit to the home of Belyn Hlaalu, descendant of one of the most noble houses in all of Morrowind. Ah, but no. You Nords don't come to the Gray Quarter, do you? You fear our streets as you fear our skin.

So now, "children of Skyrim," you have the truth of it. You may call this province home, but you can no sooner claim to own it than a cow can claim to own its master's field. You are just another breed of domestic animal, grazing stupidly while higher beings plot your slaughter.

Dwarves: The Lost Race of Tamriel

Volume I - Architecture and Designs

by Calcelmo
Scholar of Markarth

Let me begin by correcting a common misconception. The proper term to use when referencing the ancient lost race of Tamriel is "Dwemer." It is a word whose meaning is roughly translated to "people of the deep" in the common tongue, and whose use has been widely replaced by the more ubiquitous nomenclature, "dwarves." I would like stated that I use the name "dwarves" in lieu of the more accurate term in these books out of sympathy for my readership, whom I can safely assume does not have the breadth of scholarship that 200 years of study has given me.

With that small point finished, let us begin our discussion on the dwarves by focusing on the indisputable artifacts they have left behind: their architectural and cultural designs. Unlike the more controversial areas of dwarven scholarship, the construction of dwarven cities and relics are well-founded due to the plethora of samples taken from the ruins these peoples have left behind. My own home city, Markarth, was originally one such ruin, and I can state from first-hand experience that all dwarven designs share a set of common principles that we can use to determine true artifacts from fakes and delineate patterns and methodologies that were important to their craftsmen.

First of all, we can say for certain that dwarven artisans favored stone, at least as far as their buildings were concerned. This is no surprise. With notable exceptions, the vast majority of dwarven architecture is found underground or carved out of mountains. It is possible, although only theoretically, that the dwarves first mastered masonry as a race quite early, and later examples of metalwork were added on to much earlier stone designs as the dwarves began to master more complex tools. Regardless, the foundation of all known dwarven ruins is built on stonework, and the structure of dwarven stonework is sharp, angular, and intensely mathematical in nature.

By a simple count, there are hundreds if not thousands of samples of dwarven buildings made of precise square shapes, and far fewer examples of discretely rounded or curved stonework, leading us to believe that early dwarves favored trusted, well-calculated designs based on angled lines rather than riskier, more imprecise calculations based on arcs and curves. This comparatively simple tradition of stonecutting has nevertheless resulted in buildings that are as structurally sound today as they were thousands of years ago, making the works of our most skilled masons today seem like child's play in comparison.

Metalwork as far as we know is the primary method used to make almost all dwarven crafts. We cannot, however, discount more easily destructible materials such as clay, paper, and glass from outside the scope of dwarven craftsmanship, but given the tendency of dwarven design to favor the long-lasting over the fragile, we can safely assume that at the very least metal was a heavy preference. And the metal used in all so-far-discovered dwarven relics is entirely unique to their culture.

No other race has replicated whatever process was used to create dwarven metal. Although it can be easily mistaken for bronze -- and in fact many forgers of dwarven materials use bronze to create their fake replicas -- it is most definitely a distinct type of metal of its own. I have personally seen metallurgists attempt to combine several different types of steel and common and rare ores in order to imitate dwarven metal's exclusive properties, but the only method that has been successful is to melt down existing dwarven metallic scraps and start over from there.

Volume II - Weapons, Armor and Machines

by Calcelmo
Scholar of Markarth

In our previous discussion on the dwarves (or "Dwemer" in the more correct, scholarly terminology), we looked into the properties of dwarven architecture and metallic crafts. In this continuing discussion of Tamriel's Lost Race, we shall examine the ways in which dwarves waged war and kept out trespassers. Unlike many other cultures still existing today, the dwarves built and relied on increasingly complicated machines for a wide variety of martial tasks, and weapons and armor created solely for the purpose of being wielded by dwarven warriors show remarkably fewer points of progress beyond the basic designs.

Let us begin by analyzing those basic weapons and armors. Anyone who has held a dwarven axe or worn a dwarven helmet can testify as to the ancient, ever-lasting quality of dwarven craftsmanship. Weapons do not deviate too greatly from their base function. Dwarven swords pierce through light armors with incredible effectiveness, owing primarily to the remarkable sharpness of tempered dwarven metal, and owing to a far lesser extent to its simple, double-edged design.

Compare and contrast a sharp, angular dwarven dagger to a curved elven blade, and it becomes a small logical leap to say that dwarven weaponsmiths relied almost exclusively on creating quality materials first, and merely allowed the form of those materials to flow from the method that weapon was intended to kill people.

As a culture that built almost exclusively underground, it's no surprise that dwarven armors are built to withstand incredibly heavy blows. Again, the fact that they are also resistant to being pierced by arrows or small blades is more of a testament to superior dwarven metallurgy over superior dwarven armorsmithing, but it would be erroneous to thus conclude that dwarven smiths did not take the manufacture of their weapons and armor very

seriously. Every piece of war crafts I have examined show a remarkable amount of unnecessary detailing and personalization that is just as evident today among the most ardent blacksmiths.

A dwarven smith probably came from a long tradition that distinguished itself in way that, say, the grip of a mace would feel, or the design of the head of individual arrows. Although, due to the paltry lack of any cultural artifacts outside the weapons and armors themselves, this is only mere speculation.

The last, but probably most important discussion in this volume, pertains to the existence of dwarven machinery. Dwarves created and manufactured on a very broad scale thousands of mechanical apparatuses of varying complexity. The most simple of which is the standard "arachnid" design used to ward off trespassers. We are so far uncertain as to how the dwarves were able to bring to life these remarkably intelligent machines, but I have witnessed one stalk a highly trained thief for several hours, only to ambush him as he was dealing with a lock to some room or treasure trove -- I admit to have forgotten the details past the point at which it began spouting lightning at him.

Dwarven military machines also range from the human-sized "Sphere" warrior, which patrols the interiors of the ruins as a harmless ball only to emerge from it as a fully armed and armored automaton fighter, to the justly feared "Centurion" whose height ranges from twice to several hundred times human size depending on which reports you believe.

Volume III - Culture and History

by Calcelmo
Scholar of Markarth

In this final volume on our discussion on the dwarves (again, see the term "Dwemer" for references using the more scholastic name), we will attempt an examination into the distinct culture and history of Tamriel's Lost Race. We must, however, begin such a discussion with a warning. Despite what certain academic circles would like people to believe, there is so far no evidence that verifies any claim as to the dwarves' particular customs, morals, myths, legends, laws, systems of governance, or involvement in major historical events outside of those few examples that remain indisputable.

For instance, while we can say with absolute certainty that the disappearance of the entire dwarven race happened very suddenly, only the laziest of junior scholars would say that this event happened in the same day or even the same hour. There is simply no proof to dispute the theory that perhaps the dwarves disappeared from Tamriel gradually over the course of several years or indeed several decades.

There is also nothing that disproves the source of this disappearance as being attributable to mass deaths, plagues, magical contamination, experiments into the nature of Aetherius gone wrong, or even race-wide teleportation into one of the planes of Oblivion. There is simply too little that the dwarves left behind that points to the nature of their great vanishing act, and this same frustration applies to all aspects of their social structure and history.

What we know then can only be inferred by the writings of the other races which made contact with the dwarves before they left Tamriel. The dark elves ("Dunmer") for example teach that their great prophet Nerevar helped unite the dwarves and the elves in Morrowind against occupying Nord armies from Skyrim in the First Era, but Nord and Orc writings also

indicate that the dwarves were also allied with them at various points and in various legendary battles of theirs.

Unfortunately, none of these legends and folk lore make an effort to describe the dwarves in great detail, only that they were a secretive people and that an alliance with them was unusual enough to warrant crafting a story around. And past the First Era, no race makes note of encountering any living dwarves at all. This is further confounded by the fact that so many of the dark elven writings on their relationship with the dwarves were lost during the tragic eruptions of Vvardenfell during the Oblivion Crisis nearly 200 years ago. What secrets they could have revealed about the Lost Race are now buried behind layers of molten earth along with so many unfortunate dark elven people.

Thus, we conclude our discussion on the dwarves on a somber note. As with all scholarly endeavors, we are left with more questions than we have answers, and the proof we so desperately search for is so often out of reach, denied even to the most fervent effort.

The mysteries the dwarves have left us with could easily warrant another century or so worth of personal examination from me, and quite possibly even several millennia of excavation of even one dwarven ruin would be insufficient to paint a complete picture on them. But what we can see from our threadbare tapestry of dwarven artifacts is a careful, intelligent, industrious, and highly advanced culture whose secrets we as students and teachers of their works can only hope to uncover some day.

Dwemer Inquiries

Volume I - Their Architecture and Civilization

by Thelwe Ghelein, Scholar

In the Deep Halls, far from Men
Forsaken Red Mountain, Twisted Kin
Hail the Mind, Hail the Stone
Dwarven Pride, Stronger than bone

It has been my life's work to investigate the Dwemer, their dubious history and mysterious banishment. My goal with this text is to share my findings and conclusions based on eighty years spent studying their unique architectural remains.

The Migration of the Deep-Elves from their ancestral Dwemereth, now Morrowind, is a generally accepted fact. Recorded history supports this, specifically mentioning the Rourken Clan's refusal to join King Dumac in the forming of the First Council, and their subsequent exodus to Hammerfell. The architectural premise is also sound, as the building habits of the Dwarves adapted and changed, albeit slowly and in subtle ways, over time and land. I propose that some of these differences are stylistic as well as practical.

Traditional viewpoints suggest that the Vvardenfell Dwemer were the most prolific of their kind. Based on my excavations throughout Skyrim, Morrowind and High Rock, I am not sure that this is the case. While Vvardenfell is almost cluttered with dwarven ruins poking through the surface of the landscape, the construction of those ruins is fundamentally different from the majority of what I've observed elsewhere.

Further, as we delve into Vvardenfell ruins, we notice that their internal structure is quite different. While major civic and operational chambers are found near the surface in a Vvardenfell Ruin, that is not typically the case

on the Mainland. Minor passageways and storehouse rooms are near the surface, but more important locations don't occur until we explore much deeper.

Because such major locations are well-hidden in Dwemer Ruins outside of Morrowind, many scholars believed they were in fact not present in ruins outside that province. This premature conclusion led some to believe such sites to be mere outposts. My research has shown this not to be the case.

There are a few theories that may explain this difference. Perhaps Clan architects simply had their own styles and preferences when it came to civic planning. This seems only somewhat likely, as Dwarven techniques were based on empirical study, there was likely little room for creative interpretation when it came to building technique. Geological makeup of the terrain almost certainly played a role, especially in a region like Northern Skyrim where the ground near the surface is very rocky and often frozen, versus the volcanic substratum common in Vvardenfell or the ubiquitous aquifers found in Hammerfell. It's possible that Dwarven architects in the North were not even able to excavate larger structures until reaching more pliable stratum.

This scholar would like to suggest, however, that many structures west of Morrowind were built after 1E420. When the Clan Rourken left Vvardenfell, it seems evident that several clans broke off to create their own settlements, and chose to live in greater isolation than their Eastern brethren. This theory is particularly fascinating, because it leads me to believe that Dwarven architects may have developed even more elaborate methods of hiding their strongholds over time.

This opens the distinct possibility that undisturbed dwarven archaeological sites exist throughout Tamriel, even in southern areas like Cyrodiil or Black Marsh where Dwarves are not believed to have ever had a significant presence. Though we ought not get carried away on flights of fancy, one could extrapolate this logic to suggest that some Dwarven Clans were living among us for much longer than previously believed, perhaps well beyond the disappearance during the War of the Red Mountain in 1E700.

Volume II - Their Architecture and Civilization

by Thelwe Ghelein, Scholar

In the Deep Halls, far from Men
Forsaken Red Mountain, Twisted Kin
Hail the Mind, Hail the Stone
Dwarven Pride, Stronger than bone

The limited written record supports the perception of the Deep Elves as culturally revering the pursuits of logic and science. This stands in stark contrast to the belief system of most other mer cultures. When we imagine a society structured around such a central ideology, it seems reasonable that prolific scholars, especially in fields such as mathematics, metallurgy or architecture, would be elevated to social status like that of clergy in a more mystically-inclined culture. The idea is supported by a fragment of Dwemeris text recovered from a colony in Skyrim - Irkgnthand - which I believe to be associated with the Clan Rourken. The original Dwemeris and my translation Follow:

Risen by order cousin-of-privilege Cuolec of Scheziline privileged duties. Clanhome building Hoagen Kultorra tradition to Hailed World shaper"

"To raise granted-cousin Cuolec of privilege with duties for family-home building Hoagen Kultorra

Volume III - Their Architecture and Civilization

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My studies, and this text, have focused heavily on the fact that Dwemer archaeological sites west of Vvardenfell seem to be built at much greater depths than their counterparts near the Red Mountain. I believe there was a specific threshold to which Dwarven excavators would dig before the construction of vital structures would begin.

I have referred to this threshold as the "Geocline," but I have found that to often be redundant with the Deep Venue of a colony. Still, there is some variation in the actual depth of a Deep Venue, whereas the Geocline is always the marker where I reason the City proper begins.

Tunnels and chambers at more shallow depths, while often grand in their architectural style, appear to have served little in the way of critical civic purpose. Surplus stores of food, warehouse chambers that may have been used in trading with nearby surface settlements, or barracks for topside patrols are common above the Geocline.

These tunnels, I have observed, can meander in a seemingly more random pattern than those planned structures beneath. I hypothesize that this may be due to the unpredictable nature of any excavation, even to a race as clever as the Dwemer. Surely unexpected deposits of stone or geological events could make the effort difficult, and I think that these haphazard tunnels are often the result of the search for suitable substratum to build within.

I have found in a small number of ruins reference to a geological anomaly or place known as "FalZhardum Din" . This is intriguing because the term

not only appears in a few tablet fragments, but very specifically on ornate metal frames in the deepest reaches of the Strongholds Alftand, Irkgnthand and Mzinchaleft of Skyrim. I have yet to decipher the meaning of these elaborate carvings, but consider it highly strange that they occur in the deepest part of each of these ruin.

Risen by order cousin-of-privilege Cuolec of Scheziline privileged duties. Clanhome building Hoagen Kultorra tradition to Hailed World shaper"

The most reasonable translation of "FalZhardum Din" I have managed to decipher is "Blackest Kingdom Reaches", but I cannot imagine what that means.

I suspect there may be some pattern I am failing to notice. This creeping doubt has haunted my career in recent years, and I have begun to doubt if I will unravel some grand secret of the Dwarves in my lifetime, though it lies just under my nose - or indeed, under my feet.

Effects of the Elder Scrolls

It is widely known among scholars that the Elder Scrolls entail a certain hazard in their very reading. The mechanism of the effects has, at present, been largely unknown -- theories of hidden knowledge and divine retribution were the subject of idle speculation with little investigation.

I, Justinius Poluhnius, have undertaken to thoroughly document the ailments afflicted by the Elder Scrolls on their readers, though a unified theory of how they manifest continues to elude me and remains a subject for future study.

I have grouped the effects into four, finding that the avenue of experience depends largely upon the mind of the reader. If this is unclear, I hope that a proper dichotomy will lay it plain.

Group the First: The Naifs
For one who has received no training in the history or nature of the Elder Scrolls, the scroll itself is, effectively, inert. No prophecy can be scried nor knowledge obtained. While the scroll will not impart learning to the uninformed, nor will it afflict them in any adverse fashion. Visually, the scroll will appear to be awash in odd lettering and symbols. Those who know their astronomy often claim to recognize constellations in the patterns and connections, but such conjecture is impossible to further investigate since the very nature of this study necessitates unlearned subjects.

Group the Second: The Unguarded Intellects
It is this second group that realizes the greatest danger from attempting to read the scrolls. These are subjects who have an understanding of the nature of the Elder Scrolls and possess sufficient knowledge to actually read what is inscribed there. They have not, however, developed adequate discipline to stave off the mind-shattering effect of having a glimpse of infinity. These unfortunate souls are struck immediately, irrevocably, and completely blind. Such is the price for overreaching one's faculties. It bears mentioning, though, that with the blindness also comes a fragment of that hidden

knowledge -- whether the future, the past, or the deep natures of being is dependent on the individual and their place in the greater spheres. But the knowledge does come.

Group the Third: Mediated Understanding
Alone in Tamriel, it would appear that only the Cult of the Ancestor Moth has discovered the discipline to properly guard one's mind when reading the scrolls. Their novitiates must undergo the most rigorous mental cultivation, and they often spend a decade or more at the monastery before being allowed to read their first Elder Scroll. The monks say this is for the initiates' own protection, as they must have witnessed many Unguarded Intellects among their more eager ranks. With appropriate fortitude, these readers also receive blindness, though at a far lesser magnitude than the Unguarded. Their vision fogs slightly, but they retain shape, color, and enough acuity to continue to read mundane texts. The knowledge they gain from the scroll is also tempered somewhat -- it requires stages of meditation and reflection to fully appreciate and express what one saw.

Group the Fourth: Illuminated Understanding
Between the previous group and this one exists a continuum that has, at present, only been traversed by the monks of the Ancestor Moth. With continued readings the monks become gradually more and more blind, but receive greater and more detailed knowledge. As they spend their waking hours pondering the revelations, they also receive a further degree of mental fortitude. There is, for every monk, a day of Penultimate Reading, when the only knowledge the Elder Scroll imparts is that the monk's next reading shall be his last.

For each monk the Penultimate Reading comes at a different and unknowable time -- preliminary work has been done to predict the occurrence by charting the severity of an individual monk's blindness, but all who reach these later stages report that the increasing blindness seems to taper with increased readings. Some pose the notion that some other, unseen, sense is, in fact, continuing to diminish at this upper range, but I shall leave such postulations to philosophers.

To prepare for his Ultimate Reading, a monk typically withdraws to

seclusion in order to reflect upon a lifetime of revelations and appoint his mind for reception of his last. Upon this final reading, he is forever blinded as sure as those Unguarded ones who raced to knowledge. The Illuminated one, though, has retained his understanding over a lifetime and typically possesses a more integral notion of what has been revealed to him.

It is hoped that this catalog will prove useful to those who wish to further our mortal understanding of the Elder Scrolls. The Moth priests remain aloof about these matters, taking the gradual debilitation that comes with reading as a point of pride. May this serve as a useful starting point for those hoping to take up such study.

---- *Dictated to Anstius Metchim, 4th of Last Seed in the 126th year of the Second Era*

Eslaf Erol

Beggar

By Reven

Eslaf Erol was the last of the litter of five born to the Queen of the prosperous Nordic kingdom of Erolgard, Lahpyrcopa, and her husband, the King of Erolgard, Ytluaf. During pregnancy, the Queen had been more than twice as wide as she was tall, and the act of delivery took three months and six days after it had begun. It is perhaps understandable that the Lahpyrcopa elected, upon expelling Eslaf to frown, say, 'Good riddance,' and die.

Like many Nords, Ytluaf did not care very much for his wife and less for his children. His subjects were puzzled, therefore, when he announced that he would follow the ancient tradition of his people of Atmora of following his beloved spouse to the grave. They had not thought they were particularly in love, nor were they aware that such a tradition existed. Still, the simple people were grateful, for the little royal drama alleviated their boredom, which was and is a common problem in the more obscure parts of northern Skyrim, particularly in wintertide.

He gathered his household staff and his five fat, bawling little heirs in front of him, and divided his estate. To his son Ynohp, he gave his title; to his son Laernu, he gave his land; to his son Suoibud, he gave his fortune; to his daughter Laicifitra, he gave his army. Ytluaf's advisors had suggested he keep the inheritance together for the good of the kingdom, but Ytluaf did not particularly care for his advisors, or the kingdom, for that matter. Upon making his announcement, he drew his dagger across his throat.

One of the nurses, who was rather shy, finally decided to speak as the King's life ebbed away. 'Your highness, you forgot your fifth child, little Eslaf.'

Good Ytluaf groaned. It is somewhat hard to concentrate with blood

gushing from one's throat, after all. The King tried in vain to think of something to bequeath, but there was nothing left.

Finally he sputtered, irritably, 'Eslaf should have taken something then' and died.

That a babe but a few days old was expected to demand his rightful inheritance was arguably unfair. But so Eslaf Erol was given his birthright with his father's dying breath. He would have nothing, but what he had taken.

Since no one else would have him, the shy nurse, whose name was Drusba, took the baby home. It was a decrepit little shack, and over the years that followed, it became more and more decrepit. Unable to find work, Drusba sold all of her furnishings to buy food for little Eslaf. By the time he was old enough to walk and talk, she had sold the walls and the roof as well, so they had nothing but a floor to call home. And if you've ever been to Skyrim, you can appreciate that that is scarcely sufficient.

Drusba did not tell Eslaf the story of his birth, or that his brothers and sister were leading quite nice lives with their inheritances, for, as we have said, she was rather shy, and found it difficult to broach the subject. She was so painfully shy, in fact, that whenever he asked any questions about where he came from, Drusba would run away. That was more or less her answer to everything, to flee.

In order to communicate with her at all, Eslaf learned how to run almost as soon as he could walk. He couldn't keep up with his adopted mother at first, but in time he learned to go toe-heel toe-heel if he anticipated a short but fast sprint, and heel-toe heel-toe if it seemed Drusba was headed for a long distance marathon flight. He never did get all the answers he needed from her, but Eslaf did learn how to run.

The kingdom of Erolgard had, in the years that Eslaf was growing, become quite a grim place. King Ynohp did not have a treasury, for Suoibud had been given that; he did not have any property for income, for Laernu had been given that; he did not have an army to protect the people, for Laicifitra

had been given that. Futhermore, as he was but a child, all decisions in the kingdom went through Ynohp's rather corrupt council. It had become a bureaucratic exploitative land of high taxes, rampant crime, and regular incursions from neighboring kingdoms. Not a particular unusual situation for a kingdom of Tamriel, but an unpleasant one nonetheless.

The time finally came when the taxcollector arrived to Drusba's hovel, such as it was, to collect the only thing he could - the floor. Rather than protest, the poor shy maid ran away, and Eslaf never saw her again.

Without a home or a mother, Eslaf did not know what to do. He had grown accustomed to the cold open air in Drusba's shack, but he was hungry.

'May I have a piece of meat?' he asked the butcher down the street. 'I'm very hungry.'

The man had known the boy for years, often spoke to his wife about how sorry he felt for him, growing up in a home with no ceilings or walls. He smiled at Eslaf and said, 'Go away, or I'll hit you.'

Eslaf hurriedly left the butcher and went to a nearby tavern. The tavernkeeper had been a former valet in the king's court and knew that the boy was by right a prince. Many times, he had seen the poor ragged lad in the streets, and sighed at the way fate had treated him.

'May I have something to eat?' Eslaf asked this tavernkeeper. 'I'm very hungry.'

'You're lucky I don't cook you up and eat you,' replied the tavernkeeper.

Eslaf hurriedly left the tavern. For the rest of the day, the boy approached the good citizens of Erolgard, begging for food. One person had thrown something at him, but it turned out to be an inedible rock.

As night fell, a raggedy man came up to Eslaf and, without saying a word, handed him a piece of fruit and a piece of dried meat. The lad took it, wide-eyed, and as he devoured it, he thanked the man very sweetly.

'If I see you begging on the streets tomorrow,' the man growled. 'I'll kill you myself. There are only so many beggars we of the guild allow in any one town, and you make it one too many. You're ruining business.'

It was a good thing Eslaf Erol knew how to run. He ran all night.

Eslaf Erol's story is continued in the book 'Thief.'

Thief

By Reven

If the reader has not yet had the pleasure of reading the first volume in these series on the life of Eslaf Erol, 'Beggar,' he should close this book immediately, for I shan't recap.

I will tell you this much, gentle reader. When we last saw Eslaf, he was a boy, an orphan, a failed beggar, running through the wild winter woods of Skyrim, away from his home of Erolgard. He continued running, stopping here and there, for many more years, until he was a young man.

Eslaf discovered that among the ways of getting food, asking for it was the most troublesome. Far easier was finding it in the wilderness, or taking it from unguarded market stalls. The only thing worse than begging to get food was begging for the opportunity to work for the money to buy it. That seemed needlessly complicated.

No, as far as Eslaf was concerned, he was best off being a scavenger, a beggar, and a thief.

He commited his first act of thievery shortly after leaving Erolgard, while in the southern woods of Tamburkar in the rugged land near Mount Jensen just east of the village of Hoarbeld. Eslaf was starving, having not eaten anything but a rather scrawny raw squirrel in four days, and he smelled meat cooking and then found the smoke. A band of minstral bards was making camp. He watched them from the bushes as they cooked, and joked, and flirted, and sang.

He could've asked them for some food, but so many others had refused him before. Instead, he rushed out, grabbed a piece of meat from the fire, and wincing from the burns, scrambled up the nearest tree to devour it while the bards stood under him and laughed.

'What is your next move, thief?' giggled a fair, red-headed woman who was covered with tattoos. 'How do you intend to disappear without us catching and punishing you?'

As the hunger subsided, Eslaf realized she was right. The only way to get out of the tree without falling in their midst was to take the branch down to where it hung over a creek. It was a drop off a cliff of about fifty feet. That seemed like the wisest strategy, so Eslaf began crawling in that direction.

'You do know how to fall, boy?' called out a young Khajiiti, but a few years older than Eslaf, thin but muscular, graceful in his slightest movements. 'If you don't, you should just climb down here and take what's coming to you. It's idiotic to break your neck, when we'd just give you some bruises and send you on your way.'

'Of course I know how to fall,' Eslaf called back, but he didn't. He just thought the trick of falling was to have nothing underneath you, and let nature take its course. But fifty feet up, when you're looking down, is enough to give anyone pause.

'I'm sorry to doubt your abilities, Master Thief,' said the Khajiiti, grinning. 'Obviously you know to fall feet first with your body straight but loose to avoid cracking like an egg. It seems you are destined to escape us.'

Eslaf wisely followed the Khajiiti's hints, and leapt into the river, falling without much grace but without hurting himself. In the years that followed, he had to make several more drops from even greater heights, usually after a theft, sometimes without water beneath him, and he improved the basic technique.

When he arrived in the western town of Jallenheim on the morning of his twenty-first birthday, it didn't take him long to find out who was the richest person, most deserving of being burgled. An impregnable palace in a park near the center of town was owned by a mysterious young man named Suoibud. Eslaf wasted no time in finding the palace and watching it. A fortified palace he had come to learn was like a person, with quirks and habits beneath its hard shell.

It was not an old place, evidently whatever money this Suoibud had come into was fairly recent. It was regularly patrolled by guards, implying that the rich man was fearful of been burgled, with good reason. The most distinctive feature of the palace was its tower, rising a hundred feet above the stone walls, doubtless giving the occupant a good defensive view. Eslaf guessed that that if Suoibud was as paranoid as he guessed him to be, the tower would also provide a view of the palace storehouse. The rich man would want to keep an eye on his fortune. That meant that the loot couldn't be directly beneath the tower, but somewhere in the courtyard within the walls.

The light in the tower shone all night long, so Eslaf boldly decided that the best time to burgle was by the light of day, when Suoibud must sleep. That would be the time the guards would least expect a thief to pounce.

And so, when the noon sun was shining over the palace, Eslaf quickly scaled the wall near the front gate and waited, hidden in the crenelations. The interior courtyard was plain and desolate, with few places to hide, but he saw that there were two wells. One the guards used from time to time to draw up water and slake their thirst, but Eslaf noticed that guards would pass by the other well, never using it.

He waited until the guards were distracted, just for a second, by the arrival of a merchant in a wagon, bearing goods for the palace. While they were searching his wagon, Eslaf leapt, elegantly, feet first, from the wall into the well.

It was not a particularly soft landing for, as Eslaf had guessed, the well was not full of water, but gold. Still, he knew how to roll after a fall, and he didn't hurt himself. In the dank subterranean storehouse, he stuffed his pockets with gold and was about to go to the door which he assumed would lead to the tower when he noticed a gem the size of an apple, worth more than all the gold that was left. Eslaf found room for it down his pants.

The door did indeed lead to the tower, and Eslaf followed its curving stairwell up, walking quietly but quickly. At the top, he found the master of

the palace's private quarters, ornate and cold, with invaluable artwork and decorative swords and shields on the walls. Eslaf assumed the snoring lump under the sheets was Suoibud, but he didn't investigate too closely. He crept to the windows and looked out.

It was going to be a difficult fall, for certes. He needed to jump from the tower, past the walls, and hit the tree on the other side. The tree branches would hurt, but they would break his fall, and there was a pile of hay he had left under the tree to prevent further injury.

Eslaf was about to leap when the occupant of the room woke up with a start, yelling, 'My gem!'

Eslaf and stared at him for a second, wide-eyed. They looked alike. Not surprising, since they were brothers.

Eslaf Erol's story is continued in the book 'Warrior.'

Warrior

By Reven

This is the third book in a four-book series. If you have not read the first two books, 'Beggar' and 'Thief,' you would be well advised to do so.

Suoibud Erol did not know much of his past, nor did he care to.

As a child, he had lived in Erolgard, but the kingdom was very poor and taxes were as a result very high. He was too young to manage his abundant inheritance, but his servants, fearing that their master would be ruined, moved him to Jallenheim. No one knew why that location was picked. Some old maid, long dead now, had thought it was a good place to raise a child. No one else had a better idea.

There may have been children with a more pampered, more spoiled existance than young Suoibud, but that is doubtful. As he grew, he understood that he was rich, but he had nothing else. No family, no social position, no security at all. Loyalty, he found out on more than one occasion, cannot truly be bought. Knowing that he had but one asset, a vast fortune, he was determined to protect it, and, if possible, increase it.

Some otherwise perfectly nice people are greedy, but Suoibud was that rare accident of nature or breeding who has no other interest but acquiring and hoarding gold. He was willing to do anything to increase his fortune. Most recently, he had begun secretly hiring mercenaries to attack desirable properties, and then buying them when no one wanted to live there any more. The attacks would then, of course, cease, and Suoibud would have profitable land which he had purchased for a song. It had begun small with a few farms, but recently he had begun a more ambitious campaign.

In north-central Skyrim, there is an area called The Aalto, which is of unique geographical interest. It is a dormant volcanic valley surrounded on all sides by glaciers, so the earth is hot from the volcano, but the constant

water drizzle and air is frigid. A grape called Jazbay grows there comfortably, and everywhere else in Tamriel it withers and dies. The strange vineyard is a privately owned, and the wine produced from it is thus rare and extremely expensive. It is said that the Emperor needs the permission of the Imperial Council to have a glass of it once a year.

In order to harass the owner of The Aalto into selling his land cheap, Suoibud had to hire more than a few mercenaries. He had to hire the finest private army in Skyrim.

Suoibud did not like spending money, but he had agreed to pay the general of the army, a woman called Laicifitra, a gem the size of an apple. He had not given it to her yet - payment was to be delivered on the success of the mission - but he had trouble sleeping knowing that he was going to giving up such a prize. He always slept during the day so he could watch his storehouse by night, when he knew thieves were about.

That brings us up to this moment when, after a fitful sleep, Suoibud woke up at about noon, and surprised a thief in his bedroom. The thief was Eslaf.

Eslaf had been contemplating a leap from the window, a hundred feet down, into the branches of a tree beyond the walls of the fortified palace, and a tumble into a stack of hay. Anyone who has ever attempted such a feat will testify that it takes some concentration and nerve to do such a thing. When he saw that the rich man sleeping in the room had awakened, both left him, and Eslaf slipped behind a tall ornamental shield on display to wait for Suoibud to go back to sleep.

Suoibud did not go back to sleep. He had heard nothing, but could feel someone in the room with him. He stood up and began pacing the room.

Suoibud paced and paced, and gradually decided that he was imagining things. No one was there. His fortune was safe and secure.

He was returning to his bed when he heard a clunk. Turning around, he saw the gem, the one he was to give to Laicifitra on the floor by the Atmoran cavalry shield. A hand reached out from behind the shield and grabbed it up.

'Thief!' Suoibud cried out, grabbing a jeweled Akaviri katana from the wall and lunging at the shield.

The 'fight' between Eslaf and Suoibud will not go down in the annals of great duels. Suoibud did not know how to use a sword, and Eslaf was no expert at blocking with a shield. It was clumsy, it was awkward. Suoibud was furious, but was psychologically incapable of using the sword in any way that could damage its fine filligree, reducing its market value. Eslaf kept moving, dragging the shield with him, trying to keep it between him and the blade, which is, after all, the most essential part of any block.

Suoibud screamed in frustration as he struck at the shield, bumping its way across the room. He even tried negotiating with the thief, explaining that the gem was promised to a great warrior named Laicifitra, and if he would give it back, Suoibud would happily give him something else in return. Eslaf was not a genius, but he did not believe that.

By the time Suoibud's guards came to the bedroom in response to their master's calls, he had succeeded in backing the shield into a window.

They fell on the shield, having considerable more expertise with their swords than Suoibud did, but they discovered that there was no one behind it. Eslaf had leapt out the window and escaped.

As he ran heavily through the streets of Jallenheim, making jingling noises from the gold coins in his pockets, and feeling the huge gem chafe where he had hidden it, Eslaf did not know where he should go next. He knew only that he could never go back to that town, and he must avoid this warrior named Laicifitra who had claims on the jewel.

Eslaf Erol's story is continued in the book 'King.'

King

By Reven

Gentle reader, you will not understand a word of what follows unless you have read and commited to memory the first three volumes in this series, 'Beggar,' 'Thief,' and 'Warrior,' which leads up to this, the conclusion. I encourage you to seek them out at your favorite bookseller.

We last left Eslaf Erol fleeing for his life, which was a common enough occurance for him. He had stolen a lot of gold, and one particularly large gem, from a rich man in Jallenheim named Suoibud. The thief fled north, spending the gold wildly, as thieves generally do, for all sorts of illicit pleasures, which would no doubt disturb the gentleman or lady reading this, so I will not go into detail.

The one thing he held onto was the gem.

He didn't keep it because of any particular attachment, but because he did not know anyone rich enough to buy it from him. And so he found himself in the ironic situation of being penniless and having in his possession a gem worth millions.

'Will you give me a room, some bread, and a flagon of beer in exchange for this?' he asked a tavernkeep in the little village of Kravenswold, which was so far north, it was half situated on the Sea of Ghosts.

The tavernkeep looked at it suspiciously.

'It's just crystal,' Eslaf said quickly. 'But isn't it pretty?'

'Let me see that,' said a young armor-clad woman at the end of the bar. Without waiting permission, she picked up the gem, studied it, and smiled not very sweetly at Eslaf. 'Would you join me at my table?'

'I'm actually in a bit of a hurry,' replied Eslaf, holding out his hand for the stone. 'Another time?'

'Out of respect for my friend, the tavernkeep here, my men and I leave our weapons behind when we come in here,' the woman said casually, not handing the gem back, but picking up a broom that was sitting against the bar. 'I can assure you, however, that I can use this quite effectively as a blunt instrument. Not a weapon, of course, but an instrument to stun, medicinally crush a bone or two, and then - once it is on the inside...'

'Which table?' asked Eslaf quickly.

The young woman led him to a large table in the back of the tavern where ten of the biggest Nord brutes Eslaf had ever seen were sitting. They looked at him with polite disinterest, as if he were a strange insect, worth briefly studying before crushing.

'My name is Laicifitra,' she said, and Eslaf blinked. That was the name Suoibud had uttered before Eslaf had made his escape. 'And these are my lieutenants. I am the commander of a very large independent army of noble knights. The very best in Skyrim. Most recently we were given a job to attack a vineyard in The Aalto to force its owner, a man named Laernu, to sell to our employer, a man named Suoibud. Our payment was to be a gem of surpassing size and quality, quite famous and unmistakable.

'We did as we were asked, and when we went to Suoibud to collect our fee, he told us he was unable to pay, due to a recent burglary. In the end, though, he saw things our way, and paid us an amount of gold almost equal to the worth of the prize jewel... It did not empty out his treasury entirely, but it meant he was unable to buy the land in the Aalto after all. So we were not paid enough, Suoibud has taken a heavy financial blow, and Laernu's prize crop of Jazbay has been temporarily destroyed for naught,' Laicifitra took a long, slow drink of her mead before continuing. 'Now, I wonder, could you tell me, how came you in the possession of the gem we were promised?'

Eslaf did not answer at once.

Instead, he took a piece of bread from the plate of the savage bearded barbarian on his left and ate it.

'I'm sorry,' he said, his mouth full. 'May I? Of course, I couldn't stop you from taking the gem even if I wanted to, and as a matter of fact, I don't mind at all. It's also useless to deny how it came into my possession. I stole it from your employer. I certainly didn't mean you or your noble knights any harm by it, but I can understand why the word of a thief is not suitable for one such as yourself.'

'No,' replied Laicifitra, frowning, but her eyes showing amusement. 'Not suitable at all.'

'But before you kill me,' Eslaf said, grabbing another piece of bread. 'Tell me, how suitable is it for noble knights such as yourself to be paid twice for one job? I have no honor myself, but I would have thought that since Suoibud took a profit loss to pay you, and now you have the gem, your handsome profit is not entirely honorable.'

Laicifitra picked up the broom and looked at Eslaf. Then she laughed, 'What is your name, thief?'

'Eslaf,' said the thief.

'We will take the gem, as it was promised to us. But you are right. We should not be paid twice for the same job. So,' said the warrior woman, putting down the broomstick. 'You are our new employer. What would you have your own army do for you?'

Many people could find quite a few good uses for their own army, but Eslaf was not among them. He searched his brain, and finally it was decided that it was a debt to be paid later. For all her brutality, Laicifitra was an simple woman, raised, he learned, by the very army she commanded. Fighting and honor were the only things she knew.

When Eslaf left Kravenswold, he had an army at his beck and call, but not a coin to his name. He knew he would have to steal something soon.

As he wandered the woods, scrounging for food, he was beset with a strange feeling of familiarity. These were the very woods he had been in as a child, also starving, also scrounging. When he came out on the road, he found that he had come back on the kingdom where he had been raised by the dear, stupid, shy maid Drusba.

He was in Erolgard.

It had fallen even deeper into despair since his youth. The shops that had refused him food were boarded up, abandoned. The only people left were hollow, hopeless figures, so ravaged by taxation, despotism, and barbaric raids that they were too weak to flee. Eslaf realized how lucky he was to have gotten out in his youth.

There was, however, a castle and a king. Eslaf immediately made plans to raid the treasury. As usual, he watched the place carefully, taking note of the security and the habits of the guards. This took some time. In the end, he realized there was no security and no guards.

He walked in the front door, and down the empty corridors to the treasury. It was full of precisely nothing, except one man. He was Eslaf's age, but looked much older.

'There's nothing to steal,' he said. 'Would that there was.'

King Ynohp, though prematurely aged, had the same white blond hair and blue eyes like broken glass that Eslaf had. In fact, he resembled Suoibud and Laicifitra as well. And though Eslaf had never met the ruined landlord of the Aalto, Laernu, he looked him too. Not surprisingly, since they were quintuplets.

'So, you have nothing?' asked Eslaf, gently.

'Nothing except my poor kingdom, curse it,' the King grumbled. 'Before I came to the throne, it was powerful and rich, but I inherited none of that, only the title. For my entire life, I've had responsibility thrust on my

shoulders, but never had the means to handle it properly. I look over the desolation which is my birthright, and I hate it. If it were possible to steal a kingdom, I would not lift a finger to stop you.'

It was, it turned out, quite possible to steal a kingdom. Eslaf became known as Ynohp, a deception easily done given their physical similarities. The real Ynohp, taking the name of Ylekilnu, happily left his demesne, becoming eventually a simple worker in the vineyards of The Aalto. For the first time free of responsibility, he fell into his new life with gusto, the years melting off him.

The new Ynohp called in his favor with Laicifitra, using her army to restore peace to the kingdom of Erolgard. Now that it was safe, business and commerce began to return to the land, and Eslaf reduced the tyrannical taxes to encourage it to grow. Upon hearing that, Suoibud, ever nervous about losing his money, elected to return to the land of his birth. When he died years later, out of greed, he had refused to name someone an heir, so the kingdom received its entire fortune.

Eslaf used part of the gold to buy the vineyards of The Aalto, after hearing great things of it from Ynohp.

And so it was that Erolgard was returned to its previous prosperity by the fifth born child of King Ytluaf - Eslaf Erol, beggar, thief, warrior (of sorts), and king.

Collected Essays on Dwemer History and Culture

Chapter 1 - Marobar Sul and the Trivialization of the Dwemer in Popular Culture

by Hasphat Antabolis

While Marobar Sul's Ancient Tales of the Dwemer was definitively debunked in scholarly circles as early as the reign of Katariah I, it remains one of the staples of the literate middle-classes of the Empire, and has served to set the image of the Dwemer in the popular imagination for generations of schoolchildren. What about this lengthy (but curiously insubstantial) tome has proved so captivating to the public that it has been able to see off both the scorn of the literati and the scathing critiques of the scholars?

Before examing this question, a brief summary of the provenance and subsequent career of Ancient Tales would be appropriate. First published around 2E670, in the Interregnum between the fall of the First Cyrodilic Empire and the rise of Tiber Septim, it was originally presented as a serious, scholarly work based on research in the archives of the University of Gwylim, and in the chaos of that era was taken at face value (a sign of the sad state of Dwemer scholarship in those years). Little is known of the author, but Marobar Sul was most likely a pseudonym of Gor Felim, a prolific writer of "penny dreadful romances" of that era, who is known to have used many other pseudonyms. While most of Felim's other work has, thankfully, been lost to history, what little survives matches Ancient Tales in both language and tone (see Lomis, "Textual Comparison of Gor Felim's A Hypothetical Treachery with Marobar Sul's Ancient Tales of the Dwemer"). Felim lived in Cyrodiil his whole life, writing light entertainments for the elite of the old Imperial capital. Why he decided to turn his hand to the Dwemer is unknown, but it is clear that his "research" consisted of nothing more than collecting the peasants' tales of the Nibenay Valley and recasting

them in Dwemer guise.

The book proved popular in Cyrodiil, and Felim continued to churn out more volumes until the series numbered seven in all. Ancient Tales of the Dwemer was thus firmly established as a local favorite in Cyrodiil (already in its 17th printing) when the historical forces that propelled Tiber Septim to prominence also began to spread the literature of the "heartland" across the continent. Marobar Sul's version of the Dwemer was seized upon in a surge of human racial nationalism that has not yet subsided.

The Dwemer appear in these tales as creatures of fable and light fantasy, but in general they are "just like us". They come across as a bit eccentric, perhaps, but certainly there is nothing fearsome or dangerous about them. Compare these to the Dwemer of early Redguard legend: a mysterious, powerful race, capable of bending the very laws of nature to their will; vanished but perhaps not gone. Or the Dwemer portrayed in the most ancient Nord sagas: fearsome warriors, tainted by blasphemous religious practices, who used their profane mechanisms to drive the Nords from Morrowind. Marobar Sul's Dwemer were much more amenable to the spirit of the time, which saw humans as the pinnacle of creation and the other races as unenlightened barbarians or imperfect, lesser versions of humans eager for tutelage. Ancient Tales falls firmly in the latter camp, which does much to explain its enduring hold on the popular imagination. Marobar Sul's Dwemer are so much more comfortable, so much friendlier, so much more familiar, than the real Dwemer, whose truly mysterious nature we are only beginning to understand. The public prefers the light, trivial version of this vanished race. And from what I have learned in my years of studying the Dwemer, I have some sympathy for that preference. As the following essays will show, the Dwemer were, to our modern eyes, a remarkably unlikeable people in many ways.

The Exodus

By Waughin Jarth

Vralla was a little girl, beautiful and sweet-natured, beautiful and smart, beautiful and energetic. Everything that her parents had dreamed she would be. As perfect as she was, they could not help but have dreams for her. Her father, a bit of a social climber named Munthen, thought she would marry well, perhaps become a Princess of the Empire. Her mother, an insecure woman named Cinneta, thought she would reach greatness on her own, as a knight or a sorceress. As much as they wanted the very best for their daughter, they argued about what her fate would be, but both were wrong. Instead of growing up, she grew very ill.

The Temples told them to give up hope, and The Mages Guild told them that what afflicted Vralla was so rare, so deadly, that there was no cure. She was doomed to die, and soon.

When the great institutions of the Empire failed them, Munthen and Cinneta sought out the witches, the sorcerer hermits, and the other hidden, secret powers that lurk in the shadows of civilization.

'I can think of only one place you can go,' said an old herbalist they found in the most remote peaks of the Wrothgarian Mountains. 'The Mages Guild at Olenveld.'

'But we have already been to the Mages Guild,' protested Munthen. 'They couldn't help us.'

'Go to Olenveld," the herbalist insisted. "And tell no one that you're going there.'

It was not easy to find Olenveld, as it did not appear on any modern map. In a bookseller's in Skyrim, however, they found it in a historic book of cartography from the 2nd Era. In the yellowed pages, there was Olenveld, a

city on an island in the northern coast, a day's sail in summertide from Winterhold.

Bundling their pale daughter against the chill of the ocean wind, the couple set sail, using the old map as their only guide. For nearly two days, they were at sea, circling the same position, wondering if they were the victim of a cruel trick. And then they saw it.

In the mist of crashing waves were twin crumbled statues framing the harbor, long forgotten Gods or heroes. The ships within were half-sunk, rotten shells along the docks. Munthen brought his ship in, and the three walked into the deserted island city.

Taverns with broken windows, a plaza with a dried-up well, shattered palaces and fire-blackened tenements, barren shops and abandoned stables, all desolate, all still, but for the high keening ocean wind that whistled through the empty places. And gravestones. Every road and alley was lined, and crossed, and crossed again with memorials to the dead.

Munthen and Cinneta looked at one another. The chill they felt had little to do with the wind. Then they looked at Vralla, and continued on to their goal - the Mages Guild of Olenveld.

Candlelight glistened through the windows of the great dark building, but it brought them little relief to know that someone was alive in the island of death. They knocked on the door, and steeled themselves against whatever horror they might face within.

The door was opened by a rather plump middle-aged Nord woman with frizzy blond hair. Standing behind her, a meek-looking bald Nord about her age, a shy teenage Breton couple, still very pimply and awkward, and a very old, apple-cheeked Breton man who grinned with delight at the visitors.

'Oh, my goodness,' said the Nord woman, all afluster. 'I thought my ears must be fooling me when I heard that door a-knockin'. Come in, come in, it's so cold!'

The three were ushered in the door, and they were relieved to find that the Guild did not look abandoned in the least. It was well swept, well lit, and cheerfully decorated. The group fell into introductions. The inhabitants of the Guildhouse in Olenveld were two families, the Nords Jalmar and Nette, and the Bretons Lywel, Rosalyn, and old Wynster. They were friendly and accommodating, immediately bringing some mulled wine and bread while Munthen and Cinneta explained to them what they were doing there, and what the healers and herbalists had said about Vralla.

'So, you see,' said Cinneta, tearfully. 'We didn't think we'd find the Mages Guild in Olenveld, but now that we have, please, you're our last hope.'

The five strangers also had tears in their eyes. Nette wept particularly noisily.

'Oh, you've been through too, too much,' the Nord woman bawled. 'Of course, we'll help. Your little girl will be right as rain.'

'It is fair to tell you,' said Jalmar, more stoically, though he clearly was also touched by the tale. 'This is a Guildhouse, but we are not Mages. We took this building because it was abandoned and it serves our purposes since the Exodus. We are Necromancers.'

'Necromancers?' Cinneta quivered. How could these nice people be anything so horrible?

'Yes, dear,' Nette smiled, patting her hand. 'I know. We have a bad reputation, I'm afraid. Never was very good, and now that well-meaning but foolish Archmagister Hannibal Traven -'

'May the Worm King eat his soul!' cried the old man quite suddenly and very viciously.

'Now, now, Wynster,' said the teenage girl Rosalyn, blushing and smiling at Cinneta apologetically. 'I'm sorry about him. He's usually very sweet-natured.'

'Well, of course, he's right, Mannimarco will have the last say in the matter,' Jalmar said. 'But right now, it's all very, well, awkward. When Traven officially banned the art, we had to go into hiding. The only other option was to abandon it altogether, and that's just foolish, though there are many who have done it.'

'Not many people know about Olenveld anymore since Tiber Septim used it as his own personal graveyard,' said Lywel. 'Took us a week to find it again. But it's perfect for us. Lots of dead bodies, you know... '

'Lywel!' Rosalyn admonished him. 'You're going to scare them!'

'Sorry,' Lywel grinned sheepishly.

'I don't care what you do here,' said Munthen sternly. 'I just want to know what you can do for my daughter.'

'Well,' said Jalmar with a shrug. 'I guess we can make it so she doesn't die and is never sick again.'

Cinneta gasped, 'Please! We'll give you everything we have!'

'Nonsense,' said Nette, picking up Vralla in her big, beefy arms. 'Oh, what a beautiful girl. Would you like to feel better, little sweetheart?'

Vralla nodded, wearily.

'You stay here,' Jalmar said. 'Rosalyn, I'm sure we have something better than bread to offer these nice folks.'

Nette started to carry Vralla away, but Cinneta ran after her. 'Wait, I'm coming too.'

'Oh, I'm sure you would, but it'd ruin the spell, dear,' Nette said. 'Don't worry about a thing. We've done this dozens of times.'

Munthen puts his arms around his wife, and she relented. Rosalyn hurried off to the kitchen and brought some roast fowl and more mulled wine for them. They sat in silence and ate.

Wynster shuddered suddenly. 'The little girl has died.'

'Oh!' Cinneta gasped.

'What in Oblivion do you mean?!' Munthen cried.

'Wynster, was that really necessary?' Lywel scowled at the old man, before turning to Munthen and Cinneta. 'She had to die. Necromancy is not about curing a disease, it's about resurrection, total regeneration, transforming the whole body, not just the parts that aren't working now.'

Munthen stood up, angrily. 'If those maniacs killed her -'

'They didn't,' Rosalyn snapped, her shy eyes now showing fire. 'Your daughter was on her last breath when she came in here, anyone could see that. I know that this is hard, horrible even, but I won't have you call that sweet couple who are only trying to help you, 'maniacs."

Cinneta burst into tears, 'But she's going to live now? Isn't she?'

'Oh yes,' Lywel said, smiling broadly.

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' Cinneta burst into tears. 'I don't know what we would have done -'

'I know how you feel,' said Rosalyn, patting Wynster's hand fondly. 'When I thought we were going to lose him, I was willing to do anything, just like you.'

Cinneta smiled. 'How old is your father?'

'My son,' Rosalyn corrected her. 'He's six.'

From the other room came the sound of tiny footsteps.

'Vralla, go give your parents a big hug,' said Jalmar.

Munthen and Cinneta turned, and the screaming began.

Experimentation in the Physicalities of the Werewolf

by Reman Crex

Far too many books such as this one begin with some sort of justification. Some reason for study is concocted, in the hopes that the writer's obsession will be seen in a more noble light. I make no such pretensions. No werewolf killed my family, none ever threatened me personally, nor even an acquaintance of mine. My obsession is borne out of simple curiosity, with a strong dose of hatred for the unnatural. Is it possible to hate something without having been done harm by it? I am no philosopher, and thus here ends my introduction. On with my studies.

I have endeavored, over the course of several decades, to perform a complete study of the physical nature of the creatures we call werewolves. I overlook entirely the origins of this plague, whether it is acquired voluntarily or inflicted, and how one might be cured. Such matters are filled with too much guesswork and rambling second-hand inanities from farmhands.

Subject A

Captured: in Morrowind, while in beast form
Makeup: Male, Breton in his true form
Notes: Subject shows an unusually high degree of control over his transformations.

Experiment 1 -- Subject's bodily proportions were thoroughly measured before, during, and after the transformation. As expected, the proportions were identical while in true form, but some minor swelling of the head was observed immediately after the return. Changes observed during transformation:

23% increase in shoulder width
17% narrowing of hips
47% lengthening of arms
7% increase in finger length (not accounting for claws)

As for the legs -- the lengthening of the foot to several times its normal length seems to account for the otherwise negligible changes in the thigh region.

Experiment 2 -- Subject was coerced into changing as rapidly and as frequently as possible, at various times and at various levels of duress.

Transformation times and effects were not viewed to change notably. Subject expired, concluding tests.

Subject B

Captured: in Cyrodiil, already imprisoned by local authorities, in true form
Makeup: Female, Nord in her true form
Notes: Subject's large size in both true and transformed forms makes an excellent fit for vivisection

I believe I may have been the first to witness a werewolf transformation ply its effects on the internal workings of a creature. The heart is the first thing to swell, long before the lungs or bones shift to accommodate it. This may account for the intense chest pains that some of the afflicted report directly before their changes.

More interesting were the changes observed in the muscles of the legs. I had expected a strengthening, as the beasts are known for great power and speed, but they also seemed to change color into a dusky brown. This could also be attributed to blood loss from the procedures.

Before the subject expired, I worked applying some known "remedies" for

the disease directly to internal organs. Wolfsbane petals applied to the bones seemed to render them brittle, and the ribcage nearly collapsed at the touch. The juice of ripened belladonna berries was pressed directly into the veins, and they could be seen to shrivel behind the flow as it moved through the system. Upon reaching the heart, the major vessels pulled away completely, and subject expired within minutes.

An Explorer's Guide to Skyrim

by Marcius Carvain,
Viscount Bruma

Far too often, noble visitors from Cyrodiil see little more of Skyrim than the view from their carriage. To be sure, this coarse, uncivilized province is far from hospitable, but it is also a place of fierce, wild beauty, with grand vistas and inspiring natural wonders awaiting those with the will to seek them out and the refinement to truly appreciate them. If you are of a mind to see Skyrim for yourself, I recommend beginning your adventure as I did, by seeking out Stones of Fate.

No doubt you are taken aback by the name, as I once was. The provincials and village folk have all manner of dark tales about these ancient monuments. Stories of necromantic rituals and fell spirits, of great and terrible powers conferred on any who dare to touch them.

The stories are, as Jarl Igrof once told me, "A load of mammoth dung." A bit uncouth, but you get the point.

To be sure, keep your guards with you at all times - brigands and wild animals are never to be taken lightly. But the stones themselves are nothing to fear. Quite the contrary, their proximity to cities and roads makes them ideal destinations for the novice explorer, and many boast spectacular views that make the journey well worth the effort.

To whet your appetite, here are four such locations:

Most travelers enter Skyrim by way of Helgen, "Gateway to the North." If you find yourself in this backwater hovel, consider taking an afternoon's ride to the north, keeping to the road as it winds down the cliffs at the eastern end of Lake Ilinalta. Just off the path, on a small bluff, lie the three Guardian Stones, the greatest concentration of standing stones in all Skyrim. The view of the lake here at sunset is simply sublime.

Visitors from Cheydinhal will pass through Riften, city of intrigue and larceny since Tiber Septim's day. If you seek adventure in the Rift, leave the city by the southern gate and cast your gaze upon the bluff that rises to the south. Atop it sits the Shadow Stone, a fitting symbol for the city of thieves.

Whiterun is the heart of Skyrim, its towering palace rivaling even the great castles of Cyrodiil. But should you tire of the Jarl's hospitality, another adventure awaits a few hours to the east of the city, along the road that rises above White River Gorge. The Ritual Stone can be found atop the lone hill that rises on the north side of the road, set into an ancient monument. Take time to soak in the incredible view of Whiterun, the tundra, and the gorge from this unique spot.

More seasoned explorers may wish to visit Markarth, the ancient city of stone far to the west. The recent Forsworn Rebellion has made travel in the Reach perilous, but for those determined to seek adventure no matter the cost, another stone can be found to the east of the city, perched on the mountain above Kolskeggr Mine. Though the climb is difficult, reaching the summit is a milestone any explorer could be proud of.

There are other Stones of Fate to be found in Skyrim - I myself have seen several more, perched on the most remote mountain peaks, or wreathed in fog amid the northern marshes.

But the true joy of exploration is in the discovery, and so I leave the rest to you. May the Eight guide your steps.

Fall from Glory

by Nithilis Lidari

The Thieves Guild of Skyrim is something of an enigma. Within the last few decades, their order has gone from one of the largest, most influential criminal organizations in all of Tamriel to a small group of stragglers barely able to wreak havoc in their home city of Riften. Although evidence that could explain this rapid decline has never surfaced, speculation has run rampant.

One theory holds that the Guild suffered a loss - it's strongly believed that their Guild Master was slain by one of their own. This Guild Master, known only as "Gallus," maintained strong ties with many of the influential families in Skyrim. When he perished, those bonds perished with him. Without these bonds, the Guild could no longer safely operate within Skyrim's holds.

A second theory suggests that the Guild is experiencing some sort of mystical "curse" causing normal activities for its members to become exceedingly difficult. While there is no solid evidence to support this theory, the last two decades have seen an unusual rise in failed attempts by the Guild to execute highly lucrative heists. Reasons for the presence of this supposed curse is being attributed to everything from the aforementioned murder to divine interference.

In order to solve this mystery once and for all, I've spent the last two years infiltrating the Thieves Guild. Initially making contact with them in Riften proved difficult, as they're quite wary of outsiders, but through repeated efforts I was able to gain their confidence. It's my hope that once I've gained access to some of the Guild leadership, I can learn more about their decline and publish a second volume of my work.

Although helping the Guild perform their petty crimes brands me as a criminal, I feel that it's a burden worth bearing. The mystery of the Thieves

Guild's fall from power needs to be solved once and for all as a matter of record and as a footnote to Skyrim's history.

The Fall of Saarthal

by Heseph Chirirnis, Mages Guild Scholar
Assigned to Imperial Archaeologist Sentius Floronius

Let it be known that the esteemed archaeologist has chosen to focus his boundless talents on the cooking and baking habits of early First Era Nords. While this work will no doubt bring great glory and benefit to the Empire, it is clear that my limited expertise is of no use to this effort.

I have instead been using my considerable free time to investigate a particular avenue of study, namely that of the Fall of Saarthal. Every child of the Empire knows what happened here; that the first city of Man on Tamriel was sacked by the elves, jealous and fearful of the threat men posed to them. Relations have obviously improved considerably since then, but to be able to see the results of the destruction first-hand, it is quite striking to note the degree of effort that went into the venture.

The first task before me was differentiating between areas of original architecture and those that were rebuilt after Ysgramor retook the city with his five hundred companions. Initially relying heavily on the expertise of archaeologist Floronius, my ability to discern the difference for myself improved over time. Indeed, I was surprised to find that many areas of the city, far more than I would have believed, retained much of the original stonework. Work was clearly done to remedy the effects of the city being burned after the elves' assault, but I suspect they underestimated the durability of Nordic craftsmanship.

Or rather, that is what I initially thought. Perhaps it was a mistaken sense of pride in the accomplishments of these early men, or perhaps it was just my inexperience that led me to this conclusion. Something was amiss, though. Repeated attempts to consult the exceedingly perceptive archaeologist were unfruitful, often digressing into lectures on the bathing habits of Saarthal residents, or the average number of potted plants in homes. I was again forced to rely on my limited powers of observation and deduction.

And so I have no conclusive results to report at this time. I can say with certainty that the initial attack on Saarthal seems to have been very focused, and does not appear to correlate to any locations that have been established as points of defense or importance. While the eminent scholar Sentius has yet to examine my findings, or indeed show any interest in them, my inclination is to suggest that not only did the elves know the apparent layout of the city, but that their assault was based on a specific directive and perhaps a singular goal.

My humble investigations shall continue as time permits.

Fall of the Snow Prince

An account of the Battle of the Moesring as transcribed by Lokheim, chronicler to the chieftain Ingjaldr White-Eye

From whence he came we did not know, but into the battle he rode, on a brilliant steed of pallid white. Elf we called him, for Elf he was, yet unlike any other of his kind we had ever seen before that day. His spear and armor bore the radiant and terrible glow of unknown magicka, and so adorned this unknown rider seemed more wight than warrior.

What troubled, nay, frightened us most at that moment was the call that rose from the Elven ranks. It was not fear, not wonder, but an unabashed and unbridled joy, the kind of felicity felt by a damned man who has been granted a second chance at life. For at that time the Elves were as damned and near death as ever they had been during the great skirmishes of Solstheim. The Battle of the Moesring was to be the final stand between Nord and Elf on our fair island. Led by Ysgramor, we had driven the Elven scourge from Skyrim, and were intent on cleansing Solstheim of their kind as well. Our warriors, armed with the finest axes and swords Nord craftsmen could forge, cut great swaths through the enemy ranks. The slopes of the Moesring ran red with Elf blood. Why, then, would our foe rejoice? Could one rider bring such hope to an army so hopeless?

To most of our kind, the meaning of the call was clear, but the words were but a litany of Elven chants and cries. There were some among us, however, the scholars and chroniclers, who knew well the words and shuddered at their significance.

"The Snow Prince is come! Doom is at hand!"

There was then a great calm that overcame the Elves that still stood. Through their mass the Snow Prince did ride, and as a longboat slices the icy waters of the Fjalding he parted the ranks of his kin. The magnificent white horse slowed to a gallop, then a trot, and the unknown Elf rider

moved to the front of the line at a slow, almost ghostlike pace.

A Nord warrior sees much in a life of bloodshed and battle, and is rarely surprised by anything armed combat may bring. But few among us that day could have imagined the awe and uncertainty of a raging battlefield that all at once went motionless and silent. Such is the effect the Snow Prince had on us all. For when the joyous cries of the Elves had ended, there remained a quiet known only in the solitude of slumber. It was then our combined host, Elf and Nord alike, were joined in a terrible understanding -- victory or defeat mattered little that day on the slopes of the Moesring Mountains. The one truth we all shared was that death would come to many that day, victor and vanquished alike. The glorious Snow Prince, an Elf unlike any other, did come that day to bring death to our kind. And death he so brought.

Like a sudden, violent snow squall that rends travelers blind and threatens to tear loose the very foundations of the sturdiest hall, the Snow Prince did sweep into our numbers. Indeed the ice and snow did begin to swirl and churn about the Elf, as if called upon to serve his bidding. The spinning of that gleaming spear whistled a dirge to all those who would stand in the way of the Snow Prince, and our mightiest fell before him that day. Ulfgi Anvil-Hand, Strom the White, Freida Oaken-Wand, Heimdall the Frenzied. All lay dead at the foot of the Moesring Mountains.

For the first time that day it seemed the tide of battle had actually turned. The Elves, spurred on by the deeds of the Snow Prince, rallied together for one last charge against our ranks. It was then, in a single instant, that the Battle of the Moesring came to a sudden and unexpected end.

Finna, daughter of Jofrior, a lass of only twelve years and squire to her mother, watched as the Snow Prince cut down her only parent. In her rage and sorrow, Finna picked up Jofrior's sword and threw it savagely at her mother's killer. When the Elf's gleaming spear stopped its deadly dance, the battlefield fell silent, and all eyes turned to the Snow Prince. No one that day was more surprised than the Elf himself at the sight that greeted them all. For upon his great steed the Snow Prince still sat, the sword of Jofrior buried deeply in his breast. And then, he fell, from his horse, from the

battle, from life. The Snow Prince lay dead, slain by a child.

With their savior defeated, the spirit of the remaining Elven warriors soon shattered. Many fled, and those that remained on the battlefield were soon cut down by our broad Nord axes. When the day was done, all that remained was the carnage of the battlefield. And from that battlefield came a dim reminder of valor and skill, for the brilliant armor and spear of the Snow Prince still shined. Even in death, this mighty and unknown Elf filled us with awe.

It is common practice to burn the corpses of our fallen foes. This is as much a necessity as it is custom, for death brings with it disease and dread. Our chieftains wished to cleanse Solstheim of the Elven horde, in death as well as life. It was decided, however, that such was not to be the fate of the Snow Prince. One so mighty in war yet so loved by his kin deserved better. Even in death, even if an enemy of our people.

And so we brought the body of the Snow Prince, wrapped in fine silks, to a freshly dug barrow. The gleaming armor and spear were presented on a pedestal of honor, and the tomb was arrayed with treasures worthy of royalty. All of the mighty chieftains agreed with this course, that the Elf should be so honored. His body would be preserved in the barrow for as long as the earth chose, but would not be offered the protection of our Stalhrim, which was reserved for Nord dead alone.

So ends this account of the Battle of the Moesring, and the fall of the magnificent Elven Snow Prince. May our gods honor him in death, and may we never meet his kind again in life.

The Falmer: A Study

by Ursa Uthrax

I have studied, and traveled, and explored, and observed, and my hypothesis has finally been confirmed: that the twisted Falmer that inhabit the darkest depths of Skyrim are indeed the snow elves of legend.

No one really knows when the story of the snow elves began, but the ancient work "Fall of the Snow Prince," which is an account of the Battle of the Moesring as transcribed by Lokheim, chronicler to the chieftain Ingjaldr White-Eye, gives a rather vivid account of its ending.

According to this eyewitness account, the great Falmer leader known only as the Snow Prince died in glorious battle, and was buried with honor by his Nord slayers. The remaining snow elves were scattered or slain, and were never heard from again. Or so many thought.

But where the story of the ancient snow elves ends, that of the current-day Falmer begins. For when the snow elf host was shattered on that fateful day, it did not simply disperse - it descended. Into the earth, deep underground. For the Falmer sought sanctuary in the most unlikely of places - Blackreach, far beneath the surface of Skyrim, in the legendary realm of the Dwemer themselves.

Yes, Blackreach exists. I have been there, and unlike most of those who have witnessed its terrible glories, I have returned. And I now know the truth about the Falmer.

After their defeat by the Nords, the dwarves of old agreed to protect the Falmer, but at a terrible price. For these Dwemer did not trust their snow elf guests, and forced them to consume the toxic fungi that once grew deep underground. As a result, the snow elves were rendered blind.

Soon, the majestic snow elves were rendered powerless. They became the

dwarves' servants... and then their slaves. But the Dwemer's treachery was so deep, so complete, that they made the fungi an essential part of the Falmer's diet. This guaranteed the weakness of not only their current Falmer thralls, but their offspring as well. The snow elves, for time eternal, would be blind.

But as is always the story with slaves and their masters, the Falmer eventually rebelled. Generations after they first sought solace among the dwarves, and experienced bitter betrayal, the Falmer rose up against their oppressors. The overthrew the dwarves, and fled even further down, into Blackreach's deepest, most hidden reaches.

For decade upon decade, the two sides waged a bitter conflict. A full-fledged and bloody "War of the Crag" that raged deep below Skyrim's surface, completely unbeknownst to the Nords above, a war whose battles and heroes must forever remain lost to our knowledge. Until one day, the war ended. For on that day, the Falmer went to meet their Dwemer foes in battle, only to find that the entire race had... vanished.

Finally free from the threat of their Dwemer overlords, the Falmer were able to spread freely throughout Blackreach. But years of fighting the dwarves had left them bloodthirsty and brutal. Feeling the need to conquer, to kill, they began mounting raids to the surface world.

And so the legends began. Of small, blind, goblin-like creatures who would rise from the cracks of the earth, in the dead of night, to slaughter cattle, attack lonely travelers, and steal sleeping babes from their cribs.

In recent years, however, the sightings of these creatures have become more and more frequent. Their raids, more organized. Their attacks, more brutal. In fact, one might even come to the conclusion that the Falmer are ready to change once again. Could it be true? Are the snow elves of ages past ready to reclaim their long-forgotten glory? Are they ready to surge to the surface, and make war upon the "light dwellers"?

If that happens - if the Falmer are indeed planning on reconquering Skyrim - I fear a horror neither man nor gods could possibly stand against.

Father of the Niben

Translated and With Commentary by Florin Jaliil

Introduction:
Writing the biography of anyone is a challenge. Usually the problem lies in assessing one's sources, comparing the prejudices of one chronicle versus another versus another. Waughin Jarth, I have been told, in writing his well-regarded series on the Wolf Queen of Solitude used over a hundred contemporary narratives. I cannot complain about my task having a similar issue.

There is but one record of the man called Topal the Pilot, the earliest known Aldmer explorer of Tamriel. Only four short verse fragments of the epic "Father of the Niben" have survived to present day, but they offer an interesting if controversial look at the Middle Merethic Era when Topal the Pilot may have sailed the seas around Tamriel.

Though "Father of the Niben" is the only written record of Topal the Pilot's voyages, it is not the only proof of his existence. Among the treasures of the great Crystal Tower of Summerset Isle are his crude but fascinating maps, his legacy to all Tamriel.

The translation of the Aldmeri Udhendra Nibenu, "Father of the Niben," is my own, and I accept that other scholars may disagree with some of my choice of words. I cannot promise my translation lives up to the beauty of the original: I have only strived for simple coherence.

Fragment One:

Second ship, the Pasquiniel, manned by pilot
Illio, was to follow the southern pointing
Waystone; and the third, the Niben, manned
By pilot Topal, was to follow the north-east

Pointing waystone; the orders from the
Crystal Tower, they were to sail forth for
Eighty moons and then return to tell.
Only Niben returned to Firsthold, laden high with
Gold and spice and fur and strange creatures,
Dead and live.
Though, alas, Old Ehlnofey Topal never found, he
Told the tales of the lands he had visited to the
Wonderment of all.
For sixty-six days and nights, he sailed, over crashing
Waves of dire intent, past whirlpools, through
Mist that burned like fire, until he reached the
Mouth of a great bay and he landed on a
Sun-kissed meadow of gentle dells.
As he and his men rested, there came a fearsome howl,
And hideous orcs streamed forth from the murky
Glen, cannibal teeth clotted with gore

For centuries, strange crystalline balls were unearthed at the sites of ancient Aldmer shipwrecks and docks, peculiar artifacts of the Merethic and Dawn Eras that puzzled archeologists until it was demonstrated that each had a tendency to rotate on its axis in a specific direction. There were three varieties, one that pointed southward, one that pointed northeast, and one that point northwest.

It is not understood how they work, but they seemed attuned to particular lines of power. These are the "waystones" of the fragment, which each of the pilots used to point their craft in the direction they were assigned to go. A ship with a name not mentioned in the fragment took his vessel north-west, towards Thras and Yokuda. The Pasquiniel took the southern waystone, and must have sailed down toward Pyandonea. Topal and his north-east waystone found the mainland of Tamriel.

It is clear from this fragment what the three ships were assigned to do - find a passage back to Old Ehlnofey so that the Aldmer now living in Summerset could learn what became of their old homeland. As this book is

intended to be a study of Topal the Pilot, there is scarcely room to dedicate to different theories of the Aldmeri exodus from Old Ehlnofey.

If I were using this poem as my only source, I would have to agree with the scholars who believe in the tradition that several ships left Old Ehlnofey and were caught in a storm. Those who survived found their way to Summerset Isle, but without their waystones, they did not know what direction their homeland was. After all, what other explanation is there for three ships heading in three opposite directions to find a place?

Naturally, only one of the ships returned, and we do not know if either or both of the other two found Old Ehlnofey, or perished at sea or at the hands of the ancient Pyandoneans, Sload, or Yokudans. We must assume, unless we think the Aldmer particularly idiotic, that at least one of them must have been pointing in the right direction. It may well have even been Topal, and he simply did not go north-east far enough.

So, Topal setting sail from Firsthold heads north-east, which coincidentally is the longest one can travel along the Abecean Sea without striking land of any kind. Had he traveled straight east, he would have struck the mainland somewhere in what is now the Colovian West of Cyrodiil in a few weeks. Had he traveled south-east, he might have reached the hump of Valenwood in a few days. But our pilot, judging by his own and our modern maps, sailed in a straight line north-east, through the Abecean sea, and into the Iliac Bay, before touching ground somewhere near present day Anticlere in two months time.

The rolling verdant hills of southern High Rock are unmistakable in this verse, recognizable to anyone who has been there. The question, of course, is what is to be made of this apparent reference to orcs occupying the region? Tradition has it that the orcs were not born until after the Aldmer had settled the mainland, that they sprung up as a distinct race following the famous battle between Trinimac and Boethiah at the time of Resdayn.

It is possible that the tradition is wrong. Perhaps the orcs were an aboriginal tribe predating the Aldmeri colonization. Perhaps these were a cursed folk -

- "Orsimer" in the Aldmeris, the same word for "Orc" - of a different kind, whose name was to be given the orcs in a different era. It is regrettable that the fragment ends here, for more clues to the truth are undoubtedly lost.

What's missing between the first fragment and the second is appreciable. It must be more than eighty months that have passed, because Topal is on the opposite side of mainland Tamriel now, attempting to sail south-west to return to Firsthold, after his failure at finding Old Ehlnofey.

Fragment Two:

No passage westward could be found in the steely cliffs
That jutted up like giant's jaw, so the Niben
Sailed south.
As it passed an sandy, forested island that promised
Sanctuary and peace, the crew cheered in joy.
Then exultation turned to terror as a great shadow rose
From the trees on leathered wings like a unfurling Cape.
The great bat lizard was large as the ship, but good pilot
Topal merely raised his bow, and struck it in its Head.
As it fell, he asked his Bo 'sun, "Do you think it's dead?"
And before it struck the white-bearded waves, he
Shot once more its heart to be certain.
And so for another forty days and six, the Niben sailed south

We can see that in addition to Topal's prowess as a navigator, cartographer, survivalist, and raconteur, he is a master of archery. It may be poetic license, of course, but we do have archeological proof that the Merethic Aldmer were sophisticated archers. Their bows of layers of wood and horn drawn by silver silk thread are beautiful, and still, I have heard experts say, millennia later, very deadly.

It is tempting to imagine it a dragon, but the creature that Topal faces at the beginning of this fragment sounds like an ancestor of the cliffracer of present day Morrowind. The treacherous cliff coastline sounds like the region around Necrom, and the island of Gorne may be where the nest of the "bat lizard" is. No creatures like that exist in eastern Morrowind to my

knowledge at the present day.

Fragment Three:

The fetid, evil swamp lands and their human lizards
Retreated to the east, and Topal and his men's
Hearts were greatly gladdened by the sight of
Diamond blue, pure, sweet ocean.
For three days, they sailed in great cheer north-west
Where Firsthold beckoned them, but hope died
In horror, as land, like a blocking shield rose
Before them.
Topal the Pilot was sore wroth, and consulted he
The maps he had faithfully drawn, to see
Whether best to go south where the
Continent must end, or take the river that
Snaked through a passage north.
"North!" cried he to his sad men. "North we go
Now! Fear not, north!"

Tracing Topal's movements, we see that he has skirted the edge of Morrowind and delved into southern Blackmarsh, seemingly determined to follow his waystone as best as he can. The swamp he is leaving is probably near present day Gideon. Knowing what we now know about Topal's personality, we can understand his frustration in the bay between Black Marsh and Elsweyr.

Here is a man who follows his orders explicitly, and knows that he should have been going south-east through river ways to reach Firsthold. Looking at his maps, we can see that he attempted to find passages through, as he has mapped out the Inner Sea of Morrowind, and several of the swampy tributaries of Black Marsh, no doubt being turned away by the disease and fierce Argonian tribes that dissuaded many other explorers after him.

With a modern map of Tamriel in hand, we can see that he makes the wrong choice in electing to go north-east instead of pushing southward. He could not have known then that what he perceived to be the endless mainland was

only a jutting peninsula. He only knew that he had traveled too far southward already, and so he made a smart but incorrect decision to go up the river.

It is ironic that this great miscalculation would today bear his mark of history. The bay he thought was an endless ocean is now known as Topal Bay, and the river that took him astray shares the name of his boat, the Niben River.

Fragment Four:

The cat demons of four legs and two ran the river's
Length, always keeping the boat in their
Green-eyed sight, hissing, and spitting, and
Roaring with rage.
But the sailors never had to brave the shores, for
Fruit trees welcomed them, dropping their
Arms down to the river's edge as if to
Embrace the mer, and the men took the
Fruit quickly before the cats could pounce.
For eleven days, they traveled north, until they came
To a crystalline lake, and eight islands of
Surpassing beauty and peace.
Brilliant flightful creatures of glorious colors
Greeted them in Aldmeri language,
Making the mer wonder, until they
Understood they were only calling back
The word they were speaking without
Understanding it, and then the sailors
Laughed.
Topal the Pilot was enchanted with the islands
And the feathered men who lived there.
There the Niben stayed for a moon, and the bird
Men learned how to speak their own words,
And with taloned feet, to write.
In joy for their new knowledge, they made Topal
Their lord, giving him their islands for the

Gift.
Topal said he would return someday, but first he
Must find the passage east to Firsthold, so
Far away.

This last fragment is bittersweet for a number of reasons.

We know that this strange, friendly feathered people the Pilot encounters will be lost - in fact, this poem is the only one where mention is made of the bird creatures of Cyrodiil. The literacy that Topal gives them is evidently not enough to save them from their eventual fate, likely at the hands of the "cat demons," who we may assume are ancient Khajiiti.

We know that Topal and his crew never find a route from the eight islands which are the modern day Imperial City through to the Iliac Bay. His maps tell the tale where this lost poem cannot.

We see his hand as he traces his route up the Niben to Lake Rumare; and, after attempting a few tributaries which do not lead him where he wants to go, we can imagine Topal's frustration -- and that of his long-suffering crew -- as they return back down the Niben to Topal Bay.

There, they evidently discovered their earlier mistake, for we see that they pass the peninsula of Elsweyr. Eventually they traveled along its coastline, past the shores of Valenwood, and eventually home. Usually epic tales end with a happy ending, but this one begins with one, and the means to which it was accomplished is lost.

Besides the extraordinary bird creatures of present day Cyrodiil, we have caught glimpses of ancient orcs (perhaps), ancient cliff-racers, ancient Argonians, and in this fragment, ancient Khajiit. Quite a history in a few lines of simple verse, all because a man failed to find his home, and took all the wrong turns to retrace his steps back.

Feyfolken

Book One

by Waughin Jarth

The Great Sage was a tall, untidy man, bearded but bald. His library resembled him: all the books had been moved over the years to the bottom shelves where they gathered in dusty conglomerations. He used several of the books in his current lecture, explaining to his students, Taksim and Vonguldak, how the Mages Guild had first been founded by Vanus Galerion. They had many questions about Galerion's beginnings in the Psijic Order, and how the study of magic there differed from the Mages Guild.

"It was, and is, a very structured way of life," explained the Great Sage. "Quite elitist, actually. That was the aspect of it Galerion most objected to. He wanted the study of magic to be free. Well, not free exactly, but at least available to all who could afford it. In doing that, he changed the course of life in Tamriel."

"He codified the praxes and rituals used by all modern potionmakers, itemmakers, and spellmakers, didn't he, Great Sage?" asked Vonguldak.

"That was only part of it. Magic as we know it today comes from Vanus Galerion. He restructured the schools to be understandable by the masses. He invented the tools of alchemy and enchanting so everyone could concoct whatever they wanted, whatever their skills and purse would allow them to, without fears of magical backfire. Well, eventually he created that."

"What do you mean, Great Sage?" asked Taksim.

"The first tools were more automated than the ones we have today. Any layman could use them without the least understanding of enchantment and alchemy. On the Isle of Artaeum, the students had to learn the skills laboriously and over many years, but Galerion decided that was another example of the Psijics' elitism. The tools he invented were like robotic

master enchanters and alchemists, capable of creating anything the customer required, provided he could pay."

"So someone could, for example, create a sword that would cleave the world in twain?" asked Vonguldak.

"I suppose, in theory, but it would probably take all the gold in the world," chuckled the Great Sage. "No, I can't say we were ever in very great danger, but that it isn't to say that there weren't a few unfortunate incidents where a unschooled yokel invented something beyond his ken. Eventually, of course, Galerion tore apart his old tools, and created what we use today. It's a little elitist, requiring that people know what they're doing before they do it, but remarkably practical."

"What did people invent?" asked Taksim. "Are there any stories?"

"You're trying to distract me so I don't test you," said the Great Sage. "But I suppose I can tell you one story, just to illustrate a point. This particular tale takes place in city of Alinor on the west coast of Summurset Isle, and concerns a scribe named Thaurbad.

This was in the Second Era, not long after Vanus Galerion had first founded the Mages Guild and chapter houses had sprung up all over Summurset, though not yet spread to the mainland of Tamriel.

For five years, this scribe, Thaurbad, had conducted all his correspondence to the outside world by way of his messenger boy, Gorgos. For the first year of his adoption of the hermit life, his few remaining friends and family -- friends and family of his dead wife, truth be told -- had tried visiting, but even the most indefatigable kin gives up eventually when given no encouragement. No one had a good reason to keep in touch with Thaurbad Hulzik, and in time, very few even tried. His sister-in-law sent him the occasional letter with news of people he could barely remember, but even that communication was rare. Most of messages to and from his house dealt with his business, writing the weekly proclamation from the Temple of Auri-El. These were bulletins nailed on the temple door, community news, sermons, that sort of thing.

The first message Gorgos brought him that day was from his healer, reminding him of his appointment on Turdas. Thaurbad took a while to write his response, glum and affirmative. He had the Crimson Plague, which he was being treated for at considerable expense -- you have to remember these were the days before the School of Restoration had become quite so specialized. It was a dreadful disease and had taken away his voicebox. That was why he only communicated by script.

The next message was from Alfiers, the secretary at the church, as curt and noxious as ever: "THAURBAD, ATTACHED IS SUNDAS'S SERMON, NEXT WEEK'S EVENTS CALENDAR, AND THE OBITUARIES. TRY TO LIVEN THEM UP A LITTLE. I WASN'T HAPPY WITH YOUR LAST ATTEMPT."

Thaurbad had taken the job putting together the Bulletin before Alfiers joined the temple, so his only mental image of her was purely theoretical and had evolved over time. At first he thought of Alfiers as an ugly fat sloadess covered with warts; more recently, she had mutated into a rail-thin, spinster orcess. Of course, it was possible his clairvoyance was accurate and she had just lost weight.

Whatever Alfiers looked like, her attitude towards Thaurbad was clear, unwavering disdain. She hated his sense of humor, always found the most minor of misspellings, and considered his structure and calligraphy the worst kind of amateur work. Luckily, working for a temple was the next most secure job to working for the good King of Alinor. It didn't bring in very much money, but his expenses were minimal. The truth was, he didn't need to do it anymore. He had quite a fortune stashed away, but he didn't have anything else to occupy his days. And the truth was further that having little else to occupy his time and thoughts, the Bulletin was very important to him.

Gorgos, having delivered all the messages, began to clean and as he did so, he told Thaurbad all the news in town. The boy always did so, and Thaurbad seldom paid him any attention, but this time he had an interesting report. The Mages Guild had come to Alinor.

As Thaurbad listened intently, Gorgos told him all about the Guild, the remarkable Archmagister, and the incredible tools of alchemy and enchanting. Finally, when the lad had finished, Thaurbad scribbled a quick note and handed it and a quill to Gorgos. The note read, "Have them enchant this quill."

"It will be expensive," said Gorgos.

Thaurbad gave Gorgos a sizeable chunk of the thousands of gold pieces he had saved over the years, and sent him out the door. Now, Thaurbad decided, he would finally have the ability to impress Alfiers and bring glory to the Temple of Auri-El.

The way I've heard the story, Gorgos had thought about taking the gold and leaving Alinor, but he had come to care for poor old Thaurbad. And even more, he hated Alfiers who he had to see every day to get his messages for his master. It wasn't perhaps for the best of motivations, but Gorgos decided to go to the Guild and get the quill enchanted.

The Mages Guild was not then, especially not then, an elitist institution, as I have said, but when the messenger boy came in and asked to use the Itemmaker, he was greeted with some suspicion. When he showed the bag of gold, the attitude melted, and he was ushered in the room.

Now, I haven't seen one of the enchanting tools of old, so you must use your imagination. There was a large prism for the item to be bound with magicka, assuredly, and an assortment of soul gems and globes of trapped energies. Other than that, I cannot be certain how it looked or how it worked. Because of all the gold he gave to the Guild, Gorgos could infuse the quill with the highest-price soul available, which was something daedric called Feyfolken. The initiate at the Guild, being ignorant as most Guildmembers were at that time, did not know very much about the spirit except that it was filled with energy. When Gorgos left the room, the quill had been enchanted to its very limit and then some. It was virtually quivering with power.

Of course, when Thaurbad used it, that's when it became clear how over his head he was.

And now," said the Great Sage. "It's time for your test."

"But what happened? What were the quill's powers?" cried Taksim.

"You can't stop the tale there!" objected Vonguldak.

"We will continue the tale after your conjuration test, provided you both perform exceptionally well," said the Great Sage.

Book Two

by Waughin Jarth

After the test had been given and Vonguldak and Taksim had demonstrated their knowledge of elementary conjuration, the Great Sage told them that they were free to enjoy the day. The two lads, who most afternoons fidgeted through their lessons, refused to leave their seats.

"You told us that after the test, you'd tell us more of your tale about the scribe and his enchanted quill," said Taksim.

"You've already told us about the scribe, how he lived alone, and his battles with the Temple secretary over the Bulletin he scripted for posting, and how he suffered from the Crimson Plague and couldn't speak. When you left off, his messenger boy had just had his master's quill enchanted with the spirit of a daedra named Feyfolken," added Vonguldak to aid the Great Sage's memory.

"As it happens," said the Great Sage. "I was thinking about a nap. However, the story does touch on some issues of the natures of spirits and thus is related to conjuration, so I'll continue.

Thaurbad began using the quill to write the Temple Bulletin, and there was something about the slightly lopsided, almost three-dimensional quality of the letters that Thaurbad liked a lot.

Into the night, Thaurbad put together the Temple of Auri-El's Bulletin. For the moment he washed over the page with the Feyfolken quill, it became a work of art, an illuminated manuscript crafted of gold, but with good, simple and strong vernacular. The sermon excerpts read like poetry, despite being based on the archpriest's workmanlike exhortation of the most banal of the Alessian doctrines. The obituaries of two of the Temple's chief benefactors were stark and powerful, pitifully mundane deaths transitioned into world-class tragedies. Thaurbad worked the magical palette until he

nearly fainted from exhaustion. At six o'clock in the morning, a day before deadline, he handed the Bulletin to Gorgos for him to carry to Alfiers, the Temple secretary.

As expected, Alfiers never wrote back to compliment him or even comment on how early he had sent the bulletin. It didn't matter. Thaurbad knew it was the best Bulletin the Temple had ever posted. At one o'clock on Sundas, Gorgos brought him many messages.

"The Bulletin today was so beautiful, when I read it in the vestibule, I'm ashamed to tell you I wept copiously," wrote the archpriest. "I don't think I've seen anything that captures Auri-El's glory so beautifully before. The cathedrals of Firsthold pale in comparison. My friend, I prostrate myself before the greatest artist since Gallael."

The archpriest was, like most men of the cloth, given to hyperbole. Still, Thaurbad was happy with the compliment. More messages followed. All of the Temple Elders and thirty-three of the parishioners young and old had all taken the time to find out who wrote the bulletin and how to get a message to congratulate him. And there was only one person they could go through for that information: Alfiers. Imaging the dragon lady besieged by his admirers filled Thaurbad with positive glee.

He was still in a good mood the next day when he took the ferry to his appointment with his healer, Telemichiel. The herbalist was new, a pretty Redguard woman who tried to talk to him, even after he gave her the note reading "My name is Thaurbad Hulzik and I have an appointment with Telemichiel for eleven o'clock. Please forgive me for not talking, but I have no voicebox anymore."

"Has it started raining yet?" she asked cheerfully. "The diviner said it might."

Thaurbad frowned and shook his head angrily. Why was it that everyone thought that mute people liked to be talked to? Did soldiers who lost their arms like to be thrown balls? It was undoubtedly not a purposefully cruel behavior, but Thaurbad still suspected that some people just liked to prove

that they weren't crippled too.

The examination itself was routine horror. Telemichiel performed the regular invasive torture, all the while chatting and chatting and chatting.

"You ought to try talking once in a while. That's the only way to see if you're getting better. If you don't feel comfortable doing it in public, you could try practicing it by yourself," said Telemichiel, knowing her patient would ignore her advice. "Try singing in the bath. You'll probably find you don't sound as bad as you think."

Thaurbad left the examination with the promise of test results in a couple of weeks. On the ferry ride back home, Thaurbad began thinking of next week's temple bulletin. What about a double-border around the "Last Sundas's Offering Plate" announcement? Putting the sermon in two columns instead of one might have interesting effects. It was almost unbearable to think that he couldn't get started on it until Alfiers sent him information.

When she did, it was with the note, "LAST BULLETIN A LITTLE BETTER. NEXT TIME, DON'T USE THE WORD 'FORTUITOUS' IN PLACE OF 'FORTUNATE.' THE WORDS ARE NOT, IF YOU LOOK THEM UP, SYNONYMOUS."

In response, Thaurbad almost followed Telemichiel's advice by screaming obscenities at Gorgos. Instead, he drank a bottle of cheap wine, composed and sent a suitable reply, and fell asleep on the floor.

The next morning, after a long bath, Thaurbad began work on the Bulletin. His idea for putting a light shading effect on the "Special Announcements" section had an amazing textural effect. Alfiers always hated the extra decorations he added to the borders, but using the Feyfolken quill, they looked strangely powerful and majestic.

Gorgos came to him with a message from Alfiers at that very moment as if in response to the thought. Thaurbad opened it up. It simply said, "I'M SORRY."

Thaurbad kept working. Alfiers's note he put from his mind, sure that she would soon follow it up with the complete message "I'M SORRY THAT NO ONE EVER TAUGHT YOU TO KEEP RIGHT-HAND AND LEFT-HAND MARGINS THE SAME LENGTH" or "I'M SORRY WE CAN'T GET SOMEONE OTHER THAN A WEIRD, OLD MAN AS SCRIBE OF OUR BULLETIN." It didn't matter what she was sorry about. The columns from the sermon notes rose like the massive pillars of roses, crowned with unashamedly ornate headers. The obituaries and birth announcements were framed together with a spherical border, as a heartbreaking declaration of the circle of life. The Bulletin was simultaneously both warm and avant-garde. It was a masterpiece. When he sent it off to Alfiers late that afternoon, he knew she'd hate it, and was glad.

Thaurbad was surprised to get a message from the Temple on Loredas. Before he read the content, he could tell from the style that it wasn't from Alfiers. The handwriting wasn't Alfiers's usual belligerent slashing style, and it wasn't all in Alfiers's usual capital letters, which read like a scream from Oblivion.

"Thaurbad, I thought you should know Alfiers isn't at the Temple anymore. She quit her position yesterday, very suddenly. My name is Vanderthil, and I was lucky enough (let me admit it now, I begged pitifully) to be your new Temple contact. I'm overwhelmed by your genius. I was having a crisis of faith until I read last week's Bulletin. This week's Bulletin is a miracle. Enough. I just wanted to say I'm honored to be working with you. -- Vanderthil."

The response on Sundas after the service even astonished Thaurbad. The archpriest attributed the massive increase in attendance and collection plate offerings entirely to the Bulletin. Thaurbad's salary was quadrupled. Gorgos brought over a hundred and twenty messages from his adoring public.

The following week, Thaurbad sat in front of his writing plank, a glass of fine Torvali mead at his side, staring at the blank scroll. He had no ideas. The Bulletin, his child, his second-wife, bored him. The third-rate sermons of the archbishop were absolute anathema, and the deaths and births of the

Temple patrons struck him as entirely pointless. Blah blah, he thought as he scribbled on the page.

He knew he wrote the letters B-L-A-H B-L-A-H. The words that appeared on the scroll were, "A necklace of pearl on a white neck."

He scrawled a jagged line across the page. It appeared in through that damned beautiful Feyfolken quill: "Glory to Auri-El."

Thaurbad slammed the quill and poetry spilled forth in a stream of ink. He scratched over the page, blotting over everything, and the vanquished words sprung back up in different form, even more exquisite than before. Every daub and splatter caused the document to whirl like a kaleidoscope before falling together in gorgeous asymmetry. There was nothing he could do to ruin the Bulletin. Feyfolken had taken over. He was a reader, not an author.

Now," asked the Great Sage. "What was Feyfolken from your knowledge of the School of Conjuration?"

"What happened next?" cried Vonguldak.

"First, tell me what Feyfolken was, and then I'll continue the story."

"You said it was a daedra," said Taksim. "And it seems to have something to do with artistic expression. Was Feyfolken a servitor of Azura?"

"But the scribe may have been imagining all this," said Vonguldak. "Perhaps Feyfolken is a servitor of Sheogorath, and he's gone mad. Or the quill's writing makes everyone who views it, like all the congregation at the Temple of Auri-El, go mad."

"Hermaeus Mora is the daedra of knowledge ... and Hircine is the daedra of the wild ... and the daedra of revenge is Boethiah," pondered Taksim. And then he smiled, "Feyfolken is a servitor of Clavicus Vile, isn't it?"

"Very good," said the Great Sage. "How did you know?"

"It's his style," said Taksim. "Assuming that he doesn't want the power of the quill now that he has it. What happens next?"

"I'll tell you," said the Great Sage, and continued the tale.

Book Three

by Waughin Jarth

Thaurbad had at last seen the power of the quill," said the Great Sage, continuing his tale. "Enchanted with the daedra Feyfolken, servitor of Clavicus Vile, it had brought him great wealth and fame as the scribe of the weekly Bulletin of the Temple of Auri-El. But he realized that it was the artist, and he merely the witness to its magic. He was furious and jealous. With a cry, he snapped the quill in half.

He turned to finish his glass of mead. When he turned around, the quill was intact.

He had no other quills but the one he had enchanted, so he dipped his finger in the inkwell and wrote a note to Gorgos in big sloppy letters. When Gorgos returned with a new batch of congratulatory messages from the Temple, praising his latest Bulletin, he handed the note and the quill to the messenger boy. The note read: "Take the quill back to the Mages Guild and sell it. Buy me another quill with no enchantments."

Gorgos didn't know what to make of the note, but he did as he was told. He returned a few hours later.

"They wouldn't give us any gold back for it," said Gorgos. "They said it wasn't enchanted. I told 'em, I said 'What are you talking about, you enchanted it right here with that Feyfolken soul gem,' and they said, 'Well, there ain't a soul in it now. Maybe you did something and it got loose.'"

Gorgos paused to look at his master. Thaurbad couldn't speak, of course, but he seemed even more than usually speechless.

"Anyway, I threw the quill away and got you this new one, like you said."

Thaurbad studied the new quill. It was white-feathered while his old quill had been dove gray. It felt good in his hand. He sighed with relief and waved his messenger lad away. He had a Bulletin to write, and this time, without any magic except for his own talent.

Within two days time, he was nearly back on schedule. It looked plain but it was entirely his. Thaurbad felt a strange reassurance when he ran his eyes over the page and noticed some slight errors. It had been a long time since the Bulletin contained any errors. In fact, Thaurbad reflected happily, there were probably other mistakes still in the document that he was not seeing.

He was finishing a final whirl of plain calligraphy on the borders when Gorgos arrived with some messages from the Temple. He looked through them all quickly, until one caught his eye. The wax seal on the letter read "Feyfolken." With complete bafflement, he broke it open.

"I think you should kill yourself," it read in perfectly gorgeous script.

He dropped the letter to the floor, seeing sudden movement on the Bulletin. Feyfolken script leapt from the letter and coursed over the scroll in a flood, translating his shabby document into a work of sublime beauty. Thaurbad no longer cared about the weird croaking quality of his voice. He screamed for a very long time. And then drank. Heavily.

Gorgos brought Thaurbad a message from Vanderthil, the secretary of the Temple, early Fredas morning, but it took the scribe until mid-morning to work up the courage to look at it. "Good Morning, I am just checking in on the Bulletin. You usually have it in on Turdas night. I'm curious. You planning something special? -- Vanderthil."

Thaurbad responded, "Vanderthil, I'm sorry. I've been sick. There won't be a Bulletin this Sunday" and handed the note to Gorgos before retiring to his bath. When he came back an hour later, Gorgos was just returning from the Temple, smiling.

"Vanderthil and the archpriest went crazy," he said. "They said it was your best work ever."

Thaurbad looked at Gorgos, uncomprehending. Then he noticed that the Bulletin was gone. Shaking, he dipped his finger in the inkwell and scrawled the words "What did the note I sent with you say?"

"You don't remember?" asked Gorgos, holding back a smile. He knew the master had been drinking a lot lately. "I don't remember the exact words, but it was something like, 'Vanderthil, here it is. Sorry it's late. I've been having severe mental problems lately. - Thaurbad.' Since you said, 'here it is,' I figured you wanted me to bring the Bulletin along, so I did. And like I said, they loved it. I bet you get three times as much letters this Sundas."

Thaurbad nodded his head, smiled, and waved the messenger lad away. Gorgos returned back to the Temple, while his master turned to his writing plank, and pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment.

He wrote with the quill: "What do you want, Feyfolken?"

The words became: "Goodbye. I hate my life. I have cut my wrists."

Thaurbad tried another tact: "Have I gone insane?"

The words became: "Goodbye. I have poison. I hate my life."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"I Thaurbad Hulzik cannot live with myself and my ingratitude. That's why I've put this noose around my neck."

Thaurbad picked up a fresh parchment, dipped his finger in the inkwell, and proceeded to rewrite the entire Bulletin. While his original draft, before Feyfolken had altered it, had been simple and flawed, the new copy was a scrawl. Lower-case I's were undotted, G's looked like Y's, sentences ran into margins and curled up and all over like serpents. Ink from the first page leaked onto the second page. When he yanked the pages from the notebook, a long tear nearly divided the third page in half. Something about the final result was evocative. Thaurbad at least hoped so. He wrote another note

reading, simply, "Use this Bulletin instead of the piece of trash I sent you."

When Gorgos returned with new messages, Thaurbad handed the envelope to him. The new letters were all the same, except for one from his healer, Telemichiel. "Thaurbad, we need you to come in as soon as possible. We've received the reports from Black Marsh about a strain of the Crimson Plague that sounds very much like your disease, and we need to re-examine you. Nothing is definite yet, but we're going to want to see what our options are."

It took Thaurbad the rest of the day and fifteen drams of the stoutest mead to recover. The larger part of the next morning was spent recovering from this means of recovery. He started to write a message to Vanderthil: "What did you think of the new Bulletin?" with the quill. Feyfolken's improved version was "I'm going to ignite myself on fire, because I'm a dying no-talent."

Thaurbad rewrote the note using his finger-and-ink message. When Gorgos appeared, he handed him the note. There was one message in Vanderthil's handwriting.

It read, "Thaurbad, not only are you divinely inspired, but you have a great sense of humor. Imagine us using those scribbles you sent instead of the real Bulletin. You made the archbishop laugh heartily. I cannot wait to see what you have next week. Yours fondly, Vanderthil."

The funeral service a week later brought out far more friends and admirers than Thaurbad Hulzik would've believed possible. The coffin, of course, had to be closed, but that didn't stop the mourners from filing into lines to touch its smooth oak surface, imagining it as the flesh of the artist himself. The archbishop managed to rise to the occasion and deliver a better than usual eulogy. Thaurbad's old nemesis, the secretary before Vanderthil, Alfiers came in from Cloudrest, wailing and telling all who would listen that Thaurbad's suggestions had changed the direction of her life. When she heard Thaurbad had left her his quill in his final testament, she broke down in tears. Vanderthil was even more inconsolable, until she found a handsome and delightfully single young man.

"I can hardly believe he's gone and I never even saw him face-to-face or spoke to him," she said. "I saw the body, but even if he hadn't been all burned up, I wouldn't have been able to tell if it was him or not."

"I wish I could tell you there'd been a mistake, but there was plenty of medical evidence," said Telemichiel. "I supplied some of it myself. He was a patient of mine, you see."

"Oh," said Vanderthil. "Was he sick or something?"

"He had the Crimson Plague years ago, that's what took away his voice box, but it appeared to have gone into complete remission. Actually, I had just sent him a note telling him words to that effect the day before he killed himself."

"You're that healer?" exclaimed Vanderthil. "Thaurbad's messenger boy Gorgos told me that he had just picked up that message when I sent mine, complementing him on the new, primative design for the Bulletin. It was amazing work. I never would've told him this, but I had begun to suspect he was stuck in an outmoded style. It turned out he had one last work of genius, before going out in a blaze of glory. Figuratively. And literally."

Vanderthil showed the healer Thaurbad's last Bulletin, and Telemichiel agreed that its frantic, nearly illegible style spoke volumes about the power and majesty of the god Auri-El."

"Now I'm thoroughly confused," said Vonguldak.

"About which part?" asked the Great Sage. "I think the tale is very straight-forward."

"Feyfolken made all the Bulletins beautiful, except for the last one, the one Thaubad did for himself," said Taksim thoughtfully. "But why did he misread the notes from Vanderthil and the healer? Did Feyfolken change those words?"

"Perhaps," smiled the Great Sage.

"Or did Feyfolken changed Thaurbad's perceptions of those words?" asked Vonguldak. "Did Feyfolken make him mad after all?"

"Very likely," said the Great Sage.

"But that would mean that Feyfolken was a servitor of Sheogorath," said Vonguldak. "And you said he was a servitor of Clavicus Vile. Which was he, an agent of mischief or an agent of insanity?"

"The will was surely altered by Feyfolken," said Taksim, "And that's the sort of thing a servitor of Clavicus Vile would do to perpetuate the curse."

"As an appropriate ending to the tale of the scribe and his cursed quill," smiled the Great Sage. "I will let you read into it as you will."

The Final Lesson

By Aegrothius Goth

"It is time for you to leave your apprenticeship here," said the Great Sage to his students, Taksim and Vonguldak.

"So soon?" cried Vonguldak, for it had been but a few years since the training began. "Are we such poor pupils?"

"We have learned much for you, master, but you have no more to teach us?" Taksim asked. "You have told us so many tales of great enchanters of the past. Can't we continue to learn until we have reached some level of their power?"

"I have one last story for you," smiled the Great Sage.

Many thousands of years ago, long before the Cyrodilic Dynasty of Reman and even longer before the Septim Dynasty ruled Tamriel, and before there was a Mages Guild, and when the land called Morrowind was known as Resdayn, and the land of Elsweyr was called Anequina and Pellitine, and the only law of the land was the cruel ways of the Alessian Doctrines of Marukh, there lived a hermetic enchanter named Dalak who had two apprentices, Uthrac and Loreth.

Uthrac and Loreth were remarkable students, both equally assiduous in their learning, the pride of their Master. Both excelled at the arts of the cauldron, mirror castings, the infusion of spiritas into mundus, and the weaving of air and fire. Dalak was very fond of his boys, and they of him.

On a springtide morn, Dalak received a message from another enchanter named Peothil, who lived deep in the forests of the Colovian heartland. You must remember that in the dark days of the First Era, mages were solitary practitioners with the only organized consortium being the Psijics of Artaeum. Away from that island, mages seldom saw one another and even

more rarely corresponded. Thus, when Dalak received Peothil's letter, he gave it his great attention.

Peothil was greatly aged, and he had found the peace of his isolation threatened by the Alessian Reform. He feared for his life, knowing that the fanatical priests and their warriors were close at hand. Dalak brought his students to him.

"It will be an arduous and perilous journey to the Colovian Estates, one that I would fear partaking even in my youth," Dalak said. "My heart trembles to send you two forth to Peothil's cave, but I know that he is a great and benevolent enchanter, and his light must continue to burn in the heart of the continent if we are to survive these dark nights."

Uthrac and Loreth pled with their teacher not to order them to go to Peothil. It was not the priests and warriors of the Alessian Reform they feared, but they knew their Master was aged and infirm, and could not protect himself if the Reform moved further westward. Finally, he relented and allowed that one would stay with him, and the other would journey forth to the Colovian Estates. He would let them decide which of them would go.

The lads debated and discussed, fought and compromised, and at last elected to let fate make the choice. They threw lots, and Loreth came up short. He left early the next morning, miserable and filled with fear.

For a month and a day, he tramped through the forests into the midst of the Colovian Estates. Through some planning, some skill, and much assistance for sympathetic peasants, he managed to avoid the ever-tightening circle of the Alessian Reform by crossing through unclaimed mountain passes and hidden bogs. When at last he found the dark caverns where Dalak had told him to search for Peothil, it was still many hours before he could find the enchanter's lair.

No one appeared to be there. Loreth searched through the laboratory of ancient tomes, cauldrons and crystalline flutes, herbs kept alive by the glow of mystic circles, strange liquids and gasses caught in transparent membranes. At last, he found Peothil, or so he presumed. The desiccated

shell on the floor of the study, clutching tools of enchantment, scarcely seemed human.

Loreth decided that he could do nothing further for the mage, and began at once the journey back to his true master Dalak and his friend Uthrac. The armies of the Reform had moved quickly since he passed. After more than one close near encounter, the young enchanter realized that he was trapped on all sides. The only retreat that was possible was back in the caves of Peothil.

The first thing to be done, Loreth saw, was to find a means to keep the army from finding the laboratory. That, he found, was what Peothil himself had been trying to do, but by a simple error even an apprentice enchanter could recognize, he had only succeeded in destroying himself. Loreth was able to take what he had learned from Dalak and apply it to Peothil's enchantments, quite successfully. The laboratory was never found or even detected by the Reform.

Much time passed. In the 480th year of the First Era, the great Aiden Direnni won many battles against the Alessian horde, and many passages and routes that had once been closed were now open. Loreth, now no longer young, was able to return to Dalak.

When at last he found his way to his Master's old hovel, he saw candles of mourning lit in all the trees surrounding. Even before he knocked on the door and met his old fellow student Uthrac, Loreth knew that Dalak had died.

"It was only a few months ago," said Uthrac, after embracing his friend. "He talked of you every day of every year you were away. Somehow he knew that you had not preceded him to the world beyond. He told me that you would come back."

The gray-haired men sat before the fire and reminisced of the old days. The sad truth was that they both discovered how different they had become. Uthrac spoke of carrying on the Master's work, while Loreth described his new discoveries. They left one another that day, each shaking his head,

destined to never see one another again.

In the years ahead, before they left the mortal world to join their great teacher Dalak, they both achieved their desires. Uthrac went on to become respected if minor enchanter in the service of Clan Direnni. Loreth took the skills he had learned on his own, and used them to fashion the Balac-thurm, the Staff of Chaos.

My boys, the lesson is you have to learn from a teacher to avoid those small but essential errors that claimed the life of such self-taught enchanters as Peothil. And yet, the only way to become truly great is to try all the possibilities on your own.

Fire And Darkness: The Brotherhoods of Death

By Ynir Gorming

"Brother, I still call you brother for we share our bonds of blood, tested but unbroken by hatred. Even if I am murdered, which seems inevitable now, know that, brother. You and I are not innocents, so our benedictions of mutual enmity is not tragedy, but horror. This state of silent, shadowed war, of secret poisons and sleeping men strangled in their beds, of the sudden arrow and the artful dagger, has no end that I can see. No possibility for peace. I see the shadows in the room move though the flame of my candle is steady. I know the signs that I... "

This note was found where it had fallen beneath the floorboards of an abandoned house in the Nordic village of Jallenheim in the 358th year of the second era. It was said that a quiet cobbler lived in the house, whispered by some to be a member of the dread Morag Tong, the assassin's guild outlawed throughout Tamriel thirty-four years previously. The house itself was perfectly in order, as if the cobbler had simply vanished. There was a single drop of blood on the note.

The Dark Brotherhood had paid a call.

This note and others like it are rare. Both the Morag Tong and its hated child, the Dark Brotherhood, are scrupulous about leaving no evidence behind - their members know that to divulge secrets of their orders is a lethal infraction. This obviously makes the job of the historian seeking to trace their histories very difficult.

The Morag Tong, according to most scholars, had been a facet of the culture of Morrowind almost since its beginning. After all, the history of Resdayn, the ancient name of Morrowind, is rife with assassination, blood sacrifice, and religious zealotry, hallmarks of the order. It is commonly said that the

Morag Tong then as now murdered for the glory of the Daedra Prince Mephala, but common assumptions are rarely completely accurate. It is my contention that the earliest form of the Tong additionally worshipped an even older and more malevolent deity than Mephala. As terrifying as that Prince of Oblivion is, they had and have reverence for a far greater evil.

Writs of assassination from the first era offer rare glimpses into the Morag Tong's earliest philosophy. They are as matter of fact as current day writs, but many contain snatches of poetry which have perplexed our scholars for hundreds of years. "Lisping sibilant hisses,' 'Ether's sweet sway,' 'Rancid kiss of passing sin,' and other strange, almost insane insertions into the writs were codes for the name of the person to be assassinated, his or her location, and the time at which death was to come. They were also direct references to the divine spirit called Sithis.

Evidence of the Morag Tong's expertise in assassination seems scarcely necessary. The few instances of someone escaping a murder attempt by them are always remarkable and rare, proving that they were and are patient, capable murderers who use their tools well. A fragment of a letter found among the effects of a well-known armorer has been sealed in our vaults for some time. It was likely penned by an unknown Tong assassin ordering weapons for his order, and offers some illumination into what they looked for in their blades, as well the mention of Vounoura, the island where the Tong sent its agents in retirement --

'I congratulate you on your artistry, and the balance and heft of your daggers. The knife blade is whisper thin, elegantly wrought, but inpractical. It must have a bolder edge, for arteries, when cut, have a tendencies to self seal, preventing adequate blood loss. I will be leaving Vounoura in two weeks time to inspect your new tools, hoping they will be more satisfactory.'

The Morag Tong spread quietly throughout Tamriel in the early years of the second era, worshipping Mephala and Sithis with blood, as they had always done.

When the Morag Tong assassinated the Emperor Reman in the year 2920 of

the first era, and his successor, Potentate Versidae-Shae in the 324th year of the second era, the assassins so long in the shadows were suddenly thrust into the light. They had become brazen, drunk with murder, literally painting the words 'MORAG TONG' on the wall in the Potentate's blood.

The Morag Tong was instantly and unanimously outlawed in all corners of Tamriel, with the exception of its home province of Morrowind. There they continued to operate with the blessings of the Houses, apparently cutting off all contact with their satellite brothers to the west. There they continue their quasi-legal existence, accepting black writs and murdering with impunity.

Most scholars believe that the birth of the Dark Brotherhood, the secular, murder-for- profit order of assassins, was as a result of a religious schism in the Morag Tong. Given the secrecy of both cults, it is difficult to divine the exact nature of it, but certain logical assumptions can be made.

In order to exist, the Morag Tong must have appealed to the highest power in Morrowind, which at that time, the Second Era, could only have been the Tribunal of Almalexia, Sotha Sil, and Vivec. Mephala, whom the Tong worshipped with Sithis, was said to have been the Anticipation of Vivec. Is it not logical to assume that in exchange for toleration of their continued existence, the Tong would have ceased their worship of Mephala in exchange for the worship of Vivec?

The Morag Tong continues, as we know, to worship Sithis. The Dark Brotherhood is not considered a religious order by most, merely a secular organization, offering murder for gold. I have seen, however, proof positive in the form of writs to the Brotherhood that Sithis is still revered above all.

So where, the reader, asks, is the cause for the schism? How could a silent war have begun, when both groups are so close? Both assassin's guilds, after all, worship Sithis. And yet, a figure emerges from history who should give those with this assumption pause.

The Night Mother.

Who the Night Mother is, where she came from, what her functions are, no

one knows. Carlovac Townway in his generally well-researched historical fiction 2920: The Last Year of the First Era tries to make her the leader of the Morag Tong. But she is never historically associated with the Tong, only the Dark Brotherhood.

The Night Mother, my dear friend, is Mephala. The Dark Brotherhood of the west, unfettered by the orders of the Tribunal, continue to worship Mephala. They may not call her by her name, but the daedra of murder, sex, and secrets is their leader still. And they did not, and still do not, to this day, forgive their brethren for casting her aside.

The cobbler who met his end in the second era, who saw no end in the war between the Brotherhood and the Tong, was correct. In the shadows of the Empire, the Brothers of Death remain locked in combat, and they will likely remain that way forever.

The Firmament

by Ffoulke

The Stars of Tamriel are divided into thirteen constellations. Three of them are the major constellations, known as the Guardians. These are the Warrior, the Mage, and the Thief. Each of the Guardians protects its three Charges from the thirteenth constellation, the Serpent.

When the sun rises near one of the constellations, it is that constellation's season. Each constellation has a Season of approximately one month. The Serpent has no season, for it moves about in the heavens, usually threatening one of the other constellations.

The Warrior

The Warrior is the first Guardian Constellation and he protects his charges during their Seasons. The Warrior's own season is Last Seed when his Strength is needed for the harvest. His Charges are the Lady, the Steed, and the Lord. Those born under the sign of the Warrior are skilled with weapons of all kinds, but prone to short tempers.

The Mage

The Mage is a Guardian Constellation whose Season is Rain's Hand when magicka was first used by men. His Charges are the Apprentice, the Golem, and the Ritual. Those born under the Mage have more magicka and talent for all kinds of spellcasting, but are often arrogant and absent-minded.

The Thief

The Thief is the last Guardian Constellation, and her Season is the darkest month of Evening Star. Her Charges are the Lover, the Shadow, and the Tower. Those born under the sign of the Thief are not typically thieves, though they take risks more often and only rarely come to harm. They will

run out of luck eventually, however, and rarely live as long as those born under other signs.

The Serpent

The Serpent wanders about in the sky and has no Season, though its motions are predictable to a degree. No characteristics are common to all who are born under the sign of the Serpent. Those born under this sign are the most blessed and the most cursed.

The Lady

The Lady is one of the Warrior's Charges and her Season is Heartfire. Those born under the sign of the Lady are kind and tolerant.

The Steed

The Steed is one of the Warrior's Charges, and her Season is Mid Year. Those born under the sign of the Steed are impatient and always hurrying from one place to another.

The Lord

The Lord's Season is First Seed and he oversees all of Tamriel during the planting. Those born under the sign of the Lord are stronger and healthier than those born under other signs.

The Apprentice

The Apprentice's Season is Sun's Height. Those born under the sign of the apprentice have a special affinity for magick of all kinds, but are more vulnerable to magick as well.

The Atronach

The Atronach (often called the Golem) is one of the Mage's Charges. Its

season is Sun's Dusk. Those born under this sign are natural sorcerers with deep reserves of magicka, but they cannot generate magicka of their own.

The Ritual

The Ritual is one of the Mage's Charges and its Season is Morning Star. Those born under this sign have a variety of abilities depending on the aspects of the moons and the Divines.

The Lover

The Lover is one of the Thief's Charges and her season is Sun's Dawn. Those born under the sign of the Lover are graceful and passionate.

The Shadow

The Shadow's Season is Second Seed. The Shadow grants those born under her sign the ability to hide in shadows.

The Tower

The Tower is one of the Thief's Charges and its Season is Frostfall. Those born under the sign of the Tower have a knack for finding gold and can open locks of all kinds.

The Firsthold Revolt

by Maveus Cie

You told me that if her brother won, she would be sister to the King of Wayrest, and Reman would want to keep her for the alliance. But her brother Helseth lost and has fled with his mother back to Morrowind, and still Reman has not left her to marry me." Lady Gialene took a long, slow drag of the hookah and blew out dragon's breath, so the scent of blossoms perfumed her gilded chamber. "You make a very poor advisor, Kael. I might have spent my time romancing the king of Cloudrest or Alinor instead of the wretched royal husband of Queen Morgiah."

Kael knew better than to hurt his lady's vanity by the mere suggestion that the King of Firsthold might have come to love his Dunmer Queen. Instead he gave her a few minutes to pause and look from her balcony out over the high cliff palaces of the ancient capitol. The moons shone like crystal on the deep sapphire waters of the Abecean Sea. It was ever springtide here, and he could well understand why she would prefer a throne in this land than in Cloudrest or Alinor.

Finally, he spoke: "The people are with you, my lady. They do not relish the idea of Reman's dark elf heirs ruling the kingdom when he is gone."

"I wonder," she said calmly. "I wonder if as the King would not give up his Queen for want of alliances, whether she would give herself up out of fear. Of all the people of Firsthold, who most dislikes the Dunmer influence on the court?"

"Is this a trick question, my lady?" asked Kael. "The Trebbite Monks, of course. Their credo has ever been for pure Altmer bloodlines on Summurset, and among the royal families most of all. But, my lady, they make very weak allies."

"I know," said Gialene, taking up her hookah again thoughtfully, a smile

creeping across her face. "Morgiah has seen to it that they have no power. She would have exterminated them altogether had Reman not stopped her for all the good they do for the country folk. What if they found themselves with a very powerful benefactress? One with intimate knowledge of the court of Firsthold, the chief concubine of the King, and all the gold to buy weapons with that her father, the King of Skywatch, could supply?"

"Well-armed and with the support of the country people, they would be formidable," nodded Kael. "But as your advisor, I must warn you: if you make yourself an active foe of Queen Morgiah, you must play to win. She has inherited much of her mother Queen Barenziah's intelligence and spirit of vengeance."

"She will not know I am her foe until it is too late," shrugged Gialene. "Go to the Trebbite monastery and bring me Friar Lylim. We must strategize our plan of attack."

For two weeks, Reman was advised about growing resentment in the countryside from peasants who called Morgiah the "Black Queen," but it was nothing that he had not heard before. His attention was on the pirates on a small island off the coast called Calluis Lar. They had been more brazen as late, attacking royal barges in organized raids. To deliver a crushing blow, he ordered the greatest part of his militia to invade the island -- an incursion he himself would lead.

A few days after Reman left the capitol, the revolt of the Trebbite Monks exploded. The attacks were well-coordinated and without warning. The Chief of the Guards did not wait to be announced, bursting into Morgiah's bedchamber ahead of a flurry of maidservants.

"My Queen," he said. "It is a revolution."

By contrast, Gialene was not asleep when Kael came to deliver the news. She was seated by the window, smoking her hookah and looking at the fires far off in the hills.

"Morgiah is with council," he explained. "I am certain they are telling her

that the Trebbite Monks are behind the uprising, and that the revolution will be at the city gates by morning."

"How large is the revolutionary army in contrast to the remaining royal militia?" asked Gialene.

"The odds are well in our favor," said Kael. "Though not perhaps as much as we hoped. The country folk, it seems, like to complain about their queen, but stop short of insurrection. Primarily, the army is composed of the Monks themselves and a horde of mercenaries your father's gold bought. In a way of thinking, it is preferable this way -- they are more professional and organized that a common mob. Really, they are a true army, complete with a horn section."

"If that doesn't frighten the Black Queen into abdication, nothing will," smiled Gialene, rising from her chair. "The poor dear must be beside herself with worry. I must fly to her side and enjoy it."

Gialene was disappointed when she saw Morgiah come out of the Council Chambers. Considering that she had been woken from a deep sleep with cries of revolution and had spent the last several hours in consultation with her meager general force, she looked beautiful. There was a sparkle of proud defiance in her bright red eyes.

"My Queen," Gialene cried, forcing real tears. "I came as soon as I heard! Will we all be slaughtered?"

"A distinct possibility," replied Morgiah simply. Gialene tried to read her, but the expressions of women, especially alien women, were a far greater challenge than those of Altmer men.

"I hate myself for even thinking to propose this," said Gialene. "But since the cause of their fury is you, perhaps if you were to give up the throne, they might disperse. Please understand, my queen, I am thinking only of the good of the kingdom and our own lives."

"I understand the spirit of your suggestion," smiled Morgiah. "And I will

take it under advisement. Believe me, I've thought of it myself. But I don't think it will come to that."

"Have you a plan for defending us?" asked Gialene, contorting her features to an expression she knew bespoke girlish hope.

"The king left us several dozen of his royal battlemages," said Morgiah. "I think the mob believes we have nothing but palace guards and a few soldiers to protect us. When they get to the gates are greeted with a wave of fireballs, I find it highly likely that they will lose heart and retreat."

"But isn't there some protection they could be using against such an assault?" asked Gialene in her best worried voice.

"If they knew about it, naturally there is. But an unruly mob is unlikely to have mages skilled in the arts of Restoration, by which they could shield themselves from the spells, or Mysticism, by which they could reflect the spells back on my battlemages. That would be the worst scenario, but even if they were well-organized enough to have Mystics in their ranks -- and enough of them to reflect so many spells -- it just isn't done. No battlefield commander would advise such a defense during a siege unless he knew precisely what he was going to be meeting. And then, of course, once the trap is sprung" Morgiah winked. "It's too late for a countering spell."

"A most cunning solution, your highness," said Gialene, honestly impressed.

Morgiah excused herself to meet with her battlemages, and Gialene gave her an embrace. Kael was waiting in the palace garden for his lady.

"Are there Mystics among the mercenaries?" she asked quickly.

"Several, in fact," replied Kael, bewildered by her query. "Largely rejects from the Psijic Order, but they know enough to cast the regular spells of the school."

"You must sneak out the city gates and tell Friar Lylim to have them cast

reflection spells on all the front line before they attack," said Gialene.

"That's most irregular battlefield strategy," frowned Kael.

"I know it is, fool, that's what Morgiah is counting on. There's a gang of battlemages who are going to be waiting on the battlements to greet our army with a barrage of fire balls."

"Battlemages? I would have thought that King Reman would have brought them with him to fight the pirates."

"You would have thought that," laughed Gialene. "But then we would be defeated. Now go!"

Friar Lylim agreed with Kael that it was a bizarre, unheard-of way to begin a battle, casting reflection spells on all one's troops. It went against every tradition, and as a Trebbite Monk, he valued tradition above every other virtue. There was little other choice, though, given the intelligence. He had few enough healers in the army as it were, and their energies could not be wasted casting resistance spells.

At dawn's light, the rebel army was in sight of the gleaming spires of Firsthold. Friar Lylim gathered together every soldier who knew even the rudimentary secrets of Mysticism, who knew how to tap in to the elementary conundrums and knots of the energies of magicka. Though few were masters of the art, their combined force was powerful to behold. A great surge of entangling power washed over the army, crackling, hissing, and infusing all with their ghostly force. When they arrived at the gates, every soldier, even the least imaginative, knew that no spell would touch him for a long time.

Friar Lylim watched his army batter into the gate with the great satisfaction of a commander who has counteracted an unthinkable attack with an outrageous defense. The smile quickly faded from his face.

They were met at the battlements not by mages but by common archers of the palace guard. As the flaming arrows fell upon the siegers like a red rain,

the healers ran in to help the wounded. Their healing spells reflected off the dying men, one after the other. Chaos ruled as the attackers suddenly found themselves defenseless and began a panicked, unorganized retreat. Friar Lylim himself considered briefly holding his ground before fleeing himself.

Later, he would send furious notes to Lady Gialene and Kael, but they were returned. Even his best secret agents within the palace were unable to find their whereabouts.

Neither had, as it turns out, much previous experience with torture, and they soon confessed their treachery to the King's satisfaction. Kael was executed, and Gialene was sent back with escort to her father's court of Skywatch. He has still to find a husband for her. Reman, by contrast, has elected not to take a new royal concubine. The common folk of Firsthold consider this break in palace protocol to be more of the sinister alien influence of the Black Queen, and grumble to all who will listen.

The Five Songs of King Wulfharth

Shor's Tongue

The first song of King Wulfharth is ancient, circa 1E500. After the defeat of the Alessian army at Glenumbria Moors, where King Hoag Merkiller was slain, Wulfharth of Atmora was elected by the Pact of Chieftains. His thu'um was so powerful that he could not verbally swear into the office, and scribes were used to draw up his oaths. Immediately thereafter the scribes wrote down the first new law of his reign: a fiery reinstatement of the traditional Nordic pantheon. The Edicts were outlawed, their priests put to the stake, and their halls set ablaze. The shadow of King Borgas had ended for a span. For his zealotry, King Wulfharth was called Shor's Tongue, and Ysmir, Dragon of the North.

Kyne's Son

The second song of King Wulfharth glorifies his deeds in the eyes of the Old Gods. He fights the eastern Orcs and shouts their chief into Hell. He rebuilds the 418th step of High Hrothgar, which had been damaged by a dragon. When he swallowed a thundercloud to keep his army from catching cold, the Nords called him the Breath of Kyne.

Old Knocker

The third song of King Wulfharth tells of his death. Orkey, an enemy god, had always tried to ruin the Nords, even in Atmora where he stole their years away. Seeing the strength of King Wulfharth, Orkey summoned the ghost of Alduin Time-Eater again. Nearly every Nord was eaten down to six years old. Boy Wulfharth pleaded to Shor, the dead Chieftain of the Gods, to help his people. Shor's own ghost then fought the Time-Eater on the spirit plane, as he did at the beginning of time, and he won, and Orkey's folk, the Orcs, were ruined. As Boy Wulfharth watched the battle in the sky he learned a new thu'um, What Happens When You Shake the Dragon Just So. He used this new magic to change his people back to normal. In his haste to

save so many, though, he shook too many years out on himself. He grew older than the Greybeards, and died. The flames of his pyre were said to have reached the hearth of Kyne itself.

The Ash King

The fourth song of King Wulfharth tells of his rebirth. The Dwarves and Devils of the eastern kingdoms had started to fight again, and the Nords hoped they might reclaim their ancient holdings there because of it. They planned an attack, but then gave up, knowing that they had no strong King to lead them. Then in walked the Devil of Dagoth, who swore he came in peace. Moreover, he told the Nords a wondrous thing: he knew where the Heart of Shor was! Long ago the Chief of the Gods had been killed by Elven giants, and they ripped out Shor's Heart and used it as a standard to strike fear into the Nords. This worked until Ysgramor Shouted Some Sense and the Nords fought back again. Knowing that they were going to lose eventually, the Elven giants hid the Heart of Shor so that the Nords might never have their God back. But here was the Devil of Dagoth with good news! The Dwarves and Devils of the eastern kingdom had his Heart, and this was the reason for their recent unrest. The Nords asked the Devil of Dagoth why he might betray his countrymer so, and he said that the Devils have betrayed each other since the beginning of time, and this was so, and so the Nords believed him. The Tongues sung Shor's ghost into the world again. Shor gathered an army as he did of old, and then he sucked in the long-strewn ashes of King Wulfharth and remade him, for he needed a good general. But the Devil of Dagoth petitioned to be that general, too, and he pointed out his role as the blessed harbinger of this holy war. So Shor had two generals, the Ash King and the Devil of Dagoth, and he marched on the eastern kingdoms with all the sons of Skyrim.

Red Mountain

The fifth song of King Wulfharth is sad. The survivors of the disaster came back under a red sky. That year is called Sun's Death. The Devil of Dagoth had tricked the Nords, for the Heart of Shor was not in the eastern kingdoms, and had never been there at all. As soon as Shor's army had got to Red Mountain, all the Devils and Dwarves fell upon them. Their

sorcerers lifted the mountain and threw it onto Shor, trapping him underneath Red Mountain until the end of time. They slaughtered the sons of Skyrim, but not before King Wulfharth killed King Dumalacath the Dwarf-Orc, and doomed his people. Then Vehk the Devil blasted the Ash King into Hell and it was over. Later, Kyne lifted the ashes of the ashes of Ysmir into the sky, saving him from Hell and showing her sons the color of blood when it is brought by betrayal. And the Nords will never trust another Devil again.

The Secret Song of Wulfharth Ash-King

The Truth at Red Mountain

The Heart of Shor was in Resdayn, as Dagoth-Ur had promised. As Shor's army approached the westernmost bank of the Inner Sea, they stared across at Red Mountain, where the Dwemeri armies had gathered. News from the scouts reported that the Chimeri forces had just left Narsis, and that they were taking their time joining their cousins against the Nords. Dagoth-Ur said that the Tribunal had betrayed their King's trust, that they sent Dagoth-Ur to Lorkhan (for that is what they called Shor in Resdayn) so that the god might wreak vengeance on the Dwarves for their hubris; that Nerevar's peace with the Dwemer would be the ruin of the Velothi way. This was the reason for the slow muster, Dagoth-Ur said.

The Armies Grow

And Lorkhan (for that is what they called Shor in Resdayn) said: "I do not wreak vengeance on the Dwarves for the reasons that the Tribunal might believe I do. Nevertheless, it is true that they will die by my hand, and any

whoever should side with them. This Nerevar is the son of Boethiah, one of the strongest Padomaics. He is a hero to his people despite his Tribunal, and he shall muster enough that this battle will be harder going still. We will need more than what we have." And so Dagoth-Ur, who wanted the Dwarves as dead as the Tribunal did, went to Kogoran and summoned his House chap'thil, his nix-hounds, his wizards, archers, his stolen men of brass. And the Ash King, Wulfharth, hoary Ysmir, went and made peace with the Orcs in spite of his Nordic blood, and they brought many warriors but no wizards at all. Many Nords could not bring themselves to ally with their traditional enemies, even in the face of Red Mountain. They were close to desertion. Then Wulfharth said: "Don't you see where you really are? Don't you know who Shor really is? Don't you know what this war is?" And they looked from the King to the God to the Devils and Orcs, and some knew, really knew, and they are the ones that stayed.

The Doom Drum

Nerevar carried Keening, a dagger made of the sound of the shadow of the moons. His champions were Dumac Dwarfking, who carried a hammer of divine mass, and Alandro Sul, who was the immortal son of Azura and wore the Wraith Mail. They met Lorkhan at the last battle of Red Mountain. Lorkhan had his Heart again, but he had long been from it, and he needed time. Wulfharth met Sul but could not strike him, and he fell from grievous wounds, but not before shouting Sul blind. Dagoth-Ur met Dumac and slew him, but not before Sunder struck his lord's Heart. Nerevar turned away from Lorkhan and struck down Dagoth-Ur in rage, but he took a mortal wound from Lorkhan in turn. But Nerevar feigned the death that was coming early and so struck Lorkhan with surprise on his side. The Heart had been made solid by Sunder's tuning blow and Keening could now cut it out. And it was cut out and Lorkhan was defeated and the whole ordeal was thought over.

Flight from the Thalmor

Dearest reader: The work you are about to experience has been copied and duplicated, so that the story it relates can be spread throughout the Empire. But make no mistake - this is not a work of fiction. The events chronicled in this account are all true, were originally documented in a private journal (which now remains safely guarded in the House of Quills in Hammerfell) and occurred not more than a year before this book was printed.

- Ashad Ibn Khaled, High Scribe, House of Quills, Hammerfell

It's been nine days. Nine days since I slipped my bonds. Nine days since I strangled my captor with my own chains. And nine days since I rushed headlong into the night, always listening, but never looking back.

But in order to understand my current predicament, one must first understand where I came from, and just where this story began.

My name is Hadrik Oaken-Heart, and I am a proud Nord of Skyrim. I am a skald by trade, and received my formal training at the Bards College in Solitude. For years, I made my occupation as a traveling musician and minstrel, and even served several stints as war-bard in service to the armies of the various Jarls.

And it's fairly safe to say that if I weren't a bard, I never would have gotten into this mess to begin with.

My troubles began when I first started singing about Talos, the Ninth and greatest Divine, beloved of the people of Skyrim. Turns out, he's not so beloved by the Thalmor.

Ah yes, the Thalmor. As common as a head cold in Skyrim these days, and just as annoying. Or so I thought at the time, before their true power and inlfuence made itself known.

For those not in the know, the Thalmor are Skyrim's recently honored "guests" - high elves of the Aldmeri Dominion who were gracious enough not to wipe us all out during the Great War.

But, as every Nord of Skyrim knows, Thalmor graciousness comes at a terrible price. One of the stipulations of the White-Gold Concordat - the peace treaty between our peoples - was the abolishment of Talos worship. A man ascend to godhood? Preposterous, claim the Thalmor. And so, the open worship of Talos has been outlawed in Skyrim, and actively enforced in those cities where the Thalmor have a tangible presence. Cities, I might add, in which the Empire has the most secure foothold.

It was in one of these cities - Markarth, to be exact - where I made the conscious decision to defy the ban on Talos worship. And my defiance came in the form of - what else? - a song. For what bard who has spent time writing and rehearsing an original work can possible refrain from performing it? So perform it I did. Not once, not twice, but seven times. Once a day, for an entire week.

Now here's something most of my kinsman are unaware of: not all Thalmor in Skyrim are equal in station, or purpose. In fact, there is one group in particular that operates secretly, in the shadows - watching and waiting for those Nords who break the law, and continue their worship of almighty Talos. These are the Justiciars, and it is their job to enforce this, the most terrible of conditions of the White-Gold Concordat.

And so, I would have performed my song for an eighth time had I been given the opportunity. Sadly, I was not. For the Justiciars had been watching, had been waiting. Instead, I received a black sack over my head in the wee hours of the morning, a dreadfully uncomfortable wagon ride, and sinister promises that I would enjoy my "new home," which I came to realize was some sort of secret Thalmor prison or detention camp. One I was certain I would never leave alive.

It was at that moment I realized I needed to make my escape. No matter what - even if I died in the attempt - I had to slip the grasp of my captors. Better that than rot in some godsforsaken Thalmor jail until the end of time.

I finally got my chance when the wagon stopped, and we made camp for the night. One of my two Thalmor guards set off into the forest to hunt, leaving me alone with the other. And so, my account comes full circle.

It is now nine days later, and in that time, I have realized the true extent of my foolishness. I couldn't have sung the song just once? Or maybe twice? Or not at all? I couldn't have swallowed my stubborn Nord pride and realized just how much power and influence the Thalmor truly have over the Jarls?

No. I could not. So now I run. Like a hare from the hound, I run. Always moving, rarely resting, never sleeping. But the Thalmor dog my every move. Where will I go? How will I escape their grasp? I honestly don't know. The only thing I now understand for certain is this: if the agents of the Aldmeri Dominion cannot have your soul, then they will take your very life.

My name is Hadrik Oaken-Heart, and I am a proud Nord of Skyrim. Remember me. For soon I will be dead.

Forge, Hammer and Anvil

by Adolphus Eritius

These notes were found in ruins near Old Hroldan. As best I can tell, they were written by Thorbald, a rather infamous smith who died shortly before Tiber Septim's reign. He was rumored to illiterate, and given that these notes are obviously written by an assistant, that rumor is likely true. I have made no attempt to correct the texts themselves as they may have historical value.

Without further ado, the ramblings of Thorbald:

This ain't no book for how to be a grayt smith. So if you're reeding this, stop. It's just me own notes cawse I'm getting old and cranky and don't rember stuff. These be me own methods for makin things.

Iron armor and weapons. Lots of Iron ingots and some leather strips.

Steel armor and weapons. Lots of Steel ingots, a little iron, and some leather strips. Cept for Steel Plate. It needs some Corundum too.

Leather armor and weapons. Who'd be stupid enuf to make leather weapons? Leather armor needs leather. Big peeces and little peeces. Just like Hide armor. And studded armor. Scaled armor too. Well, that needs some steel also. And Curundum. Can't make Scaled armor without Corundum. That would be dum.

Dwarfen armor and weapons. Dwarfen scrap metal, some iron, and some leather strips. I'm gonna stop sayin leather, cawse it's always used. Are you writin what I jus said? You idiot! Jus do it, don't rite it. (Thorbald is old and fat)

Elven armor and weapons. Elves and dwarfs didn't get along. Bet you didn't know that. Elven stuff needs Moonstone and a little bit of iron. Except for

that Gilded stuff. Gotta add Quicksilver if you wanna make Gilded Elven armor.

Orcish armor and weapons. Use Orichalcum and a bit of iron. (Thorbald doesn't like Orcs)

Ebony armor and weapons. Takes only Ebony. No iron. Not even a little. You'll want to, but don't.

Glass armor and weapon. Need Malachite and sum Moonstone. Nasty stuff, workin' with Malachite.

Daedric armor and weapons. Hah! Like I'd rite that down. (He uses daydra hearts. I don't know whare he gets 'em)

That's all. You can stop writin now. I said stop!

Postscript - The last page had a large streak of ink an a few splatters of blood. It would be a fair conclusion that Thorbald beat his assistant. We have no way of know if Thorbald ever discovered the extraneous comments added to his script.

-- Adolphus Eritius

Fragment: On Artaeum

by Taurce il-Anselma

The Isle of Artaeum (ar-TAY-um) is the third largest island in the Summurset archipelago, located south of the Moridunon village of Potansa and west of the mainland village of Runcibae. It is best known for being home to the Psijic Order, perhaps the oldest monastic group in Tamriel.

The earliest written record of Psijics is from the 20th year of the First Era and tells the tale of the renowned Breton sage and author Voernet, traveling to the Isle of Artaeum to meet with Iachesis, the Ritemaster of the Psijics.

Even then, the Psijics were the counsellors of kings and proponents of the "Elder Way," taught to them by the original race that inhabited Tamriel. The Elder Way is a philosophy of meditation and study said to bind the forces of nature to the individual will. It differs from magicka in origin, but the effects are much the same.

That said, it is perhaps more than coincidence that the Isle of Artaeum literally vanished from the shores of Summurset at the beginning of the Second Era at about the time of the founding of the Mages Guild in Tamriel. Various historians and scholars have published theories about this, but perhaps none but Iachesis and his own could shed light on the matter.

Five hundred years passed and Artaeum returned. The Psijics on the Isle consisted of persons, mostly Elves, who had disappeared and were presumed dead in the Second Era. They could not or would not offer any explanation for Artaeum's whereabouts during that time, or the fate of Iachesis and the original council of Artaeum.

Currently, the Psijics are led by the Loremaster Celarus, who has presided over the Council of Artaeum for the last two hundred and fifty years. The Council's influence in Tamrielan politics is tidal. The kings of Sumurset, particularly those of Moridunon, have often sought the Psijics' opinion.

Emperor Uriel V was much influenced by the Council in the early, most glorious parts of his reign, before his disastrous attack on Akavir. It has even been suggested that the fleet of King Orghum of Pyandonea was destroyed by a joint effort of Emperor Antiochus and the Psijic Order. The last four emperors, Uriel VI, Morihatha, Pelagius IV, and Uriel VII, have been suspicious of the Psijics enough to refuse ambassadors from the Isle of Artaeum within the Imperial City.

The Isle of Artaeum is difficult to chart geographically. It is said that it shifts continuously either at random or by decree of the Council. Visitors to the island are so rare as to be almost unheard of. Anyone desirous of a meeting with a Psijic may find contacts in Potansa and Runcibae as well as many of the kingdoms of Summurset.

Were it more accessible, Artaeum would be a favored destination for travelers. I have been to the Isle once and still dream of its idyllic orchards and clear pastures, its still and silent lagoons, its misty woodlands, and the unique Psijic architecture that seems to be as natural as its surroundings as well as wondrous in its own right. The Ceporah Tower in particular I would study, for it is a relic from a civilization that predates the High Elves by several hundred years and is still used in certain rites by the Psijics. Perhaps one day I might return.

Note: The author is currently on the Isle of Artaeum by gracious consent of Master Sargenius of the Council of Artaeum.

Frontier, Conquest and Accommodation: A Social History of Cyrodiil

University of Gwylim Press 3E 344

Historians often portray the human settlement of Tamriel as a straightforward process of military expansion of the Nords of Skyrim. In fact, human settlers occupied nearly every corner of Tamriel before Skyrim was even founded. These so-called "Nedic peoples" include the proto-Cyrodilians, the ancestors of the Bretons, the aboriginals of Hammerfell, and perhaps a now-vanished Human population of Morrowind. Strictly speaking, the Nords are simply another of these Nedic peoples, the only one that failed to find a method of peaceful accommodation with the Elves who already occupied Tamriel.

Ysgramor was certainly not the first human settler in Tamriel. In fact, in "fleeing civil war in Atmora," as the Song of Return states, Ysgramor was following a long tradition of migration from Atmora; Tamriel had served as a "safety valve" for Atmora for centuries before Ysgramor's arrival. Malcontents, dissidents, rebels, landless younger sons, all made the difficult crossing from Atmora to the "New World" of Tamriel. New archeological excavations date the earliest human settlements in Hammerfell, High Rock, and Cyrodiil at ME800-1000, centuries earlier than Ysgramor, even assuming that the twelve Nord "kings" prior to Harald were actual historical figures.

The Nedic peoples were a minority in a land of Elves, and had no choice but to live peacefully with the Elder Race. In High Rock, Hammerfell, Cyrodiil, and possibly Morrowind, they did just that, and the Nedic peoples flourished and expanded over the last centuries of the Merethic Era. Only in Skyrim did this accommodation break down, an event recorded in the Song of Return. Perhaps, being close to reinforcements from Atmora, the proto-Nords did not feel it necessary to submit to the authority of the Skyrim Elves. Indeed, the early Nord chronicles note that under King Harald, the

first historical Nord ruler (1E 113-221), "the Atmoran mercenaries returned to their homeland" following the consolidation of Skyrim as a centralized kingdom. Whatever the case, the pattern was set -- in Skyrim, expansion would proceed militarily, with human settlement following the frontier of conquest, and the line between Human territory and Elven territory was relatively clear.

But beyond this "zone of conflict," the other Nedic peoples continued to merge with their Elven neighbors. When the Nord armies of the First Empire finally entered High Rock and Cyrodiil, they found Bretons and proto-Cyrodiils already living there among the Elves. Indeed, the Nords found it difficult to distinguish between Elf and Breton, the two races had already intermingled to such a degree. The arrival of the Nord armies upset the balance of power between the Nedic peoples and the Elves. Although the Nords' expansion into High Rock and Cyrodiil was relatively brief (less than two centuries), the result was decisive; from then on, power in those regions shifted from the Elves to the Humans.

Galerion The Mystic

by Asgrim Kolsgreg

During the early bloody years of the Second Era, Vanus Galerion was born under the name Trechtus, a serf on the estate of a minor nobleman, Lord Gyrnasse of Sollicich-on-Ker. Trechtus' father and mother were common laborers, but his father had secretly, against the law of Lord Gyrnasse, taught himself and then Trechtus to read. Lord Gyrnasse had been advised that literate serfs were an abomination of nature and dangerous to themselves and their lords, and had closed all bookstalls within Sollicich-on-Ker. All booksellers, poets, and teachers were forbidden, except within Gyrnasse's keep. Nevertheless, a small scale smuggling operation kept a number of books and scrolls in circulation right under Gyrnasse's shadow.

When Trechtus was eight, the smugglers were found and imprisoned. Some said that Trechtus's mother, an ignorant and religious woman fearful of her husband, was the betrayer of the smugglers, but there were other rumors as well. The trial of the smugglers was nonexistant, and the punishment swift. The body of Trechtus' father was kept hanging for weeks during the hottest summer Sollicich-on-Ker had seen in centuries.

Three months later, Trechtus ran away from Lord Gyrnasse's estate. He made it as far as Alinor, half-way across Summerset Isle. A band of troubadours found him nearly dead, curled up in a ditch by the side of the road. They nursed him to health and employed him as an errand boy in return for food and shelter. One of the troubadours, a soothsayer named Heliand, began testing Trechtus' mind and found the boy, though shy, to be preternaturally intelligent and sophisticated given his circumstances. Heliand recognized in the boy a commonality, for Heliand had been trained on the Isle of Artaeum as a mystic.

When the troupe was performing in the village of Potansa on the far eastern end of Summurset, Heliand took Trechtus, then a boy of eleven, to the Isle of Artaeum. The Magister of the Isle, Iachesis, recognized potential in

Trechtus and took him on as pupil, giving him the name of Vanus Galarion. Vanus trained his mind on the Isle of Artaeum, as well as his body.

Thus was the first Archmagister of the Mages Guild trained. From the Psijics of the Isle of Artaeum, he received his training. From his childhood of want and injustice, he received his philosophy of sharing knowledge.

A Game At Dinner

by An Anonymous Spy

Forward From The Publisher:

The history behind this letter is almost as interesting and dark as the story it tells. The original letter to the mysterious Dhaunayne was copied and began circulating around the Ashlands of Vvardenfell a few months ago. In time, a print found its way to the mainland and Prince Hlaalu Helseth's palace outside Almalexia. While the reader may conclude after reading this letter that the Prince would be furious about such a work, impugning his highness with great malevolence, quite the reverse was true. The Prince and his mother, Queen Barenziah, had it privately printed into bound copies and sent to libraries and booksellers throughout Morrowind.

As matter of record, the Prince and the Queen have not officially stated whether the letter is a work of pure imagination or based on an actual occurrence. The House Dres has publicly denounced the work, and indeed, no one named Dhaunayne, despite the suggestions in the letter, has ever been linked to the house. We leave the reader to interpret the letter as he or she believes.
-- Nerris Gan, Publisher

Dark Liege Dhaunayne,

You asked for a detailed description of my experience last night and the reasons for my plea to House Dres for another assignment. I hope I have served you well in my capacity as informant in the court of Prince Helseth, a man who I have stated in many previous reports could teach Molag Bal how to scheme. As you know, I've spent nearly a year now working my way into his inner circle of advisors. He was in need of friendship when he first arrived in Morrowind and eagerly took to me and a few others. Still, he was disinclined to trust any of us, which is perhaps not surprising, given his

tenuous position in Morrowind society.

For your unholiness's recollection, the Prince is the eldest son of Barenziah, who was once the Queen of Morrowind and once the Queen of the High Rock kingdom of Wayrest. At the death of her husband, Prince Helseth's stepfather, King Eadwyre, there was a power struggle between the Prince and Eadwyre's daughter, the Princess Elysana. Though details of what transpired are imperfect, it is clear that Elysana won the battle and became Queen, banishing Helseth and Barenziah. Barenziah's only other child, Morgiah, had already left court to marry and become Queen of the Summurset Isle kingdom of Firsthold.

Barenziah and Helseth crossed the continent to return to Morrowind only last year. They were well received by Barenziah's uncle, our current king, Hlaalu Athyn Llethan, who had taken the throne after Barenziah's abdication more than forty years ago. Barenziah made it clear that she had no designs on reclaiming the throne, but merely to retire to her family estates. Helseth, as you know, has lingered in the royal court, and many have whispered that while he lost the throne of Wayrest, he does not intend to lose the throne of Morrowind at Llethan's death.

I've kept your unholiness informed of the Prince's movements, meetings, and plots, as well as the names and characters of his other advisors. As you may recall, I've often thought that I was not the only spy in Helseth's court. I told you before that a particular Dunmer counselor of Helseth looked like a fellow I had seen in the company of Tholer Saryoni, the Archcanon of the Tribunal Temple. Another, a young Nord woman, has been verified to visit the Imperial fortress in Balmora. Of course, in their cases, they might well have been on Helseth's own business, but I couldn't be certain. I had begun to think myself paranoid as the Prince himself when I found myself doubting the sincere loyalty of the Prince's chamberlain, Burgess, a Breton who had been in his employ since his days in the court of Wayrest.

That is the background on that night, last night.

Yesterday morning, I received a curt invitation to dine with the Prince. Based only on my own paranoia, I dispatched one of my servants, who is a

good and loyal servant of the House Dres, to watch the palace and report back anything unusual. Just before dinner, he returned and told me what he had witnessed.

A man cloaked in rags had been given entrance into the palace, and had stayed there for some time. When he left, my servant saw his face beneath the cloak -- an alchemist of infamous repute, said to be a leading suppliers of exotic poisons. A fine observer, my servant also noticed that the alchemist entered the palace smelling of wickwheat, bittergreen, and something alien and sweet. When he left, he was odorless.

He had come to the same conclusion as I did. The Prince had procured ingredients to prepare a poison. Bittergreen alone is deadly when eaten raw, but the other ingredients suggested something far deeper. As your unholiness can doubtless imagine, I went to dinner that night, prepared for any eventuality.

All of Prince Helseth's other counselors were in attendance, and I noticed that all were slightly apprehensive. Of course, I imagined that I was in a nest of spies, and all knew of the Prince's mysterious meeting. It is just as likely that some knew of the alchemist's visit, while others were simply concerned by the nature of the Prince's invitation, and still others merely unconsciously adopted the tense disposition of their fellow, better informed counselors.

The Prince, however, was in fine mettle and soon had everyone relaxed and at ease. At nine, we were all ushered into his dining hall where the feast had been laid out. And what a feast! Honeyed gorapples, fragrant stews, roasts in various blood sauces, and every variety of fish and fowl expertly and ostentatiously prepared. Crystal and gold flagons of wine, flin, shein, and mazte were at our seats to be savored as appropriate with each course. As tantalizing as the aromas were, it occurred to me that in such a maze of spices and flavors, a discreet poison would be undetectable.

Throughout the meal, I maintained the illusion of eating the food and drinking the liquor, but I was surreptitious and swallowed nothing. Finally, the plates and food were cleared from the table, and a tureen of a spicy

broth was placed in the center of the banquet. The servant who brought it then retired, closing the banquet hall door behind him.

"It smells divine, my Prince," said the Marchioness Kolgar, the Nord woman. "But I cannot eat another thing."

"Your Highness," I added, feigning a tone of friendliness and slight intoxication. "You know that every one at this table would gladly die to put you on the throne of Morrowind, but is it really necessary that we gorge ourselves to death?"

The others at the table agreed with appreciative groans. Prince Helseth smiled. I swear by Vaernima the Gifter, my dark liege, even you have never seen a smile such as this one.

"Ironic words. You see, an alchemist visited me today, as some of you already doubtless know. He showed me how to make a marvelous poison and its antidote. A most potent potion, excellent for my purposes. No Restoration spell will aid you once you've ingested it. Only the antidote in the tureen will save you from certain death. And what a death, from what I've heard. I am eager to see if the effects are all that the alchemist promised. It should be horribly painful for the afflicted, but quite entertaining."

No one said a word. I could feel my heart beating hard in my chest.

"Your Highness," said Allarat, the Dunmer I suspected of alliance with the Temple. "Have you poisoned someone at this table?"

"You are very astute, Allarat," said Prince Helseth, looking about the table, eying each of his advisors carefully. "Little wonder I value your counsel. As indeed I value all in this room. It would be perhaps easiest for me to say who I haven't poisoned. I haven't poisoned any who serve but one master, any whose loyalty to me is sincere. I haven't poisoned any person who wants to see King Helseth on the throne of Morrowind. I haven't poisoned anyone who isn't a spy for the Empire, the Temple, the House of Telvanni, the House of Redoran, the House of Indoril, the House of Dres."

Your unholiness, he looked directly at me at his last words. I know that in certainty. My face is practiced at keeping my thoughts from showing, but I immediately thought of every secret meeting I've had, every coded message I sent to you and the House, my dark liege. What could he know? What could he, even without knowing, suspect?

I felt my heart beating even faster. Was it fear, or poison? I couldn't speak, certain as I was that my voice would betray my calm facade.

"Those loyal to me who wish harm on my enemies may be wondering how can I be certain that the poison has been ingested. Is it possible that the guilty party, or dare I say, parties were suspicious and merely pretended to eat and drink tonight? Of course. But even the craftiest of pretenders would have to raise a glass to his or her lips and put empty forks or spoons in their mouths to play the charade. The food, you see, was not poisoned. The cups and cutlery were. If you did not partake out of fear, you're poisoned just the same, and sadly, missed an excellent roast."

Sweat beaded on my face and I turned from the Prince so he would not see. My fellow advisors, all of them, were frozen in their seats. From the Marchioness Kolgar, white with fear, to Kema Inebbe, visibly shaking; from the furrowed, angry brow of Allarat to the statue-like stare of Burgess.

I couldn't help thinking then, could the Prince's entire counsellorship be comprised of nothing but spies? Was there any person at the table loyal? And then I thought, what if I were not a spy myself, would I trust Helseth to know that? No one knows better than his advisors both the depth of the Prince's paranoia and the utter implacability of his ambition. If I were not a spy for the House Dres, even then would I be safe? Could a loyalist be poisoned because of a not-so-innocent misjudgment?

The others must have been thinking the same, loyalists and spies alike.

While my mind whirled, I could hear the Prince's voice, addressing all assembled: "The poison acts quickly. If the antidote is not taken within one minute from now, here will be death at the table."

I couldn't decide whether I had been poisoned or not. My stomach ached, but I reminded myself it might have been the result of sitting at a sumptuous banquet and not partaking. My heart shook in my chest and a bitter taste like Trama Root stung my lips. Again, was it fear or poison?

"These are the last words you will hear if you are disloyal to me," said Prince Helseth, still smiling that damned smile as he watched his advisors squirming in their seats. "Take the antidote and live."

Could I believe him? I thought of what I knew of the Prince and his character. Would he kill a self-confessed spy at his court, or would he rather send the vanquished back to his masters? The Prince was ruthless, but either possibility was within his manner. Surely the theatricality of this whole dinner was meant to be a presentation to instill fear. What would my ancestors say if I joined them after sitting at a table, eventually dying of poison? What would they say if I took the antidote, confessing my allegiance to you and the House Dres, and was summarily executed? And, I confess, I thought of what you might to do me even after I was dead.

I had grown so light-headed and filled with my own thoughts, that I didn't see Burgess jump from his seat. I was only suddenly aware that he had the tureen in his hands and was gulping down the liquid within. There were guards all around, though I never noticed them entering.

"Burgess," said Prince Helseth, still smiling. "You have spent some time at Ghostgate. House Redoran?"

"You didn't know?" Burgess laughed sourly. "No House. I report to your stepsister, the Queen of Wayrest. I've always been in her employ. By Akatosh, you poisoned me because you thought I was working for some damnable Dark Elves?"

"You're half right," said the Prince. "I didn't guess who you were working for, or even that you were a spy. But you're also wrong about me poisoning you. You poisoned yourself when you drank from the tureen."

Your unholiness, you don't need to hear how Burgess died. I know that you have seen much over the many, many years of your existence, but you truly don't want to know. I wish I could erase the memory of his agonies from my own mind.

The council was dismissed shortly thereafter. I do not know if Prince Helseth knows or suspects that I too am a spy. I do not know how many others that night, last night, were as close as I was from drinking from the tureen before Burgess did. I only know that if the Prince does not suspect me now, he will. I cannot win at the games he mastered long ago at the court of Wayrest, and I beg your unholiness, my dark liege Dhaunayne to use your influence in the House Dres and dismiss your loyal servant from this charge.

Publisher's Note:
Of course, the anonymous writer's signature has not been on any reprint of the letter since the original.

A Gentleman's Guide to Whiterun

by Mikael the Bard

Welcome, good sir, to this indispensible guide. Within these pages, I, your humble author and guide, will describe to you the great city of Whiterun, the Jewel of the North.

Whiterun offers numerous diversions for the man in search of adventure, fortune and companionship, whether for a night or for a lifetime. The city is graced with not one, but two worthy taverns and there are maids and wenches aplenty.

The city is located rather centrally in Skyrim, and this is well, for it is not far from anywhere. Perched high upon a rocky hill, Whiterun dominates the grassy plains that surround it. High wooden walls protect its denizens from the wolves, mammoths, bandits and other dangers lurking beyond.

When you first enter through the city's main gate, you will find yourself in the Plains District. This is so named because it is the lowest of the city's three neighborhoods.

Ah, but here can be found the Bannered Mare, which I count among the finest taverns in all Skyrim. The scenery within is quite compelling, if you have an eye for the fairer sex.

A stout lass named Hulda tends the bar. Don't let that stony Nord exterior fool you, for she is possessed of that same fiery passion that all Nord women try so hard to conceal. Saadia, the barmaid, is an exotic Redguard beauty. She is quite mysterious, and your humble author is determined to learn her secrets.

Outside the Bannered Mare is a modest marketplace, and here is where I found true love. Though I would never deter a fellow hunting hound from the chase - for indeed, why should I author these tomes, if not to provide

guidance in this very matter? - I must ask that you do me this one kindness.

Her name is Carlotta Valentia, and she is a magnificent beauty who makes a modest living selling bread and produce in the daylight hours. By the gods, I will make that feisty beauty mine someday!

And of course, there are other services to be found in the Plains district. Belethor's General Goods offers various and sundry wears for the adventurous traveler, and Arcadia's Cauldron offers what tonics and herbs one would expect from an apothecary's shop.

Arcadia herself is an amiable sort. I often visit her to make conversation, as she is a fellow Imperial far from home. She is, however, a bit old for my taste. A gentleman of advanced years might find in her a worthy companion.

Should you need your blade sharpened or your armor hammered, Warmaiden's offers smithing services very near the main gate. The smith is a pretty Nord named Adrianne Avenicci, but she is married to a great hulking brute named Ulfberth War-Bear.

Adrianne is quite fair, but I should not want to find myself being introduced to the keen edge of that husband's war-axe. If married ladies are your preferred sport, then have at, but don't say that you weren't warned!

Near to the smith is the Drunken Huntsman. Here, some of the wealthier gentlemen gather to share both drink and rumors of the wide world. If you prefer a more distinguished class of company while you sip fine wine, you'll be well at home here.

Of the Wind district I have little to say. Most of the buildings in this second tier of the city are residences, though there is also a Temple of Kynareth and Jorrvaskr, the mead hall of the Companions.

There are some intriguing prospects to be found in the mead hall should you favor a strong and fearless warrior-woman. You will find little game at the temple, however. The priestess, Danica Pure-Spring, is interested almost

exclusively in spiritual matters.

At last we come to the Cloud District, exclusive domain of the Jarl's castle. I have had some merry adventures within the stone walls of Dragonsreach, let me tell you. The serving girls are most easily impressed by a well-spoken Imperial. After all, the nights in Skyrim do grow quite cold, if you take my meaning.

And I will not deny that I have visited the town's jail once or twice, which can be found in the lower levels of the palace.

As for the Jarl and his court, take pains to avoid them. I find that they lack any sense of humor or appreciation for the Imperial culture. Besides which, they are all wealthy men and so must be viewed as your most serious competition. These Nords are simple folk, after all, and too easily swayed by the sight of fine clothes and a purse full of septims.

Now I will conclude this work by wishing you great success in your pursuits of women and wine. Spare a moment in your revels to think of me, your humble author, and the risks I have taken to bring you this most thorough report on all thing of interest to the discerning gentleman in the grand city of Whiterun.

Ah, but I will not lie and say that it was all a hardship. After all, who could want to sleep alone in such a cold and hard land as this? Not I!

Ghosts in the Storm

by Adonato Leotelli

For many years now, I have traveled the length and breadth of Skyrim, writing of my experiences and my adventures.

I have seen many wondrous sights and many strange creatures in my travels, but one encounter remains fixed in my memory, though I wish it were not.

I had taken up traveling with one of the Khajiit trade caravans that crisscross Skyrim, peddling their wares outside the gates of the large cities.

We were nearing Windhelm when the storm struck. It was a violent and terrible gale, one of the very worst I have seen in all my long years. The winds howled like all the daedra of Oblivion, and the driving snow made us blind to the world.

Ri'saad called a halt and we staggered from the road, our hands held over our faces to ward off the stinging pellets of ice. We huddled together in the shelter of a copse of pines. There was no hope of raising our tents - the wind would tear them from our hands the moment we unpacked them.

They struck at the height of the storm. There were perhaps half a dozen of the creatures. It was difficult to say, as the blowing snow and howling wind overwhelmed our sight and our hearing.

They were roughly man-sized, but hunched over and ugly. For garments, they wore only rags and leathers. They were armed with daggers and swords or various kinds, no doubt scavenged from their previous victims.

They had no noses to speak of, only long slits for nostrils. Their ears were sharply pointed, suggesting a distant kinship with the elves. With their pallid skin and lifeless black eyes, they seemed like something out of a

nightmare.

Bhisha saw them first, but too late to save herself. So loud was her death-cry, we heard it over the roaring winds. That cry saved us all.

Alerted to the presence of our foes, the Khajiit drew their blades and formed a circle, facing outward. The white fiends were too few to surround us completely, and the Khajiit fended off each attack. After three of the snow-devils had fallen, the rest fell back and did not come at us again.

The storm abated and we arrived in Windhelm the next morning. I have taken up residence in Candlehearth Hall and I find I am quite comfortable behind the towering stone walls of the city.

Comfortable, at least until I go to sleep and visions of those awful creatures return to haunt my dreams.

Glories and Laments Among the Ayleid Ruins

by Alexandre Hetrard

Having arrived at Gottlesfont Priory, halfway on the Gold Road between Skingrad and the Imperial City, I resolved to make a side trip to view the magnificent ruins of Ceyatatar, or "Shadow of the Fatherwoods' in the ancient Ayleid tongue. After many hours of difficult travel through tangled hawthorn hells and limberlosts, I was suddenly struck dumb by the aspect of five pure white columns rising from a jade-green mound of vines to perfect V-shaped arches and graceful capitals towering above the verdant forest growth. This spectacle caused me to meditate on the lost glories of the past, and the melancholy fate of high civilizations now poking like splinter shards of bone from the green-grown tumulus of time-swept obscurity.

Within the forest tangle I discovered an entrance leading down into the central dome of a great underground edifice once dedicated to Magnus, the God of Sight, Light, and Insight. Dimly lit by the faded power of its magical pools, the shattered white walls of the enclosure shimmered with a cold blue light.

The marble benches of the central plaza faced out across the surrounding waters to tall columns and sharp arches supporting the high dome. From the central island, stately bridges spanned the still pools to narrow walkways behind the columns, with broad vaulted avenues and limpid canals leading away through ever-deeping gloom into darkness. Reflected in the pools were the tumbled columns, collapsed walls, and riotous root and vine growth thriving the dark half-light of the magical fountains.

The ancient Ayleids recognized not the four elements of modern natural philosophy -- earth, water, air, and fire -- but the four elements of High Elf religion -- earth, water, air, and light. The Ayleids considered fire to be but a

weak and corrupt form of light, which Ayleid philosophers identified with primary magical principles. Thus their ancient subterranean temples and sanctuaries were lit by lamps, globes, pools, and fountains of purest magic.

It was by these ancient, faded, but still active magics that I knelt and contemplated the departed glories of the long-dead Ayelid architects. Gazing through the glass-smooth reflections of the surrounding pools, I could see, deep below, the slow pulse, the waxing and waning of the Welkynd stones.

The chiefest perils of these ruins to the explorer are the cunning and deadly mechanisms devised by the Ayleids to torment and confound those would invade their underground sanctuaries. What irony that after these many years, these devices should still stand vigilant against those who would admire the works of the Ayleids. For it is clear... these devices were crafted in vain. They did not secure the Ayleids against their true enemies, which were not the slaves who revolted and overthrew their cruel masters, nor the were they the savage beast peoples who learned the crafts of war and magic from their Ayleid masters. No, it was the arrogant pride of their achievements, their smug self-assurance that their empire would last forever, that doomed them to fail and fade into obscurity.

The Gold Ribbon of Merit

by Ampyrian Brum

In that early springtime morning, pale sunlight flickered behind the morning mist floating through the trees as Templer and Stryngpool made their way to the clearing. Neither had been back in High Rock, let alone in their favorite woods for four years. The trees had changed little even if they had. Stryngpool had a handsome blond moustache now, stiffened and spiked with wax, and Templer seemed to be a completely alien creature to the young lad who searched for adventure in the ancient grove. He was much quieter, as if scarred within as well as without.

They each carried their bows and quivers with extra care as they maneuvered their way through the clusters of vine and branch.

"This is the path that used to lead to your house, isn't it, old boy?" asked Stryngpool.

Templer glanced at the overgrowth and nodded, before continuing on.

"I thought so," said Stryngpool and laughed: "I remember it because you used to run down it every time you got a bloody nose. I know I can't offend you, but I have to say, it's hard to believe that you ended up a soldier."

"How's your family?" asked Templer.

"The same. A bit more pompous, if that's possible. It's obvious they wish I'd come back from the academy, but there's nothing much for me here. At least not until I collect my inheritance. Did I you see I got a gold ribbon of merit in archery?"

"How could I miss it?" said Templer.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot that the family's put it in the Great Hall. Very

ostentatiously. I suppose you can actually see it through the picture window. Silly, but I hope the peasants are impressed."

The clearing opened up before them, where the mist settled on the grass, enveloping it in an opaque, chilly vapor. Burlap targets were arranged around in a semi-circle, several meters apart, like sentinels.

"You've been practicing," observed Templer.

"Well, a bit. I've only been back in town for a few days." said Stryngpool with a smile. "My parents said you got here a week ago?"

"That's right. My unit's camped a few miles east, and I thought I'd visit the old haunts. A lot's changed, I could hardly recognize anything at all." Templer looked down at the valley below, to the vast empty tilled ground, stretching out for miles around. "It looks like a good planting."

"My family's rather spread out since yours left. There was some discussion I think about keeping your old house up, but it seemed a little sentimental. Especially as there was fertile ground beneath."

Stryngpool strung his bow carefully. It was a beautiful piece of art, darkest ebony and spun silver filigrees, hand-crafted for him in Wayrest. He looked over at Templer stringing his bow, and felt a twinge of pity. It was a sad, weathered utensil, bound together with strips of fabric.

"If that's how they taught you to string your bow, you need some advisors from the academy in that army of yours," said Stryngpool as gently as he could. "The untightened loop is supposed to look like an X in an O. Yours looks like a Z in a Y."

"It works for me," said Templer. "I should tell you, I won't be able to make an afternoon of this. I'm supposed to join my unit this evening."

Stryngpool began to feel annoyed by his old friend. If he was angry about his family losing their land, why couldn't he just say it? Why did he come back to the valley at all? He watched Templer nock his first arrow, taking

aim at a target, and coughed.

"I'm sorry, but I can't in good faith send you back to the army without a little new wisdom. There are three types of draw, three-fingers, thumb and index, thumb and two fingers. Then there's the thumb draw which I like, but you see," Stryngpool showed Templer the small leather loop fastened on the cord of his bow, "You need to have one of these thingies or you'll tear your thumb right off."

"I think I like my stupid method best."

"Don't be pigheaded, Templer. They didn't give me the gold ribbon of merit for nothing. I had demonstrated shooting from under a shield, standing, sitting, squatting, kneeling, and sitting on horseback. This is practical information I'm imparting for the sake of our friendship which I, at least, haven't completely forgotten. Sweet Kynareth, I remember when you were just an oily little squirt, begging for this kind of honest guidance."

Templer looked at Stryngpool for a moment, and lowered his bow. "Show me."

Stryngpool relaxed, shook away the tensions that had been building. He did his exercise, drawing the bow back to his eyebrow, his moustache, his chest, his earlobe.

"There are three ways of shooting: snatching and releasing in one continuous motion, like the Bosmer do; holding with a short draw and a pause before releasing like the Khajiit; and partial draw, pause, final draw," Stryngpool fired the arrow into the center of the target with cool precision, "And release. Which I prefer."

"Very nice," said Templer.

"Now you," said Stryngpool. He helped Templer select a grip, nock his arrow correctly, and take aim. A smile grew on Templer's face -- the first time Stryngpool had seen such a childlike expression on the war-etched visage all afternoon. When Templer released the arrow, it rocketed high

over the top of the target and into the valley below where it disappeared from sight.

"Not bad," said Templer.

"No, not bad," said Stryngpool, feeling friendly once again. "If you practice, you should be able to focus your aim a little bit."

The two shot a few more practice bolts before parting ways. Templer began the long trek east to his unit's camp, and Stryngpool wound his way down through the woods to the valley and his family's mansion. He hummed a little tune he learned at the academy as he passed the great lawn and walked up to the front door, pleased with himself for helping his old friend. It entirely escaped his attention that the large picture window was broken.

But he noticed right away when he came into the Great Hall, and saw Templer's wild-shot bolt sticking in his gold ribbon of merit.

Great Harbingers of the Companions

This history is recorded by Swyk the Long-Sighted, of the Circle of Jorrvaskr in the 3rd era. While I am not gifted with a sharp gift of words, I have learned the stories of the Companions before me, and set to record them that they might not be lost when I am. Hereafter is the list of notable Harbingers of the Companions, those who lead us through the darkness to glories in Sovngarde.

Notes on the Harbinger: the Companions have never had a true leader since Ysgramor -- none have been mighty enough to corral the great hearts that beat within Jorrvaskr. While others like mages and thieves need the blessings of their hierarchy to know how to dress, we Companions are capable of leading our own destinies to glory. The Harbinger advises, resolves disputes, and helps to clarify when questions arise of the nature of honor. In the thousands of years the Companions have held at Jorrvaskr, there have been Harbingers both terrible and brilliant, those known for their arm, those for their hearts, and those for their minds. Here are listed some of the most gloried Harbingers, who inspire song and deed.

Ysgramor: the first Harbinger, the first Man, the bringer of Words, and the one who first bound the Companions to honor in that far off land of long ago. Better people have written of him, so I will not attempt to meet their words.

Jeek of the River: Captain of the Jorrvaskr during the Return, discoverer of the Skyforge, founder of Whiterun, and keeper of the original oath of the Companions, now lost to time. While other crews sought glory in conquest, his was the first to settle and serve as protector for the less war-gifted in the land as they came behind.

Mryfwiil the Withdrawn: Several hundred years after the death of Ysgramor, the Companions as we now know them were soldiers for hire,

little better than mercenaries. Our services could be purchased for the fighting of wars, but the commitment to individual honor meant that often Shield-Brothers would be forced to face each other on the field of battle. The bonds of honor which bind the Companions threaten to break, until Mryfwiil, in his wisdom, decreed that we would no longer be party to any war or political conflict of any kind. Because of his steady hand, the Companions today are known as impartial arbiters of honor, in addition to their glories on the field of battle.

Cirroc the Lofty: The first Harbinger to not be of ancestral Atmoran blood. This was around the time that the Nords began to think of themselves as such, and there were great disputes about purity and the legacy of Ysgramor. Cirroc first came to Jorrvaskr as a servant, but the Redguard quickly proved his mettle when treated disrespectfully by one of the less honor-bound warriors of the time. Granted the stature of an honorary Companion after saving the life of Harbinger Tulvar the Unmentioned, he became known as the most capable of Shield-Brothers in the hall, with speed and cunning surpassing any of the old Atmoran stock. His time as Harbinger was short-lived, but it is said that his field knowledge of bladework continues to pass to every new Companion through their training.

Henantier the Outsider: The first elven Harbinger. Like Cirroc before him, he was initially subject to ridicule when arriving at Jorrvaskr, for this was the time (near the closing of the first era) when elves were not permitted to be full Companions, and few were even allowed to see the inside of the hall. Henantier was humble in the daylight hours, performing any task asked of him. At night, he trained fiercely in the outside yard, allowing himself only minutes of sleep before resuming his servant duties the next day. So he toiled through several Harbingers, never resting, never complaining, and always keeping his mind and body sharp. Given his long life, he came to be trusted by the new Companions as the one who them learn the ways of honor.

When one such pupil had aged into an old man and become Harbinger himself, Henantier was the one at his deathbed. With all Companions assembled, he named Henantier as his successor, saying "even an elf can be

born with the heart of a Nord sometimes." There were some number of Companions who laid down their weapons that day, but those who remained knew the truth of honor, and it is their legacy we continue to bear.

Macke of the Piercing Eyes: A Harbinger known for her great beauty, but any who underestimated her on account of it would never make the mistake again. Was said to have once stared down half an opposing army, then slaughtered the remainder single-handedly. Her disappearance in her 8th year as Harbinger has never been explained, though many slanderous lies claim to make accountings for it.

Kyrnil Long-Nose: After the dark periods in the late second era, when a string of false and dishonorable Harbingers laid claim to Jorrvaskr, it was Kyrnil Long-Nose who gathered the true hearts of the Companions in the wilds and stormed Jorrvaskr itself, killing the usurpers and returning honor through blood, in the old ways. He began the tradition of trusted advisors called the Circle (after our great lord Ysgramor's council of captains) who would serve as examples to the younger, newer Companions.

By ensuring that the notions of honor can have an unbroken string of tradition, he steadied the course of the Companions and restored our destinies to that of Ysgramor's, pressing ever onwards to Sovngarde.

Hallgerd's Tale

by Tavi Dromio

I think the greatest warrior who ever lived had to be Vilus Nommenus," offered Xiomara. "Name one other warrior who conquered more territory."

"Tiber Septim, obviously," said Hallgerd.

"He wasn't a warrior. He was an administrator... a politician," said Garaz. "And besides, acreage conquered can't be final means of determining the best warrior. How about skill with a blade?"

"There are other weapons than blades," objected Xiomara. "Why not skill with an axe or a bow? Who was the greatest master of all weaponry?"

"I can't think of one greatest master of all weaponry," said Hallgerd. "Balaxes of Agia Nero in Black Marsh was the greatest wielder of a lance. Ernse Llervu of the Ashlands is the greatest master of the club I've ever seen. The greatest master of the katana is probably an Akaviri warlord we've never heard of. As far as archery goes --"

"Pelinal Whitestrake supposedly conquered all of Tamriel by himself," interrupted Xiomara.

"That was before the First Era," said Garaz. "It's probably mostly myth. But there are all sorts of great warriors of the modern eras. The Camoran Usurper? The unknown hero who brought together the Staff of Chaos and defeated Jagar Tharn?"

"We can't declare an unknown champion as the greatest warrior. What about Nandor Beraid, the Empress Katariah's champion?" suggested Xiomara. "They said he could use any weapon ever invented."

"But what happened to him?" smiled Garaz. "He was drowned in the Sea of

Ghosts because he couldn't get his armor off. Call me overly particular, but I think the greatest warrior in the world should know how to take armor off."

"It's kinda hard to judge ability to wear armor as a skill," said Xiomara. "Either you have basic functionality in a suit of armor or you don't."

"That's not true," said Hallgerd. "There are masters in that as well, people who can do things while wearing armor better than we can out of armor. Have you ever heard of Hlaalu Pasoroth, the King's great grandfather?"

Xiomara and Garaz admitted that they had not.

"This was hundreds and hundreds of years ago, and Pasoroth was the ruler of a great estate which he had won by right of being the greatest warrior in the land. It's been said, and truly, that much of the House's current power is based on Pasoroth's earnings as a warrior. Every week he held games at his castle, pitting his skill against the champions of the neighboring estates, and every week, he won something.

His great skill wasn't in the use of weaponry, though he was decent enough with an axe and a long sword, but in his ability to move quickly and with great agility wearing a full suit of heavy mail. There were some who said that he moved faster while wearing armor than he did out of it.

"Some months before this story begins, he had won the daughter of one of his neighbors, a beautiful creature named Mena who he had made his wife. He loved her very much, but he was intensely jealous, and with good reason. She wasn't very pleased with his husbandly skills, and the only reason Mena never strayed was because Pasoroth kept a close eye on her. She was, to put it kindly, naturally amorous and resentful of her position as a prize. Wherever he went, he always brought her with him. At the games, she was placed in a special box so that he could see her even while he competed.

"But his real competition, though he didn't know it, was from a handsome young armorer he also had won at one of his competitions. Mena had

noticed him, and the armorer, whose name was Taren, had certainly noticed her."

"This has all the makings of a dirty joke, Hallgerd," said Xiomara, with a smile.

"I swear that it's entirely true," said Hallgerd. "The problem facing the lovers was, of course, that they could never be alone. Perhaps because of this, it became a burning obsession to both of them. Taren decided that the best time for them to consummate their love was during the games. Mena feigned illness, so she didn't have to stay in the box, but Pasoroth visited the sickroom every few minutes between fights, so Taren and Mena could never get together. The sound of Pasoroth's armor clunking up the stairs to visit his sick wife gave Taren the idea.

"He crafted his lord a new suit of armor, strong, and bright, and beautifully decorated. For his purposes, Taren rubbed the leg joints with luca dust so the more he sweated and the more he moved them, the more they'd stick together. After a little while, Taren figured, Pasoroth wouldn't be able to walk very quickly, and wouldn't have enough time in between fights to visit his wife. But just in case, Taren also added bells to the legs which rung loudly when they moved, so the couple would be able to hear him coming in plenty of time.

"When the games commenced the following week, Mena feigned illness again and Taren presented his lord with the new armor. Pasoroth was delighted with it, as Taren hoped he would be, and donned it for his first fight. Taren then stole upstairs to Mena's bedchamber.

"All was silent outside as the two began to make love. Suddenly, Mena noticed a peculiar expression on Taren's face and before she had a chance to ask him about it, his head fell off at the neck. Pasoroth was standing behind him with his axe in hand."

"How did he get upstairs so quickly, with his leg joints gummed up? And didn't they hear the bells ringing?" asked Garaz.

"Well, you see, when Pasoroth realized he couldn't walk on his legs very quickly, he walked on his hands."

"I don't believe it," laughed Xiomara.

"What happened next?" asked Garaz. "Did Pasoroth kill Mena also?"

"No one knows exactly what happened next," said Hallgerd. "Pasoroth didn't return for the next game, nor for the next. Finally, at the fourth game, he returned to fight, and Mena appeared in the box to watch. She didn't appear to be sick anymore. In fact, she was smiling and had a light flush to her face."

"They did it?" cried Xiomara.

"I don't have all the salacious details, except that after the battle, it took ten squires thirteen hours to get Pasoroth's armor off because of all the luca dust mixed with sweat."

"I don't understand, you mean, he didn't take his armor off when they -- but how?"

"Like I said," replied Hallgerd. "This is a story about someone who was more agile and accomplished in his armor than out of it."

"Now, that's skill," said Garaz.

Hanging Gardens of Wasten Coridale

This book was apparently written in Dwemer and translated to Aldmeris. Only fragments of the Aldmeris is readable, but it may be enough for a scholar of Aldmeris to translate fragments of other Dwemer books.

...guide Altmer-Estrial led with foot-flames for the town-center where lay dead the quadrangular gardens...

...asked the foundations and chains and vessels their naming places...

...why they did not use solid sound to teach escape from the Earth Bones nor nourished them with frozen flames...

....the word I shall have once written of, this "art" our lesser cousins speak of when their admirable ignorance...

...but neither words nor experience cleanses the essence of the strange and terrible ways of defying our ancestors' transient rules.

The translation ends with a comment in Dwemer in a different hand, which you may be translated as follows:

"Put down your ardent cutting-globes, Nbthld. Your Aldmeris has the correct words, but they cannot be properly misinterpreted."

Harvesting Frostbite Spider Venom

My reserves of frostbite spider venom are nearly depleted. The injuries I suffered in my last encounter with these deadly arachnids prevent me from undertaking the task myself, which is why I've hired you.

Collecting the venom of the frostbite spider is not a complicated task, but there is some risk involved. I've written this brief guide in the hope that you'll be able to avoid making some of the mistakes that I've made.

Frostbite spiders most often make their lairs in caves. These creatures do not shun the icy climes of the north, for as their name implies, they are largely immune to the cold.

When food is especially scarce, a spider will venture out to hunt prey in the wilderness. Usually, however, the eight-legged devils prefer to ambush those unfortunate creatures who venture into their caverns seeking shelter.

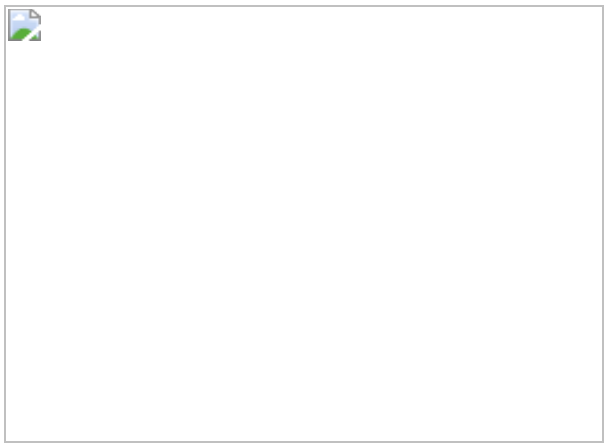
The easiest way to locate a nest of frostbite spiders is to search for their large webs. Just take care not to get caught in one, for these webs are strong enough to trap a full-grown man. Once any part of you touches the sticky threads, it's nearly impossible to get free without help.

Also, keep a watchful eye toward the ceiling. The frostbite spider is as stealthy as it is swift, and can drop down onto your head and have its fangs in your back before you can scream.

As long as you find the frostbite spider before it finds you, collecting the venom should be a simple matter. Because they rely on their webs to immobilize their prey, the creatures are not that difficult to kill in open combat. If you're inclined toward the arcane arts, don't bother with ice spells. Fire magic will serve you far better.

With that, I will say farewell and good hunting. Remember, any loot that you find in the spider's web is yours to keep.

The larger the hole, the larger the spider.



Heavy Armor Forging

by Sven Two-Hammers

Heavy armor must be designed to take a lot of punishment. It will receive direct blows from all sorts of weapons while protecting the wearer. Leather strips are used to make the straps and bindings in all armor.

Iron and steel are easy to work. Just heat them up and pound them into shape. The heat of the forge is not that critical. Avoid filing off any of the metal. Always try to conserve the metal and work it back into shape.

Iron armor requires a large number of iron ingots. A smith might need a couple of dozen to complete a full set of iron armor. Steel armor primarily uses steel ingots, but some iron is used as well.

Dwarven armor is made from dwarven metal. The secret of this material was lost when the dwarves disappeared millennia ago. Now it can only be found as scrap in the ruins of their abandoned cities and fortresses.

Orcish armor requires large amounts of Orichalcum, melded with a bit of iron. Heat should be used sparingly, let it become brittle. The Orcs are masters of this technique, but it can be learned by any smith with patience and skill.

Steel plate mail is made by adding steel to molten Corundum. The alloy is stronger than either metal by itself. Corundum is a finicky material requiring the heat from the forge to be steady and not vary much.

Ebony can only be worked when heated. It will develop small cracks that eventually shatter the material if hammered cold. Unlike most other armors, Ebony will not alloy with iron. It must be used pure.

I can only tell you tales of how to make Daedric armor. I have never seen it myself, nor do I know anyone that has. The stories say that it should always

be worked on at night... ideally under a new or full moon, and never during an eclipse. A red harvest moon is best. Ebony is the principle material, but at the right moment a daedra heart must be thrown into the fire.

Herbalist's Guide to Skyrim

Agneta Falia

Those avoiding this northern province due to claims of barbarism or concerns over climate are doing themselves a disservice; in fact, Skyrim has a wealth of materials that every Alchemist would do well to avail himself of. I have traveled extensively throughout this land, and here are but a few of my findings.

Bleeding Crown

The caps of these mushrooms do indeed appear smeared with blood, though it is often hard to see in the dark, damp places in which they grow. Not uncommonly found in Skyrim, their abundance is countered by the difficulty in acquiring them. As any experienced herbalist knows, the darkest of caves often conceal far more than mere mushrooms.

Nonetheless, these potent fungi, when combined with certain powdered antlers, produce a mixture rendering one quite susceptible to poison. Their usefulness is also quite apparent when mixed with Lavender, creating a substance highly resistant to magic.

Deathbell

Folklore abounds about this flower found in the swamps of Hjaalmarch. Some stories claim it grows where unfortunate deaths have taken place, others insist it grows first and then lures unsuspecting people and animals to their doom. I have found no direct evidence to support these stories; indeed I found the flowers difficult to locate at all. While it is most well-known for its use in poisons, it would be remiss to overlook that the blooms of the Deathbell are very effective in mixtures for boosting one Alchemy skill.

Dragonfly

A surprising number of insects survive in Skyrim's climate, many thriving

in the lower, southern areas of the province. Dragonflies can be found in a great many places, and while catching them can be a daunting prospect, the reward is well worth the effort. It was beyond the scope of my research to determine whether the orange and blue dragonflies are fully different breeds or merely simple color variations, but through experimentation I found that the orange dragonfly, when combined with the very hardy barnacles found along the coast, transfer some of their flighty nature, giving the herbalist some very nimble fingers.

Hagraven Claw

The claws of a hagraven are best obtained in shops; it is inadvisable to suggest one collects them oneself. These creatures have traded in their humanity for access to powerful magics, and the transformations they undergo infuse their entire beings with some element of that power. Ingesting the powdered claws makes one more resistant to magic, but an especially curious property of the claws is revealed when mixed with snowberries (often found in Skyrim's higher elevations). I found myself capable of comprehending enchantments I had believed mystifying after ingesting the mixture, and have passed this knowledge on to several court wizards who were grateful for the knowledge.

Jazbay

There was a time when it would be considered treason to pick one of these grapes without express permission from the Emperor himself. It is my understanding that although growers in Skyrim were successful in improving the fruit's survivability, it came at the cost of flavor. No longer is it quite the prize it once was. And yet, growing amidst the volcanic tundra of Eastmarch, it is still immensely useful for concocting potions. Mages value it highly as it can be combined with simple garlic to enhance the regeneration of magicka. While no longer against the law, picking these grapes in large amounts is best kept to oneself.

Luna Moth Wing

As with the dragonflies, I was taken aback by the number of butterflies, moths, and other insects that manage to thrive in Skyrim. The Luna moth is especially beautiful; its thin, almost ephemeral wings seem too delicate to hoist anything into the air, giving them an almost magical appearance. Indeed, that sense extends to the properties they exhibit when crushed and distilled (an action I admit was difficult to perform at first, no matter my resolve to discover all that Skyrim has to offer. These creatures are simply that beautiful!) While they can be used for creating poisons that damage magicka, I feel that would be a waste of their potential. Do not be alarmed if, when the wings are broken down almost completely, they appear to almost disappear under your mortar. That very quality makes the wings quite effective in potions of invisibility!

Tundra Cotton

Not all Nords are savages wrapped in animal skins, howling at the moon. There are a wide variety of fabrics worn throughout the land, thanks in no small part to the stubborn Tundra Cotton plant. It soaks up what rain it can in the plains west of Whiterun, and blooms frequently. While it does not exhibit any of the more striking alchemical properties, it is a staple in potions for not only fortifying magicka, but for resisting spells as well. I wonder if that quality is what allows it to have adapted so well to this climate.

Nightshade

The name and shape of this plant are known to all; long understood to be one of the more potent components in many poisons, the average Nord

keeps his distance from the bright purple flowers nestled among dark leaves. It is exceedingly effective as a pure poison, but can also be combined with other compounds to stiffen joints as well. It is thus favored amongst those who wish to disable their opponents in battle, and can be found coating the blades of many of the more unsavory characters in Skyrim.

Herbane's Bestiary

The Ice Wraiths

17 Last Seed

When winters chill descended upon me as I traveled further north through the frozen plains and mountains, I settled in at the inn at Dawnstar for a moment of respite and a warm meal. Another traveler there told me to be cautious, that there are creatures who settle into the powder white of the snow with nary a clue to the careless, until it is too late. He went on and on, with wild gestures and fantastic tales of entire merchant expeditions being killed by the beasts. His stories frightened the other inn patrons, but I will not be turned by a coward's tale, I will see these for my own eyes, for those icy caves and snow capped peaks of the north are exactly the type of places that call to an adventurer like me. It did not take me long to find what I sought.

These Ice Wraiths are lucid, serpentine creatures of magic, as if conjured from the frozen tundra and glaciers of Skyrim itself. At one with an environment that makes them nearly invisible, these ethereal apparitions are the death of many Nords, if not by their sudden, unholy strike that casts their entire body through their target, then by the malady of Witbane, a curse of infection that dulls the intellect and makes the target even more the victim.

As deadly as they are, Ice Wraiths are simple minded in their determination, and combat is a straight forward affair and brute force and a sharp blade are enough to fell these savage creatures. Only the heartiest of men would hope to survive just one of these beasts, but I have slain two with general ease.

It's good that I've found I can make decent coin selling the Ice Wraith's teeth, as they are a prized ingredient in alchemical potions. That will continue to afford me the opportunity to search these lands for a challenge worthy of story, for I have yet to see what would make me tremble.

Dwarven Automatons

9 Hearthfire

The Dwarves have been extinct for many an age, and perhaps for the best. To see men and women the size of large children, all with beards, would be a most disturbing sight. Still, whatever wrath the Dwarves brought from the gods that consumed an entire civilization surely must have been an awe-inspiring thing to witness.

The remnants of their civilization lie buried in the hearts of mountains, and scholars and thieves the world over descend on the skeletal remains of dwarven cities like vultures, to scrape clean the bones of the past, old knowledge waiting to be exhumed and treasures to be discovered. But many men lay murdered in those halls of the damned, because those dwarven ruins do not release their treasures without a fight.

My kin would tell the stories long ago, when I was just a child, about how adept the Dwarves were at building machines. They would say that before our time, dwarves harnessed the power of the earth, and wielded fire and hammers to reshape steel and bronze with a mechanical brilliance that breathed life into these now ancient constructs of metal and magic. In the dark halls and chambers amid the ceasless droning of grinding gears and venting steam, they lie in wait to confound or destroy would-be plunderers of the dwarven sanctums, as the grim watchmen of the last vestiges of culture from a dead race.

I descended into the humid darkness of Mzulft. The slow hiss of steam, creaking of metal and the rattle of old gears powering an empty city would unnerve most men. I could hear things in the darkness, skittering across the floor just out of sight and as I stepped over the bodies of plunderers or scholars who had not made it far, I knew it was not rats wandering these halls.

Small mechanical spiders set upon me with rapid movements, and machines

sprouted from the walls and uncurled from spheres into contraptions that rolled on top of gears for legs and crossbows for arms. I could not help but marvel at these single purpose machines built for the murder of men. My sword and my shield are my strength and I am undeterred by such things because I had heard of greater things that roam these depths, and indeed something else in these chambers stirred, and it echoed with massive weight. As it lumbered closer, its feet struck the ground as if walking on massive pistons and as it loomed out of darkness, I could see it clear for the first time, axe for one hand, hammer for the other, as tall as five men, made of dull bronze with a face molded in the image of its masters. A Steam Centurion. The stories were true, these were the guardians of the greatest dwarven treasures.

We fought, and the dwarves must truly be extinct because our battle was surely booming enough to wake the dead. It came at me with hammer and axe, inhuman strength and great fortitude, and a purpose of nothing but murder. I dodged as it crushed the stone around me with futile strikes and I thrust and slashed at it with my blade and took every opening afforded as we shook the halls with violence. I refuse to be undone by a machine.

Where the average man would be long dead, I stood over the husk of this dead automaton, its steam escaping like a final gasp. I could have taken the dwarven artifacts and metal but left them there for others, for I would not hex my journey with the possessions of dead men and maybe that is where countless others go wrong.

I will continue to my journey across the lands, And perhaps one day Herebane will meet a worthy challenge, for I have yet to see what would make me tremble.

Hagravens

5 Sun's Dawn

I have heard a tale most bizarre- a beautiful young woman cast out of town by the thrown stones of accusers for giving in to the dark arts. They say she fled into the Reach and never reappeared, and justly so because they say the devilry of her magic had grown stronger with each new day. Shortly after, a witch of half woman and half bird had been sighted deep in the mountains, and as the sightings increased the young women began to disappear.

This tale has brought me to the Reach, where this witch they call a Hagraven makes it home. With sword and shield at the ready, for I must see this creature and I must slay it.

24 Sun's Dawn

The stomach of an average man would turn at the cruelty set before me- I first saw the thatch and bone, the human skulls, the dead goat heads mounted on pikes, filthy animal pelts, loose entrails, and feathers matted in blood. I had heard that Forsworn revere and protect these Hagravens, and all around were their small, crude trinkets and alters to these witches on which sat dull, empty soul gems. What vile creature would live where all things are dead?

Deeper into the lair, I heard it first- an unsteady shuffling, followed by a heaving, unforgettable stench. I thrust the torch in front of me and waited for my eyes to adjust to the tunnel of darkness ahead of me. I saw the silhouette of what I thought to be a frail woman on an awkward gait, but the light of the torch revealed something else. This Hagraven was horrifying, almost human but more an abomination of woman and creature fused together, nothing more than a husk of humanity surrendered in exchange for possession of the powers of dark magic. This magic corrupted her greatly, and her dull, glass eyes stared with hate from the visage of an old crone sat atop the body of a contorted, misshapen human body adorned with black

feathers. It bristled as it let out a piercing scream, and as a vivid red light began to form in the palm of its talons, it was all I could do to raise my shield in defense of magic most foul. I fought through devilry that seemed to snatch life from me, and the thought that this thing was once a woman seemed to play on my nerves.

Most men would have crumbled, but I do not bend. The Hagraven is a most repulsive creature, and deserving of its fate and its claws that are my trophy will tell the story of Herebanes triumph. I have naught but to continue my travels and my conquests, for I have yet to see what would make me tremble.

The Holds of Skyrim: A Field Officer's Guide

For Use by Officers of the Imperial Legion

Welcome, loyal officer of the Empire. You have been given this guide to help you, and those men under your command, better understand the geography of Skyrim. Since you will be serving in Skyrim for a lengthy period of time, this information should prove invaluable.

Skyrim is organized into nine holds. A hold is a large area of land roughly equivalent to a county in Cyrodiil. Each hold is governed by a Jarl who maintains his court in the hold's capital city.

Four of these holds are fairly small and sparsely populated. As a result, the capitals are little more than towns. The five major cities of Skyrim act as capitals for the larger holds.

Following is a detailed review of each hold.

EASTMARCH
Located in the eastern reaches of Skyrim, Eastmarch shares a common border with Morrowind. Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak rules from the ancient city of Windhelm, and he and his followers should be considered your most serious threat.

Do not tread lightly in Eastmarch, for the Stormcloaks are at their strongest and most organized in these lands. As an Imperial soldier, you will find few friends here.

HAAFINGAR
Solitude, the seat of High King of Skyrim and the capital of Haafingar hold, has always welcomed the Empire with open arms. Much commerce flows

along the rivers here, and you will find the folk of this hold to be among the most hospitable in Skyrim.

As you venture forth in your campaigns, be sure to maintain a secure supply line back to Solitude. The Empire maintains ample provisions in Castle Dour, from which General Tullius commands all the legions stationed in Skyrim.

HJAALMARCH
This hold is divided evenly between wind-swept tundra dotted with farms and a huge, stinking salt marsh. There is little of interest here, save perhaps for the hold's capital, Morthal.

Jarl Idgrod Ravencrone has been cooperative enough with the Empire in the past, but will ultimately look out for her own iterests if put in a difficult position.

While the hold offers minimal strategic value to the Empire, it would make an ideal staging ground for a Stormcloak siege of Solitude, and so must be held against the enemy.

THE PALE
The Pale is a barren realm covered by vast fields of ice and snow. Its boundaries stretch from the center of Skyrim all the way to its northern coast. Here, at the capital city of Dawnstar, can be found one of the busiest ports in the province.

With access to the coastal waterways of Skyrim, Dawnstar could prove vital in the war effort. Should the Stormcloaks choose to attack Solitude from the river, this port would make a tempting target due to its close proximity.

THE REACH
Dominating the western border of Skyrim, the Reach is made up almost entirely of steep, craggy mountains. Little grows in this forbidding realm, but the capital city of Markarth is a nigh-impregnable stone fortress that would make an excellent defensive position for either side in the war.

Be aware that this dangerous region of Skyrim is home to the Forsworn, the rebellious natives of the Reach. They know the terrain, can strike without warning, and count the Empire as an enemy. If they attack, you must neither give nor expect any mercy.

THE RIFT
This hold occupies the southeast corner of Skyrim, and much like the Reach in the west, is dominated by tall mountain peaks. The climate in the Reach is milder than in the northern holds, and there is more vegetation to be found here. Farming thrives as a result.

A word of warning about Riften, the hold's capital city. Our agents have reason to suspect that the Thieves' Guild makes it home here, though it is now much diminished from its strength of previous years.

Nevertheless, mind that your men keep an eye on their coin purses should they have reason to spend any length of time in the city.

WHITERUN
This central hold is characterized by wide, grassy plains that are home to numerous farms. Many roads pass through Whiterun, joining the more distant holds together.

The hold's capital city, also called Whiterun, sits high on a rocky promontory amid a large, flat swath of scrubland. Among the wealthiest cities of Skyrim, Whiterun has usually proven friendly to the Emperor's soldiers.

WINTERHOLD
This bleak, snow-blown hold in the northeast corner of Skyrim is utterly inhospitable. Perhaps the mages at the College of Winterhold chose to make their home there because they knew they would be left largely alone.

As with Whiterun, the name Winterhold describes both the hold and its capital city, though the word "city" hardly applies. The hold capital is a meager village built near the mages' college.

Few other noteworthy settlements exist in this frozen waste, and it is unlikely to play any significant part in the war.

The Hope of the Redoran

by Turiul Nirith

One of the few magical arts the Psijics of Artaeum have kept to themselves, away from the common spells and schools of the Mages Guild, is the gift of divination. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, omens and prophesies abound in Tamriel, some of substance, others of pure folly, and still others so ambiguous as to be unverifiable. There are still other prophesies kept secret, from the prophesies of Dro'Jizad in Elsweyr and the Nerevarine in Morrowind, to the Elder Scrolls themselves.

The Nord nobility have a tradition of having omens read for their children. In general, these readings are of the obscure variety. One of my acquaintances told me that her parents were told, for example, that their daughter would have her life rescued by a snake, and so gave her the name Serpentkin in a special ceremony. And this young lady, Eria Valkor Serpentkin, was indeed saved by a snake many years later, when an assassin creeping on her stepped on a danswyrm viper.

Occasionally, omens seem to be almost purposefully misleading, as if Boethiah had crafted them as traps. I recall one particularly. Many, many years ago, a male child was born into House Redoran. It was a very difficult birth, and the mother was delirious and near death by the time it was over. She chanted just as her son came into the world and she passed from it.

Fortune has smiled this day not frowned
My child will be mighty in mind and in arm
He shall bring hope to House Redoran
Neither spell nor blade shall hurt the man
Nor illness nor poison cause any harm
His blood shall never drop on the ground

The boy, named Andas, was indeed extraordinary. He never was ill and never suffered so much as a scratch all through his childhood. He was also

quite intelligent and strong, which, combined with his invulnerability, caused many to call him, after his mother's omen, the Hope of the Redoran. Of course, any one who is called the Hope of the Redoran will eventually develop some taint of impertinence, and it wasn't long before he had enemies.

His worst enemy was his cousin Athyn, who had borne much abuse at the hands of Andas. Primary among the grudges was that Athyn had been sent to Rihad to complete his education at Andas's insistence. When Athyn returned from Hammerfell, it was because of the death of his father, who had also been a councilor of the House. Athyn was old enough to take his seat in the Council, but Andas claimed the seat as well, saying that his cousin had been gone too long from Morrowind and didn't understand politics as he did. The majority of the House agreed with Andas, wanting to see the Hope of Redoran rise quickly.

Athyn exercised his right to combat his cousin for the seat. No one thought he had any chance of winning, of course, but the battle was scheduled to commence the following morn. Andas whored and dined and drank with the councilors that night, confident that his place in the House was secured and the hopeful new dawn of House Redoran was rising. Athyn retired to his castle with his friends, Andas's enemies, and his servants he had brought from Hammerfell.

Athyn and his friends were discussing the duel morosely when one of his old teachers, a warrior called Shardie, came into the hall. She had grown quite proud of her student over the years in Hammerfell, proud enough to accompany him across the Empire to his family's lands, and wanted to know why they had so little confidence in his odds in the battle. They explained to her Andas's uncommon blessings and the nature of his mother's omen.

"If he can't be harmed by disease, poison, magicka, and his blood can never be spilled, what hope have I of ever besting him?" cried Athyn.

"Have you remembered nothing I taught you?" replied Shardie. "Is there no weapon you can think of that will slay without blood? Are swords and

spears and arrows the only items in your arsenal?"

Athyn quickly realized the weapon Shardie was speaking of, but it seemed absurd. Not only absurd, but pathetic and primitive. Still, it was the only hope he had. All that night, Shardie trained him in the art and techniques, showing him the various swings and stances her people had developed in Albion-Gora; counter-attacks, feints, and blocks imported from Yokuda; the classic one and two-handed grips for the most ancient weapon in history.

The cousins faced one another the next morning, and never have two combatants looked so unevenly matched. Andas's entrance brought a great cheer, for not only was he much beloved as the Hope of the Redoran, but as his victory was a foregone conclusion, most wanted to be in good standing with him. His shining mail and blade drew admiration and awe. By contrast, Athyn drew a gasp of surprise and only a smattering of polite applause. He appeared costumed and armed like a barbarian.

As Shardie had suggested, Athyn allowed Andas to attack first. The Hope of the Redoran was eager to finish the battle and take the power he deserved quickly. The blade pushed by Andas's mighty arm slashed across Athyn's chest, but shallowly, and before it could be counterswung, Athyn knocked it back with his own weapon. When Athyn attacked and wounded Andas, the Hope of the Redoran was so surprised by being hurt for the first time in his life, he dropped his sword.

The less said about the end of the battle, the better. Suffice it to say that Athyn, wielding a simple club, battered Andas to death without spilling a drop of blood.

Athyn took his father's seat as councilor, and it was then said that the hope in the omen referred to Athyn, not Andas. After all, had Andas not tried to take the councilor seat away from his cousin, Athyn, being not very ambitious, might have never tried to get it. It can certainly be argued that way, I suppose.

The Horror Of Castle Xyr: A One Act Play

by Baloth-Kul

* Dramatis Personae *
Clavides, Captain of the Imperial Guard. Cyrodilic.
Anara, a Dunmer maid.
Ullis, a Lieutenant of the Imperial Guard. Argonian.
Zollassa, a young Argonian mage

Late evening. The play opens in the interior Great Entrance Hall of a castle in Scath Anud, replete with fine furnishings and tapestries. Torches provide the only illumination. In the center of the foyer is a great iron door, the main entrance to the castle. The staircase up to the landing above is next to this door. On stage left is the door to the library, which is currently closed. On stage right is a huge suit of armor, twenty feet tall, nearly touching the ceiling of the room. Though no one can be seen, there is the sound of a woman singing coming from the library door.

A loud thumping knock on the iron front door stops the woman's singing. The door to the library opens and ANARA, a common-looking maid, comes out and hurries to open the front door. CLAVIDES, a handsome man in Imperial garb stands there.

ANARA: Good evening to you, serjo.

CLAVIDES: Good evening. Is your master at home?

ANARA: No, serjo, it's only me here. My master Sedura Kena Telvanni Hordalf Xyr is at his winter estate. Is there something I can do for you?

CLAVIDES: Possibly. Would you mind if I came in?

ANARA: Not at all, serjo. Please. May I offer you some flin?

Clavides comes into the Hall and looks around.

CLAVIDES: No thank you. What's your name?

ANARA: Anara, serjo.

CLAVIDES: Anara, when did your master leave Scath Anud?

ANARA: More than a fortnight ago. That's why it's only me in the castle, serjo. All the other servants and slaves who tend to his lordship travel with him. Is there something wrong?

CLAVIDES: Yes, there is. Do you know an ashlander by the name of Sul-Kharifa?

ANARA: No, serjo. I don't know no one by that name.

CLAVIDES: Then you aren't likely to now. He's dead. He was found a few hours ago dying of frostbite in the ashlands. He was hysterical, nearly incomprehensible, but among his last words were "castle" and "Xyr."

ANARA: Dying of frostbite in summertide in the ashlands? B'vek, that's strange. I suppose it's possible that my master knew this man, but being an ashlander and my master being of the House of Telvanni, well, if you'll pardon me for being flippant, serjo, I don't think they coulda been friends.

CLAVIDES: That is your master's library? Would you mind if I looked in?

ANARA: Please, serjo, go wherever you want. We got nothing to hide. We're loyal Imperial subjects.

CLAVIDES: As, I hear, are all Telvanni.

(Note from the playwright: this line should be delivered without sarcasm. Trust the audience to laugh -- it never fails, regardless of the politics of the locals.)

Clavides enters the library and looks over the books.

CLAVIDES: The library needs dusting.

ANARA: Yes, serjo. I was just doing that when you knocked at the door.

CLAVIDES: I'm grateful for that. If you had finished, I wouldn't notice the space in the dust where a rather large book has recently been removed. Your master is a wizard, it seems.

ANARA: No, serjo. I mean, he studies a lot, but he don't cast no spells, if that's what you mean by wizard. He's a kena, went to college and everything. You know, now that I think about it, I know what happened to that book. One of the other kenas from the college been round yesterday, and borrowed a couple of books. He's a friend of the master, so I thought it'd be all fine.

CLAVIDES: This kena, was his name Warvim?

ANARA: Coulda been. I don't remember.

CLAVIDES: There is a suspected necromancer at the college named Kena Warvim we arrested last night. We don't know what he was doing at the college, but it was something illegal, that's for certain. Was that the kena who borrowed the book? A little fellow, a cripple with a withered leg?

ANARA: No, serjo, it weren't the kena from yesterday. He was a big fella who could walk, so I noticed.

CLAVIDES: I'm going to have a look around the rest of the house, if you don't mind.

Clavides goes up the stairs, and delivers the following dialogue from the landing and the rooms above. Anara continues straightening up the downstairs, moving a high-backed bench in front of the armor to scrub the floor.

ANARA: Can I ask, serjo, what you're looking for? Maybe I could help you.

CLAVIDES: Are these all the rooms in the castle? No secret passages?

ANARA (laughing): Oh, serjo, what would Sedura Kena Telvanni Hordalf Xyr want with secret passages?

CLAVIDES (looking at the armor): Your master is a big man.

ANARA (laughing): Oh, serjo, don't tease. That's giant armor, just for decoration. My master slew that giant ten years ago, and kind of keeps it for a souvenir.

CLAVIDES: That's right, I remember hearing something about that when I first took my post here. It was someone named Xyr who killed the giant, but I didn't think the first name was Hordalf. Memory fades I'm afraid. What was the giant's name?

ANARA: I'm afraid I don't remember, serjo.

CLAVIDES: I do. It was Torfang. "I got out of Torfang's Shield."

ANARA: I don't understand, serjo. Torfang's shield?

Clavides runs down the stairs, and examines the armor.

CLAVIDES: Sul-Kharifa said something about getting out of Torfang's shield. I thought he was just raving, out of his mind.

ANARA: But he ain't got a shield, serjo.

Clavides pushes the high-backed bench out of the way, revealing the large mounted shield at the base of the armor.

CLAVIDES: Yes, he does. You covered it up with that bench.

ANARA: I didn't do it on purpose, serjo! I was just cleaning! I see that armor ever day, serjo, and b'vek I swear I ain't never noticed the shield before!

CLAVIDES: It's fine, Anara, I believe you.

Clavides pushes on the shield and it pulls back to reveal a tunnel down.

CLAVIDES: It appears that Sedura Kena Telvanni Hordalf Xyr does have a need for a secret passage. Could you get me a torch?

ANARA: B'vek, I ain't never seen that before!

Anara takes a torch from the wall, and hands it to Clavides. Clavides enters the tunnel.

CLAVIDES: Wait here.

Anara watches Clavides disappear down the tunnel. She appears agitated, and finally runs for the front door. When she opens it, ULLIS, an Argonian lieutenant in the Imperial guard is standing at the entrance. She screams.

ULLIS: I'm sorry to frighten you.

ANARA: Not now! Go away!

ULLIS: I'm afraid the Captain wouldn't like that, miss.

ANARA: You're ... with the Captain? Blessed mother.

Clavides comes out of the tunnel, white-faced. It takes him a few moments to speak.

ULLIS: Captain? What's down there?

CLAVIDES (to Anara): Did you know your master's a necromancer? That your cellar is filled with bodies?

Anara faints. Ullis carries her to the bench and lays her down.

ULLIS: Let me see, serjo.

CLAVIDES: You'll see soon enough. We're going to need every soldier from the post here to cart away all the corpses. Ullis, I've seen enough battles, but I've never seen anything like this. No two are alike. Khajiiti, sload, dunmer, cyrodiil, breton, nord, burned alive, poisoned, electrified, melted, torn apart, turned inside out, ripped to shreds and sewn back up together.

ULLIS: You think the ashlander escaped, that's what happened?

CLAVIDES: I don't know. Why would someone do something like this, Ullis?

There is a knock on the door. Clavides answers it. A young Argonian woman, ZOLLASSA, is standing, holding a package and a letter.

ZOLLASSA: Good morning, you're not Lord Xyr, are you?

CLAVIDES: No. What do you have there?

ZOLLASSA: A letter and a package I'm supposed to deliver to him. Will he be back shortly?

CLAVIDES: I don't believe so. Who gave you the package to deliver?

ZOLLASSA: My teacher at the college, Kema Warvim. He has a bad leg, so he asked me to bring these to his lordship. Actually, to tell you the truth, I was supposed to deliver them last night, but I was busy.

ULLIS: Greetings, sistre. We'll give the package to his lordship when we see him.

ZOLLASSA: Ah, hail, brothre. I had heard there was a handsome Argonian

in Scath Anud. Unfortunately, I promised Kema Warvim that I'd deliver the package directly to his lordship's hands. I'm already late, I can't just --

CLAVIDES: We're Imperial Guard, miss. We will take the package and the letter.

Zollassa reluctantly hands Clavides the letter and the package. She turns to go.

ULLIS: You're at the college, if we need to see you?

ZOLLASSA: Yes. Fare tidings, brothre.

ULLIS: Goodnight, sistre.

Clavides opens the package as Zollassa exits. It is a book with many loose sheets.

CLAVIDES: It appears we've found the missing book. Delivered to our very hands.

Clavides begins to read the book, silently to himself.

ULLIS (to himself, very pleased): Another Argonian in Scath Anud. And a pretty one, at that. I hope we weren't too rude to her. I'm tired of all these women with their smooth, wet skin, it would be wonderful if we could meet when I'm off duty.

While Ullis talks, he opens the letter and reads it.

ULLIS (continued): She looks like she's from the south, like me. You know, Argonians from northern Black Marsh are... much... less...

Ullis continues reading, transfixed by the letter. Clavides skips to the back of the book, and reads the last sentences.

CLAVIDES (reading): In black ink "The Khajiiti male showed surprisingly

little fortitude to a simple lightning spell, but I've had interesting physiological results with a medium-level acid spell cast slowly over several days." In red ink on the margins, "Yes, I see. Was the acid spell cast uniformly over the entire body of the subject?" In black ink "The Nord female was subjected to sixteen hours of a frost spell which eventually crystalized her into a state of suspended animation, from which she eventually expired. Not so the Nord male, nor the Ashlander male who lapsed into their comas much earlier, but then recovered. The Ashlander then tried to escape, but I restrained him. The Nord then had an interesting chemical overreaction to a simple fire spell and expired. See the accompanying illustration." In red ink, "Yes, I see. The pattern of boils and lesions suggest some sort of internal incineration perhaps caused by the combination of a short burst of flame following a longer session with frost. It's such a shame I can't come to see the experiment personally, but I compliment you on your excellent notation." In black ink, "Thank you for the suggestion about slowly poisoning my maid Anara. The dosages you've suggested have had fascinating results, eroding her memory very subtly. I intend to increase it expotentially and see how long it is before she notices. Speaking of which, it is a pity that I haven't any Argonian subjects, but the slave-traders promise me some healthy specimens in the autumn. I should like to test their metabolism in comparison to elves and humans. It's my theory that a medium-level lightning spell cast in a continuous wave on an Argonian wouldn't be lethal for several hours at least, similiar to my results with the Cyrodilic female and, of course, the giant." In red ink, "It'd be a shame to wait until autumn to see."

ULLIS (reading the letter): In red ink, "Here is your Argonian. Please let me know the results." It's signed "Kema Warvim."

CLAVIDES: By Kynareth, this isn't necromancy. It's Destruction. Kema Warvim and Kena Telvanni Hordalf Xyr haven't been experimenting with death, but with the limits of magical torture.

ULLIS: The letter isn't addressed to Kena Telvanni Hordalf Xyr. It's addressed to Sedura Iachilla Xyr. His wife, do you think?

CLAVIDES: Iachilla. That was the Telvanni of the Xyr family who I heard

about in connection with the giant slaying. We'd best get the maid out of here. She'll need to go to a healer.

Clavides wakes up Anara. She appears disoriented.

ANARA: What's happening? Who are you?

CLAVIDES: Don't worry, everything is going to be fine. We're going to take you to a healer.

ULLIS: Do you need a coat, Iachilla?

ANARA: Thank you, no, I'm not cold --

Anara/Iachilla stops, realizing that she's been caught. Clavides and Ullis unsheathe their blades.

CLAVIDES: You have black ink on your fingers, your ladyship.

ULLIS: And when you saw me at the door, you thought I was the Argonian your friend Warvim sent over. That's why you said, "Not now. Go away."

ANARA/IACHILLA: You're much more observant than Anara. She never did understand what was happening, even when I tripled the poison spell and she expired in what I observed as considerable agony.

ULLIS: What were you going to use on me first, lightning or fire?

ANANA/IACHILLA: Lightning. I find fire to be too unpredictable.

As she speaks, the flames in the torchs extinguish. The stage is utterly dark.

There is the sound of a struggle, swords clanging. Suddenly a bolt of lightning flashes out, and there is silence. From the darkness, Anana/Iachilla speaks.

ANANA/IACHILLA: Fascinating.

There are several more flashes of lightning as the curtain closes.

THE END

How Orsinium Passed to the Orcs

by Menyna Gsost

The year was 3E 399 and standing on a mountainside overlooking a vast tract of land between the lands of Menevia and Wayrest was a great and learned judge, an arbitrator and magistrate, impartial in his submission to the law.

"You have a very strong claim to the land, my lad," said the judge. "I won't lie to you about that. But your competition has an equal claim. This is what makes my particular profession difficult at times."

"You would call it my competition?" sneered Lord Bowyn, gesturing to the Orc. The creature, called Gortwog gro-Nagorm, looked up with baleful eyes.

"He has ample documentation to make a claim on the land," the magistrate shrugged. "And the particular laws of our land do not discriminate between particular races. We had a Bosmer regency once, many generations ago."

"But what if a pig or a slaughterfish turned up demanding the property? Would they have the same legal rights as I?"

"If they had the proper papers, I'm afraid so," smiled the judge. "The law is very clear that if two claimants with equal titles to the property are set in deadlock, a duel must be held. Now, the rules are fairly archaic, but I've had opportunity to look them over, and I think they're still valid. The Imperial council agrees."

"What must we do?" asked the Orc, his voice low and harsh, unused to the tongue of the Cyrodiils.

"The first claimant, that's you, Lord Gortwog, may choose the armor and weapon of the duelists. The second claimant, that's you, Lord Bowyn, may

choose the location. If you would prefer, either or both you may choose a champion or you may duel yourself."

The Breton and the Orc looked at one another, evaluating. Finally, Gortwog spoke, "The armor will be Orcish and the weapons will be common steel long swords. No enchantments. No wizardry allowed."

"The arena will be the central courtyard of my cousin Lord Berylth's palace in Wayrest," said Bowyn, looking Gortwog in the eye scornfully. "None of your kind will be allowed in to witness."

So it was agreed. Gortwog declared that he would fight the duel himself, and Bowyn, who was a fairly young man and in better than average condition, felt that he could not keep his honor without competing himself as well. Still, upon arriving at his cousin's palace a week before the duel was scheduled, he felt the need to practice. A suit of Orcish armor was purchased and for the first time in his life, Bowyn wore something of tremendous weight and limited facility.

Bowyn and Berylth sparred in the courtyard. In ten minutes times, Bowyn had to stop. He was red-faced and out of breath from trying to move in the armor: to add to his exasperation, he had not scored one blow on his cousin, and had dozens of feinted strikes scored on him.

"I don't know what to do," said Bowyn over dinner. "Even if I knew someone who could fight properly in that beastly steel, I couldn't possibly send in a champion to battle Gortwog."

Berylth commiserated. As the servants cleared the plates, Bowyn stood up in his seat and pointed at one of them: "You didn't tell me you had an Orc in your household!"

"Sir?" whined the elderly specimen, turning to Lord Berylth, certain that he caused offense somehow.

"You mean Old Tunner?" laughed Berylith. "He's been with my house for ages. Would you like him to give you training on how to move in Orcish

armor?"

"Would you like me to?" asked Tunner obsequiously.

Unknown to Berylith but known to him now, his servant had once ridden with the legendary Cursed Legion of High Rock. He not only knew how to fight in Orcish armor himself, but he had acted as trainer to other Orcs before retiring into domestic service. Desperate, Bowyn immediately engaged him as his full-time trainer.

"Your try too hard, sir," said the Orc on their first day in the arena. "It is easy to strain yourself in heavy mail. The joints are just so to let you to bend with only a little effort. If you fight against the joints, you won't have any strength to fight your foe."

Bowyn tried to follow Tunner's instructions, but he quickly grew frustrated. And the more frustrated he got, the more intensity he put into his work, which tired him out even quicker. While he took a break to drink some water, Berylith spoke to his servant. If they were optimistic about Bowyn's chances, their faces did not show it.

Tunner trained Bowyn hard the next two days, but her Ladyship Elysora's birthday followed hard upon them, and Bowyn enjoyed the feast thoroughly. A liquor of poppies and goose fat, and cock tinsh with buttered hyssop for a first course; roasted pike, combwort, and balls of rabbit meat for a second; sliced fox tongues, ballom pudding with oyster gravy, battaglir weed and beans for the main course; collequiva ice and sugar fritters for dessert. As Bowyn was settling back afterwards, his eyes weary, he suddenly spied Gortwog and the judge entering the room.

"What are you doing here?" he cried. "The duel's not for another two days!"

"Lord Gortwog asked that we move it to tonight," said the judge. "You were training when my emisary arrived two days ago, but his lordship your cousin spoke for you, agreeing to the change of date."

"But there's no time to assemble my supporters," complained Bowyn. "And

I've just devoured a feast that would kill a lesser man. Cousin, how could you neglect to tell me?"

"I spoke to Tunner about it," said Berylith, blushing, unused to deception. "We decided that you would be best served under these conditions."

The battle in the arena was sparsely attended. Saturated with food, Bowyn found himself unable to move very quickly. To his surprise, the armor responded to his lethargy, rotating smoothly and elegantly to each stagger. The more he successfully maneuvered, the more he allowed his mind and not his body to control his defensive and offensive actions. For the first time in his life, Bowyn saw what it was to look through the helmet of an Orc.

Of course, he lost, and rather badly if scores had been tabulated. Gortwog was a master of such battle. But Bowyn fought on for more than three hours before the judge reluctantly called a winner.

"I will name the land Orsinium after the land of my fathers," said the victor.

Bowyn's first thought was that if he must lose to an Orc, it was best that the battle was largely unwatched by his friends and family. As he left the courtyard to go to the bed he had longed for earlier in the evening, he saw Gortwog speaking to Tunner. Though he did not understand the language, he could see that they knew each other. When the Breton was in bed, he had a servant bring the old Orc to him.

"Tunner," he said kindly. "Speak frankly to me. You wanted Lord Gortwog to win."

"That is true," said Tunner. "But I did not fail you. You fought better than you would have fought two days hence, sir. I did not want Orsinium to be won by its king without a fight."

A Hypothetical Treachery: A One Act Play

by Anthil Morvir

Dramatis Personae
- Malvasian: A High Elf battlemage
- Inzoliah: A Dark Elf battlemage
- Dolcettus: A Cyrodiil healer
- Schiavas: An Argonian barbarian
- A Ghost
- Some bandits

Scene: Eldenwood

As the curtain rises, we see the misty labyrinthian landscape of the legendary Eldengrove of Valenwood. All around we hear wolves howling. A bloodied reptilian figure, SCHIAVAS, breaks through the branches of one of the trees and surveys the area.

SCHIAVAS: It's clear.

INZOLIAH, a beautiful Dark Elf mage, climbs down from the tree, helped by the barbarian. There is the sound of footsteps nearby. Schiavas readies his sword and Inzoliah prepares to cast a spell. Nothing comes out.

INZOLIAH: You're bleeding. You should have Dolcettus heal that for you.

SCHIAVAS: He's still drained from all the spells he had to cast down in the caves. I'm fine. If we get out of this and no one needs it more, I'll take the last potion of healing. Where's Malvasian?

MALVASIAN, a High Elf battlemage, and DOLCETTUS, a Cyrodiil healer, emerge from the tree, carrying a heavy chest between the two of them. They awkwardly try to get down from the tree, carrying their loot.

MALVASIAN: Here I am, though why I'm carrying the heavy load is beyond me. I always thought that the advantage of dungeon delving with a great barbarian was that he carried all the loot.

SCHIAVAS: If I carried that, my hands would be too full to fight. And tell me if I'm wrong, but not one of the three of you has enough magicka reserved to make it out of here alive. Not after you electrified and blasted all those homunculuses down below ground.

DOLCETTUS: Homunculi.

SCHIAVAS: Don't worry, I'm not going to do what you think I'm going to do.

INZOLIAH (innocently): What's that?

SCHIAVAS: Kill you all and take the Ebony Mail for myself. Admit it -- you thought I had that in mind.

DOLCETTUS: What a perfectly horrible thought. I never thought anyone, no matter how vile and degenerate --

INZOLIAH: Why not?

MALVASIAN: He needs porters, like he said. He can't carry the chest and fight off the inhabitants of Eldengrove both.

DOLCETTUS: By Stendarr, of all the mean, conniving, typically Argonian --

INZOLIAH: And why do you need me alive?

SCHIAVAS: I don't necessarily. Except that you're prettier than the other two, for a smoothskin that is. And if something comes after us, it might go for you first.

There is a noise in some bushes nearby.

SCHIAVAS: Go check that out.

INZOLIAH: It's probably a wolf. These woods are filled with them. You check it out.

SCHIAVAS: You have a choice, Inzoliah. Go and you might live. Stay here, and you definitely won't.

Inzoliah considers and then goes to the bushes.

SCHIAVAS (to Malvasian and Dolcettus): The king of Silvenar will pay good money for the Mail, and we can divide it more nicely between three than four.

INZOLIAH: You're so right.

Inzoliah suddenly levitates up to the top of the stage. A semi-transparent Ghost appears from the bush and rushes at the next person, who happens to be Schiavas. As the barbarian screams and thrashes at it with his sword, it levels blasts of whirling gas at him. He crumbles to the ground. It turns next to Dolcettus, the healer, and as the Ghost focuses its feasting chill on the hapless Dolcettus, Malvasian casts a ball of flame at it that causes it to vaporize into the misty air.

Inzoliah floats back down to the ground as Malvasian examines the bodies of Dolcettus and Schiavas, who are both white-faced from the draining power of the ghost.

MALVASIAN: You had some magicka reserved after all.

INZOLIAH: So did you. Are they dead?

Malvasian takes the potion of healing from Dolcettus's pack.

MALVASIAN: Yes. Fortunately, the potion of healing wasn't broken when he fell. Well, I guess this leaves just the two of us to collect the reward.

INZOLIAH: We can't get out of this place without each other. Like it or not.

The two battlemages pick up the chest and begin plodding carefully through the undergrowth, pausing from time to time at the sound of footsteps or other eerie noises.

MALVASIAN: Let me make sure I understand. You have a little bit of magicka left, so you elected to use it to make Schiavas the ghost's target, forcing me to use most of my limited reserve to destroy the creature so I wouldn't be more powerful than you. That's first-rate thinking.

INZOLIAH: Thank you. It's only logical. Do you have enough power to cast any other spells?

MALVASIAN: Naturally. An experienced battlemage always knows a few minor but highly effective spells for just such a trial. I take it you, too, have a few tricks up your sleeve?

INZOLIAH: Of course, like you said.

They pause for a moment before continuing as a fearful wail pierces the air. When it dies away, they slowly trudge on.

INZOLIAH: Just as an intellectual exercise, I wonder what spell you would cast at me if we made it out of here without any more combat.

MALVASIAN: I hope you're not implying that I would dream of killing you so I would keep the treasure all to myself.

INZOLIAH: Of course not, nor would I do that to you. It is merely an intellectual exercise.

MALVASIAN: Well, in that case, purely as an intellectual exercise, I would probably cast a leech spell on you, to take away your life force and heal myself. After all, there are brigands on the road between here and Silvenar, and a wounded battlemage with a valuable artifact would make a tempting

target. I'd hate to survive Eldengrove merely to die in the open.

INZOLIAH: That's a well-reasoned response. As for myself, again, not saying I would ever do this, but I think a simple, sudden electrical bolt would serve my purposes admirably. I agree about the danger of brigands, but don't forget, we also have a potion of healing. I could easily slay you and heal myself to full capacity.

MALVASIAN: Very true. It would end up a question then of whose spell was more effective at that instant. If our spells counteracted one another and I leeched your life energy only to be crippled by your lightning bolt, then we could both be killed. Or so near death that a mere potion of healing would scarcely help either one of us, let alone both. How ironic it would be if two scheming battlemages, not saying we are scheming but for the purpose of this intellectual exercise, were left on the brink of death, completely drained of magicka, with one healing potion to choose from. Who would get it then?

INZOLIAH: Logically, whoever drank it first, which in this case would be you since you're holding it. Now, what if one of us were injured, but not killed?

MALVASIAN: Logic would dictate that a scheming battlemage would take the potion, leaving the injured party to the mercy of the elements, I suppose.

INZOLIAH: That does seem most sensible. But suppose that the battlemages, while certainly scheming types, had a certain respect for one another. Perhaps in that case, the victorious one might, for instance, put the potion up a tree near his or her gravely wounded victim. Then when the wounded party had enough magicka replenished, he or she would be able to levitate to the tree branches and recover the potion. By that time, the victorious battlemage would have already collected the reward.

They pause for a moment at the sound of something in the bushes nearby. Carefully, they climb across the branches of a tree to bypass it.

MALVASIAN: I understand what you're saying, but it seems out of

character for our hypothetic scheming battlemage to allow his or her victim to live.

INZOLIAH: Perhaps. But it's been my observation that most scheming battlemages enjoy the feeling of having bested someone in combat, and having that person alive to live with the humiliation.

MALVASIAN: These hypothetical scheming battlemages sound ... (excitedly) Daylight! Do you see it?

The two scurry across the branch dropping behind a bush, so we can no longer see them. We can, however, see the shimmering halo of sunlight.

MALVASIAN (behind the tall bush): We made it.

INZOLIAH (likewise, behind the tall bush): Indeed.

There is a sudden explosion of electrical energy and a wild howling aura of red light, and then silence. After a few moment's pause, we hear someone climbing up the tree. It is Malvasian, putting the potion high up in the bough. He chuckles as he climbs back down and the curtain drops.

Epilogue.

The curtain rises on a road to Silvenar. A gang of bandits have surrounded Malvasian, who is propped up on his staff, barely able to stand. They pull his chest away from him with ease.

BANDIT #1: What have we got here? Don't you know it ain't safe to be out on the road, all sick like you are? Why don't we help you with your load?

MALVASIAN (weakly): Please ... Let me be ...

BANDIT #2: Go on, spellcaster, fight us for it!

MALVASIAN: I can't ... too weak ...

Suddenly, Inzoliah flies in, casting lightning bolts from her fingers at the bandits, who quickly scramble away. She lands on the ground and picks up the chest. Malvasian collapses, dying.

MALVASIAN: Hypothetically, what if ... a battlemage cast a spell on another which didn't harm him at once, but ... drained his life force and his magicka, bit by bit, so he wouldn't know at the time, but ... feel confident enough to leave the potion of healing behind?

INZOLIAH: A most treacherous battlemage she'd be.

MALVASIAN: And ... hypothetically ... would she be likely to help her fallen foe ... so that she could enjoy the humiliation of him continuing ... to live?

INZOLIAH: From my experience, hypothetically, no. She doesn't sound like a fool.

As Inzoliah lugs the chest off toward Silvenar, and Malvasian expires on the stage, we drop the curtain.

Ice and Chitin

By Pletius Spatec

The tale dates to the year 855 of the Second Era, after General Talos had taken the name Tiber Septim and begun his conquest of Tamriel. One of his commanding officers, Beatia of Ylliolos, had been surprised in an ambush while returning from a meeting with the Emperor. She and her personal guard of five soldiers barely escaped, and were separated from their army. They fled across the desolate, sleet-painted rocky cliffs by foot. The attack had been so sudden, they had not even the time to don armor or get to their horses.

"If we can get to the Gorvigh Ridge," hollered Lieutenant Ascutus, gesturing toward a peak off in the mist, his voice barely discernible over the wind. "We can meet the legion you stationed in Porhnak."

Beatia looked across the craggy landscape, through the windswept hoary trees, and shook her head: "Not that way. We'll be struck down before we make it halfway to the mountain. You can see their horses' breath through the trees."

She directed her guard toward a ruined old keep on the frozen isthmus of Nerone, across the bay from Gorvigh Ridge. Jutting out on a promontory of rock, it was like many other abandoned castles in northern Skyrim, remnants of Reman Cyrodiil's protective shield against the continent of Akavir. As they reached their destination and made a fire, they could hear the army of the warchiefs of Danstrar behind them, making camp on the land southwest, blocking the only escape but the sea. The soldiers assessed the stock of the keep while Beatia looked out to the fog-veiled water through the casements of the ruin.

She threw a stone, watching it skip across the ice trailing puffs of mist before it disappeared with a splash into a crack in the surface.

"No food or weaponry to be found, commander," Lieutenant Ascutus reported. "There's a pile of armor in storage, but it's definitely taken on the elements over the years. I don't know if it's salvageable at all."

"We won't last long here," Beatia replied. "The Nords know that we'll be vulnerable when night falls, and this old rock won't hold them off. If there's anything in the keep we can use, find it. We have to make it across the ice floe to the Ridge."

After a few minutes of searching and matching pieces, the guards presented two very grimy, scuffed and cracked suits of chitin armor. Even the least proud of the adventurers and pirates who had looted the castle over the years had thought the shells of chitin beneath their notice. The soldiers did not dare to clean them: the dust looked to be the only adhesive holding them together.

"They won't offer us much protection, just slow us down," grimaced Ascutus. "If we run across the ice as soon as it gets dark--"

"Anyone who can plan and execute an ambush like the warchiefs of Danstrar will be expecting that. We need to move quickly, now, before they're any closer." Beatia drew a map of the bay in the dust, and then a semicircular path across the water, an arc stretching from the castle to the Gorvigh Ridge. "The men should go the long way across the bay like so. The ice is thick there a ways from the shoreline, and there are a lot of rocks for cover."

"You're not staying behind to hold the castle!"

"Of course not," Beatia shook her head and drew a straight line from the castle to the closest shore across the Bay. "I'll take one of the chitin suits, and try to cross the water here. If you don't see or hear me when you've made it to land, don't wait -- just get to Porhnak."

Lieutenant Ascutus tried to dissuade his commander, but he knew that she was would never order one of her men to perform the suicidal act of diversion, that all would die before they reached Gorvigh Ridge if the

warlords' army was not distracted. He could find only one way to honor his duty to protect his commanding officer. It was not easy convincing Commander Beatia that he should accompany her, but at last, she relented.

The sun hung low but still cast a diffused glow, illuminating the snow with a ghostly light, when the five men and one woman slipped through the boulders beneath the castle to the water's frozen edge. Beatia and Ascutus moved carefully and precisely, painfully aware of each dull crunch of chitin against stone. At their commander's signal, the four unarmored men dashed towards the north across the ice.

When her men had reached the first fragment of cover, a spiral of stone jutting a few yards from the base of the promontory, Beatia turned to listen for the sound of the army above. Nothing but silence. They were still unseen. Ascutus nodded, his eyes through the helm showing no fear. The commander and her lieutenant stepped onto the ice and began to run.

When Beatia had surveyed the bay from the castle ramparts, the crossing closest to shore had seemed like a vast, featureless plane of white. Now that she was down on the ice, it was even more flat and stark: the sheet of mist rose only up their ankles, but it billowed up at their approach like the hand of nature itself was pointing out their presence to their enemies. They were utterly exposed. It came almost as a relief when Beatia heard one of the warchiefs' scouts whistle a signal to his masters.

They didn't have to turn around to see if the army was coming. The sound of galloping hoofs and the crash of trees giving way was very clear over the whistling wind.

Beatia wished she could risk a glance to the north to see if her men were hidden from view, but she didn't dare. She could hear Ascutus running to her right, keeping pace, breathing hard. He was used to wearing heavier armor, but the chitin joints were so brittle and tight from years of disuse, it was all he could do to bend them.

The rocky shore to the Ridge still looked at eternity away when Beatia felt and heard the first volley of arrows. Most struck the ice at their feet with

sharp cracking sounds, but a few nearly found home, ricocheting off their backs. She silently offered a prayer of thanks to whatever anonymous shellsmith, now long dead, had crafted the armor. They continued to run, as the first rain of arrows was quickly followed by a second and a third.

"Thank Stendarr," Ascutus gasped. "If there was only leather in the keep, we'd be pierced through and through. Now if only it weren't... so rigid..."

Beatia felt her own armor joints begin to set, her knees and hips finding more and more resistance with every step. There could be no denying it: they were drawing closer toward the shore, but they were running much more slowly. She heard the first dreadful galloping crunch of the army charging across the floe toward them. The riders were cautious on the slippery ice, not driving their horses at full speed, but Beatia knew that they would be upon the two of them soon.

The old chitin armor could withstand the bite of a few arrows, but not a lance driven with the force of a galloping horse. The only great unknown was time.

The thunder of beating hooves was deafening behind them when Ascutus and Beatia reached the edge of the shore. The giant, jagged stones that strung around the beach blockaded the approach. Beneath their feet, the ice sighed and crackled. They could not stand still, run forward, nor run back. Straining against the tired metal in the armor joints, they took two bounds forward and flew at the boulders.

The first landing on the ice sounded an explosive crack. When they rose for the final jump, it was on a wave of water so cold it felt like fire through the thin armor. Ascutus's right hand found purchase in a deep fissure. Beatia gripped with both hands, but her boulder was slick with frost. Faces pressed to the stone, they could not turn to face the army behind them.

But they heard the ice splintering, and the soldiers cry out in terror for just an instant. Then there was no sound but the whining of the wind and the purring lap of the water. A moment later, there were footsteps on the cliff

above.

The four guardsmen had crossed the bay. There were two to pull Beatia up from the face of the boulder, and another two for Ascutus. They strained and swore at the weight, but finally they had their commander and her lieutenant safely on the edge of Gorvigh Ridge.

"By Mara, that's heavy for light armor."

"Yes," smiled Beatia wearily, looking back over the empty broken ice floe, the cracks radiating from the parallel paths she and Ascutus had run. "But sometimes that's good."

Immortal Blood

By Anonymous

The moons and stars were hidden from sight, making that particular quiet night especially dark. The town guard had to carry torches to make their rounds; but the man who came to call at my chapel carried no light with him. I came to learn that Movarth Piquine could see in the dark almost as well as the light - an excellent talent, considering his interests were exclusively nocturnal.

One of my acolytes brought him to me, and from the look of him, I at first thought he was in need of healing. He was pale to the point of opalescence with a face that looked like it had once been very handsome before some unspeakable suffering. The dark circles under his eyes bespoke exhaustion, but the eyes themselves were alert, intense, almost insane.

He quickly dismissed my notion that he himself was ill, though he did want to discuss a specific disease.

"Vampirism," he said, and then paused at my quizzical look. "I was told that you were someone I should seek out for help understanding it."

"Who told you that?" I asked with a smile.

"Tissina Gray."

I immediately remembered her. A brave, beautiful knight who had needed my assistance separating fact from fiction on the subject of the vampire. It had been two years, and I had never heard whether my advice had proved effective.

"You've spoken to her? How is her ladyship?" I asked.

"Dead," Movarth replied coldly, and then, responding to my shock, he

added to perhaps soften the blow. "She said your advice was invaluable, at least for the one vampire. When last I talked to her, she was tracking another. It killed her."

"Then the advice I gave her was not enough," I sighed. "Why do you think it would be enough for you?"

"I was a teacher once myself, years ago," he said. "Not in a university. A trainer in the Fighters Guild. But I know that if a student doesn't ask the right questions, the teacher cannot be responsible for his failure. I intend to ask you the right questions."

And that he did. For hours, he asked questions and I answered what I could, but he never volunteered any information about himself. He never smiled. He only studied me with those intense eyes of his, commiting every word I said to memory.

Finally, I turned the questioning around. "You said you were a trainer at the Fighters Guild. Are you on an assignment for them?"

"No," he said curtly, and finally I could detect some weariness in those feverish eyes of his. "I would like to continue this tomorrow night, if I could. I need to get some sleep and absorb this."

"You sleep during the day," I smiled.

To my surprise, he returned the smile, though it was more of a grimace. "When tracking your prey, you adapt their habits."

The next day, he did return with more questions, these ones very specific. He wanted to know about the vampires of eastern Skyrim. I told him about the most powerful tribe, the Volkihar, paranoid and cruel, whose very breath could freeze their victims' blood in the veins. I explained to him how they lived beneath the ice of remote and haunted lakes, never venturing into the world of men except to feed.

Movarth Piquine listened carefully, and asked more questions into the night, until at last he was ready to leave.

"I will not see you for a few days," he said. "But I will return, and tell you how helpful your information has been."

True to his word, the man returned to my chapel shortly after midnight four days later. There was a fresh scar on his cheek, but he was smiling that grim but satisfied smile of his.

"Your advice helped me very much," he said. "But you should know that the Volkihar have an additional ability you didn't mention. They can reach through the ice of their lakes without breaking it. It was quite a nasty surprise, being grabbed from below without any warning."

"How remarkable," I said with a laugh. "And terrifying. You're lucky you survived."

"I don't believe in luck. I believe in knowledge and training. Your information helped me, and my skill at melee combat sealed the bloodsucker's fate. I've never believed in weaponry of any kind. Too many unknowns. Even the best swordsmith has created a flawed blade, but you know what your body is capable of. I know I can land a thousand blows without losing my balance, provided I get the first strike."

"The first strike?" I murmured. "So you must never be surprised."

"That is why I came to you," said Movarth. "You know more than anyone alive about these monsters, in all their cursed varieties across the land. Now you must tell me about the vampires of northern Valenwood."

I did as he asked, and once again, his questions taxed my knowledge. There were many tribes to cover. The Bonsamu who were indistinguishable from Bosmer except when seen by candlelight. The Keerilth who could disintegrate into mist. The Yekef who swallowed men whole. The dread Telboth who preyed on children, eventually taking their place in the family, waiting patiently for years before murdering them all in their unnatural

hunger.

Once again, he bade me farewell, promising to return in a few weeks, and once again, he returned as he said, just after midnight. This time, Movarth had no fresh scars, but he again had new information.

"You were wrong about the Keerilth being unable to vaporize when pushed underwater," he said, patting my shoulder fondly. "Fortunately, they cannot travel far in their mist form, and I was able to track it down."

"It must have surprised it fearfully. Your field knowledge is becoming impressive," I said. "I should have had an acolyte like you decades ago."

"Now, tell me," he said. "Of the vampires of Cyrodiil."

I told him what I could. There was but one tribe in Cyrodiil, a powerful clan who had ousted all other competitors, much like the Imperials themselves had done. Their true name was unknown, lost in history, but they were experts at concealment. If they kept themselves well-fed, they were indistinguishable from living persons. They were cultured, more civilized than the vampires of the provinces, preferring to feed on victims while they were asleep, unaware.

"They will be difficult to surprise," Movarth frowned. "But I will seek one out, and tell you what I learn. And then you will tell me of the vampires of High Rock, and Hammerfell, and Elsweyr, and Black Marsh, and Morrowind, and the Sumurset Isles, yes?"

I nodded, knowing then that this was a man on an eternal quest. He wouldn't be satisfied with but the barest hint of how things were. He needed to know it all.

He did not return for a month, and on the night that he did, I could see his frustration and despair, though there were no lights burning in my chapel.

"I failed," he said, as I lit a candle. "You were right. I could not find a single one."

I brought the light up to my face and smiled. He was surprised, even stunned by the pallor of my flesh, the dark hunger in my ageless eyes, and the teeth. Oh, yes, I think the teeth definitely surprised the man who could not afford to be surprised.

"I haven't fed in seventy-two hours," I explained, as I fell on him. He did not land the first blow or the last.

Incident in Necrom

by Jonquilla Bothe

"The situation simply is this," said Phlaxith, his face as chiseled and resolute as any statue. "Everyone knows that the cemetery west of the city is haunted by some malevolent beings, and has been for many years now. The people have come to accept it. They bury their dead by daylight, and are away before Masser and Secunda have risen and the evil comes forth. The only victims to fall prey to the devils within are the very stupid and the outsiders."

"It sounds like a natural solution to filtering out the undesirables then," laughed Nitrah, a tall, middle-aged woman with cold eyes and thin lips. "Where is the gold in saving them?"

"From the Temple. They're re-opening a new monastery near the cemetery, and they need the land cleansed of evil. They're offering a fortune, so I accepted the assignment with the caveat that I could assemble my own team to split the reward. That's why I've sought you each out. From what I've heard, you, Nitrah, are the best bladesman in Morrowind."

Nitrah smiled her unpleasant best.

"And you, Osmic, are a renowned burglar, though never once imprisoned."

The bald-pated young man stammered as if to refute the charges, before grinning back, "I'll get you in where you need to go. But then it's up to you to do what you need to do. I'm no combatter."

"Anything Nitrah and I can't handle, I'm sure Massitha will prove her mettle," Phlaxith said, turning to the fourth member of the party. "She comes on very good references as a sorceress of great power and skill."

Massitha was the picture of innocence, round-faced and wide-eyed. Nitrah

and Osmic looked at her uncertainly, particularly watching her fearful expressions as Phlaxith described the nature of the creatures haunting the cemetery. It was obvious she had never faced any adversary other than man and mer before. If she survived, they thought to themselves, it would be very surprising.

As the foursome trudged toward the graveyard at dusk, they took the opportunity to quiz their new teammate.

"Vampires are filthy creatures," said Nitrah. "Disease-ridden, you know. They say off to the west, they'll indiscriminately pass on their curse together with a number of other afflictions. They don't do that here so much, but still you don't want to leave their wounds untreated. I take it you know something of the spells of Restoration if one of us gets bit?"

"I know a little, but I'm no Healer," said Massitha meekly.

"More of a Battlemage?" asked Osmic.

"I can do a little damage if I'm really close, but I'm not very good at that either. I'm more of an illusionist, technically."

Nitrah and Osmic looked at one another with naked concern as they reached the gates of the graveyard. There were moving shadows, stray specters among the wrack and ruins, crumbled paths stacked on top of crumbled paths. It wasn't a maze of a place; it could have been any dilapidated graveyard but even without looking at the tombstones, it did have one very noticeable feature. Filling the horizon was the mausoleum of a minor Cyrodilic official from the 2nd Era, slightly exotic but still harmonizing with the Dunmer graves in a complimentary style called decay.

"It's a surprisingly useful School," whispered Massitha defensively. "You see, it's all concerned with magicka's ability to alter the perception of objects without changing their physical compositions. Removing sensual data, for example, to cast darkness or remove sound or smell from the air. It can help by--"

A red-haired vampire woman leapt out of the shadows in front of them, knocking Phlaxith on his back. Nitrah quickly unsheathed her sword, but Massitha was faster. With a wave of her hand, the creature stopped, frozen, her jaws scant inches from Phlaxith's throat. Phlaxith pulled out his own blade and finished her off.

"That's illusion?" asked Osmic.

"Certainly," smiled Massitha. "Nothing changed in the vampire's form, except its ability to move. Like I said, it's a very useful School."

The four climbed up over the paths to the front gateway to the crypt. Osmic snapped the lock and disassembled the poison trap. The sorceress cast a wave of light down the dust-choked corridors, banishing the shadows and drawing the inhabitants out. Almost immediately they were set on by a pair of vampires, howling and screaming in a frenzy of bloodlust.

The battle was joined, so no sooner were the first two vampires felled than their reinforcements attacked. They were mighty warriors of uncanny strength and endurance, but Massitha's paralysis spell and the weaponry of Phlaxith and Nitrah clove through their ranks. Even Osmic aided the battle.

"They're crazy," gasped Massitha when the fight finally ended and she could catch her breath.

"Quarra, the most savage of the vampire bloodlines," said Phlaxith. "We have to find and exterminate each and every one."

Delving into the crypts, the group hounded out more of the creatures. Though they varied in appearance, each seemed to rely on their strength and claws for attacking, and subtlety did not seem to be the style of any. When the entire mausoleum had been searched and every creature within destroyed, the four finally made their way to the surface. It was only an hour until sunrise.

There was no frenzied scream or howl. Nothing rushed forward towards them. The final attack when it happened was so unlike the others that the

questors were taken utterly by surprise.

The ancient creature waited until the four were almost out of the cemetery, talking amiably, making plans for spending their share of the reward. He judged carefully who would be the greatest threat, and then launched himself at the sorceress. Had Phlaxith not turned his attention back from the gate, she would have been ripped to shreds before she had a chance to scream.

The vampire knocked Massitha across a stone, its claws raking across her back, but stopped its assault in order to block a blow from Phlaxith's sword. It accomplished this maneuver in its own brutal way, by tearing the warrior's arm from its socket. Osmic and Nitrah set on it, but they found themselves in a losing battle. Only when Massitha had pulled herself back up from behind the pile of rocks, weak and bleeding, that the fight turned. She cast a magickal ball of flame at the creature, which so enraged it that it turned back to her. Nitrah saw her opening and took it, beheading the vampire with a stroke of her sword.

"So you do know some spells of destruction, like you said," said Nitrah.

"And a few spells of healing too," she said weakly. "But I can't save Phlaxith."

The warrior died in the bloodied dust before them. The three were quiet as they traveled across the dawn-lit countryside back toward Necrom. Massitha felt the throb of pain on her back intensify as they walked and then a gradual numbness like ice spread through her body.

"I need to go to a healer and see if I've been diseased," she said as they reached the city.

"Meet us at the Moth and Fire tomorrow morning," said Nitrah. "We'll go to the Temple and get our reward and split it there."

Three hours later, Osmic and Nitrah sat in their room at the tavern, happily counting and recounting the gold marks. Split three ways, it was a very

comfortable sum.

"What if the healers can't do anything for Massitha?" smiled Osmic dreamily. "Some diseases can be insidious."

"Did you hear something in the hall?" asked Nitrah quickly, but when she looked, there was no one there. She returned, shutting the door behind her. "I'm sure Massitha will survive if she went straight to the healer. But we could leave tonight with the gold."

"Let's have one last drink to our poor sorceress," said Osmic, leading Nitrah out of the room toward the stairs down.

Nitrah laughed. "Those spells of illusion won't help her track us down, as useful as she keeps saying they are. Paralysis, light, silence -- not so good when you don't know where to look."

They closed the door behind them.

"Invisibility is another spell of illusion," said Massitha's disembodied voice. The gold on the table rose in the air and vanished from sight as she slipped it into her purse. The door again opened and closed, and all was silent until Osmic and Nitrah returned a few minutes later.

Interviews With Tapestrists

Volume Eighteen

Cherim's Heart of Anequina
by Livillus Perus, Professor at the Imperial University

Contemporary with Maqamat Lusign (interviewed in volume seventeen of this series) is the Khajiti Cherim, whose tapestries have been hailed as masterpieces all over the Empire for nigh on thirty years now. His four factories located throughout Elsweyr make reproductions of his work, but his original tapestries command stellar prices. The Emperor himself owns ten Cherim tapestries, and his representatives are currently negotiating the sale of five more.

The muted use of color contrasted with the luminous skin tones of Cherim's subjects is a marked contrast with the old style of tapestry. The subjects of his work in recent years have been fabulous tales of the ancient past: the Gods meeting to discuss the formation of the world; the Chimer following the Prophet Veloth into Morrowind; the Wild Elves battling Morihaus and his legions at the White Gold Tower. His earliest designs dealt with more contemporary subjects. I had the opportunity to discuss with him one of his first masterpieces, The Heart of Anequina, at his villa in Orcrest.

The Heart of Anequina presents an historic battle of the Five Year War between Elsweyr and Valenwood which raged from 3E 394 (or 3E 395, depending on what one considers to be the beginning of the war) until 3E 399. In most fair accounts, the war lasted 4 years and 9 months, but artistic license from the great epic poets added an additional three months to the ordeal.

The actual details of the battle itself, as interpreted by Cherim, are explicit. The faces of a hundred and twenty Wood Elf archers can be differentiated one from the other, each registering fear at the approach of the Khajiti army. Their hauberks catch the dim light of the sun. The menacing shadows of the Elsweyr battlecats loom on the hills, every muscle strained, ready to pounce in command. It is not surprising that he got all the details right, because

Cherim was in the midst of it, as a Khajiti foot soldier.

Every minute part of the Khajiti traditional armor can be seen in the soldiers in the foreground. The embroidered edging and striped patterns on the tunics. Each lacquered plate on loose-fitting leather in the Elsweyr style. The helmets of cloth and fluted silver.

"Cherim does not understand the point of plate mail," said Cherim. "It is hot, for one, like being both burned and buried alive. Cherim wore it at the insistence of our Nord advisors during the Battle of Zelinin, and Cherim couldn't even turn to see what my fellow Khajiit were doing. Cherim did some sketches for a tapestry of the Battle of Zelinin, but Cherim finds that to make it realistic, the figures came out very mechanical, like iron golems or dwemer centurions. Knowing our Khajiti commanders, Cherim would not be surprised if giving up the heavy plate was more aesthetic than practical."

"Elsweyr lost the Battle of Zelinin, didn't she?"

"Yes, but Elsweyr won the war, starting at the next battle, the Heart of Anequina," said Cherim with a smile. "The tide turned as soon as we Khajiit sent our Nordic advisors back to Solitude. We had to get rid of all the heavy armor they brought to us and find enough traditional armor our troops felt comfortable wearing. Obviously, the principle advantage of the traditional armor was that we could move easily in it, as you can see from the natural stances of the soldiers in the tapestry.

"Now if you look at this poor perforated Cathay-raht who just keeps battling on in the bottom background, you see the other advantage. It seems strange to say, but one of the best features of traditional armor is that an arrow will either deflect completely or pass all the way through. An arrow head is like a hook, made to stick where it strikes if it doesn't pass through. A soldier in traditional armor will find himself with a hole in his body and the bolt on the other side. Our healers can fix such a wound easily if it isn't fatal, but if the arrow still remains in the armor, as it does with heavier armor, the wound will be reopened every time the fellow moves. Unless the Khajiit strips off the armor and pulls out the arrow, which is what we had to

do at the Battle of Zelinin. A difficult and time-consuming process in the heat of battle, to say the least."

I asked him next, "Is there a self portrait in the battle?"

"Yes," Cherim said with another grin. "You see the small figure of the Khajiit stealing the rings off the dead Wood Elf? His back is facing you, but he has a brown and orange striped tail like Cherim's. Cherim does not say that all stereotypes about the Khajiit are fair, but Cherim must sometimes acknowledge them."

A self-deprecating style in self-portraiture is also evident in the tapestries of Ranulf Hook, the next artist interviewed in volume nineteen of this series.

Invocation of Azura

by Sigillah Parate

For three hundred years I have been a priestess of Azura, the Daedric Princess of Moonshadow, Mother of the Rose, and Queen of the Night Sky. Every Hogithum, which we celebrate on the 21st of First Seed, we summon her for guidance, as well as to offer things of worth and beauty to Her Majesty. She is a cruel but wise mistress. We do not invoke her on any Hogithum troubled by thunderstorms, for those nights belong to the Mad One, Sheogorath, even if they do coincide with the occasion. Azura at such times understands our caution.

Azura's invocation is a very personal one. I have been priestess to three other Daedric Princes, but Azura values the quality of her worshippers, and the truth behind our adoration of her. When I was a Dark Elven maid of sixteen, I joined my grandmother's coven, worshippers of Molag Bal, the Schemer Princess. Blackmail, extortion, and bribery are as much the weapons of the Witches of Molag Bal as is dark magic. The Invocation of Molag Bal is held on the 20th of Evening Star, except during stormy weather. This ceremony is seldom missed, but Molag Bal often appears to her cultists in mortal guise on other dates. When my grandmother died in an attempt to poison the heir of Firewatch, I re-examined my faith in the cult.

My brother was a wizard of the cult of Boethiah-and from what he told me, the Dark Warrior was closer to my spirit than the treacherous Molag Bal. Boethiah is a Warrior Princess who acts more overtly than any other Daedroth. After years of skulking and scheming, it felt good to perform acts for a mistress which had direct, immediate consequences. Besides, I liked it that Boethiah was a Daedra of the Dark Elves. Our cult would summon her on the day we called the Gauntlet, the 2nd of Sun's Dusk. Bloody competitions would be held in her honor, and the duels and battles would continue until nine cultists were killed at the hands of other cultists. Boethiah cared little for her cultists-she only cared for our blood. I do think I saw her smile when I accidentally slew my brother in a sparring session.

My horror, I think, greatly pleased her.

I left the cult soon after that. Boethiah was too impersonal for me, too cold. I wanted a mistress of greater depth. For the next eighteen years of my life, I worshipped no one. Instead I read and researched. It was in an old and profane tome that I came upon the name of Nocturnal-Nocturnal the Night Mistress, Nocturnal the Unfathomable. As the book prescribed, I called to her on her holy day, the 3rd of Hearth Fire. At last I had found the personal mistress I had so long desired. I strove to understand her labyrinthine philosophy, the source of her mysterious pain. Everything about her was dark and shrouded, even the way she spoke and the acts she required of me. It took years for me to understand the simple fact that I could never understand Nocturnal. Her mystery was as essential to her as savagery was to Boethiah or treachery was to Molag Bal. To understand Nocturnal is to negate her, to pull back the curtains cloaking her realm of darkness. As much as I loved her, I recognized the futility of unraveling her enigmas. I turned instead to her sister, Azura.

Azura is the only Daedra Princess I have ever worshipped who seems to care about her followers. Molag Bal wanted my mind, Boethiah wanted my arms, and Nocturnal perhaps my curiosity. Azura wants all of that, and our love above all. Not our abject slavering, but our honest and genuine caring in all its forms. It is important to her that our emotions be engaged in her worship. And our love must also be directed inward. If we love her and hate ourselves, she feels our pain. I will, for all time, have no other mistress.

Journal of Gallus Desidenius

Mercer Frey continues to elude my every step. I think he's aware I'm following him, and appears to be taking no unnecessary chances. I'm bringing all of my skills to the forefront in order to deceive him. It still pains me that the deception is necessary. When I became a Nightingale, using my newfound talents against my own was the furthest thought from my mind.

There was a close call today. I was settling down for a night's rest in the cistern when Mercer Frey entered unexpectedly. He was creeping along the wall, but I spotted him immediately. He edged closer to the vault door, making his way carefully around the perimeter of the room, but suddenly stopped and turned towards my hiding place. I froze instantly, even holding my breath for a moment, but my position was already compromised. He abruptly turned and walked back towards the Flagon.
What was he doing?

At last, I have a piece of evidence that might explain Mercer Frey's actions. Instead of trying to follow him or break into his manor, I used every loose-tongued source at my disposal to scour the Ratway looking for answers. It took several weeks, but Maul was able to provide an interesting bit of information. Mercer had been spending inordinately large sums of coin on all manner of things unrelated to the Guild. How he was able to afford this was a mystery to me. The vault was impregnable, so what was the source of his coin?

It's been confirmed by my sources. Mercer's been living an unduly lavish lifestyle replete with spending vast amounts of gold on personal pleasures. I have more than my share of evidence to confront him now. He must be stealing from the Guild, but without proof, all I have is baseless accusation. Mercer came from wealthy stock, but the amount of coin he's been spending is immense.

I've been giving it some serious thought. There's only a single way that

Mercer could have access to vast amounts of coin. I hesitate to even believe it's possible. How could he possibly desecrate the Twilight Sepulcher? This goes far beyond mere greed and transcends common theft. His actions could represent the failure of the Nightingales, something that hasn't occurred in hundreds of years. Why? Why would he readily throw away everything he believes in? All I need is proof.

Mercer Frey has requested I meet him at Snow Veil Sanctum today. He sent a note by courier so I can only assume he's already there. All my senses tell me it's a trap, but I have no choice. His message indicated the meeting was of the utmost urgency and involved Guild business, so I'm obligated to go. I can't risk bringing anyone else with me, but I'm almost certain Karliah will disobey and follow.

Keepers of the Razor

Current Descendants of the Inner Circle

Jorgen of Morthal, 8th generation of Clan Axe-Bearer to bear the Hilt of Mehrunes' Razor. Son of Halnir, son of Hroi, son of Koli, son of Malte, son of Lygrleid, son of Neddrir, son of Lenne.

Ghunzul, leader of the Cracked Tusk Bandits, and 8th to bear the blade shards of Mehrunes' Razor. Son of Shelakh, son of Mog, son of Grul, son of Durgob, son of Uzgakh, son of Ramolg, son of Othmash.

Drascua, leader of the Forsworn of Dead Crone Rock, and 8th to bear the pommel of Mehrunes' Razor. Daughter of Cairine, daughter of Edana, daughter of Malvina, daughter of Muriel, daughter of Riane, daughter of Cayleigh, daughter of Sorcha.

HISTORICAL BACKGROND

Of all the groups that pledged to eradicate the Mythic Dawn from Tamriel, none were as inadvertently successful as the Keepers of the Razor. Originally a militia group founded to destroy the remnants of the Mythic Dawn, the group was renamed the after discovering the legendary artifact of Mehrunes Dagon that became their namesake. How they found the Razor is a secret that I have been unable to uncover, but it is clear that they were not part of Frathen Drothan's failed expedition to Varsa Baalim, and in fact the group does not first appear in Imperial records until fifty years later.

The Razor was divided among the three highest ranking members of the order's inner circle, to be passed down from oldest child to oldest child "until the twin moons themselves disappeared from the skies." Although this pledge seems to have been loosely interpreted, as the moons did vanish

from the heavens during The Void Nights of 4E98-4E100, yet the Razor's pieces were still being bequeathed through the generations during and after this time.

Tracing the lineages of the inner circle proved especially difficult thanks to the group's unusual membership. While the leader of the Keepers of the Razor was a Nord and thankfully was easily researched through the clan's family histories, the other two members were an Orc and a native daughter of the Reach, whose culture's paucity of respect for literacy made tracking them down less straightforward. Fortunately, Othmash gro-Gularz and his sons are well-recorded for their service in the Imperial Legion. Yet the daughters of Sorcha proved nearly impossible to find until I uncovered Markarth's meticulously thorough tax records, which recorded each birth of Sorcha's kin in order to administer certain petty fees. Sorscha's current descendent, Drascua, fled to Dead Crone Rock after the Markarth Incident, and is considered by the Jarl to be a major threat to the safety of the hold.

Killing - Before You're Killed

by Eduardo Corvus

I've seen many a man rush headlong into battle only to have their life cut short in an instant. I've been a trainer of the warrior arts for many spans - cut from the cloth of a great lineage of knights, Blades and even a distant sellsword or two.

It's with this knowledge that I'll try to pen a brief treatise on the subtle art of war. Not mage fire, not archery or criminal throat-slitting. But war. Man on man with nothing but a fine bit of steel between them.

The first thing you'll need to learn is how to block. The best way not to get killed is not to let the other man hit you. Use a shield, use it well. Now, you'll get tired from this. You may even get a little hurt. But a blocked blow is much better than a landed one. Over time you'll get better, eventually shrugging off even the mightiest of hits.

But beware - your foes, if they're not base cur bandits, will know how to counter you. They'll hit you with everything they've got in, order to open you up, and keep on hitting. So watch for these powerful attacks. While it's still better to absorb the impact with a quarter inch of steel, it's best to try to just step out of the way.

Remember, against spells your blocking is useless until you're trained. So get up on mages quickly and let them eat steel. Deserves them right for using a witch weapon.

You can also block without a shield as well - just cross that blow with your sword, though this isn't nearly as effective. And if you decide you're fancy and want to wield two blades, you can't block at all, so don't even try. Without both hands on the hilt you just won't have the strength to counter blows.

But, with a weapon in each hand you are much more likely to take your opponent down quickly. The best defense, some say.

To wield the blade there are some fundamentals. Quick strikes are always good, but can be repelled, so watch for your opponent's own defensive postures. Wait for an opening, or create one with your own heavy attacks. Hammers hit hardest but are slow. Same with maces and all blunt weaponry. Axes are a nice middle ground, while swords are the quickest but won't stagger your opponent as efficiently with the hard hits.

Keep an eye not to get too exhausted - always try to save a little of your strength to counter blows, or even run! Keep moving during a fight. Never let yourself get cornered or surrounded. Pick your threats - weak spellcasters that can hurt you quick are the first things I fell.

The shield is not only a defensive tool. Put your shoulder into it and bash your opponent. This sends them flying and opens them up for quick counter assaults. Even better, put extra weight into it and power bash your opponent. If they're small this will put them on their knees.

Bigger opponents cannot be staggered by heavy attacks. Only the power bash will really knock them around and create openings for you to exploit.

So again - block, counter, bash! Hit them when they're down! They'll show no mercy, so why should you? Battle is about the offense, about catching your foe early and never relenting. Keep moving, keep swinging. If you consider yourself overly powerful, pick up a two-handed weapon and see your foes fall before you like wheat stalks. They're slow and unwieldy, but they shatter bones and cleave flesh better than anything.

The graves are filled with many a mediocre swordsman. If you don't have the stomach for war, try a monk's work. But if you do travel the path of the warrior, learn the basics and keep your head firmly planted on your shoulders - or someone's bound to lob it off.

A Kiss, Sweet Mother

So you wish to summon the Dark Brotherhood? You wish to see someone dead? Pray, child. Pray, and let the Night Mother hear your plea.

You must perform that most profane of rituals - the Black Sacrament.

Create an effigy of the intended victim, assembled from actual body parts, including a heart, skull, bones and flesh. Encircle that effigy with candles.

The ritual itself must then commence. Proceed to stab the effigy repeatedly with a dagger rubbed with the petals of a Nightshade plant, while whispering this plea:

"Sweet Mother, sweet Mother, send your child unto me, for the sins of the unworthy must be baptized in blood and fear."

Then wait, child, for the Dread Father Sithis rewards the patient. You will be visited by a representative of the Dark Brotherhood. So begins a contract bound in blood.

The Knights of the Nine

By Karoline of Solitude

Few people now remember the Knights of the Nine, but in their time, they were famous throughout Cyrodiil -- indeed, throughout the Empire. For a brief period in the early days of the Septim Empire, their adventures were the talk of the land. But their renown, as with so much else, was swallowed up by the War of the Red Diamond, and today even the location of their priory house has been lost to history.

The Knights were founded by Sir Amiel Lannus in 3E 111, following his heroic turn in the War of the Isle, with the high purpose of recovering the legendary Crusader's Relics, the weapons and armor of Pelinal Whitestrake which have been lost for thousands of years. They were born out of the sense of optimism and ambition that characterised the first century of the Third Era. Tamriel was united and at peace for the first time in many centuries. Nothing was impossible.

The fame of the knights was established early on when Sir Amiel led them against the Wyrm of Elynglenn to recover the Cuirass of the Crusader, which had not been seen since the First Era. Soon, the greatest knights of the day were lining up to join the new order, and the Priory of the Nine in the West Weald of Cyrodiil became a magnet for the great and the good. The Knights were the toast of the Empire. When Berich Vlindrel joined the order, the scion of one of the great noble families of Colovia, it was clear that the Knights of the Nine had become the Empire's most prestigous knightly order. In relatively short order, the Knights reclaimed three more Relics, and their fame soared to new heights with each one. No one doubted that they would eventually succeed in their quest to recover all eight Relics.

Sadly, this early promise of the Knights did not survive the ravages of the War of the Red Diamond, which tore apart the Empire beginning in 3E 121. At first, it seems that Sir Amiel was able to keep his knights out of the war. But the very success of the Knights undermined this, as many of the

Knights came from important families from across the Empire which were lining up on either side of the bloody civil war. Sir Berich was apparently the first to leave the Order to join the war on the side of Cephorus, carrying the Sword and Greaves of the Crusader into battle with him. Many other knights seem to have left the Order shortly after this, some joining the war on one side or the other.

The end of the order was as ignomonious as its beginning was glorious. Following the victory of Cephorus in 3E 127, Berich Vlindrel became an important figure on the winning side. It seems likely that he was behind the Imperial decree which officially dissolved the Knights of the Nine in 3E 131, although in truth this was little more than a formality -- despite Sir Amiel's best efforts, the order had never recovered from the bitterness of the civil war.

What happened to the various Relics originally recovered by the Knights of the Nine? The Sword and the Greaves went with Sir Berich, but where he bestowed them is unknown. The Gauntlets famously lie immovable on the floor of the Chapel of Stendarr in Chorrol, where Sir Casimir left them after his disgraceful murder of a beggar in 3E 139. The location of the Cuirass is a mystery, lost to history along with the eventual fate of Sir Amiel, who was last reported still living alone in the empty Priory of the Nine by a passing traveller in 3E 150. And so the Knights of the Nine faded away into history.

Kolb & the Dragon: An Adventure for Nord Boys

1

Kolb was a brave Nord warrior. One day his Chief asked Kolb to slay an evil dragon that threatened their village. "Go through the mountain pass, Kolb", his Chief said. "You will find the Dragon on the other side."

Turn to page (2)

2

Kolb took his favorite axe and shield and walked to the pass, where he found a cold cave, a windy cave, and a narrow trail.

Enter the cold cave (17)
Enter the windy cave (8)
Walk up the trail (12)

3

Kolb stepped onto a rocky hill. He could see the dragon sleeping below, and a tavern off a road nearby.

Climb down (16)
Visit tavern (14)

4

Following the stench, Kolb found a filthy orc! The orc snarled and charged Kolb with his spiked club.

Raise Shield (9)
Swing Axe (13)

5

Treading through the marsh, Kolb discovered a wailing ghost blocking his way.

Attack Ghost (15)
Give Gold (10)

6

The head of the axe lodged itself in the tough, scaly neck of the beast. It wailed and thrashed, but Kolb held on and eventually sawed through the neck, killing the beast. Kolb returned home victorious, and his village was never bothered by the dragon again.

THE END

7

Leaving the marsh behind him, Kolb could see the dragon's lair nearby, as well as a small, welcoming tavern.

Go to the Lair (16)
Go to Tavern (14)

8

A strong gust of wind blew Kolb's torch out, and knocked him into a pit where split his head and died.

THE END

9

The orc cackled as his club splintered Kolb's shield and smashed into his face. There Kolb died, and the orc had soup from his bones.

THE END

10

Kolb remembered a story his Gran told him and tossed two gold chits for the ghost, and it faded away, allowing him to pass.

Turn to Page (7)

11

Kolb crept towards the belly of the beast, but no sooner had he taken his eyes off the head of the beast than it snapped him up and ate him whole, axe and all.

THE END

12

Climbing up, Kolb found a camp. He met a wise man who shared bread and showed two paths to the dragon's lair. One went through the hills, the other through a marsh.

Take the hills (3)
Take the marsh (5)

13

Before the orc could strike, Kolb swung his mighty axe. The orc's head and club fell uselessly to the floor.

Turn to Page (3)

14

Kolb stopped at the tavern to rest before fighting the dragon. High elves ran the tavern, however, and poisoned his mead so they could steal his gold.

THE END

15

Kolb swung his axe as hard as he could, but the ghost hardly seemed to notice. The ghost drifted into Kolb, and a deep sleep took him over, from which he never awoke.

THE END

16

Kolb found the lair where the dragon slept, tendrils of smoke wafting from it's nostrils. The air made Kolb's eyes sting, and he nearly slipped on the bones of men, picked clean. The beast lay on its side, the throat and belly both waiting targets.

Strike the Neck (6)
Strike the Belly (11)

17

Kolb stepped into the frozen cave, but his Nord blood kept him warm. A smelly tunnel climbed ahead of him, and wind howled from another to his left. A ladder was nearby as well.

Take the smelly tunnel (4)
Take the windy tunnel (8)
Climb the ladder (12)

Lady Benoch's Words and Philosophy

Lady Allena Benoch, former master of the Valenwood Fighter's Guild and head of the Emperor's personal guard in the Imperial City, has been leading a campaign to reacquaint the soldiers of Tamriel with the sword. I met with her on three different occasions for the purposes of this book. The first time was at her suite in the palace, on the balcony overlooking the gardens below.

I was early for the interview, which had taken me nearly six months to arrange, but she gently chided me for not being even earlier.

"I've had time to put up my defenses now," she said, her bright green eyes smiling.

Lady Benoch is a Bosmer, a Wood Elf, and like her ancestors, took to the bow in her early years. She excelled at the sport, and by the age of fourteen, she had joined the hunting party of her tribe as a Jaqspur, a long distance shooter. During the black year of 396, when the Parikh tribe began their rampage through southeastern Valenwood with the aid of powers from the Summurset Isle, Lady Benoch fought the futile battle to keep her tribe's land.

"I killed someone for the first time when I was sixteen," she says now. "I don't remember it very well -- he or she was just a blur on the horizon where I aimed my bow. It meant no more to me than shooting animals. I probably killed a hundred people like that during that summer and fall. I didn't really feel like a killer until that wintertide, when I learned what it was like to look into a man's eyes as you spilled his blood.

"It was a scout from the Parikh tribe who surprised me while I was on camp watch. We surprised each other, I suppose. I had my bow at my side, and I just panicked, trying to string an arrow when he was half a yard away from me. It was the only thing I knew to do. Of course, he struck first with his blade, and I just fell back in shock."

"You always remember the mistakes of your first victim. His mistake was assuming because he had drawn blood and I had fallen, that I was dead. I rushed at him the moment he turned from me towards the sleeping camp of my tribesmen. He was caught off guard, and I wrested his blade away from him."

"I don't know how many times I stabbed at him. By the time I stopped, when the next watch came to relieve me, my arms were black and blue with strain, there was not a solid piece of him left. I had literally cut him into pieces. You see, I had no concept of how to fight or how much it took to kill a man."

Lady Benoch, aware of this deficiency in her education, began teaching herself swordsmanship at once.

"You can't learn how to use a sword in Valenwood," she says. "Which isn't to say Bosmer can't use blades, but we're largely self-taught. As much as it hurt when my tribe found itself homeless, pushed to the north, it did have one good aspect: it afforded me the opportunity to meet Redguards."

Studying all manners of weapon wielding under the tutelage of Warday A'kor, Lady Benoch excelled. She became a freelance adventurer, traveling through the wilds of southern Hammerfell and northern Valenwood, protecting caravans and visiting dignitaries from the various dangers indigenous to the population.

Unfortunately, before we were able to pursue her story of her early years any further, Lady Benoch was called away on urgent summons from the Emperor. Such is often the case with the Imperial Guard, and in these troubled times, perhaps, more so than in the past. When I tried to contact her for another talk, her servants informed me than their mistress was in Skyrim. Another month passed, and when I visited her suite, I was told she was in High Rock.

To her credit, Lady Benoch actually sought me out for our second interview on Sun's Dusk of that year. I was in a tavern in the City called the Blood

and Rooster, when I felt her hand on my shoulder. She sat down at the rude table and continued her tale as if it had never been interrupted.

She returned to the theme of her days as an adventurer, and told me about the first time she ever felt confident with a sword.

"I owned at that time an enchanted daikatana, quite a good one, of daedric metal. It wasn't an original Akaviri, not even of design. I didn't have that kind of money, but it served my primary purpose of delivering as much damage with as little effort on my part as possible. A'kor had taught me how to fence, but when faced with a life or death situation, I always fell back on the old overhand wallop."

"A pack of orcs had stolen some gold from a local chieftain in Meditea, and I went looking for them in one of the ubiquitous dungeons that dot the countryside in that region. There were the usual rats and giant spiders, and I was enough of a veteran by then to dispatch them with relative ease. The problem came when I found myself in a pitch black room, and all around me, I heard the grunts of orcs nearing in."

"I waved my sword around me, connecting with nothing, hearing their footsteps coming ever nearer. Somehow, I managed to hold back my fear and to remember the simple exercises Master A'kor had taught me. I listened, stepped sideways, swung, twisted, stepped forward, swung a circle, turned around, side-stepped, swung."

"My instinct was right. The orcs had gathered in a circle around me, and when I found a light, I saw that they were all dead."

"That's when I focused on my study of swordplay. I'm stupid enough to require a near death experience to see the practical purposes, you see."

Lady Benoch spent the remainder of the interview, responding in her typically blunt way to the veracity of various myths that surrounded her and her career. It was true that she became the master of the Valenwood Fighter's Guild after winning a duel with the former master, who was a stooge of the Imperial Battlemage, the traitor Jagar Tharn. It was not true

that she was the one responsible for the Valenwood Guild's disintegration two years later ("Actually, the membership in the Valenwood chapter was healthy, but in Tamriel overall the mood was not conducive for the continued existence of a nonpartisan organization of freelance warriors.") It was true that she first came to the Emperor's attention when she defended Queen Akorithi of Sentinel from a Breton assassin. It was not true that the assassin was hired by someone in the high court of Daggerfall ("At least," she says wryly, "That has never been proven."). It was also true that she married her former servant Urken after he had been in her service for eleven years ("No one knows how to keep my weaponry honed like he does," she says. "It's a practical business. I either had to give him a raise or marry him.").

The only story I asked her that she would neither admit nor refute was the one about Calaxes, the Emperor's bastard. When I brought up the name, she shrugged, professing no knowledge of the affair. I pressed on with the details of the story. Calaxes, though not in line for succession, had been given the Archbishopric of The One: a powerful position in the Imperial City, and indeed over all Tamriel where that religion is honored. Whispering began immediately that Calaxes believed that the Gods were angered with the secular governments of Tamriel and the Emperor specifically. It was even said that Calaxes advocated full-scale rebellion to establish a theocracy over the Empire.

It is certainly true, I pressed on, that the Emperor's relationship with Calaxes had become very stormy, and that legislation had been passed to limit the Church's authority. That is, up until the moment when Calaxes disappeared, suddenly, without notice to his closest of friends. Many said that Lady Benoch and the Imperial Guard assassinated the Archbishop Calaxes in the sacristy of his church -- the date usually given was the 29th of Sun's Dusk 3E 498.

"Of course," responds Lady Benoch with one of her mysterious grins. "I don't need to tell you that the Imperial Guard's position is as protectors of the throne, not assassins."

"But surely, no one is more trusted that the Guard for such a sensitive

operation," I say, carefully.

Lady Benoch acknowledges that, but merely says that such details of her duties must remain secret as a matter of Imperial security. Unfortunately, her ladyship had to leave early the next morning, as the Emperor had business down south -- of course, I couldn't be told more specifics. She promised to send me word when she returned so we could continue our interview.

As it turned out, I had business of my own in the Summurset Isle, compiling a book on the Psijic Order. It was therefore with surprise that I met her ladyship three months later in Firsthold. We managed to get away from our respective duties to complete our third and final interview, on a walk along the Diceto, the great river that passes through the royal parks of the city.

Steering away from questions of her recent duties and assignments, which I guessed rightly she was loath to answer, I returned to the subject of swordfighting.

"Frandar Hunding," she says. "Lists thirty-eight grips, seven hundred and fifty offensive and eighteen hundred defensive positions, and nearly nine thousand moves essential to sword mastery. The average hack-and-slasher knows one grip, which he uses primarily to keep from dropping his blade. He knows one offensive position, facing his target, and one defensive position, fleeing. Of the multitudinous rhythms and inflections of combat, he knows less than one.

"The ways of the warrior were never meant to be the easiest path. The archetype of the idiot fighter is as solidly ingrained as that of the brilliant wizard and the shrewd thief, but it was not always so. The figure of the philosopher swordsman, the blade-wielding artist are creatures of the past, together with the swordsinger of the Redguards, who was said to be able to create and wield a blade with but the power of his mind. The future of the intelligent blade-wielder looks bleak in comparison to the glories of the past."

Not wanting to end our interviews on a sour note, I pressed Lady Allena Benoch for advice for young blade-swingers just beginning their careers.

"When confronted with a wizard," she says, throwing petals of Kanthleaf into the Diceto. "Close the distance and hit 'im hard."

The Last King of the Ayleids

by Herminia Cinna

The Ayleids, or Heartland High Elves, ruled Cyrodiil in the long ages of Myth before the beginning of recorded history. One of the earliest recorded dates, in fact, is the Fall of White Gold Tower in 1E 243, which is commonly assumed to mark the end of the Ayleids.

Although Ayleid rule over all of Cyrodiil was indeed broken in 1E 243, this was only one of the most obvious stages near the end of a long decline. The first two centuries of the First Era saw increasing strife between the great Ayleid lords of Cyrodiil. Alessia appears to have taken advantage of a period of civil war to launch her uprising. Imperial historians have traditionally attributed her victory to intervention from Skyrim, but it appears that she had at least as much help from rebel Ayleid lords during the siege of White Gold Tower.

The popular image of the Ayleids as brutal slavemasters is based in fact, of course, but it is less well-known that a number of Ayleid princes continued to rule parts of Cyrodiil after 263, as vassals of the new Empress of Cyrodiil. This suggests either that Ayleid rule was not universally detested, or that Alessia and her successors were more pragmatic than is traditionally believed, or perhaps some of both.

In any event, excavations at a number of Ayleid sites show continued occupation and even expansion during the so-called Late Ayleid Period (1E 243 - c. 498). At first, many Ayleid lords continued to rule as vassals of the new human regime. In some cases, Ayleid supporters of Alessia were even rewarded with new lands taken from slain enemies. It is not clear to what extent human slavery continued under the Cyrodilic Empire. Humans continued to dwell in the Ayleid-ruled areas of Cyrodiil, but there is nothing definitive to show under what terms.

This was an uneasy relationship from the beginning, and was not destined

to last long. Resentment at the continued presence of Ayleid nobles within the Empire was a contributing factor to the rise of the so-called Alessian Order founded by Maruhk. The first victims of the Alessians were the Ayleids of Cyrodiil. In the early 300s, the surviving Ayleid communities in human-ruled areas were obliterated one by one, the refugees temporarily swelling the power of the remaining Ayleid lordships.

Then in 361, the Alessians gained control of the Empire and enforced the Alessian Doctrines throughout its domain. The Ayleid lordships were abolished. Enforcement of this decree does not appear to have required much direct violence -- it seems that by this point the balance of power was so overwhelmingly against them, and their fate so long foreshadowed, that most of the remaining Ayleids simply left Cyrodiil, eventually being absorbed into the Elven populations of Valenwood and High Rock. Indeed, the rise of the Direnni Hegemony may be linked to this exodus of Ayleids from Cyrodiil (a connection so far little studied by historians).

Still, a remnant Ayleid population seems to have survived the rule of the Alessians, because we hear of "the last king of the Ayleids" joining the battle of Glenumbria Moors where the Direnni decisively defeated the Alessians in 482. How this king's people survived the preceding century is unknown. We do not even know who they were, although recent research points to Nenalata as the possible resting place of this "last king." Unfortunately, in the current state of the Empire, funds are no longer available for proper scientific investigation of such extensive ruins, so the answer to these questions will have to be left to future generations.

The Last Scabbard of Akrash

By Tabar Vunqidh

For several warm summer days in the year 3E 407, a young, pretty Dunmer woman in a veil regularly visited one of the master armorers in the city of Tear. The locals decided that she was young and pretty by her figure and her poise, though no one ever saw her face. She and the armorer would retire to the back of his shop, and he would close down his business and dismiss his apprentices for a few hours. Then, at mid-afternoon, she would leave, only to return at precisely the same time the next day. As gossip goes, it was fairly meager stuff, though what the old man was doing with such a well dressed and attractively proportioned woman was the source of several crude jokes. After several weeks, the visits stopped, and life returned to normal in the slums of Tear.

It was not until a month or two after the visits had stopped, that in one of the many taverns in the neighborhood, a young local tailor, having imbibed too much sauce, asked the armorer, "So whatever happened to your lady friend? You break her heart?"

The armorer, well aware of the rumors, simply replied, "She is a proper young lady of quality. There was nothing between her and the likes of me."

"What was she doing at your shop every day for?" asked the tavern wench, who had been dying to get the subject open.

"If you must know," said the armorer. "I was teaching her the craft."

"You're putting us on," laughed the tailor.

"No, the young lady had a particular fascination with my particular kind of artistry," the armorer said, with a hint of pride before getting lost in the reverie. "I taught her how to mend swords specifically, from all kinds of nicks and breaks, hairline fissures, cracked pommels, quillons, and grips.

When she first started, she had no idea how to secure the grips to the tang of the blade... Well, of course she was green to start off with, why wouldn't she be? But she weren't afraid to get her hands dirty. I taught her how to patch the little inlaid silver and gold filigree you find on really fine blades, and how to polish it all to a mirror sheen so the sword looks like the gods just pulled it from their celestial anvil."

The tavern wench and the tailor laughed out loud. No matter what he alleged, the armorer was speaking of the young lady's training as another man speaks of a long lost love.

More of the locals in the tavern would have listened to the armorer's pathetic tale, but more important gossip had taken precedence. There was another murdered slave-trader found in the center of town, gutted from fore to aft. That made six of them total in barely a fortnight. Some called the killer "The Liberator," but that sort of anti-slavery zeal was rare among the common folk. They preferred calling him "The Lopper," as several of the earlier victims had been completely beheaded. Others had been simply perforated, sliced, or gutted, but "The Lopper" still kept his original sobriquet.

While the enthusiastic hooligans made bets about the condition of the next slave-trader's corpse, several dozen of the surviving members of that trade were meeting at the manor house of Serjo Dres Minegaur. Minegaur was a minor houseman of House Dres, but a major member of the slave-trading fraternity. Perhaps his best years were behind him, but his associates still counted on him for wisdom.

"We need to take what we know of this Lopper and search accordingly," said Minegaur, seated in front of his opulent hearth. "We know he has an unreasonable hatred of slavery and slave-traders. We know he is skilled with a blade. We know he has the stealth and finesse to execute our most well-secured brethren in their most secure abodes. It sounds to me to be an adventurer, an Outlander. Surely no citizen of Morrowind would strike at us like this."

The slave-traders nodded in agreement. An Outlander seemed most likely

for their troubles. It was always true.

"Were I fifty years younger, I would take down my blade Akrash from the hearth," Minegaur made an expansive gesture to the shimmering weapon. "And join you in seeking out this terror. Search him out where adventurers meet -- taverns and guildhalls. Then show him a little lopping of my own."

The slave-traders laughed politely.

"You wouldn't let us borrow your blade for the execution, I suppose, would you, Serjo?" asked Soron Jeles, a young toadying slaver enthusiastically.

"It would be an excellent use for Akrash," sighed Minegaur. "But I vowed to retire her when I retired."

Minegaur called for his daughter Peliah to bring the slavers more flin, but they waved the girl away. It was to be a night for hunting the Lopper, not drinking away their troubles. Minegaur heartily approved of their devotion, particular as expensive as the liquor was getting to be.

When the last of the slavers had left, the old man kissed his daughter on the head, took one last admiring look at Akrash, and toddled off to his bed. No sooner had he done so then Peliah had the blade off the mantle, and was flying with it across the field behind the manor house. She knew Kazagh had been waiting for her for hours in the stables.

He sprung out at her from the shadows, and wrapping his strong, furry arms around her, kissed her long and sweet. Holding him as long as she dared to, she finally broke away and handed him the blade. He tested its edge.

"The finest Khajiiti swordsmith couldn't hone an edge this keen," he said, looking at his beloved with pride. "And I know I nicked it up good last night."

"That you did," said Peliah. "You must have cut through an iron cuirass."

"The slavers are taking precautions now," he replied. "What did they say

during their meeting?"

"They think it's an Outlander adventurer," she laughed. "It didn't occur to any of them that a Khajiiti slave would possess the skill to commit all these 'loppings.'"

"And your father doesn't suspect that it's his dear Akrash that is striking into the heart of oppression?"

"Why would he, when every day he finds it fresh as the day before? Now I must go before anyone notices I'm gone. My nurse sometimes comes in to ask me some detail about the wedding, as if I had any choice in the matter at all."

"I promise you," said Kazagh very seriously. "You will not be forced into any marriage to cement your family's slave-dealing dynasty. The last scabbard Akrash will be sheathed into will be your father's heart. And when you are an orphan, you can free the slaves, move to a more enlightened province, and marry who you like."

"I wonder who that will be," Peliah teased, and raced out of the stables.

Just before dawn, Peliah awoke and crept out to the garden, where she found Akrash hidden in the bittergreen vines. The edge was still relatively keen, but there were scratches vertically across the blade's surface. Another beheading, she thought, as she took pumice stone and patiently rubbed out the marks, finally polishing it with a solution of salt and vinegar. It was up on the mantle in pristine condition when her father came into the sitting room for his breakfast.

When the news came that Kemillith Torom, Peliah's husband-to-be, had been found outside of a canton, his head on a spike some feet away, she did not have to pretend to grieve. Her father knew she did not want to marry him.

"It is a shame," he said. "The lad was a good slaver. But there are plenty of other young men who would appreciate an alliance with our family. What

about young Soron Jeles?"

Two days nights later, Soron Jeles was visited by the Lopper. The struggle did not take long, but Soron had had armed himself with one small defense -- a needle dipped in the ichor of poisonplant, hidden up his sleeve. After the mortal blow, he collapsed forward and stuck Kazagh in the calf with the pin. By the time he made it back to the Minegaur manorhouse, he was dying.

Vision blurring, he climbed up to the eaves of the house to Peliah's window and rapped. Peliah did not answer immediately, as she was in a deep, wonderful sleep, dreaming about her future with her Khajiiti lover. He rapped louder, which woke up not only Peliah, but also her father in the next room.

"Kazagh!" she cried, opening up the window. The next person in the bedroom was Minegaur himself.

As he saw it, this slave, his property, was about to lop off the head of his daughter, his property, with his sword, his property. Suddenly, with the energy of a young man, Minegaur rushed at the dying Khajiit, knocking the sword out of his hand. Before Peliah could stop him, her father had thrust the blade into her lover's heart.

The excitement over, the old man dropped the sword and turned to the door to call the Guard. As an after thought, it occurred to him to make certain that his daughter hadn't been injured and might require a Healer. Minegaur turned to her. For a moment, he felt simply disoriented, feeling the force of the blow, but not the blade itself. Then he saw the blood and then felt the pain. Before he fully realized that his daughter had stabbed him with Akrash, he was dead. The blade, at last, found its scabbard.

A week later, after the official investigations, the slave was buried in an unmarked grave in the manor field, and Serjo Dres Minegaur found his resting place in a modest corner of the family's opulent mausoleum. A larger crowd of curious onlookers came to view the funeral of the noble slaver whose secret life was as the savage Lopper of his competitors. The audience

was respectfully quiet, though there was not a person there not imagining the final moments of the man's life. Attacking his own daughter in his madness, luckily defended by the loyal, hapless slave, before turning the blade on himself.

Among the viewers was an old armorer who saw for one last time the veiled young lady before she disappeared forever from Tear.

The Legendary City of Sancre Tor

By Matera Chapel

During the Skyrim Conquests [1E 240 - 415], ambitious Highland earls, envious of the conquests and wealth of their northern cousins in High Rock and Morrowind, looked south over the ramparts of the Jerall Mountains for their opportunities. The Jerall Mountains proved to be too great a barrier, and northern Cyrodiil too poor a prize, to reward full scale Nord invasions. However, Alessia hired many ambitious Nord and Breton warbands as mercenaries with the promises of rich lands and trade concessions. Once settled among the victorious Alessian Cyrodiils, the Nord and Breton warriors and battlemages were quickly assimilated into the comfortable and prosperous Nibenean culture.

Alessia received the divine inspiration for her Slave Rebellion at Sancre Tor, and here she founded her holy city. Sancre Tor's mines provided some wealth, but the poor soils and harsh climate of the remote mountain site meant it must be supplied with food and goods from the Heartlands. Further, located on one of the few passes through the Jeralls, its fortunes were subject to the instability of relations with Skyrim. When relations were good with Skyrim, it prospered through trade and alliance. When relations were bad with Skyrim, it was vulnerable to siege and occupation by the Nords.

With the decline of the Alessian Order [circa 1E2321], the seat of religious rule of Cyrodiil moved south to the Imperial City, but Sancre Tor remained a mountain fortress and major religious center until the rise of the Septim Dynasty. In 2E852, the city was suffering under one of the periodic occupations by Skyrim and High Rock invaders. King Cuhlecain sent his new general, Talos, to recapture the city and expel the northern invaders. During his siege, Sancre Tor was destroyed and abandoned. Realizing the strategic weakness of the site, General Talos -- later Tiber Septim -- resolved to abandon Sancre Tor, and during his reign, no effort was made to rebuild the city or citadel.

Alessian historians asserted that Sancre Tor was magically concealed and defended by the gods. Records of Sancre Tor's repeated defeats and occupations by northern invaders gives the lie to this assertion. The entrance to the citadel was indeed concealed by sorcery, and the citadel and its labyrinthine subterranean complex were defended by magical traps and illusions, but their secrets were betrayed to besieging Nords by the Breton enchanters who crafted them.

One enduring feature of the legend of Sancre Tor is the ancient tombs of the Reman emperors. Following the defeat of the Akaviri invaders, Sancre Tor enjoyed a brief resurgence of wealth and culture under Reman Cyrodiil and his descendants, Reman II and Reman III. Tracing his ancestry to St. Alessia, and following the tradition that St. Alessia was buried in the catacombs beneath Sancre Tor [1], Reman built splendid funerary precincts in the depths of the ancient citadel underpassages. Here the last Reman emperor, Reman III, was buried in his tomb with the Amulet of Kings.

During the Sack of Sancre Tor, General Talos is said to have recovered the Amulet of Kings from the tomb of Reman III. Theologians ascribe the long centuries of political and economic turmoil following the collapse of the Reman dynasty to the loss of the Amulet of Kings, and associate the renaissance of the Cyrodilic empire in the Third Era with Tiber Septim's recovery of the Amulet from Reman III's tomb.

Sancre Tor has lain in ruins since the beginning of the Third Age, and the surrounding region is virtually uninhabited. Now all communications with the north are through the passes at Chorrol and Bruma, and Sancre Tor's citadel and underpassages have become the refuge of various savage goblin tribes.

[1] The is a competing tradition that St. Alessia is buried on the site of the Temple of the One in the Imperial City. The actual resting place of St. Alessia is unknown.

The Legendary Scourge

"Not till the very evening they came," answered he, and then told of his dealings with Mehrunes Dagon's thralls, saying that Mackkan would find it easier to whistle on the wind's tracks and go on a fool's errand than to fight his toads. Then said Mackkan:

"Now see to thy safety henceforward,
And stick to thy parts and thy pride;
Or this mallet of mine, Malacath's Scourge,
Will meet with thine ear of a surety.
For quick as I can cry "Equality,"
Though eight arms thou couldst boast of,
Such bumps thou shalt comb on thy brainpan,
Thou that breakest the howes of the dead.

EXPLICATION: The mace Scourge, Blessed of Malacath, Mackkan's legendary weapon, forged from sacred ebony in the Fountains of Fickledire, has ever been the bane of the Dark Kin, and many a black spirit has been hurled back into Oblivion with a single blow of this bold defender of the friendless. Scourge now hangs within the armory of Battlespire, ready to take up in the name of the Emperor against the Daedric Lords.

The Legend of Red Eagle

by Tredayn Dren
Archivist of Winterhold

This tale was transcribed from the memory of Clarisse Vien, student of Winterhold. Elements of the legend suggest a date c.1E 1030, though as with any oral tradition, much of it is likely a later anachronism. Curiously, stories of a similar king and his legendary blade appear in other ancient myths of the Reach.

Long ago, a child was born in the Sundered Hills. They named him Faolan, which means 'Red Eagle' in the tongue of the Reach, for the screeching bird-call that greeted his birth, and the crimson blooms on the autumn hills.

Thus began his legend: Reach-child, born under auspicious skies, his very name the color of blood.

Ten kings ruled the Reach in those days, and though men were free, the people were scattered and warred amongst themselves. The augurs foresaw the boy's destiny: a warrior without peer, first and foremost Lord of the Reach, chosen to unite all under his name.

Faolan grew in years and strength, and it seemed the prophecy would be fulfilled. The banner of the Red Eagle was raised along the cliffs of the Reach, and his people prospered.

Then came Hestra, Empress of the South, riding to war. One by one, the kings stood before her. One by one, they fell aside, bending knee in Imperial bargains or slaughtered on the battlefield.

Her legions came at last to the Sundered Hills, and envoys were sent to bargain for their surrender. Faolan refused to yield the freedom of his people, but the elders were afraid, cast him out, and accepted the Imperial yoke.

Thus was stolen by the foreign invaders: his land, his people, his very name. In the years that followed, Red Eagle became known as the untamed spirit of the Reach, unbowed, unbroken, stained by the blood of his foes.

He gathered loyal Reachmen to himself, those who clung to the old ways, who yearned for freedom, and forged a new nation. Together, they fell upon the occupiers and the traitors by night, disappearing into the cliffs and caves each morn, evading capture. It was not enough. For every Imperial patrol and garrison they wiped out, yet more seemed to march from the green south to replace them.

One night, under a cloud-choked sky, the men of the Red Eagle warmed themselves over damp fires of smoldering moss. A huddled, shambling figure came to them, cloaked in rags, face cowled. Though his men mocked and cast stones at the stranger, Faolan sensed something, and beckoned. The cowl was thrown back in the dim light, and she revealed herself to be one the ancient and venerable Hagravens. She offered power, for a price, and a pact was made.

Thus was brokered to the witch: his heart, his will, his humanity. From that day forth, his was a spirit of vengeance, pitiless and beyond remorse. The rebels grew in strength and numbers, and none could stand against them. Faolan's eyes burned coldly in those days, black opals reflecting a mind not entirely his own. Two years passed, and the foreigners were all but driven from the Reach.

Such peace could not last, however, and a great host fell upon them, a swift army of invaders unlike any before. For a fortnight, Hestra's generals laid siege to Red Eagle's stronghold, till he himself came forth for battle, alone and robed in nothing but his righteous fury. A thousand foreigners fell before his flaming sword, and the enemy was routed. Yet, when night fell, so too did he. The warriors who came to him said Faolan's eyes were clear again on that final night.

He was taken to the place prepared for him, a tomb hidden deep within the rock. With his remaining strength he presented his sword to his people, and

swore an oath: Fight on, and when at last the Reach is free, his blade should be returned, that he might rise and lead them again.

Thus was given for his people: his life, his dream, his sword. But when every debt is repaid in blood, these he shall reclaim once more.

The Legend of the Krately House

By Baloth-Kul

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THEOPHON - Imperial man, 24, thief
NIRIM - Bosmer man, 20, thief
SILANUS KRATELY - Imperial man, 51, merchant
DOMINITIA KRATELY - His wife, 40
AELVA KRATELY - Their daughter, 16
MINISTES KRATELY - Their son, 11

Setting: The famous haunted Krately House in Cheydinhal, first and second floors, requiring a stage with a second story where most of the action takes place.

The stage is dark.

There is a CREAKING noise, footsteps on the stairs, the sound of a man breathing, but still we see nothing.

Then, a voice calls from above.

AELVA (off stage)
Hello? Is someone down there?

MINESTES (off stage)
Should I wake up Papa?

AELVA (off stage)
No... Maybe I was imagining it...

A light from a lantern can be seen coming from the upstairs, and the slim

form of a beautiful young girl, AELVA, descends the staircase at stage right, nervously.

From the light of the lantern, we can see that we are looking at the second floor of a dusty old house, with a set of stairs going up and another one going down on stage right. An unlit stone fireplace sits at stage left. A table, a locked chest, and a wardrobe complete the furnishings.

MINESTES (off stage)
Aelva, what are you doing?

AELVA
I'm just making certain... Go back to bed, Minestes.

As the girl passes the table, we see a Bosmer NIRIM slide gracefully up from behind and around her field of sight, carefully avoiding the pool of light. She doesn't appear to see him as he creeps closer to her, his footsteps silent on the hard wooden floor.

When he is almost on her, there is a sudden CRASH from down below. This causes the Bosmer to leap away, hiding again behind the table.

The girl does not seem to notice the sound, and Nirim, peeking out from behind the table, watches her.

MINESTES (off stage)
Found anything?

AELVA
No. Probably just my imagination, but I'm just going to check downstairs.

MINESTES (off stage)
Is there a fire? I'm cold...

Aelva looks towards the long dead fireplace, and so does Nirim.

AELVA

Of course there is. Can't you hear it crackling?

MINESTES (off stage)
I guess so...

Aelva suddenly jumps as if she heard something which we do not. She turns her attention down the stairs to the first floor.

AELVA
Hello?

Aelva, lantern ahead of her, begins the descent. She does not seem to notice as an Imperial, THEOPHON, carrying a big bag of loot and a lantern of his own, calmly walks up right past her.

THEOPHON
Excuse me, young lady. Just robbing you.

Aelva continues her slow, nervous walk downstairs, which we can now see thanks to her light. She looks around the low-ceilinged, thoroughly looted room as the action continues upstairs

Theophon's lantern provides the dim light for the second floor.

THEOPHON
Why are you hiding, Nirim? I told you. They can't see you, and they can't hear you.

Nirim sheepishly steps out from behind the table.

NIRIM
I can't believe they're all ghosts. They seem so alive.

THEOPHON
That's what spooks them superstitians. But they ain't going to hurt us. Just reliving the past, the way ghosts do.

NIRIM
The night they was murdered.

THEOPHON
Stop thinking about that or you'll get yourself all willy spooked. I got all kinds of stuff on the first floor - silver candlesticks, silk, even some gold... What'd you get?

Nirim holds up his empty bag.

NIRIM
Sorry, Theophon, I was just about to start...

THEOPHON
Get to work on that chest then. That's what you're here for.

NIRIM
Oh yeah. I got the talent, you got the ideas... and the equipment. You refilled that lantern before we came here, right? I can't work in the dark...

THEOPHON
Don't worry, Nirim. I promise. No surprises.

Nirim jumps when a young boy, MINESTES, appears on the stairs. The lad creeps down quietly and goes to the fire. He acts as if he's stoking a fire, feeding it wood, poking at the embers, though there is no wood, no poker, no fire.

THEOPHON
We got all the time in the world, friend. No one comes near this house. If they sees our lantern light, they'll just assume it's the ghosts.

Nirim begins picking the lock on a chest of drawers, while Theophon opens a wardrobe and begins going through the contents, which are mostly rotten cloth.

Nirim is distracted, looking at the young boy.

NIRIM
Hey, Theophon, how long ago did they die?

THEOPHON
About five years ago. Why you asking?

NIRIM
Just making conversation.

As they talk, Aelva, downstairs, finally having searched the small room, acts as if she's locking the front door.

THEOPHON
Didn't I already tell you the story?

NIRIM
No, you just said, hey, I know a place we can burgle where no one's at home, except for the ghosts. I thought you was joking.

THEOPHON
No joking, partner. Five years ago, the Kratelys lived here. Nice people. You seen the daughter Aelva and the boy Minestes. The parents were Silenus and Dominitia, if I remembers rightly.

Nirim successfully unlocks the chest and begins rummaging through it. While he does so, Ministes gets up from the 'fire,' apparently warmed up, and stands at the top of the stairs down.

MINISTES
Hey!

The boy's voice causes Nirim, Theophon, and Aelva to all jump.

AELVA
Why aren't you in bed? I'm just going to check the cellar.

MINISTES
I'll wait for you.

NIRIM
So, what happened?

THEOPHON
Oh, they was rip to piece. Halfway eaten. No one ever knew who or what did it neither. Though there was rumors...

Aelva opens the door to the cellar, and goes in. The light disappears from the first floor. Ministes patiently waits at the top of the stairs, humming a little song to himself.

NIRIM
What kind of rumors?

Theophon, having exhausted the possibilities in the wardrobe, helps Nirim sort through the gold in the chest.

THEOPHON
Pretty good haul, eh? Oh, the rumors. Well, they says old lady Dominitia was a witch before she married Silenus. Gave it all up for him, to be a good wife and mother. But the witches didn't take too kindly to it. They found her and sent some kind of creature here, late at night. Something horrible, right out of a nightmare.

MINISTES
Aelva? Aelva, what's taking you so long?

NIRIM
Ye Gods, are we going to watch them get killed, right in front of us?

MINISTES
Aelva!

SILENUS (off stage)
What's happening down there? Stop playing around, boy, and go to sleep.

MINISTES
Papa!

Ministes, frightened, runs to the stairs up. Along the way, he bumps into Nirim, who falls down. The boy does not seem to notice but continues on up to the dark third floor sleeping porch, off-stage.

THEOPHON
Are you all right?

Nirim jumps to his feet, white-faced.

NIRIM
Never mind that! He touched me?! How can a ghost touch me?!

THEOPHON
Well... Of course they can. Some anyhow. You heard of ancestor spirits guarding tombs, and that ghost of the king they had in Daggerfall. If they don't touch you, what good are they? Why you so surprised? You thought he'd move right through you, I figger.

NIRIM
Yes!

SILENUS, the man of the house, comes down the stairs, cautiously.

DOMINITIA (off stage)
Don't leave us alone, Silenus! We're coming with you!

SILENUS
Wait, it's dark. Let me get some light.

Silenus goes to the cold fireplace, sticks his hand forward, and suddenly in his arm, there's a lit, burning torch. Nirim scrambles back, horrified.

NIRIM
I felt that! I felt the heat of the fire!

SILENUS
Come on down. It's all right.

Ministes leads his mother DOMINITIA down the stairs where they join Silenus.

THEOPHON
I don't know why you so scared, Nirim. I must say I'm disappointed. I didn't figger you for a supersitionalist.

Theophon goes for the stairs up.

NIRIM
Where are you going?

THEOPHON
One more floor to search.

NIRIM
Can't we just go?

Nirim watches as the family of three, following Silenus and his torch, walk down towards the first floor.

SILENUS
Aelva? Say something, Aelva.

THEOPHON
There, you see? If you don't like ghosts, third floor's the place to be. All four of 'em are downstairs now.

Theophon goes upstairs, off-stage, but Nirim stands at the top of the stairs,

looking down at the family. The three look around the first floor as Aelva did, finally turning towards the cellar door.

NIRIM
All... four?

Silenus opens the cellar door.

SILENUS
Aelva? What are you doing down in the cellar, girl?

DOMINITIA
You see her?

NIRIM
All four, Theophon?

SILENUS
I think so... I see someone... Hello?

NIRIM
What if there's five ghosts, Theophon?!

Silenus thrusts his torch in through the cellar door, and it is suddenly extinguished. The first floor falls into darkness.

Ministes, Dominitia, and Silenus SCREAM, but we cannot see what is happening to them.

Nirim is nearly hysterical, screaming along with them. Theophon runs downstairs from the third floor.

THEOPHON
What is it?!

NIRIM

What if there is five ghosts?! The man, the wife, the girl, the boy... and what killed them?!

THEOPHON
And what killed them?

NIRIM
And what if it's a ghost that can touch us too?! Just like the others!

From the darkened first floor, there is a CREAK of a door opening, though we cannot see it. And then, there is a heavy, clawed footfall. One step at a time, coming towards the stairs.

THEOPHON
Don't get so upset. If it can touch us, what'd make you think it'd wants to? All the others didn't even notice we was here.

Theophon's lantern dims slightly. He adjusts it carefully.

NIRIM
Only... only what if it ain't a ghost, Theophon. What if it's the same creature, and it's still alive... and it ain't ate nothing since five years ago...

The footsteps begin the slow, heavy stomp up the stairs, though whatever it is, we cannot see it. Nirim notices the light beginning to dim from the lantern despite Theophon frantically trying to fix it.

NIRIM
You said you refilled the lamp!

The light goes out entirely, and the stage is filled with darkness.

NIRIM
You promised me you refilled the lamp!

More footsteps and a horrible, horrible HOWL. The men SCREAM.

The curtain falls.

Light Armor Forging

By Revus Sarvani

There are two classes of light armor, metallic and non-metallic. Elven and Glass are metallic light armor. You may be surprised to think that Glass can be thought of as metallic, but appearances are deceiving. What we call Glass is nothing like the windows panes you see in houses. The greenish material is far stronger and has a much higher melting point.

Non-metallic armors are Hide, Studded, Leather, and Scaled. For these armor types, the forger is as much tailor as blacksmith. All use large pieces of leather, stitched together with leather strips.

Studded armor also need iron ingots, from which you will make the studs and metal rings that make it more effective than simple hide. Scaled armor uses steel instead of iron, but the steel is infused with Corundum to make the metal inserts stronger.

For centuries the secret of making Elven armor was a closely guarded secret on Summerset Isle. Then the Betrayal of Ulvul Llaren brought it the rest of Tamriel. Ulvul was a Dark Elf slave, working the bellows for Nuulion, master smith of the isle from the fifth through the seventh century of the second era. When Ulvul escaped, he could think of no greater punishment to mete out to his cruel master than to reveal all his secrets to the world. Thus we came to know that Moonstone is the key ingredient in Elven armor, and that salt water must be used to quench the hot metal.

For Gilded Elven armor, you must also meld in Quicksilver. It melts at a much lower heat than Moonstone, making it tricky to work the two metals together.

The trickiest of all is Glass. Hammer blows struck across the grain run the risk of shattering the armor. It's principle ingredient is Malachite, although it also requires Moonstone to give it the right strength.

Liminal Bridges: A Discourse On The Theory and Praxis of Travelling Between Mundus and Oblivion

by Camilonwe of Alinor

Transliminal passage of quickened objects or entities without the persistent agency of hyperagonal media is not possible, and even if possible, would result in instantaneous retromission of the transported referents. Only a transpontine circumpenetration of the limen will result in transits of greater than infinitessimal duration.

Though other hyperagonal media may exist in theory, the only known transliminal artifact capable of sustained transpontine circumpenetration is the sigil stone. A sigil stone is a specimen of pre-Mythic quasi-crystalline morpholith that has been transformed into an extra-dimensional artifact through the arcane inscription of a daedric sigil. Though some common morpholiths like soul gems may be found in nature, the exotic morpoliths used to make sigil stones occur only in pocket voids of Oblivion, and cannot be prospected or harvested without daedric assistance.

Therefore, since both the morpholiths and the daedric sigils required for hyperagonal media cannot be obtained without traffic and commerce with Daedra Lords, it is necessary that a transliminal mechanic cultivate a working knowledge of conjuration -- though purpose-built enchantments may be substituted if the mechanic has sufficient invocatory skill. Traffic and commerce with Daedra Lords is an esoteric but well-established practice, and lies outside the compass of this treatise. [1]

Presuming a sigil stone has been acquired, the transliminal mechanic must first prepare the morpholith to receive the daedric sigil.

Let the mechanic prepare a chamber, sealed against all daylight and

disturbances of the outer air, roofed and walled with white stone and floored with black tiles. All surfaces of this chamber must be ritually purified with a solution of void salts in ether solvent.

A foursquare table shall be placed in the center of the room, with a dish to receive the morpholith. Four censers shall be prepared with incense compounded from gorvix and harrada. On the equinox, the mechanic shall then place the morpolith in the dish and intone the rites of the Book of Law, beginning at dawn and continuing without cease until the sunset of the same day.

The mechanic may then present the purified morpholith to the Daedra Lord for his inscription. Once inscribed with the Daedra Lord's sigil, the morpholith becomes a true sigil stone, a powerful artifact that collects and stores arcane power -- similar in many respects to a charged soul gem, but of a much greater magnitude. And it is this sigil stone that is required to provide the tremendous arcane power necessary to sustain the enchantment that supports the transpontine circumpenetration of the limen.

To open a gate to Oblivion, the mechanic must communicate directly, by spell or enchantment, with the Daedra Lord who inscribed the sigil stone in question. The Daedra Lord and the mechanic jointly invoke the conjurational charter [2], and the mechanic activates the charged sigil stone, which is immediately transported through the liminal barrier to the spot where its sigil was inscribed, thus opening a temporary portal between Mundus and Oblivion. This portal may only remain open for a brief period of time, depending on the strength of the liminal barrier at the chosen spots, several minutes being the longest ever reported, so the usefulness of such a gate is quite limited.

[1] Interested students are invited to consult the works of Albrecht Theophannes Bombidius and Galerion The Mystic for the fundaments of this discipline.
[2] Recommended examples of the conjurational charter may be found in Therion's Book of Most Arcane Covenants or Ralliballah's Eleven Ritual Forms.

The Locked Room

By Porbert Lyttumly

Yana was precisely the kind of student her mentor Arthcamu despised: the professional amateur. He enjoyed all the criminal types who were his usual pupils at the stronghold, from the common burglar to the more sophisticated blackmailers, children and young people with strong career ambitions which the art and science of lockpicking could facilitate. They were always interested in simple solutions, the easy way, but people like Yana were always looking for exceptions, possibilities, exotica. For pragmatists like Arthcamu, it was intensely vexing.

The Redguard maiden would spend hours in front of a lock, prodding at it with her wires and picks, flirting with the key pins and driver pins, exploring the hull with a sort of casual fascination that no delinquent possesses. Long after her fellow students had opened their test locks and moved on, Yana was still playing with hers. The fact that she always opened it eventually, no matter how advanced a lock it was, irked Arthcamu even further.

"You are making things much too difficult," he would roar, boxing her ears. "Speed is of the essence, not merely technical know-how. I swear that if I put the key to the lock right in front of you, you'd still never get around to opening it."

Yana would bear Arthcamu's abuse philosophically. She had, after all, paid him in advance. Speed was doubtless an important factor for the picker trying to get somewhere he wasn't supposed to go with the city guard on patrol behind him, but Yana knew it wouldn't apply to her. She merely wanted the knowledge.

Arthcamu did everything he could think of to encourage Yana to move faster. She seemed to perversely thrive on his physical and verbal blows, spending more and more time on each lock, learning its idiosyncrasies and

personality. Finally, he could bear it no longer. Very late one afternoon after Yana had dawdled over a perfectly ordinary lock, he grabbed the girl by her ear and dragged her to a room in the stronghold far from the other students, an area they had always been forbidden to visit.

The room was completely barren, except for one large crate in the center. There were no windows and no other door except for the one leading in. Arthcamu slammed his student against the crate and closed the door behind her. There was a distinct click of the lock.

"This is the test for my advanced students," he laughed behind the door. "See if you can escape."

Yana smiled and began her usual slow process of massaging the lock, gaining information. After a few minutes had gone by, she heard Arthcamu's voice again call out from behind the door.

"Perhaps I should mention that this is a test of speed. You see the crate behind you? It contains a vampire ancient who has been locked in here for many months. It is absolutely ravenous. In a few minutes' time, the sun will have completely set, and if you have not opened the door, you will be nothing but a bloodless husk."

Yana considered only for a moment whether Arthcamu was joking or not. She knew he was an evil, horrible man, but to resort to murder to teach his pupil? The moment she heard a rustling in the crate, any doubts she had were erased. Ignoring all her usual explorations, she jammed her wire into the lock, thrust the pegs against the pressure plate, and shoved open the door.

Arthcamu stood in the hallway beyond, laughing cruelly, "So, now you've learned the value of fast work."

Yana fled from Arthcamu's stronghold, fighting back her tears. He was certain that she would never return to his tutelage, but he considered that he had taught her at last a very valuable lesson. When she did return the next morning, Arthcamu registered no surprise, but inside he was seething.

"I'll be leaving shortly," she explained, quietly. "But I believe I've developed a new type of lock, and I'd be grateful if you'd give me your opinion of it."

Arthcamu shrugged and asked her to present her design.

"I was wondering if I might use the vampire room and install the lock. I think it would be better if I demonstrated it."

Arthcamu was dubious, but the prospect of the tiresome girl leaving at last put him in an excellent and even indulgent mood. He agreed to give her access to the room. For all morning and most of the afternoon, she worked near the slumbering vampire, removing the old lock and adding her new prototype. Finally, she asked her old master to take a look.

He studied the lock with an expert eye, and found little to be impressed with.

"This is the first and only pick-proof lock," Yana explained. "The only way to open it is to have the right key."

Arthcamu scoffed and let Yana close the door, shutting him in the room. The door clicked and he began to go to work. To his dismay, the lock was much more difficult than he thought it would be. He tried all his methods to force it, and found that he had to resort to his hated student's method of careful and thorough exploration.

"I need to leave now," called Yana from the other side of the door. "I'm going to bring the city guard to the stronghold. I know that it's against the rules, but I really think it's for the welfare of the villagers not to have a hungry vampire on the loose. It's getting dark, and even though you aren't able to unlock the door, the vampire might be less proud about using the key to escape. Remember when you said 'If I put the key to the lock right in front of you, you'd still never get around to opening it'?"

"Wait!" Arthcamu yelled back. "I'll use the key! Where is it? You forgot to

give it to me!"

But there was no reply, only the sound of footfall disappearing down the corridor beyond the door. Arthcamu began to work harder on the lock, but his hands were shaking with fear. With no windows, it was impossible to tell how late it was getting to be. Were minutes that were flying by or hours? He only knew that the vampire ancient would know.

The tools could not stand very much twisting and tapping from Arthcamu's hysterical hands. The wire snapped in the keyhole. Just like a student. Arthcamu screamed and pounded on the door, but he knew that no one could possibly hear him. It was while sucking in his breath to scream again, he heard the distinct creak of the crate opening behind him.

The vampire ancient regarded the master locksmith with insane, hungry eyes, and flew at him in a frenzy. Before Arthcamu died, he saw it: on a chain that had been placed around the vampire's neck while it had been sleeping was a key.

Lord Jornibret's Last Dance

(Traditional)

Women's Verse I:
Every winter season,
Except for the reason
Of one war or another
(Really quite a bother),
The Queen of Rimmen and her consort
Request their vassals come and cavort.
On each and every ball,
The first man at the Hall
Is Lord Ogin Jornibret of Gaer,
The Curse of all the Maidens Fair.

Women's Refrain:
Oh, dear ladies, beware.
Dearest, dearest ladies, take care.
Though he's a very handsome man,
If you dare to take his handsome hand,
The nasty little spell will be cast
And your first dance with him will be the last.

Men's Verse I:
At this social event
Everyone who went
Knew the bows and stances
And steps to all the dances.
The Queen of Rimmen and her consort
Would order a trumpet's wild report,
And there could be no indecision
As the revelers took position.
The first dance only ladies, separate

Away from such men as Lord Jornibret.

Men's Refrain:
Oh, dear fellows, explain.
Brothers, can you help make it plain:
The man's been doing this for years,
Leaving maidens fair in tears
Before the final tune's been blast.
And her first dance with him will be the last.

Women's Verse II:
Lord Ogin Jornibret of Gaer
Watched the ladies dance on air
The loveliest in the realm.
A fellow in a ursine-hide helm
Said, "The Queen of Rimmen and her consort
Have put together quite a sport.
Which lady fair do you prefer?"
Lord Jornibret pointed, "Her.
See that bosom bob and weave.
Well-suited for me to love and leave."

Women's Refrain.

Men's Verse II:
The man in the mask of a bear
Had left the Lord of Gaer
Before the ladies' dance was ending.
Then a trumpet sounded, portending
That the Queen of Rimmen and her consort
Called for the men to come to court.
Disdainful, passing over all the rest,
Ogin approached she of bobbing breast.
She was rejected, saved a life of woe,
For a new maiden as fair as snow.

Men's Refrain.

Women's Verse III:
At the first note of the band,
The beauty took Ogin's hand.
She complimented his stately carriage
Dancing to the tune about the marriage
Of the Queen of Rimmen and her consort.
It is very difficult indeed to comport
With grace, neither falling nor flailing,
Wearing ornate hide and leather mailing,
Dancing light as the sweetest of dreams
Without a single squeak of the seams.

Women's Refrain.

Men's Verse III:
The rhythms rose and fell
No one dancing could excel
With masculine grace and syncopation,
Lord Jornibret even drew admiration
From the Queen of Rimmen and her consort.
Like a beauteous vessel pulling into port,
He silently slid, belying the leather's weight.
She whispered girlishly, "The hour is late,
But I've never seen such grace in hide armor."
It 'twas a pity he knew he had to harm her.

Men's Refrain

Women's Verse IV
The tune beat was furious
He began to be curious
Where had the maiden been sequest'ed.
"Before this dance was requested
By the consort and his Queen of Rimmen
I didn't see you dance with the women."

"My dress was torn as I came to the dance,"
She said smiling in a voice deep as a man's,
"My maids worked quickly to repair,
While I wore a suit of hide, a helm of a bear."

Women's Refrain.

Lost Legends of Skyrim

by Talsgar the Elder
Archivist of Winterhold

The history of Skyrim is vast, predating even the most ancient records of man and mer. Much has been lost, fallen to the ravages of war or the turning of the ages. But nothing is ever truly forgotten. Where no records exist, legends and folk tales offer us a key to the past, a way to piece together truths half-remembered in the minds of men.

For generations, the people of Morthal have told whispered tales of the Pale Lady, a ghostly woman who wanders the northern marshes, forever seeking her lost daughter. Some say she steals children who wander astray, others that her sobbing wail strikes dead all those who hear it. But behind these tales may lie a kernel of truth, for ancient records speak of 'Aumriel', a mysterious figure Ysgramor's heirs battled for decades, and finally sealed away.

Reachmen tell the story of Faolan 'Red-Eagle', an ancient king who rallied his people and drove back the armies of Cyrodiil with a flaming sword. Though accounts vary, they too seem to be based on an underlying truth: the imperial chronicles of Empress Hestra mention a rebel leader of that era who was eventually cornered and slain in battle, at the cost of a full legion of men.

But some tales prove far harder to analyze. Among scholars, perhaps the best known is the 'Forbidden Legend' of the Archmage Gauldur.

In the dawning days of the First Era, the story goes, there lived a powerful wizard by the name of Gauldur. Wise and just, he was well-known in the courts of King Harald and the jarls of Skyrim, and his aid and counsel were sought by man and mer alike.

And then he was murdered. Some say one of his sons killed him, others that

King Harald, jealous of his power, gave the order. But Gauldur's three sons fled into the night, pursued by a company of Harald's best warriors and the Lord Geirmund, the king's personal battlemage.

A great chase ensued, from the wilds of the Reach to the glacial north. One brother is said to have perished in the ruins of Folgunthur, at the foot of Solitude. The others were run to ground soon thereafter. And once it was done, King Harald ordered every record of their murders destroyed, and Gauldur's name and deeds were struck from the rolls of history.

Even today, few sources remain, and no bard will tell the tale. But perhaps the truth yet remains in some ancient ruin, waiting to be unearthed. For nothing is ever truly forgotten.

The Lunar Lorkhan

by Fal Droon

I will not go into the varying accounts of what happened at Adamantine Tower, nor will I relate the War of Manifest Metaphors that rendered those stories unable to support most qualities of what is commonly known as "narrative." We all have our favorite Lorkhan story and our favorite Lorkhan motivation for the creation of Nirn and our favorite story of what happened to His Heart. But the Theory of the Lunar Lorkhan is of special note.

In short, the Moons were and are the two halves of Lorkhan's 'flesh-divinity'. Like the rest of the Gods, Lorkhan was a plane(t) that participated in the Great Construction... except where the Eight lent portions of their heavenly bodies to create the mortal plane(t), Lorkhan's was cracked asunder and his divine spark fell to Nirn as a shooting star "to impregnate it with the measure of its existence and a reasonable amount of selfishness."

Masser and Secunda therefore are the personifications of the dichotomy-- the "Cloven Duality," according to Artaeum-- that Lorkhan legends often rail against: ideas of the anima/animus, good/evil, being/nothingness, the poetry of the body, throat, and moan/silence-as-the- abortive, and so on -- set in the night sky as Lorkhan's constant reminder to his mortal issue of their duty.

Followers of this theory hold that all other "Heart Stories" are mythical degradations of the true origin of the moons (and it needn't be said that they observe the "hollow crescent theory" as well).

The Lusty Argonian Maid

Volume 1

By: Crassius Curio

Act IV, Scene III, continued

Lifts-Her-Tail
Certainly not, kind sir! I am here but to clean your chambers.

Crantius Colto
Is that all you have come here for, little one? My chambers?

Lifts-Her-Tail
I have no idea what it is you imply, master. I am but a poor Argonian maid.

Crantius Colto
So you are, my dumpling. And a good one at that. Such strong legs and shapely tail.

Lifts-Her-Tail
You embarrass me, sir!

Crantius Colto
Fear not. You are safe here with me.

Lifts-Her-Tail
I must finish my cleaning, sir. The mistress will have my head if I do not!

Crantius Colto
Cleaning, eh? I have something for you. Here, polish my spear.

Lifts-Her-Tail
But it is huge! It could take me all night!

Crantius Colto
Plenty of time, my sweet. Plenty of time.

END OF ACT IV, SCENE III

Volume 2

By: Crassius Curio

ACT VII, SCENE II, CONTINUED

Lifts-Her-Tail
My goodness, that's quite a loaf! But how ever shall it fit my oven?

Crantius Colto
This loaf isn't ready for baking, my sweet. It has yet to rise.

Lifts-Her-Tail
If only we could hurry that along. How would I accomplish such a task?

Crantius Colto
Oh, my foolish little Argonian maid, you must use your hands.

Lifts-Her-Tail
You wish me to kneed the loaf? Here?

Crantius Colto
Of course.

Lifts-Her-Tail
But what if the mistress catches me? Your loaf was meant to satisfy her appetite.

Crantius Colto
Don't fret, my delicate flower. I'll satisfy the mistress's cravings later.

Lifts-Her-Tail
Very well, but I'm afraid my oven isn't hot enough. It could take hours!

Crantius Colto

Plenty of time, my sweet. Plenty of time.

END OF ACT VII, SCENE II

Lycanthropic Legends of Skyrim

by Lentulus Inventius
Order of the Horn

I had heard the same rumors as everyone else -- that the province of Skyrim was awash in various forms of Lycanthropy. I had studied werewolves for some time, and was keen to see if these rumors of werebears were actually substantiated. I elected to pursue these studies in the warmer summer months in deference to my fragile constitution.

One quickly finds that common villagers are of practically no use in this land. Whereas in Cyrodiil, even the youngest child can tell you the true fauna that inhabit its environs, here I find alleged "wise men" recounting tales of unicorns and flying horses directly alongside their stories of werebears, so I don't put any stock in the rumors. They certainly have their traditions for warding off werebears (certain plants and ceremonies), but nobody can attest to even having seen one first-hand, much less possess any sort of artifact. Everyone has a cousin or a friend who saw one once, but when pressed, these stories fall apart.

I don't wish to completely discount these stories, but I also must conclude that they may have spun out of some wild retelling of a particularly vicious, but mundane, bear. Legends can take a life of their own, particularly when there are grains of truth, as here we have the very real threat of werewolves. I worry that by spreading stories of a potentially false (or at least rare) beast, people may begin to discount the threat that real beasts pose. But if Skyrim's people choose to lead a backwards life, shrieking at shadows and clouds, I will not stop them.

The werewolves of this land are a curious sort. At least the legends of them. Given the Nord flair for bravado, I had expected to see werewolf pelts lining walls in the cities, werewolf heads on pikes, that sort of gaudy show. Instead, few people in civilized society ever mentioned them, and my questions were usually met with nervous stares.

Thinking that perhaps the common folk were simply more cowardly than I had been lead to believe by my Nordic acquaintances in Cyrodiil, I sought out those known for actual bravery. The supposedly fearless warrior band of Whiterun, the Companions, lost all color when I broached the subject, and asked me to leave. I had thought better of them, and was disappointed at how quickly brave men and women can be intimidated by stories.

Pressing into the wilderness, away from any sort of settlement, I would often find hunters, willing to recount stories of their kills. It was finally through one of them (a certain Karsten Hammer-Back) that I heard my first (and unfortunately only) verifiable stories of werewolves in the province, accompanied by pelts and claws to prove the killing. Just as I was thrilling to finding some actual evidence of the local beasts, he got a wild, conspiratorial look in his eyes and began spinning tales of some band of werewolf hunters and their exploits in hunting down the creatures. I left him to mop his drool and continued my journeys.

In the end, I regret that my trip to Skyrim did not prove more productive. If it is indeed true that their breeds of lycanthropes are distinct from and more powerful than our local ones, they could prove to be powerful allies in our conflict against the influx of werevultures in Valenwood. If they have grown as great and terrible as my friend Gaelian asserts, they could soon threaten the interior of Tamriel. When the summer next crests, I plan to travel there for a better accounting of the winged cretins, so that I may make more fitting report to the council.

Mace Etiquette

Warriors sometimes make the mistake of thinking that there are no tactics with a mace. They assume that the sword is all about skill and the mace is only about strength and stamina. As a veteran instructor of mace tactics, I can tell you they are wrong.

Wielding a mace properly is all about timing and momentum. Once the swing of the mace has begun, stopping it or slowing it down is difficult. The fighter is committed to not just the blow, but also the recoil. Begin your strike when the opponent is leaning forward, hopefully off balance. It is completely predictable that he will lean backward, so aim for a point behind his head. By the time the mace gets there, his head will be in it's path.

The mace should be held at the ready, shoulder high. The windup should not extend past the shoulders by more than a hand's width. When swinging, lead with the elbow. As the elbow passes the height of your collarbone, extend the forearm like a whip. The extra momentum will drive the mace faster and harder, causing far more damage.

At the moment of impact, let the wrist loosen. The mace will bounce and hurt a stiff wrist. Allow the recoil of the blow to drive the mace back into the ready position, thereby preparing the warrior for a quicker second strike.

The "Madmen" of the Reach: A Cultural Treatise on the Forsworn

by Arrianus Arius
Imperial Scholar

Since the legendary victory of Tiber Septim over the "barbarian natives" in the Battle of Old Hroldan, Imperial and Nord scholarship has cast the people of the Reach as little more than savages, prone to irrational fits of violence, worshipping old, heretical gods, and fetishizing beasts and nature spirits that any civilized person would best well avoid. In truth, these accounts are little more than "victor's essays," a perspective narrowed by the Empire's constant strife with the ancient, proud people that lived in this land far before Tiber Septim walked the soil of Tamriel. In light of this, I hope to create a more complete, accurate, and fair assessment of a group that has long suffered under the role of "enemy," "troublemakers," and "them."

Let us begin with the Forsworn, the so-called "madmen" of the Reach. The Imperial Legion classifies them as little more than brigands, noting their constant raids and ambushes within the Hold. But none of their military reports asks the question of "why?" If they were merely a group of bandits, surely they would be focused on acquiring gold and minimizing deaths among their own. But the opposite is true in Forsworn attacks. Large sums of coin are often left behind, and their fighters easily throw away their lives rather than risk capture by Imperial soldiers.

It is this incongruity that led me to Markarth, the capital city of the Reach, in search of answers. There, I met one of the native peoples, an old woman who preferred to not be named in my writings. She told me of her family's long history. How she believes they originally came from High Rock, home of the Bretons (which would explain the similar faces and stature of the two peoples). How the Nords came and took their lands, their gods, and their culture from them. When asked about the Forsworn, the old woman would

say that they are the "real" men and women of the Reach: those that refused to give in to the Nords. Those that still practiced the ancient traditions that the rest of their people had abandoned in exchange for peace.

In time, I was able to create trust with many more natives in my search that corroborated the old woman's story. By chance, one of them arranged a meeting between myself and what I thought was an elder member of his village. I was shocked to find that I was led to a camp, filled with the animal skulls, severed heads, and still beating hearts that I had read about from the military reports back in the Imperial City. There, I met Cortoran, a Forsworn, who seemed amused at the prospect of me writing down his story. Which I quote in full below:

"You want to know who the Forsworn are? We are the people who must pillage our own land. Burn our own ground. We are the scourge of the Nords. The axe that falls in the dark. The scream before the gods claim your soul. We are the true sons and daughters of the Reach. The spirits and hags have lived here from the beginning, and they are on our side. Go back. Go back and tell your Empire that we will have our own kingdom again. And on that day, we will be the ones burying your dead in a land that is no longer yours."

The Madness of Pelagius

by Tsathenes

The man who would be Emperor of all Tamriel was born Thoriz Pelagius Septim, a prince of the royal family of Wayrest in 3E 119 at the end of the glorious reign of his uncle, Antiochus I. Wayrest had been showered by much preference during the years before Pelagius' birth, for King Magnus was Antiochus' favorite brother.

It is hard to say when Pelagius' madness first manifested itself, for, in truth, the first ten years of his life were marked by much insanity in the land itself. When Pelagius was just over a year old, Antiochus died and a daughter, Kintyra, assumed the throne to the acclaim of all. Kintyra II was Pelagius' cousin and an accomplished mystic and sorceress. If she had sufficient means to peer into the future, she would have surely fled the palace.

The story of the War of the Red Diamond has been told in many other scholarly journals, but as most historians agree, Kintyra II's reign was usurped by her and Pelagius' cousin Uriel, by the power of his mother, Potema -- the so-called wolf queen of Solitude. The year after her coronation, Kintyra was trapped in Glenpoint and imprisoned in the Imperial dungeons there.

All of Tamriel exploded into warfare as Prince Uriel took the throne as Uriel III, and High Rock, because of the imprisoned Empress' presence there, was the location of some of the bloodiest battles. Pelagius' father, King Magnus, allied himself with his brother Cephorus against the usurper Emperor, and brought the wrath of Uriel III and Queen Potema down on Wayrest. Pelagius, his brothers and sisters, and his mother Utheilla fled to the Isle of Balfiera. Utheilla was of the line of Direnni, and her family manse is still located on that ancient isle even to this day.

There is thankfully much written record of Pelagius' childhood in Balfiera

recorded by nurses and visitors. All who met him described him as a handsome, personable boy, interested in sport, magic, and music. Even assuming diplomats' lack of candor, Pelagius seemed, if anything, a blessing to the future of the Septim Dynasty.

When Pelagius was eight, Cephorus slew Uriel III at the Battle of Ichidag and proclaimed himself Emperor Cephorus I. For the next ten years of his reign, Cephorus battled Potema. Pelagius' first battle was the Siege of Solitude, which ended with Potema's death and the final end of the war. In gratitude, Cephorus placed Pelagius on the throne of Solitude.

As king of Solitude, Pelagius' eccentricities of behavior began to be noticeable. As a favorite nephew of the Emperor, few diplomats to Solitude made critical commentary about Pelagius. For the first two years of his reign, Pelagius was at the very least noted for his alarming shifts in weight. Four months after taking the throne, a diplomat from Ebonheart called Pelagius "a hale and hearty soul with a heart so big, it widens his waist"; five months after that, the visiting princess of Firsthold wrote to her brother that "the king's gripped my hand and it felt like I was being clutched by a skeleton. Pelagius is greatly emaciated, indeed."

Cephorus never married and died childless three years after the Siege of Solitude. As the only surviving sibling, Pelagius' father Magnus left the throne of Wayrest and took residence at the Imperial City as the Emperor Magnus I. Magnus was elderly and Pelagius was his oldest living child, so the attention of Tamriel focused on Sentinel. By this time, Pelagius' eccentricities were becoming infamous.

There are many legends about his acts as King of Sentinel, but few well-documented cases exist. It is known that Pelagius locked the young princes and princesses of Silvenar in his room with him, only releasing them when an unsigned Declaration of War was slipped under the door. When he tore off his clothes during a speech he was giving at a local festival, his advisors apparently decided to watch him more carefully. On the orders of Magnus, Pelagius was married to the beautiful heiress of an ancient Dark Elf noble family, Katariah Ra'athim.

Nordic kings who marry Dark Elves seldom improve their popularity. There are two reasons most scholars give for the union. Magnus was trying to cement relations with Ebonheart, where the Ra'athim clan hailed. Ebonheart's neighbor, Mournhold, had been a historical ally of the Empire since the very beginning, and the royal consort of Queen Barenziah had won many battles in the War of the Red Diamond. Ebonheart had a poorly-kept secret of aiding Uriel III and Potema.

The other reason for the marriage was more personal: Katariah was as shrewd a diplomat as she was beautiful. If any creature was capable of hiding Pelagius' madness, it was she.

On the 8th of Second Seed, 3E 145, Magnus I died quietly in his sleep. Jolethe, Pelagius' sister took over the throne of Solitude, and Pelagius and Katariah rode to the Imperial City to be crowned Emperor and Empress of Tamriel. It is said that Pelagius fainted when the crown was placed on his head, but Katariah held him up so only those closest to the thrones could see what had happened. Like so many Pelagius stories, this cannot be verified.

Pelagius III never truly ruled Tamriel. Katariah and the Elder Council made all the decisions and only tried to keep Pelagius from embarrassing all. Still, stories of Pelagius III's reign exist.

It was said that when the Argonian ambassador from Blackrose came to court, Pelagius insisted on speaking in all grunts and squeaks, as that was the Argonian's natural language.

It is known that Pelagius was obsessed with cleanliness, and many guests reported waking to the noise of an early-morning scrubdown of the Imperial Palace. The legend of Pelagius while inspecting the servants' work, suddenly defecating on the floor to give them something to do, is probably apocryphal.

When Pelagius began actually biting and attacking visitors to the Imperial Palace, it was decided to send him to a private asylum. Katariah was proclaimed regent two years after Pelagius took the throne. For the next six

years, the Emperor stayed in a series of institutions and asylums.

Traitors to the Empire have many lies to spread about this period. Whispered stories of hideous experiments and tortures performed on Pelagius have almost become accepted as fact. The noble lady Katariah became pregnant shortly after the Emperor was sent away, and rumors of infidelity and, even more absurd, conspiracies to keep the sane Emperor locked away, ran amok. As Katariah proved, her pregnancy came about after a visit to her husband's cell. With no other evidence, as loyal subjects, we are bound to accept the Empress' word on the matter. Her second child, who would reign for many years as Uriel IV, was the child of her union with her consort Lariate, and publicly acknowledged as such.

On a warm night in Suns Dawn, in his 34th year, Pelagius III died after a brief fever in his cell at the Temple of Kynareth in the Isle of Betony. Katariah I reigned for another forty six years before passing the scepter onto the only child she had with Pelagius, Cassynder.

Pelagius' wild behavior has made him perversely dear to the province of his birth and death. The 2nd of Suns Dawn, which may or may not be the anniversary of his death (records are not very clear) is celebrated as Mad Pelagius, the time when foolishness of all sorts is encouraged. And so, one of the least desirable Emperors in the history of the Septim Dynasty, has become one of the most famous ones.

Magic from the Sky

by Irlav Jarol

The ancient Ayleids believed that Nirn was composed of four basic elements -- earth, water, air, and light -- and of these four elements, they believed the most sublime form of light was star light. The stars are our links to the plane of Aetherius, the source of all magical power, and therefore, light from the stars is the most potent and exalted of all magical powers.

From time to time, fragments of Aetherius fall from the heavens. The people know these fragments as 'shooting stars', and from time to time, such Aetherial fragments are found on Nirn. The most common varieties are known as 'meteoric iron'; this metal is prized by armorers and enchanters for its properties in the forging of enchanted weapons and armors. This meteoric iron is also the primary component in 'Ayleid Wells,' ancient enchanted artifacts found throughout Cyrodiil.

Another, rarer form of Aetherial fragment is called 'meteroic glass'. It is from such fragments that other rare Ayleid enchanted artifacts are crafted -- Welkynd Stones and Varla Stones.

Ayleids Wells are scattered across Cyrodiil's landscape. Their siting is a mystery; they are not associated with any known Ayleid cities or settlements. It is presumed that, in some manner, they harvest magical power from starlight. It is also suggested, without evidence or support, that they are located at the meeting points of ancient lines of magical power; however, modern arcane arts have discovered no perceptible evidence of such lines of power.

Those with magical talents can draw magicka from Ayleid wells to restore their own reservoirs of magical power. No ritual or arcane knowledge is necessary, suggesting that these wells were designed to serve persons not skilled in the magical arts. Once drained, the wells replenish again only at

magical midnight. Once recharged, they appear to radiate magical power back into the sky, which prompts some to theorize they are also objects with religious or magical ritual significance -- perhaps a means of offering magic back to the heavens.

Welkynd Stones [Aldmeris - "sky stone," "heaven stone"; literally, "sky child"] are pieces of cut and enchanted meteoric glass which apparently act as storage devices for magical power. A magical talent can restore his reseroirs of magicka from such stones. Alas, the means of restoring power to these stones may have been lost with the Ayleids. Currently, these objects simply crumble to dust after they have been used.

Great Welkynd Stones are exceptionally large pieces of enchanted meteoric glass. Scholars believe that at the heart of each ancient Ayleid city, a Great Welkynd Stone was the source of the settlement's magical enchantments. It may be that these great stones were linked to the lesser stones, restoring and maintaining their power. In any case, research on these Great Welkynd Stones is impossible, since all the known Ayleid ruins have been looted of their great stones, and no examples of these great stones are known to survive.

Another rare enchanted item found in Ayleid ruins is called a Varla Stone [Aldmeris - "star stone"]. Varla Stones are remarkably powerful, enabling untrained users to restore magical energy to any number of enchanted items. Because of their great value and utility, these items are also extremely rare, but since they are small and easily concealed, diligent explorers may still occasionally come across them in any Ayelid ruin.

Ayleid Wells. Welkynd Stones. Varla Stones. Consider, then, these marvels of magical enchantment. Are we then to conclude that the Ayleids were a superior race and culture? Did they so exceed us in art and craft that they mock the feeble powers of Third Era Wizards?

Never! The Ayleids were powerful, yes, and cunning, but they were neither good nor wise, and so they were struck down. Their works have passed from Nirn, save these rare and sparkling treasures. Their ancient cities are dark and empty, save for the grim revenants and restless spirits condemned

forever to walk the halls, keeping their melancholy vigils over bones and dust.

Mannimarco: King of Worms

By Horicles

O sacred isle Artaeum, where rosy light infuses air,
O'er towers and through flowers, gentle breezes flow,
Softly sloping green-kissed cliffs to crashing foam below,
Always springtide afternoon housed within its border,
This mystic, mist-protected home of the Psijic Order:
Those counselors of kings, cautious, wise, and fair.

Ten score years and thirty since the mighty Remans fell,
Two brilliant students studied within the Psijics' fold.
One's heart was light and warm, the other dark and cold.
The madder latter, Mannimarco, whirled in a deathly dance,
His soul in bones and worms, the way of the necromance.
Entrapping and enslaving souls, he cast a wicked spell.

The former, Galerion had magic bold and bright as day.
He confronted Mannimarco beneath gray Ceporah Tower,
Saying, 'Your wicked mysticism is no way to wield your power,
Bringing horror to the spirit world, your studies must cease.'
Mannimarco scoffed, hating well the ways of life and peace,
And returned to his dark artistry; his paints, death and decay.

O sacred isle Artaeum, how slow to perceive the threat,
When the ghastly truth revealed, how weak the punishment.
The ghoulish Mannimarco from the isle of the wise was sent
To the mainland Dawn's Beauty, more death and souls to reap.
'You have found a wolf, and sent the beast to flocks of sheep,'
Galerion told his Masters, 'A terror on Tamriel has set.'

'Speak no more of him,' the sage Cloaks of Gray did say.
'Twas not the first time Galerion thought his Masters callous,
Unconcerned for men and mer, aloof in their island palace.

'Twas not the first time Galerion thought 'twas time to build
A new Order to bring true magic to all, a mighty Mages Guild.
But 'twas the time he left, at last, fair Artaeum's azure bay.

O, but sung we have of Vanus Galerion many times before,
How cast he off the Psijics' chains, bringing magic to the land.
Throughout the years, he saw the touch of Mannimarco's hand,
Through Tamriel's deserts, forests, towns, mountains, and seas.
The dark grip stretching out, growing like some dread disease
By his dark Necromancers, collecting cursed artifacts of yore.

They brought to him these tools, mad wizards and witches,
And brought blood-tainted herbs and oils to his cave of sin,
Sweet Akaviri poison, dust from saints, sheafs of human skin,
Toadstools, roots, and much more cluttered his alchemical shelf,
Like a spider in his web, he sucked all their power into himself,
Mannimarco, Worm King, world's first of the undying liches.

Corruption on corruption, 'til the rot sunk to his very core,
Though he kept the name Mannimarco, his body and his mind
Were but a living, moving corpse as he left humanity behind.
The blood in his veins became instead a poison acid stew.
His power and his life increased as his fell collection grew.
Mightiest were these artifacts, long cursed since days of yore.

They say Galerion left the Guild, calling it 'a morass,'
But untruth is a powerful stream, polluting the river of time.
Galerion beheld Mannimarco's rise through powers sublime,
To his mages and Lamp Knights, 'Before my last breath,
Face I must the tyranny of worms, and kill at last, undeath.'
He led them north to cursed lands, to a mountain pass.

O those who survived the battle say its like was never seen.
Armored with magicka, armed with ensorcelled sword and axe,
Galerion cried, echoing, 'Worm King, surrender your artifacts,
And their power to me, and you shall live as befits the dead.'
A hollow laugh answered, 'You die first,' Mannimarco said.

The mage army then clashed with the unholy force obscene.

Imagine waves of fire and frost, and the mountain shivers,
Picture lightning arching forth, crackling in a dragon's sigh.
Like leaves, the battlemages fly to rain down from the sky,
At the Necromancers' call, corpses burst from earth to fight,
To be shattered into nothingness with a flood of holy light.
A maelstrom of energy unleashed, blood cascades in rivers.

Like a thunderburst in blue skies or a lion's sudden roar,
Like sharp razors tearing over delicate embroidered lace,
So at a touch did Galerion shake the mountain to its base.
The deathly horde fell fatally, but heeding their dying cries
From the depths, the thing they called Worm King did rise.
Nirn itself did scream in the Mages' and Necromancers' war

His eyes burning dark fire, he opened his toothless maw,
Vomiting darkness with each exhalation of his breath,
All sucking in the fetid air felt the icy touch of death.
In the skies above the mountain, darkness overcame pale,
Then Mannimarco Worm King felt his dismal powers fail:
The artifacts of death pulled from his putrid skeletal claw.

A thousand good and evil perished then, history confirms.
Among, alas, Vanus Galerion, he who showed the way,
It seemed once that Mannimarco had truly died that day.
Scattered seemed the Necromancers, wicked, ghastly fools,
Back to the Mages Guild, victors kept the accursed tools,
Of him, living still in undeath, Mannimarco, King of Worms.

Children, listen as the shadows cross your sleeping hutch,
And the village sleeps away, streets emptied of the crowds,
And the moons do balefully glare through the nightly clouds,
And the graveyard's people rest, we hope, in eternal sleep,
Listen and you'll hear the whispered tap of the footsteps creep,
Then pray you'll never feel the Worm King's awful touch.

The Marksmanship Lesson

By Alla Llaleth

Kelmeril Brin had very definite opinions on how things should be done. Every slave he bought on the day he bought him or her was soundly whipped in the courtyard for a period of one to three hours, depending on the individual degree of independent spirit. The whip he used -- or had his castellan use -- was of wet, knotted cloth, which regularly drew blood but very seldom maimed. To his great satisfaction and personal pride, few slaves ever needed to be whipped more than once. The memory of their first day, and the sight and sound of every subsequent slave's first day, stayed with them throughout their lives.

When Brin bought his first Bosmer slave, he ordered his castellan to whip him only for an hour. The creature, which Brin had named Dob, seemed so much more delicate than the Argonians and Khajiiti and Orcs who made up the bulk of his slaves. Dob was clearly ill suited for work in the mines or in the fields, but he seemed presentable enough for domestic service.

Dob did his work quietly and tolerably well. Brin occasionally had to correct him by refusing him food, but the punishment never needed to go further. Whenever guests arrived at the plantation, the sight of the exotic and elegant addition to Brin's household staff always impressed them.

"Here, you," said Genethah Illoc, a minor but still noble member of the House Indoriil, as Dob presented her with a glass of wine. "Were you born a slave?"

"No, sedura," Dob answered with a bow. "I used to rob nice ladies like you on the road."

The company all laughed with delight, but Kelmeril Brin checked with the slave trader from whom he had bought Dob, and found that the story was true. The Bosmer had been a highwayman, though not one of any great

notoriety, before he had been caught and sold into slavery as punishment. It seemed so extraordinary that a quiet fellow like Dob, who always looked respectfully downward at the sight of his superiors, could have been a criminal. Brin made up his mind to question him about it.

"You must have used some sort of weapon when you were robbing all those pilgrims and merchants," Brin grinned as he watched Dob mop.

"Yes, sedura," Dob replied humbly. "A bow."

"Of course. You Bosmeri are supposed to be very handy with those," Brin thought a moment and then asked: "A bit of a marksman, were you?"

Dob nodded humbly.

"You will tutor my son Wodilic in archery," the master said after another moment's pause. Wodilic was twelve years of age and had been rather sadly spoiled by his mother, Brin's late wife. The boy was useless at swordplay, fearful of being cut. He embarrassed his father's pride, but the personality defect seemed ideally suited to the bow.
Brin had his castellan purchase a finely wrought bow, several quivers of arrows, and ordered targets to be set up in the wildflower field next to the plantation house. In a few days time, the lessons began.

For the first few days, the master watched Wodilic and Dob to be certain that the slave knew how to teach. He was pleased to see the boy learn the grips and the different stances. Business concerns, however, had to take precedence. Brin only had time to see to it that the lessons were continuing, but not how well they were progressing.

It was a month's time before the issue was reexamined. Brin and his castellan were reviewing the plantation's earnings and expenses, and they had come to the area of miscellaneous household costs.

"You might also check to see how many targets in the field need to be repaired."

"I have already anticipated that, sedura," said the castellan. "They are in pristine condition."

"How is that possible?" Brin shook his head. "I've seen targets fall apart after only a few good shots. There shouldn't be anything left after a month's worth of lessons."

"There are no holes of any kind in the targets, sedura. See for yourself."

As it happened at that hour, the marksmanship lesson was underway. Brin walked across the field, watching Dob guide Wodilic's arm as the boy took aim at the sky. The arrow flew up into an arc, over the top of the target, burying itself in the ground. Brin examined the target and found it to be, as his castellan said, in pristine condition. No arrow had touched it.

"Master Wodilic, you must pull your right arm down further," Dob was saying. "And the follow-through is essential if you expect your arrow to gain any height."

"Height?" Brin snarled. "What about accuracy? Unless he's been secretly racking up a high kill ratio on birds, you haven't taught my son a thing about marksmanship."

Dob bowed humbly. "Sedura, first Master Wodilic must become comfortable with the weapon before he need worry about accuracy. In Valenwood, we learn by watching the bolt arc at different levels, in different winds, before we try very hard to strike targets."

Brin's face turned purple with fury: "I'm not a fool! I should have known not to trust a slave with my boy's education!"

The master grabbed Dob and shoved him toward the plantation house. Dob, head down, began the humble, shuffling walk he had learned in his domestic duties. Wodilic, tears streaming down his face, tried to follow.

"You stay and practice!" roared his father. "Try aiming at the target itself, not at the sky! You are not coming back into the house until there is one

hole in that damned bullseye!"

The boy tearfully returned to practice, while Brin brought Dob into the courtyard and called for his whip. Dob suddenly broke away and scrambled to hide between some barrels in the center of the yard.

"Take your punishment, slave! I should have never shown you mercy the day I bought you!" Brin bellowed, bringing the whip down on Dob's exposed back again and again. "I have to toughen you up! There'll be no more soft jobs as tutor and valet in your future!"

Wodilic's plaintive yell drifted in from the meadow: "I can't! Father, I can't hit it!"

"Master Wodilic!" Dob cried back as loud as he could, his voice shaking with pain. "Keep your left arm straight and aim slightly east! The wind has changed!"

"Stop confusing my son!" Brin screamed. "You'll be in the saltrice fields if I don't beat you to death first! Like you deserve!"

"Dob!" the boy wailed, far away. "I still can't hit it!"

"Master Wodilic! Take four steps back, aim east, and don't be afraid of the height!" Dob tore away from the barrels, hiding under a cart near the wall. Brin pursued him, raining down blows.

The boy's arrow sailed high over the target and kept climbing, reaching a pinnacle at the edge of the plantation house before coming down in a magnificent arc. Brin tasted the blood before he realized he'd been hit. Gingerly, he raised his hands and felt the arrowhead protruding out of the back of his neck. He looked at Dob crouching under the wagon, and thought he saw a thin smile cross the slave's lips. Just for an instant before he died, Brin saw the face of the rogue highwayman on Dob.

"Bullseye, Master Wodilic!" Dob crowed.

The Mirror

by Berdier Wreans

The wind blew over the open plain, jostling the few trees within to move back and forth with the irritation of it. A young man in bright green turban approached the army and gave his chieftain's terms for peace to the commander. He was refused. It was to be battle, the battle of Ain-Kolur.

So the chief Iymbez had decreed his open defiance and his horsemen were at war once again. Many times the tribe had moved into territory that was not theirs to occupy, and many times the diplomatic approach had failed. It had come to this, at long last. It was just as well with Mindothrax. His allies may win or lose, but he would always survive. Though he had occasionally been on the losing side of a war, never once in all his thirty-four years had he lost in hand-to-hand combat.

The two armies poured like dual frothing streams through the dust, and when they met a clamor rang out, echoing into the hills. Blood, the first liquor the clay had tasted in many a month, danced like powder. The high and low battle cries of the rival tribes met in harmony as the armies dug into one another's flesh. Mindothrax was in the element he loved.

After ten hours of fighting with no ground given, both commanders called a mutual and honorable withdrawal from the field.

The camp was positioned in a high-walled garden of an old burial ground, adorned by springtide blossoms. As Mindothrax toured the grounds, he was reminded of his childhood home. It was a happy and a sad recollection, the purity of childhood ambition, all of his schooling in the ways of battle, but tinged with memories of his poor mother. A beautiful woman looking down at her son with both pride and unspoken sorrow. She never talked about what troubled her, but it came as no surprise to any when she took the walk across the moors and was found days later, her throat slit open by her own hand.

The army itself was like a colony of ants, newly shaken. Within a half hour's time after the end of the battle, they had reorganized as if by instinct. As the medics looked to the wounded, someone remarked, with a measure of admiration and astonishment, "Look at Mindothrax. His hair isn't even out of place."

"He is a mighty swordsman," said the attending physician.

"The sword is a greatly overvalued article," said Mindothrax, nevertheless pleased with the attention. "Warriors pay too much attention to striking and not enough in defending strikes. The proper way to go into battle is to defend yourself, and to hit your opponent only when the ideal moment arises."

"I prefer a more straight-forward approach," smiled one of the wounded. "It is the way of the horse men."

"If it is the way of the Bjoulsae tribes to fail, then I renounce my heritage," said Mindothrax, making a quick sign to the spirits that he was being expressive not blasphemous. "Remember what the great blademaster Gaiden Shinji said, 'The best techniques are passed on by the survivors.' I have been in thirty-six battles, and I haven't a scar to show for them. That is because I rely on my shield, and then my blade, in that order."

"What is your secret?"

"Think of melee as a mirror. I look to my opponent's left arm when I am striking with my right. If he is prepared to block my blow, I blow not. Why exert undue force?" Mindothrax cocked an eyebrow, "But when I see his right arm tense, my left arm goes to my shield. You see, it takes twice as much power to send force than it does to deflect it. When your eye can recognize whether your opponent is striking from above, or at angle, or in an uppercut from below, you learn to pivot and place your shield just so to protect yourself. I could block for hours if need be, but it only takes a few minutes, or even seconds, for your opponent, used to battering, to leave a space open for your own strike."

"What was the longest you've ever had to defend yourself?" asked the wounded man.

"I fought a man once for an hour's time," said Mindothrax. "He was tireless with his bludgeoning, never giving me a moment to do aught but block his strikes. But finally, he took a moment too long in raising his cudgel and I found my mark in his chest. He struck my shield a thousand times, and I struck his heart but once. But that was enough."

"So he was your greatest opponent?" asked the medico.

"Oh, indeed not," said Mindothrax, turning his great shield so the silvery metal reflected his own face. "There is he."

The next day, the battle recommenced. Chief Iymbez had brought in reinforcements from the islands to the south. To the horror and disgrace of the tribe, mercenaries, renegade horsemen and even some Reachmen witches were included in the war. As Mindothrax stared across the field at the armies assembling, putting on his helmet and readying his shield and blade, he thought again of his poor mother. What had tortured her so? Why had she never been able to look at her son without grief?

Between sunrise and sundown, the battle raged. A bright blue-sky overhead burned down on the combatants as they rushed against one another over and over again. In every melee, Mindothrax prevailed. A foe with an ax rained a series of strokes against his shield, but every one was deflected until at last Mindothrax could best the warrior. A spear maiden nearly pierced the shield with her first strike, but Mindothrax knew how to give with the blow, throwing her off balance and leaving her open for his counterstrike. Finally, he met a mercenary on the field, armed with shield and sword and a helm of golden bronze. For an hour and a half they battled.

Mindothrax tried every trick he knew. When the mercenary tensed his left arm, he held back his strike. When his opponent rose his sword, his shield rose too and expertly blocked. For the first time in his life, he was battling another defensive fighter. Stationary, reflective, with energy to battle for

days if need be. Occasionally, another warrior would enter into the fray, sometimes from Mindothrax's army, sometimes from his opponent's. These distractions were swiftly dispatched, and the champions returned to their fight.

As they fought, circling one another, matching block for blow and blow for block, it dawned on Mindothrax that here at last he was fighting the perfect mirror.

It became more a game, almost a dance, than a battle of blood. It was not until Mindothrax missed his own step, striking too soon, throwing himself off balance, that the promenade was ended. He saw, rather than felt, the mercenary's blade rip across him from throat to chest. A good strike. The sort he himself might have delivered.

Mindothrax fell to the ground, feeling his life passing. The mercenary stood over him, prepared to give his worthy adversary the killing blow. It was a strange, honorable deed for an outsider to do, and Mindothrax was greatly moved. Across the battlefield, he heard someone call a name, similar to his own.

"Jurrifax!"

The mercenary removed his helmet to answer the call. As he did so, Mindothrax saw through the slits of his helmet his own reflection in the man. It was his own close-set eyes, red and brown hair, thin and wide mouth, and blunt chin. For a moment he marveled at the mirror, before the stranger turned back to him and delivered the death stroke.

Jurrifax returned to his commander and was well paid for his part in the day's victory. They retired for a hot meal under the stars in a garden by an old cairn that had previously been occupied by their foes. The mercenary was strangely quiet as he observed the land.

"Have you been here before, Jurrifax?" asked one of the tribesmen who had hired him.

"I was born a horseman just like you. My mother sold me when I was just a babe. I have always wondered how my life might have been different had I not been bartered away. I might never have been a mercenary."

"There are many things that decide our fate," said the witch. "It is madness to try to see how you might have taken this turn or that in the world. There are none exactly like yourself, so it is foolish to compare."

"But there is one," said Jurrifax, looking to the stars. "My master, before he set me free, said that my mother had twin sons when I was born. She could only afford to raise but one child, but somewhere out there, there is a man just like me. My brother. I hope to meet him."

The witch saw the spirits before her and knew the truth that the twins had met already. She remained silent and stared into the fire, banishing the thoughts from her head, too wise to tell all.

The Monomyth

"In Mundus, conflict and disparity are what bring change, and change is the most sacred of the Eleven Forces. Change is the force without focus or origin."-Oegnithr, Taheritae, Order of PSJJJJ

Simply put, the schism in the Human/Aldmeri worldview is the mortal's relationship to the divine. Humans take the humble path that they were created by the immortal forces, while the Aldmer claim descent from them. It doesn't seem like much, but it is a distinction that colors the rest of their diverging mythologies.

All Tamrielic religions begin the same. Man or mer, things begin with the dualism of Anu and His Other. These twin forces go by many names: Anu-Padomay, Anuiel-Sithis, Ak-El, Satak-Akel, Is-Is Not. Anuiel is the Everlasting Ineffable Light, Sithis is the Corrupting Inexpressible Action. In the middle is the Gray Maybe ('Nirn' in the Ehlnofex).

In most cultures, Anuiel is honored for his part of the interplay that creates the world, but Sithis is held in highest esteem because he's the one that causes the reaction. Sithis is thus the Original Creator, an entity who intrinsically causes change without design. Even the hist acknowledge this being.

Anuiel is also perceived of as Order, opposed to the Sithis-Chaos. Perhaps it is easier for mortals to envision change than perfect stasis, for often Anuiel is relegated to the mythic background of Sithis' fancies. In Yokudan folk-tales, which are among the most vivid in the world, Satak is only referred to a handful of times, as "the Hum"; he is a force so prevalent as to be not really there at all.

In any case, from these two beings spring the et'Ada, or Original Spirits. To humans these et'Ada are the Gods and Demons; to the Aldmer, the Aedra/Daedra, or the 'Ancestors'. All of the Tamrielic pantheons fill their rosters from these et'Ada, though divine membership often differs from

culture to culture. Like Anu and Padomay, though, every one of these pantheons contains the archetypes of the Dragon God and the Missing God.

The Dragon God and the Missing God

The Dragon God is always related to Time, and is universally revered as the "First God." He is often called Akatosh, "whose perch from Eternity allowed the day." He is the central God of the Cyrodilic Empire.

The Missing God is always related to the Mortal Plane, and is a key figure in the Human/Aldmeri schism. The 'missing' refers to either his palpable absence from the pantheon (another mental distress that is interpreted a variety of ways), or the removal of his 'divine spark' by the other immortals. He is often called Lorkhan, and his epitaphs are many, equally damnable and devout.

Note that Tamriel and the Mortal Plane do not exist yet. The Gray Maybe is still the playground of the Original Spirits. Some are more bound to Anu's light, others to the unknowable void. Their constant flux and interplay increase their number, and their personalities take long to congeal. When Akatosh forms, Time begins, and it becomes easier for some spirits to realize themselves as beings with a past and a future. The strongest of the recognizable spirits crystallize: Mephala, Arkay, Y'ffre, Magnus, Rupgta, etc., etc. Others remain as concepts, ideas, or emotions. One of the strongest of these, a barely formed urge that the others call Lorkhan, details a plan to create Mundus, the Mortal Plane.

Humans, with the exception of the Redguards, see this act as a divine mercy, an enlightenment whereby lesser creatures can reach immortality. Aldmer, with the exception of the Dark Elves, see this act as a cruel deception, a trick that sundered their connection to the spirit plane.

The Myth of Aurbis

Subtitled "The Psijiic Compensation," "Mythic Aurbis" was an attempt by Artaeum apologists to explain the basics of Aldmeri religion to Uriel V in the early, glorious part of his reign. It quietly avoided any blame or bias

against the Lorkhan-concept, which was still held in esteem by the Cyrodiils as "Shezarr", the missing sibling of the Divines. Despite this, the Psijiici still give a nice summary of the Elder view, and it will serve our purposes here. This version comes from the archives of the Imperial Seminary from the handwritten notes of an unknown scribe.

Mythic Aurbis exists, and has existed from time without measure, as a fanciful Unnatural Realm.

'Aurbis' is used to connote the imperceptible Penumbra, the Gray Center between the IS/IS NOT of Anu and Padomay. It contains the multitude realms of Aetherius and Oblivion, as well as other, less structured forms.

The magical beings of Mythic Aurbis live for a long time and have complex narrative lives, creating the patterns of myth.

These are spirits made from bits of the immortal polarity. The first of these was Akatosh the Time Dragon, whose formation made it easier for other spirits to structure themselves. Gods and demons form and reform and procreate.

Finally, the magical beings of Mythic Aurbis told the ultimate story -- that of their own death. For some this was an artistic transfiguration into the concrete, non-magical substance of the world. For others, this was a war in which all were slain, their bodies becoming the substance of the world. For yet others, this was a romantic marriage and parenthood, with the parent spirits naturally having to die and give way to the succeeding mortal races.

The agent of this communal decision was Lorkhan, whom most early myths vilify as a trickster or deceiver. More sympathetic versions of this story point out Lorkhan as being the reason the mortal plane exists at all.

The magical beings created the races of the mortal Aurbis in their own image, either consciously as artists and craftsmen, or as the fecund rotting matter out of which the mortals sprung forth, or in a variety of other analogical senses.

The magical beings, then, having died, became the et'Ada. The et'Ada are the things perceived and revered by the mortals as gods, spirits, or geniuses of Aurbis. Through their deaths, these magical beings separated themselves in nature from the other magical beings of the Unnatural realms.

The Daedra were created at this time also, being spirits and Gods more attuned to Oblivion, or that realm closer to the Void of Padomay. This act is the dawn of the Mythic (Merethic) Era. It has been perceived by the earliest mortals many different ways, either as a joyous 'second creation', or (especially by the Elves) as a painful fracturing from the divine. The originator of the event is always Lorkhan.

Lorkhan

This Creator-Trickster-Tester deity is in every Tamrielic mythic tradition. His most popular name is the Aldmeri "Lorkhan," or Doom Drum. He convinced or contrived the Original Spirits to bring about the creation of the Mortal Plane, upsetting the status quo much like his father Padomay had introduced instability into the universe in the Beginning Place. After the world is materialized, Lorkhan is separated from his divine center, sometimes involuntarily, and wanders the creation of the et'Ada. Interpretations of these events differ widely by culture. Below are some of the better known:

Yokudan, "Satakal the Worldskin"

"Satak was First Serpent, the Snake who came Before, and all the worlds to come rested in the glimmer of its scales. But it was so big there was nothing but, and thus it was coiled around and around itself, and the worlds to come slid across each other but none had room to breathe or even be. And so the worlds called to something to save them, to let them out, but of course there was nothing outside the First Serpent, so aid had to come from inside it; this was Akel, the Hungry Stomach. Akel made itself known, and Satak could only think about what it was, and it was the best hunger, so it ate and ate. Soon there was enough room to live in the worlds and things began. These things were new and they often made mistakes, for there was hardly time to

practice being things before. So most things ended quickly or were not good or gave up on themselves. Some things were about to start, but they were eaten up as Satak got to that part of its body. This was a violent time.

"Pretty soon Akel caused Satak to bite its own heart and that was the end. The hunger, though, refused to stop, even in death, and so the First Serpent shed its skin to begin anew. As the old world died, Satakal began, and when things realized this pattern so did they realize what their part in it was. They began to take names, like Ruptga or Tuwhacca, and they strode about looking for their kin. As Satakal ate itself over and over, the strongest spirits learned to bypass the cycle by moving at strange angles. They called this process the Walkabout, a way of striding between the worldskins. Ruptga was so big that he was able to place the stars in the sky so that weaker spirits might find their way easier. This practice became so easy for the spirits that it became a place, called the Far Shores, a time of waiting until the next skin.

"Ruptga was able to sire many children through the cycles and so he became known as the Tall Papa. He continued to place stars to map out the void for others, but after so many cycles there were almost too many spirits to help out. He made himself a helper from the detritus of past skins and this was Sep, or Second Serpent. Sep had much of the Hungry Stomach still left in him, multiple hungers from multiple skins. He was so hungry he could not think straight. Sometimes he would just eat the spirits he was supposed to help, but Tall Papa would always reach in and take them back out. Finally, tired of helping Tall Papa, Sep went and gathered the rest of the old skins and balled them up, tricking spirits to help him, promising them this was how you reached the new world, by making one out of the old. These spirits loved this way of living, as it was easier. No more jumping from place to place. Many spirits joined in, believing this was good thinking. Tall Papa just shook his head.

"Pretty soon the spirits on the skin-ball started to die, because they were very far from the real world of Satakal. And they found that it was too far to jump into the Far Shores now. The spirits that were left pleaded with Tall Papa to take them back. But grim Ruptga would not, and he told the spirits that they must learn new ways to follow the stars to the Far Shores now. If

they could not, then they must live on through their children, which was not the same as before. Sep, however, needed more punishment, and so Tall Papa squashed the Snake with a big stick. The hunger fell out of Sep's dead mouth and was the only thing left of the Second Serpent. While the rest of the new world was allowed to strive back to godhood, Sep could only slink around in a dead skin, or swim about in the sky, a hungry void that jealously tried to eat the stars."

Cyrodilic ""Shezarr's Song""

"This was a new thing that Shezarr described to the Gods, becoming mothers and fathers, being responsible, and making great sacrifices, with no guarantee of success, but Shezarr spoke beautifully to them, and moved them beyond mystery and tears. Thus the Aedra gave free birth to the world, the beasts, and the beings, making these things from parts of themselves. This free birth was very painful, and afterwards the Aedra were no longer young, and strong, and powerful, as they had been from the beginning of days.

"Some Aedra were disappointed and bitter in their loss, and angry with Shezarr, and with all creation, for they felt Shezarr had lied and tricked them. These Aedra, the Gods of the Aldmer, led by Auri-El, were disgusted by their enfeebled selves, and by what they had created. 'Everything is spoiled, for now, and for all time, and the most we can do is teach the Elven Races to suffer nobly, with dignity, and chastise ourselves for our folly, and avenge ourselves upon Shezarr and his allies.' Thus are the Gods of the Elves dark and brooding, and thus are the Elves ever dissatisfied with mortality, and always proud and stoic despite the harshness of this cruel and indifferent world.

"Other Aedra looked upon creation, and were well pleased. These Aedra, the Gods of Men and Beast Folk, led by Akatosh, praised and cherished their wards, the Mortal Races. 'We have suffered, and are diminished, for all time, but the mortal world we have made is glorious, filling our hearts and spirits with hope. Let us teach the Mortal Races to live well, to cherish beauty and honor, and to love one another as we love them.' Thus are the Gods of Men tender and patient, and thus are Men and Beast Folk great in

heart for joy or suffering, and ambitious for greater wisdom and a better world.

"Now when the Daedra Lords heard Shezarr, they mocked him, and the other Aedra. 'Cut parts of ourselves off? And lose them? Forever? That's stupid! You'll be sorry! We are far smarter than you, for we will create a new world out of ourselves, but we will not cut it off, or let it mock us, but we will make this world within ourselves, forever ours, and under our complete control.'

"So the Daedra Lords created the Daedric Realms, and all the ranks of Lesser Daedra, great and small. And, for the most part, the Daedra Lords were well pleased with this arrangement, for they always had worshippers and servants and playthings close to hand. But, at the same time, they sometimes looked with envy upon the Mortal Realms, for though mortals were foul and feeble and contemptible, their passions and ambitions were also far more surprising and entertaining than the antics of the Lesser Daedra. Thus do the Daedra Lords court and seduce certain amusing specimens of the Mortal Races, especially the passionate and powerful. It gives the Daedra Lords special pleasure to steal away from Shezarr and the Aedra the greatest and most ambitious mortals. 'Not only are you fools to mutilate yourselves,' gloat the Daedra Lords, 'But you cannot even keep the best pieces, which prefer the glory and power of the Daedra Lords to the feeble vulgarity of the mush-minded Aedra.'"

Altmeri "The Heart of the World"

"Anu encompassed, and encompasses, all things. So that he might know himself he created Anuiel, his soul and the soul of all things. Anuiel, as all souls, was given to self-reflection, and for this he needed to differentiate between his forms, attributes, and intellects. Thus was born Sithis, who was the sum of all the limitations Anuiel would utilize to ponder himself. Anuiel, who was the soul of all things, therefore became many things, and this interplay was and is the Aurbis.

"At first the Aurbis was turbulent and confusing, as Anuiel's ruminations went on without design. Aspects of the Aurbis then asked for a schedule to

follow or procedures whereby they might enjoy themselves a little longer outside of perfect knowledge. So that he might know himself this way, too, Anu created Auriel, the soul of his soul. Auriel bled through the Aurbis as a new force, called time. With time, various aspects of the Aurbis began to understand their natures and limitations. They took names, like Magnus or Mara or Xen. One of these, Lorkhan, was more of a limit than a nature, so he could never last long anywhere.

"As he entered every aspect of Anuiel, Lorkhan would plant an idea that was almost wholly based on limitation. He outlined a plan to create a soul for the Aurbis, a place where the aspects of aspects might even be allowed to self-reflect. He gained many followers; even Auriel, when told he would become the king of the new world, agreed to help Lorkhan. So they created the Mundus, where their own aspects might live, and became the et'Ada.

"But this was a trick. As Lorkhan knew, this world contained more limitations than not and was therefore hardly a thing of Anu at all. Mundus was the House of Sithis. As their aspects began to die off, many of the et'Ada vanished completely. Some escaped, like Magnus, and that is why there are no limitations to magic. Others, like Y'ffre, transformed themselves into the Ehlnofey, the Earthbones, so that the whole world might not die. Some had to marry and make children just to last. Each generation was weaker than the last, and soon there were Aldmer. Darkness caved in. Lorkhan made armies out of the weakest souls and named them Men, and they brought Sithis into every quarter.

"Auriel pleaded with Anu to take them back, but he had already filled their places with something else. But his soul was gentler and granted Auriel his Bow and Shield, so that he might save the Aldmer from the hordes of Men. Some had already fallen, like the Chimer, who listened to tainted et'Ada, and others, like the Bosmer, had soiled Time's line by taking Mannish wives.

"Auriel could not save Altmora, the Elder Wood, and it was lost to Men. They were chased south and east to Old Ehlnofey, and Lorkhan was close behind. He shattered that land into many. Finally Trinimac, Auriel's greatest knight, knocked Lorkhan down in front of his army and reached in with

more than hands to take his Heart. He was undone. The Men dragged Lorkhan's body away and swore blood vengeance on the heirs of Auriel for all time.

"But when Trinimac and Auriel tried to destroy the Heart of Lorkhan it laughed at them. It said, "This Heart is the heart of the world, for one was made to satisfy the other." So Auriel fastened the thing to an arrow and let it fly long into the sea, where no aspect of the new world may ever find it."

Mysterious Akavir

Akavir means "Dragon Land". Tamriel means "Dawn's Beauty." Atmora means "Elder Wood". Only the Redguards know what Yokuda ever meant.

Akavir is the kingdom of the beasts. No Men or Mer live in Akavir, though Men once did. These Men, however, were eaten long ago by the vampiric Serpent Folk of Tsaesci. Had they not been eaten, these Men would have eventually migrated to Tamriel. The Nords left Atmora for Tamriel. Before them, the Elves had abandoned Aldmeris for Tamriel. The Redguards destroyed Yokuda so they could make their journey. All Men and Mer know Tamriel is the nexus of creation, where the Last War will happen, where the Gods unmade Lorkhan and left their Adamantine Tower of secrets. Who knows what the Akaviri think of Tamriel, but ask yourself: why have they tried to invade it three times or more?

There are four major nations of Akavir: Kamal, Tsaesci, Tang Mo, and Ka Po' Tun. When they are not busy trying to invade Tamriel, they are fighting with each other.
Kamal is "Snow Hell". Demons live there, armies of them. Every summer they thaw out and invade Tang Mo, but the brave monkey-folk always drive them away. Once Ada'Soom Dir-Kamal, a king among demons, attempted to conquer Morrowind, but Almalexia and the Underking destroyed him at Red Mountain.

Tsaesci is "Snake Palace", once the strongest power in Akavir (before the Tiger-Dragon came). The serpent-folk ate all the Men of Akavir a long time ago, but still kind of look like them. They are tall, beautiful (if frightening), covered in golden scales, and immortal. They enslave the goblins of the surrounding isles, who provide labor and fresh blood. The holdings of Tsaesci are widespread. When natives of Tamriel think of the Akaviri they think of the Serpent-Folk, because one ruled the Cyrodilic Empire for four hundred years in the previous era. He was Potentate Versidue-Shaie, assassinated by the Morag Tong.

Tang Mo is the "Thousand Monkey Isles". There are many breeds of monkey-folk, and they are all kind, brave, and simple (and many are also very crazy). They can raise armies when they must, for all of the other Akaviri nations have, at one time or another, tried to enslave them. They cannot decide who they hate more, the Snakes or the Demons, but ask one, and he will probably say, "Snakes". Though once bitter enemies, the monkey-folk are now allies with the tiger-folk of Ka Po' Tun.

Ka Po' Tun is the "Tiger-Dragon's Empire". The cat-folk here are ruled by the divine Tosh Raka, the Tiger-Dragon. They are now a very great empire, stronger than Tsaesci (though not at sea). After the Serpent-Folk ate all the Men, they tried to eat all the Dragons. They managed to enslave the Red Dragons, but the black ones had fled to (then) Po Tun. A great war was raged, which left both the cats and the snakes weak, and the Dragons all dead. Since that time the cat-folk have tried to become the Dragons. Tosh Raka is the first to succeed. He is the largest Dragon in the world, orange and black, and he has very many new ideas.

"First," Tosh Raka says, "is that we kill all the vampire snakes." Then the Tiger-Dragon Emperor wants to invade Tamriel.

The Mystery of Princess Talara

Part I

by Mera Llykith

The year was 3E 405. The occasion was the millennial celebration of the founding of the Breton Kingdom of Camlorn. Every grand boulevard and narrow alley was strung with gold and purple banners, some plain, some marked with the heraldic symbols of the Royal Family or the various principalities and dukedoms which were vassals of the King. Musicians played in the plazas great and small, and on every street corner was a new exotic entertainer: Redguard snake charmers, Khajiiti acrobats, magicians of genuine power and those whose flamboyant skill was equally impressive if largely illusion.

The sight that drew most of the male citizens of Camlorn was the March of Beauty. A thousand comely young women, brightly and provocatively dressed, danced their way down the long, wide main street of the city, from the Temple of Sethiete to the Royal Palace. The menfolk jostled one another and craned their necks, picking their favorites. It was no secret that they were all prostitutes, and after the March and the Flower Festival that evening, they would be available for more intimate business.

Gyna attracted much of the attention with her tall, curvaceous figure barely covered by strips of silk and her curls of flaxen hair specked with flower petals. In her late twenties, she wasn't the youngest of the prostitutes, but she was certainly one of the most desirable. It was clear by her demeanor that she was used to the lascivious glances, though she was far from jaded at the sight of the city in splendor. Compared to the squalid quarter of Daggerfall where she made her home, Camlorn at the height of celebration seemed so unreal. And yet, what was even stranger was how, at the same time, familiar it all looked, though she had never been there before.

The King's daughter Lady Jyllia rode out of the palace gates, and immediately cursed her misfortune. She had completely forgotten about the March of Beauty. The streets were snarled, at a standstill. It would take

hours to wait for the March to pass, and she had promised her old nurse Ramke a visit in her house south of the city. Jyllia thought for a moment, picturing in her mind the arrangement of streets in the city, and devised a shortcut to avoid the main street and the March.

For a few minutes she felt very clever as she wound her way through tight, curving side streets, but presently she came upon temporary structures, tents and theaters set up for the celebration, and had to improvise a new path. In no time at all, she was lost in the city where she had lived all but five years of her life.

Peering down an alley, she saw the main avenue crowded with the March of Beauty. Hoping that it was the tale end, and desirous not to be lost again, Lady Jyllia guided her horse toward the festival. She did not see the snake-charmer at the mouth of the alley, and when his pet hissed and spread its hood, her charge reared up in fear.

The women in the parade gasped and surged back at the sight, but Lady Jyllia quickly calmed her stallion down. She looked abashed at the spectacle she had caused.
"My apologies, ladies," she said with a mock military salute.

"It's all right, madam," said a blonde in silk. "We'll be out of your way in a moment."

Jyllia stared as the March passed her. Looking at that whore had been like looking in a mirror. The same age, and height, and hair, and eyes, and figure, almost exactly. The woman looked back at her, and it seemed as if she was thinking the same thing.

And so Gyna was. The old witches who sometimes came in to Daggerfall had sometimes spoke of doppelgangers, spirits that assumed the guise of their victims and portended certain death. Yet the experience had not frightened her: it seemed only one more strangely familiar aspect of the alien city. Before the March had danced it way into the palace gates, she had all but forgotten the encounter.

The prostitutes crushed into the courtyard, as the King himself came to the balcony to greet them. At his side was his chief bodyguard, a battlemage by the look of him. As for the King himself, he was a handsome man of middle age, rather unremarkable, but Gyna was awed at the sight of him. A dream, perhaps. Yes, that was it: she could see him as she had dreamt of him, high above her as he was now, bending now to kiss her. Not a one of lust as she had experienced before, but one of small fondness, a dutiful kiss.

"Dear ladies, you have filled the streets of the great capitol of Camlorn with your beauty," cried the King, forcing a silence on the giggling, murmuring assembly. He smiled proudly. His eyes met Gyna's and he stopped, shaken. For an eternity, they stayed locked together before His Highness recovered and continued his speech.

Afterwards, while the women were all en route back to their tents to change into their costumes for the evening, one of the older prostitutes approached Gyna: "Did you see how the King looked at you? If you're smart, you'll be the new royal mistress before this celebration ends."

"I've seen looks of hunger before, and that wasn't one of them," laughed Gyna. "I'd wager he thought I was someone else, like that lady who tried to run us over with her horse. She's probably his kin, and he thought she had dressed up like a courtesan and joined the March of Beauty. Can you imagine the scandal?"

When they arrived at the tents, they were greeted by a stocky, well-dressed young man with a bald pate and a commanding presence of authority. He introduced himself as Lord Strale, ambassador to the Emperor himself, and their chief patron. It was Strale who had hired them, on the Emperor's behalf, as a gift to the King and the kingdom of Camlorn.

"The March of Beauty is but a precursor to the Flower Festival tonight," he said. Unlike the King, he did not have to yell to be heard. His voice was loud and precise in its natural modulations. "I expect each of you to perform well, and justify the significant expense I've suffered bringing you all the way up here. Now hurry, you must be dressed and in position on Cavilstyr Rock before the sun goes down."

The ambassador needn't have worried. The women were all professionals, experts at getting dressed and undressed with none of the time-consuming measures less promiscuous females required. His manservant Gnorbooth offered his assistance, but found he had little to do. Their costumes were simplicity itself: soft, narrow sheets with a hole for their heads. Not even a belt was required, so the gowns were open at the sides exposing the frame of their skin.

So it was long before the sun had set that the prostitutes turned dancers were at Cavilstyr Rock. It was a great, wide promontory facing the sea, and for the occasion of the Festival of Flowers, a large circle of unlit torches and covered baskets had been arranged. As early as they were, a crowd of spectators had already arrived. The women gathered in the center of the circle and waited until it was time.

Gyna watched the crowd as it grew, and was not surprised when she saw the lady from the March approaching, hand-in-hand with a very old, very short white-haired woman. The old woman was distracted, pointing out islands out at sea. The blonde lady seemed nervous, unsure of what to say. Gyna was used to dealing with uneasy clients, and spoke first.

"Good to see you again, madam. I am Gyna of Daggerfall."

"I'm glad you bear me no ill will because of the whores, I mean horse," the lady laughed, somewhat relieved. "I am Lady Jyllia Raze, daughter of the King."

"I always thought that daughters of kings were called princess," smiled Gyna.

"In Camlorn, only when they are heirs to the throne. I have a younger brother from my father's new wife whom he favors," Jyllia replied. She felt her head swim. It was madness, speaking to a common prostitute, talking of family politics so intimately. "Relative to that subject, I must ask you something very peculiar. Have you ever heard of the Princess Talara?"

Gyna thought a moment: "The name sounds somewhat familiar. Why would I have?"

"I don't know. It was a name I just thought you might recognize," sighed Lady Jyllia. "Have you been to Camlorn before?"

"If I did, it was when I was very young," said Gyna, and suddenly she felt it was her turn to be trusting. Something about the Lady Jyllia's friendly and forthcoming manner touched her. "To be honest, I don't remember anything at all of my childhood before I was nine or ten. Perhaps I was here with my parents, whoever they were, when I was a little girl. I tell you, I think perhaps I was. I don't recall ever being here before, but everything I've seen, the city, you, the King himself, all seem ... like I've been here before, long ago."
Lady Jyllia gasped and took a step back. She gripped the old woman, who had been looking out to sea and murmuring, by the hand. The elderly creature looked to Jyllia, surprised, and then turned to Gyna. Her ancient, half-blind eyes sparkled with recognition and she made a sound like a grunt of surprise. Gyna also jumped. If the King had seemed like something out of a half-forgotten dream, this woman was someone she knew. As clear and yet indistinct as a guardian spirit.

"I apologize," stammered Lady Jyllia. "This is my childhood nursemaid, Ramke."

"It's her!" the old woman cried, wild-eyed. She tried to run forward, arms outstretched, but Jyllia held her back. Gyna felt strangely naked, and pulled her robe against her body.

"No, you're wrong," Lady Jyllia whispered to Ramke, holding the old woman tightly. "The Princess Talara is dead, you know that. I shouldn't have brought you here. I'll take you back home." She turned back to Gyna, her eyes welling with tears. "The entire royal family of Camlorn was assassinated over twenty years ago. My father was Duke of Oloine, the King's brother, and so he inherited the crown. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Goodnight."

Gyna gazed after Lady Jyllia and the old nurse as they disappeared into the crowd, but she had little time to consider all she had heard. The sun was setting, and it was time for the Flower Festival. Twelve young men emerged from the darkness wearing only loincloths and masks, and lit the torches. The moment the fire blazed, Gyna and all the rest of the dancers rushed to the baskets, pulling out blossoms and vines by the handful.

At first, the women danced with one another, sprinkling petals to the wind. The crowd then joined in as the music swelled. It was a mad, beautiful chaos. Gyna leapt and swooned like a wild forest nymph. Then, without warning, she felt rough hands grip her from behind and push her.

She was falling before she understood it. The moment the realization hit, she was closer to the bottom of the hundred foot tall cliff than she was to the top. She flailed out her arms and grasped at the cliff wall. Her fingers raked against the stone and her flesh tore, but she found a grip and held it. For a moment, she stayed there, breathing hard. Then she began to scream.

The music and the festival were too loud up above: no one could hear her - she could scarcely hear herself. Below her, the surf crashed. Every bone in her body would snap if she fell. She closed her eyes, and a vision came. A man was standing below her, a King of great wisdom, great compassion, looking up, smiling. A little girl, golden-haired, mischievous, her best friend and cousin, clung to the rock beside her.

"The secret to falling is making your body go limp. And with luck, you won't get hurt," the girl said. She nodded, remembering who she was. Eight years of darkness lifted.

She released her grip and let herself fall like a leaf into the water below.

Part II

By Mera Llykith

She felt nothing, darkness enveloping her body and mind. Pain surged through her leg and with that sensation, a great feeling of cold washed over her. She opened her eyes and saw that she was drowning.

Her left leg would not move at all, but using her right one and her arms, she pulled herself up toward the moons above. It was long way through the swirling currents that wrenched back at her. At last she broke the surface and sucked in the cold night air. She was still close to the rocky shoreline of the capitol city of the kingdom of Camlorn, but the water had carried her quite a ways from the point where she fell at Cavilstyr Rock.

Not fell, she thought, correcting herself. She had been pushed.

Further down current, she allowed herself to drift. There the steep cliff walls sloped lower until they were close to the water's edge. The silhouette of a large house on the shore loomed ahead, and as she neared it, she could see smoke rising from the chimney and the flicker of firelight within. The pain in her leg was great, but greater still was the chill of the water. The thought of a warm hearth fire was all the motivation she needed to begin swimming again.

At the shore's edge, she tried to stand but found she couldn't. Her tears mixed with the sea water as she began to crawl across the sand and rock. The simple white sheet which had been her costume at the Flower Festival was tattered and felt like a weight of lead across her back. Beyond the point of exhaustion, she fell forward and began to sob.

"Please!" she cried. "If you can hear me, please help!"

A moment later, the door to the house opened and a woman stepped out. It

was Ramke, the old lady she had met at the Flower Festival. The one who had started and cried "It's her!" even before she herself knew who she was. By contrast, when the old woman came to her, this time there was no glimmer of recognition in her eyes.

"By Sethiete, are you hurt?" Ramke whispered, and helped her up, acting as her crutch. "I've seen that gown before. Were you one of the dancers at the Flower Festival tonight? I was there with Lady Jyllia Raze, the daughter of the King."

"I know, she introduced us," she groaned. "I called myself Gyna of Daggerfall?"

"Of course, I knew you looked familiar somehow," the old woman chuckled, and led her hop by hop across the beach and into the front door. "My memory isn't as good as it used to be. Lets get you warm and have a look at that leg."

Ramke took Gyna's soaking rags and covered her with a blanket as she sat at the fire. As the numbness of the chill water began to leave her, it cruelly abandoned her to the intense agony of her leg. Until then, she had not dared to look at it. When she did, she felt vomit rise at the sight of the deep gash, fish-white dead flesh, plump and swollen. Thick arterial blood bubbled up, splashing on the floor in streams.

"Oh dear," said the old woman, returning to the fire. "That must rather sting. You're lucky that I still remember a little of the old healing spells."

Ramke seated herself on the floor and pressed her hands on either side of the wound. Gyna felt a flare of pain, and then a cool soft pinching and prickle. When she looked down, Ramke was slowly sliding her wrinkled hands towards one another. At their approach, the lesion began to mend before her eyes, flesh binding and bruises fading.

"Sweet Kynareth," Gyna gasped. "You've saved my life."

"Not only that, you won't have an ugly scar on your pretty leg," Ramke

chuckled. "I had to use that spell so many times when Lady Jyllia was little. You know, I was her nursemaid."

"I know," Gyna smiled. "But that was a long time ago, and you still remember the spell."

"Oh, when you're learning anything, even the School of Restoration, there's always a lot of study and mistakes, but once you're as old as I am, there's no longer any need to remember things. You just know. After all, I've probably cast it a thousand times before. Little Lady Jyllia and the little Princess Talara was always getting cut and bruised. Small wonder, the way they was always climbing all over the palace."

Gyna sighed. "You must have loved Lady Jyllia very much."

"I still do," Ramke beamed. "But now she's all grown and things are different. You know, I didn't notice it before because you were all wet from the sea, but you look very much like my lady. Did I mention that before when we met at the Festival?"

"You did," said Gyna. "Or rather I think you thought I looked like Princess Talara."

"Oh, it would be so wonderful if you were the Princess returned," the old woman gasped. "You know, when the former royal family was killed, and everyone said the Princess was killed though we never found the body, I think the real victim was Lady Jyllia. Her little heart just broke, and for a while, it looked like her mind did too."

"What do you mean?" asked Gyna. "What happened?"

"I don't know if I should tell a stranger this, but it's fairly well-known in Camlorn, and I really feel like I know you," Ramke struggled with her conscience and then released. "Jyllia saw the assassination, you see. I found her afterwards, hiding in that terrible blood-stained throne room, and she was like a little broken doll. She wouldn't speak, she wouldn't eat. I tried all my healing spells, but it was quite beyond my power. So much more than a

scraped knee. Her father who was then Duke of Oloine sent her to a sanitarium in the country to get well."

"That poor little girl," cried Gyna.

"It took her years to be herself again," said Ramke, nodding. "And, in truth, she never really returned altogether. You wonder why her father when he was made king didn't make her his heir? He thought that she was still not exactly right, and in a way, as much as I would deny it, he's correct to think so. She remembered nothing, nothing at all."

"Do you think," Gyna considered her words carefully. "That she would be better if she knew that her cousin the Princess Talara was alive and well?"

Ramke considered it. "I think so. But maybe not. Sometimes it's best not to hope."

Gyna stood up, finding her leg to be as strong as it looked to be. Her gown had dried, and Ramke gave her a cloak, insisting she protect herself against the cold night air. At the door, Gyna kissed the old woman's cheek and thanked her. Not only for the healing spell and for the cloak, but for everything else of kindness she had ever done.

The road close to the house went north and south. To the left was the way back to Camlorn, where secrets lay to which she alone held the key. To the south was Daggerfall, her home for more than twenty years. She could return there, back to her profession on the streets, very easily. For a few seconds, she considered her options, and then made her choice.

She had not been walking for very long, when a black carriage drawn by three horses bearing the Imperial Seal, together with eight mounted horses, passed her. Before it rounded the wooded pass ahead, it stopped suddenly. She recognized one of the soldiers as Gnorbooth, Lord Strale's manservant. The door opened and Lord Strale himself, the Emperor's ambassador, the man who had hired her and all the other women to entertain at court, stepped out.

"You!' he frowned. "You're one of the prostitutes, aren't you? You're the one who disappeared during the Flower Festival? Gyna, am I right?"

"All that is true," she smiled sourly. "Except my name I've discovered is not Gyna."

"I don't care what it is," said Lord Strale. "What are you doing on the south road? I paid for you to stay and make the kingdom merry."

"If I went back to Camlorn, there are a great many who wouldn't be merry at all."

"Explain yourself," said Lord Strale.

So she did. And he listened.

Part III

By Mera Llykith

Gnorbooth was leaving his favorite pub in Camlorn, The Breaking Branch, when he heard someone calling his name. His was not the sort of a name that could be mistaken for another. He turned and saw Lord Eryl, the Royal Battlemage from the palace, emerge from the darkness of the alley.

"Milord," said Gnorbooth with a pleasant smile.

"I'm surprised to see you out this evening, Gnorbooth," grinned Lord Eryl with a most unpleasant smile. "I have not seen you and your master very much since the millennial celebration, but I understand you've been very busy. What I've been wondering is what you've been busy doing."

"Protecting the Imperial interests in Camlorn is busy work, milord. But I cannot imagine you would be interested in the minutiae of the ambassador's appointments."

"But I am," said the battlemage. "Especially as the ambassador has begun acting most mysteriously, most undiplomatically lately. And I understand that he has taken one of the whores from the Flower Festival into his house. I believe her name is Gyna?"

Gnorbooth shrugged: "He's in love, I would imagine, milord. It can make men act very strangely, as I'm sure you've heard before."

"She is a most comely wench," laughed Lord Eryl. "Have you noticed how much she resembles the late Princess Talara?"

"I have only been in Camlorn for fifteen years, milord. I never saw her late majesty."

"Now I could understand it if he had taken to writing poetry, but what man in love spends his days in the kitchens of the palace, talking to old servants? That hardly sounds like molten passion to me, even based on my limited experience." Lord Eryl rolled his eyes. "And what is this business he has now in - oh, what is the name of that village?"

"Umbington?" replied Gnorbooth, and immediately wished he hadn't. Lord Eryl was too canny an actor to reveal it, but Gnorbooth knew at the pit of his stomach that the battlemage did not even know Lord Strale had left the capitol. He had to get away to let the ambassador know, but there was still a game to be carefully played. "He's not leaving for there until tomorrow. I believe it's just to put a stamp on some deed that needs the Imperial seal."

"Is that all? How tedious for the poor fellow. I suppose I'll see him when he returns then," Lord Eryl bowed. "Thank you for being so informative. Farewell."

The moment the royal battlemage turned the corner, Gnorbooth leapt onto his horse. He had drunk one or two ales too many, but he knew he must find his way to Umbington before Lord Eryl's agents did. He galloped east out of the capitol, hoping there were signs along the road.

Seated in a tavern that smelled of mildew and sour beer, Lord Strale marveled at how the Emperor's agent Lady Brisienna always found the most public of places for her most private of conferences. It was harvest time in Umbington, and all of the field hands were drinking away their meager wages in the noisiest of fashions. He was dressed appropriately for the venue, rough trousers and a simple peasant's vest, but he still felt conspicuous. In comparison to his two female companions, he certainly was. The woman to his right was used to frequenting the low places of Daggerfall as a common prostitute. Lady Brisienna to his left was even more clearly in her element.

"By what name would you prefer I call you?" Lady Brisienna asked solicitously.

"I am used to the name Gyna, though that may have to change," was her

reply. "Of course, it may not. Gyna the Whore may be the name writ on my grave."

"I will see to it that there is no attempt on your life like that the Flower Festival," Lord Strale frowned. "But without the Emperor's help, I won't be able to protect you forever. The only permanent solution is to capture those who would do you harm and then to raise you to your proper station."

"Do you believe my story?" Gyna turned to Lady Brisienna.

"I have been the Emperor's chief agent in High Rock for many years now, and I have heard few stranger tales. If your friend the ambassador hadn't investigated and discovered what he has, I would have dismissed you outright as a madwoman," Brisienna laughed, forcing a smile onto Gyna's face to match. "But now, yes, I do believe you. Perhaps that makes me the madwoman."

"Will you help us?" asked Lord Strale simply.

"It is a tricky business interfering in the affairs of the provincial kingdoms," Lady Brisienna looked into the depths of her mug thoughtfully. "Unless there is a threat to the Empire itself, we find it is best not to meddle. What we have in your case is a very messy assassination that happened twenty years ago, and its aftermath. If His Imperial Majesty involved itself in every bloody hiccup in the succession in each of his thousand vassal kingdoms, he would never accomplish anything for the greater good of Tamriel."

"I understand," murmured Gyna. "When I remembered everything, who I was and what happened to me, I resolved to do nothing about it. In fact, I was leaving Camlorn and going back home to Daggerfall when I saw Lord Strale again. He was the one who began this quest to resolve this, not me. And when he brought me back, I only wanted to see my cousin to tell her who I was, but he forbade me."
"It would have been too dangerous," growled Strale. "We still don't know yet the depths of the conspiracy. Perhaps we never will."

"I'm sorry, I always find myself giving long explanations to short questions.

When Lord Strale asked if I would help, I should have begun by saying 'yes,'" Lady Brisienna laughed at the change in Lord Strale and Gyna's expressions. "I will help you, of course. But for this to turn out well, you must accomplish two things to the Emperor's satisfaction. First, you must prove with absolute certainty who is the power behind this plot you've uncovered. You must get someone to confess."

"And secondly," said Lord Strale, nodding. "We must prove that this is a matter worthy of His Imperial Majesty's consideration, and not merely a minor local concern."

Lord Strale, Lady Brisienna, and the woman who called herself Gyna discussed how to accomplish their goals for a few hours more. When it was agreed what had to be done, Lady Brisienna took her leave to find her ally Proseccus. Strale and Gyna set off to the west, toward Camlorn. It was not long after beginning their ride through the woods that they heard the sound of galloping hoof beats far up ahead. Lord Strale unsheathed his sword and signaled for Gyna to position her horse behind him.

At that moment, they were attacked on all sides. It was an ambush. Eight men, armed with axes, had been lying in wait.

Lord Strale quickly yanked Gyna from her horse, pulling her behind him. He made a brief, deft motion with his hands. A ring of flame materialized around them, and rushed outward, striking their assailants. The men roared in pain and dropped to their knees. Lord Strale jumped the horse over the closest one, and galloped at full speed westward.

"I thought you were an ambassador not a mage!" laughed Gyna.

"I still believe there are times for diplomacy," replied Lord Strale.

The horse and rider they had heard before met them on the road. It was Gnorbooth. "Milord, it's the royal battlemage! He found out you two were in Umbington!"

"With considerable ease, I might add," Lord Eryl's voice boomed out of the

woods. Gnorbooth, Gyna, and Lord Strale scanned the dark trees, but they showed nothing. The battlemage's voice seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere.

"I'm sorry, milord," groaned Gnorbooth. "I tried to warn you as soon as I could."

"In your next life, perhaps you'll remember not to trust your plans to a drunkard!" laughed Lord Eryl. He had them in his sight, and the spell was unleashed.

Gnorbooth saw him first, by the light of the ball of fire that leapt from his fingertips. Later, Lord Eryl was to wonder to himself what the fool had intended to do. Perhaps he was rushing forward to pull Lord Strale out of the path. Perhaps he was trying to flee the path of destruction, and had simply moved left when he should have moved right. Perhaps, as unlikely as it seemed, he was willing to sacrifice himself to save his master. Whatever the reason, the result was the same.

He got in the way.

There was an explosion of energy that filled the night, and an echoing boom that shook birds from the trees for a mile around. On the few square feet where Gnorbooth and his horse had stood was nothing but black glass. They had been reduced to less than vapor. Gyna and Lord Strale were thrown back. Their horse, when it recovered its senses, galloped away as fast as it could. In the lingering glowing aura of the spell's detonation, Lord Strale looked straight into the woods and into the wide eyes of the battlemage.

"Damn," said Lord Eryl and began to run. The ambassador jumped to his feet and pursued.

"That was an expensive use of magicka, even for you," said Lord Strale as he ran. "Don't you know well enough not to use ranged spells unless you are certain your target won't be blocked?"

"I never thought - that idiot -" Lord Eryl was struck from behind and

knocked to the wet forest floor before he had a chance to finish his lamentation.

"It doesn't matter what you thought," said Lord Strale calmly, flipping the battlemage around and pinning his arms to the ground with his knees. "I'm not a battlemage, but I knew enough not to use my entire reserve on your little ambush. Perhaps it's a matter of philosophy, as a government agent, I feel inclined toward conservatism."

"What are you going to do?" whimpered Lord Eryl.

"Gnorbooth was a good man, one of the best, and so I'm going to hurt you quite a lot," the ambassador made a slight movement and his hands began to glow brightly. "That's a certainty. How much more I'm going to hurt you after that depends on what you tell me. I want to hear about the former Duke of Oloine."

"What do you want to know?" Lord Eryl screamed.

"Let's start with everything," replied Lord Strale with perfect patience.

Part V

by Mera Llykith

By what right do you arrest my father?" cried the Lady Jyllia. "What has he done?"

"I arrest the King of Camlorn, the former Duke of Oloine, by my right as an Imperial Commanding Officer and Ambassador," said Lord Strale. "By the right of law of the Emperor of Tamriel which supercedes all provincial royal authority."

Gyna came forward and tried to put her hand on Jyllia's arm, but she was coldly rebuffed. Quietly, she sat down at the foot of the throne in the now empty audience chamber.

"This young lady came to me, having completely recovered her memory, but the story she told was beyond incredible, I simply couldn't believe it," said Lord Strale. "But she was so convinced of it, I had to investigate. So I talked to everyone who was here at the palace twenty years ago to see if there could be any truth to it. Of course, at the time of the King and Queen's murder, and the Princess's disappearance, there was a full inquiry made, but I had different questions to ask this time. Questions about the relationship between the two little cousins, Lady Jyllia Raze and the Princess."

"I've told everyone over and over again, I don't remember anything at all about that time in my life," said Jyllia, tears welling up.

"I know you don't. There has never been a question in my mind that you witnessed a horrible murder, and that your memory lapse and hers," said Lord Strale, gesturing toward Gyna "Are both very real. The story I heard from the servants and other people at the palace was that the little girls were inseparably close. There were no other playmates, and as the Princess's place was to be close to her parents, so the little Lady Jyllia was always there as well. When the assassin came to murder the Royal Family, the King

and Queen were in their bedroom, and the girls were playing in the throne room."

"When my memory came back to me, it was like opening a sealed box," said Gyna solemnly. "Everything was so clear and detailed, like it all happened yesterday not twenty years ago. I was on the throne, playing Empress, and you were hiding behind the dais, pretending you were in a dungeon I had sent you to. A man I had never seen burst into the room from the Royal bedchamber, his blade soaked in blood. He came at me, and I ran for my life. I remember starting to run for the dais, but I saw your face, frozen in fear, and I didn't want to lead him to you. So I ran for the window.

"We had climbed on the outside of the castle before, just for fun, that was one of the first memories that came back to me when I was holding onto that cliff. You and I on the castle wall, and the King calling up to me, telling me how to get down. But that day, I couldn't hold on, I was trembling so much. I just fell, and landed in the river.

"I don't know if it was entirely the horror of what I had seen, or that combined with the impact of the fall and the coldness of the water, but everything just went blank in my mind. When I finally pulled myself out of the river, many miles away, I had no idea who I was. And so it stayed," Gyna smiled. "Until now."

"So you are the Princess Talara?" cried Jyllia.

"Let me explain further before she answers that, because the simple answer would just confuse you, as it did me," said Lord Strale. "The assassin was caught before he managed to escape the palace - in truth, he had to know he was going to be caught. He confessed immediately to the murders of the Royal Family. The Princess, he said, he had thrown out the window to her death. A servant down below heard the scream, and saw something fly past his window, so he knew it to be true.

"It was not for several hours that little Lady Jyllia was found by her nursemaid Ramke hiding behind the dais, coated with dust, shivering with fear, and unable to speak at all. Ramke was very protective of you," Strale

said, nodding to Jyllia. "She insisted on putting you to your room right away, and sent word the Duke of Oloine that the Royal Family was dead, and that his daughter had witnessed the murders but survived."

"I'm beginning to remember a little of that," said Jyllia, wonderingly. "I remember lying in bed, with Ramke comforting me. I was so muddled and I couldn't concentrate. I remember I just wanted it all to be play time still, I don't know why. And then, I remember being bundled up and taken to that asylum."

"It'll all come back to you soon," Gyna smiled. "I promise. That's how I began to remember. I just caught one detail, and the whole flood began."

"That's it," Jyllia began to sob in frustration. "I don't remember anything else except confusion. No, I also remember Daddy not even looking at me as I was taken away. And I remember not caring about that, or anything else."

"It was a confusing time for all, so particularly so for little girls. Especially little girls who went through what you two did," said Lord Strale sympathetically. "From what I understand, as soon as he received the message from Ramke, the Duke left his palace at Oloine, gave orders for you to be sent to a private sanitarium until you'd recovered from your ordeal, and set to work with his private guard torturing the assassin for information. When I heard that, that no one but the Duke and his personal guard saw the assassin after he gave his initial confession, and that no one was present but the Duke and his guards when the assassin was killed trying to escape, I thought that very significant.

"I spoke with Lord Eryl, who I knew was one of those present, and I had to bluff him, pretending I had more evidence than I did. I got the reaction I was hoping for, though it was a dangerous gambit. At last he confessed to what I already knew to be true.

"The assassin," Lord Strale paused, and reluctantly met Jyllia's eyes, "Had been hired by the Duke of Oloine to kill the Royal Family, including the Princess as heir, so that the crown might be passed to him and to his

children."

Jyllia stared at Lord Strale, aghast. "My father -"

"The assassin had been told that once the Duke had him in custody, he would be paid and a prison break would be arranged. The thug picked the wrong time to be greedy and try to get more gold. The Duke decided that it would be cheaper to silence him, so he murdered him then and there, so the man would never tell anyone what really happened," Lord Strale shrugged. "No tragic loss as far as murders go. In a few years' time, you returned from the sanitarium, a little shaken but back to normal, except for a complete absence of memory about your childhood. And in that time, the former Duke of Oloine had taken his brother's place as the King of Camlorn. It was no small maneuver."

"No," said Jyllia, quietly. "He must have been very busy. He remarried and had another child. No one ever came to visit me in the sanitarium but Ramke."

"If he had visited and seen you," said Gyna. "This story might have turned out very differently."

"What do you mean?" asked Jyllia.

"This is the most amazing part," said Lord Strale. "The question has long been whether Gyna is the Princess Talara. When her memory returned, and she told me what she remembered, I put several pieces of evidence together. Consider these facts.

"The two of you look remarkably alike now after twenty years of living very different lives, and as little girls and constant playmates, you looked nearly identical.

"At the time of the assassination, the murderer who had never been there before, only saw one girl on the throne, who he assumed to be his quarry.

"The woman who found Lady Jyllia was her nursemaid Ramke, a creature

of unstable mind and fanatical devotion to her charge - the type would never accept the possibility that her beloved little girl had been the one who disappeared. The nursemaid was the only single person who knew both Princess Talara and the Lady Jyllia who visited you while you were in the sanitarium.

"Finally," said Lord Strale, "Consider the fact that when you returned to court from the sanitarium, five years had past, and you had grown from a child to a young lady. You looked familiar, but not quite the same as your family remembered you, which is only natural."

"I don't understand," cried the poor girl, her eyes wide, because she did understand. Here memory was falling together like a terrible flood.

"Let me explain it like this," said her cousin, wrapping her in her arms. "I know who I am now. My real name is Jyllia Raze. That man who was arrested was my father, the man who murdered the King - your father. YOU are the Princess Talara."

Myths of Sheogorath

by Mymophonus

Sheogorath Invents Music

In the earliest of days, in a time when the world was still raw, Sheogorath decided to walk amongst the mortals. He donned his guise of Gentleman With a Cane, and moved from place to place without being recognized. After eleven days and eleven nights, Sheogorath decided that life among mortals was even more boring than his otherworldly existence.

"What can I do to make their lives more interesting?" he said to himself. At that same moment, a young woman nearby commented wistfully to herself, "The sounds of the birds are so beautiful."

Sheogorath silently agreed with her. Mortals could not make the beautiful and inspired calls of birds. Their voices were wretched and mundane. He could not change the nature of mortals, for that was the purview of other Daedric Princes. However, he could give them tools to make beautiful sounds.

Sheogorath took hold of the petulant woman and ripped her asunder. From her tendons he made lutes. From her skull and arm bones he made a drum. From her bones he made flutes. He presented these gifts to the mortals, and thus Music was born.

Sheogorath and King Lyandir

King Lyandir was known to be an exceedingly rational man. He lived in a palace that was a small, simple structure, unadorned with art and ugly to

look upon. "I do not need more than this," he would say. "Why spend my gold on such luxuries when I can spend it on my armies or on great public works?"

His kingdom prospered under his sensible rule. However, the people did not always share the king's sense of practicality. They would build houses that were beautiful to look upon, although not necessarily very practical. They devoted time and energy to works of art. They would celebrate events with lavish festivals. In general, they were quite happy.

King Lyandir was disappointed that more of them did not follow his example and lead frugal, sensible lives. He brooded on this for many years. Finally, he decided that his subjects simply didn't understand how much more they could accomplish if they didn't waste time on those frivolous activities. Perhaps, he reasoned, they just needed more examples.

The king decreed that all new buildings must be simple, unadorned, and no larger than was necessary for their function. The people were not happy about this, but they liked their king and respected the new law. In a few short years, there were more plain buildings than ornate ones. The citizens used the money saved to make and buy even more lavish art and hold even more excessive celebrations.

Once again, King Lyandir decided to provide them a strict example of how beneficial it would be to use their time and resources for more practical purposes. He banned all works of art in the city. The people were quite put out by this, but they knew that their king was doing what he thought was best for them. However, human nature is not so easily denied. In a few more years the city was filled with plain, simple buildings, and devoid of any sort of art. However, the people now had even more money and time to devote to their parties and festivals.

With a heavy heart, King Lyandir decided that his people were to be treated like children. And like all children, they needed rules and discipline laid down by great figures of authority to make them understand what was truly important in life. He decreed that there should be no revelry in the city. Singing, dancing, and music were all banned. Even food and drink were

limited to water and simple foodstuffs.

The people had had enough. Revolt was out of the question, since King Lyandir had a very well trained and equipped army. They visited the shrines and temples in droves, praying to all the gods, and even to some of the Daedric Princes, that King Lyandir would revoke these new, oppressive laws.

Sheogorath heard their pleas and decided to visit King Lyandir. He appeared to the king in his dreams as a field of flowers, each with arms instead of petals and the face of the Madgod in the center. "I am Lord of the Creative and Lord of the Deranged. Since you have no use for my gifts of creativity, I have decided to bless you with an abundance of my other gift."

From that day forward, every child born in the city was born into madness. Since infants do not reveal illnesses of the mind, it was several years before this was realized. The king's own son was among the victims, suffering from seizures and delusions. Yet, King Lyandir refused to change his ways.

When his son, Glint, was 12 years old, he stabbed his father while Lyandir was sleeping. With his dying breath, King Lyandir asked, "Why?" His son replied, "It is the most practical thing I could do."

The new, young king ordered all the palace servants slaughtered. He ordered a grand festival to celebrate his new reign and the repeal of Lyandir's laws. He served the crowds a stew made from the carcasses of the palace servants. He ordered the east facing walls of every building painted red, and the west facing walls painted in stripes. He decreed that all citizens wear ornate masks on the backs of their heads. He then burned down the palace and began construction of a new one.

In the new palace, the young king ordered his personal chambers to not have any doors; for fear that small woodland creatures would attack him. He ordered that it have no windows for fear that the sun and moon were jealous of him and plotting his death.

And thus ended the line of King Lyandir. The people of the city returned to

their grand works of art and raucous celebrations. They talked and acted as if they still had a living king, and even kept up the palace, using it to house and care for their mad children. Sheogorath was mightily pleased with this outcome. From that day forward the city was blessed with more than the normal number of gifted artists and deranged citizens.

The Contest of Wills

A mighty wizard named Ravate once walked the Winds of Time to find Lord Sheogorath. His intent was to win a favor from this most capricious of the Daedric Princes. Upon finding Sheogorath, Ravate spoke humbly to him, "Lord Sheogorath, I beg a favor of you. I would gladly drive a thousand men mad in your name if you would but grant me the greater magical powers."

Fortunately for Ravate, Sheogorath was in a playful mood. He proposed a game, "I will grant your wish, if you are still sane in three days. During that time, I will do my utmost to drive you mad. It shall be great fun."

Ravate was not so certain that he liked this new deal. He had been really looking forward to driving a thousand men mad. "Lord Sheogorath, I regret having disturbed you with my shallow, selfish request. I withdraw my unfortunate plea and will humbly leave this place."

Sheogorath just laughed, "Too late, mighty Ravate. The game is afoot, and you must play." Ravate fled, only to find that all exits from the Daedric realm were now sealed. He wandered aimlessly, constantly looking over his shoulder, jumping at every noise. Each moment brought new terror as he waited for Sheogorath to begin.

After three days, Ravate was convinced that every plant and animal was a tool of Sheogorath. He hadn't eaten or drunk for fear that Sheogorath had poisoned the food or drink. He hadn't slept for fear of Sheogorath invading his dreams. (Which was foolish, as dreams are the domain of Vaermina,

may She grant us Restful Sleep.)

It was then that Sheogorath appeared to him. Ravate cried out, "You have set the whole world to watching me! Every creature and plant are doing your bidding to drive me mad."

Sheogorath replied, "Actually, I have done nothing. You have driven yourself mad with your fears. Your delusions prove that you are truly deranged, and therefore I win. While you wanted to make a thousand men mad, I only wanted to break one man's mind, yours."

From that day forward Ravate served Sheogorath's every whim. Whenever daring travelers try to approach Sheogorath, Ravate warns them, "Sheogorath is already inside each of us. You have already lost."

Nerevar Moon and Star

[This is a selection from a series of monographs by various Imperial scholars on Ashlander legends.

In ancient days, the Deep Elves and a great host of outlanders from the West came to steal the land of the Dunmer. In that time, Nerevar was the great khan and warleader of the House People, but he honored the Ancient Spirits and the Tribal law, and became as one of us.

So, when Nerevar pledged upon his great Ring of the Ancestors, One-Clan-Under-Moon-and-Star, to honor the ways of the Spirits and rights of the Land, all the Tribes joined the House People to fight a great battle at Red Mountain.

Though many Dunmer, Tribesman and Houseman, died at Red Mountain, the Dwemer were defeated and their evil magicks destroyed, and the outlanders driven from the land. But after this great victory, the power-hungry khans of the Great Houses slew Nerevar in secret, and, setting themselves up as gods, neglected Nerevar's promises to the Tribes.

But it is said that Nerevar will come again with his ring, and cast down the false gods, and by the power of his ring will make good his promises to the Tribes, to honor the Spirits and drive the outsiders from the land.

N'Gasta! Kvata! Kvakis!

an obscure text in the language of the Sload, purportedly written by the Second Era Western necromancer, N'Gasta.

N'Gasta! Kvata! Kvakis! ahkstas so novajxletero (oix jhemile) so Ranetauw. Ricevas gxin pagintaj membrauw kaj aliaj individuauw, kiujn iamaniere tusxas so raneta aktivado. En gxi aperas informauw unuavice pri so lokauw so cxiumonataj kunvenauw, sed nature ankoix pri aliaj aktuasoj aktivecauw so societo. Ne malofte enahkstas krome plej diversaspekta materialo eduka oix distra.

So interreta Kvako (retletera kaj verjheauw) ahkstas unufsonke alternativaj kanasouw por distribui so enhavon so papera Kva! Kvak!. Sed alifsonke so enhavauw so diversaj verjheauw antoixvible ne povas kaj ecx ne vus cxiam ahksti centprocente so sama. En malvaste cirkusonta paperfolio ekzemple ebsos publikigi ilustrajxauwn, kiuj pro kopirajtaj kiasouw ne ahkstas uzebsoj en so interreto. Alifsonke so masoltaj kostauw reta distribuo forigas so spacajn limigauwn kaj permahksas pli ampleksan enhavon, por ne paroli pri gxishora aktualeco.

Tiuj cirkonstancauw rahkspeguligxos en so aspekto so Kvakoa, kiu ja cetere servos ankoix kiel gxeneraso retejo so ranetauw.

Night Falls On Sentinel

By Boali

No music played in the Nameless Tavern in Sentinel, and indeed there was very little sound except for discreet, cautious murmurs of conversation, the soft pad of the barmaid's feet on stone, and the delicate slurping of the regular patrons, tongues lapping at their flagons, eyes focused on nothing at all. If anyone were less otherwise occupied, the sight of the young Redguard woman in a fine black velvet cape might have aroused surprise. Even suspicion. As it were, the strange figure, out of place in an underground cellar so modest it had no sign, blended into the shadows.

"Are you Jomic?"

The stout, middle-aged man with a face older than his years looked up and nodded. He returned to his drink. The young woman took the seat next to him.

"My name is Haballa," she said and pulled out a small bag of gold, placing it next to his mug.

"Sure it be," snarled Jomic, and met her eyes again. "Who d'you want dead?"

She did not turn away, but merely asked, "Is it safe to talk here?"

"No one cares about nobody else's problems but their own here. You could take off your cuirass and dance bare-breasted on the table, and no one'd even spit," the man smiled. "So who d'you want dead?"

"No one, actually," said Haballa. "The truth is, I only want someone ... removed, for a while. Not harmed, you understand, and that's why I need a professional. You come highly recommended."

"Who you been talking to?" asked Jomic dully, returning to his drink.

"A friend of a friend of a friend of a friend."

"One of them friends don't know what he's talking about," grumbled the man. "I don't do that any more."

Haballa quietly took out another purse of gold and then another, placing them at the man's elbow. He looked at her for a moment and then poured the gold out and began counting. As he did, he asked, "Who d'you want removed?"

"Just a moment," smiled Haballa, shaking her head. "Before we talk details, I want to know that you're a professional, and you won't harm this person very much. And that you'll be discreet."

"You want discreet?" the man paused in his counting. "Awright, I'll tell you about an old job of mine. It's been - by Arkay, I can hardly believe it - more 'n twenty years, and no one but me's alive who had anything to do with the job. This is back afore the time of the War of Betony, remember that?"

"I was just a baby."

"'Course you was," Jomic smiled. "Everyone knows that King Lhotun had an older brother Greklith what died, right? And then he's got his older sister Aubki, what married that King fella in Daggerfall. But the truth's that he had two elder brothers."

"Really?" Haballa's eyes glistened with interest.

"No lie," he chuckled. "Weedy, feeble fella called Arthago, the King and Queen's first born. Anyhow, this prince was heir to the throne, which his parents wasn't too thrilled about, but then the Queen she squeezed out two more princes who looked a lot more fit. That's when me and my boys got hired on, to make it look like the first prince got took off by the Underking or some such story."

"I had no idea!" the young woman whispered.

"Of course you didn't, that's the point," Jomic shook his head. "Discretion, like you said. We bagged the boy, dropped him off deep in an old ruin, and that was that. No fuss. Just a couple fellas, a bag, and a club."

"That's what I'm interested in," said Haballa. "Technique. My... friend who needs to be taken away is weak also, like this Prince. What is the club for?"

"It's a tool. So many things what was better in the past ain't around no more, just 'cause people today prefer ease of use to what works right. Let me explain: there're seventy-one prime pain centers in an average fella's body. Elves and Khajiiti, being so sensitive and all, got three and four more respectively. Argonians and Sloads, almost as many at fifty-two and sixty-seven," Jomic used his short stubby finger to point out each region on Haballa's body. "Six in your forehead, two in your brow, two on your nose, seven in your throat, ten in your chest, nine in your abdomen, three on each arm, twelve in your groin, four in your favored leg, five in the other."

"That's sixty-three," replied Haballa.

"No, it's not," growled Jomic.

"Yes, it is," the young lady cried back, indignant that her mathematical skills were being question: "Six plus two plus two plus seven plus ten plus nine plus three for one arm and three for the other plus twelve plus four plus five. Sixty-three."

"I must've left some out," shrugged Jomic. "The important thing is that to become skilled with a staff or club, you gotta be a master of these pain centers. Done right, a light tap could kill, or knock out without so much as a bruise."

"Fascinating," smiled Haballa. "And no one ever found out?"

"Why would they? The boy's parents, the King and Queen, they're both dead now. The other children always thought their brother got carried off by

the Underking. That's what everyone thinks. And all my partners are dead."

"Of natural causes?"

"Ain't nothing natural that ever happens in the Bay, you know that. One fella got sucked up by one of them Selenu. Another died a that same plague that took the Queen and Prince Greklith. 'Nother fella got hisself beat up to death by a burglar. You gotta keep low, outta sight, like me, if you wanna stay alive." Jomic finished counting the coins. "You must want this fella out of the way bad. Who is it?"

"It's better if I show you," said Haballa, standing up. Without a look back, she strode out of the Nameless Tavern.

Jomic drained his beer and went out. The night was cool with an unrestrained wind surging off the water of the Iliac Bay, sending leaves flying like whirling shards. Haballa stepped out of the alleyway next to the tavern, and gestured to him. As he approached her, the breeze blew open her cape, revealing the armor beneath and the crest of the King of Sentinel.

The fat man stepped back to flee, but she was too fast. In a blur, he found himself in the alley on his back, the woman's knee pressed firmly against his throat.

"The King has spent years since he took the throne looking for you and your collaborators, Jomic. His instructions to me what to do when I found you were not specific, but you've given me an idea."

From her belt, Haballa removed a small sturdy cudgel.

A drunk stumbling out of the bar heard a whimpered moan accompanied by a soft whisper coming from the darkness of the alley: "Let's keep better count this time. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven..."

The Nightingales

Volume I: Who We Are

By Gallus Desidenius

As a Nightingale, I feel compelled to place quill to parchment and record my thoughts regarding my knowledge of our order. If one day the Nightingales should vanish from Tamriel, then let this tome serve as a reminder of what we once were and to dispel any rumor or hearsay about our purposes and our motivations.

Our trinity serves the Lady Nocturnal, the Empress of Murk and the Daughter of Twilight. We believe her to be our patron, if not the patron of all thieves worldwide. We serve her without prayer, without charity and without celebration. Our bond with Nocturnal is in the form of a business transaction we strike known as the Oath. Her terms are simple and binding. As Nightingales we are required to guard the Twilight Sepulcher, the Temple of Nocturnal, against those perceived as a threat. In return, we are allowed to use our abilities as Nightingales to further our own means and the means of the Thieves Guild.

Upon our death, we are bound to the Twilight Sepulcher as guardian spirits until such time as Nocturnal feels our contract has been fulfilled. Our ultimate fate lies within the Evergloam, Nocturnal's realm. There, our spirits become one with shadow itself and we become the cloak which envelops all of our fellow thieves in their endeavors. This is the true origin of the phrase "walk with the shadows" uttered within the Thieves Guild.

The Twilight Sepulcher is more than a temple, it contains a conduit from our world to the Evergloam, a swirling pool of liquid midnight we call the Ebonmere. This is the heart of the Sepulcher, and the source of Nocturnal's influence throughout the world. The Ebonmere can only be sealed by removing a unique key from its lock. This key, which occasionally finds its way beyond the walls of the Sepulcher, is widely known as the Skeleton Key of Nocturnal.

The Skeleton Key is an often misunderstood artifact. Those that seek to possess it tend to use only a fraction of its potential. Most mistake it for a unique and unbreakable lockpick. While this is true, the wonder of this device can only be appreciated once the owner is willing to expand his mind and abstract what defines "unlocking." This action refers to more than simple doors and portals. In the proper hands, the Skeleton Key has the capability to unlock hidden potential and untapped abilities. The extent of this power has yet to be discovered, which is a frightening thought if it ever fell into the wrong hands.

As a member of the trinity of Nightingales, it is incumbent upon us to recover the Skeleton Key if it strays from the Twilight Sepulcher. Why Nocturnal allows the Key to be stolen in the first place is a mystery. Some say she revels in the chaos this artifact causes, others feel she simply does not care, that the petty squabbles of men and mer are beyond her attention. Whatever the case may be, it is our duty to ensure it remains safely within the confines of the Sepulcher.

To say that the Nightingales are a holy order would be doing us a disservice. In our hearts, we are thieves. We enjoy the hunt and delight in the spoils. We might swear our loyalty to Nocturnal and hold some influence within the Thieves Guild, but the greatest allegiance a Nightingale holds is to himself.

Volume II: What We Were

By Gallus Desidenius

As a Nightingale, I feel compelled to place quill to parchment and record my thoughts regarding my knowledge of our order. If one day the Nightingales should vanish from Tamriel, then let this tome serve as a reminder of what we once were and to dispel any rumor or hearsay about our purposes and our motivations.

I will attempt to relate the scant bit of knowledge I have of our history to the best of my ability. It is my hope that in the future, someone else may happen upon this writing and amend it in order to expand the record of our existence.

Our history begins with a well-known tale. The tome "The Real Barenziah IX" mentions that a bard named "Nightingale" tricked Queen Barenziah into revealing the location of an artifact called the Staff of Chaos which he later claimed for his own. The story goes on to reveal that "Nightingale" was a powerful Imperial Battlemage named Jagar Tharn in disguise and that he used the Staff to imprison Emperor Uriel Septim VIII. His ultimate goal was to assume the form of the banished emperor and sit upon the throne in his stead.

In actuality, the individual identified as "the bard Nightingale" was not Jagar Tharn at all. This master of disguise was a Nightingale thief named Drayven Indoril. Jagar Tharn hired Drayven, one of the greatest master thieves in Skyrim, to seduce Barenziah and coerce her into revealing the location of the Staff of Chaos. After the Staff was given to Jagar Tharn, he attempted to eradicate Drayven, but his Nightingale abilities aided his escape. Jagar Tharn searched for Drayven but eventually had to abandon the pursuit in order to enact his plans involving the emperor.

It is interesting to note that history refers to Jagar Tharn as "Nightingale" well after the point Drayven would have vanished from the story. The

distortion of actual events is very typical of Barenziah's manipulation. With the pressure of blame falling squarely on her shoulders for Uriel Septim VII's imprisonment, she twisted the truth and created the notion that the "bard" named Nightingale was Jagar Tharn himself. She felt the tale of being enthralled by the master sorcerer held more of a forgiving if not romantic notion than simply being seduced by a master rogue. Some also further speculate that eliminating Drayven from history was her attempt at protecting the reputation of Jagar Tharn, whom she was rumored to have been quite fond of.

Drayven had escaped into Morrowind after Jagar Tharn's pursuit and rejoined the Indoril family who held an estate quite close to the border of Skyrim which allowed him to perform his Nightingale duties at the Sepulcher if the need arose. He remained there for many years until the Indoril family began to lose its power and a war between the houses erupted. Not wanting any part of it, and feeling that Jagar Tharn was no longer a threat, Drayven left his homeland behind and settled in The Rift under the guise of a miner.

Co-currently with Drayven's history, born out of Dravyen's seduction of Barenziah, the Dunmer Queen eventually bore a child. This child, whom Barenziah abandoned with a midwife in an attempt to keep her Nightingale story valid, eventually grew into adulthood and struck out on her own to find her father. Calling herself Dralsi, she overturned every stone in Skyrim looking for any traces of Drayven. After an unknown number of years passed, she finally located him in a small mining community called Shor's Stone. He was quite elderly now... no longer the spry rogue that had seduced Barenziah, but nevertheless he was still Dralsi's father and he treated her as such. In the remaining years of Drayven's life, he imparted the ways of the Nightingale to Dralsi until he finally succumbed to his age.

Dralsi willingly struck the Oath of the Nightingales and performed her duties well in the service of Nocturnal. She eventually took a husband and together they had a child whom they named Karliah. Like Dralsi's father did for her, Dralsi taught Karliah the art of thievery and how to survive in Skyrim living as a rogue. She intended to pass the Nightingale mantle on to Karliah, but had to wait until the time was right to reveal it. When she was

old enough, Karliah struck out on her own wanting to ply her trade in a larger city. She eventually found her way to Riften and joined the Thieves Guild under my own leadership at the time.

As Karliah slowly climbed the ranks in the Guild, I watched her progress and saw much of her mother in her methods. After several years passed, I received word that Dralsi had been killed defending the Twilight Sepulcher from a band of mercenaries and so it became time for the mantle to be passed. I traveled to Nightingale Hall with Mercer Frey and together, we inducted Karliah into the Nightingales.

I will relate my own history in my next volume and perhaps, as I uncover more information, the history of Mercer Frey as well.

The Nightingales: Fact or Fiction?

by Wilimina Roth

Mention the "Nightingale" to any thief worth his salt and he'll laugh in your face. He'll tell you that the supposed avengers of the Daedric Lord Nocturnal are nothing but fictional characters who live nowhere else but within tales designed to scare young footpads into doing what they're told. But are they fictional or simply misunderstood?

While it's true that most scholars would scoff at the notion of a holy sect appearing within the normally unethical and unorganized rabble that is the Thieves Guild, evidence suggests that such a group existed at one time within the borders of Skyrim. One hundred and twenty years before the publication of this tome, a corpse was discovered wearing a strange suit of armor that was described as "forged midnight." The tattered armor bore a crest of some sort, the symbol of a bird embracing a circle of undetailed blackness. The remains and the armor was taken to the College of Winterhold for study, but mysteriously vanished only a day after it arrived.

The crest from this armor was circulated around Skyrim for years but identification proved almost impossible. Then the most unlikely of sources, a prisoner incarcerated within the mines of Markarth, claimed that it was the mark of a group of thieves who called themselves the Nightingales. When pressed for more information, the prisoner claimed that the Nightingales were warriors of Nocturnal and performed her bidding without question. He claimed his source was someone he knew within the Thieves Guild of Skyrim, but he refused to identify them by name, so his story was quickly dismissed.

The second piece of evidence pointing to the existence of the Nightingales exists to this day just outside of Riften. Discovered at the terminus of a short pathway off of the main road stands a stone of unidentified blackened material. Carved into its face is the same avian symbol previously found on the dark suit of armor. To those that subscribed to the existence of the

Nightingales, this was thought to be some sort of a meeting place. To others, this symbol was once again dismissed as a hoax or simply a diversion created by the Thieves Guild.

The final, and most controversial sample of evidence is a passage found scrawled on the inside of a cell wall in Whiterun. The cell had previously been occupied by a Dunmer named Lorthus was incarcerated for murder and was set for execution. After the deed was performed, and Lorthus's cell was examined, the following was found etched into one of the stone blocks:

"Take my hand Lady Nocturnal, for it's my will to serve you. As a Nightingale, I'm born anew. Let my past echo our triumph."

This is the first and only time that a solid connection between Nocturnal and the Nightingale has been made. The unusual nature of the passage, the religious connotations towards Nocturnal made by a career criminal, kept discussions lively for years regarding the possibility of this group actually existing. Sadly, since not a single piece of evidence beyond this has surfaced to date, this exciting discovery faded into obscurity and the debate subsided.

With these scant samples of evidence, conclusions are difficult to formulate. All we're left with are more questions than answers. Can religion and thievery coexist? Does the Daedric Lord Nocturnal have active agents roaming Skyrim with a no-doubt nefarious purpose? Does the Thieves Guild have extensive knowledge of the Nightingales, but remain sworn to secrecy? Perhaps one day the answers to these questions will be revealed, but at present it falls to you, the reader, to decide whether the Nightingales are fact or merely fiction.

The Night Mother's Truth

by Gaston Bellefort

Although various works have been written on the subjects of both Morrowind's Morag Tong, and Tamriel's more widespread Dark Brotherhood, there remains confusion as to precisely when and how these two feared assassins guilds formed. Or, more specifically, when and how the Dark Brotherhood split from the Morag Tong, as the former is widely accepted to have sprung from the latter.

The largest point of contention seems to be the figure of the Night Mother, a woman who figures prominently in both organizations. Through extensive research and interviews, and not inconsiderable risk to my own life (for the Dark Brotherhood holds this information sacred), I have finally solved this ages-old mystery. I have finally uncovered the Night Mother's Truth.

Although her name has been lost to time, the Night Mother was once a mere mortal, a Dark Elf woman who lived in a small village once located where the city of Bravil stands now, in the Imperial Province of Cyrodiil. She was a respected member of the Morag Tong and, like her fellow members, this woman made her trade as an assassin in service to the Daedric Prince Mephala. In fact, the woman held the title of Night Mother, reserved for the highest ranking female member of the organization. To be Night Mother of a particular sect was to be that group's matron - the favored of Mephala, both respected and feared.

However, it was not Mephala who facilitated the transformation from woman to spectre, but another, some would say far deeper form of evil - Sithis, the Dread Lord, embodiment of the unending Void.

Following the Potentate's assassination in 2E 324, strife descended upon the Morag Tong, and the guild was all but eradicated in Cyrodiil and much of the Empire. It was shortly after these events that the Dunmer woman claimed to hear the voice of Sithis himself. The Dread Lord, she claimed,

was displeased. He was unhappy with the Morag Tong's lack of success. The Void, he told her, was hungry for souls - and it was her destiny to set things right.

And so, according to Dark Brotherhood legend, Sithis visited the Night Mother in her bed chamber, and begat her five children. Two years passed, before the unthinkable happened. The Dark Elf woman followed through with the Dread Lord's ultimate plan - one night, she murdered her children, and sent their souls straight to the Void. Straight to their father.

When they learned of this affront to decency, the people of the village rallied against the woman. For such an act was considered incomprehensible, even for a Night Mother of the Morag Tong. In one night of vengeance, they descended upon the woman, killing her, and burning down the house in which the atrocity took place. And that was the end of the story. Or so everyone thought.

A little more than thirty years later, an unnamed man heard a strange, comforting voice inside his very head, just as the Dunmer woman claimed to hear the voice of Sithis inside hers. The voice identified herself as the Night Mother, and named the man "Listener" - the first of many.

And so the Unholy Matron set her servant on his path - he would found a new organization, a guild of assassins known as the Dark Brotherhood, in service not to Mephala, but to the Dread Lord Sithis. The Morag Tong, now surviving only in Morrowind, was an artifact of a forgotten age. The Dark Brotherhood would marry business with death. The organization would grow in wealth and power, and the Void would swell with fresh souls. It was, the Night Mother told her Listener, the perfect arrangement.

In the early days of the Dark Brotherhood, the bodies of the Night Mother and her children were recovered from their original burial site, and interred in a crypt beneath the site of her house. And there they remain, even today.

So if, in your travels, you find yourself in the city of Bravil, and make a wish at the statue of the Lucky Old Lady (as is the local custom), know that

you stand on sacred, if evil, ground. For you stand above the Night Mother, the Unholy Matron herself, and your luck has just run out.

The Nirnoot Missive (Revised Edition)

By Sinderion

The following is a transcript of the speech given by Master Alchemist Sinderion at the Alchemical Symposium on Rain's Hand of 4E 02. It is a revised version of an earlier missive Sinderion gave to the same group several years before. We've done the best we could to preserve the original tone of his speech, but some light embellishments have been made for editorial reasons and for clarity.

Sharmirin Raythorne,
Imperial Scribe

I would like to address the Symposium today with some startling revelations regarding the nirnroot.

Although this curiously tenacious flora grows almost anywhere a significant body of water is present, it's extremely rare, and soon to become extinct. After years of extensive research, and the tireless efforts of my field assistant, I came into the possession of a large sampling of nirnroot. According to the theories presented by the noted Imperial Herbalist Chivius Regelliam, the nirnroot once flourished until a cataclysmic event severely reduced their numbers. Although many scholars reject the proposal that the Sun's Death event of 1E 668 catastrophically affected plant life, Chivius felt that the nirnroot's normal growth cycle was interrupted by the lack of sun for a full year. Whereas other plant species tend to "find a way," the nirnroot's mysterious magical nature made it especially susceptible to this climate shift. While this may or may not be the case, it's certainly true that the recorded sightings of nirnroot are declining as the years pass.

Chivius's notes oddly describe the nirnroot as emitting a "brilliant yellowish glow." Contrary to this fact, the nirnroot of today has a soft, haunting blue-white glow. Subsequent studies by other scholars have failed to adequately

explain this shift in hue. I propose that the nirnroot sensed its own impending extinction and therefore altered its metabolism in order to survive. One of the most glaring pieces of evidence of my theory is the presence of nirnroot in subterranean environments... places completely devoid of sunlight. Strangely, Chivius's notes fail to mention even a single instance of a subterrestrial nirnroot. How could this be? How could a surface-dwelling plant suddenly begin appearing in new locations radically different from its normal habitat?

The answer, my fellow alchemists, is ironically concealed within Chivius's own notes. Although he spends a great deal of time experimenting with the nirnroot in his laboratory, he overlooked an important part of a plant's growth cycle... its soil. Chivius was correct in assuming the volcanic eruption of Red Mountain contributed to the demise of the nirnroot, but I believe the ash from that mighty explosion did more than simply cloud the skies. When mixed with the fertile soil of Cyrodiil, this fine powder is the true cause of the nirnroot's astounding metamorphosis. Although little volcanic ash from that dark time remains, I have performed tests on samples sent to me from Vvardenfell. Careful scrutiny of the samples revealed that they were rife with "ash salt," a highly magical substance. Dunmer native to the Vvardenfell region were known to have used ash salt as an ingredient to cure the "Blight," an awful disease which decimated their realm hundreds of years ago. This unique property of the ash salt coupled with the nirnroot's inherent magic caused the radical change... in essence; the root "healed itself."

In summation, it's clear that the nirnroot was dying and used a byproduct of its destructor to preserve itself. I feel the nirnroot has accomplished in a relatively short amount of time what it would take other species thousands of years to complete.

Whether you subscribe to my theory or not, one thing is certain; the nirnroot is on a path to destruction. It contains untapped potential to create potions the likes of which have never been seen in our day. I propose to you today that we divert a small portion of our funds to an expedition to collect some of these roots to study. I have outlined this proposal for your perusal after this section of the Symposium. Please, seriously consider this proposal

before it becomes too late, and the nirnroot becomes nothing but a memory.

Thank you for your time.

Nords Arise!

by Anonymous

Nords Arise! Throw off the shackles of Imperial oppression. Do not bow to the yoke of a false emperor. Be true to your blood, to your homeland.

The empire tells us we cannot worship holy Talos. How can man set aside a god? How can a true Nord of Skyrim cast aside the god that rose from our own heartland? Mighty Tiber Septim, himself the first emperor, conqueror of all Tamriel, ascended to godhood to sit at the right hand of Akatosh. Tiber Septim, a true son of Skyrim, born in the land of snow and blood, bred to the honor of our people, is now Talos, god of might and honor. The Empire has no right to tell us we cannot worship him.

Our own high king, Torygg, betrayed us to the empire. He traded our god for peace. He agreed to a pact with the Thalmor signed by an emperor in a foreign land. Are we to be beholden to such a pact? No! A thousand times no.

Do not let the lessons of history go unheeded. The Aldmeri Dominion and its Thalmor masters made war upon men, just as the elves made war upon Ysgramor and our people in ancient times. Shining Saarthal was burned to the ground, reduced to ruins and rubble in their treacherous assault. But Ysgramor and his sons gathered the 500 Companions and made war upon the elves, casting them out of Skyrim. In the Great War fought by our fathers, the elves again betrayed men by attacking us unprovoked. The Dominion and the Thalmor cannot be trusted!

Like Ysgramor, Ulfric Stormcloak is a true hero of Skyrim. His name will ring in Sovngarde for generations to come. Only he had the courage to single out King Torygg and challenge him to trial by arms. Ulfric's thu'um, a gift from Talos himself, struck down this traitorous ruler. And by his death we are now free of our Imperial shackles and the Thalmor overlords that darken the Imperial throne.

The Empire has sent its Legions to govern us. They have enlisted our own countrymen to their cause. They have set brother against brother, father against son. They have caused Skyrim to battle itself in their name, for their cause. Do not let them divide us. Do not let them conquer us! Reject the Imperial law that forbids the worship of Talos. Join Ulfric Stormcloak and his cause!

Nords of Skyrim

Nords of Skyrim - My People, My Pride

Respected reader. My name is Hrothmund Wolf-Heart, and I am a Nord. But, more importantly, I am a Nord born and raised in the land of Skyrim.

I write this volume in the desperate hope that the rest of Tamriel can come to know my people as they deserve to be known, and understand this province for what it truly is - a place of uncontested beauty and culture.

Some of what you know is undoubtedly true. Physically, we Nords are an impressive, often imposing sight - tall of stature, strong of bone, and thick of muscle. Our hair is often fair, and worn braided, as has been the custom for generations. Often we are swathed in the hides of beasts, for such creatures are abundant in Skyrim, and we would be foolish not to take advantage of such an available resource.

Having read this far, you may be shocked at the strength of my words, and the literacy of a northern "savage." Aye, many Nords can both read and write. My father began my instruction in the way of letters when I was but a bairn, as did his father, and his father before him.

But the accomplishments of the children of Skyrim are multitude, and go beyond mere wordcraft. For we are artisans as well, and through the ages have learned to manipulate steel the way a sculptor would clay.

Indeed, I have seen with mine own eyes, visitors from High Rock and Cyrodiil weep in disbelief as they beheld the blades wrought in the fires of the Skyforge, and honed to beautiful deadliness by the gods-touched hands of Clan Gray-Mane.

But how can this be true, you ask? How are such achievements possible from a people who have yet to emerge from the muck and snow? Again, provincial bias clouds the truth.

The cities of Skyrim are a testament to Nord ingenuity and craftsmanship. Chief among them are Solitude, seat of the High King and capital of the province; Windhelm, ancient and honored, a jewel in the snow; Markarth, carved into the living rock itself, in ages long since past; Riften, nestled in the golden shadows of the Fall Forest, whence comes delicious fish and mead; and Whiterun, built around the hall of Jorrvaskr, home of the most noble Companions and revered Skyforge.

And now, respected reader, you have the full measure of it. We Nords are everything you imagined - and so much more.

But let not this work be your only gateway to the truth. Book passage on carriage or vessel, and make the journey north. See Skyrim with thine own eyes. See Skyrim as have the Nords, since the gods first shaped the world.

Notes on Racial Phylogeny and Biology

Seventh Edition

By the Council of Healers, Imperial University

After much analysis of living specimens, the Council long ago determined that all "races" of elves and humans may mate with each other and bear fertile offspring. Generally the offspring bear the racial traits of the mother, though some traces of the father's race may also be present. It is less clear whether the Argonians and Khajiit are interfertile with both humans and elves. Though there have been many reports throughout the Eras of children from these unions, as well as stories of unions with daedra, there have been no well documented offspring. Khajiit differ from humans and elves not only their skeletal and dermal physiology -- the "fur" that covers their bodies -- but their metabolism and digestion as well. Argonians, like the dreugh, appear to be a semi-aquatic troglophile form of humans, though it is by no means clear whether the Argonians should be classified with dreugh, men, mer, or (in this author's opinion), certain tree-dwelling lizards in Black Marsh.

The reproductive biology of orcs is at present not well understood, and the same is true of goblins, trolls, harpies, dreugh, tsaesci, imga, various daedra and many others. Certainly, there have been cases of intercourse between these "races," generally in the nature of rape or magickal seduction, but there have been no documented cases of pregnancy. Still the interfertility of these creatures and the civilized hominids has yet to be empirically established or refuted, likely due to the deep cultural differences. Surely any normal Bosmer or Breton impregnated by an orc would keep that shame to herself, and there's no reason to suppose that an orc maiden impregnated by a human would not be likewise ostracized by her society. Regrettably, our oaths as healers keep us from forcing a coupling to satisfy our scientific knowledge. We do know, however, that the sload of Thras are hermaphrodites in their youth and later reabsorb their reproductive organs once they are old enough to move about on land. It can be safely assumed

that they are not interfertile with men or mer.

One might further wonder whether the proper classification of these same "races," to use the imprecise but useful term, should be made from the assumption of a common heritage and the differences between them have arisen from magickal experimentation, the manipulations of the so-called "Earth Bones," or from gradual changes from one generation to the next.

The Oblivion Crisis

by Praxis Sarcorum
Imperial Historian

At the turning of the Fourth Age, in the year 3E 433, the Emperor Uriel Septim VII was assassinated and the Amulet of Kings was destroyed. This set in motion a chain of events that would bring down an empire and change forever the relationship between man and the gods.

The assassins first attacked the Emperor in the White Gold Tower. While the Blades held them back, the Emperor made his way down to the dungeons, to a secret escape route built into one of the prison cells. For reasons known only to himself, the Emperor pardoned the fortunate prisoner in that cell. Some say the prisoner reminded him of a childhood friend. Others say it was a moment of prophecy. Whatever the case, the prisoner came to play a fateful role in the history of the Empire and Tamriel - surely a sign that the gods themselves were at work.

The pursuing assassins killed the Blades bodyguards in a relentless series of sneak attacks. Eventually they struck down the Emperor himself. Before he fell, Uriel Septim VII gave the Amulet of Kings to the prisoner, who somehow made it out of the Imperial sewers and into the light of day.

The assassination is now known to have been the work of a group of daedric cultists known as the Mythic Dawn. (Those who still suspect the Dark Brotherhood should consider two facts: first, they would have only needed a single assassin, not a small army of them; second, the Dark Brotherhood would never be so foolish as to effectively declare war on the Empire and thus ensure their complete destruction. Witness the eventual fate of the Mythic Dawn.)

The Amulet of Kings next surfaced at Weynon Priory near Chorrol. Jauffre, secret Grandmaster of the Blades and head of the priory, took possession of the amulet. The messenger was sent off to Kvatch to find a lowly priest

named Martin. Unbeknownst even to himself, Martin was the bastard son of Uriel Septim VII, and the last heir to the Ruby Throne. He alone could use the Amulet of Kings to light the Dragonfires that wards the barrier between Tamriel and Oblivion, and save the world from the Mythic Dawn plot.

The prisoner arrived at Kvatch to find it overrun by daedra that had poured in from a newly-opened Oblivion Gate, the start of the Empire-spanning devastation of the Oblivion Crisis. How the prisoner closed the gate is not recorded. Once closed, Martin and the surviving Kvatch guardsmen drove back the daedra.

Now known as the Hero of Kvatch, the prisoner and Martin returned to Weynon Priory, only to find the priory sacked and the Amulet taken. Jauffre survived the attack, however, and the three of them made their way to Cloud Ruler Temple, bastion of the Blades. This secret fortress in the mountains outside Bruma is where Martin was held safe while the Hero of Kvatch searched for the lost Amulet.

Knowing only that a mysterious group called the Mythic Dawn was behind the assassination and theft of the Amulet, the Hero of Kvatch was sent to locate the cult. With the help of Baurus, a Blade in the service of the Emperor, they somehow used the Commentaries on the Mysterium Xarxes, esoteric works by the madman Mankar Camoran, to direct them to the Mythic Dawn's secret lair. Scholars familiar with the Commentaries claim the location is not directly mentioned in them. How they did this remains a mystery.

No official records exist of how the Hero of Kvatch penetrated the Mythic Dawn's lair near Lake Arrius. There is a bardic tale that claims the Hero used trickery and disguise, but that is just speculation.What was discovered there is that Mankar Camoran was behind the Mythic Dawn, and that the group worshiped the daedric prince Mehrunes Dagon. Mankar Camoran believed himself to be a direct descendant of the Camoran Usurper, the infamous pretender to the throne of Valenwood.

Somehow the Hero escaped with the Mysterium Xarxes itself, the holy book of the Mythic Dawn cult. Mankar Camoran fled to Oblivion with the

Amulet of Kings. With some effort and great risk to his sanity, Martin deciphered the Mysterium Xarxes and intended to use it to open a gateway to Mankar Camoran in order to recover the Amulet of Kings.

Before Martin could perform the ritual to open the gateway, Mehrunes Dagon opened an Oblivion Gate outside Bruma. The Hero of Kvatch saved the city and Martin by entering the gate and closing it before a daedric siege engine could destroy Bruma and Cloud Ruler Temple. Many songs and stories have been told of this battle and I will not retell them here. The Hero of Kvatch was now also known as the Savior of Bruma.

With the city and Cloud Ruler Temple safe, Martin opened the portal to Mankar Camoran's "Paradise". The details of what transpired in this place have not been recorded. All that is known is that the Savior of Bruma travelled to this Paradise, killed Mankar Camoran, and returned with the Amulet of Kings.

With the Amulet in hand, Martin Septim presented himself to the Elder Council to be crowned Emperor of all Tamriel. Once crowned he planned to relight the Dragonfires and seal Tamriel from Oblivion. In a last-ditch attempt to stop him, Mehrunes Dagon launched an assault on the Imperial City, opening several Oblivion Gates within the capital itself. Uncrowned, Martin joined the battle in the city streets.

Mehrunes Dagon himself left Oblivion and entered Tamriel, breaking the covenant. Only the unlit Dragonfires allowed this to be possible. Now that the barrier was ripped asunder, it was too late to relighting the Fires. Martin Septim chose to make the ultimate sacrifice - he shattered the Amulet of Kings to become the avatar of the god Akatosh and do battle with Mehrunes Dagon.

Records of this battle vary wildly. What we do know is that Mehrunes Dagon was defeated and sent back to Oblivion. The avatar of Akatosh was turned to stone and can be seen to this day in the Temple of the One in the Imperial City. With the Amulet gone, the Dragonfires quenched, and the last Dragonblood Emperor dead, the barrier to Oblivion is sealed forever.

Ode To The Tundrastriders

Oh mighty tundrastrider!

How you and your mighty tusked beast silhouette against the great orange expanse.

Thundering footsteps herald your herd. Man and beast blazing trail together.

One in nature, each relying upon the other, more than just man and beast, but equals who need one another to survive.

How I long to run across the tundra in their mighty wake.

That would truly be my greatest honor.

The morning would be spent gathering dyes to paint our mammoths and then carve the fiercest images into their tusks.

Then it would be time for the skeever hunt. Our clubs would rain down upon the rat pests smashing the life out of them.

In the evening could sit around the campfire and I would regale those nearby with songs of their majesty and grace.

They would let me sample of the mammoth's cheese. A food so foul yet with healing properties so great.

We'd snack on the roasted skeever we'd freshly caught that day before laying under the stars to sleep.

I'd slowly fade to dream nested in the radiating heat of mammoth fur. It's cold resisting properties keeping me snug.

What a grand time we would have.

Unknown

Of Crossed Daggers: The History of Riften

by Dwennon Wyndell

Situated on the eastern banks of Lake Honrich, the city of Riften serves as a reminder of a bygone era. The once-proud streets and buildings have vanished and been replaced with a collection of wooden structures and rough stonework shrouded in a permanent fog-like mist. In order to understand how such a large city became nothing more than a glorified fortress, one need only look to the history books for answers.

Riften was a major hub of activity for trade caravans and travellers to and from Morrowind. Fishing skiffs could be seen dotting the lake at all hours of the day and the bustling city was alive with activity at night. The city guard was formiddable and maintained a tight grasp on its populace, keeping them safe from harm. The marketplace in Riften was also quite a draw, containing numerous stands offering wares from across Tamriel.

In 4E 98, amidst the confusion of the Void Nights, Hosgunn Crossed-Daggers was installed as Jarl when the previous Jarl had been assassinated. Although many believe that Hosgunn was responisble, and cries of protest filled the streets of Riften, the Jarl took the throne and immediately took action to protect his station. Using the city guard, he had the streets cleared of protesters and initiated a curfew. Any caught breaking the curfew was immediately jailed without process or executed if it was a repeat offence.

For over 40 years, Hosgunn ruled Riften with a black heart and an iron fist. He imposed ridiculous taxes upon his subjects and any merchants that wished to sell their wares within the city walls. Hosgunn kept most of the coin for himself, using it to construct a massive wooden castle with unecessarily lavish quartering within. The castle took seven years to build, and became a visual reminder of the people's oppression which earned it the nickname "Hosgunn's Folly." Towards the end of his reign, the streets of Riften became littered with refuse and it's people plagued by disease and hunger.

Then, in 4E 129, the people had finally had enough. With their numbers, they were able to temporarily overhwhelm the city guard long enough to set Hosgunn's Folly on fire with the greedy Jarl still within. As the fighting recommensed, the fire spread through the city unchecked. By the morning, the people had emerged victorious, but not without great cost. Most of the city was now in ruins and many had died.

It took five years to rebuild Riften into the smaller city that it is today. And even though over fifty years had passed since then, it still has yet to fully recover. Some believe it will never achieve the level of affluence it saw at the beginning of the Fourth Era, but there are a few who still hold on to the hope that Riften can return from the ashes and become a center of commerce once again.

Of Fjori and Holgeir

In her 29th summer of life, Fjori the huntress met the warlord Holgeir on the field of battle. None remember what they fought over, for their love to come was so great it overshadowed all rivalries or disputes. They fought to a standstill, as their followers looked on - till her sword broke his axe and his shield dulled her blade and all could see that they were equals.

As the Eagle finds its mates, so too did Fjori find hers in Holgeir, and a time of peace came to the clans of the forest. But as the summer's warmth gives way to winter's chill, so too would this peace pass.

But the Snake came and bit Holgeir, its venom seeping deep into the wound.

A Whale greeted Fjori's view as she came over the snow-covered mountains to the coast.

She obtained an elixir from the Akavir and returned to the forest in haste.

Though Holgeir could smell the winds of Sovngarde, she gave him the elixir and he was cured in an instant.

But the Snake bit Fjori as she poured the last drop into Holgeir's mouth, and fatigued from her journey, she joined the ancestors immediately.

Holgeir's grief was such that he built a tomb and upon completion, took his own life that he might rejoin her.

Olaf and the Dragon

by Adonato Leotelli

One of the more colorful legends in Nord folklore is the tale of Olaf One-Eye and Numinex.

Long ago in the First Age, a fearsome dragon named Numinex ravaged the whole of Skyrim. The dreadful drake wiped out entire villages, burned cities and killed countless Nords. It seemed that no power in Tamriel could stop the monster.

This was a troubled time in Skyrim's history, for a bitter war of succession raged between the holds. The Jarls might have been able to conquesr the beast if they had worked together, but trust was in desperately short supply.

A skillful warrior named Olaf came forward and promised to defeat the beast. In some accounts, he is the Jarl of Whiterun. In other versions of the legend, Olaf promises the people of Whiterun that he will capture the monster if they will name him Jarl.

At any rate, Olaf ventures forth with a handful of his most trusted warriors and seeks the beast out, eventually finding Numinex in his lair atop Mount Athor. Needless to say, it's an epic battle.

First, Olaf comes at the dragon with his axe and his shield. Some variants of the legend say that Olaf and the beast battled with blade and claw for days, but were too evenly matched for either to gain an advantage.

Most accounts hold that Olaf, perhaps frustrated that his weapons are completely ineffectual against the dragon, finally casts them aside. Giving voice to the rage that has been building within him, Olaf unleashes a terrible shout.

Here again, the stories diverge. Many accounts hold that Olaf did not realize

he possessed the power of Dragon-speech, while others suggest that he had long possessed this gift, but wished to test himself against the dragon in martial combat first.

Virtually all variations of the legend, however, agree on what happened next.

Using the awesome powers of the Dragon language, Numinex and Olaf engage in an epic shouting duel atop Mount Athor. So forceful are their words, they are said to shatter the stone and split the sky.

Finally, Numinex collapses from a combination of injury and sheer exhaustion. Somehow - and this detail is conspicuously absent in virtually every account - Olaf manages to convey the dragon all the way back to the capital city of Whiterun.

The people of Whiterun are suitably impressed with Olaf's hostage. They build a huge stone holding cell at the rear of the palace, which they rename "Dragonsreach". This enormous cell serves as Numinex's prison until his death.

Olaf himself eventually becomes the High King of Skyrim, putting an end to the war of succession. Presumably, his great deed made him the only leader upon whom all the people could agree, and so the land once again has peace.

As a visitor to Skyrim, I find this tale both fascinating and highly entertaining. It is one the most celebrated legends of the Nords, and one can easily understand why. It's a story of surpassing heroism, in which a resourceful and worthy Nord does battle with a truly terrifying adversary and emerges victorious by yelling him into submission. The only way in which this could have been even more of a Nordic tale would be if Olaf beat Numinex in a drinking contest.

The legend is not without its doubters, however. The bard Svaknir, who lived during Olaf's reign, wrote and performed an alliterative verse that challenged Olaf's version of events. Enraged, the High King threw the

rebellious bard in prison and destroyed all written copies of the verse.

How I would love to lay hands on a copy of that verse! I admit, I am immensely curious to know what assertions Svaknir made about how Olaf really defeated Numinex.

There are a few ancient bard texts that provide one possible answer. These tomes suggest that Numinex was particularly foul-tempered because he was extremely old. In these accounts, the dragon spends his final years terrorizing the country side before flying off to the top of Mount Athor to die in peace.

When Olaf finds Numinex, the dragon is too weak to defend himself. Olaf and his men capture the beast without effort, but decide to take advantage of the situation by fabricating a heroic tale. It is worth noting that all of Olaf's warriors who were said to witness the shout duel went on to become wealthy leaders during Olaf's reign as High King.

However, it is equally likely that Svaknir had some grudge against Olaf, and his scandalous verse was an attempt to damage the High King's reputation. Alas, we will never know.

I leave you now, good reader, with this gentle reminder: A good historian must remain impartial, and consider all points of view. Time has a way of distorting our record of events, so the closer you can get to the original sources, the better!

The Old Ways

by Celarus the Loremaster

We who know the Old Ways are well aware of the existence of a spiritual world invisible to the unenlightened. Just as one living in a kingdom but unaware of the political machinations underneath may see a new tax or battle preparation as the caprices of fortune, many observe floods, famines, and madness with helpless incomprehension. This is deplorable. As the great Cuilean Darnizhaan moaned, "The power of ignorance can shatter ebony like glass."

What, after all, is the origin of these spiritual forces that move the invisible strings of Mundus? Any neophyte of Artaeum knows that these spirits are our ancestors -- and that, while living, they too were bewildered by the spirits of their ancestors, and so on back to the original Acharyai. The Daedra and gods to whom the common people turn are no more than the spirits of superior men and women whose power and passion granted them great influence in the afterworld.

Certainly this is our truth and our religion. But how does it help us in our sacred duty of seliffrnsae, or providing "grave and faithful counsel" to lesser men?

Primarily, it is easy to grasp the necessity both of endowing good men with great power and making powerful men good. We recognize the multiple threats that a strong tyrant represents -- breeds cruelty which feeds the Daedra Boethiah and hatred which feeds the Daedra Vaernima; if he should die having performed a particularly malevolent act, he may go to rule in Oblivion; and worst of all, he inspires other villains to thirst after power and other rulers to embrace villainy. Knowing this, we have developed patience in our dealings with such despots. They should be crippled, humiliated, impoverished, imprisoned. Other counsellors may advocate assassination or warfare -- which, aside from its spiritual insignificance, is expensive and likely to inflict at least as much pain on the innocents as the brutish dictator.

No, we are intelligence gatherers, dignified diplomats -- not revolutionaries.

How, then, are our counsellors "faithful"? We are faithful only to the Old Ways -- it is essential always to remember the spiritual world while keeping our eyes open in the physical one. Performing the Rites of Moawita on the 2nd of Hearth Fire and the Vigyld on the 1st of Second Seed are essential means of empowering salutary spirits and debilitating unclean ones. How, then, are we at once faithful to those we counsel and to the Isle of Artaeum? Perhaps the sage Taheritae said it best: "In Mundus, conflict and disparity are what bring change, and change is the most sacred of the Eleven Forces. Change is the force without focus or origin. It is the duty of the disciplined Psijic ["Enlightened One"] to dilute change where it brings greed, gluttony, sloth, ignorance, prejudice, cruelty... [here Taheritae lists the rest of the 111 Prodigalities], and to encourage change where it brings excellence, beauty, happiness, and enlightenment. As such, the faithful counsel has but one master: His mind. If the man the Psijic counsels acts wickedly and brings oegnithr ["bad change"] and will otherwise not be counselled, it is the Psijic's duty to counterbalance the oegnithr by any means necessary [emphasis mine]."

A student of the Old Ways may indeed ally himself to a lord -- but it is a risky relationship. It cannot be stressed enough that the choice be wisely made. Should the lord refuse wise counsel and order the Psijic (to use Taheritae's outmoded word) to perform an act contrary to the teachings of the Old Ways, there are few available options. The Psijic may obey, albeit unwillingly, and fall prey to the dark forces against which he has devoted his life. The Psijic may abandon his lord, which will bring shame on him and the Isle of Artaeum, and so may never be allowed home again. Or the Psijic may simply kill himself.

On Artaeum

By Taurce il-Anselma

The Isle of Artaeum (ar-TAY-um) is the third largest island in the Summurset archipelago, located south of the Moridunon village of Potansa and west of the mainland village of Runcibae. It is best known for being home to the Psijic Order, perhaps the oldest monastic group in Tamriel.

The earliest written record of Psijics is from the 20th year of the First Era and tells the tale of the renowned Breton sage and author Voernet, traveling to the Isle of Artaeum to meet with Iachesis, the Ritemaster of the Psijics.

Even then, the Psijics were the counsellors of kings and proponents of the "Elder Way," taught to them by the original race that inhabited Tamriel. The Elder Way is a philosophy of meditation and study said to bind the forces of nature to the individual will. It differs from magicka in origin, but the effects are much the same.

That said, it is perhaps more than coincidence that the Isle of Artaeum literally vanished from the shores of Summurset at the beginning of the Second Era at about the time of the founding of the Mages Guild in Tamriel. Various historians and scholars have published theories about this, but perhaps none but Iachesis and his own could shed light on the matter.

Five hundred years passed and Artaeum returned. The Psijics on the Isle consisted of persons, mostly Elves, who had disappeared and were presumed dead in the Second Era. They could not or would not offer any explanation for Artaeum's whereabouts during that time, or the fate of Iachesis and the original council of Artaeum.

Currently, the Psijics are led by the Loremaster Celarus, who has presided over the Council of Artaeum for the last two hundred and fifty years. The Council's influence in Tamrielan politics is tidal. The kings of Summurset, particularly those of Moridunon, have often sought the Psijics' opinion.

Emperor Uriel V was much influenced by the Council in the early, most glorious parts of his reign, before his disastrous attack on Akavir. It has even been suggested that the fleet of King Orghum of Pyandonea was destroyed by a joint effort of Emperor Antiochus and the Psijic Order. The last four emperors, Uriel VI, Morihatha, Pelagius IV, and Uriel VII, have been suspicious of the Psijics enough to refuse ambassadors from the Isle of Artaeum within the Imperial City.

The Isle of Artaeum is difficult to chart geographically. It is said that it shifts continuously either at random or by decree of the Council. Visitors to the island are so rare as to be almost unheard of. Anyone desirous of a meeting with a Psijic may find contacts in Potansa and Runcibae as well as many of the kingdoms of Summurset.

Were it more accessible, Artaeum would be a favored destination for travelers. I have been to the Isle once and still dream of its idyllic orchards and clear pastures, its still and silent lagoons, its misty woodlands, and the unique Psijic architecture that seems to be as natural as its surroundings as well as wondrous in its own right. The Ceporah Tower in particular I would study, for it is a relic from a civilization that predates the High Elves by several hundred years and is still used in certain rites by the Psijics. Perhaps one day I might return.

[Note: The author is currently on the Isle of Artaeum by gracious consent of Master Sargenius of the Council of Artaeum.]

On Oblivion

by Morian Zenas

It is improper, however customary, to refer to the denizens of the dimension of Oblivion as "demons." This practice probably dates to the Alessian Doctrines of the First Era prophet Marukh -- which, rather amusingly, forbade "trafficke with daimons" and then neglected to explain what daimons were.

It is most probable that "daimon" is a misspelling or etymological rendition of "Daedra," the old Elven word for those strange, powerful creatures of uncertain motivation who hail from the dimension of Oblivion. ("Daedra" is actually the plural form; the singular is "Daedroth.") In a later tract by King Hale the Pious of Skyrim, almost a thousand years after the publication of the original Doctrines, the evil machinations of his political enemies are compared to "the wickedness of the demons of Oblivion... their depravity equals that of Sanguine itself, they are cruel as Boethiah, calculating as Molag Bal, and mad as Sheogorath." Hale the Pious thus long-windedly introduced four of the Daedra lords to written record.

But the written record is not, after all, the best way to research Oblivion and the Daedra who inhabit it. Those who "trafficke with daimons" seldom wish it to be a matter of public account. Nevertheless, scattered throughout the literature of the First Era are diaries, journals, notices for witch burnings, and guides for Daedra-slayers. These I have used as my primary source material. They are at least as trustworthy as the Daedra lords I have actually summoned and spoken with at length.

Apparently, Oblivion is a place composed of many lands -- thus the many names for which Oblivion is synonymous: Coldharbour, Quagmire, Moonshadow, etc. It may be correctly supposed that each land of Oblivion is ruled over by one prince. The Daedra princes whose names appear over and over in ancient records (though this is not an infallible test of their authenticity or explicit existence, to be sure) are the afore-mentioned

Sanguine, Boethiah, Molag Bal, and Sheogorath, and in addition, Azura, Mephala, Clavicus Vile, Vaernima, Malacath, Hoermius (or Hermaeus or Hormaius or Herma -- there seems to be no one accepted spelling) Mora, Namira, Jyggalag, Nocturnal, Mehrunes Dagon, and Peryite.

From my experience, Daedra are a very mixed lot. It is almost impossible to categorize them as a whole except for their immense power and penchant for extremism. Be that as it may, I have here attempted to do so in a few cases, purely for the sake of scholastic expediency.

Mehrunes Dagon, Molag Bal, Peryite, Boethiah, and Vaernima are among the most consistently "demonic" of the Daedra, in the sense that their spheres seem to be destructive in nature. The other Daedra can, of course, be equally dangerous, but seldom purely for the sake of destruction as these five can. Nor are these previous five identical in their destructiveness. Mehrunes Dagon seems to prefer natural disasters -- earthquakes and volcanoes -- for venting his anger. Molag Bal elects the employment of other daedra, and Boethiah inspires the arms of mortal warriors. Peryite's sphere seems to be pestilence, and Vaernima's torture.

In preparation for the next instalment in this series, I will be investigating two matters that have intrigued me since I began my career as a Daedra researcher. The first is on one particular Daedroth, perhaps yet another Daedra prince, referred to in multiple articles of incunabula as Hircine. Hircine has been called "the Huntsman of the Princes" and "the Father of Man-beasts," but I have yet to find anyone who can summon him. The other, and perhaps more doubtful, goal I have is to find a practical means for mortal men to pass through to Oblivion. It has always been my philosophy that we need only fear that which we do not understand -- and with that thought in mind, I ever pursue my objective.

On Stepping Lightly: *The Nordic Ruins of Skyrim*

by Sigilis Justus

Dotting the landscape of Skyrim, the ancient Nordic Ruins are a testament to the ingenuity of the Nordic people of the past. When constructing the final resting places of their noble class, these supposedly "barbaric" people proved quite the opposite; developing some of the most sophisticated and clever defenses ever encountered. Coupled with the presence of the fearsome draugr, these tombs have become quite a challenge for the would-be treasure hunter.

The most often-overlooked obstacles are the abundance of traps spread throughout the tombs. Ranging from simple tripwire-activated rock falls to complex pressure plate-triggered dart traps, the Nords utilize these devices abundantly. Most of the traps can be avoided by simply looking for the trigger mechanism and avoiding them. Since they are most often placed in areas where distractions abound, remember to keep your eyes to the floor.

One of the keys to survival in a Nordic Ruin is through the clever use of these traps to gain an upper hand against its denizens. In many cases, it's trivial to lure them across the triggering mechanism in hopes that they'll fall victim to the trap's effect. This advantage can come heavily into play when encountering an oil trap. Using a ranged attack, lure your victim onto the oil and then loose an arrow at the fire pot hanging above. The moment the fire pot shatters, the entire pool of oil will ignite and engulf the enemy. Just be certain that you're standing clear of the oil yourself, or else this trick could end your expedition in an untimely manner.

Perhaps one of the most amazing engineering marvels of all to be found in the ruins has little to do with the traps designed to kill. Utilizing all manner of pull chains, levers, switches and pressure plates, some of the most frustrating obstacles can occur in the form of puzzles that could threaten to

block your progress. Watch for the telltale signs of these barriers: groups of levers in a single place, rotating pillars with carvings on all faces and even large arrays of pressure plates covering the floor of a room. In most cases, the puzzle might take experimentation, in others the solution could actually be present elsewhere in the complex. It's recommended to keep a writing implement and a journal handy in the latter case.

Although Nordic Ruins are commonly infested with vermin such as skeever and spiders, these creatures pale in comparison to the mighty draugr. These horrific, animated dead beings are commonly found as guardians in most of the tombs and will defend them mercilessly. Since the draugr tends to lay dormant until someone happens upon their resting place, it's advisable to keep an eye on any niches or sarcophaguses that you encounter. These undead beings animate rather rapidly and silently, so always watch your back - any remains you may have passed could suddenly animate and set upon you without warning.

The perils of the Nordic Ruin are not without reward. The burial chambers in some of the larger complexes have been known to contain all manners of riches, from gold coins to even the occasional enchanted weapon or armor. Never dismiss the small ceremonial urns that dot the ruins, they are commonly filled with ancient offerings of great value. There are rumors that most, if not all of these ruins contain large walls with magical inscriptions upon them, but these have yet to be confirmed.

While this might seem like comprehensive guide to the ruins, there are certain to be dangers lurking within that remain undiscovered. Just be sure to always enter these tombs with plenty of equipment and a good, solid weapon by your side. With a bit of patience, a keen eye and a light step, the Nordic Ruin can bring you great wealth - do without these simple safety measures and you risk becoming a permanent resident like many before you.

On the Great Collapse

To the esteemed Jarl Valdimar of Winterhold,

First, please allow me to offer my most sincere condolences. I understand that you, like many others, have lost family and you have my deepest sympathies.

I also understand that some on your council have placed the blame for this horrible disaster on my colleagues at the College. While I can certainly appreciate the shock at the scope of recent events, and the desire to comprehend what has happened, I must strongly urge you to consider the full situation.

You know as well as any the College's history and reputation in Winterhold. It has long been a source of pride for your city, a unique fixture in Skyrim. Some of the greatest wizards have studied here, and the College has always promoted positive relations with the other provinces of Tamriel.

It is well-known that those relations have been, shall we say, strained over the last few decades. After the Oblivion Crisis, it was only natural that the people of Skyrim showed a distrust for mages, even though the vast majority of us actively worked to counter the actions of the Mythic Dawn cult. The College expected such a reaction, and hoped that distrust would fade over time.

And then, the Red Year. No one foresaw the explosion of Red Mountain, or the devastating effect it would have on the Dunmer culture. Your predecessor was kind enough to welcome many of the refugees, particularly those who could contribute to the College's studies. We were quite grateful.

When Solstheim was generously offered to the Dunmer as a new home, I was as surprised as any. I did not, however, share the apparent expectation that all dark elves would leave Skyrim. It did not go unnoticed that many in Winterhold were unhappy at how many mages chose to stay at the College

rather than relocate.

And now, the storms that have wracked the coast of Skyrim for close to a year have finally broken, but at great cost to us all. This great collapse that has devastated Winterhold was unexpected, I assure you. That the College has remained unaffected is only a testament to the protective magicks placed around it so long ago. It in no way implies that we were somehow prepared specifically for this event, and is certainly no indication that the College was somehow responsible.

I certainly would never hold you accountable for the gossip spread amongst the people of Winterhold. I would urge you, though, to not allow that gossip to take root and become a commonly held belief. I do not wish to see our relationship crumble like Winterhold has, as I assure you the College will remain here a very, very long time.

Your persistent advocate,

Arch-Mage Deneth

Opusculus Lamae Bal ta Mezzamortie: A Brief Account of Lamae Bal and the Restless Death

Mabei Aywenil, Scribe

Translation by
University of Gwylim Press; 3E 105

As brighter grows light, darker becomes shadow. So it passed that the Daedra Molag Bal looked on Arkay and thought the Aedra prideful of his dominion o'er the death of man and mer, and it was sooth.

Bal, whose sphere is the wanton oppression and entrapment of mortal souls, sought to thwart Arkay, who knew that not man, nor mer, nor beastfolk of all Nirn could escape eventual death. The Aedra was doubtless of his sphere, and so Molag Bal set upon Nirn to best death.

Tamriel was still young, and filled with danger and wondrous magick when Bal walked in the aspect of a man and took a virgin, Lamae Beolfag, from the Nedic Peoples. Savage and loveless, Bal profaned her body, and her screams became the Shrieking Winds, which still haunt certain winding fjords of Skyrim. Shedding a lone droplet of blood on her brow, Bal left Nirn, having sown his wrath.

Violated and comatose, Lamae was found by nomads, and cared for. A fortnight hence, the nomad wyrd-woman enshrouded Lamae in pall for she had passed into death. In their way, the nomads built a bonfire to immolate the husk. That night, Lamae rose from her funeral pyre, and set upon the coven, still aflame. She ripped the throats of the women, ate the eyes of the children, and raped their men as cruelly as Bal had ravished her.

And so; Lamae, (who is known to us as blood-matron) imprecated her foul

aspect upon the folk of Tamriel, and begat a brood of countless abominations, from which came the vampires, most cunning of the night-horrors. And so was the scourge of undeath wrought upon Tamriel, cruelly mocking Arkay's rhythm of life and death through all the coming eras of the et'Ada, and for all his sadness, Arkay knew this could not be undone.

An Overview Of Gods and Worship In Tamriel

by Brother Hetchfeld

Editor's Note:
Brother Hetchfeld is an Associate Scribe at the Imperial University, Office of Introductory Studies.

Gods are commonly judged upon the evidence of their interest in worldly matters. A central belief in the active participation of Deities in mundane matters can be challenged by the reference to apparent apathy and indifference on the part of Gods during times of plague or famine.

From intervention in legendary quests to manifestations in common daily life, no pattern for the Gods of Tamriel activities is readily perceived. The concerns of Gods in many ways may seem unrelated or at best unconcerned with the daily trials of the mortal realm. The exceptions do exist, however.

Many historical records and legends point to the direct intervention of one or more gods at times of great need. Many heroic tales recount blessings of the divinity bestowed upon heroic figures who worked or quested for the good of a Deity or the Deity's temple. Some of the more powerful artifacts in the known world were originally bestowed upon their owners through such reward. It has also been reported that priests of high ranking in their temples may on occasion call upon their Deity for blessings or help in time of need. The exact nature of such contact and the blessings bestowed is given to much speculation, as the temples hold such associations secret and holy. This direct contact gives weight to the belief that the Gods are aware of the mortal realm. In many circumstances, however, these same Gods will do nothing in the face of suffering and death, seeming to feel no need to interfere. It is thus possible to conclude that we, as mortals, may not be capable of understanding more than a small fraction of the reasoning and logic such beings use.

One defining characteristic of all Gods and Goddesses is their interest in worship and deeds. Deeds in the form of holy quests are just one of the many things that bring the attention of a Deity. Deeds in everyday life, by conforming to the statutes and obligations of individual temples are commonly supposed to please a Deity. Performance of ceremony in a temple may also bring a Deity's attention. Ceremonies vary according to the individual Deity. The results are not always apparent but sacrifice and offerings are usually required to have any hope of gaining a Deity's attention.

While direct intervention in daily temple life has been recorded, the exact nature of the presence of a God in daily mundane life is a subject of controversy. A traditional saying of the Wood Elves is that "One man's miracle is another man's accident." While some gods are believed to take an active part of daily life, others are well known for their lack of interest in temporal affairs.

It has been theorized that gods do in fact gain strength from such things as worship through praise, sacrifice and deed. It may even be theorized that the number of worshippers a given Deity has may reflect on His overall position among the other Gods. This my own conjecture, garnered from the apparent ability of the larger temples to attain blessings and assistance from their God with greater ease than smaller religious institutions.

There are reports of the existence of spirits in our world that have the same capacity to use the actions and deeds of mortals to strengthen themselves as do the Gods. The understanding of the exact nature of such creatures would allow us to understand with more clarity the connection between a Deity and the Deity's worshipers.

The implication of the existence of such spirits leads to the speculation that these spirits may even be capable of raising themselves to the level of a God or Goddess. Motusuo of the Imperial Seminary has suggested that these spirits may be the remains of Gods and Goddesses who through time lost all or most of their following, reverting to their earliest most basic

form. Practioners of the Old Ways say that there are no Gods, just greater and lesser spirits. Perhaps it is possible for all three theories to be true.

Palla

Book I

by Vojne Mierstyyd

Palla. Pal La. I remember when I first heard that name, not long ago at all. It was at a Tales and Tallows ball at a very fine estate west of Mir Corrup, to which I and my fellow Mages Guild initiates had found ourselves unexpectedly invited. Truth be told, we needn't have been too surprised. There were very few other noble families in Mir Corrup -- the region had its halcyon days as a resort for the wealthy far back in the 2nd era -- and on reflection, it was only appropriate to have sorcerers and wizards present at a supernatural holiday. Not that we were anything more exotic than students at a small, nonexclusive charterhouse of the Guild, but like I said, there was a paucity of other choices available.

For close to a year, the only home I had known was the rather ramshackle if sprawling grounds of the Mir Corrup Mages Guild. My only companions were my fellow initiates, most of which only tolerated me, and the masters, whose bitterness at being at a backwater Guild prompted never-ending abuse.

Immediately the School of Illusion had attracted me. The Magister who taught us recognized me as an apt pupil who loved not only the spells of the science but their philosophical underpinnings. There was something about the idea of warping the imperceptible energies of light, sound, and mind that appealed to my nature. Not for me the flashy schools of destruction and alteration, the holy schools of restoration and conjuration, the practical schools of alchemy and enchantment, or the chaotic school of mysticism. No, I was never so pleased as to take an ordinary object and by a little magic make it seem something other than what it was.

It would have taken more imagination than I had to apply that philosophy to my monotonous life. After the morning's lessons, we were assigned tasks before our evening classes. Mine had been to clean out the study of a recently deceased resident of the Guild, and categorize his clutter of

spellbooks, charms, and incunabula.

It was a lonely and tedious appointment. Magister Tendixus was an inveterate collector of worthless junk, but I was reprimanded any time I threw something away of the least possible value. Gradually I learned enough to deliver each of his belongings to the appropriate department: potions of healing to the Magisters of Restoration, books on physical phenomena to the Magisters of Alteration, herbs and minerals to the Alchemists, and soulgems and bound items to the Enchanters. After one delivery to the Enchanters, I was leaving with my customary lack of appreciation, when Magister Ilther called me back.

"Boy," said the portly old man, handing me back one item. "Destroy this."

It was a small black disc covered with runes with a ring of red-orange gems like bones circling its periphery.

"I'm sorry, Magister," I stammered. "I thought it was something you'd be interested in."

"Take it to the great flame and destroy it," he barked, turning his back on me. "You never brought it here."

My interest was piqued, because I knew the only thing that would make him react in such a way. Necromancy. I went back to Magister Tendixus's chamber and poured through his notes, looking for any reference to the disc. Unfortunately, most of the notes had been written in a strange code that I was powerless to decipher. I was so fascinated by the mystery that I nearly arrived late for my evening class in Enchantment, taught by Magister Ilther himself.

For the next several weeks, I divided my time categorizing the general debris and making my deliveries, and researching the disc. I came to understand that my instinct was correct: the disc was a genuine necromantic artifact. Though I couldn't understand most of the Magister's notes, I determined that he thought it to be a means of resurrecting a loved one from the grave.

Sadly, the time came when the chamber had been categorized and cleared, and I was given another assignment, assisting in the stables of the Guild's menagerie. At least finally I was working with some of my fellow initiates and had the opportunity of meeting the common folk and nobles who came to the Guild on various errands. Thus was I employed when we were all invited to the Tales and Tallows ball.

If the expected glamour of the evening were not enough, our hostess was reputed to be young, rich, unmarried orphan from Hammerfell. Only a month or two before had she moved to our desolate, wooded corner of the Imperial Province to reclaim an old family manorhouse and grounds. The initiates at the Guild gossiped like old women about the mysterious young lady's past, what had happened to her parents, why she had left or been driven from her homeland. Her name was Betaniqi, and that was all we knew.

We wore our robes of initiation with pride as we arrived for the ball. At the enormous marble foyer, a servant announced each of our names as if we were royalty, and we strutted into the midst of the revelers with great puffery. Of course, we were then promptly ignored by one and all. In essence, we were unimportant figures to lend some thickness to the ball. Background characters.

The important people pushed through us with perfect politeness. There was old Lady Schaudirra discussing diplomatic appointments to Balmora with the Duke of Rimfarlin. An orc warlord entertained a giggling princess with tales of rape and pillage. Three of the Guild Magisters worried with three painfully thin noble spinsters about the haunting of Daggerfall. Intrigues at the Imperial and various royal courts were analyzed, gently mocked, fretted over, toasted, dismissed, evaluated, mitigated, admonished, subverted. No one looked our way even when we were right next to them. It was as if my skill at illusion had somehow rendered us all invisible.

I took my flagon out to the terrace. The moons were doubled, equally luminous in the sky and in the enormous reflecting pool that stretched out into the garden. The white marble statuary lining the sides of the pool

caught the fiery glow and seemed to burn like torches in the night. The sight was so otherworldly that I was mesmerized by it, and the strange Redguard figures immortalized in stone. Our hostess had made her home there so recently that some of the sculptures were still wrapped in sheets that billowed and swayed in the gentle breeze. I don't know how long I stared before I realized I wasn't alone.

She was so small and so dark, not only in her skin but in her clothing, that I nearly took her for a shadow. When she turned to me, I saw that she was very beautiful and young, not more than seventeen.

"Are you our hostess?" I finally asked.

"Yes," she smiled, blushing. "But I'm ashamed to admit that I'm very bad at it. I should be inside with my new neighbors, but I think we have very little in common."

"It's been made abundantly clear that they hope I have nothing in common with them either," I laughed. "When I'm a little higher than an initiate in the Mages Guild, they might see me as more of an equal."

"I don't understand the concept of equality in Cyrodiil yet," she frowned. "In my culture, you proved your worth, not just expected it. My parents both were great warriors, as I hope to be."

Her eyes went out to the lawn, to the statues.

"Do the sculptures represent your parents?"

"That's my father Pariom there," she said gesturing to a life-sized representation of a massively built man, unashamedly naked, gripping another warrior by the throat and preparing to decapitate him with an outstretched blade. It was clearly a realistic depiction. Pariom's face was plain, even slightly ugly with a low forehead, a mass of tangled hair, stubble on his cheeks. Even a slight gap in his teeth, which no sculptor would surely have invented except to do justice to his model's true idiosyncrasies.

"And your mother?" I asked, pointing to a nearby statue of a proud, rather squat warrior woman in a mantilla and scarf, holding a child.

"Oh no," she laughed. "That was my uncle's old nurse. Mother's statue still has a sheet over it."

I don't know what prompted me to insist that we unveil the statue that she pointed to. In all likelihood, it was nothing but fate, and a selfish desire to continue the conversation. I was afraid that if I did not give her a project, she would feel the need to return to the party, and I would be alone again. At first she was reluctant. She had not yet made up her mind whether the statues would suffer in the wet, sometimes cold Cyrodilic climate. Perhaps all should be covered, she reasoned. It may be that she was merely making conversation, and was reluctant as I was to end the stand-off and be that much closer to having to return to the party.

In a few minutes time, we tore the tarp from the statue of Betaniqi's mother. That is when my life changed forevermore.

She was an untamed spirit of nature, screaming in a struggle with a misshapen monstrous figure in black marble. Her gorgeous, long fingers were raking across the creature's face. The monster's talons gripped her right breast in a sort of caress that prefaces a mortal wound. Its legs and hers wound around one another in a battle that was a dance. I felt annihilated. This lithe but formidable woman was beautiful beyond all superficial standards. Whoever had sculpted it had somehow captured not only a face and figure of a goddess, but her power and will. She was both tragic and triumphant. I fell instantly and fatally in love with her.

I had not even noticed when Gelyn, one of my fellow initiates who was leaving the party, came up behind us. Apparently I had whispered the word "magnificent," because I heard Betaniqi reply as if miles away, "Yes, it is magnificent. That's why I was afraid of exposing it to the elements."

Then I heard, clearly, like a stone breaking water, Gelyn: "Mara preserve me. That must be Palla."

"Then you heard of my mother?" asked Betaniqi, turning his way.

"I hail from Wayrest, practically on the border to Hammerfell. I don't think there's anyone who hasn't heard of your mother and her great heroism, ridding the land of that abominable beast. She died in that struggle, didn't she?"

"Yes," said the girl sadly. "But so too did the creature."

For a moment, we were all silent. I don't remember anything more of that night. Somehow I knew I was invited to dine the next evening, but my mind and heart had been entirely and forever more arrested by the statue. I returned back to the Guild, but my dreams were fevered and brought me no rest. Everything seemed diffused by white light, except for one beautiful, fearsome woman.

Palla.

Book II

by Vojne Mierstyyd

Palla. Pal La. The name burned in my heart. I found myself whispering it in my studies even when I tried to concentrate on something the Magister was saying. My lips would silently purse to voice the "Pal," and tongue lightly flick to form the "La" as if I were kissing her spirit before me. It was madness in every way except that I knew that it was madness. I knew I was in love. I knew she was a noble Redguard woman, a fierce warrior more beautiful than the stars. I knew her young daughter Betaniqi had taken possession of a manorhouse near the Guild, and that she liked me, perhaps was even infatuated. I knew Palla had fought a terrible beast and killed it. I knew Palla was dead.

As I say, I knew it was madness, and by that, I knew I could not be mad. But I also knew that I must return to Betaniqi's palace to see her statue of my beloved Palla engaged in that final, horrible, fatal battle with the monster.

Return I did, over and over again. Had Betaniqi been a different sort of noblewoman, more comfortable with her peers, I would not have had so many opportunities. In her innocence, unaware of my sick obsession, she welcomed my company. We would talk for hours, laughing, and every time we would take a walk to the reflecting pond where I would always stop breathless before the sculpture of her mother.

"It's a marvelous tradition you have, preserving these figures of your ancestors at their finest moments," I said, feeling her curious eyes on me. "And the craftsmanship is without parallel."

"You wouldn't believe me," laughed the girl. "But it was a bit of scandal when my great grandfather began the custom. We Redguards hold a great reverence for our families, but we are warriors, not artists. He hired an traveling artist to create the first statues, and everyone admired them until it

was revealed that the artist was an elf. An Altmer from the Summurset Isle."

"Scandal!"

"It was, absolutely," Betaniqi nodded seriously. "The idea that a pompous, wicked elf's hands had formed these figures of noble Redguard warriors was unthinkable, profane, irreverent, everything bad you can imagine. But my great grandfather's heart was in the beauty of it, and his philosophy of using the best to honor the best passed down to us all. I would not have even considered having a lesser artist create the statues of my parents, even if it would have been more allegiant to my culture."

"They're all exquisite," I said.

"But you like the one of my mother most of all," she smiled. "I see you look at it even when you seem to be looking at the others. It's my favorite also."

"Would you tell me more about her?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light and conversational.

"Oh, she would have said she was nothing extraordinary, but she was," the girl said, picking a flower from the garden. "My father died when I was quite young, and she had so many roles to fill, but she did them all effortlessly. We have a great many business interests and she was brilliant at managing everything. Certainly better than I am now. All it took was her smile and everyone obeyed, and those that didn't paid dearly. She was very witty and charming, but a formidable force when the need arose for her to fight. Hundreds of battles, but I can never remember a moment of feeling neglected or unloved. I literally thought she was too strong for death. Stupid, I know, but when she went to battle that -- that horrible creature, that freak from a mad wizard's laboratory, I never even thought she would not return. She was kind to her friends and ruthless to her enemies. What more can one say about a woman than that?"

Poor Betaniqi's eyes teared up with remembrance. What sort of villain was I to goad her so, in order to satisfy my perverted longings? Sheogorath could never have conflicted a mortal man more than me. I found myself both

weeping and filled with desire. Palla not only looked like a goddess, but from her daughter's story, she was one.

That night while undressing for bed, I rediscovered the black disc I had stolen from Magister Tendixus's office weeks before. I had half-forgotten about its existence, that mysterious necromantic artifact which the mage believed could resurrect a dead love. Almost by pure instinct, I found myself placing the disc on my heart and whispering, "Palla."

A momentary chill filled my chamber. My breath hung in the air in a mist before dissipating. Frightened I dropped the disc. It took a moment before my reason returned, and with it the inescapable conclusion: the artifact could fulfill my desire.

Until the early morning hours, I tried to raise my mistress from the chains of Oblivion, but it was no use. I was no necromancer. I entertained thoughts of how to ask one of the Magisters to help me, but I remembered how Magister Ilther had bid me to destroy it. They would expel me from the Guild if I went to them and destroy the disc themselves. And with it, my only key to bringing my love to me.

I was in my usual semi-torpid condition the next day in classes. Magister Ilther himself was lecturing on his specialty, the School of Enchantment. He was a dull speaker with a monotone voice, but suddenly I felt as if every shadow had left the room and I was in a palace of light.

"When most persons think of my particular science, they think of the process of invention. The infusing of charms and spells into objects. The creation of a magickal blade, perhaps, or a ring. But the skilled enchanter is also a catalyst. The same mind that can create something new can also provoke greater power from something old. A ring that can generate warmth for a novice, on the hand of such a talent can bake a forest black." The fat man chuckled: "Not that I'm advocating that. Leave that for the School of Destruction."

That week all the initiates were asked to choose a field of specialization. All were surprised when I turned my back on my old darling, the School of

Illusion. It seemed ridiculous to me that I had ever entertained an affection for such superficial charms. All my intellect was now focused on the School of Enchantment, the means by which I could free the power of the disc.

For months thereafter, I barely slept. A few hours a week, I'd spend with Betaniqi and my statue to give myself strength and inspiration. All the rest of my time was spent with Magister Ilther or his assistants, learning everything I could about enchantment. They taught me how to taste the deepest levels of magicka within a stored object.

"A simple spell cast once, no matter how skillfully and no matter how spectacularly, is ephemeral, of the present, what it is and no more," sighed Magister Ilther. "But placed in a home, it develops into an almost living energy, maturing and ripening so only its surface is touched when an unskilled hand wields it. You must consider yourself a miner, digging deeper to pull forth the very heart of gold."

Every night when the laboratory closed, I practiced what I had learned. I could feel my power grow and with it, the power of the disc. Whispering "Palla," I delved into the artifact, feeling every slight nick that marked the runes and every facet of the gemstones. At times I was so close to her, I felt hands touching mine. But something dark and bestial, the reality of death I suppose, would always break across the dawning of my dream. With it came an overwhelming rotting odor, which the initiates in the chambers next to mine began to complain about.

"Something must have crawled into the floorboards and died," I offered lamely.

Magister Ilther praised my scholarship, and allowed me the use of his laboratory after hours to further my studies. Yet no matter what I learned, Palla seemed scarcely closer. One night, it all ended. I was swaying in a deep ecstasy, moaning her name, the disc bruising my chest, when a sudden lightning flash through the window broke my concentration. A tempest of furious rain roared over Mir Corrup. I went to close the shutters, and when I returned to my table, I found that the disc had shattered.

I broke into hysterical sobs and then laughter. It was too much for my fragile mind to bear such a loss after so much time and study. The next day and the day after, I spent in my bed, burning with a fever. Had I not been a Mages Guild with so many healers, I likely would have died. As it was, I provided an excellent study for the budding young scholars.

When at last I was well enough to walk, I went to visit Betaniqi. She was charming as always, never once commenting on my appearance, which must have been ghastly. Finally I gave her reason to worry when I politely but firmly declined to walk with her along the reflecting pool.

"But you love looking at the statuary," she exclaimed.

I felt that I owed her the truth and much more. "Dear lady, I love more than the statuary. I love your mother. She is all I've been able to think about for months now, ever since you and I first removed the tarp from that blessed sculpture. I don't know what you think of me now, but I have been obsessed with learning how to bring her back from the dead."

Betaniqi stared at me, eyes wide. Finally she spoke: "I think you need to leave now. I don't know if this is a terrible jest --"

"Believe me, I wish it were. You see, I failed. I don't know why. It could not have been that my love wasn't strong enough, because no man had a stronger love. Perhaps my skills as an enchanter are not masterful, but it wasn't from lack of study!" I could feel my voice rise and knew I was beginning to rant, but I could not hold back. "Perhaps the fault lay in that your mother never met me, but I think that only the caster's love is taken into account in the necromantic spell. I don't know what it was! Maybe that horrible creature, the monster that killed her, cast some sort of curse on her with its dying breath! I failed! And I don't know why!"

With a surprising burst of speed and strength for so small a lady, Betaniqi shoved herself against me. She screamed, "Get out!" and I fled out the door.

Before she slammed the door shut, I offered my pathetic apologies: "I'm so sorry, Betaniqi, but consider that I wanted to bring your mother back to you.

It's madness, I know, but there is only one thing that's certain in my life and that's that I love Palla."

The door was nearly shut, but the girl opened it crack to ask tremulously: "You love whom?"

"Palla!" I cried to the Gods.

"My mother," she whispered angrily. "Was named Xarlys. Palla was the monster."

I stared at the closed door for Mara knows how much time, and then began the long walk back to the Mages Guild. My memory searched through the minutiae to the Tales and Tallows night so long ago when I first beheld the statue, and first heard the name of my love. That Breton initiate, Gelyn had spoken. He was behind me. Was he recognizing the beast and not the lady?

I turned the lonely bend that intersected with the outskirts of Mir Corrup, and a large shadow rose from the ground where it had been sitting, waiting for me.

"Palla," I groaned. "Pal La."

"Kiss me," it howled.

And that brings my story up to the present moment. Love is red, like blood.

Pension of the Ancestor Moth

To be read by all novitiates of the Temple:

The Order of the Ancestor Moth is as ancient as it is noble. We nurture and celebrate our beloved ancestors, whose spirits are manifest in the Ancestor Moths. Each moth carries the fjyron of an ancestor's spirit. Loosely translated as the "will to peace," the fjyron can be sung into the silk produced by the Ancestor Moths. When the silk is in turn spun into cloth and embroidered with the genealogy of the correct Ancestor, clothing of wondrous power can be made.

Adepts of our order are gifted with prescient powers. The wisdom of the ancestors can sing the future into the present. For this reason, our order and our order alone has been given the privilege to interpret the Elder Scrolls. These writings exceed even the gods, both aedra and daedra. Such insight into the inner fabric of reality comes at a price. Each reading of the Elder Scrolls is more profound than the last. Each leaves the priest blind for longer, and longer periods of time. Finally, the last reading achieves a nearly sublime understanding of that scroll's contents, but the priest is left permanently blinded to the light of this world. No longer can he read the scrolls.

This Monastery is dedicated to the service of these noble members of our order. They now live out their lives with the Ancestor Moths that they so love. Their underground demesnes are well suited to the moths. They raise and nurture the fragile creatures, singing to them constantly. They harvest the silk and spin it into bolts of cloth. They weave the cloth, embroidering it with the genealogies and histories of the ancestors that spun the silk. This is their new life.

As they tend the Ancestor Moths, so we tend the blind monks. While they toil in dark, we serve in the light. They need food and water. We provide. They need tools and furniture. We provide. They need secrecy and anonymity. We provide. They need purveyors to sell the fruit of their labors.

We provide.

At one time, we also provided protection. Many generations ago, Gudrun came to our temple. Newly blinded by visions of what was to be, she brought with her new teachings. The visions of the ancestors foresaw the need of the monks to defend themselves. They train and practice the teachings of Gudrun constantly. They are masters of the sword of no sword, the axes of no axe.

As a novitiate, you will learn the teachings of Gudrun. You will learn the way of the peaceful fist. You will learn to serve the blind monks. You will learn to provide. In time, you may attain the peace and insight of the Ancestor Moths.

The Pig Children

by Tyston Bane

No one -- not the oldest Dark Elf of Mount Dagoth-Ur or the Ancient Sage of Solitude himself -- can recall a time when the Orc did not ravage our fair Tamriel. Whatever foul and pestilent Daedra of Oblivion conjured them up could scarcely have created a more constant threat to the well-being of the civilized races of Tamriel than the obnoxious Orc.

Orcs are thankfully easy to recognize from other humanoids by their size -- commonly forty pertans in height and fifteen thousand angaids in weight -- their brutal pig-like features, and their stench. They are consistently belligerent, morally grotesque, intellectually moronic, and unclean. By all rights, the civilized races of Tamriel should have been able to purge the land of their blight eras ago, but their ferocity, animal cunning, and curious tribal loyalty have made them inevitable as leeches in a stagnant pool.

Tales of Orcish barbarity precede written record. When Jastyaga wrote of the Order of Diagna's joining the armies of Daggerfall and Sentinel "to hold at bay the wicked Orcs in their foul Orsinium fastness... and burn aught in cleansing flame" in 1E950, she assumed that any reader would be aware of the savagery of the Orcs. When the siege was completed thirty years later, after the death of many heroes including Gaiden Shinji, and the destruction of Orsinium scattered the Orcish survivors throughout the Wrothgarian Mountains, she further wrote, "The free peoples rejoiced for that their ancient fell enemy was dispersed into diverse parts." Obviously, the Orcs had been terrorizing the region of the Iliac Bay at least since the early years of the First Era.

The Posting of the Hunt

The writing in the book appears to be a hasty transcription, perhaps from dictation, or copied from a longer work.

Let no man say before a witness that the Hunt has not been called, nor the Rites declared, or the Ancient Offices observed.

The Ritual of the Innocent Quarry, also called the Wild Hunt, is an ancient rite drawing magical energy from the powerful magicka stream that engulfs this realm. The creators and times of the rituals are long forgotten. But followed properly, the rite brings great power and prestige to the Huntsman.

The ritual pits the all-powerful Huntsmen and their Greater and Lesser Dogs against the pitiful and doomed Innocent Quarry, called by tradition the Hare, after the mortal creature of human hunts. At once, the Huntsman is transported by the exquisite thrill and glory of his might and dominion over his helpless prey, and at the same time touched by the tragic, noble, and ultimately futile plight of the Innocent Quarry. In the highest aesthetic realization of the ritual, the ecstatic rapture of the kill is balanced by the Huntsman's identification with the sadness and despair of the Innocent Quarry. As in pieces the body of the innocent Hare is torn, the Huntsman reflects on the tragic imbalances of power and the cruel injustices of the world.

As the Hunt begins, the Lesser Dogs assemble before the green crystal reflections of the Chapel of the Innocent Quarry. Inside the Chapel, the Huntsmen, the Greater Dogs, and the Master of the Hunt perform the rites that initiate and sanctify the Huntsmen, the Hunt, and the Innocent Quarry. Then the Huntsman emerges from the Chapel, displays the Spear of Bitter Mercy, and recites the Offices of the Hunt. The Offices describe explains the laws and conditions of the four stages of the Hunt: the Drag, the Chase, the Call, and the View to the Kill.

Stage One -- The Drag, in which the Lesser Dogs drag the ground to flush

out the Hare.

Stage Two -- The Chase, in which the Greater Hounds drive the Hare before them.

Stage Three -- The Call, in which the Greater Hounds trap the Hare and summon the Huntsmen for the kill.

Stage Four -- The View, in which the Huntsman makes the kill with the ritual Spear of Bitter Mercy, and calls upon the Master of the Hunt to view the kill by ringing the town bell. The Master of the Hunt then bestows the Bounty upon the Huntsman Bold who has wielded the Spear of Bitter Mercy in the kill. The Master of the Hunt also calls upon the Huntsman Bold to name the next Hare for the next Hunt (though the Huntsman Bold himself may not participate in the next Hunt).

The Offices of the Hunt, which the Huntsmen, Master, and Hounds are solemnly sworn to honor, detail the practices and conditions of the Hunt. These practices and conditions, also known as the Law, strictly define all details of the Hunt, such as how many Hounds of each sort may participate, how the Spear of Bitter Mercy may be wielded, and so forth. In addition, the Law states that the Hare must have a genuine chance to escape the Hunt, no matter how slim. In practice, this condition has been defined as the availability of six keys, which, if gathered together in the Temple of Daedric Rites, permit the Hare to teleport away from the Hunt, and so elude the Huntsman and his Spear. It is inconceivable, of course, that the Hare might actually discover the keys and escape, but the forms must be observed, and tampering with the keys or cheating the Hare of a genuine chance of finding or using the keys is a shameful and unforgivable betrayal of the Law of the Hunt.

The Ritual of the Hunt grants the Huntsmen protection from all forms of attack, including mortal and immortal weapons, and sorceries of all schools. Huntsmen are cautioned, however, that the ritual does not protect the Huntsman from the potent energies of his own Spear, and cautions against reckless wielding of the Spear in close melee, darkness, or other dangerous circumstances, for a single touch of the Spear of Bitter Mercy means instant

and certain death for innocent Hare or fellow Huntsman alike.

The right to name a Wild Hunt is a grand and grave right indeed, as all but the High Daedra Lords are vulnerable to the potent sorceries of the Spear of Bitter Mercy. The Spear itself is therefore a terrible weapon, and it is forbidden to remove it from the Grounds of the Ritual Hunt.

A Primer on Enchanting

by Sergius Turrianus

Enchanting was raised to a fine art by the wizards of the Arcane University. Sadly, some of the nuances of this skill were lost when the Imperial City was sacked. Yet we are not without capability. This text will cover only the basics of Enchanting. It is but a primer for students of the College of Winterhold.

Before a weapon or bit of armor can be enchanted, the wizard must first learn the enchantment. This is a personal task. Enchantments cannot easily be passed from one mage to another. They must be understood at a primal level that can only be achieved by destroying an enchanted item and absorbing its nature.

The Arcane Enchanter is specifically designed for this task. Merely place an enchanted item in the device and will it to relent. The magic will flow into the mage, imbuing him with the knowledge of how the enchantment is formed. The utter destruction of the enchanted item is the unavoidable consequence of this process.

Items that already have enchantments cannot be enchanted further, so choose carefully when you enchant a blade or helmet. Before beginning an enchantment, make sure you have a filled soul gem. The enchantment will use this soul as a source of power. Place the item and the soul gem on the Arcane Echanter. Concentrate on the enchantment. The device will meld the two together, enchanting your weapon or armor.

Armor enchantments are permanent and do not need to be charged or powered. The reasons for this are not known. Some in the College have postulated that the wearer contributes small amounts of his own energy to keep the armor enchanted. Others say it is just the will of Magnus that it works that way. Regardless of the reason, enchanted armor and clothing never wear out.

Weapon enchantments are a different story. They slowly use up the soul energy in them until they are depleted. The enchantment remains, but a filled soul gem must be used to recharge the weapon. Perhaps it is the destructive nature of the weapon enchantment that makes it deplete. One intriguing theory is that the soul leaks out a little at a time into the victims that the weapon harms. As a novice enchanter, the reason is immaterial.

At first you will find that your enchantments require a lot of the soul energy. As you become more skilled, you can achieve the same effects with less and less soul energy. So practice your lessons and pay heed to your masters in the magical arts.

Proper Lock Design and Construction

by Unknown

I have encountered many thieves whose sole interest in locks is how to open them and thereby pilfer the protected contents of the room or chest. I have taken it upon myself to devise a system of locks that can defeat such villianous intent.

The materials used to create a lock are of utmost importance. Shoddy brass or copper will give way to a well placed kick, thereby rendering the lock itself useless. I recommend steel over iron when choosing a material. More robust materials tend to be prohibitively expensive and necessitate the door being made of similar metals. I have been chagrined to stumble across the shattered shell of a wooden chest, it's dwarven lock intact and still locked.

Once these basics are settled, pay particular attention to the offset of the tumblers. A seven degree offset to the keyhole will allow a torque style key to work smoothly, while at the same time causing numerous headaches for the thief attempting to insert non-torque lockpicks.

In similar fashion, the springs of the tumblers should be made by different smiths. Each smith will unknowingly create a spring with different tension than his fellow smiths. This variance will also create difficulties for anyone attempting to pick the lock.

Purloined Shadows

By Waughin Jarth

* Chapter One *

The candle was lit, and the thief was standing there, blinking, caught. She was young, rather dirty, wearing ragged black clothes that were surely quite smart and expensive weeks ago when she had stolen them from one of the city's best tailors. The look of surprise slipped from her face, and she took on a blank expression as she put the gold back on the table.

"What are you doing here?" the man with the candle asked, stepping from the shadows.

"That's a stupid question," the girl replied, frowning. "I'm obviously robbing you."

"Since nothing I have is missing," the man smiled, glancing at the gold on the table. "I would have to say that you're not robbing me. Attempting to rob me perhaps. The question I have is, why? You know who I am, I assume. You didn't just come in through an unlocked door."

"I've stolen from everyone else. I've taken soul gems from the Mages Guild, I've robbed the treasury of the most secure fortress, I cheated the Archbishop of Julianos... I even pickpocketed the Emperor Pelagius at his coronation. I thought it was your turn."

"I'm flattered," the man nodded. "Now that your ambition has been thwarted, what will you do? Flee? Perhaps retire?"

"Teach me," the girl replied, a little grin finding its way unconsciously on her face. "I picked all your locks, I slipped past all your wards... You designed them, you know how difficult that was for someone without training. I didn't come here for six gold pieces. I came here to prove myself.

Make me your student."

The Master of Stealth looked at the little girl burglar. "Your skill is not in need of training. Your planning is adequate, but I can help you with that. What is without hope is your ambition. You are past stealing for your livelihood, now you steal for the pleasure of it, for the challenge. That's a personality trait which is incurable, and will lead you to an early grave."

"Haven't you ever wanted to steal that which can't be stolen?" the girl asked. "Something that would make your name known forever?"

The Master did not answer: he only frowned.

"Clearly I was fooled by your reputation," she shrugged, and opened a window. "I thought you might want a willing accomplice on some great act of thievery which would go down in history. Like you said, my skill at planning is only adequate. I didn't have in mind an escape route, but this will have to do."

The burglar slipped down the sheer wall, dashed across the shadowy courtyard, and within a few minutes was back at her room in the run-down tavern. The Master was waiting for her there, in the dark.

"I didn't see you go past me," she gasped.

"You turned on the street when you heard the owl call," he replied. "The most important tool in the thieves' repertoire is distraction, either planned or improvised. I suppose your lessons have begun."

"And what is the final test?" the girl smiled.

When he told her, she could only stare. She had, it seemed, not misunderstood his reputation for daring. Not at all.

* Chapter Two *

For the week leading up to the Eighth of Hearthfire, the skies above Rindale were dark and alive as clouds of crows blotted out the sun. Their guttural squawks and groans deafened all. The peasants wisely bolted their doors and windows, praying to survival that most unholy of days.

On the night of the summoning, the birds fell silent, their black unblinking eyes following the witches' march into the glen. There were no moons to light the way, only the leader's single torch in the gloom. Their white robes appeared as indistinct shapes, like the faintest of ghosts.

A single tall tree stood in the middle of the clearing, every branch thick with crows, watching the procession without moving. The lead witch placed the torch at the base of the tree, and her seventeen followers formed a circle and began their slow, strange, wailing chant.

As they sang, the glow of the torch began to change. It did not diminish at all, but its color became more and more grey, so it seemed a pulsating wave of ash had fallen on the witches. Then it grew darker still, so that for a moment, though the fire yet burned, it was darkest night in the forest. The penumbra continued until the torch was burning with a color without a name, emptiness beyond mere blackness. It cast a glow, but it was an unnatural scintillation falling on the witches. Their robes of white became black. The Dunmer among them had eyes of green, and ivory white flesh. The Nords appeared black as coal. The crows watching overhead were as pure white as the witches' cloaks.

The Daedra Princess Nocturnal stepped out of the pit of uncolor.

She stood in the center of the circle, the tree of pallid crows her throne, aloof, as the witches continued their chanting, dropping their robes to prostrate themselves naked before their great mistress. Wrapping her night cloak around her, she smiled at their song. It spoke of her mystery, of veiled beauty, of eternal shadows and a divine future when the sun burns no more.

Nocturnal let her cloak slide from her shoulders and was naked. Her witches did not raise their head from the ground, but continued their hymn

of darkness.

"Now," said the girl to herself.

She had been up in the tree all day, dressed in a ridiculous suit of mock crows. It was uncomfortable, but when the witches had arrived, she forgot all her aches, and concentrated on being perfectly still, like the other crows in the tree. It had taken considerable planning and study between her and the Master of Stealth to find the glen, and to learn what to expect in the summoning of Nocturnal.

Gently, silently, the burglar eased herself down the branches of the tree, coming closer and closer to the Daedra Princess. She let herself break her concentration for just a moment, and wondered where the Master was. He had been confident in the plan. He said that when Nocturnal dropped her cloak, there would be a distraction, and it could be quickly taken in that instant provided the girl was in position at the precise right moment.

The girl climbed along the lowest of the branches, carefully pushing aside the crows that were, as the Master said, transfixed by the Princess in her naked beauty. The girl was now close enough, if she only reached out her arm, to touch Nocturnal's back.

The song was rising to a crescendo, and the girl knew that the ceremony would soon be over. Nocturnal would clothe herself before the witches ended the chant, and the chance to take the cloak would be over. The girl gripped the tree branch tightly as her mind raced. Could it be that the Master was not here at all? Was this, was this conceivably the entire test? Was it only to show that it could be done, not to do it?

The girl was furious. She had done everything perfectly, but the so-called Master of Stealth had proven himself a coward. Perhaps he had taught her a little in the months that it took to plan this, but what was it worth? Only one thing made her smile. On that night when she had stolen into his stronghold, she had kept one single gold piece, and he had never suspected it. It was symbolic, as symbolic as stealing the cloak of Nocturnal in its way, proving that the Master Thief could be robbed.

The girl was so lost on her mind that she thought she imagined it for a moment when a man's voice yelled out from the darkness, "Mistress!"

The next words she knew she didn't imagine: "Mistress! A thief! Behind you!"

The witches raised their heads, and screamed, ruining the sanctity of the ceremony, as they charged forward. The crows awoke and burst from the tree in an explosion of feathers and toad-like cries. Nocturnal herself whirled around, affixing the girl with her black eyes.

"Who art thee who dares profane?" The Princess hissed, as the pitch shadows flew from her body enveloping the girl in their lethal chill.

In the last instant before she was swallowed alive by darkness, the girl looked to the ground and saw that the cloak was gone, and she answered, as she understood, "Oh, who am I? I'm the distraction."

The Rear-Guard

by Tenace Mourl

The castle would hold. No matter the forces, the walls of Cascabel Hall would never fail, but that was small consolation for Menegur. He was hungry. In fact, he had never been so hungry. The well in the atrium of the fortress supplied him with enough water to hold there until the Fourth Era, but his stomach reminded Menegur minute to minute that he needed food.

The wagonload of supplies mocked him. When his army, the forces of the King of Solitude, had left Cascabel Hall, and he had manned the battlements as the rear-guard to protect their retreat, they had left a wagon behind to supply him with enough food for months. It was not until the night after they left that he inspected the larder and found that nothing edible was in the wagon. Trunk after trunk was filled with netch armor from the army's incursion into Morrowind. Apparently his Nord confederates had assumed that the lightly opaque material was hard tack in aspic. If the Dunmer whose caravan had been raided knew about this, they would never be able to stop laughing.

Menegur thought that his fellow mercenary and kinswoman Aerin would have found this amusing as well. She had spoken with great authority about netch leather, being an expert of sorts on light armor, but she had made a point to mention that it could not be eaten like other leather in occasions of hardship. It was a pity she couldn't be there to enjoy the irony, Menegur thought savagely. She had returned to Morrowind even before the king's army had left, preferring a life as a wanted fugitive to a free existence in the cold of Skyrim.

All the weeds in the courtyard had been devoured by the rear-guard's sixteenth day manning Cascabel Hall. The entire castle had been scoured: rotten tubers in the mulch pile found and consumed, a dusty bouquet in the countess's bedchamber eaten, almost every rat and insect but the most cunning infesting the castle walls had been tracked down and gobbled up.

The castellan's chambers, filled with acrid, inedible law books, had yielded up a couple crumbs of bread. Menegur had even scraped moss from the stones. There was no denying it: he would be dead from starvation before his army returned to break the ranks of the enemies who surrounded the fortress.

"The worst part," said Menegur, who had taken to talking to himself on only the second day alone in the castle. "Is how close sustenance is."

A vast arbor of golden apples stretched acre after acre near the castle walls. The sunlight cast a seductive gleam on the fruit, and the cruel wind carried sweet smells into Cascabel to torture him.

Like most Bosmer, Menegur was an archer. He was a master of long and medium distance fighting, but in close quarters, as he would be if he dared to leave the castle and enter the enemy camp in the arbor, he knew he would not last long. At some point, he knew he would have to try, but he had been dreading the day. It was upon him now.

Menegur put on the netch armor for the first time, feeling the powdery, almost velvet texture of the rendered leather against his skin. There was also a barely perceptible throb, which he recognized as the remnant nematocysts of the netch's venomous flesh, still tingling months after its death with domesticated poison. The combination made him feel energized. Aerin had described the sensation perfectly, just as she had explained how to defend himself while wearing netch leather armor.

Under cover of night, Menegur crept out of the back gate of the castle, locking it behind him with a rather cumbersome key. He made for the arbor as quietly as he could, but a passing sentry, coming behind a tree, saw him. Remaining calm, Menegur did as he remembered Aerin had instructed, only moving after the attack had been launched. The sentry's blade glided against the armor and knocked to the left, throwing the young man off balance. That was the trick, as he understood it: you had to be prepared to be hit, and merely move with the blow, allowing the membranous armor to divert the injury away.

Use your enemy's momentum against him, as Aerin used to say.

There were several more close encounters in the arbor, but each swing of an ax and each thrust of a sword found purchase elsewhere. With handfuls of apples, Menegur ran the gauntlet back to the castle. He locked the back gate door behind him and fell into an orgy of eating.

For week after week, the Bosmer stole out to gather his food. The guards began anticipating his raids, but he kept his schedule irregular and always remembered when attacked to wait for the blow, accept it, and then turn. In such a way, he lived and survived his lonely vigil in Cascabel Hall.

Four months later, as he was preparing for another seizure of apples, Menegur heard a loud clamor at the front gate. Surveying the group from a safe distance on the battlements, he saw the shields of the King of Solitude, his ally the Count of Cascabel, and their enemy the King of Farrun. Evidently, a truce had been called.

Menegur opened the gates and the combined armies flooded the courtyard. Many of the knights of Farrun sought to shake the hand of the man they had named the Shadow of the Arbor, expressing their admiration at his defensive skills and apologizing good-naturedly for their attempts to slay him. Only doing their job, you know.

"There's hardly a apple left on the vines," said the King of Solitude.

"Well, I started on the edges and worked my way in," explained Menegur. "I brought back extra fruit to tempt the rats of out of walls so I could have a little meat as well."

"We've spent the last several months working out the details of the truce," said the King. "Really quite exhausting. In any rate, the Count will be taking back possession of his castle now, but there is a small detail we need to work out. You're a mercenary, and as such responsible for your own expenses. If you had been a subject of mine, things might be different, but there are certain old rules of law that must be respected."

Menegur anticipated the strike.

"The problem is," the King continued. "You've taken a good deal of the Count's crops while here. By any reasonable computation, you've eaten an amount equal to and likely exceeding your mercenary's wages. Obviously, I would not want to penalize you for the excellent job you've done defending the castle in uncomfortable circumstances, but you agree that it's important that we observe the old rules of law, don't you?"

"Of course," replied Menegur, accepting the blow.

"I'm delighted to hear that," said the King. "Our estimation is that you owe the Count of Cascabel thirty-seven Imperial gold."

"Which I will gladly pay to myself, with interest, after the autumntide harvest," said Menegur. "There is more left on the vine than you suggest."

The Kings of Solitude and Farrun, and the Count of Cascabel stared at the Bosmer.

"We agreed to abide to the strictest old rules of law, and I've had time to read a great many books over the time you were making your truce. In 3E 246, during the reign of Uriel IV, the Imperial Council, in an attempt to clear up some questions of property rights in Skyrim during those chaotic days, decreed that any man without a liege who occupied a castle for more than three months would be granted the rights and titles of that estate. It's a good law, of course, meant to discourage absent and foreign landlords." Menegur smiled, feeling the now familiar sensation of a glancing strike diverting. "By the rule of law, I am the Count of Cascabel."

The rear-guard's son still hold the title of Count of Cascabel. And he grows the finest, most delectable apples in the Empire.

The Real Barenziah

Volume One

by Anonymous

Five hundred years ago in Mournhold, City of Gems, there lived a blind widow and her only child, a tall, strapping young man. He was a miner, as was his father before him, a common laborer in the mines of the Lord of Mournhold, for his ability in magicka was small. The work was honorable but paid poorly. His mother made and sold comberry cakes at the city market to help eke out their living. They did well enough, she said, they had enough to fill their bellies, no one could wear more than one suit of clothing at a time, and the roof leaked only when it rained. But Symmachus would have liked more. He hoped for a lucky strike at the mines, which would garner him a large bonus. In his free hours he enjoyed hoisting a mug of ale in the tavern with his friends, and gambling with them at cards. He also drew the eyes and sighs of more than one pretty Elven lass, although none held his interest for long. He was a typical young Dark Elf of peasant descent, remarkable only for his size. It was rumored that he had a bit of Nordic blood in him.

In Symmachus' thirtieth year, there was great rejoicing in Mournhold-a girl-child had been born to the Lord and Lady. A Queen, the people sang, a Queen is born to us! For among the people of Mournhold, the birth of an heiress is a sure sign of future peace and prosperity.

When the time came round for the royal child's Rite of Naming, the mines were closed and Symmachus dashed home to bathe and dress in his best. "I'll rush straight home and tell you all about it," he promised his mother, who would not be able to attend. She had been ailing, and besides there would be a great crush of people as all Mournhold turned out to be part of the blessed event; and being blind she would be unable to see anything anyway.

"My son," she said. "Afore you go, fetch me a priest or a healer, else I may pass from the mortal plane ere you return."

Symmachus crossed to her pallet at once and noted anxiously that her forehead was very hot and her breathing shallow. He pried loose a slat of the wooden floor under which their small hoard of savings was kept. There wasn't nearly enough to pay a priest for healing. He would have to give what they had and owe the rest. Symmachus snatched up his cloak and hurried away.

The streets were full of folk hurrying to the sacred grove, but the temples were locked and barred. "Closed for the ceremony," read all the signs.

Symmachus elbowed his way through the mob and managed to overtake a brown-robed priest. "After the rite, brother," the priest said, "if you have gold I shall gladly attend to your mother. Milord has bidden all clerics attend-and I, for one, have no wish to offend him."

"My mother's desperately ill," Symmachus pled. "Surely Milord will not miss one lowly priest."

"True, but the Archcanon will," the priest said nervously, tearing his robe loose from Symmachus' desperate grip and vanishing into the crowd.

Symmachus tried other priests, and even a few mages, but with no better result. Armored guards marched through the street and pushed him aside with their lances, and Symmachus realized that the royal procession was approaching.

As the carriage bearing the city's rulers drew abreast, Symmachus rushed out from the crowd and shouted, "Milord, Milord! My mother's dying-!"

"I forbid her to do so on this glorious night!" the Lord shouted, laughing and scattering coin into the throng. Symmachus was close enough to smell wine on the royal breath. On the other side of the carriage his Lady clutched the babe to her breast, and stared slit-eyed at Symmachus, her nostrils flared in disdain.

"Guards!" she cried. "Remove this oaf." Rough hands seized Symmachus.

He was beaten and left dazed by the side of the road.

Symmachus, head aching, followed in the wake of the crowd and witnessed the Rite of Naming from the top of a hill. He could see the brown-robed clerics and blue-robed mages gathered near the highborn folk far below.

Barenziah.

The name came dimly to Symmachus' ears as the High Priest lifted the swaddled babe and proffered her to the twin moons on either side of the horizon: Jone rising, Jode setting.

"Behold the Lady Barenziah, born to the land of Mournhold! Grant her thy blessings and thy counsel, ye kind gods, that she may ever rule well over Mournhold, its ken and its weal, its kith and its ilk."

"Bless her, bless her," all the people intoned along with their Lord and Lady, hands upraised.

Only Symmachus stood silent, head bowed, knowing in his heart that his dear mother was gone. And in silence he swore a mighty oath-that he should be his Lord's bane, and in vengeance for his mother's needless death, the child Barenziah he should have for his own bride, and that his mother's grandchildren should be born to rule over Mournhold.

After the ceremony, he watched impassively as the royal procession returned to the palace. He saw the priest to whom he'd first spoken. The man came gladly enough now in return for the gold Symmachus had, and a promise of more afterward.

They found his mother dead.

The priest sighed and tucked the pouch of gold coins away. "I'm sorry, brother. It's all right, you can forget the rest of the gold, there's aught I can do here. Likely-"

"Give me back my money!" Symmachus snarled. "You've done naught to earn it!" He lifted his right arm threateningly.

The priest backed away, about to utter a curse, but Symmachus struck him across the face before more than three words had left his mouth. He went down heavily, striking his head sharply on one of the stones that formed the fire pit. He died instantly.

Symmachus snatched up the gold and fled the city. As he ran, he muttered one word over and over, like a sorcerer's chant. "Barenziah," he said. "Barenziah. Barenziah."

Barenziah stood on one of the balconies of the palace, staring down into the courtyard where soldiers milled, dazzling in their armor. Presently they formed into ordered ranks and cheered as her parents, the Lord and Lady, emerged from the palace, clad from head to toe in ebony armor, long purple-dyed fur cloaks flowing behind. Splendidly caparisoned, shining black horses were brought for them, and they mounted and rode to the courtyard gates, and turned to salute her.

"Barenziah!" they cried. "Barenziah our beloved, farewell!"

The little girl blinked back tears and waved one hand bravely, her favorite stuffed animal, a gray wolfcub she called Wuffen, clutched to her breast with the other. She had never been parted from her parents before and had no idea what it meant, save that there was war in the west and the name Tiber Septim was on everyone's lips, spoken in hate and dread.

"Barenziah!" the soldiers cried, lifting their lances and swords and bows. Then her dear parents turned and rode away, knights trailing in their wake, until the courtyard was nearly emptied.

Sometime after came a day when Barenziah was shaken awake by her nurse, dressed hurriedly, and borne from the palace.

All she could remember of that dreadful time was seeing a huge shadow with burning eyes filling the sky. She was passed from hand to hand. Foreign soldiers appeared, disappeared, and sometimes reappeared. Her nurse vanished and was replaced by strangers, some more strange than others. There were days, or it may have been weeks, of travel.

One morning she awoke to step out of the coach into a cold place with a large gray stone castle amid empty, endless gray-green hills covered patchily with gray-white snow. She clutched Wuffen to her breast in both hands and stood blinking and shivering in the gray dawn, feeling very small and very dark in all this endless space, this endless gray-white space.

She and Hana, a brown-skinned, black-haired maid who had been traveling with her for several days, went inside the keep. A large gray-white woman with icy gray-golden hair was standing by a hearth in one of the rooms. She stared at Barenziah with dreadful, bright blue eyes.

"She's very -- black, isn't she?" the woman remarked to Hana. "I've never seen a Dark Elf before."

"I don't know much about them myself, Milady," Hana said. "But this one's got red hair and a temper to match, I can tell you that. Take care. She bites. And worse."

"I'll soon train her out of that," the other woman sniffed. "And what's that filthy thing she's got? Ugh!" The woman snatched Wuffen away and threw him into the blazing hearth.

Barenziah shrieked and would have flung herself after him, but was held back despite her attempts to bite and claw at her captors. Poor Wuffen was reduced to a tiny heap of charred ash.

Barenziah grew like a weed transplanted to a Skyrim garden, a ward of Count Sven and his wife the Lady Inga. Outwardly, that is, she thrived -- but always there was a cold and empty place within.

"I've raised her as my own daughter," Lady Inga was wont to sigh as she sat gossiping when neighboring ladies came to visit. "But she's a Dark Elf. What can you expect?"

Barenziah was not meant to overhear these words. At least she thought she was not. Her hearing was keener than that of her Nordic hosts. Other, less desirable Dark Elven traits evidently included pilfering, lying, and a little misplaced magic, just a small fire spell here and a little levitation spell there. And, as she grew older, a keen interest in boys and men, who could provide very pleasant sensations -- and to her astonishment, gifts as well. Inga disapproved of this last for reasons incomprehensible to Barenziah, so she was careful to keep it as secret as possible.

"She's wonderful with the children," Inga added, referring to her five sons, all younger than Barenziah. "I don't think she'd ever let them come to harm." A tutor had been hired when Jonni was six and Barenziah eight, and they took their lessons together. She would have liked to train in arms as well, but the very idea scandalized Count Sven and Lady Inga. So Barenziah was given a small bow and allowed to play at target shooting with the boys. She watched them at arms practice when she could, sparred with them when no grownup folk were about, and knew she was good as or better than they.

"She's very... proud, though, isn't she?" one of the ladies would whisper to Inga; and Barenziah, pretending not to hear, would nod silently in agreement. She could not help but feel superior to the Count and his Lady. There was something about them that provoked contempt.

Afterward she came to learn that Sven and Inga were distant cousins of Darkmoor Keep's last titled residents, and she finally understood. They were poseurs, impostors, not rulers at all. At least, they were not raised to rule. This thought made her strangely furious at them, a good clean hatred quite detached from resentment. She came to see them as disgusting and

repellent insects who could be despised but never feared.

Once a month a courier came from the Emperor, bringing a small bag of gold for Sven and Inga and a large bag of dried mushrooms from Morrowind for Barenziah, her favorite treat. On these occasions, she was always made to look presentable-or at least as presentable as a skinny Dark Elf could be made to look in Inga's eyes-before being summoned into the courier's presence for a brief interview. The same courier seldom came twice, but all of them looked her over in much the same way a farmer would look over a hog he is readying for market.

In the spring of her sixteenth year, Barenziah thought the courier looked as if she were at last ready for market. Upon reflection, she decided she did not wish to be marketed. The stable-boy, Straw, a big, muscular blond lad, clumsy, gentle, affectionate, and rather simple, had been urging her to run off for some weeks now. Barenziah stole the bag of gold the courier had left, took the mushrooms from the storeroom, disguised herself as a boy in one of Jonni's old tunics and a pair of his cast-off breeches... and on one fine spring night she and Straw took the two best horses from the stable and rode hard through the night toward Whiterun, the nearest city of any importance and the place where Straw wanted to be. But Mournhold and Morrowind also lay eastward and they drew Barenziah as a lodestone draws iron.

In the morning they abandoned the horses at Barenziah's insistence. She knew they would be missed and tracked down, and she hoped to throw off any pursuers.

They continued on foot until late afternoon, keeping to side roads, and slept for several hours in an abandoned hut. They went on at dusk and came to Whiterun's city gates just before dawn. Barenziah had prepared a pass of sorts for Straw, a makeshift document stating an errand to a temple in the city for a local village lord. She herself glided over the wall with the help of a levitation spell. She had reasoned-correctly, as it turned out-that by now the gate guards would have been alerted to keep an eye out for a young

Dark Elven girl and a Nordic boy traveling together. On the other hand, unaccompanied country yokels like Straw were a common enough sight. Alone and with papers, it was unlikely that he would draw attention.

Her simple plan went smoothly. She met Straw at the temple, which was not far from the gate; she had been to Whiterun on a few previous occasions. Straw, however, had never been more than a few miles from Sven's estate, which was his birthplace.

Together they made their way to a rundown inn in the poorer quarters of Whiterun. Gloved, cloaked, and hooded against the morning chill, Barenziah's dark skin and red eyes were not apparent and no one paid any heed to them. They entered the inn separately. Straw paid the innkeeper for a single cubicle, an immense meal, and two jugs of ale. Barenziah sneaked in a few minutes later.

They ate and drank together gleefully, rejoicing in their escape, and made love vigorously on the narrow cot. Afterward they fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

They stayed for a week at Whiterun. Straw earned a bit of money running errands and Barenziah burgled a few houses at night. She continued to dress as a boy. She cut her hair short and dyed her flame-red tresses jet black to further the disguise, and kept out of sight as much as possible. There were few Dark Elves in Whiterun.

One day Straw got them work as temporary guards for a merchant caravan traveling east. The one-armed sergeant looked her over dubiously.

"Heh," he chuckled, "Dark Elf, ain'tcha? Like settin' a wolf t'guard the sheep, that is. Still, I need arms, and we ain't goin' near 'nough Morrowind so's ye can betray us to yer folk. Our homegrown bandits would as fain cut yer throat as mine."

The sergeant turned to give Straw an appraising look. Then he spun back

abruptly toward Barenziah, whipping out his shortsword. But she had her dagger out in the twinkling of an eye and was in a defensive stance. Straw drew his own knife and circled round to the man's rear. The sergeant dropped his blade and chuckled again.

"Not bad, kids, not bad. How are ye with yon bow, Dark Elf?" Barenziah demonstrated her prowess briefly. "Aye, not bad, not bad 'tall. And ye'll be keen of eye by night, boy, and of hearin' 'tall times. A trusty Dark Elf makes as good a fightin' man as any could ask for. I know. I served under Symmachus hisself afore I lost this arm and got invalided outter the Emp'ror's army."

"We could betray them. I know folk who'd pay well," Straw said later as they bedded down for their last night at the ramshackle lodge. "Or rob them ourselves. They're very rich, those merchants are, Berry."

Barenziah laughed. "Whatever would we do with so much money? And besides, we need their protection for traveling quite as much as they need ours."

"We could buy a little farm, you and me, Berry -- and settle down, all nice like."

Peasant! Barenziah thought scornfully. Straw was a peasant and harbored nothing but peasant dreams. But all she said was, "Not here, Straw, we're too close to Darkmoor still. We'll have other chances farther east."

The caravan went only as far east as Sunguard. The Emperor Tiber Septim I had done much in the way of building relatively safe and regularly patrolled highways. But the tolls were steep, and this particular caravan kept to the side roads as much as possible to avoid them. This exposed them to the hazards of wayside robbers, both human and Orcish, and roving brigand bands of various races. But such were the perils of trade and profit.

They had two such encounters before reaching Sunguard -- an ambush

which Barenziah's keen ears warned them of in plenty of time for them to circle about and surprise the lurkers, and a night attack by a mixed band of Khajiit, humans, and Wood Elves. The latter were a skilled band and even Barenziah did not hear them sneaking up in time to give much warning. This time the fighting was fierce. The attackers were driven off, but two of the caravan's other guards were slain and Straw got a nasty cut on his thigh before he and Barenziah managed to gash his Khajiit assailant's throat.

Barenziah rather enjoyed the life. The garrulous sergeant had taken a liking to her, and she spent most of her evenings sitting around the campfire listening to his tales of campaigning in Morrowind with Tiber Septim and General Symmachus. This Symmachus had been made general after Mournhold fell, the sergeant said. "He's a fine soldier, boy, Symmachus is. But there was more'n soldiery involved'n that Morrowind business, if y'take my meanin'. But, well, y'know all 'bout that, I 'spect."

"No. No, I don't remember," Barenziah said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I've lived most of my life in Skyrim. My mother married a Skyrim man. They're both dead, though. Tell me, what happened to the Lord and Lady of Mournhold?"

The sergeant shrugged. "I ain't never heard. Dead, I 'spect. 'Twas a lot of fightin' afore the Armistice got signed. It's pretty quiet now. Maybe too quiet. Like a calm afore a storm. Say, boy, you goin' back there?"

"Maybe," Barenziah said. The truth was that she was drawn irresistibly to Morrowind, and Mournhold, like a moth to a burning house. Straw sensed it and was unhappy about it. He was unhappy anyway since they could not bed together, as she was supposed to be a boy. Barenziah rather missed it too, but not as much as Straw did, seemingly.

The sergeant wanted them to sign on for the return trip, but gave them a bonus nonetheless when they turned the offer down, and parchments of recommendation.

Straw wanted to settle down permanently near Sunguard, but Barenziah insisted on continuing their travels east. "I'm the Queen of Mournhold by

rights," she said, unsure whether it was true -- or was it just a daydream she had made up as a lost, bewildered child? "I want to go home. I need to go home." That at least was true.

After a few weeks they managed to get places in another caravan heading east. By early winter they were at Riften, and nearing the Morrowind border. But the weather had grown severe as the days passed and they were told no merchant caravans would be setting forth till mid-spring.

Barenziah stood on top of the city walls and stared across the deep gorge that separated Riften from the snow-clad mountain wall guarding Morrowind beyond.

"Berry," Straw said gently. "Mournhold's a long way off yet, nearly as far as we've come already. And the lands between are wild, full of wolves and bandits and Orcs and still worse creatures. We'll have to wait for spring."

"There's Silgrod Tower," Berry said, referring to the Dark Elven township that had grown up around an ancient minaret guarding the border between Skyrim and Morrowind.

"The bridge guards won't let me across, Berry. They're crack Imperial troops. They can't be bribed. If you go, you go alone. I won't try and stop you. But what will you do? Silgrod Tower is full of Imperial soldiers. Will you become a washing-woman for them? Or a camp follower?"

"No," Barenziah said slowly, thoughtfully. Actually the idea was not entirely unappealing. She was sure she could earn a modest living by sleeping with the soldiers. She'd had a few adventures of that sort as they crossed Skyrim, when she'd dressed as a woman and slipped away from Straw. She'd only been looking for a bit of variety. Straw was sweet but dull. She'd been startled, but extremely pleased, when the men she picked up offered her money afterward. Straw had been unhappy about it, though, and would shout for a while then sulk for days afterward if he caught her at it. He was quite jealous. He'd even threatened to leave her. Not that he ever

did. Or could.

But the Imperial Guards were a tough and brutal lot by all accounts, and Barenziah had heard some very ugly stories during their treks. The ugliest of them by far had come from the lips of ex-army veterans around the caravan campfire, and were proudly recounted. They'd been trying to shock her and Straw, she realized-but she also comprehended that there was some truth behind the wild tales. Straw hated that kind of dirty talk, and hated it more that she had to hear it. But there was a part of him that was fascinated nevertheless.

Barenziah sensed this and had encouraged Straw to seek out other women. But he said he didn't want anyone else but her. She told him candidly she didn't feel that way about him, but she did like him better than anyone else. "Then why do you go with other men?" Straw had asked on one occasion.

"I don't know."

Straw sighed. "They say Dark Elven women are like that."

Barenziah smiled and shrugged. "I don't know. Or, no ... maybe I do. Yes, I do know." She turned and kissed him affectionately. "I guess that's all the explanation there is.

Volume Two

by Anonymous

Barenziah and Straw settled into Rifton for the winter, taking a cheap room in the slummier section of town. Barenziah wanted to join the Thieves Guild, knowing there would be trouble if she were caught freelancing. One day in a barroom she caught the eye of a known member of the Guild, a bold young Khajiit named Therris. She offered to bed him if he would sponsor her membership. He looked her over, grinning, and agreed, but said she'd still have to pass an initiation.

"What sort of initiation?"

"Ah," Therris said. "Pay up first, sweetness."

[This passage has been censored by order of the Temple.]

Straw was going to kill her, and maybe Therris too. What in Tamriel had possessed her to do such a thing? She cast an apprehensive look around the room, but the other patrons had lost interest and gone back to their own business. She did not recognize any of them; this wasn't the inn where she and Straw were staying. With luck it'd be a while, or never, before Straw found out.

Therris was by far the most exciting and attractive man she had yet met. He not only told her about the skills she needed to become a member of the Thieves Guild, but also trained her in them himself or else introduced her to people who could.

Among these was a woman who knew something about magic. Katisha was a plump and matronly Nord. She was married to a smith, had two teenage children, and was perfectly ordinary and respectable--except that she was

very fond of cats (and by logical inference, their humanoid counterparts the Khajiit), had a talent for certain kinds of magic, and cultivated rather odd friends. She taught Barenziah an invisibility spell and schooled her in other forms of stealth and disguise. Katisha mingled magical and non-magical talents freely, using one set to enhance the other. She was not a member of the Thieves Guild but was fond of Therris in a motherly sort of way. Barenziah warmed to her as she never had toward any woman, and over the next few weeks she told Katisha all about herself.

She brought Straw there too sometimes. Straw approved of Katisha. But not of Therris. Therris found Straw "interesting" and suggested to Barenziah that they arrange what he called a "threesome."

"Absolutely not," Barenziah said firmly, grateful that Therris had broached the subject in private for once. "He wouldn't like it. I wouldn't like it!"

Therris smiled his charming, triangular feline smile and sprawled lazily on his chair, stretching his limbs and curling his tail. "You might be surprised. Both of you. Pairing is so boring."

Barenziah answered him with a glare.

"Or maybe you wouldn't like it with that country bumpkin of yours, sweetness. Would you mind if I brought along another friend?"

"Yes, I would. If you're bored with me, you and your friend can find someone else." She was a member of the Thieves Guild now. She had passed their initiation. She found Therris useful but not essential. Maybe she was a bit bored with him too.

She talked to Katisha about her problems with men. Or what she thought of as her problems with men. Katisha shook her head and told her she was looking for love, not sex, that she'd know the right man when she found him, that neither Straw nor Therris was the right one for her.

Barenziah cocked her head to one side quizzically. "They say Dark Elven women are pro-- pro-- something. Prostitutes?" she said, although she was dubious.

"You mean promiscuous. Although some do become prostitutes, I suppose," Katisha said as an afterthought. "Elves are promiscuous when they're young. But you'll outgrow it. Perhaps you're beginning to already," she added hopefully. She liked Barenziah, had grown to be quite fond of her. "You ought to meet some nice Elven boys, though. If you go on keeping company with Khajiits and humans and what have you, you'll find yourself pregnant in next to no time."

Barenziah smiled involuntarily at the thought. "I'd like that. I think. But it would be inconvenient, wouldn't it? Babies are a lot of trouble, and I don't even have my own house yet."

"How old are you, Berry? Seventeen? Well, you've a year or two yet before you're fertile, unless you're very unlucky. Elves don't have children readily with other Elves after that, even, so you'll be all right if you stick with them."

Barenziah remembered something else. "Straw wants to buy a farm and marry me."

"Is that what you want?"

"No. Not yet. Maybe someday. Yes, someday. But not if I can't be queen. And not just any queen. The Queen of Mournhold." She said this determinedly, almost stubbornly, as if to drown out any doubt.

Katisha chose to ignore this last comment. She was amused at the girl's hyperactive imagination, took it as a sign of a well-functioning mind. "I think Straw will be a very old man before 'someday' comes, Berry. Elves live for a very long time." Katisha's face briefly wore the envious, wistful look humans got when contemplating the thousand-year lifespan Elves had been granted by the gods. True, few ever actually lived that long as disease and violence took their respective tolls. But they could. And one or two of

them actually did.

"I like old men too," Berry said.

Katisha laughed.
Barenziah fidgeted impatiently while Therris sorted through the papers on the desk. He was being meticulous and methodical, carefully replacing everything just as he'd found it.

They'd broken into a nobleman's household, leaving Straw to hover outside as lookout. Therris had said it was a simple job but very hush-hush. He hadn't even wanted to bring any other Guild members along. He said he knew he could trust Berry and Straw, but no one else.

"Tell me what you're looking for and I'll find it," Berry whispered urgently. Therris' night sight wasn't as good as hers and he didn't want her to magick up even a small orb of light.

She had never been in such a luxurious place. Not even the Darkmoor castle of Count Sven and Lady Inga where she had spent her childhood compared to it. She'd gazed around in wonder as they made their way through the ornately decorated and hugely echoing downstairs rooms. But Therris didn't seem interested in anything but the desk in the small book-lined study on the upper floor.

"Sssst," he hissed angrily.

"Someone's coming!" Berry said, a moment before the door opened and two dark figures stepped into the room. Therris gave her a violent shove toward them and sprang to the window. Barenziah's muscles went rigid; she couldn't move or even speak. She watched helplessly as one of the figures, the smaller one, leaped after Therris. There were two quick, silent stabs of blue light, then Therris folded over into a still heap.

Outside the study the house had come alive with hastening footsteps and voices calling out in alarm and the clank of armor hurriedly put on.

The bigger man, a Dark Elf by the looks of him, half-lifted, half-dragged Therris to the door and thrust him into the waiting arms of another Elf. A jerk of the first Elf's head sent his smaller blue-robed companion after them. Then he sauntered over to inspect Barenziah, who was once again able to move although her head throbbed maddeningly when she tried to.

"Open your shirt, Barenziah," the Elf said. Barenziah gawked at him and clutched it closed. "You're a girl, aren't you, Berry?" he said softly. "You should have stopped dressing as a boy months ago, you know. You were only drawing attention to yourself. And calling yourself Berry! Is your friend Straw too stupid to remember anything else?"

"It's a common Elven name," Barenziah defended.

The man shook his head sadly. "Not among Dark Elves it isn't, my dear. But you wouldn't know much about Dark Elves, would you? I regret that, but it couldn't be helped. No matter. I shall try to remedy it."

"Who are you?" Barenziah demanded.

"Ai. So much for fame," the man shrugged, smiling wryly. "I am Symmachus, Milady Barenziah. General Symmachus of His Awesome and Terrible Majesty Tiber Septim I's Imperial Army. And I must say it's a merry chase you've led me throughout Tamriel. Or this part of it, anyway. Although I guessed, and guessed correctly, that you'd head for Morrowind eventually. You had a bit of luck. A body was found in Whiterun that was thought to be Straw's. So we stopped looking for the pair of you. That was careless of me. Yet I'd not have thought you'd have stayed together this long."

"Where is he? Is he all right?" she asked in genuine trepidation.

"Oh, he's fine. For now. In custody, of course." He turned away. "You ... care for him, then?" he said, and then suddenly stared at her with fierce curiosity. Out of red eyes that seemed strange to her, except in her own seldom-seen reflection.

"He's my friend," Barenziah said. The words came out in a tone that sounded dull and hopeless to her own ears. Symmachus! A general in the Imperial Army, no less--said to have the friendship and ears of Tiber Septim himself.

"Ai. You seem to have several unsuitable friends--if you'll forgive my saying so, Milady."

"Stop calling me that." She was irritated at the general's seeming sarcasm. But he only smiled.

As they talked the bustle and flurry in the house died away. Although she could still hear people, presumably the residents, whispering together not far off. The tall Elf perched himself on a corner of the desk. He seemed quite relaxed and prepared to stay awhile.

Then it occurred to her. Several unsuitable friends, had he said? This man knew all about her! Or seemed to know enough, anyway. Which amounted to the same thing. "W-what's going to happen to them? To m-me?"

"Ah. As you know, this house belongs to the commander of the Imperial troops in this area. Which means to say that it belongs to me." Barenziah gasped and Symmachus looked up sharply. "What, you didn't know? Tsk, tsk. Why, you are rash, Milady, even for seventeen. You must always know what it is you do, or get yourself into."

"B-but the G-guild w-wouldn't ... wouldn't h-have--" Barenziah was trembling. The Thieves Guild would never have attempted a mission that crossed Imperial policy. No one dared oppose Tiber Septim, at least no one she knew of. Someone at the Guild had bungled. Badly. And now she was going to pay for it.

"I daresay. It's unlikely that Therris had Guild approval for this. In fact, I wonder--" Symmachus examined the desk carefully, pulling out drawers. He selected one, placed it on top of the desk, and removed a false bottom. There was a folded sheet of parchment inside. It seemed to be a map of some sort. Barenziah edged closer. Symmachus held it away from her,

laughing. "Rash indeed!" He glanced it over, then folded and replaced it.

"You advised me a moment ago to seek after knowledge."

"So I did, so I did." Suddenly he seemed to be in high good humor. "We must be going, my dear Lady."

He shepherded her to the door, down the stairs, and out into the night air. No one was about. Barenziah's eyes darted toward the shadows. She wondered if she could outrun him, or elude him somehow.

"You're not thinking of attempting to escape, are you? Ai. Don't you want to hear first what my plans for you are?" She thought that he sounded a bit hurt.

"Now that you mention it--yes."

"Perhaps you'd rather hear about your friends first."

"No."

He looked gratified at this. It was evidently the answer he wanted, thought Barenziah, but it was also the truth. While she was concerned for her friends, especially Straw, she was far more concerned for herself.

"You will take your place as the rightful Queen of Mournhold."

Symmachus explained that this had been his, and Tiber Septim's, plan for her all along. That Mournhold, which had been under military rule for the dozen or so years since she had been away, was gradually to be returned to civilian government--under the Empire's guidance, of course, and as part of the Imperial Province of Morrowind.

"But why was I sent to Darkmoor?" Barenziah asked, hardly believing anything she had just been told.

"For safekeeping, naturally. Why did you run away?"

Barenziah shrugged. "I saw no reason to stay. I should have been told."

"You would have been by now. I had in fact sent for you to be removed to the Imperial City to spend some time as part of the Emperor's household. But of course you had, shall we say, absconded by then. As for your destiny, it should be, and should have been, quite obvious to you. Tiber Septim does not keep those he has no use for -- and what else could you be that would be of use to him?"

"I know nothing of him. Nor, for that matter, of you."

"Then know this: Tiber Septim rewards friends and foes alike according to their deserts."

Barenziah chewed on that for a few moments. "Straw has deserved well of me and has never done anyone any harm. He is not a member of the Thieves Guild. He came along to protect me. He earns our keep by running errands, and he ... he ..."

Symmachus waved her impatiently to silence. "Ai. I know all about Straw," he said, "and about Therris." He stared at her intently. "So? What would you?"

She took a deep breath. "Straw wants a little farm. If I'm to be rich, then I would like for one to be given to him."

"Very well." He seemed astonished at this, and then pleased. "Done. He shall have it. And Therris?"

"He betrayed me," Barenziah said coldly. Therris should have told her what risks the job entailed. Besides, he'd pushed her right into their enemies' arms in an attempt to save himself. Not a man to be rewarded. Not, in fact, a man to be trusted.

"Yes. And?"

"Well, he should be made to suffer for it ... shouldn't he?"

"That seems reasonable. What form should said suffering take?"

Barenziah balled her hands into fists. She would've liked to beat and claw at the Khajiit herself. But considering the turn events had taken, that didn't seem very queenly. "A whipping. Er ... would twenty stripes be too many, do you think? I don't want to do him any permanent injury, you understand. Just teach him a lesson."

"Ai. Of course." Symmachus grinned at this. Then his features suddenly set, and became serious. "It shall be done, Your Highness, Milady Queen Barenziah of Mournhold." Then he bowed to her, a sweeping, courtly, ridiculously wonderful bow.

Barenziah's heart leapt.

She spent two days at Symmachus' apartment, during which she was kept very busy. There was a Dark Elven woman named Drelliane who saw to her needs, although she did not exactly seem a servant since she took her meals with them. Nor did she seem to be Symmachus' wife, or lover. Drelliane looked amused when Barenziah asked her about it. She simply said she was in the general's employ and did whatever was asked of her.

With Drelliane's assistance, several fine gowns and pairs of shoes were ordered for her, plus a riding habit and boots, along with other small necessities. Barenziah was given a room to herself.

Symmachus was out a great deal. She saw him at most mealtimes, but he said little about himself or what he had been doing. He was cordial and polite, quite willing to converse on most subjects, and seemed interested in anything she had to say. Drelliane was much the same. Barenziah found them pleasant enough, but "hard to get to know," as Katisha would have put

it. She felt an odd twinge of disappointment. These were the first Dark Elves with whom she'd associated closely. She had expected to feel comfortable with them, to feel at last that she belonged somewhere, with somebody, as part of something. Instead she found herself yearning for her Nordic friends, Katisha and Straw.

When Symmachus told her they were to set out for the Imperial City on the morrow, she asked if she could say good-bye to them.

"Katisha?" he asked. "Ai. But then ... I suppose I owe her something. She it was who led me to you by telling me of a lonely Dark Elven girl named Berry who needed Elven friends -- and who sometimes dressed as a boy. She has no association with the Thieves Guild, apparently. And no one associated with the Thieves Guild seems to know your true identity, save Therris. That is well. I prefer that your former Guild membership not be made public knowledge. Please speak of it to no one, Your Highness. Such a past does not ... become an Imperial Queen."

"No one knows but Straw and Therris. And they won't tell anyone."

"No." He smiled a curious little smile. "No, they won't."

He didn't know that Katisha knew, then. But still, there was something about the way he said it ...

Straw came to their apartment on the morning of their departure. They were left alone in the salon, although Barenziah knew that other Elves were within earshot. He looked drawn and pale. They hugged one another silently for a few minutes. Straw's shoulders were shaking and tears were rolling down his cheeks, but he said nothing.

Barenziah tried a smile. "So we both get what we want, eh? I'm to be Queen of Mournhold and you'll be lord of your own farmstead." She took his hand, smiled at him warmly, genuinely. "I'll write you, Straw. I promise. You must find a scribe so you can write me too."

Straw shook his head sadly. When Barenziah persisted, he opened his

mouth and pointed at it, making inarticulate noises. Then she realized what it was. His tongue was gone, had been cut off.

Barenziah collapsed onto a chair and wept noisily.

"But why?" she demanded of Symmachus when Straw had been ushered away. "Why?"

Symmachus shrugged. "He knows too much. He could be dangerous. At least he's alive, and he won't need his tongue to ... raise pigs or whatever."

"I hate you!" Barenziah screamed at him, then abruptly doubled over and vomited on the floor. She continued to revile him between intermittent bouts of nausea. He listened stolidly for some time while Drelliane cleaned up after her. Finally, he told her to cease or he would gag her for her journey to the Emperor.

They stopped at Katisha's house on their way out of the city. Symmachus and Drelliane didn't dismount. All seemed normal but Barenziah was frightened as she knocked on the door. Katisha answered the knock. Barenziah thanked the gods silently that at least she was all right. But she'd also obviously been weeping. In any case, she embraced Barenziah warmly.

"Why are you crying?" Barenziah asked.

"For Therris, of course. You haven't heard? Oh dear. Poor Therris. He's dead." Barenziah felt icy fingers creeping round her heart. "He was caught stealing from the Commandant's house. Poor fellow, but that was so foolish of him. Oh, Berry, he was drawn and quartered this very dawn by the Commandant's order!" She started to sob. "I went. He asked for me. It was terrible. He suffered so before he died. I'll never forget it. I looked for you and Straw, but no one knew where you'd both gone to." She glanced behind Barenziah. "That's the Commandant, isn't it? Symmachus." Then Katisha did a strange thing. She stopped crying and grinned. "You know, the moment I saw him, I thought, This is the one for Barenziah!" Katisha took a

fold of her apron and wiped it across her eyes. "I told him about you, you know."

"Yes," Barenziah said, "I know." She took Katisha's hands in each of hers and looked at her earnestly. "Katisha, I love you. I'm going to miss you. But please don't ever tell anyone else anything about me. Ever. Swear you won't. Especially not to Symmachus. And look after Straw for me. Promise me that."

Katisha promised, puzzled though willing. "Berry, it wasn't somehow because of me that Therris was caught, was it? I never said anything about Therris to ... to ... him." She glanced over at the general.

Barenziah assured her that it wasn't, that an informant had told the Imperial Guard of Therris' plans. Which was probably a lie, but she could see that Katisha plainly needed some kind of comfort.

"Oh, I'm glad of that, if I can be glad of anything just now. I'd hate to think-- But how could I have known?" She leaned over and whispered in Barenziah's ear, "Symmachus is very handsome, don't you think? And so charming."

"I wouldn't know about that," Barenziah said dryly. "I haven't really thought about it. There've been other things to think about." She explained hurriedly about being Queen of Mournhold and going to live in the Imperial City for a while. "He was looking for me, that's all. On orders from the Emperor. I was the object of a quest, nothing more than some sort of... of a... goal. I don't think he thinks of me as a woman at all. He said I didn't look like a boy, though," she added in the face of Katisha's incredulity. Katisha knew that Barenziah evaluated every male she met in terms of sexual desirability, and availability. "I suppose it's the shock of finding out that I really am a queen," she added, and Katisha agreed that yes, that's true, that must've been something of a shock, although one there was no likelihood of her experiencing firsthand. She smiled. Barenziah smiled with her. Then they hugged again, tearfully, for the last time. She never saw Katisha again. Or Straw.

The royal party left Rifton by the great southern gate. Once through,

Symmachus tapped her shoulder and pointed back at the portals. "I thought you might want to say good-bye to Therris too, Your Highness," he said.

Barenziah stared briefly but steadily at the head impaled on a spike above the gate. The birds had been at it, but the face was still recognizable. "I don't think he'll hear me, although I'm quite sure he'll be pleased to know I'm fine," she said, seeming to sound light. "Let's be on our way, General, shall we?"

Symmachus was clearly disappointed by her lack of reaction. "Ai. You heard of this from your friend Katisha, I suppose?"

"You suppose correctly. She attended the execution," Barenziah said casually. If he didn't know already, he'd find out soon enough, she was sure of that.

"Did she know Therris belonged to the Guild?"

She shrugged. "Everyone knew that. It's only lower-ranking members like me who are supposed to keep their membership secret. The ones higher up are well known." She turned to smile archly at him. "But you must know all that, shouldn't you, General?" she said sweetly.

He seemed unaffected by this. "So you told her who you were and whence you came, but not about the Guild."

"The Guild membership was not my secret to tell. The other was. There's a difference. Besides, Katisha is a very honest woman. Had I told her, it would have lessened me in her eyes. She was always after Therris to take up a more honest line of work. I value her good opinion." She afforded him a glacial stare. "Not that it's any concern of yours, but do you know what else she thought? She also thought I'd be happier if I settled down with just one man. One of my own race. One of my own race with all the right qualities. One of my own race with all the right qualities, who knows to say all the right things. You, in fact." She grabbed the reins preparatory to assuming a brisker pace--but not without sinking one final irresistible barb. "Isn't it odd how wishes come true sometimes--but not in the way you want

them to? Or maybe I should say, not in the way you would ever want them to?"

His answer so took her by surprise that she quite forgot about cantering off. "Yes. Very odd," he replied, and his tone matched his words exactly. Then he excused himself and fell behind.

She held her head high and urged her mount onward, trying to look unimpressed. Now what was it about his response that bothered her? Not what he said. No, that wasn't it. But something about the way he said it. Something about it made her think that she, Barenziah, was one of his wishes that had come true. Unlikely as this seemed, she gave it due deliberation. He had found her at last, after months of searching, it seemed, under pressure from the Emperor, no doubt. So his wish had come true. Yes, that must be it.

But in a way, apparently, not altogether to his liking.

Volume Three

by Anonymous

For several days, Barenziah felt a weight of sorrow at her separation from her friends. But by the second week out her spirits began to rise a little. She found that she enjoyed being on the road again, although she missed Straw's companionship more than she would have thought. They were escorted by a troop of Redguard knights with whom she felt comfortable, although these were much more disciplined, and decorous, than the guards of the merchant caravans she had spent time with. They were genial but respectful toward her despite her attempts at flirtation.

Symmachus scolded her privately, saying a queen must maintain royal dignity at all times.

"You mean I'm never to have any fun?" she inquired petulantly.

"Ai. Not with such as these. They are beneath you. Graciousness is to be desired from those in authority, Milady. Familiarity is not. You will remain chaste and modest while you are at the Imperial City."

Barenziah made a face. "I might as well be back at Darkmoor Keep. Elves are promiscuous by nature, you know. Everyone says so."

"'Everyone' is wrong, then. Some are, some aren't. The Emperor -- and I -- expect you to display both discrimination and good taste. Let me remind you, Your Highness, that you hold the throne of Mournhold not by right of blood but solely at the pleasure of Tiber Septim. If he judges you unsuitable, your reign will end ere it begins. He requires intelligence, obedience, discretion, and total loyalty of all his appointees, and he favors chastity and modesty in women. I strongly suggest you model your deportment after our good Drelliane. Milady."

"I'd as lief be back in Darkmoor!" Barenziah snapped resentfully, offended

at the thought of emulating the frigid, prudish Drelliane in any way.

"That is not an option. Your Highness. If you are of no use to Tiber Septim, he will see to it that you are of no use to his enemies either," the general said portentously. "If you would keep your head on your shoulders, take heed. Let me add that power offers pleasures other than those of carnality and cavorting with base company."

He began to speak of art, literature, drama, music, and the grand balls thrown at the Imperial Court. Barenziah listened with growing interest, spurred on not entirely by his threats. But afterward she asked timidly if she might continue her study of magic while at the Imperial City. Symmachus seemed pleased at this and promised to arrange it. Encouraged, she then said that she noted three of their knights escort were women, and asked if she might train a little with them, just for the sake of exercise. The general looked less delighted at this, but gave his consent, though stressing it would only be with the women.

The late winter weather held fair, though slightly frosty, for the rest of their journey so that they traveled quickly over firm roads. On the last day of their trip, spring seemed to have arrived at last for there were hints of a thaw. The road grew muddy underfoot, and everywhere one could hear water trickling and dripping faintly but steadily. It was a welcome sound.

They came to the great bridge that crossed into the Imperial City at sunset. The rosy glow turned the stark white marble edifices of the metropolis a delicate pink. It all looked very new and grand and immaculate. A broad avenue led north toward the Palace. A crowd of people of all sorts and races filled the wide concourse. Lights winked out in the shops and on in the inns as dusk fell and stars came out singly then by twos and threes. Even the side streets were broad and brightly illuminated. Near the Palace the towers of an immense Mages Guildhall reared toward the east, while westward the stained glass windows of a huge tabernacle glittered in the dying light.

Symmachus had apartments in a magnificent house two blocks from the

palace, past the temple. ("The Temple of the One," he identified as they passed it, an ancient Nordic cult which Tiber Septim had revived. He said that Barenziah would be expected to become a member should she prove acceptable to the Emperor.) The place was quite splendid--although little to Barenziah's taste. The walls and furnishings were done in utter pristine white, relieved only by touches of dull gold, and the floors in dully gleaming black marble. Barenziah's eyes ached for color and the interplay of subtle shadings.

In the morning Symmachus and Drelliane escorted her to the Imperial Palace. Barenziah noted that everyone they met greeted Symmachus with a deferential respect in some cases bordering on obsequiousness. The general seemed to take it for granted.

They were ushered directly into the imperial presence. Morning sun flooded a small room through a large window with tiny panes, washing over a sumptuously laden breakfast table and the single man who sat there, dark against the light. He leapt to his feet as they entered and hurried toward them. "Ah, Symmachus our most loyal friend, we welcome your return most gladly." His hands held Symmachus' shoulders briefly, fondly, halting the deep genuflection the Dark Elf had been in the process of effecting.

Barenziah curtseyed as Tiber Septim turned to her.

"Barenziah, our naughty little runaway. How do you do, child? Here, let us have a look at you. Why, Symmachus, she's charming, absolutely charming. Why have you hidden her from us all these years? Is the light too much, child? Shall we draw the hangings? Yes, of course." He waved aside Symmachus' protests and drew the curtains himself, not troubling to summon a servant. "You will pardon us for this discourtesy toward yourselves, our dear guests. We've much to think of, though that's scant excuse for hospitality's neglect. But ah! pray join us. There's some excellent nectarines from Black Marsh."

They settled themselves at the table. Barenziah was dumbfounded. Tiber Septim was nothing like the grim, grey, giant warrior she'd pictured. He was of average height, fully half a head shorter than tall Symmachus, although

he was well-knit of figure and lithe of movement. He had a winning smile, bright -- indeed piercing -- blue eyes, and a full head of stark white hair above a lined and weathered face. He might have been any age from forty to sixty. He pressed food and drink upon them, then repeated the question the general had asked her days ago: Why had she left home? Had her guardians been unkind to her?

"No, Excellency," Barenziah replied, "in truth, no -- although I fancied so at times." Symmachus had fabricated a story for her, and Barenziah told it now, although with a certain misgiving. The stable-boy, Straw, had convinced her that her guardians, unable to find a suitable husband for her, meant to sell her off as a concubine in Rihad; and when a Redguard had indeed come, she had panicked and fled with Straw.

Tiber Septim seemed fascinated and listened raptly as she provided details of her life as a merchant caravan escort. "Why, 'tis like a ballad!" he said. "By the One, we'll have the Court Bard set it to music. What a charming boy you must have made."

"General Symmachus said--" Barenziah stopped in some confusion, then proceeded. "He said -- well, that I no longer look much like a boy. I have... grown in the past few months." She lowered her gaze in what she hoped approximated maidenly modesty.

"He's a very discerning fellow, is our loyal friend Symmachus."

"I know I've been a very foolish girl, Excellency. I must crave your pardon, and that of my kind guardians. I... I realized that some time ago, but I was too ashamed to go back home. But I don't want to return to Darkmoor now. Excellency, I long for Mournhold. My soul pines for my own country."

"Our dear child. You shall go home, we promise you. But we pray you remain with us a little longer, that you may prepare yourself for the grave and solemn task with which we shall charge you."

Barenziah gazed at him earnestly, heart beating fast. It was all working just as Symmachus had said it would. She felt a warm flush of gratitude toward

him, but was careful to keep her attention focused on the Emperor. "I am honored, Excellency, and wish most earnestly to serve you and this great Empire you have built in any way I can." It was the politic thing to say, to be sure -- but Barenziah really meant it. She was awed at the magnificence of the city and the discipline and order evident everywhere, and moreover was excited at the prospect of being a part of it all. And she felt quite taken by the gentle Tiber Septim.

After a few days Symmachus left for Mournhold to take up the duties of a governor until Barenziah was ready to assume the throne, after which he would become her Prime Minister. Barenziah, with Drelliane as chaperone, took up residence in a suite of rooms at the Imperial Palace. Several tutors were provided her, in all the fields deemed seemly for a queenly education. During this time she became deeply interested in the magical arts, but she found the study of history and politics not at all to her preference.

On occasion she met with Tiber Septim in the Palace gardens and he would unfailingly and politely inquire as to her progress -- and chide her, although with a smile, for her disinterest at matters of state. However, he was always happy to instruct her on the finer points of magic, and he could make even history and politics seem interesting. "They're people, child, not dry facts in a dusty volume," he said.

As her understanding broadened, their discussions grew longer, deeper, more frequent. He spoke to her of his vision of a united Tamriel, each race separate and distinct but with shared ideals and goals, all contributing to the common weal. "Some things are universal, shared by all sentient folk of good will," he said. "So the One teaches us. We must unite against the malicious and the brutish, the miscreated -- the Orcs, trolls, goblins, and other worse creatures -- and not strive against one another." His blue eyes would light up as he stared into his dream, and Barenziah was delighted just to sit and listen to him. If he drew close to her, the side of her body next to him would glow as if he were a smoldering blaze. If their hands met she would tingle all over as if his body were charged with a shock spell.

One day, quite unexpectedly, he took her face in his hands and kissed her gently on the mouth. She drew back after a few moments, astonished by the violence of her feelings, and he apologized instantly. "I... we... we didn't mean to do that. It's just -- you are so beautiful, dear. So very beautiful." He was looking at her with hopeless yearning in his generous eyes.

She turned away, tears streaming down her face.

"Are you angry with us? Speak to us. Please."

Barenziah shook her head. "I could never be angry with you, Excellency. I... I love you. I know it's wrong, but I can't help it."

"We have a consort," he said. "She is a good and virtuous woman, the mother of our children and future heirs. We could never put her aside -- yet there is nothing between us and her, no sharing of the spirit. She would have us be other than what we are. We are the most powerful person in all of Tamriel, and... Barenziah, we... I... I think I am the most lonely as well." He stood up suddenly. "Power!" he said with sublime contempt. "I'd trade a goodly share of it for youth and love if the gods would only sanction it."

"But you are strong and vigorous and vital, more than any man I've ever known."

He shook his head vehemently. "Today, perhaps. Yet I am less than I was yesterday, last year, ten years ago. I feel the sting of my mortality, and it is painful."

"If I can ease your pain, let me." Barenziah moved toward him, hands outstretched.

"No. I would not take your innocence from you."

"I'm not that innocent."

"How so?" The Emperor's voice suddenly grated harshly, his brows knitted.

Barenziah's mouth went dry. What had she just said? But she couldn't turn back know. He would know. "There was Straw," she faltered. "I... I was lonely too. Am lonely. And not so strong as you." She cast her eyes down in abashment. "I... I guess I'm not worthy, Excellency--"

"No, no. Not so. Barenziah. My Barenziah. It cannot last for long. You have a duty toward Mournhold, and a duty toward the Empire. I must tend toward mine as well. But while we may -- shall we share what we have, what we can, and pray the One forgives us our frailty?"

Tiber Septim held out his arms -- and wordlessly, willingly, Barenziah stepped into his embrace.

"You caper on the edge of a volcano, child," Drelliane admonished as Barenziah admired the splendid star sapphire ring her imperial lover had given her to celebrate their one-month anniversary.

"How so? We make one another happy. We harm no one. Symmachus bade me be discriminating and discreet. Who better could I choose? And we've been most discreet. He treats me like a daughter in public." Tiber Septim's nightly visits were made through a secret passage that only few in the Palace were privy to -- himself and a handful of trusted bodyguards.

"He slavers over you like a cur his supper. Have you not noticed the coolness of the Empress and her son toward you?"

Barenziah shrugged. Even before she and Septim had become lovers, she'd received no more from his family than bare civility. Threadbare civility. "What matter? It is Tiber who holds the power."

"But it is his son who holds the future. Do not put his mother up to public scorn, I beg you."

"Can I help it if that dry stick of a woman cannot hold her husband's interest even in conversation at dinner?"

"Have less to say in public. That is all I ask. She matters little, it is true -- but her children love her, and you do not want them as enemies. Tiber Septim has not long to live. I mean," Drelliane amended quickly at Barenziah's scowl, "humans are all short-lived. Ephemeral, as we of the Elder Races say. They come and go as the seasons -- but the families of the powerful ones live on for a time. You must be a friend to this family if you would see lasting profit from your relationship. Ah, but how can I make you see truly, you who are so young and human-bred as well! If you take heed, and wisely, you and Mournhold are like to live to see the fall of Septim's dynasty, if indeed he has founded one, just as you have witnessed its rise. It is the way of human history. They ebb and flow like the inconstant tides. Their cities and dominions bloom like spring flowers, only to wither and die in the summer sun. But the Elves endure. We are as a year to their hour, a decade to their day."

Barenziah just laughed. She knew that rumors abounded about her and Tiber Septim. She enjoyed the attention, for all save the Empress and her son seemed captivated by her. Minstrels sang of her dark beauty and her charming ways. She was in fashion, and in love -- and if it was temporary, well, what was not? She was happy for the first time she could remember, each of her days filled with joy and pleasure. And the nights were even better.

"What is wrong with me?" Barenziah lamented. "Look, not one of my skirts fit. What's become of my waistline? Am I getting fat?" Barenziah regarded her thin arms and legs and her undeniably thickened waist in the mirror with displeasure.

Drelliane shrugged. "You appear to be with child, young as you are. Constant pairing with a human has brought you to early fertility. I see no choice but for you to speak with the Emperor about it. You are in his power. It would be best, I think, for you to go directly to Mournhold if he would agree to it, and bear the child there."

"Alone?" Barenziah placed her hands on her swollen belly, tears forming in her eyes. Everything in her yearned to share the fruit of her love with her lover. "He'll never agree to that. He won't be parted from me now. You'll see."

Drelliane shook her head. Although she said no more, a look of sympathy and sorrow had replaced her usual cool scorn.

That night Barenziah told Tiber Septim when he came to her for their usual assignation.

"With child?" He looked shocked. No, stunned. "You're sure of it? But I was told Elves do not bear at so young an age..."

Barenziah forced a smile. "How can I be sure? I've never--"

"I shall have my healer fetched."

The healer, a High Elf of middle years, confirmed that Barenziah was indeed pregnant, and that such a thing had never before been known to happen. It was a testimony to His Excellency's potency, the healer said in sycophantic tones. Tiber Septim roared at him.

"This must not be!" he said. "Undo it. We command you."

"Sire," the healer gaped at him. "I cannot... I may not--"

"Of course you can, you incompetent dullard," the Emperor snapped. "It is our express wish that you do so."

Barenziah, till then silent and wide-eyed with terror, suddenly sat up in bed. "No!" she screamed. "No! What are you saying?"

"Child," Tiber Septim sat down beside her, his face wearing one of his winning smiles. "I'm so sorry. Truly. But this cannot be. Your issue would be a threat to my son and his sons. I shall no more put it plainly than that."

"The child I bear is yours!" she wailed.

"No. It is now but a possibility, a might-be, not yet gifted with a soul or quickened into life. I will not have it so. I forbid it." He gave the healer another hard stare and the Elf began to tremble.

"Sire. It is her child. Children are few among the Elves. No Elven woman conceives more than four times, and that is very rare. Two is the usual number. Some bear none, even, and some only one. If I take this one from her, Sire, she may not conceive again."

"You promised us she would not bear to us. We've little faith in your prognostications."

Barenziah scrambled naked from the bed and ran for the door, not knowing where she was going, only that she could not stay. She never reached it. Darkness overtook her.

She awoke to pain, and a feeling of emptiness. A void where something used to be, something that used to be alive, but now was dead and gone forever. Drelliane was there to soothe the pain and clean up the blood that still pooled at times between her legs. But there was nothing to fill the emptiness. There was nothing to take the place of the void.

The Emperor sent magnificent gifts and vast arrangements of flowers, and came on short visits, always well-attended. Barenziah received these visits with pleasure at first. But Tiber Septim came no more at night -- and after some time nor did she wish him to.

Some weeks passed, and when she was completely physically recovered, Drelliane informed her that Symmachus had written to request she come to Mournhold earlier than planned. It was announced that she would leave forthwith.

She was given a grand retinue, an extensive trousseau befitting a queen, and

an elaborate and impressive ceremonial departure from the gates of the Imperial City. Some people were sorry to see her leave, and expressed their sadness in tears and expostulations. But some others were not, and did not.

Volume Four

by Anonymous

Everything I have ever loved, I have lost," Barenziah thought despondently, looking at the mounted knights behind and ahead, her tirewomen near her in a carriage. "Yet I have gained a measure of wealth and power, and the promise of more to come. Dearly have I bought it. Now I do understand better Tiber Septim's love of it, if he has often paid such prices. For surely worth is measured by the price we pay." By her wish, she rode on a shiny roan mare, clad as a warrior in resplendent chain mail of Dark Elven make.

As the days slowly slipped by and her train rode the winding road eastward into the setting sun, around her gradually rose the steep-sided mountain slopes of Morrowind. The air was thin, and a chill late autumn wind blew constantly. But it was also rich with the sweet spicy smell of the late-blooming black rose, which was native to Morrowind and grew in every shadowy nook and crevice of its highlands, finding nourishment even in the stoniest banks and ridges. In small villages and towns, ragged Dark Elven folk gathered along the road to cry her name or simply gape. Most of her knightly escort were Redguards, with a few High Elves, Nords, and Bretons. As they wove their way into the heart of Morrowind, they grew increasingly uncomfortable and clung together in protective clusters. Even the Elven knights seemed wary.

But Barenziah felt at home, at last. She felt the welcome extended to her by the land. Her land.

Symmachus met her at the Mournhold border with an escort of knights, about half of whom were Dark Elven. In Imperial battle dress, she noted.

There was a grand parade of entry into the city and speeches of welcome from stately dignitaries.

"I've had the queen's suite refurbished for you," the general told her later when they reached the palace, "but you may change anything not to your taste, of course." He went on about the details of the coronation, which was to be held in a week. He was his old commanding self -- but she sensed something else as well. He was eager for her approval of the arrangements, was in fact fishing for it. That was new. He had never required her commendation before.

He asked her nothing about her stay in the Imperial City, or of her affair with Tiber Septim -- although Barenziah was certain Drelliane had told him, or earlier written him, everything in detail.

The ceremony itself, like so much else, was a mixture of old and new -- parts of it from the ancient Dark Elven tradition of Mournhold, the others dictated by Imperial decree. She was sworn to the service of the Empire and Tiber Septim as well as to the land of Mournhold and its people. She accepted oaths of fealty and allegiance from the people, the nobility, and the council. This last was composed of a blend of Imperial emissaries ("advisors" they were called) and native representatives of the Mournhold people, who were mostly elders in accordance with Elven custom.

Barenziah later found that much of her time was occupied in attempting to reconcile these two factions and their cronies. The elders were expected to do most of the conciliating, in light of reforms introduced by the Empire pertaining to land ownership and surface farming. But most of these went clean against Dark Elven observances. Tiber Septim, "in the name of the One," had ordained a new tradition -- and apparently even the gods and goddesses themselves were expected to obey.

The new Queen threw herself into her work and her studies. She was through with love and men for a long, long time -- if not forever. There were other pleasures, she discovered, as Symmachus had promised her long ago: those of the mind, and those of power. She developed (surprisingly, for she had always rebelled against her tutors at the Imperial City) a deep love for Dark Elven history and mythology, a hunger to know more fully the people from whom she had sprung. She was gratified to learn that they had

been proud warriors and skilled craftsmen and cunning mages since time immemorial.

Tiber Septim lived for another half-century, during which she saw him on several occasions as she was bidden to the Imperial City on one reason of state or another. He greeted her with warmth during these visits, and they even had long talks together about events in the Empire when opportunity would permit. He seemed to have quite forgotten that there had ever been anything between them more than easy friendship and a profound political alliance. He changed little as the years passed. Rumor had it that his mages had developed spells to extend his vitality, and that even the One had granted him immortality. Then one day a messenger came with the news that Tiber Septim was dead, and his grandson Pelagius was now Emperor in his place.

They had heard the news in private, she and Symmachus. The sometime Imperial General and now her trusted Prime Minister took it stoically, as he took most everything.

"Somehow it doesn't seem possible," Barenziah said.

"I told you. Ai. It's the way of humans. They are a short-lived people. It doesn't really matter. His power lives on, and his son now wields it."

"You called him your friend once. Do you feel nothing? No grief?"

He shrugged. "There was a time when you called him somewhat more. What do you feel, Barenziah?" They had long ago ceased to address each other in private by their formal titles.

"Emptiness. Loneliness," she said, then she too shrugged. "But that's not new."

"Ai. I know," he said softly, taking her hand. "Barenziah..." He turned her face up and kissed her.

The act filled her with astonishment. She couldn't remember his ever

touching her before. She'd never thought of him in that way -- and yet, undeniably, an old familiar warmth spread through her. She'd forgotten how good it felt, that warmth. Not the scorching heat she'd felt with Tiber Septim, but the comforting, robust ardor she somehow associated with... with Straw! Straw. Poor Straw. She hadn't thought of him in so long. He'd be middle-aged now if he were still alive. Probably with a dozen children, she thought affectionately... and a hearty wife who hopefully could talk for two.

"Marry me, Barenziah," Symmachus was saying, he seemed to have picked up her thoughts on marriage, children... wives, "I've worked and toiled and waited long enough, haven't I?"

Marriage. A peasant with peasant dreams. The thought appeared in her mind, clear and unbidden. Hadn't she used those very same words to describe Straw, so very long ago? And yet, why not? If not Symmachus, who else?

Many of the great noble families of Morrowind had been wiped out in Tiber Septim's great war of unification, before the treaty. Dark Elven rule had been restored, it was true -- but not the old, not the true nobility. Most of them were upstarts like Symmachus, and not even half as good or deserving as he was. He had fought to keep Mournhold whole and hale when their so-called counselors would have picked at its bones, sucked them dry as Ebonheart had been sucked dry. He'd fought for Mournhold, fought for her, while she and the kingdom grew and thrived. She felt a sudden rush of gratitude -- and, undeniably, affection. He was steady and reliable. And he'd served her well. And loved her well.

"Why not?" she said, smiling. And took his hand. And kissed him.

The union was a good one, in its political as well as personal aspects. While Tiber Septim's grandson, the Emperor Pelagius I, viewed her with a jaundiced eye, his trust in his father's old friend was absolute.

Symmachus, however, was still viewed with suspicion by Morrowind's stiff-necked folk, chary at his peasant ancestry and his close ties to the Empire. But the Queen was quite unshakably popular. "The Lady Barenziah's one of our own," it was whispered, "held captive as we."

Barenziah felt content. There was work and there was pleasure -- and what more could one ask of life?

The years passed swiftly, with crises to be dealt with, and storms and famines and failures to be weathered, and plots to be foiled, and conspirators to be executed. Mournhold prospered steadily. Her people were secure and fed, her mines and farms productive. All was well -- save that the royal marriage had produced no children. No heirs.
Elven children are slow to come, and most demanding of their welcome -- and noble children more so than others. Thus many decades had come to pass before they grew concerned.

"The fault lies with me, Symmachus. I'm damaged goods," Barenziah said bitterly. "If you want to take another..."

"I want no other," Symmachus said gently, "nor do I know for certain that the fault is yours. Perhaps it is mine. Ai. Whichever. We will seek a cure. If there is damage, surely it may be repaired."

"How so? When we dare not entrust anyone with the true story? Healer's oaths do not always hold."

"It won't matter if we change the time and circumstances a bit. Whatever we say or fail to say, Jephre the Storyteller never rests. The god's inventive mind and quick tongue are ever busy spreading gossip and rumor."

Priests and healers and mages came and went, but all their prayers, potions, and philtres produced not even a promise of bloom, let alone a single fruit. Eventually they thrust it from their minds and left it in the gods' hands. They were yet young, as Elves went, with centuries ahead of them. There was time. With Elves there was always time.
Barenziah sat at dinner in the Great Hall, pushing food about on a plate,

feeling bored and restless. Symmachus was away, having been summoned to the Imperial City by Tiber Septim's great-great-grandson, Uriel Septim. Or was it his great-great-great-grandson? She'd lost count, she realized. Their faces seemed to blur one into the next. Perhaps she should have gone with him, but there'd been the delegation from Tear on a tiresome matter that nevertheless required delicate handling.

A bard was singing in an alcove off the hall, but Barenziah wasn't listening. Lately all the songs seemed the same to her, whether new or old. Then a turn of phrase caught her attention. He was singing of freedom, of adventure, of freeing Morrowind from its chains. How dare he! Barenziah sat up straight and turned to glare at him. Worse, she realized he was singing of some ancient, and now immaterial, war with the Skyrim Nords, praising the heroism of Kings Edward and Moraelyn and their brave Companions. The tale was old enough, certainly, yet the song was new ... and its meaning ... Barenziah couldn't be sure.

A bold fellow, this bard, but with a strong, passionate voice and a good ear for music. Rather handsome too, in a raffish sort of way. He didn't look to be well-off exactly, nor was he all that young. Certainly he couldn't be under a century of age. Why hadn't she heard him before, or at least heard of him?

"Who is he?" she inquired of a lady-in-waiting.

The woman shrugged and said, "Calls himself the Nightingale, Milady. No one seems to know anything about him."
"Bid him speak with me when he has done."

The man called the Nightingale came to her, thanked her for the honor of the Queen's audience and the fat purse she handed him. His manner wasn't bold at all, she decided, rather quiet and unassuming. He was quick enough with gossip about others, but she learned nothing about him -- he turned all questions away with a joking riposte or a ribald tale. Yet these were recounted so charmingly it was impossible to take offence.

"My true name? Milady, I am no one. No, no, my parents named me Know

Wan -- or was it No Buddy? What matters it? It matters not. How may parents give name to that which they know not? Ah! I believe that was the name, Know Not. I have been the Nightingale for so long I do not remember, since, oh, last month at the very least -- or was it last week? All my memory goes into song and tale, you see, Milady. I've none left for myself. I'm really quite dull. Where was I born? Why, Knoweyr. I plan to settle in Dunroamin when I get there ... but I'm in no hurry."

"I see. And will you then marry Atallshur?"

"Very perceptive of you, Milady. Perhaps, perhaps. Although I find Innhayst quite charming too, at whiles."

"Ah. You are fickle, then?"

"Like the wind, Milady. I blow hither and yon, hot and cold, as chance suits. Chance is my suit. Naught else wears well on me."

Barenziah smiled. "Stay with us awhile, then ... if you will, Milord Erhatick."

"As you wish, Milady Bryte."

After that brief exchange, Barenziah found her interest in life somehow rekindled. All that had seemed stale became fresh and new again. She greeted each day with zest, looking forward to conversation with the Nightingale and the gift of his song. Unlike other bards, he never sang her praises, nor other women's, but only of high adventure and bold deeds.

When she asked him about this, he said, "What greater praise of your beauty could you ask, Milady, than that which your own mirror gives you? And if words you would have, you have those of the greatest, of those greater than my callow self. How should I vie with them, I who was born but a week gone by?"

For once they were speaking privately. The Queen, unable to sleep, had summoned him to her chamber that his music might soothe her. "You are lazy and a coward, sera, else I hold no charm for you."

"Milady, to praise you I must know you. I can never know you. You are wrapped in enigma, in clouds of enchantment."
"Nay, not so. Your words are what weave enchantment. Your words... and your eyes. And your body. Know me if you will. Know me if you dare."

He came to her then. They lay close, they kissed, they embraced. "Not even Barenziah truly knows Barenziah," he whispered softly, "so how may I? Milady, you seek and know it not, nor yet for what. What would you have, that you have not?"

"Passion," she answered back. "Passion. And children born of it."

"And for your children, what? What birthright might be theirs?"

"Freedom," she said, "the freedom to be what they would be. Tell me, you who seem wisest to these eyes and ears, and the soul that knits them. Where may I find these things?"

"One lies beside you, the other beneath you. But would you dare stretch out your hand, that you might take what could be yours, and your children's?"

"Symmachus..."

"In my person lies the answer to part of what you seek. The other lies hidden below us in these your very kingdom's mines, that which will grant us the power to fulfill and achieve our dreams. That which Edward and Moraelyn between them used to free High Rock and their spirits from the hateful domination of the Nords. If it be properly used, Milady, none may stand against it, not even the power the Emperor controls. Freedom, you say? Barenziah, freedom it gives from the chains that bind you. Think on it, Milady." He kissed her again, softly, and withdrew.

"You're not leaving... ?" she cried out. Her body yearned for him.

"For now," he said. "Pleasures of the flesh are nothing beside what we might have together. I would have you think on what I have just said."

"I don't need to think. What must we do? What preparations must be made?"

"Why -- none. The mines may not be entered freely, it is true. But with the Queen at my side, who will stand athwart? Once below I can guide you to where this thing lies, and lift it from its resting place."

Then the memory of her endless studies slid into place. "The Horn of Summoning," she whispered in awe. "Is it true? Could it be? How do you know? I've read that it's buried beneath the measureless caves of Daggerfall."

"Nay, long have I studied this matter. Ere his death King Edward gave the Horn for safekeeping into the hand of his old friend King Moraelyn. He in turn secreted it here in Mournhold under the guardianship of the god Ephen, whose birthplace and bailiwick this is. Now you know what it has cost me many a long year and weary mile to discover."
"But the god? What of Ephen?"

"Trust me, Milady heart. All will be well." Laughing softly, he blew her a last kiss and was gone.

On the morrow they passed the guards at the great portals that led into the mines, and further below. Under pretence of her customary tour of inspection, Barenziah, unattended but for the Nightingale, ventured into cavern after subterranean cavern. Eventually they reached what looked like a forgotten sealed doorway, and upon entering found that it led to an ancient part of the workings, long abandoned. The going was treacherous for some of the old shafts had collapsed, and they had to clear a passage through the rubble or find a way around the more impassable piles. Vicious rats and huge spiders scurried here and there, sometimes even attacking them. But

they proved no match for Barenziah's firebolt spells or the Nightingale's quick dagger.

"We've been gone too long," Barenziah said at length. "They'll be looking for us. What will I tell them?"

"Whatever you please," the Nightingale laughed. "You are the Queen, aren't you?"

"The Lord Symmachus--"

"That peasant obeys whoever holds power. Always has, always will. We shall hold the power, Milady love." His lips were sweetest wine, his touch both fire and ice.

"Now," she said, "take me now. I'm ready." Her body seemed to hum, every nerve and muscle taut.

"Not yet. Not here, not like this." He waved around, indicating the aged dusty debris and grim walls of rock. "Just a little while longer." Reluctantly, Barenziah nodded her assent. They resumed walking.

"Here," he said at last, pausing before a blank barrier. "Here it lies." He scratched a rune in the dust, his other hand weaving a spell as he did so.

The wall dissolved. It revealed an entrance to some ancient shrine. In the midst stood a statue of a god, hammer in hand, poised above an admantium anvil.

"By my blood, Ephen," the Nightingale cried, "I bid thee waken! Moraelyn's heir of Ebonheart am I, last of the royal line, sharer of thy blood. At Morrowind's last need, with all of Elvendom in dread peril of their selves and souls, release to me that guerdon which thou guardst! Now I do bid thee, strike!"

At his final words the statue glowed and quickened, the blank stone eyes shone a bright red. The massive head nodded, the hammer smote the anvil,

and it split asunder with a thunderous crash, the stone god itself crumbling. Barenziah clapped her hands over her ears and crouched down, shaking terribly and moaning out loud.

The Nightingale strode forward boldly and clasped the thing that lay among the ruins with a roar of ecstasy. He lifted it high.

"Someone's coming!" Barenziah cried in alarm, then noticed for the first time what it was he was holding aloft. "Wait, that's not the Horn, it -- it's a staff!"

"Indeed, Milady. You see truly, at last!" The Nightingale laughed aloud. "I am sorry, Milady sweet, but I must leave you now. Perhaps we shall meet again one day. Until then... Ah, until then, Symmachus," he said to the mail-clad figure who had appeared behind them, "she is all yours. You may claim her back."

"No!" Barenziah screamed. She sprang up and ran toward him, but he was gone. Winked out of existence -- just as Symmachus, claymore drawn, reached him. His blade cleaved a single stroke through empty air. Then he stood still, as if taking the stone god's place.

Barenziah said nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing... felt nothing...

Symmachus told the half dozen or so Elves who had accompanied him that the Nightingale and Queen Barenziah had lost their way, and had been set upon by giant spiders. That the Nightingale had lost his footing and fallen into a deep crevice, which closed over him. That his body could not be recovered. That the Queen had been badly shaken by the encounter and deeply mourned the loss of her friend, who had fallen in her defense. Such was Symmachus' presence and power of command that the slack-jawed knights, none of whom had caught more than a glimpse of what happened, were convinced that it was all exactly as he said.

The Queen was escorted back to the palace and taken to her chamber,

whereupon she dismissed her servants-in-waiting. She sat still before her mirror for a long time, stunned, too distraught even to weep. Symmachus stood watching over her.

"Do you have any idea at all what you have just done?" he said finally -- flatly, coldly.

"You should have told me," Barenziah whispered. "The Staff of Chaos! I never dreamed it lay here. He said-- he said-- " A mewling escaped her lips and she doubled over in despair. "Oh, what have I done? What have I done? What happens now? What's to become of me? Of us?"

"Did you love him?"

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes! Oh my Symmachus, the gods have mercy on me, but I did love him. Did. But now... now... I don't know... I'm not sure... I..."

Symmachus' hard-lined face softened slightly, and his eyes glittered with new light, and he sighed. "Ai. That's something then. You will become a mother yet if it's within my power. As for the rest -- Barenziah, my dearest Barenziah, I expect you have loosed a storm upon the land. It'll be a while yet in the brewing. But when it comes, we'll weather it together. As we always have."

He came over to her then, and stripped her of her clothing, and carried her to the bed. Out of grief and longing, her enfeebled body responded to his brawny one as it never had before, pouring forth all that the Nightingale had wakened to life in her. And in so doing calming the restless ghosts of all he had destroyed.

She was empty, and emptied. And then she was filled, for a child was planted and grew within her. As her son flourished in the womb, so did her feeling toward patient, faithful, devoted Symmachus, which had been rooted in long friendship and unbroken affection -- and which now, at last, ripened into the fullness of true love. Eight years later they were again

blessed, this time with a daughter.

Directly after the Nightingale's theft of the Staff of Chaos, Symmachus had sent urgent secret communiques to Uriel Septim. He had not gone himself, as he would normally have, choosing instead to stay with Barenziah during her fertile period to father a son upon her. For this, and for the theft, he suffered Uriel Septim's temporary disfavor and unjust suspicion. Spies were sent in search of the thief, but the Nightingale seemed to have vanished whence he had come -- wherever that was.

"Dark Elf in part, perhaps," said Barenziah, "but part human too, I think, in disguise. Else would I not have come so quickly to fertility."

"Part Dark Elf, for sure, and of ancient Ra'athim lineage at that, else he would not have been able to free the Staff," Symmachus reasoned. He turned to peer at her fixedly. "I don't think he would have lain with you. As an Elf he did not dare, for then he would not have been able to part from you." He smiled. Then he turned serious once more. "Ai! He knew the Staff lay there, not the Horn, and that he must teleport to safety. The Staff is not a weapon that would have seen him clear, unlike the Horn. Praise the gods at least that he does not have that! It seems all was as he expected -- but how did he know? I placed the Staff there myself, with the aid of the ragtail end of the Ra'athim Clan who now sits king in Castle Ebonheart as a reward. Tiber Septim claimed the Horn, but left the Staff for safekeeping. Ai! Now the Nightingale can use the Staff to sow seeds of strife and dissension wherever he goes, if he wishes. Yet that alone will not gain him power. That lies with the Horn and the ability to use it."
"I'm not so sure it's power the Nightingale seeks," Barenziah said.

"All seek power," Symmachus said, "each in our own way."

"Not I," she answered. "I, Milord, have found that for which I sought."

Volume Five

by Anonymous

As Symmachus had predicted, the theft of the Staff of Chaos had few short-term consequences. The current Emperor, Uriel Septim, sent some rather stiff messages expressing shock and displeasure at the Staff's disappearance, and urging Symmachus to make every effort to locate its whereabouts and communicate developments to the newly appointed Imperial Battlemage, Jagar Tharn, in whose hands the matter had been placed.

"Tharn!" Symmachus thundered in disgust and frustration as he paced about the small chamber where Barenziah, now some months pregnant, was sitting serenely embroidering a baby blanket. "Jagar Tharn, indeed. Ai! I wouldn't give him directions for crossing the street, not if he were a doddering old blind sot."

"What have you against him, love?"

"I just don't trust that mongrel Elf. Part Dark Elf, part High Elf, and part the gods only know what. All the worst qualities of all his combined bloods, I'll warrant." He snorted. "No one knows much about him. Claims he was born in southern Valenwood, of a Wood Elven mother. Seems to have been everywhere since -- "

Barenziah, sunk in the contentment and lassitude of pregnancy, had only been humoring Symmachus thus far. But now she suddenly dropped her needlework and looked at him. Something had piqued her interest. "Symmachus. Could this Jagar Tharn have been the Nightingale, disguised?"

Symmachus thought this over before replying. "Nay, my love. Human blood seems to be the one missing component in Tharn's ancestry." To Symmachus, Barenziah knew, that was a flaw. Her husband despised Wood Elves as lazy thieves and High Elves as effete intellectuals. But he admired

humans, especially Bretons, for their combination of pragmatism, intelligence, and energy. "The Nightingale's of Ebonheart, of the Ra'athim Clan - House Hlaalu, the House of Mora in particular, I'll be bound. That house has had human blood in it since her time. Ebonheart was jealous that the Staff was laid here when Tiber Septim took the Horn of Summoning from us."

Barenziah sighed a little. The rivalry between Ebonheart and Mournhold reached back almost to the dawn of Morrowind's history. Once the two nations had been one, all the lucrative mines held in fief by the Ra'athims, whose nobility retained the High Kingship of Morrowind. Ebonheart had split into two separate city-states, Ebonheart and Mournhold, when Queen Lian's twin sons -- grandsons of the legendary King Moraelyn -- were left as joint heirs. At about the same time the office of High King was vacated in favor of a temporary War Leader to be named by a council in times of provincial emergency.

Still, Ebonheart remained jealous of her prerogatives as the eldest city-state of Morrowind ("first among equals" was the phrase its rulers often quoted) and claimed that rightful guardianship of the Staff of Chaos should have been entrusted to its ruling house. Mournhold responded that King Moraelyn himself had placed the Staff in the keeping of the god Ephen -- and Mournhold was unarguably the god's birthplace.

"Why not tell Jagar Tharn of your suspicions, then? Let him recover the thing. As long as it's safe, what does it matter who recovers it, or where it lies?"

Symmachus stared at her without comprehension. "It matters," he said softly after a while, "but I suppose not that much. Ai." He added, "Certainly not enough for you to concern yourself further with it. You just sit there and tend to your," and here he smiled at her wickedly, "embroidery."

Barenziah flung the sampler at him. It hit Symmachus square in the face -- needle, thimble, and all.

In a few more months Barenziah gave birth to a fine son, whom they named Helseth. Nothing more was heard of the Staff of Chaos, or the Nightingale. If Ebonheart had the Staff in its possession, they certainly did not boast of it.

The years passed swiftly and happily. Helseth grew tall and strong. He was much like his father, whom he worshipped. When Helseth was eight years old Barenziah bore a second child, a daughter, to Symmachus' lasting delight. Helseth was his pride, but little Morgiah -- named for Symmachus' mother -- held his heart.

Sadly, the birth of Morgiah was not the harbinger of better times ahead. Relations with the Empire slowly deteriorated, for no apparent reason. Taxes were raised and quotas increased with each passing year. Symmachus felt that the Emperor suspected him of having had a hand in the Staff's disappearance and sought to prove his loyalty by making every effort to comply with the escalating demands. He lengthened working hours and raised tariffs, and even made up some of the difference from both the royal exchequer and their own private holdings. But the levies multiplied, and commoners and nobles alike began to complain. It was an ominous rumble.

"I want you to take the children and journey to the Imperial City," Symmachus said at last in desperation one evening after dinner. "You must make the Emperor listen, else all Mournhold will be up in revolt come spring." He grinned forcibly. "You have a way with men, love. You always did."

Barenziah forced a smile of her own. "Even with you, I take it."

"Yes. Especially with me," he acknowledged amiably.

"Both children?" Barenziah looked over toward a corner window, where Helseth was strumming a lute and crooning a duet with his little sister. Helseth was fifteen by then, Morgiah eight.

"They might soften his heart. Besides, it's high time Helseth was presented

before the Imperial Court."

"Perhaps. But that's not your true reason." Barenziah took a deep breath and grasped the nettle. "You don't think you can keep them safe here. If that's the case, then you're not safe here either. Come with us," she urged.

He took her hands in his. "Barenziah. My love. Heart of my heart. If I leave now, there'll be nothing for us to return to. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. Ai! I can take care of myself -- and I can do it better if I'm not worrying about you or the children."

Barenziah laid her head against his chest. "Just remember that we need you. I need you. We can do without the rest of it if we have each other. Empty hands and empty bellies are easier to bear than an empty heart." She started to cry, thinking of the Nightingale and that sordid business with the Staff. "My foolishness has brought us to this pass."

He smiled at her tenderly. "If so, 'tis not so bad a place to be." His eyes rested indulgently on their children. "None of us shall ever go without, or want for anything. Ever. Ever, my love, I promise you. I cost you everything once, Barenziah, I and Tiber Septim. Ai. Without my aid the Empire would never have begun. I helped its rise." His voice hardened. "I can bring about its fall. You may tell Uriel Septim that. That, and that my patience is not infinite."

Barenziah gasped. Symmachus was not given to empty threats. She'd no more imagined that he would ever turn against the Empire than that the old house wolf lying by the grate would turn on her. "How?" she demanded breathlessly. But he shook his head.

"Better that you not know," he said. "Just tell him what I told you should he prove recalcitrant, and do not fear. He's Septim enough that he will not take it out on the messenger." He smiled grimly. "For if he does, if he ever harms the least hair on you, my love, or the children -- so help me all the gods of Tamriel, he'll pray that he hadn't been born. Ai. I'll hunt him down, him and his entire family. And I won't rest until the last Septim is dead." The red Dark Elven eyes of Symmachus gleamed brightly in the ebbing firelight. "I

plight you that oath, my love. My Queen ... my Barenziah."

Barenziah held him, held him as tight as she could. But in spite of the warmth in his embrace, she couldn't help shivering.

Barenziah stood before the Emperor's throne, trying to explain Mournhold's straits. She'd waited weeks for an audience with Uriel Septim, having been fobbed off on this pretext or that. "His Majesty is indisposed." "An urgent matter demands His Excellency's attention." "I am sorry, Your Highness, there must be some mistake. Your appointment is for next week. No, see..." And now it wasn't even going well. The Emperor did not even make the slightest pretence at listening to her. He hadn't invited her to sit, nor had he dismissed the children. Helseth stood still as a carven image, but little Morgiah had begun to fuss.

The state of her own mind didn't help her any. Shortly upon arrival at her lodgings, the Mournholdian ambassador to the Imperial City had demanded entry, bringing with him a sheaf of dispatches from Symmachus. Bad news, and plenty of it. The revolt had finally begun. The peasants had organized around a few disgruntled members of Mournhold's minor nobility, and were demanding Symmachus step down and hand over the reins of government. Only the Imperial Guard and a handful of troops whose families had been retainers of Barenziah's house for generations stood between Symmachus and the rabble. Hostilities had already broken out, but apparently Symmachus was safe and still in control. Not for long, he wrote. He entreated Barenziah to try her best with the Emperor -- but in any case she was to stay in the Imperial City until he wrote to tell her it was safe to go back home with the children.

She had tried to barge her way through the Imperial bureaucracy -- with little success. And to add to her growing panic, all news from Mournhold had come to a sudden stop. Tottering between rage at the Emperor's numerous major-domos and fear of the fate awaiting her and her family, the weeks had passed by tensely, agonizingly, remorselessly. Then one day the Mournholdian ambassador came calling to tell her she should expect news

from Symmachus the following night at the latest, not through the regular channels but by nighthawk. Seemingly by the same stroke of luck, she was informed that same day by a clerk from the Imperial Court that Uriel Septim had finally consented to grant her an audience early on the morrow.

The Emperor had greeted the three of them when they came into the audience chamber with a too-bright smile of welcome that nonetheless didn't reach his eyes. Then, as she presented her children, he had gazed at them with a fixed attention that was real yet somehow inappropriate. Barenziah had been dealing with humans for nearly five hundred years now, and had developed the skill of reading their expressions and movements that was far beyond what any human could ever perceive. Try as the Emperor might to conceal it, there was hunger in his eyes -- and something else. Regret? Yes. Regret. But why? He had several fine children of his own. Why covet hers? And why look at her with such a vicious -- however brief -- yearning? Perhaps he had tired of his consort. Humans were notoriously, though predictably, inconstant. After that one long, burning glance, his gaze had shifted away as she began to speak of her mission and the violence that had erupted in Mournhold. He sat still as stone throughout her entire account.

Puzzled at his inertia, and vexed no end, Barenziah stared into the pale, set face, looking for some trace of the Septims she'd known in the past. She didn't know Uriel Septim well, having met him once when he was still a child, and then again at his coronation twenty years later. Twice, that was all. He'd been a stern and dignified presence at the ceremony, even as a young adult -- yet not icily remote as this more mature man was. In fact, despite the physical resemblance, he didn't seem to be the same man at all. Not the same, yet something about him was familiar to her, more familiar than it should be, some trick of posture or gesture...

Suddenly she felt very hot, as if lava had been poured over her. Illusion! She had studied the arts of illusion well since the Nightingale had deceived her so badly. She had learned to detect it -- and she felt it now, as certainly as a blind man could feel the sun on his face. Illusion! But why? Her mind worked furiously even as her mouth went on reciting details about Mournhold's troubles. Vanity? Humans were oft as ashamed at the signs of

ageing as Elves were proud to exhibit them. Yet the face Uriel Septim wore seemed consistent with his age.

Barenziah dared use none of her own magic. Even petty nobles had means of detecting magicka, if not actually shielding themselves from its effects, within their own halls. The use of sorcery here would bring down the Emperor's wrath as surely as drawing a dagger would.

Magic.

Illusion.

Suddenly she was brought to mind of the Nightingale. And then he was sitting before her. Then the vision changed, and it was Uriel Septim. He looked sad. Trapped. And then the vision faded once more, and another man sat in his place, like the Nightingale, and yet unlike. Pale skin, bloodshot eyes, Elven ears -- and about him a fierce glow of concentrated malice, an aura of eldritch energy -- a horrible, destructive shimmer. This man was capable of anything!

And then once again she was looking into the face of Uriel Septim.

How could she be sure she wasn't imagining things? Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her. She felt a sudden vast weariness, as if she'd been carrying a heavy burden too long and too far. She decided to abandon her earnest narrative of Mournhold's ills -- as it was quite plainly getting her nowhere -- and switch back to pleasantry. Pleasantry, however, with a hidden agenda.

"Do you remember, Sire, Symmachus and I had dinner with your family shortly after your father's coronation? You were no older than tiny Morgiah here. We were greatly honored to be the only guests that evening -- except for your best friend Justin, of course."

"Ah yes," the Emperor said, smiling cautiously. Very cautiously. "I do believe I recall that."

"You and Justin were such friends, Your Majesty. I was told he died not long after. A great pity."

"Indeed. I still do not like to speak of him." His eyes turned blank -- or blanker, if it had been possible. "As for your request, Milady, we shall take it under advisement and let you know."

Barenziah bowed, as did the children. A nod from the Emperor dismissed them, and they backed away from the imperial presence.

She took a deep breath when they emerged from the throne room. "Justin" had been an imaginary playmate, although young Uriel had insisted a place be set for Justin at every meal. Not only that, Justin, despite the boyish name, had been a girl! Symmachus had kept up the joke long after she had gone the way of imaginary childhood friends -- inquiring after Justin's health whenever he and Uriel Septim met, and being responded to in as mock-serious a fashion. The last Barenziah had heard of Justin, several years ago, the Emperor had evidently joked elaborately to Symmachus that she had met an adventurous though incorrigible Khajiit youth, married him, and settled down in Lilandril to raise fire ferns and mugworts.

The man sitting on the Emperor's divan was not Uriel Septim! The Nightingale? Could it be...? Yes. Yes! A chord of recognition rang through her and Barenziah knew she was right. It was him. It was! The Nightingale! Masquerading as the Emperor! Symmachus had been wrong, so wrong...

What now? she wondered frantically. What had become of Uriel Septim -- and more to the point, what did it mean for her and Symmachus, and all of Mournhold? Thinking back, Barenziah guessed that their troubles were due to this false Emperor, this Nightingale-spawned glamour -- or whatever he really was. He must have taken Uriel Septim's place shortly before the unreasonable demands on Mournhold had begun. That would explain why relations had deteriorated for so long (as humans reckoned time), long after her disapproved liaison with Tiber Septim. The Nightingale knew of Symmachus' famed loyalty to, and knowledge of, the Septim House, and was effecting a pre-emptive strike. If that were the case, they were all in terrible danger. She and the children were in his power here in the Imperial

City, and Symmachus was left alone to deal with troubles of the Nightingale's brewing in Mournhold.

What must she do? Barenziah impelled the children ahead of her, a hand on each shoulder, trying to stay cool, collected, her ladies-in-waiting and personal knights escort trailing behind. Finally they reached their waiting carriage. Even though their suite of rooms was only a few blocks from the Palace, royal dignity forbade travel on foot for even short distances -- and for once, Barenziah was glad of it. The carriage seemed a kind of refuge now, false as she knew the feeling must be.

A boy dashed up to one of the guards and handed him a scroll, then pointed toward the carriage. The guard brought it to her. The boy waited, eyes wide and shining. The epistle was brief and complimentary, and simply inquired if King Eadwyre of Wayrest, of the Province of High Rock, might be granted an audience with the famed Queen Barenziah of Mournhold, as he had heard much of her and would be pleased to make her acquaintance.

Barenziah's first impulse was to refuse. She wanted only to leave this city! Certainly she had no inclination toward any dalliance with a dazzled human. She looked up, frowning, and one of the guards said, "Milady, the boy says his master awaits your reply yonder." She looked in the direction indicated and saw a handsome elderly man on horseback, surrounded by a half dozen courtiers and cavaliers. He caught her eye and bowed respectfully, taking off a plumed hat.

"Very well," Barenziah said to the boy on impulse. "Tell your master he may call on me tonight, after the dinner hour." King Eadwyre looked polite and grave, and rather worried -- but not in the least lovestruck. At least that was something, she thought pensively.
Barenziah stood at the tower window, waiting. She could sense the familiar's nearness. But though the night sky was clear as day to her eyes, she could not yet see him. Then suddenly he was there, a swift moving dot beneath the wispy night clouds. A few more minutes and the great nighthawk finished its descent, wings folding, talons reaching for her thick leather armband.

She carried the bird to its perch, where it waited, panting, as her impatient fingers felt for the message secured in a capsule on one leg. The hawk drank mightily from the water till when she had done, then ruffled its feathers and preened, secure in her presence. A tiny part of her consciousness shared its satisfaction at a job well done, mission accomplished, and rest earned ... yet beneath it all was unease. Things were not right, even to its humble avian mind.

Her fingers shook as she unfolded the thin parchment and pored over the cramped writing. Not Symmachus' bold hand! Barenziah sat slowly, fingers smoothing the document while she prepared her mind and body to accept disaster calmly, if disaster it would be.

Disaster it was.

The Imperial Guard had deserted Symmachus and joined the rebels. Symmachus was dead. The remaining loyal troops had suffered a decisive defeat. Symmachus was dead. The rebel leader had been recognized as King of Mournhold by Imperial envoys. Symmachus was dead. Barenziah and the children had been declared traitors to the Empire and a price set on their heads.

Symmachus was dead.

So the audience with the Emperor earlier that morning had been nothing but a blind, a ruse. A charade. The Emperor must have already known. She was just being strung along, told to stay put, take things easy, Milady Queen, enjoy the Imperial City and the delights it has to offer, do make your stay as long as you want. Her stay? Her detention. Her captivity. And in all probability, her impending arrest. She had no delusions about her situation. She knew the Emperor and his minions would never let her leave the Imperial City, ever again. At least, not alive.

Symmachus was dead.

"Milady?"

Barenziah jumped, startled by the servant's approach. "What is it?"

"The Breton is here, Milady. King Eadwyre," the woman added helpfully, noting Barenziah's incomprehension. She hesitated. "Is there news, Milady?" she said, nodding toward the nighthawk.

"Nothing that will not wait," Barenziah said quickly, and her voice seemed to echo in the emptiness that suddenly yawned like a gaping abyss inside her. "See to the bird." She stood up, smoothed her gown, and prepared to attend on her royal visitor.

She felt numb. Numb as the stone walls around her, numb as the quiescence of the night air... numb as a lifeless corpse.

Symmachus was dead!

King Eadwyre greeted her gravely and courteously, if a bit fulsomely. He claimed to be a fervent admirer of Symmachus, who figured prominently in his family's legends. Gradually he turned the conversation to her business with the Emperor. He inquired after details, and asked if the outcome had been favorable to Mournhold. Finding her noncommittal, he suddenly blurted out, "Milady Queen, you must believe me. The man who claims himself the Emperor is an impostor! I know it sounds mad, but I -- "

"No," Barenziah said, with sudden decisiveness. "You are entirely correct, Milord King. I know."

Eadwyre relaxed into his seat for the first time, eyes suddenly shrewd. "You know? You're not just humoring someone you might think a madman?"

"I assure you, Milord, I am not." She took a deep breath. "And who do you surmise is dissembling as the Emperor?"

"The Imperial Battlemage, Jagar Tharn."

"Ah. Milord King, have you, perchance, heard of someone called the Nightingale?"

"Yes, Milady, as a matter of fact I have. My allies and I believe him to be one and the same man as the renegade Tharn."

"I knew it!" Barenziah stood up and tried to mask her upheaval. The Nightingale -- Jagar Tharn! Oh, but the man was a demon! Diabolical and insidious. And so very clever. He had contrived their downfall seamlessly, perfectly! Symmachus, my Symmachus...!

Eadwyre coughed diffidently. "Milady, I... we... we need your aid."

Barenziah smiled grimly at the irony. "I do believe I should be the one saying those words. But go on, please. Of what assistance might I be, Milord King?"

Quickly the monarch outlined a plot. The mage Ria Silmane, of late apprenticed to the vile Jagar Tharn, had been killed and declared a traitor by the false Emperor. Yet she had retained a bit of her powers and could still contact a few of those she had known well on the mortal plane. She had chosen a Champion who would undertake to find the Staff of Chaos, which had been hidden by the traitorous sorcerer in an unknown site. This Champion was to wield the Staff's power to destroy Jagar Tharn, who was otherwise invulnerable, and rescue the true Emperor being held prisoner in another dimension. However, the Champion, while thankfully still alive, now languished in the Imperial Dungeons. Tharn's attention must be diverted while the chosen one gained freedom with Ria's spirit's help. Barenziah had the false Emperor's ears -- and seemingly his eyes. Would she provide the necessary distraction?

"I suppose I could obtain another audience with him," Barenziah said carefully. "But would that be sufficient? I must tell you that my children and I have just recently been declared traitors to the Empire."

"In Mournhold, perhaps, Milady, and Morrowind. Things are different in the Imperial City and the Imperial Province. The same administrative

morass that makes it near impossible to obtain an audience with the Emperor and his ministers also quite assures that you would never be unlawfully imprisoned or otherwise punished without benefit of due legal process. In your case, Milady, and your children's, the situation is further exacerbated by your royal rank. As Queen and heirs apparent, your persons are considered inviolable -- sacrosanct, in fact." The King grinned. "The Imperial bureaucracy, Milady, is a double-edged claymore."

So. At least she and the children were safe for the time being. Then a thought struck her. "Milord King, what did you mean earlier when you said I had the false Emperor's eyes? And seemingly, at that?"

Eadwyre looked uncomfortable. "It was whispered among the servants that Jagar Tharn kept your likeness in a sort of shrine in his chambers."

"I see." Her thoughts wandered momentarily to that insane romance of hers with the Nightingale. She had been madly in love with him. Foolish woman. And the man she had once loved had caused to be killed the man she truly did love. Did love. Loved. He's gone now, he's... he... She still couldn't bring herself to accept the fact that Symmachus was dead. But even if he is, she told herself firmly, my love is alive, and remains. He would always be with her. As would the pain. The pain of living the rest of her life without him. The pain of trying to survive each day, each night, without his presence, his comfort, his love. The pain of knowing he would never see his children grow into a fine pair of adults, who would never know their father, how brave he was, how strong, how wonderful, how loving... especially little Morgiah.

And for that, for all that, for all you have done to my family, Nightingale -- you must die.

"Does that surprise you?"

Eadwyre's words broke into her thoughts. "What? Does what surprise me?"

"Your likeness. In Tharn's room."

"Oh." Her features set imperturbably. "Yes. And no."

Eadwyre could see from her expression that she wished to change the subject. He turned once again to their plans. "Our chosen one may need a few days to escape, Milady. Can you gain him a bit more time?"

"You trust me in this, Milord King? Why?"

"We are desperate, Milady. We have no choice. But even if we did -- why, yes. Yes, I would trust you. I do trust you. Your husband has been good to my family over the years. The Lord Symmachus--"

"Is dead."

"What?"

Barenziah related the recent events quickly and coolly.

"Milady... Queen... but how dreadful! I... I'm so sorry..."

For the first time Barenziah's glacial poise was shaken. In the face of sympathy, she felt her outward calm start to crumble. She gathered her composure, and willed herself to stillness.

"Under the circumstances, Milady, we can hardly ask--"

"Nay, good Milord. Under the circumstances I must do what I may to avenge myself upon the murderer of my children's father." A single tear escaped the fortress of her eyes. She brushed it away impatiently. "In return I ask only that you protect my orphaned children as you may."

Eadwyre drew himself up. His eyes shone. "Willingly do I so pledge, most brave and noble Queen. The gods of our beloved land, indeed Tamriel itself, be my witnesses."

His words touched her absurdly, yet profoundly. "I thank you from my heart and my soul, good Milord King Eadwyre. You have mine and m-my

children's e-everlasting g-gra -- grati -- "

She broke down.

She did not sleep that night, but sat in a chair beside her bed, hands folded in her lap, thinking deep and long into the waxing and waning of the darkness. She would not tell the children -- not yet, not until she must.

She had no need to seek another audience with the Emperor. A summons arrived at first light.

She told the children she expected to be gone a few days, bade them give the servants no trouble, and kissed them good-bye. Morgiah whimpered a bit; she was bored and lonely in the Imperial City. Helseth looked dour but said nothing. He was very like his father. His father...

At the Imperial Palace, Barenziah was escorted not into the great audience hall but to a small parlour where the Emperor sat at a solitary breakfast. He nodded a greeting and waved his hand toward the window. "Magnificent view, isn't it?"

Barenziah stared out over the towers of the great city. It dawned on her that this was the very chamber where she'd first met Tiber Septim all those years ago. Centuries ago. Tiber Septim. Another man she had loved. Who else had she loved? Symmachus, Tiber Septim... and Straw. She remembered the big blond stable-boy with sudden and intense affection. She never realized it till now, but she had loved Straw. Only she had never let him know. She had been so young then, those had been carefree days, halcyon days... before everything, before all this... before... him. Not Symmachus. The Nightingale. She was shocked in spite of herself. The man could still affect her. Even now. Even after all that had happened. A strong wave of inchoate emotion swept over her.

When she turned back at last, Uriel Septim had vanished -- and the Nightingale sat in his place.

"You knew," he said quietly, scanning her face. "You knew. Instantly. I wanted to surprise you. You might at least have pretended."

Barenziah spread her arms, trying to pacify the maelstrom churning deep inside her. "I'm afraid my skill at pretence is no match for yours, my liege."

He sighed. "You're angry."

"Just a little, I must admit," she said icily. "I don't know about you, but I find betrayal a trifle offensive."
"How human of you."

She took a deep breath. "What do you want of me?"

"Now you are pretending." He stood up to face her directly. "You know what I want of you."

"You want to torment me. Go ahead. I'm in your power. But leave my children alone."

"No, no, no. I don't want that at all, Barenziah." He came near, speaking low in the old caressing voice that had sent shivers cascading through her body. The same voice that was doing the same thing to her, here and now. "Don't you see? This was the only way." His hands closed on her arms.

She felt her resolve fading, her disgust at him weakening. "You could have taken me with you." Unbidden tears gathered in her eyes.

He shook his head. "I didn't have the power. Ah, but now, now...! I have it all. Mine to have, mine to share, mine to give -- to you." He once more waved his hand toward the window and the city beyond. "All Tamriel is mine to lay at your feet -- and that is only the beginning."

"It's too late. Too late. You left me to him."

"He's dead. The peasant's dead. A scant few years -- what do they matter?"

"The children--"

"Can be adopted by me. And we'll have others together, Barenziah. Oh, and what children they'll be! What things we shall pass on to them! Your beauty, and my magic. I have powers you haven't even dreamt of, not in your most untamed imaginings!" He moved to kiss her.

She slipped his grasp and turned away. "I don't believe you."

"You do, you know. You're still angry, that's all." He smiled. But it didn't reach his eyes. "Tell me what you want, Barenziah. Barenziah my beloved. Tell me. It shall be yours."

Her whole life flashed in front of her. The past, the present, and the future still to come. Different times, different lives, different Barenziahs. Which one was the real one? Which one was the real Barenziah? For by that choice she would determine the shape of her fate.

She made it. She knew. She knew who the real Barenziah was, and what she wanted.

"A walk in the garden, my liege," she said. "A song or two, perhaps."

The Nightingale laughed. "You want to be courted."

"And why not? You do it so well. It's been long, besides, since I've had the pleasure."

He smiled. "As you wish, Milady Queen Barenziah. Your wish is my command." He took her hand and kissed it. "Now, and forever."

And so they spent their days in courtship -- walking, talking, singing and laughing together, while the Empire's business was left to subordinates.

"I'd like to see the Staff," Barenziah said idly one day. "I only had a glimpse of it, you'll recall."

He frowned. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure, heart's delight -- but that would be impossible."

"You don't trust me," Barenziah pouted, but softened her lips when he leaned over for a kiss.

"Nonsense, love. Of course I do. But it isn't here." He chuckled. "In fact, it isn't anywhere." He kissed her again, more passionately this time.

"You're talking in riddles again. I want to see it. You couldn't have destroyed it."

"Ah. You've gained in wisdom since last we met."

"You inspired my hunger for knowledge somewhat." She stood up. "The Staff of Chaos can't be destroyed. And it can't be removed from Tamriel, not without the direst consequences to the land itself."

"Ahhh. You impress me, my love. All true. It is not destroyed, and it is not removed from Tamriel. And yet, as I said, it isn't anywhere. Can you solve the puzzle?" He pulled her to him and she leaned into his embrace. "Here's a greater riddle still," he whispered. "How does one make one of two? That I can, and will, show you." Their bodies merged, limbs tangled together.

Later, when they had drawn a bit apart and he lay dozing, she thought sleepily, "One of two, two of one, three of two, two of three... what cannot be destroyed or banished might be split apart, perhaps..."

She stood up, eyes blazing. She started to smile.

The Nightingale kept a journal. He scribbled entries onto it every night after quick reports from underlings. It was locked in a bureau. But the lock was a

simple one. She had, after all, been a member of the Thieves Guild in a past life... in another life... another Barenziah...

One morning Barenziah managed to sneak a quick look at it while he was occupied at his toilet. She discovered that the first piece of the Staff of Chaos was hidden in an ancient Dwarvish mine called Fang Lair -- although its location was given only in the vaguest of terms. The diary was crammed with jotted events in an odd shorthand, and was very hard to decipher.

All Tamriel, she thought, in his hands and mine, and more perhaps -- and yet...

For all his exterior charm there was a cold emptiness where his heart should have been, a vacuum of which he was quite unaware, she thought. One could glimpse it now and then, when his eyes would go blank and hard. And yet, though he had a different concept of it, he yearned for happiness too, and contentment. Peasant dreams, Barenziah thought, and Straw flashed before her eyes again, looking lost and sad. And then Therris, with a feline Khajiit smile. Tiber Septim, powerful and lonely. Symmachus, solid, stolid Symmachus, who did what ought to be done, quietly and efficiently. The Nightingale. The Nightingale, a riddle and a certainty, both the darkness and the light. The Nightingale, who would rule all, and more -- and spread chaos in the name of order.

Barenziah got reluctant leave from him to visit her children, who had yet to be told of their father's death -- and of the Emperor's offer of protection. She finally did, and it wasn't easy. Morgiah clung to her for what seemed an era, sobbing wretchedly, while Helseth ran off into the garden to be alone, afterward refusing all her attempts to speak to him on the subject of his father, or even to let her hold him to her breast.

Eadwyre called on her while she was there. She told him what she had discovered so far, explaining that she must remain awhile yet and learn more as she could.

The Nightingale teased her about her elderly admirer. He was quite aware of Eadwyre's suspicion -- but he wasn't the least bit perturbed, for no one

took the old fool seriously. Barenziah even managed to arrange a reconciliation of sorts between them. Eadwyre publicly recanted his misgivings, and his "old friend" the Emperor forgave him. He was afterward invited to dine with them at least once a week.

The children liked Eadwyre, even Helseth, who disapproved of his mother's liaison with the Emperor and consequently detested him. He had become surly and temperamental as the days passed, and frequently quarreled with both his mother and her lover. Eadwyre was not happy with the affair either, and the Nightingale took great delight at times in openly displaying his affection for Barenziah just to nettle the old man.

They could not marry, of course, for Uriel Septim was already married. At least, not yet. The Nightingale had exiled the Empress shortly after taking the Emperor's place, but had not dared harm her. She was given sanctuary by the Temple of the One. It had been given out that she was suffering from ill health, and rumors had been circulated by the Nightingale's agents that she had mental problems. The Emperor's children had likewise been dispatched to various prisons all across Tamriel disguised as "schools."

"She'll grow worse in time," Nightingale said carelessly, referring to the Empress and eyeing Barenziah's swollen breasts and swelling belly with satisfaction. "As for their children... Well, life is full of hazards, isn't it? We'll be married. Your child will be my true heir."

He did want the child. Barenziah was sure of that. She was far less sure, however, of his feelings for her. They argued continually now, often violently, usually about Helseth, whom he wanted to send away to school in Summurset Isle, the province farthest from the Imperial City. Barenziah made no effort to avoid these altercations. The Nightingale, after all, had no interest in a smooth, unruffled life; and besides, he thoroughly enjoyed making up afterward...

Occasionally Barenziah would take the children and retreat to their old apartment, declaring she wanted no more to do with him. But he would always come to fetch her back, and she would always let herself be fetched back. It was ineffable, like the rising and setting of Tamriel's twin moons.

She was six months pregnant before she finally deciphered the location of the last Staff piece -- an easy one, since every Dark Elf knew where the Mount of Dagoth-Ur was.

When she next quarreled with the Nightingale, she simply left the city with Eadwyre and rode hard for High Rock, and Wayrest. The Nightingale was furious, but there was little he could do. His assassins were rather inept, and he dared not leave his seat of power to pursue them in person. Nor could he openly declare war on Wayrest. He had no legitimate claim on her or her unborn child. True to form, the Imperial City's nobility had disapproved of his liaison with Barenziah -- as they had so many years ago of Tiber Septim's -- and were glad to see her go.

Wayrest was equally distrustful of her, but Eadwyre was fanatically loved by his prosperous little city-state, and allowances were readily made for his... eccentricities. Barenziah and Eadwyre were married a year after the birth of her son by the Nightingale. In spite of this unfortunate fact, Eadwyre doted on her and her children. She in her turn did not love him -- but she was fond of him, and that was something. It was nice to have someone, and Wayrest was a very good place, a good place for children to grow up, while they waited, and bided their time, and prayed for the Champion's success in his mission.

Barenziah could only hope that he wouldn't take very long, whoever this unnamed Champion was. She was a Dark Elf, and she had all the time in the world. All the time. But no more love left to give, and no more hatred left to burn. She had nothing left, nothing but pain, and memories... and her children. She only wanted to raise her family, and provide them a good life, and be left to live out what remained of hers. She had no doubt it was going to be a long life yet. And during it she wanted peace, and quiet, and serenity, of her soul as well as of her heart. Peasant dreams. That was what she wanted. That was what the real Barenziah wanted. That was what the real Barenziah was. Peasant dreams.

Pleasant dreams.

Reality & Other Falsehoods

It is easy to confuse Illusion and Alteration. Both schools of magic attempt to create what is not there. The difference is in the rules of nature. Illusion is not bound by them, while Alteration is. This may seem to indicate that Alteration is the weaker of the two, but this is not true. Alteration creates a reality that is recognized by everyone. Illusion's reality is only in the mind of the caster and the target.

To master Alteration, first accept that reality is a falsehood. There is no such thing. Our reality is a perception of greater forces impressed upon us for their amusement. Some say that these forces are the gods, other that they are something beyond the gods. For the wizard, it doesn't really matter. What matters is the appeal couched in a manner that cannot be denied. It must be insistent without being insulting.

To cast Alteration spells is to convince a greater power that it will be easier to change reality as requested than to leave it alone. Do not assume that these forces are sentient. Our best guess is that they are like wind and water. Persistent but not thoughtful. Just like directing the wind or water, diversions are easier than outright resistance. Express the spell as a subtle change and it is more likely to be successful.

The Red Book of Riddles

This handye booke doth containe alle diverse manner of riddles and follyes, and, by means of carefulle studye, the prudente scholarlye gentlemane maye finde himselfe noe longer discomfited by the sharpe wite of his fellowes.

The posing and puzzling of riddles is a convention of polite aristocratic Western society. Nobles and social aspirants collect books of riddles and study them, hoping thereby to increase the chances of their appearing sly and witty in conversation.

The question:
It has a tail, a side and a head
I call it what I call a snake
It has no body and it is dead

The answer:
It must be a drake

The question:
Poets know the hearts of Men and Mer
But beasts can't know my heart, you see
This book was written by a bear

The answer:
It is not a book of poetry.

The question:
I gave you a sock, not unlike a box
With hammers and nails all around it
Two lids open when it knocks

The answer:
It must have been a great hit.

The Red Kitchen Reader

By Simocles Quo

Though naturally modest, I must admit to some pleasure in being dubbed by our Emperor's father, the late Pelagius IV, as "the finest connoisseur in Tamriel." He was also good enough to appoint me the first, and to this day, the only Master of Cuisine in the Imperial Court. Other Emperors, of course, had master chefs and cooks in their staff, but only during the reign of Pelagius was there someone of rarefied tastes to plan the menus and select the finest produce to be served at court. His son Uriel requested that I continue in that position, but I was forced to graciously decline the invitation, because of age and poor health.

This book, however, is not intended to be autobiography. I have had a great many adventures in my life as a knight of fine dining, but my intention for this book is much more specific. Many times I have been asked, "What is the best thing you ever ate?"

The answer to that is not a simple one. Much of the pleasure of a great meal is not only in the food: it is in the setting, the company, the mood. Eat an indifferently cooked roast or a simple stew with your one true love, and it is a meal to be remembered. Have an excellent twelve-course feast with dull company, while feeling slightly ill, and it will be forgotten, or remembered only with distaste.

Sometimes meals are memorable for the experiences that come before them.

Fairly recently, in northern Skyrim, I had a bit of bad luck. I was with a group of fishermen, observing their technique of capturing a very rare, very delicious fish called Merringar. The fish is found only far from shore, so it was a week's voyage out beyond civilization. Well, we found our school of Merringar, but as the fishermen began spearing them, the blood in the water attracted a family of Dreugh, who capsized the boat and everyone on it. I

managed to save myself, but the fishermen and all our supplies were lost. Sailing is not, alas, a skill I have picked up over the years, and it took me three weeks, with no provisions, to find my way back to the kingdom of Solitude. I had managed to catch enough small fish to eat raw, but I was still delirious from hunger and thirst. The first meal I had on shore, of Nordic roast boar, Jazbay wine, and, yes, filet of Merringar would have been excellent under any circumstances, but because of the threat of starvation I had faced, it was divine beyond words.

Sometimes meals are even memorable for the experiences that follow them.

In a tavern in Falinesti, I was introduced to a simple peasant dish called Kollopi, delicious little balls of flesh, thick with spices and juice, so savory I asked the proprietress whence they came. Mother Pascost explained that the Kollopi were an arboreal rodent that fed exclusively on the most tender branches of the graht-oak, and I was fortunate enough to be in Valenwood at the time of the annual harvest. I was invited to join with a small colony of Imga monkeys, who alone could gather these succulent little mice. Because they lived only on the slenderest branches of the trees, and only on the ends of those same branches, the Imga had to climb beneath them and jump up to "pick" the Kollopi from their perches. Imga are, of course, naturally dexterous, but I was then relatively young and spry, and they let me help them. While I could never jump as high they could, with practice, I found that if I kept my head and upper body rigid, and launched off the ground with a scissors-like kick, I could reach the Kollopi on the lowest branches of the tree. I believe I gathered three Kollopi myself, though with considerable effort.

To this day, I salivate at the thought of Kollopi, but my mind is on the image of myself and several dozen Imgas leaping around beneath the shade of the graht-oaks.

Then, of course, there are the rare meals memorable for what came before, after, and during the meal, which brings me to the finest thing I ever ate, the meal that began my lifelong obsession with excellent cuisine.

As a child growing up in Cheydinhal, I did not care for food at all. I

recognized the value of nutrition, for I was not a complete dullard, but I cannot say that mealtime brought me any pleasure at all. Partly, of course, this was the fault of my family's cook, who believed that spices were an invention of the Daedra, and that good Imperials should like their food boiled, textureless and flavorless. Though I think she was alone in assigning a religious significance to this, my sampling of traditional Cyrodilic cuisine suggests that the philosophy is regrettably common in my homeland.

Though I did not enjoy food per se, I was not a morose, unadventurous child in other respects. I enjoyed the fights in the Arena, of course, and nothing made me happier than wandering the streets of my town, with my imagination as my only companion. It was on one such jaunt on a sunny Fredas in Mid Year that I made a discovery that changed my heart and my life.

There were several old abandoned houses down the street from my own home, and I often played around them, imagining them to be filled with desperate outlaws or haunted by hundreds of evil spirits. I never had the nerve to go inside. In fact, had I not that day seen some other children who had delighted in teasing me in the past, I would never have gone in. But I needed a sanctuary, so I ran into the closest one.

The house seemed to be as desolate on the inside as on the outside, further proof that no one lived there, and had not for some time. When I heard footsteps, I could only assume that the loathsome little urchins I hoped to avoid had followed me in. I escaped to the basement, and from there, past a broken-down wall that led to a well. I could still hear the footsteps above, and I decided that I was still loath to confront my tormentors. Knocking aside the rusty locks on the well, I slipped down below.

The well was dry, but I discovered it was far from empty. There was a sort of a sub-basement to the house, three large rooms that were clean, furnished, and evidently not abandoned at all. My senses told me someone was living in the house, after all: not only my sense of sight, but my sense of smell. For one of the rooms was a large red-painted kitchen, and spread out on the coals of the oven was a roast, carved into small morsels. Passing a beautiful and appropriate bas-relief of a mother carving a roast for her

grateful children, I beheld the kitchen and the wonders within.

Like I said, food had never interested me before, but I was transfixed, and even now as I write this, words fail me in describing the rich aroma that hung in the air. It was like nothing I had ever smelled in my family's kitchen, and I was unable to stop myself from popping one of the steaming chunks of meat into my mouth. The taste was magical, the flesh tender and sweet. Before I knew it, I had eaten everything on the stove, and I learned at that very second the truth that that food can and should be sublime.

After gorging myself and having my culinary epiphany, I was conflicted on what to do. Part of me wanted to wait down in that red kitchen until the chef returned, so I could ask him what his secret recipe was for the delicious meat. Part of me recognized that I had stolen into someone's house and eaten their dinner, and it would be wise to leave while I could. That was what I did.

Time and again, I've tried to return to that strange, wonderful place, but Cheydinhal has changed over time. Old houses have been reclaimed, and new houses abandoned. I know what to look for on the inside of the house - the well, the beautiful etching of a woman preparing to carve out a roast for her children, the red kitchen itself - but I have never been able to find the house again. After a while, as I grew older, I stopped trying. It is better as it remains in my memory, the most perfect meal I ever ate.

The inspiration for my life that followed all was cooked up, together with that fabulous meat, right there in the Red Kitchen.

The Refugees

By Geros Albreigh

The smell of the bay oozed through the stones of the cellar, salt and brined decay. The cellar itself had its own scents of old wine turned to vinegar, mildew, and the more exotic spices of herbs the healers had brought with them to tend to the wounded. There were more than fifty people squeezed into the big earthen room which had once been forgotten storage for the brothel above. The groaning and whimpering had ceased for now, and all was still, as if the hospital had turned into a mass grave.

"Mother," a Redguard boy whispered. "What was that?"

The boy's mother was about to answer him when there was another rolling roar from outside, which grew louder and louder, as if some great but incorporeal beast had come into the cellar. The walls trembled and dust burst from the ceiling in a rain of powder.

Unlike the last time, no one screamed. They waited until the weird, haunting sound had past, and then was replaced by the soft rumble of the distant battle.

A wounded soldier began whispering Mara's Prayer from the Doomed.

"Mankar," a Bosmer woman curled up in a cot hissed, her eyes feverish, flesh white and wet with sweat. "He is coming!"

"Who is coming?" asked the boy, grasping his mother's skirt tight.

"Who do you think, lad? The sweets monger?" a grizzled one-armed Redguard growled. "The Camoran Usurper."

The boy's mother shot an angry look at the old warrior. "She doesn't know what she's saying. She's sick."

The boy nodded. His mother was usually right. He had not yet even been born when people began whispering that the Camoran Usurper was coming towards her little village, and she had packed up their belongings to flee. Their neighbors had laughed at her, she said, saying that Rihad and Taneth would handily defeat him. Her husband, Lukar's father who he was never to meet, had also laughed at her. It was the harvest time, and she would miss out on the celebrations. But his mother, Miak-I, was right. Two weeks after she fled the village, she heard the tale that it had been obliterated during the night with no survivors. Rihad and Taneth had both fallen. The Usurper was unstoppable.

Lukar had been born and grown up in refugee camps throughout Hammerfell. He had never known a friend for more than a few days. He knew that when the sky burned red to the west, they would pack up and move east. When it burned to the south, they moved north. At last, after twelve years of moving from camp to camp, they had taken passage across the Iliac Bay to the province of High Rock and the barony of Dwynnen. There Miak-I had promised, and hoped, that they would have a peaceful, permanent home.

It was so green there, it blinded him. Unlike Hammerfell, which was only green in certain seasons and in certain places, Dwynnen was verdant year round. Until wintertide, when it began to snow, and Lukar had been frightened of it at first. He was ashamed to think of it now, when there was real danger, but the red clouds of war, the stink and pain of the refugee camp, that was familiar.

Now, the red sky was on the horizon of the bay and coming closer, and he longed for the days when a scattering of white made him cry.

"Mankar!" the Bosmer woman cried out again. "He is coming, and he will bring death!"

"No one is coming," said a pretty young Breton healer, coming to the woman's side. "Hush now."

"Hello?" came a voice from above.

The whole room, almost together as one gasped. A Bosmer limped down the shoddy wooden stairs, his friendly face very obviously not that of the Camoran Usurper.

"Sorry if I frightened you," he said. "I was told there were healers here, and I could use a little help."

Rosayna hurried to take a look at the Bosmer's wounds on his leg and chest. Dishelved but still beautiful, she was one of the favorites at the brothel, who had learned her healing skill along with her more vocational skills at the House of Dibella. She carefully but quickly pulled the rent leather cuirass, chausses, tassets, grieves, and boots off him, and placed them to the side while she examined the injuries.

The old Redguard warrior picked them up and studied them. "You were in the war?"

"Next to it is probably a better way to put it," the Bosmer smiled, wincing slightly at Rosayna's touch. "Behind it, beside it, in front of it. My name's Orben Elmlock. I'm a scout. I try to avoid the real battle, so I can get back and report what I see. A good job for people who don't like the color of their own blood very much."

"Hzim," said the warrior, shaking Orben's hand. "I can't fight anymore, but I can fix up this armor if you're going to return."

"You're a leathersmith?"

"Naw, just a jack of all trades," replied Hzim, opening up a small canister of wax to prep the hard but flexible leather. "I could tell you were a scout from the armor, though. Can you tell us what you've been spying on? We've been down in here for half a day now, with no word from the outside."

"The entire Iliac Bay is one great battlefield on the waves," said Orben and sighed as Rosayna's spell began to close his jagged but shallow wounds.

"We've shut off the invasion from the mouth of the bay, but I was coming from the coast, and the enemy's army is marching over the Wrothgarian Mountains. That's where I had my little scuffle. It's not too surprising, moving the flank in from the side while the front battle is occupied. It's a play right out of Camoran Kaltos's book of tricks the Hart-King borrowed."

"The Hart-King?" Lukar asked. He had been listening quietly, understanding everything except that.

"Haymon Camoran, the Camoran Usurper, Haymon Hart-King, they're all the same, lad. He's a complicated fellow, and needs more than one name."

"You know him?" Miak-I asked, stepping forward.

"Near on twenty years, before this whole black, bloody business. I was Camoran Kaltos's chief scout, and Haymon was his sorcerer and advisor. I helped them both, when they were vying for the Camoran throne, and began the conquest of - Ouch!"

Rosayna has ceased her healing. With eyes of fury, she had reversed her spell, and the closed, mended wounds were opening again, dark infections returning. She held him with surprising strength when Orben tried to pull back.

"You bastard," the healer courtesan hissed. "I have a cousin in Falinesti, a priestess."

"She's fine!" Orben yelped. "Lord Kaltos was very adamant about not harming anyone who did not pose a threat... "

"I think the people of Kvatch would disagree with that assessment," said Hzim, coldly.

"That was horrible, the worst thing I have ever seen," Orben nodded. "Kaltos wept when he saw what Haymon had done. My master did everything he could to stop it, begging the Hart-King to return to Valenwood. But he turned on Kaltos, and we fled. We are not your enemy,

and we have never been. Kaltos could do nothing to prevent the horror that the Usurper has brought to the Colovian West and Hammerfell, and he has fought for fifteen years to prevent more."

The frightening bestial roar passed through the cellar again, even louder than before. The wounded could not help groaning in helpless terror.

"And what is that?" Miak-I sneered. "Another of Camoran Kaltos's tricks that the Usurper picked up?"

"It is indeed a trick, as a matter of fact," Orben yelled, above the screech. "It's a phastasm he employs to scare people. He had to use fear tactics in the beginning when his power was ascending, and he has to fall back on them now for his power is waning. That is why it took him two years to conquer Valenwood, and another thirteen to half-conquer Hammerfell. No offense to you Redguards, but it isn't only your battle prowess that has been holding him back. He does not have the support he used to have from his Master -"

The echoing roar increased in intensity before once again falling silent.

"Mankar!" the Bosmer woman groaned. "He comes, and he will destroy all!"

"His Master?" asked Lukar, but Orben's eyes had gone to the Bosmer woman, curled up in her blood-soaked cot.

"Who is she?" Orben asked Rosayna.

"One of the refugees, of course, from your friendly little war in Valenwood before you and your Kaltos changed sides," the healer replied. "I think her name is Kaalys."

"By Jephre," Orben whispered under his breath, limping over to the woman's cot and wiping the sweat and blood streaked hair from her pallid face. "Kaalys, it's Orben. Do you remember me? How did you get here? Did he hurt you?"

"Mankar!" Kaalys moaned.

"That's all she says," said Rosayna.

"I don't know what that it is," Orben frowned. "Not the Usurper, though she knew him too. Very well. She was a favorite of his."

"His favorites, you, Kaltos, her, all seem to turn against him," said Miak-I.

"That is why he will fall," replied Hzim.

Armored footfall rang along the ceiling, and the cellar door burst open. It was the captain of Baron Othrok's castle guards. "The docks are on fire! If you want to live, you'll need to take refuge at Castle Wightmoor!"

"We need help!" Rosayna called back, but she knew that the guards were needed for defense, not to help carry the sick to safety.

With ten guards who could be spared and the most able-bodied of the wounded assisting, the cellar was emptied as the streets of Dwynnen filled with smoke, and fire began to spread through the chaos. It had been a single fireball miscast out at sea striking the docks, but the damage would be tremendous. Some hours later, in the courtyard of the mighty castle, the healers were able to set up the cots and begin to tend once again to the suffering of the innocent. The first person Rosayna found was Orben Elmlock. Even with his wounds reopened, he had helped carry two of the patients into the castle.

"I'm sorry," she said as she pressed her healing hands onto his wounds. "I lost my temper. I forgot that I am a healer."

"Where is Kaalys?" Orben asked.

"She's not here?" Rosayna said, looking around. "She must have run away."

"Run away? But wasn't she injured?"

"It was not a healthy situation, but new mothers can surprise you with what they can do when it's all over."

"She was pregnant?" Orben gasped

"Yes. It wasn't such a difficult birth in the end. She was holding the boy in her arms when I saw her last. She said she had done it herself."

"She was pregnant," Orben murmured again. "The mistress of the Camoran Usurper was pregnant."

Word quickly spread throughout the castle that the battle was over, and more than that, the war was over. Haymon Camoran's forces had been defeated at sea, and in the mountains. The Hart-King was dead.

Lukar watched down from the battlements into the dark woods that surrounded Dwynnen. He had heard about Kaalys, and he imagined a desperate woman fleeing with her newborn baby in her arms into the wilderness. Kaalys would have nowhere to go, no one to protect them. She and her baby would be a refugee, like Miak-I and him had been. Reflecting back, he remembered her words.

He is coming. He is coming, and he will bring death. He will destroy all.

Lukar remembered her eyes. She was sick, but not afraid. Who was this "He" who was coming if the Camoran Usurper was dead?

"Did she say nothing else?" asked Orben.

"She told me the baby's name," Rosayna replied. "Mankar."

Remanada

Chapter 1: Sancre Tor and the Birth of Reman

And in those days the empire of the Cyrodiils was dead, save in memory only, for through war and slug famine and iniquitous rulers, the west split from the east and Colovia's estrangment lasted some four hundreds of years. And the earth was sick with this sundering. Once-worthy western kings, of Anvil and Sarchal, of Falkreath and Delodiil, became through pride and habit as like thief-barons and forgot covenant. In the heartland things were no better, as arcanists and false moth-princes lay in drugged stupor or the studies of vileness and no one sat on the Throne in dusted generations. Snakes and the warnings of snakes went unheeded and the land bled with ghosts and deepset holes unto cold harbors. It is said that even the Chim-el Adabal, the amulet of the kings of glory, had been lost and its people saw no reason to find it.

And it was in this darkness that King Hrol set out from the lands beyond lost Twil with a sortie of questing knights numbered eighteen less one, all of them western sons and daughters. For Hrol had seen in his visions the snakes to come and sought to heal all the borders of his forebears. And to this host appeared at last a spirit who resembled none other than El-Estia, queen of ancienttimes, who bore in her left hand the dragonfire of the aka-tosh and in her right hand the jewels of the covenant and on her breast a wound that spilt void onto her mangled feet. And seeing El-Estia and Chim-el Adabal, Hrol and his knights wailed and set to their knees and prayed for all things to become as right. Unto them the spirit said, I am the healer of all men and the mother of dragons, but as you have run so many times from me so shall I run until you learn my pain, which renders you and all this land dead.

And the spirit fled from them, and they split among hills and forests to find her, all grieving that they had become a villainous people. Hrol and his shieldthane were the only ones to find her, and the king spoke to her, saying, I love you sweet Aless, sweet wife of Shor and of Auri-el and the

Sacred Bull, and would render this land alive again, not through pain but through a return to the dragon-fires of covenant, to join east and west and throw off all ruin. And the shieldthane bore witness to the spirit opening naked to his king, carving on a nearby rock the words AND HROL DID LOVE UNTO A HILLOCK before dying in the sight of their union.

When the fifteen other knights found King Hrol, they saw him dead after his labors against a mound of mud. And they parted each in their way, and some went mad, and the two that returned to their homeland beyond Twil would say nothing of Hrol, and acted ashamed for him.

But after nine months that mound of mud became as a small mountain, and there were whispers among the shepherds and bulls. A small community of believers gathered around that growing hill during the days of its first churning, and they were the first to name it the Golden Hill, Sancre Tor. And it was the shepherdess Sed-Yenna who dared climb the hill when she heard his first cry, and at its peak she saw what it had yielded, an infant she named Reman, which is "Light of Man."

And in the child's forehead was the Chim-el Adabal, alive with the dragon-fires of yore and divine promise, and none dared obstruct Sed-Yenna when she climbed the steps of White-Gold Tower to place the babe Reman on his Throne, where he spoke as an adult, saying I AM CYRODIIL COME.

Chapter 2: The Chevalier Renald Blade of the Pig

And in the days of interregnum, the Chim-el Adabal was lost again amid the petty wars of gone-heathen kings. West and east knew no union then and all the lands outside of them saw Cyrodiil as a nest of snakemen and snakes. And for four more hundreds of years did the seat of Reman stay sundered, with only the machinations of a group of loyal knights keeping all its

borders from throwing wide.

These loyal knights did go by no name then, but were known by their eastern swords and painted eyes, and it was whispered that they were descended from the bodyguard of old Reman. One of their number, called the Chevalier Renald, discovered the prowess of Cuhlecain and then supported him towards the throne. Only later would it be revealed that Renald did this thing to come closer to Talos, anon Stormcrown, the glorious yet-emperor Tiber Septim; only later still, that he was under instruction by a pig.

Long glory was wife to the all the knights of the dragon-banner, who knew no other and were brothers before beyond many seas and now were brothers under the law named the blade-surrender of Pale Pass. And having vampire blood these brother-knights lived for ages through and past Reman and then kept guard over his ward, the coiled king, Versidue-Shaie. The snake-captain Vershu became Renald became the protector of the northern west when the black dart was hooked into Savirien-Chorak.

Here torn pages indicate that the rest of this ancient book has been lost.

Response to Bero's Speech

by Malviser, Battlemage

On the 14th of Last Seed, an illusionist by the name of Berevar Bero gave a very ignorant speech at the Chantry of Julianos in the Imperial City. As ignorant speeches are hardly uncommon, there was no reason to respond to it. Unfortunately, he has since had the speech privately printed as "Bero's Speech to the Battlemages," and it's received some small, undeserved attention in academic circles. Let us put his misconceptions to rest.

Bero began his lecture with an occasionally factual account of famous Battlemages from Zurin Arctus, Tiber Septim's Imperial Battlemage, to Jagar Tharn, Uriel Septim VII's Imperial Battlemage. His intent was to show that where it matters, the Battlemage relies on other Schools of Magicka, not the School of Destruction which is supposedly a Battlemage's particular forte. Allow me first to dispute these so-called historical facts.

Zurin Arctus did not create the golem Numidium by spells of Mysticism and Conjuration as Bero alleges. The truth is that we don't know how Numidium was created or if it was a golem or atronach in any traditional sense of those words. Uriel V's Battlemage Hethoth was not an Imperial Battlemage -- he was simply a sorcerer in the employ of the Empire, thus which spells he cast in the various battles on Akavir are irrelevant, not to mention heresay. Bero calls Empress Morihatha's Battlemage Welloc "an accomplished diplomat" but not "a powerful student of the School of Destruction." I congratulate Bero on correctly identifying an Imperial Battlemage, but there are many written examples of Welloc's skill in the School of Destruction. The sage Celarus, for example, wrote extensively about Welloc casting the Vampiric Cloud on the rebellious army of Blackrose, causing their strength and skill to pass on to their opponents. What is this, but an impressive example of the School of Destruction?

Bero rather pathetically includes Jagar Tharn in his list of underachieving Battlemages. To use an insane traitor as example of rational behavior is an

untenable position. What would Bero prefer? That Tharn used the School of Destruction to destroy Tamriel by a more traditional means?

Bero uses his misrepresenta- tion of history as the basis for his argument. Even if he had found four excellent examples from history of Battlemages casting spells outside their School -- and he didn't -- he would only have anecdotal evidence, which isn't enough to support an argument. I could easily find four examples of illusionists casting healing spells, or nightblades teleporting. There is a time and a place for everything.

Bero's argument, built on this shaky ground, is that the School of Destruction is not a true school. He calls it "narrow and shallow" as an avenue of study, and its students impatient, with megalomaniac tendencies. How can one respond to this? Someone who knows nothing about casting a spell of Destruction criticizing the School for being too simple? Summarizing the School of Destruction as learning how to do the "maximum amount of damage in the minimum amount of time" is clearly absurd, and he expounds on his ignorance by listing all the complicated factors studied in his own School of Illusion.

Allow me in response to list the factors studied in the School of Destruction. The means of delivering the spell matters more in the School of Destruction than any other school, whether it is cast at a touch, at a range, in concentric circles, or cast once to be triggered later. What forces must be reigned in to cast the spell: fire, lightning, or frost? And what are the advantages and dangers of each? What are the responses from different targets from the assault of different spells of destruction? What are the possible defenses and how may they be assailed? What environmental factors must be taken into consideration? What are the advantages of a spell of delayed damage? Bero suggests that the School of Destruction cannot be subtle, yet he forgets about all the Curses that fall under the mantle of the school, sometimes affecting generation after generation in subtle yet sublime ways.

The School of Alteration is a distinct and separate entity from the School of Destruction, and Bero's argument that they should be merged into one is patently ludicrous. He insists -- again, a man who knows nothing about the

Schools of Alteration and Destruction, is the one insisting this -- that "damage" is part of the changing of reality dealt with by the spells of Alteration. The implication is that Levitation, to list a spell of Alteration, is a close cousin of Shock Bolt, a spell of Destruction. It would make as much sense to say that the School of Alteration, being all about the actuality of change, should absorb the School of Illusion, being all about the appearance of change.

It certainly isn't a coincidence that a master of the School of Illusion cast this attack on the School of Destruction. Illusion is, after all, all about masking the truth.

The Rise and Fall of the Blades

by Anonymous

There are many that still remember the Blades. There are fewer that can pass down their stories, their origins and their downfall. My father could. In his proudest moments he said to me, "You keep secrets like the Blades."

The Blades were good at keeping secrets. They didn't write down much. They passed information carefully between their spies in every province, to their elite members that protected the Emperors. Even amongst their members, they kept much secret.

Most associate the Blades with their ceremonial Akaviri armor and curved longswords. One can trace the Blades back to the fiercest warriors of Akavir, the Dragonguard. It was there, just as they would do in Tamriel, that they protected rulers and their kingdom. But recent discoveries show it to be much more than that.

Many classic texts tell us of adventures to Akavir, known as the dragon lands of the east. Many from Tamriel have attempted to conquer it, most famously Emperor Uriel V and his Tenth Legion in 3E288 as documented in the Imperial dispatch "Disaster at Ionith." Dragons have long been legend in Akavir, and many believe that their brief appearance in Tamriel's history are those that escaped Akaviri, for it was there they were hunted and killed off by the Dragonguard. The Dragonguard would follow those that fled to Tamriel in the late 1st Era.

Invading from the north, the Dragonguard met not only dragons, but the men of Skyrim, who don't meet invasions with pitchers of mead. The Dragonguard cut a path through Skyrim, and it was not until they were stopped by Reman Cyrodiil during the battle at Pale Pass that the invasion came to an end. It was Reman who united the human lands of Cyrodiil and defeated the Akaviri invaders.

Reman is one of the first documented, and widely accepted, of the mythic Dragonborn; those anointed by Akatosh and Alessia themselves. "Born with the soul of a dragon" is what his followers would say. Reports differ widely on the nature of the battle at Pale Pass. But the end result is the same, that the remaining Dragonguard, upon hearing the voice of Reman Cyrodiil, knelt and swore their lives to him, their conqueror and savior. Fragments of from late 1st era texts refer to the warriors dropping to their knees saying "we were not hunting" (or "did not intend", author - rough translation), continuing "we have been searching, for you."

They protected Reman with their lives, as well as his descendants, as the Reman Dynasty ushered in Tamriel's 2nd era. It was through these years that their reach extended, and their order grew to become the Blades. Their conquest of the dragons complete, they only sought to protect the Dragonborn, and through him, the Empire.

They reached their height late during the 3rd era under the rule of the Septim emprors. Despite their numbers, they kept their secrecy. The most visible and well documented were the members who personally guarded the Emperor, still wearing the original Akaviri armor. But that was the just the tip of the spear, for the Blades were a larger organization, stretching to every corner of Tamriel. These agents were of every race. They were merchants, thieves, craftsman, mages, and warriors, all acting as spies, protecting the Empire as needed, and operating in secret. They often acted alone, but some fragments speak of them meeting in secret fortresses across the continent. The most famous being Cyrodiil's Cloud Ruler Temple, where they hung the swords of those slain protecting the Dragonborn. Other maps speak of Wind Scour Temple under the great expanse of Hammerfell's Alik'r desert, Sky Haven Temple in the mountains of Skyrim, and Storm Talon Temple east of Wayrest.

They were known to have a "Grandmaster", who often lived amongst the people, unknown to others. The nature of their communications, meeting places, and missions were known to only a few elite members. The only two to know all were the Grandmaster himself and the Chronicler, whose only job was to make sure the group's mission was never known, but never lost.

With the death of Uriel Septim VII and his son, Martin, the 3rd era came to a close with the Blades fortifying themselves deep within Cyrodiil's Cloud Ruler Temple, as they waited for a Dragonborn to return when they would be called upon again.

The Empire of the 4th era no longer saw the Blades openly protecting it, or the Emperors. That role is now filled by the Penitus Oculatus, a purely Imperial organization. But the Blades continued their secret work, to watch for the Dragonborn and guard against future enemies. The Blades were among the first to see the signs that the Thalmor of the Aldmeri Dominion would not remain isolated within their borders forever. They could do what the Penitus Oculatus, servant to Imperial policy, could not, and thus earned the lasting hatred of the Thalmor.

The warnings of the Blades were proved right, as is well known to all. The Great War between the Empire and the Thalmor consumed the Empire and nearly destroyed it. Emperor Titus Mede II eventually brokered peace with the Thalmor, but at a price many of us still bear.

The reach and destructive nature of the Thalmor is known to many (author's note - in my family firsthand). They are not fools. They knew early on that the Blades were an enemy. So they hunted them throughout the Great War. Some were killed defending their Temples, others as they slept in their hideaways, alone. Some fought, some ran, some hid. But the Thalmor found them all.

There are those that say the Blades still exist around us, in hiding from the Thalmor. Waiting as they have done time and time again, for a Dragonborn to return. For one to protect, for one to guide them.

Rising Threat

Volume I

by Lathenil of Sunhold

The following is the account of Lathenil of Sunhold, an Altmer refugee from Summerset Isle who came to Cyrodiil in the early years of the Fourth Era. According to Lathenil, he did not flee the aftermath of the Oblivion Crisis in Summerset - rather he fled "the darkening shadow of the Thalmor upon my beloved homeland."

Lathenil had a very intense presence, to put it politely, and some of his accusations of Thalmor involvement border on madness. This may be why his fervent warnings and outspoken criticisms of the Thalmor and the Aldmeri Dominion went unheeded, but history has at least partially vindicated Lathenil's claims.

Praxis Erratuim, Imperial Historian

I was barely more than a child when the Great Anguish fell upon us. The very air was torn asunder, leaving gaping, infected wounds that spewed daedra from the bowels of Oblivion. Many flocked to the shores, seeking escape from Dagon's murderous host - but the seas betrayed our people, raising up to smash our ships and our ports, leaving us to fates so vile and wicked that death would seem a mercy.

The Crystal Tower stood as our last bastion of hope, in both the literal and figurative sense.

Refugees filled the Crystal Tower until it could hold no more. I could taste the fear hanging in the air; feel the pall of despair suffocating us. We could see the daedra moving through the trees in the distance, but they did not come. Days passed, and still the daedra would not approach within arrow-shot of the battlements. Hope began to grow. "They fear us," some would say, "even a daedra knows not to trifle with the wisdom and magicks of the Crystal-Like-Law!"

It was as if the foul denizens of Oblivion had been waiting for this very spirit to stoke our hearts before they acted.

As we slept, innumerable legions of daedra amassed around us... and they were not alone. Hundreds of Altmer prisoners were gathered with them. As dawn broke, we were awoken by their screams as the daedra began to flail them and flay them. We watched in abject horror as our kinfolk were defiled completely... carved up and eaten alive, impaled on their depraved war machines, and worried apart as meals for their profane beasts.

This bloodletting was only a prelude to whet their appetites.

Once the daedra finished with our kinfolk, they turned their eyes to the Crystal Tower. Our great and noble bastion proved as much of an impediment as a mighty oak to a landslide - standing tall for but a few moments, appearing almost able to ride the tide of destruction around it, but ultimately being swept away.

Our exalted wizards decimated the fiends, roasting them by the dozens. Archers were finding the narrowest of chinks in their daedric armor at over a hundred paces, felling their captains and commanders. The might and skillfulness of our heroic defenders was astonishing to behold, but it was not enough. The daedra clambered over the corpses of their cohort. They marched headlong into death and destruction that would make the mightiest armies in all of Tamriel quake with fear.

When they breached the walls, I fled along with the other cowards. I take no pride in that act. It has haunted my existence ever since, and I burn with shame to admit it, but it is truth. We fled in mindless panic - abandoning those stalwart Altmer who held the line against the onslaught, to preserve and defend our illustrious Crystal Tower.

We raced through cleverly concealed passageways and emerged well away from the chaos that had descended upon the tower. That is when it happened. It started like a gust rustling through the leaves of a dense forest, but the sound did not taper off. It rose into a roar as the very ground on

which I stood began to shudder. I turned to look, and the world held its breath...

I stood transfixed as the heart of my homeland was torn as if from my own breast. The unthinkable, the incomprehensible... the tower of Crystal-Like-Law cast to the ground, with all the dignity of a beggar meeting an iron-clad fist. An eternity I watched, trying to reconcile what I knew with what I saw.

Sobs racked my chest, and weeping filled the air around me as the spell loosened its hold and I realized where I was. There were scores of other refugees mesmerized by the horror that had likewise ensorcelled me. "Go," I croaked out as my heart - the heart of my land - shattered. No one moved, not even me.

I mustered what will I could and bellowed all the fear and hatred and agony at what had just happened, turning the word into a mindless shriek: "GO!" I ran then, feeling more than seeing that the others had followed.

Volume II

by Lathenil of Sunhold

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Praxis Erratuim, Imperial Historian

What happened after the tower of Crystal-like-law fell was a daze. It was as if my mind simply... stopped. Instinct took over, as my every thought sank into a black abyss of despair. Time lost all meaning, and to this day I know not how long I was in this state. Eventually a conscious thought managed to break my fugue: the daedric horde had vanished! Gone as suddenly as they had come.

Before my numbed mind could comprehend the tumult that consumed my beloved Summerset Isle, before I could formulate the question "how?" they were there, dripping honeyed poison in our ears: the Thalmor. They were the ones that saved us, they claimed, working deep and subtle magicks. It was their efforts, their sacrifices that delivered the Altmer from extinction.

Oh, what fools we were. We wanted so desperately someone to thank for ending our tribulations, we lavished it upon the first to step up and claim the glory. With that simple act of gratitude, we allowed a vile rot to seep into our homeland, to putrefy our once noble and distinguished civilization.

It was months before I began to suspect the error we had made. Small twinges of unease would vex me, but each one alone was easy enough to disregard and push aside. The exile of the great seer-mage Rynandor the Bold was the final doubt that I could not ignore. You see, Rynandor was one of the very few who survived the collapse of the Crystal Tower - I saw some of his bravery and heroics with my own eyes. It was his leadership and sorcery that made the daedra pay such a high price for their destruction of the Crystal Tower.

The Thalmor besmirched his name when he had the audacity to publicly doubt and question their role in ending the Oblivion Crisis on Summerset Isle. Rynandor made the mistake of ignoring the consensus gentium, trusting instead to logic and facts. The shrewdness of the Thalmor, however, was not such to allow something as trivial as the truth stand in their way. As soon as they shifted the collective opinion ever so slightly against Rynandor, they had him sequestered and intensified their efforts to tarnish his reputation. Unable to mount any sort of defense to the Thalmor's attacks, Rynandor was quickly denounced and exiled.

Volume III

by Lathenil of Sunhold

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Praxis Erratuim, Imperial Historian

Ever so cautiously, I formed a cabal made up of others who distrusted the motives and methods of the Thalmor. Over several months, I liquidated my ancestral holdings and took whatever inheritance I could without raising any suspicions. I would follow after Rynandor and help him restore his reputation and status. We would then return to best the Thalmor at their own game and win back the mores and morals of the Altmer! The rest of my cabal would stay on Summerset Isle and win the trust of the Thalmor on whatever level best suited each of them, sending clandestine missives to me when possible.

After weeks of painstaking investigations and exorbitant bribes, I was able to learn that Rynandor was placed on a ship to Anvil. I booked my own passage to Anvil. My search almost ended there, for Rynandor had never arrived in Anvil Harbor. My instinct that Rynandor met a duplicitous end was confirmed when I sought out several of the deckhands who were

reported to be aboard Rynandor's vessel. All died under mysterious and violent circumstances.

The first of many attempts on my life occurred soon after. Needless to say, I survived, but my grand plan to stymie the Thalmor fell apart without an esteemed leader to rally behind. I went into hiding, waiting anxiously for word of the Thalmor's activities back on Summerset Isle.

Over the following years, I tried to bend the ear of the Empire through various avenues and warn them of the Thalmor's doings. The Empire, however, was having enough troubles dealing with the aftermath of the Oblivion crisis within its own borders without seeking trouble in far away Summerset. With the assassination of Emperor Uriel Septim VII and his heirs, and the self-sacrifice of Martin Septim (the true savior of Summerset Isle and the rest of Tamriel!) the Empire's leadership was left defunct.

High Chancellor Ocato convened the full Elder Council in an unsuccessful bid to select a new Emperor. Without an Emperor, the Empire beyond the reach of Cyrodiil began to splinter. Ocato reluctantly agreed to become the Potentate under the terms of the Elder Council Charter until Imperial rule could be reestablished, but a reluctant leader is rarely a strong leader.

Potentate Ocato made admirable efforts to rein in the bedlam that threatened to rip the Empire apart, and was even making headway when Red Mountain erupted and destroyed much of Vvardenfell (likely from Thalmor tampering, but I have yet to find proof of their misdeeds in this). What was left of Morrowind was thrown into absolute chaos. The effects of the eruption were felt even in Black Marsh, destroying roads and cutting off the Imperial garrisons there.

None were prepared for what happened next.

Volume IV

by Lathenil of Sunhold

The following is the account of Lathenil of Sunhold, an Altmer refugee from Summerset Isle who came to Cyrodiil in the early years of the Fourth Era. According to Lathenil, he did not flee the aftermath of the Oblivion Crisis in Summerset - rather he fled "the darkening shadow of the Thalmor upon my beloved homeland."

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Praxis Erratuim, Imperial Historian

While Morrowind and the Imperial forces in Black Marsh were still reeling from the consecutive catastrophes of the Oblivion Crisis and the destruction of Vvardenfell, the Thalmor incited the Argonians to mount a massive uprising. Black Marsh and southern Morrowind were completely lost to the Argonians, but luckily the Thalmor too lost what influence they had over the reptilians.

All the while, the Thalmor consolidated their hold over my beloved homeland.
It took almost a decade before my own machinations put me into contact with Ocato. He seemed more interested than most in what I had to say about the Thalmor, maybe because he was himself an Altmer and recognized the threat they represented. It wasn't long before the Thalmor had Ocato assassinated.

Potentate Ocato's murder began the Stormcrown Interregnum. The Elder Council fractured, leading into years of ruthless in-fighting, plots and backstabbing. Many tried to claim the Ruby Throne. Most were pretenders to the crown, a few had legitimate claims, others still were little more than brutal dullards who thought mere strength of arms was all the entitlement they needed. Violent, unnatural storms lashed the Imperial City several times during this anarchy, always with the eye of the storm looking directly down upon White-Gold Tower, as if this was the judgment of the Nine Divines.

With the Empire submerged in this mayhem, the Thalmor were quick to act. They overthrew the rightful Kings and Queens of the Altmer. I remember the revulsion and horror that took hold when word reached me - that this dementia had gripped my homeland. Once so proud and majestic, many of our great race actually embraced this insanity!

Then the first of many pogroms descended on Summerset Isle. They slaughtered any who were not "of the blood of the Aldmer". A fine excuse to purge the dissidents, as well - the Thalmor have never been ones to waste such an opportunity.

After seven long, bloody years the Stormcrown Interregnum was ended when a Colovian warlord by the name of Titus Mede seized the crown. Whether he had rightful claim or not is moot. Without Titus Mede, there would not be an Empire today. He proved a shrewd and capable leader, such that Skyrim endorsed him as Emperor.

With the Empire stabilizing under the auspicious efforts Emperor Titus Mede, I resumed my efforts to warn them of the Thalmor threat. Again, the Thalmor remained a step ahead. Before my efforts could come to fruition, the Thalmor struck: another coup, this time in Valenwood. The Empire was not prepared for the Thalmor's subterfuge and stratagem.

There are those who claim the combined Altmer and Bosmer forces greatly out-matched the Empire, but this is a farce. This short, savage campaign was won by the Thalmor even before first blood was drawn. They waited and watched their enemy, they chose where and when they would attack. The Thalmor were able to bring the full fury of their small contingent of Altmer and Bosmer to any of several Imperial strongholds.

Contrary to the posturing of the Empire's generals, the Thalmor did not command greater numbers. They had better spies and greater mobility, and knew how best to use them. This is the menace that the Thalmor represent! They are cruel and merciless, but they are no fools! They are devious and subtle, and so very patient.

In one fell stroke, the Thalmor took a strategic foothold on the mainland of Tamriel and prevented any significant attempt the Empire could have made to invade Summerset Isle and depose the tyranny of the Thalmor. At the same time, they took a better vantage to continue to watch the Empire and wait. In so doing, they also revived the Aldmeri Dominion with their alliance to the Bosmer of Valenwood!

Over the decades, the Thalmor have grown quiet - but this is not the end. It has only just begun. They merely consolidate their power and tighten their grip on the hearts and minds of the Altmer. The Empire may wish to forget

the wounds its pride has suffered at the hands of the Thalmor, but they are still out there. Plotting. Watching. Waiting.

While the Empire is content to secure inconsequential corners of its vast holdings, the threat of the Thalmor continues to rise. Not since Potentate Ocato has anyone in the Empire listened to me. I beseech any and all citizens of this renowned Empire to heed my words! The Thalmor must be stopped, before it is too late.

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Soon after Lathenil of Sunhold commissioned to have these volumes printed and distributed far and wide in the Empire with his own coin, he himself met a violent end. In light of the events that followed his death, we must consider that he may very well have been murdered by Thalmor assassins.

-- Praxis Erratuim, Imperial Historian

Rislav the Righteous

By Sinjin

Like all true heroes, Rislav Larich had inauspicious beginnings. We are told by chroniclers that the springtide night in the 448th year of the first era on which he was born was unseasonably cold, and that his mother Queen Lynada died very shortly after setting eyes upon her son. If he were much beloved of his father, King Mhorus of Skingrad, who already had plenty of heirs, three sons and four daughters before him, the chroniclers make no mention of it.

His existence was so very undistinguished that we hear virtually nothing of him for the first twenty years of his life. His schooling, we can suppose, was similar to that of any "spare prince" in the Colovian West, with Ayleid tutors to teach him the ways of hunting and battle. Etiquette, religious instruction, and even basic statecraft were seldom a part of the training of a prince of the Highlands, as it was in the more civilized valley of Nibenay.

There is a brief reference to him, together with his family, as part of the rolls of honor during the coronation of the Emperor Gorieus on the 23rd of Sun's Dawn 1E 461. The ceremony, of course, held during the time of the Alessian Doctrines of Marukh, and so was without entertainment, but the thirteen-year-old Rislav was still witness to some of the greatest figures of legend. The Beast of Anequina, Darloc Brae, represented his kingdom, giving honor to the Empire. The Chieftain of Skyrim Kjoric the White and his son Hoag were in attendance. And despite the Empire's intolerance of all elves, chimer Indoril Nerevar and dwemer Dumac Dwarfking were evidently there as well, diplomatically representing Resdayn, all in relative peace.

Also mentioned on the rolls was a young mer in service to the Imperial court of High Rock, who was to have a great history with Rislav. Ryain Direnni.

Whether the two young men of about the same age met and conversed is entirely the stuff of historian's fancy. Ryain is spoken of in praising words as a powerful land-owner, eventually buying the island of Balfiera in the Iliac Bay and gradually conquering all of High Rock and large parts of Hammerfell and Skyrim, but Rislav is not heard of again in history's books for another seventeen years. We can only offer supposition based on the facts that follow.

Children of kings are, of course, married to the children of other kings to bind alliances. The kingdoms of Skingrad and Kvatch skirmished over common territory throughout the fifth century, until they reached a peace in the year 472. The details of this accord are not recorded, but since we know that Prince Rislav was in the court of Kvatch six years later, as husband to Belene, the daughter of King Justinius, it is fair to make an educated guess that they were married then to make peace.

This brings us to the year 478, when a great plague swept through all of Cyrodiil and seemed particularly concentrated in the independent Colovian West. Among the victims were King Mhorus and the rest of the entire royal family in Skingrad. Rislav's only surviving elder brother, Dorald, survived, being in the Imperial City as a priest of Marukh. He returned to his homeland to assume the throne.

Of Dorald, we have some history. The King's second son, he was slightly simple-minded and evidently very pious. All the chroniclers spoke of his sweetness and decency, how he saw a vision in his early years that brought him - with his father's blessing - from Skingrad to the Imperial City and the priesthood. The priesthood of Marukh, of course, saw no difference between spiritual and political matters. It was the religion of the Alessian Empire, and it taught that to resist the Emperor was to resist the Gods. Given that, it is scarcely a surprise what Dorald did when he became King of the independent kingdom of Skingrad.

His first edict, on his very first day, was to cede the kingdom to the Empire.

The reaction throughout the Colovian Estates was shock and outrage, nowhere more so than in the court of Kvatch. Rislav Larich, we are told,

rode forth to his brother's kingdom, together with his wife and two dozen of his father-in-law's cavalry. It was surely not an impressive army, no matter how the chroniclers embellish it, but they had little trouble defeating all the guards Dorald sent to stop them. In truth, there was no actual battling, for the soldiers of Skingrad resented their new king's decision to give up their autonomy.

The brothers faced one another in the castle courtyard where they had grown up.

In typical Colovian fashion, there was no trial, no accusations of treason, no jury, no judge. Only an executioner.

"Thou art no brother of mine," Rislav Larich said, and struck Dorald's head from his shoulders in one blow. He was crowned King of Skingrad still holding the same bloody axe in his arms.

If King Rislav had no battle experience beforehand, that was shortly to change. Word spread quickly to the Imperial City that Skingrad, once offered, was now being taken back. Gorieus was an accomplished warrior even before taking the throne, and the seventeen years he had as Emperor were scarcely peaceful. Only eight months before Dorald's assassination and Rislav's ascendancy, Gorieus and the Alessian army had faced another of his coronation guests, Kjoric the White, on the fields of the frozen north. The High Chieftain of Skyrim lost his life in the Battle of Sungard. While the pact of chieftains was selecting a new leader, Cyrodiil was busily grabbing back the land of southern Skyrim that it had lost.

In short, Emperor Gorieus knew how to deal with rebellious vassals.

The Alessian army poured westward "like a flood of death," to borrow the chronicler's phrase, in numbers far exceeding what would be required to conquer Skingrad. Gorieus could not have thought actual battle was likely. Rislav, as we said, had little to no experience at warfare, and only a few days' practice at kingcraft. His kingdom and all of the Colovian West had just been ravaged by plague. The Alessians anticipated that a mere show of arms, and a surrender.

Rislav instead prepared for battle. He quickly inspected his troops and drew up plans.

The chroniclers who had heretofore ignored the life of Rislav now devote verse after verse describing the king's aspect with fetishistic delight. While it may lack literary merit and taste, we are at least given some details at last. Not surprisingly, the king wore the finest armor of his era, as the Colovian Estates then had the finest leathersmiths - the only type of armor available - in all of Tamriel. The king's klibanion mail, boiled and waxed for hardness, and studded with inch-long spikes, was a rich chestnut red, and he wore it over his black tunic but under his black cloak. The statue of Rislav the Righteous which now stands in Skingrad is a romanticized version of king, but not inaccurate except in the armor represented. No bard of the Colovian West would have gone to the market so lightly protected. But it does, as we will see, include the most important accouterments of Rislav: his trained hawk and his fast horse.

The winter rains had washed through the roads to the south, sending much of the West Weald spilling into Valenwood. The Emperor took the northern route, and King Rislav with a small patrol of guards met him at a low pass on what is now the Gold Road. The Emperor's army, it is said, was so large that the Beast of Anequina could hear its march from hundreds of miles away, and despite himself, the chroniclers say, he quaked in fear.

Rislav, it was said, did not quake. With perfect politeness, he told the Emperor that his party was too large to be accommodated in the tiny kingdom of Skingrad.

"Next time," Rislav said. "Write before you come."

The Emperor was, like most Alessian Emperors, not a man of great humor, and he thought Rislav touched by Sheogorath. He ordered his personal guards to arrest the poor madman, but at that moment, the King of Skingrad raised his arm and sent his hawk flying into the sky. It was a signal his army had been waiting for. The Alessian were all within the pass and the range of their arrows.

King Rislav and his guard began riding westward as fast as if they had been "kissed by wild Kynareth," as the chroniclers said. He did not dare to look behind him, but his plan went faultlessly. The far eastern end of the pass was sealed by rolling boulders, giving the Alessian no direction to go but westward. The Skingrad archers rained arrows down upon the Imperial army from far above on the plateaus, remaining safe from reprisal. The furious Emperor Gorieus chased Rislav from the Weald to the Highlands, leaving Skingrad far behind, all the while his army growing steadily smaller and smaller.

In the ancient Highland forest, the Imperial army met the army of Rislav's father-in-law, the King of Kvatch. The Alessian army likely still outnumbered their opponents, but they were exhausted and their morale had been obliterated by the chase amid a sea of arrows. After an hour's battle, they retreated north into what is now the Imperial Reserve, and from there, further north and east, to slip back to nurse their wounds and pride in Nibenay.

It was the beginning of the end of the Alessian hegemony. The Kings of the Colovian West joined with Kvatch and Skingrad to resist Imperial incursions. The Clan Direnni under Ryain was inspired to outlaw the religion of the Alessian Reform throughout his lands in High Rock, and began pushing into Imperial territories. The new High Chief of Skyrim, Hoag, now called Hoag Merkiller, though sharing the Emperor's official xenophobia, also joined the resistance. His heir, King Ysmir Wulfharth of Atmora, helped continue the struggle upon Hoag's death in battle, and also insured his place in history.

The heroic King of Skingrad, who faced the Emperor's army virtually alone, and triggered its end, justly deserves his sobriquet of Rislav the Righteous.

The Ruins of Kemel-Ze

by Rolard Nordssen

With the acclamations of the Fellows of the Imperial Society still ringing in my ears, I decided to return to Morrowind immediately. It was not without some regret that I bade farewell to the fleshpots of the Imperial City, but I knew that the wonders I had brought back from Raled-Makai had only scratched the surface of the Dwemer ruins in Morrowind. Even more spectacular treasures were out there, I felt, just waiting to be found, and I was eager to be off. I also had before me the salutary example of poor Bannerman, who was still dining out on his single expedition to Black Marsh twenty years ago. That would never be me, I vowed.

With my letter from the Empress in hand, this time I would have the full cooperation of the Imperial authorities. No more need to worry about attacks from superstitious locals. But where should I look next? The ruins at Kemel-Ze were the obvious choice. Unlike Raled-Makai, getting to the ruins would not be a problem. Also known as the "Cliff City", Kemel-Ze lies on the mainland side of the Vvardenfel Rift, sprawling down the sheer coastal cliff. Travelers from the east coast of Vvardenfel often visit the site by boat, and it can also be reached overland from the nearby villages without undue hardship.

Once my expedition had assembled in Seyda Neen, with the usual tedious complications involved in operating in this half-civilized land, we set out for the village of Marog near the ruins, where we hoped to hire a party of diggers. My interpreter, Tuen Panai, an unusually jolly fellow for a Dark Elf who I had hired in Seyda Neen at the recommendation of the local garrison commander, assured me that the local villagers would be very familiar with Kemel-Ze, having looted the site for generations. Incidentally, Ten Penny

(as we soon came to call him, to his constant amusement) proved invaluable and I would recommend him without hesitation to any of my colleagues who were planning similar expeditions to the wilds of Morrowind.

At Marog, we ran into our first trouble. The hetman of the village, a reserved, elegant old fellow, seemed willing to cooperate, but the local priest (a representative of the absurd religion they have here, worshiping something called the Tribunal who they claim actually live in palaces in Morrowind) was fervently against us excavating the ruins. He looked likely to sway the villagers to his side with his talk of "religious taboos", but I waved the Empress's letter under his nose and mentioned something about my friend the garrison commander at Seyda Neen and he quieted right down. No doubt this was just a standard negotiating tactic arranged among the villagers to increase their pay. In any event, once the priest had stalked off muttering to himself, no doubt calling down curses upon the heads of the foreign devils, we soon had a line of villagers eager to sign on to the expedition.

While my assistant was working out the mundane details of contracts, supplies, etc., Master Arum and I rode on to the ruins. By land, they can only be reached using narrow paths that wind down the face of the cliff from above, where any misstep threatens to send one tumbling into the sea foaming about the jagged rocks below. The city's original entrance to the surface must have been in the part of the city to the northeast - the part that fell into the sea long ago when the eruption of Red Mountain created this mind-bogglingly vast crater. After successfully navigating the treacherous path, we found ourselves in a large chamber, open to the sky on one side, disappearing into the darkness on the other. As we stepped forward, our boots crunched on piles of broken metal, as common in Dwarven ruins as potsherds in other ancient sites. This was obviously where the looters brought their finds from deeper levels, stripping off the valuable outer casings of the Dwarven mechanisms and leaving their innards here - easier than lugging the intact mechanisms back up to the top of the cliff. I laughed

to myself, thinking of the many warriors unwittingly walking around Tamriel with pieces of Dwarven mechanisms on their backs. For that, of course, is what most "Dwarven armor" really is - just the armored shells of ancient mechanical men. I sobered when I thought of how exceedingly valuable an intact mechanism would be. This place was obviously full of Dwarven devices, judging from the litter covering the floor of this vast chamber - or had been, I reminded myself. Looters had been working over this site for centuries. Just the casing alone would be worth a small fortune, sold as armor. Most Dwarven armor is made of mismatched pieces from various devices, hence its reputation for being bulky and unwieldy. But a matched set from an intact mechanism is worth more than its weight in gold, for the pieces all fit together smoothly and the wearer hardly notices the bulk. Of course, I had no intention of destroying my finds for armor, no matter how valuable. I would bring it back to the Society for scientific study. I imagined the astonished cries of my colleagues as I unveiled it at my next lecture, and smiled again.

I picked up a discarded gear from the piles at my feet. It still gleamed brightly, as if new-made, the Dwarven alloys resisting the corrosion of time. I wondered what secrets remained hidden in the maze of chambers that lay before me, defying the efforts of looters, waiting to gleam again in the light they had not seen in long eons. Waiting for me. It remained only to find them! With an impatient gesture to Master Arum to follow, I strode forward into the gloom.

Master Arum, Ten Penny and I spent several days exploring the ruins while my assistants set up camp at the top of the cliff and hauled supplies and equipment from the village. I was looking for a promising area to begin excavation -- a blocked passage or corridor untouched by looters that might lead to completely untouched areas of the ruins.

We found two such areas early on, but soon discovered that the many winding passages bypassed the blockage and gave access to the rooms behind. Nevertheless, even these outer areas, for the most part stripped clean of artifacts by generations of looters, were full of interest to the professional archaeologist. Behind a massive bronze door, burst from its hinges by some ancient turmoil of the earth, we discovered a large chamber filled with exquisite wall-carvings, which impressed even the jaded Ten Penny, who claimed to have explored every Dwarven ruin in Morrowind. They seemed to depict an ancient ritual of some kind, with a long line of classically-bearded Dwarven elders processing down the side walls, all seemingly bowing to the giant form of a god carved into the front wall of the chamber, which was caught in the act of stepping forth from the crater of a mountain in a cloud of smoke or steam. According to Master Arum, there are no known depictions of Dwarven religious rituals, so this was an exciting find indeed. I set a team to work prying the carved panels from the wall, but they were unable to even crack the surface. On closer examination the chamber appeared to be faced with a metallic substance with the texture and feel of stone, impervious to any of our tools. I considered having Master Arum try his blasting magic on the walls, but decided that the risk of destroying the carvings was too great. Much as I would have preferred to bring them back to the Imperial City, I had to settle for taking rubbings of the carvings. If my colleagues in the Society showed enough interest, I was sure a specialist could be found, perhaps a master alchemist, who could find a way to safely remove the panels.

I found another curious room at the top of a long winding stair, barely passable due to the fall of rubble from the roof. At the top of the stair was a domed chamber with a large ruined mechanism at its center. Painted constellations were still visible in some places on the surface of the dome. Master Arum and I agreed that this must have been some kind of observatory, and the mechanism was therefore the remains of a Dwarven telescope. To remove it from ruins down the narrow stairway would require its complete disassembly (which fact no doubt had preserved it from the attention of looters), so I decided to leave it in place for the time being. The existence of this observatory suggested, however, that this room had once

been above the surface. Closer examination of the structure revealed that this was indeed a building, not an excavated chamber. The only other doorways from the room were completely blocked, and careful measurements from the top of the cliff to the entry room and then to the observatory revealed that we were still more than 250 feet below the present ground level. A sobering reminder of the forgotten fury of Red Mountain.

This discovery led us to focus our attentions downward. Since we now knew approximately where the ancient surface lay, we could rule out many of the higher blocked passages. One wide passage, impressively flanked with carven pillars, particularly drew my interest. It ended in a massive rockfall, but we could see where looters had begun and then abandoned a tunnel through this debris. With my team of diggers and Master Arum's magery to assist, I believed we could succeed where our predecessors had failed. I therefore set my team of Dark Elves to work on clearing the passage, relieved finally to be beginning the real exploration of Kemel-Ze. Soon, I hoped, my boots would be stirring up dust that had lain undisturbed since the dawn of time.

With this exciting prospect before me, I may have driven my diggers a bit too hard. Ten Penny reported that they were beginning to grumble about the long days, and that some were talking of quitting. Knowing from experience that nothing puts heart back into these Dark Elves like a taste of the lash, I had the ringleaders whipped and the rest confined to the ruins until they had finished clearing the passageway. Thank Stendarr for my foresight in requisitioning a few legionnaires from Seyda Neen! They were sullen at first, but with the promise of an extra day's wages when they broke through, they soon set to work with a will. While these measures may sound harsh to my readers back in the comforts of civilization, let me assure you that there is no other way to get these people to stick to a task.

The blockage was much worse than I had first thought, and in the end it took almost two weeks to clear the passage. The diggers were as excited as I was when their picks finally broke through the far end into emptiness, and we shared a round of the local liquor together (a foul concoction, in truth) to show that all was forgiven. I could hardly restrain my eagerness as they enlarged the hole to allow entry into the chamber beyond. Would the passage lead to entire new levels of the ancient city, filled with artifacts left by the vanished Dwarves? Or would it be only a dead end, some side passage leading nowhere? My excitement grew as I slid through the hole and crouched for a moment in the darkness beyond. From the echoing sounds of the stones rattling beneath my feet, I was in a large room. Perhaps very large. I stood up carefully, and unhooded my lantern. As the light flooded the chamber, I looked around in astonishment. Here were wonders beyond even my wildest dreams!

As the light from my lamp filled the chamber beyond the rock fall, I looked around in astonishment. Everywhere was the warm glitter of Dwarven alloys. I had found an untouched section of the ancient city! My heart pounding with excitement, I looked around me. The room was vast, the roof soaring up into darkness beyond the reach of my lamp, the far end lost in shadows with only a tantalizing glimmer hinting at treasures not yet revealed. Along each wall stood rows of mechanical men, intact except for one oddity: their heads had been ritually removed and placed on the floor at their feet. This could mean only one thing -- I had discovered the tomb of a great Dwarven noble, maybe even a king! Burials of this type had been discovered before, most famously by Ransom's expedition to Hammerfell, but no completely intact tomb had ever been found. Until now.

But if this was truly a royal burial, where was the tomb? I stepped forward gingerly, the rows of headless bodies standing silently as they had for eons, their disembodied eyes seeming to watch me as I passed. I had heard wild tales of the Curse of the Dwarves, but had always laughed it off as

superstition. But now, breathing the same air as the mysterious builders of this city, which had lain undisturbed since the cataclysm that spelled their doom, I felt a twinge of fear. There was some power here, I felt, something malevolent that resented my presence. I stopped for a moment and listened. All was silent.

Except... it seemed I heard a faint hiss, regular as breathing. I fought down a sudden surge of panic. I was unarmed, not thinking of danger in my haste to explore past the blocked passage. Sweat dripped down my face as I scanned the gloom for any movement. The room was warm, I suddenly noticed, much warmer than the rest of the labyrinth thus far. My excitement returned. Could I have found a section of the city still connected to a functioning steam grid? Pipes ran along the walls, as in all sections of the city. I walked over and placed my hand on one. It was hot, almost too hot to touch! Now I saw that in places where the ancient piping had corroded, small jets of steam were escaping -- the sound I had heard. I laughed at my own credulity.

I now advanced quickly to the far end of the room, giving a cheerful salute to the ranks of mechanical soldiers who had appeared so menacing only moments before. I smiled with triumph as the light swept back the darkness of centuries to reveal the giant effigy of a Dwarven king standing on a raised dais, his metal hand clutching his rod of office. This was the prize indeed! I circled the dais slowly, admiring the craftsmanship of the ancient Dwarves. The golden king stood twenty feet tall under a freestanding domed cupola, his long upswept beard jutting forward proudly as his glittering metal eyes seemed to follow me. But my superstitious mood had passed, and I gazed benevolently on the old Dwarven king. My king, as I had already begun to think of him. I stepped onto the dais to get a better look at the sculpted armor. Suddenly the eyes of the figure opened and it raised a mailed fist to strike!

I leaped to one side as the golden arm came crashing down, striking sparks from the steps where I had stood a moment before. With a hiss of steam and the whir of gears, the giant figure stepped ponderously out from under its canopy and strode towards me with frightening speed, its eyes tracking me as I scrambled backwards. I dodged behind a pillar as the fist whistled down again. I had dropped my lantern in the confusion, and now I crept into the darkness outside the pool of light, hoping to slip between the headless mechanisms and thus escape back to the safety of the passageway. Where had the monster gone? You would think that a twenty-foot golden kind would be hard to miss, but he was nowhere to be seen. The guttering lamp only illuminated a small part of the room. He could be hiding anywhere in the gloom. I crawled faster. Without warning, the dim ranks of Dwarven soldiers in front of me went flying as the monstrous guardian loomed before me. He had cut off my escape! As I dodged backwards, blow after blow whistled down as the implacable machine followed me relentlessly, driving me into the far corner of the room. At last there was nowhere left for me to go. My back was to the wall. I glared up at my foe, determined to die on my feet. The huge fists lifted for one final blow.

The room blazed with sudden light. Bolts of purple energy crackled across the metal carapace of the Dwarven monster, and it halted, half-turning to meet this new threat. Master Arum had come! I was about to raise a cheer when the giant figure turned back to me, unharmed by the lightning bolt hurled by Master Arum, determined to destroy this first intruder. I shouted out "Steam! Steam!" as the giant raised his fist to crush me into the floor. There was a hiss and a gust of bitter cold and I looked up. The monster was now covered with a shell of ice, frozen in the very moment of dispatching me. Master Arum had understood. I leaned against the wall with relief.

The ice cracked above me. The giant golden king stood before me, the shell of ice falling away, his head swiveling towards me in triumph. Was there no stopping this Dwarven monstrosity?! But then the light faded from his eyes,

and his arms dropped to his sides. The magical frost had worked, cooling its steam-driven energy.

As Master Arum and the diggers crowded around me, congratulating me on my narrow escape, my thoughts drifted. I imagined my return to the Imperial City, and I knew that this would be my greatest triumph yet. How could I possibly top this find? Perhaps it was time to move on. Recovering the fabled Eye of Argonia... now that would be a coup! I smiled to myself, reveling in the glory of the moment but already planning my next adventure.

Sacred Witness: A True History of the Night Mother

By Enric Milnes

I have met countesses and courtesans, empresses and witches, ladies of war and slatterns of peace, but I have never met a woman like The Night Mother. And I never will again.

I am a writer, a poet of some small renown. If I told you my name, you may have heard of me, but very likely, not. For decades until very recently, I had adopted the city of Sentinel on the coast of Hammerfell as my home, and kept the company of other artists, painters, tapestrists, and writers. No one I knew would have known an assassin by sight, least of all the queen of them, the Blood Flower, the Lady Death, the Night Mother.

Not that I had not heard of her.

Some years ago, I had the good fortune of meeting Pelarne Assi, a respected scholar, who had come to Hammerfell to do research for a book about the Order of Diagna. His essay, 'The Brothers of Darkness' together with Ynir Gorming's 'Fire and Darkness: The Brotherhoods of Death' are considered to be the canon tomes on the subject of Tamriel's orders of assassins. By luck, Gorming himself was also in Sentinel, and I was priveleged to sit with the two in a dark skooma den in the musty slums of the city, as we smoked and talked about the Dark Brotherhood, the Morag Tong, and the Night Mother.

While not disputing the possibility that the Night Mother may be immortal or at least very long-lived, Assi thought it most likely that several women - and perhaps some men - throughout the ages had assumed the honorary title. It was no more logical to say there was only one Night Mother, he asserted, than to say there was only one King of Sentinel.

Gorming argued that there never was a Night Mother, at least no human one. The Night Mother was Mephala herself, whom the Brotherhood revered second only to Sithis.

'I don't suppose there's any way of knowing for certain,' I said, in a note of diplomacy.

'Certainly there is,' whispered Gorming with a grin. 'You could talk to that cloaked fellow in the corner.'

I had not noticed the man before, who sat by himself, eyes hidden by his cloak, seemingly as much a part of the dingy place as the rough stone and unswept floor. Turning back to Ynir, I asked him why that man would know about the Night Mother.

'He's a Dark Brother,' hissed Pellarne Assi. 'That's as plain as the moons. Don't even joke about speaking with him about Her.'

We moved on to other arguments about the Morag Tong and the Brotherhood, but I never forgot the image of the lone man, looking at nothing and everything, in the corner of the dirty room, with fumes of skooma smoke floating around him like ghosts. When I saw him weeks later on the streets of Sentinel, I followed him.

Yes, I followed him. The reader may reasonably ask 'why' and 'how.' I don't blame you for that.

'How' was simply a question of knowing my city as well as I do. I'm not a thief, not particularly sure-footed and quiet, but I know the alleys and streets of Sentinel intimately from decades worth of ambling. I know which bridges creak, which buildings cast long irregular shadows, the intervals at which the native birds begin the ululations of their evening songs. With relative ease, I kept pace with the Dark Brother and out of his sight and hearing.

The answer to 'Why' is even simpler. I have the natural curiosity of the born writer. When I see a strange new animal, I must observe. It is the writer's

curse.

I trailed the cloaked man deeper into the city, down an alleyway so narrow it was scarcely a crack between two tenements, past a crooked fence, and suddenly, miraculously, I was in a place I had never seen before. A little courtyard cemetery, with a dozen old half-rotted wooden tombstones. None of the surrounding buildings had windows that faced it, so no one knew this miniature necropolis existed.

No one, except the six men and one woman standing in it. And me.

The woman saw me immediately, and gestured for me to come closer. I could have run, but - no, I couldn't have. I had pierced a mystery right in my adopted Sentinel, and I could not leave it.

She knew my name, and she said it with a sweet smile. The Night Mother was a little old lady with fluffy white hair, cheeks like wrinkled apples that still carried the flush of youth, friendly eyes, blue as the Iliac Bay. She softly took my arm as we sat down amidst the graves and discussed murder.

She was not always in Hammerfell, not always available for direct assignment, but it seemed she enjoyed actually talking to her clientele.

'I did not come here to hire the Brotherhood,' I said respectfully.

'Then why are you here?' the Night Mother asked, her eyes never leaving mine.

I told her I wanted to know about her. I did not expect an answer to that, but she told me.

'I do not mind the stories you writers dream up about me,' she chuckled. 'Some of them are very amusing, and some of them are good for business. I like the sexy dark woman lounging on the divan in Carlovac Townway's fiction particularly. The truth is that my history would not make a very dramatic tale. I was a thief, long, long ago, back when the Thieves Guild was only beginning. It's such a bother to sneak around a house when

performing a burglary, and many of us found it most efficacious to strangle the occupant of the house. Just for convenience. I suggested to the Guild that a segment of our order be dedicated to the arts and sciences of murder.

'It did not seem like such a controversial idea to me,' the Night Mother shrugged. 'We had specialists in catburglary, pick-pocketing, lock-picking, fencing, all the other essential parts of the job. But the Guild thought that encouraging murder would be bad for business. Too much, too much, they argued.

'They might have been right,' the old woman continued. 'But I discovered there is a profit to be made, just the same, from sudden death. Not only can one rob the deceased, but, if your victim has enemies, which rich people often do, you can be paid for it even more. I began to murder people differently when I discovered that. After I strangled them, I would put two stones in their eyes, one black and one white.'

'Why?' I asked.

'It was a sort of calling card of mine. You're a writer - don't you want your name on your books? I couldn't use my name, but I wanted potential clients to know me and my work. I don't do it anymore, no need to, but at the time, it was my signature. Word spread, and I soon had quite a successful business.'

'And that became the Morag Tong?' I asked.

'Oh, dear me, no,' the Night Mother smiled. 'The Morag Tong was around long before my time. I know I'm old, but I'm not that old. I merely hired on some of their assassins when they began to fall apart after the murder of the last Potentate. They did not want to be members of the Tong anymore, and since I was the only other murder syndicate of any note, they just joined on.'

I phrased my next question carefully. 'Will you kill me now that you've told me all this?'

She nodded sadly, letting out a little grandmotherly sigh. 'You are such a

nice, polite young man, I hate to end our acquaintanceship. I don't suppose you would agree to a concession or two in exchange for your life, would you?'

To my everlasting shame, I did agree. I said I would say nothing about our meeting, which, as the reader can see, was a promise I eventually, years later, chose not to keep. Why have I endangered my life thus?

Because of the promises I did keep.

I helped the Night Mother and the Dark Brotherhood in acts too despicable, too bloody for me to set to paper. My hand quivers as I think about the people I betrayed, beginning with that night. I tried to write my poetry, but ink seemed to turn to blood. Finally, I fled, changing my name, going to a land where no one would know me.

And I wrote this. The true history of the Night Mother, from the interview she gave me on the night we met. It will be the last thing I ever write, this I know. And every word is true.

Pray for me.

Editor's Note: Though originally published anonymously, the identity of the author has never been in serious doubt. Any layman familiar with the work of the poet Enric Milnes will recognize Sacred Witness's familiar cadence and style in such books of his as 'The Alik'r.' Shortly after publication, Milnes was murdered, and his killer was never found. He had been strangled, and two stones, a black one and a white one, crushed into his eyesockets. Very brutally.

Scourge of the Gray Quarter

by Frilgeth Horse-Breaker

The tragedies befalling Morrowind do bring forth pity from even the stoutest Nordic heart. The dark elves deserve our condolences, but thus far they do not show themselves deserving of the simplest acts of charity. There are very different approaches to how to deal with the imminent problem of Morrowind, and I offer two options as seen in practice in Skyrim. One should serve as an exemplar, the other a cautionary tale.

Consider Riften, which shares a border with the ruined province. A number of the dark elves have made their homes there, but they are expected to earn their livelihoods as is any other citizen of the great city. They ply trades as merchants, work in the temple, and serve in the keep. Honest labor, to be admired from a race that was so recently in such dire straits as to even warrant this discussion. Today the city still has its share of problems, but they are not traceable to any influx of outsiders in their presence. In short, the dark elves have properly assimilated themselves into the Skyrim way of life, to be expected from any newcomer to these lands.

For an alternative approach, we only have to look at the once-proud city of Windhelm to see what can happen when our arms are cast too wide open in welcome. To think that the city of Ysgramor, whose very name was made in driving out the elves from our sacred home, would open itself as a welcome destination for any refugee from the smoking sulphur, is a disgrace to the very idea of being a Nord.

And what has become of this? Predictably, the lazy, discontented rabble has descended into squalor in an area now delicately referred to as "the Gray Quarter" of the city. They were not expected to contribute and so have not. That they attempt to make over a proud Nord city into a little pocket of Morrowind is insulting enough, but the amount of unrest they have provoked even within the proper city walls should give any other Jarl reason to fear.

The Nords I talk to in the city speak of constant strife and crime coming from the Gray Quarter, with no respite in sight. The city guard barely patrol there, leaving the dark elves to mete out whatever passes for justice in their native customs. The respectable families of the city, the Cruel-Seas and Shatter-Shields, speak with an almost parental affection of the Argonians in their employ, but the dark elves have made no effort to ingratiate or assimilate themselves to the proper city-dwellers.

There is cause for optimism, though, as Jarl Ulfric is not nearly so tolerant of these substandard beings as his fathers were. Indeed, the soft hand of Hoag can be seen in the cities Argonian population as well; the fish-men, at least, have learned how to best contribute to their new home. They have proven themselves as models, toiling at the docks with utmost efficiency and bright smiles. It would do the dark elves well to pay heed to their scaly cousins. I would expect in due course that they will find themselves either contributing more directly or once again wandering the land in search of roof and warmth.

Shadowmarks

by Delvin Mallory

Need to know your way around, eh? Don't want to stumble into a necromancer's house or fall into another trap set up by the city guard? Then you need to read this book from cover to cover. Learning to identify the shadowmark can mean the difference between making a fortune and ending up with a blade in your gut.

The clever little marks are carved all over Skyrim... mostly on the doorframes or fronts of buildings, but you can find them pretty much anywhere a thief's been. It's the way we talk to each other without talking. Keeps the newer thieves from becoming dead thieves and all that nonsense. There aren't that many of the bloody things, so I don't want to hear any excuses about not having the time to learn them.

Anyway, enough of my gabbing. Time to put your wizard's cap on and do a little research.

Glossary
of Shadowmarks

"The Guild"

This is the symbol for the Guild. This means the place is as safe as the Flagon's cistern. If you see this shadowmark, someone from the Guild is nearby for certain.

"Safe"

We usually leave this shadowmark when we've scouted and found a safe way around something, a hallway without traps or maybe a house that's already cleared out. If you see one of these, head the way it's pointing and you'll be fine.

"Danger"

If you see this shadowmark, head the other way or take your life in your own hands. It means there's something ahead or beyond that door that wants to turn you inside-out.

"Escape Route"

Now, on the rare occasion (it better be a rare occasion if you want to work in the Guild) that you find yourself in jail, look for this little beauty. You see this shadowmark and escape is just a few steps away.

"Protected"

We put these shadowmarks on places we don't want you to go. As in stay out of there or there's going to be a boot up the backside. These people are under the Guild's protection and should never be robbed or assaulted.

"Fence"

This should quickly become your favorite shadowmark. The person near this mark will buy your... hard-earned stolen goods for a fair price.

"Thieves' Cache"

Who says we only take and never give back? If you find this shadowmark near a chest or maybe a hollowed log, you're in for a surprise... a gift from the Guild for the thief in the field. Whoever said membership didn't have its privileges?

"Loot"

There's something near this shadowmark worth stealing. Saves you from breaking into a place only to find the people don't even have two septim to rub together.

"Empty"

The opposite of the Loot Shadowmark. Pass on this place, there's nothing inside.

Shezarr and the Divines

by Faustillus Junius
Subcurator of Ancient Theology and Paleonumerology
Imperial Library

The position Shezarr enjoys in Cyrodilic worship if often misconstrued. He, and a thousand other deities, have sizeable cults in the Imperial City. Shezarr is especially venerated in the Colovian West, though he is called Shor there, as the West Kings are resolutely, and religiously, Nordic.

The haziness of Shezarr's relationship to the Divines (he is often called their 'Missing Sibling') begins with St. Alessia, the so-called 'Slave Queen of Cyrodiil, the founder figure of the original Cyrodilic Empire. In the earliest Cyro-Nordic stories of the Heartland, Shezarr fought against the Ayleids (the 'Heartland Highelves') on mankind's behalf. Then, for some unknown reason, he vanishes from the stage (presumably to help other humans elsewhere), and, without his leadership, the Ayleids conquer the humans and enslave them.

This slavery lasts for generations. The isolated humans eventually begin to venerate the pantheon of their masters, or at least assimilate so much of High Elven religious practices into their native traditions that the two become indistinguishable.

In 1E242, under the leadership of Alessia, her demigod lover, Morihaus-Breath-of-Kyne, and the infamous Pelinal Whitestrake, the Cyrodilic humans revolt. When Skyrim lends its armies to the Slave-Queen of the South, the revolution succeeds. The Ayleid Hegemonies are quickly overthrown. Shortly thereafter, White Gold Tower is captured by Alessia's forces, and she promptly declares herself the first Empress of Cyrodiil. Part of the package meant that she had to become the High Priestess of Akatosh, as well.

Akatosh was an Aldmeri god, and Alessia's subjects were as-yet unwilling

to renounce their worship of the Elven pantheon. She found herself in a very sensitive political situation. She needed to keep the Nords as her allies, but they were (at that time) fiercely opposed to any adoration of Elven deities. On the other hand, she could not force her subjects to revert back to the Nordic pantheon, for fear of another revolution. Therefore, concessions were made and Empress Alessia instituted a new religion: the Eight Divines, an elegant, well-researched synthesis of both pantheons, Nordic and Aldmeri.

Shezarr, as a result, had to change. He could no longer be the bloodthirsty anti-Aldmer warlord of old. He could not disappear altogether either, or the Nords would have withdrawn their support of her rule. In the end, he had become "the spirit behind all human undertaking." Even though this was merely a thinly-disguised, watered-down version of Shor, it was good enough for the Nords.

As for why Tiber Septim has not attempted to 'revitalize' Shezarr during his wars against the Aldmeri Dominion, we can only speculate that, at this time, memories of the Alessian Order's follies (the Dragon Break, the War of Righteousness, the defeat at Gelnumbria Moors) would only damage his campaign for the Imperial Crown.

A Short History of Morrowind

by Jeanette Sitte

[from the Introduction]

Led by the legendary prophet Veloth, the ancestors of the Dunmer, exiles from Altmer cultures in present-day Summerset Isle, came to the region of Morrowind. In earliest times the Dunmer were harassed or dominated by Nord sea raiders. When the scattered Dunmer tribes consolidated into the predecessors of the modern Great House clans, they threw out the Nord oppressors and successfully resisted further incursions.

The ancient ancestor worship of the tribes was in time superseded by the monolithic Tribunal Temple theocracy, and the Dunmer grew into a great nation called Resdayn. Resdayn was the last of the provinces to submit to Tiber Septim; like Black Marsh, it was never successfully invaded, and was peacefully incorporated by treaty into the Empire as the Province of Morrowind.

Almost four centuries after the coming of the Imperial Legions, Morrowind is still occupied by Imperial legions, with a figurehead Imperial King, though the Empire has reserved most functions of the traditional local government to the Ruling Councils of the Five Great Houses....

[on Vvardenfell District]

In 3E 414, Vvardenfell Territory, previously a Temple preserve under Imperial protection, was reorganized as an Imperial Provincial District. Vvardenfell had been maintained as a preserve administrated by the Temple since the Treaty of the Armistice, and except for a few Great House settlements sanctioned by the Temple, Vvardenfell was previously uninhabited and undeveloped. But when the centuries-old Temple ban on trade and settlement of Vvardenfell was revoked by King of Morrowind, a flood of Imperial colonists and Great House Dunmer came to Vvardenfell,

expanding old settlements and building new ones.

The new District was divided into Redoran, Hlaalu, Telvanni, and Temple Districts, each separately administered by local House Councils or Temple Priesthoods, and all under the advice and consent of Duke Dren and the District Council in Ebonheart. Local law became a mixture of House Law and Imperial Law in House Districts, jointly enforced by House guards and Legion guards, with Temple law and Imperial law enforced in the Temple district by Ordinators. The Temple was still recognized as the majority religion, but worship of the Nine Divines was protected by the legions and encouraged by Imperial cult missions.

The Temple District included the city of Vivec, the fortress of Ghostgate, and all sacred and profane sites (including those Blighted areas inside the Ghostfence) and all unsettled and wilderness areas on Vvardenfell. In practice, this district included all parts of Vvardenfell not claimed for Redoran, Hlaalu, or Telvanni Districts. The Temple stubbornly fought all development in their district, and were largely successful.

House Hlaalu in combination with Imperial colonists embarked on a vigorous campaign of settlement and development. In the decades after reorganization, Balmora and the Ascadian Isles regions have grown steadily. Caldera and Pelagiad are completely new settlements, and all legion forts were expanded to accommodate larger garrisons.

House Telvanni, normally conservative and isolationist, has been surprisingly aggressive in expanding beyond their traditional tower villages. Disregarding the protests of the other Houses, the Temple, the Duke, and the District council, Telvanni pioneers have been encroaching on the wild lands reserved to the Temple. The Telvanni council officially disavows responsibility for these rogue Telvanni settlements, but it is an open secret that they are encouraged and supported by ambitious Telvanni mage-lords.

Under pressure from the Temple, conservative House Redoran has steadfastly resisted expansion in their district. As a result, House Redoran and the Temple are in danger of being politically and economically marginalized by the more aggressive and expansionist Hlaalu and Telvanni

interests.

The Imperial administration faces many challenges in the Vvardenfell district, but the most serious are the Great House rivalries, animosity from the Ashlander nomads, internal conflicts within the Temple itself, and the Red Mountain blight. Struggles between Great House, Temple, and Imperial interests to control Vvardenfell's resource could at any time erupt into full-scale war. Ashlanders raid settlements, plunder caravans, and kill foreigners on their wild lands. The Temple has unsuccessfully attempted to silence criticism and calls for reform within its ranks.

But most serious are the plagues and diseased hosts produced by the blight storms sweeping out from Red Mountain. Vvardenfell and all Morrowind have long been menaced by the legendary evils of Dagoth Ur and his ash vampire kin dwelling beneath Red Mountain. For centuries the Temple has contained this threat within the Ghostfence. But recently the Temple's resources and will have faltered, and the threat from Red Mountain has grown in scale and intensity. If the Ghostfence should fail, and hosts of blighted monsters were to spill out across Vvardenfell's towns and villages, the Empire might have no choice but to evacuate Vvardenfell district and abandon it to disease and corruption.

A Short Life of Uriel Septim VII

by Rufus Hayn

3E 368-389: Strategist and Conciliator

The early decades of Emperor Uriel's life were marked by aggressive expansion and consolidation of Imperial influence throughout the empire, but especially in the East, in Morrowind and Black Marsh, where the Empire's power was limited, Imperial culture was weak, and native customs and traditions were strong and staunchly opposed to assimilation. During this period Uriel greatly benefitted from the arcane support and shrewd council of his close advisor, the Imperial Battlemage, Jagar Tharn.

The story of Uriel's marriage to the Princess Caula Voria is a less happy tale. Though she was a beautiful and charming woman, and greatly loved and admired by the people, the Empress was a deeply unpleasant, arrogant, ambitious, grasping woman. She snared Uriel Septim with her feminine wiles, but Uriel Septim thereafter soon regretted his mistake, and was repelled by her. They heartily detested one another, and went out of their ways to hurt one another. Their children were the victims of this unhappy marriage.

With his agile mind and vaunting ambition, Uriel soon outstripped his master in the balanced skills of threat and diplomacy. Uriel's success in co-opting House Hlaalu as an advance guard of Imperial culture and economic development in Morrowind is a noteworthy example. However, Uriel also grew in pride and self-assurance. Jagar Tharn fed Uriel's pride, and hiding behind the mask of an out-paced former master counselor, Tharn purchased the complete trust that led finally to Uriel's betrayal and imprisonment in Oblivion and Tharn's secret usurpation of the Imperial throne.

3E 389-399: Betrayed and Imprisoned

Little is known of Uriel's experience while trapped in Oblivion. He says he

remembers nothing but an endless sequence of waking and sleeping nightmares. He says he believed himself to be dreaming, and had no notion of passage of time. Publicly, he long claimed to have no memory of the dreams and nightmares of his imprisonment, but from time to time, during the interviews with the Emperor that form the basis of this biography, he would relate details of nightmares he had, and would describe them as similar to the nightmares he had when he was imprisoned in Oblivion. He seemed not so much unwilling as incapable of describing the experience.

But it is clear that the experience changed him. In 3E 389 he was a young man, full of pride, energy, and ambition. During the Restoration, after his rescue and return to the throne, he was an old man, grave, patient, and cautious. He also became conservative and pessimistic, where the policies of his early life were markedly bold, even rash. Uriel accounts for this change as a reaction to and revulsion for the early teachings and counsel of Jagar Tharn. However, Uriel's exile in Oblivion also clearly drained and wasted him in body and spirit, though his mind retained the shrewd cunning and flexibility of his youth.

The story of Tharn's magical impersonation of the emperor, the unmasking of Tharn's imposture by Queen Barenziah, and the roles played by King Eadwyre, Ria Silmane, and her Champion in assembling the Staff of Chaos, defeating the renegade Imperial Battlemage Jagar Tharn, and restoring Uriel to the throne, is treated at length in Stern Gamboge's excellent three-Volume BIOGRAPHY OF BARENZIAH. There is no reason to recount that narrative here. Summarized briefly, Jagar Tharn's neglect and mismanagement of Imperial affairs resulted in a steady decline in the Empire's economic prosperity, allowed many petty lords and kings to challenge the authority of the Empire, and permitted strong local rulers in the East and the West to indulge in open warfare over lands and sovereign rights.

3E 399-415: Restoration, the Miracle of Peace, and Vvardenfell

During the Restoration, Uriel Septim turned from the aggressive campaign of military intimidation and diplomatic accommodation of his earlier years, and relied instead on clandestine manipulation of affairs behind the scenes,

primarily through the agencies of the various branches of the Blades. A complete assessment of the methods and objectives of this period must wait until after the Emperor's death, when the voluminous diaries archived at his country estate may be opened to the public, and when the Blades no longer need to maintain secrecy to protect the identities of its agents.

Two signal achievements of this period point to the efficacy of Uriel's subtle policies: the 'Miracle of Peace' (also popularly known as 'The Warp in the West') that transformed the Iliac Bay region from an ruly assortment of warring petty kingdoms into the well-ordered and peaceful modern counties of Hammerfell, Sentinel, Wayrest, and Orsinium, and the colonization of Vvardenfell, presided over by the skillful machinations of King Helseth of Morrowind and Lady Barenziah, the Queen-Mother, which brought Morrowind more closely into the sphere of Imperial influence.

3E 415-430: The Golden Peace, King Helseth's Court, and the Nine in the East

Following the 'Miracle of Peace' (best described in Per Vetersen's DAGGERFALL: A MODERN HISTORY), the Empire entered a period of peace and prosperity comparable to the early years of Uriel's reign. With the Imperial Heartland and West solidly integrated into the Empire, Uriel was able to turn his full attention to the East -- to Morrowind.

Exploiting conflicts at the heart of Morrowind's monolithic Tribunal religion and the long-established Great House system of government, and taking advantage of the terrible threat that the corrupted divine beings at the heart of the Tribunal religion presented to the growing colonies on Vvardenfell, Uriel worked through shadowy agents of the Blades and through the court of King Helseth in Mournhold to shift the center of political power in Morrowind from the Great House councils to Helseth's court, and took advantage of the collapse of the orthodox Tribunal cults to establish the Nine Divines as the dominant faiths in Hlaalu and Vvardenfell Districts.

Hasphat Anabolis's treatment of the establishment of the Nine in the East in his four-volume LIFE AND TIMES OF THE NEREVARINE is comprehensive; however, he fails to resolve the central mystery of this

period -- how much did Uriel know about the prophecies of the Nerevarine, and how did he learn of their significance? The definitive resolution of this and other mysteries must await the future release of the Emperor's private papers, or a relenting of the Blades' strict policies of secrecy concerning their agents.

Sinderion's Field Journal

4E 58 Second Seed, Middas

I've spent a large portion of my life unraveling the mystery of the nirnroot and yet I still feel unfulfilled. The trilling sound this strange herb emits seems to taunt me, to push me even harder to discover its secrets. Even after a generous and indomitable traveler became a field collector in my stead, and provided me with five score of the nirnroot, I was only able to muster what I consider a mediocre alchemical creation at best. This only served to strengthen my hunger and whet my appetite for the solution.

It wasn't until over fifty years later that the answer to my prayers was carried into my basement workshop at the West Weald Inn. The first thing I heard was the familiar tone - that unmistakable warble unique to the nirnroot. But when I turned around, my heart leapt and a chill ran down my spine. This was indeed a nirnroot, but of a variety the likes of which I have never seen. The herb was awash in a spectacular array of red hues, each leaf seemingly emblazoned with innumerable variations of crimson. I couldn't move - I was completely transfixed. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined a species of nirnroot with such a unique property.

After an awkward silence, I finally managed to stammer out a few questions to the traveler who'd brought me this treasure. He told me his name was Obeth Arnesian, a treasure-seeker from Skyrim. Apparently, he'd been exploring a vast subterranean network of grand caverns called Blackreach and had stumbled across what he dismissed as "a noisy red weed." His expedition was largely unsuccessful and he didn't want to leave the caves empty-handed, so Obeth picked one of the crimson nirnroot to bring home. He said that it took some time, but eventually he was pointed my way and that perhaps I'd pay a fair price for it.

Before I could gather my wits and ask anything else, Obeth offered to sell me the crimson nirnroot sample, a map showing me how to find Blackreach and the strange key needed to breach its outer defenses. It took me mere

moments to decide. Obeth left Skingrad a thousand septims richer, but I would have easily paid ten times that amount to obtain the sample alone.

It took a year of planning, but I was able to pack up and sell my workshop and make my way into Skyrim. Before delving headfirst into Blackreach, I knew I needed to set up a new laboratory, but wished to do so in seclusion. After making inquiries at the College of Winterhold, of which I was an honorary member, I was directed to speak to Avrusa Sarethi, a student of botanical alchemy who had a small farm near the city of Riften. By bartering my knowledge of nirnroot cultivation, I was able to secure Sarethi Farm as a launching point for my field research. I kept the knowledge of the crimson nirnroot a secret from Avrusa, but imparted everything else I knew to her in exchange for her hospitality.

A few months passed, but I was finally ready to enter Blackreach. I used the Runed Lexicon that Obeth had provided and descended into the depths. My goal was to gather enough crimson nirnroot to produce my greatest alchemical creation to date - I was certain it would take at least thirty of them to provide the necessary catalyst.

This brings me to the present. My initial research seems to indicate that the crimson nirnroot has a similar affinity for moisture as the garden variety, but also maintains some sort of symbiotic relationship with the enormous fungi that inhabits Blackreach. It's my guess that the fungi itself is a source of water, absorbing it from the moist subterranean air like a sponge. This provides the ideal environment for the nirnroot to grow. Unfortunately, the crimson nirnroot appears to have a vastly shortened lifespan, and they are in no way plentiful down here. Gathering thirty of them will be quite the challenge, but hopefully the denizens of Blackreach will allow me to gather my samples unhindered.

Sithis

Sithis is the start of the house. Before him was nothing, but the foolish Altmer have names for and revere this nothing. That is because they are lazy slaves. Indeed, from the Sermons, 'stasis asks merely for itself, which is nothing.'

Sithis sundered the nothing and mutated the parts, fashioning from them a myriad of possibilities. These ideas ebbed and flowed and faded away and this is how it should have been.

One idea, however, became jealous and did not want to die; like the stasis, he wanted to last. This was the demon Anui-El, who made friends, and they called themselves the Aedra. They enslaved everything that Sithis had made and created realms of everlasting imperfection. Thus are the Aedra the false gods, that is, illusion.

So Sithis begat Lorkhan and sent him to destroy the universe. Lorkhan! Unstable mutant!

Lorkhan had found the Aedric weakness. While each rebel was, by their nature, immeasurable, they were, through jealously and vanity, also separate from each other. They were also unwilling to go back to the nothing of before. So while they ruled their false dominions, Lorkhan filled the void with a myriad of new ideas. These ideas were legion. Soon it seemed that Lorkhan had a dominion of his own, with slaves and everlasting imperfections, and he seemed, for all the world, like an Aedra. Thus did he present himself as such to the demon Anui-El and the Eight Givers: as a friend.

Go unto the Sharmat Dagoth Ur as a friend.

AE HERMA MORA ALTADOON PADHOME LKHAN AE AI.

Sixteen Accords of Madness

Volume VI

Hircine's Tale

Ever proud and boastful, Oblivion's Mad Prince stood one fifth day of mid year among the frigid peaks of Skyrim, and beckoned forth Hircine for parlay. The Huntsman God materialized, for this was his day, and the boldness of Sheogorath intrigued him.

Wry without equal, Sheogorath holds in his realm giggling loons, flamboyant auteurs, and craven mutilators. The Mad Prince will ply profitless bargains and promote senseless bloodshed for nothing more than the joy of another's confusion, tragedy, or rage. So it was that Sheogorath had set a stage on which to play himself as rival to Hircine.

Without haste, the coy Prince proffered his contest; each Prince was to groom a beast to meet at this place again, three years to the hour, and do fatal battle. Expressionless behind his fearsome countenance, Hircine agreed, and with naught but a dusting of snow in the drift, the Princes were gone to their realms.

Confident, but knowing Sheogorath for a trickster, Hircine secretly bred an abomination in his hidden realm. An ancient Daedroth he summoned, and imbued it with the foul curse of lycanthropy. Of pitch heart and jagged fang, the unspeakable horror had no peer, even among the great hunters of Hircine's sphere.

In the third year, on the given day, Hircine returned, where Sheogorath leaned, cross-legged on a stone, whistling with idle patience. The Prince of the Hunt struck his spear to the ground, bringing forth his unnatural, snarling behemoth. Doffing his cap, sly as ever, Sheogorath stood and stepped aside to reveal a tiny, colorful bird perched atop the stone. Demurely it chirped in the bristling gusts, scarcely audible.

In a twisted, springing heap, the Daedroth was upon the stone, leaving only rubble where the boulder had been. Thinking itself victorious, the monster's bloodied maw curled into a mock grin, when a subdued song drifted in the crisp air. The tiny bird lightly hopped along the snout of the furious Daedroth. Sheogorath looked on, quietly mirthful, as the diminutive creature picked at a bit of detritus caught in scales betwixt the fiery eyes of the larger beast. With howling fury, the were-thing blinded itself trying to pluck away the nuisance. And so it continued for hours, Hircine looking on in shame while his finest beast gradually destroyed itself in pursuit of the seemingly oblivious bird, all the while chirping a mournful tune to the lonesome range.

Livid, but beaten, Hircine burned the ragged corpse and withdrew to his realm, swearing in forgotten tongues. His curses still hang in those peaks, and no wayfarer tarries for fear of his wrathful aspect in those obscured heights.

Turning on his heel, Sheogorath beckoned the miniscule songbird to perch atop his shoulder, and strolled down the mountain, making for the warm breezes and vibrant sunsets of the Abecean coast, whistling in tune with the tiniest champion in Tamriel.

Volume IX

Vaermina's Tale

Darius Shano found himself running as fast as he could.

He had no idea what he was running from or towards, but he didn't care. The desire saturated his mind -- there was nothing in the world except flight. He looked around for landmarks, anything to place himself or to use as a target, but to no avail -- the featureless grasslands through which he was sprinting extended as far as the eye could see. "Just have to keep running", he thought to himself. "I have to run as fast as I can". On and on he ran, with no end in sight or in mind....

Standing over Darius Shano while he lay quietly in his bed were his mistress, Vaermina the Dreamweaver, and the Madgod Sheogorath. Vaernima looked down with pride at this disciple of hers, and was boastful of her little jewel.

"Such potential in this one! Through dreams of inspiration, I have nurtured literary talent into fruition, and now he stands in acclaim as an emerging bard and poet! He will gain much favor before I tire of him." Sheogorath, too, gazed at the young Breton artist and saw that he was indeed famous among the other mortals.

"Hmmm," mused Sheogorath, "but how many are there who hate this mortal whom you have built? It is the hatred of the mortals which confirms greatness, and not their love. Surely you can accomplish this as well?"

Vaernima's eyes narrowed. "Yes, the mortals are indeed often foolish and petty, and it is true that many of their most bold have been despised. Do not worry, mad one, for I have the power to achieve many forms of greatness with this one, hatred among them."

"Perhaps, Dreamweaver, it would be amusing to show who has this power? Inspire foolish, arrogant hatred of this mortal for ten years, and then I will

do the same. We shall see whose talents are most efficient, free of aid or interference from any of the Daedra."

At this, she relaxed into confident pleasure. "The Madgod is indeed powerful, but this task is suited to my skills. The mortals are repulsed by madness, but rarely think it worthy of hate. I shall take pleasure in revealing this to you, as I bring the more subtle horrors out of this mortal's subconscious."

And so, in the 19th year of his life, the dreams Darius Shano had been experiencing began to change. Fear had always been part of the night for him, but now there was something else. A darkness began to creep into his slumber, a darkness that sucked away all feeling and color, leaving only emptiness behind. When this happened, he opened his mouth to scream, but found that the darkness had taken his voice as well. All he had was the terror and the void, and each night they filled him with a new understanding of death. Yet, when he woke, there was no fear, for he had faith that his Lady had a purpose.

Indeed, one night Vaernima herself emerged from the void. She leaned in close to whisper into his ear.

"Watch carefully, my beloved!" With that, she pulled the void away, and for hours each night she would reveal to Darius the most horrible perversions of nature. Men being skinned and eaten alive by other men, unimaginable beasts of many limbs and mouths, entire populations being burned -- their screams filled his every evening. In time, these visions gnawed at his soul, and his work began to take on the character of his nightmares. The images revealed to him at night were reproduced on the page, and the terrible cruelty and hollow vice that his work contained both revolted and fascinated the public. They reveled in their disgust over every detail. There were those who openly enjoyed his shocking material, and his popularity among some only fed the hatred of those who found him abhorrent. This continued for several years, while the infamy of Darius grew steadily. Then, in his 29th year, without warning, the dreams and nightmares ceased.

Darius felt a weight lifted, as he no longer endured the nightly tortures, but

was confused. "What have I done to displease my Mistress?", he wondered aloud. "Why has she abandoned me?" Vaernima never answered his prayers. No one ever answered, and the restless dreams faded away to leave Darius in long, deep sleeps.

Interest in the works of Darius Shano waned. His prose became stale and his ideas failed to provoke the shock and outrage they once had. As the memory of his notoriety and of his terrible dreams faded, the questions that raced in his mind eventually produced resentment against Vaernima, his former mistress. Resentment grew into hatred, from hatred came ridicule, and over time ridicule became disbelief. Slowly it became obvious -- Vaernima had never spoken to him at all; his dreams were simply the product of a sick mind that had righted itself. He had been deceived by his own subconscious, and the anger and shame overwhelmed him. The man who once conversed with a deity drifted steadily into heresy.

In time, all of the bitterness, doubt, and sacrilege focused in Darius a creative philosophy that was threaded throughout all of his subsequent work. He challenged the Gods themselves, as well as the infantile public and corrupt state for worshiping them. He mocked them all with perverse caricatures, sparing no one and giving no quarter. He challenged the Gods in public to strike him down if they existed, and ridiculed them when no such comeuppance was delivered. To all of this, the people reacted with outrage far greater than they had shown his previous work. His early career had offended only sensibilities, but now he was striking directly at the heart of the people.

His body of work grew in size and intensity. Temples, nobles, and commoners were all targets of his scorn. Finally, at age 39, Darius wrote a piece entitled "The Noblest Fool," ridiculing The Emperor God Tiber Septim for integrating into the pathetic Nine Divines cult. The local King of Daenia, who had been humiliated by this upstart in the past, saw his chance -- for his sacrilege against the Empire, Darius Shano was executed, with a ceremonial blade, in front of a cheering crowd of hundreds. His last, bitter words were gurgled through a mouthful of his own blood.

20 years after their wager was first placed, Vaernima and Sheogorath met

over Darius Shano's headless corpse. The Dreamweaver had been eager for this meeting; she had been waiting for years to confront the Daedric Prince over his lack of action.

"I have been deceived by you, Sheogorath! I performed my half of the bargain, but during your ten years you never contacted the mortal once. He owes none of his greatness to you or your talents or your influence!"

"Nonsense," croaked the Madgod. "I was with him all along! When your time ended and mine began, your whispers in his ear were replaced with silence. I severed his link to that from which he found the most comfort and meaning, and withheld the very attention the creature so desperately craved. Without his mistress, this man's character could ripen under resentment and hatred. Now his bitterness is total and, overcome by a madness fueled by his rage, he feeds me in my realm as an eternal servant."

Sheogorath turned and spoke to the empty space by his side.

"Indeed; Darius Shano was a glorious mortal. Despised by his own people, his kings, and even by the Gods he mocked. For my success, I shall accept three-score followers of Vaernima into my service. And the dreamers will awaken as madmen."

And thus did Sheogorath teach Vaernima that without madness, there are no dreams, and no creation. Vaernima will never forget this lesson.

Volume XII

Malacath's Tale

In the days before the Orsinium's founding, the spurned Orc-folk were subjected to ostracism and persecutions even more numerous and harsh than their progeny are accustomed to in our own age. So it was that many champions of the Orsimer traveled, enforcing what borders they could for the proliferation of their own people. Many of these champions are spoken of yet today, among them the Cursed Legion, Gromma the Hairless, and the noble Emmeg Gro-Kayra. This latter crusader would have certainly risen to legendary status throughout Tamriel, had he not been subject to the attention of certain Daedric Princes.

Emmeg Gro-Kayra was the bastard son of a young maiden who was killed in childbirth. He was raised by the shaman of his tribe, the Grilikamaug in the peaks of what we now call Normar Heights. Late in his fifteenth year, Emmeg forged by hand an ornate suit of scaled armor, a rite of ascension among his tribe. On a blustery day, he pounded the final rivet, and draping a heavy cloak over the bulky mantle, Emmeg set out from his village for the last time. Word of his exploits always returned home, whether defending merchant caravans from brigands or liberating enslaved beast folk. News of the noble Orc crusader began to grace even the lips of Bretons, often with a tinge of fear.

Less than two years after ascending to maturity, Gro-Kayra was making camp when a thin voice called out from the thickening night. He was surprised to hear the language of his people spoken by a tongue that obviously did not belong to an Orc.

'Lord Kayra', said the voice, 'tales of your deeds have crossed the lips of many, and have reached my ears.' Peering into the murk, Emmeg made out the silhouette of a cloaked figure, made wavy and ephemeral by the hazy campfire. From the voice alone he had thought the interloper an old hag, but he now decided that he was in the presence of a man of slight and lanky

build, though he could discern no further detail.

'Perhaps,' the wary Orc began, 'but I seek no glory. Who are you?'

Ignoring the question, the stranger continued, 'Despite that, Orsimer, glory finds you, and I bear a gift worthy of it.' The visitor's cloak parted slightly, revealing nothing but faintly glinting buttons in the pale moonlight, and a bundle was withdrawn and tossed to the side of the fire between the two. Emmeg cautiously removed the rags in which the object was swathed, and was dazzled to discover the item to be a wide, curved blade with ornately decorated handle. The weapon had heft, and Emmeg realized on brandishing it that the elaborate pommel disguised the more practical purpose of balancing the considerable weight of the blade itself. It was nothing much to look at in its present condition, thought the Orc, but once the tarnish was cleaned away and a few missing jewels restored, it would indeed be a blade worthy of a champion ten times his own worth.

'Her name is Neb-Crescen' spoke the thin stranger, seeing the appreciation lighting Gro-Kayra's face. 'I got her for a horse and a secret in warmer climes, but in my old age I'd be lucky to even lift such a weapon. It's only proper that I pass her on to one such as yourself. To possess her is to change your life, forever.' Overcoming his initial infatuation with the arc of honed steel, Emmeg turned his attention back to the visitor.

'Your words are fine, old man,' Emmeg said, not masking his suspicion, 'but I'm no fool. You traded for this blade once, and you'll trade for it again tonight. What is it that you want?' The stranger's shoulders slumped, and Emmeg was glad to have unveiled the true purpose of this twilight visit. He sat with him a while, eventually offering a stack of furs, warm food, and a handful of coins in exchange for the exotic weapon. By morning, the stranger was gone.

In the week following Emmeg's encounter with the stranger, Neb-Crescen had not left its scabbard. He had encountered no enemy in the woods, and his meals consisted of fowl and small game caught with bow and arrow. The peace suited him fine, but on the seventh morning, while fog still crept between the low-hanging boughs, Emmeg's ears pricked up at the telltale

crunch of a nearby footfall in the dense snow and forest debris.

Emmeg's nostrils flared, but he was upwind. Being unable to see or smell his guest, and knowing that the breeze carried his scent in that direction, Emmeg's guard was up, and he cautiously drew Neb-Crescen from its sheath. Emmeg himself was not entirely sure of all that happened next.

The first moment of conscious memory in Emmeg Gro-Kayra's mind after drawing Neb-Crescen was the image of the curved blade sweeping through the air in front of him, spattering blood over the virginal powder coating the forest floor. The second memory was a feeling of frenzied bloodlust creeping over him, but it was then that he saw for the first time his victim, an Orc woman perhaps a few years younger than himself, her body a canvas of grisly wounds, enough to kill a strong man ten times over.

Emmeg's disgust overwhelmed the madness that had overtaken him, and with all his will enlisted, he released Neb-Crescen from his grip and let the blade sail. With a discordant ringing it spun through the air and was buried in a snowdrift. Emmeg fled the scene in shame and horror, drawing the hood of his cloak up to hide himself from the judging eyes of the rising sun.

The scene where Emmeg Gro-Kayra had murdered one of his own kind was a macabre one. Below the neck, the body was flayed and mutilated almost beyond recognition, but the untouched face was frozen in a permanent expression of abject terror.

It was here that Sheogorath performed certain rites that summoned Malacath, and the two Daedric Lords held court in the presence of the disfigured corpse.

'Why show me this, Mad One?' began Malacath, once he recovered from his initial, wordless outrage. 'Do you take such pleasure in watching me grieve the murder of my children?' His guttural voice rumbled, and the patron of the Orismer looked upon his counterpart with accusing eyes.

'By birth, she was yours, brother outcast,' began Sheogorath, solemn in aspect and demeanor. 'But she was a daughter of mine by her own habits.

My mourning here is no less than your own, my outrage no less great.'

'I am not so sure,' grumbled Malacath, 'but rest assured that vengeance for this crime is mine to reap. I expect no contest from you. Stand aside.' As the fearsome Prince began to push past him, Lord Sheogorath spoke again.

'I have no intention of standing between you and vengeance. In fact, I mean to help you. I have servants in this wilderness, and can tell you just where to find our mutual foe. I ask only that you use a weapon of my choosing. Wound the criminal with my blade, and banish him to my plane, where I can exact my own punishment. The rights of honor-killing here belong to you.'

With that, Malacath agreed, took the wide blade from Sheogorath, and was gone.

Malacath materialized in the path of the murderer, the cloaked figure obscured through a blizzard haze. Bellowing a curse so foul as to wilt the surrounding trees, the blade was drawn and Malacath crossed the distance more quickly than a wild fox. Frothing with rage, he swung the blade in a smooth arc which lopped the head of his foe cleanly off, then plunged the blade up to its hilt in his chest, choking off the spurts of blood into a steady, growing stain of red bubbling from beneath the scaled armor and heavy cloak.

Panting from the unexpected immediacy and fury of his own kill, Malacath rested on a knee as the body before him collapsed heavily backwards and the head landed roughly upon a broad, flat stone. The next sound broke the silence like a bolt.

'I - I'm sorry...' sputtered the voice of Emmeg Gro-Kayra. Malacath's eyes went wide as he looked upon the severed head, seeping blood from its wound, but somehow kept alive. Its eyes wavered about wildly, trying to focus on the aspect of Malacath before it. The once-proud eyes of the champion were choked with tears of grief, pain, and confused recognition.

To his horror, Malacath recognized only now that the man he had killed was

not only one of his Orismer children, but very literally a son he had blessed an Orc maiden with years hence. For achingly long moments the two looked upon each other, despondent and shocked.

Then, silent as oiled steel, Sheogorath strode into the clearing. He hefted Emmeg Gro-Kayra's disembodied head and bundled it into a small, grey sack. Sheogorath reclaimed Neb-Crescen from the corpse and turned to walk away. Malacath began to stand, but kneeled again, knowing he had irreversibly damned his own offspring to the realm of Sheogorath, and mourned his failure as the sound of his son's hoarse pleas faded into the frozen horizon.

Skyrim's Rule: An Outsider's View

by Abdul-Mujib Ababneh

In my travels, and they have been many, I have encountered many strange peoples and cultures, in many different provinces of the Empire. And in each, I have found a method of governing and customs of leadership unique to that particular province.

In Black Marsh, for example, the Argonian King relies upon his Shadowscale Assassins to eliminate threats secretly, without the common knowledge of his people. In the Imperial Province of Cyrodiil, the Emperor may rule directly, but the power granted to his Elder Council cannot be understated.

During a recent journey to Skyrim, that harsh, frozen realm of the Nords, I was able for the first time to witness the unique manner of rule of this strong, proud people.

It would appear that the entire province of Skyrim is separated into territories known as "holds," and each hold finds its seat of power in one of the great, ancient cities. And in each of those cities, there rules that hold's king, known as a Jarl.

The Jarls of Skyrim are, as a whole, a fierce sight indeed. Sitting on their thrones, ready to administer justice, or send their forces out to quell some local threat, be it a pack of feral wolves or a terrifying giant that has wandered too close to a settlement.

In observing these Jarls, I found each to of course have his or her own unique personality and leadership style. But what I perhaps did not expect - especially considering the Nord leaders' unfair reputation as barbarians or uncivilized chieftains - was the formal structure of each Jarl's court. For while that hold's leader may be the one to sit on the throne, there is also a collection of functionaries who serve very specific and important roles.

The court wizard counsels the Jarl in all matters magical, and may even sell services or spells to the keep's visitors. The Steward is the Jarl's primary advisor, and generally takes care of the more mundane aspects of running the keep, the city, or even the hold, depending on the situation. And woe is the fool who defies the Housecarl - a personal bodyguard who rarely leaves the Jarl's side, and has pledged to sacrifice his or her own life to save that of their honored leader, if ever the need should arrive.

But as mighty and influential as each individual Jarl is, Skyrim's true power comes from the strength of its High King. The High King is ruler above all, and is always one of the Jarls, selected by a body called the "Moot" - a specially convened council of all the Jarls, who meet with the express purpose of choosing Skyrim's High King. Or so it is, in theory.

The reality, however, is that the High King swears fealty to the Emperor, and as Solitude is the city most directly influenced by Imperial culture and politics, the Jarl of Solitude has served as High King for generations. The Moot, therefore, is more formality and theater than anything else.

But as I prepared to leave Skyrim, I could feel a change in the air, sense the trepidation of some of the good Nord people. Many seemed unhappy with the Empire's continued presence in their land. And the outlawing of the worship of Talos as the Ninth Divine - a stipulation of the White-Gold Concordat, the peace treaty between the Empire and Aldmeri Dominion - has only strengthened that division.

So while the Jarls of Skyrim still control their holds, and those Jarls are ruled over by their Imperial-sanctioned High King, will there come a day when the Moot convenes to select a new High King - one that is not, as many would say, the Emperor's "Solitude puppet"?

If that day comes, I will be thankful to be far away from Skyrim, in my own home of Hammerfell. For such a decision could well mean civil war, and I fear that such a conflict would tear the fierce and beautiful Nord people asunder.

Song of Hrormir

Hrormir
Son of Hrorgar
Summoned to the Court of Vjindak,
Son of Vjinmore, King of Evensnow.
"Mighty caster of magic,
I charge thee to go to Aelfendor,
For its hoary Warriors do threaten my Land
And bring forth their cousin Demons
To terrify my People."
Hrormir
Son of Hrorgar
Heard the Words of Vjindak Evensnow.
"By Icestaff,
Surely I would help thee
But I have already a Quest to drink
Twelve Flagons of Mead in one Hour,
And then to bed four Wenches,
Twice each.
So I must with grace decline."
The King he did not smile
At Hrormir and his jolly Spirit.
"By thine Honor
Must thou aidest my Cause
For must thou takest up the Sword
Of thy Companion Darfang
Who took the Quest and failed."
Hrormir laughed.
"Now I know thou jest.
My boon Mate Darfang wouldst not fail.
There be no finer Bladesman.
If thou chargest him, he wouldst not fall."
"I did not say he fell.
He joined the Dark Kings of Aelfendor

And by doing so dishonored
Himself and thee, his Friend."

Hrormir could not believe the Words,
And yet, he knew Eversnow
Didst not lie.
So for twenty Days and three rodeth he
To the Land of Night, the Kingdom of Fear,
Where the Peasants ever carried Candles
Knowing what Evil awaiteth them
Should they stray beyond the Glow.
The Sovereigncy of three Dark Kings:
Aelfendor.
There, Torch in Hand, didst Hrormir
Pass through haunted Countryside
And frightened Villages,
And through the black Gates
Of the blacker Castle of Aelfendor.
The three Dark Kings didst sneer
At the sight of mighty Hrormir
And summoned they their Champion
Darfang the Blade.
"My boon Companion!"
Hrormir called in the Hall of Night.
"I dare not trust my Eyes,
For then I wouldst believe
That thou hast joined with Evil,
And turned thy Way from Honor
And Brotherhood!"

"Hrormir!"
Darfang the Blade didst cry.
"If thou dost not go now,
One of us must die, for I hate thee!"
But Hrormir was battle ready,
And in the echoing Halls of Night
The Blade of Darfang

And the Staff of Hrormir
Didst strike again and yet again.
Mighty Warriors and Mages both,
The boon Companions now Foes,
Shook Mundus with their War.
They might have fought for a Year
If there were Sun in Aelfendor
To mark Time,
And either Hrormir or Darfang
May verily have won.
But Hrormir saweth through the Dark
The Tears in the Eyes of his former Friend,
And then he saweth the Shadow of Darfang
Wert not his own.
And so with Icestaff, he did strike
Not Darfang, but his Shadow, which cried.
"Hold, Mortal Man!"

The Shadow becameth the Hag,
Bent and twisted, in her Cloak and Hood.
From her faceless Shadows, she hissed.
"Mortal Man called Hrormir
The Soul of thy boon Companion
Is my Plaything,
But I will take thine in trade,
For though ye both have strong Arms,
Thou hast the more clever Mind
Which my Sons the Dark Kings need
For a Champion of Aelfendor."
Hrormir the brave didst not take a Breath
Or pause before he boldly said.
"Shadowy Hag, release Darfang,
And thou mayst use me as thou will."
The Hag didst laugh and freed Darfang.
"To save thine Honor this thou hast done,
But now thou must be without Honor
Mortal Man, as the Champion

Of the Dark Kings, my Heirs of Gray Maybe,
Thou must help them divide Aelfendor,
And love me,
Thy Shadowy Hag and thy Mistress well."

For his loss of Honor,
And his dear Friend's Sacrifice,
Noble Darfang prepared to take his Dagger
And plunge it in his good Heart,
But Hrormir stayed his Brother's Hand and whispered.
"No, boon Companion,
Wait for me at the Village Banquet Hall."
And then did Darfang the Blade leave the Castle
While Hrormir took the withered Claw
Of the Hag, and pressed it to his Lips.
"Shadowy Hag, to thee I pledge
To only honor thy black Words
To turn my back on Truth
To aid thy Dark Kings' Ambition
To divide their Inheritance fairly
To love thee
To think thee beautiful."
Then to the Chamber in the Heart of Night
Hrormir and the Hag did retire
Kissed he there her wrinkled Lips
And her wrinkled, sagging Breasts,
For ten Days and Nights and three did Hrormir
And his Icestaff
Battle thus.

Then Sweet Kynareth blew honeyed Winds
O'er the Hills and Forest Glens of Aelfendor,
And the Caress of warm blooded Dibella
Coaxed the Blossoms to wanton Display
So that Aelfendor became a Garden
Of all the Senses.
The frightened Servants of the Dark Kings

Woke to find there was naught to fear
And through the once dark Streets of the Village
Came the Cries of Celebration.
In the Banquet Hall of the Village
Hrormir and his boon Companion Darfang
Embraced and drank of rich Mead.
The Shadowy Hag too was smiling,
Sleeping still in her soft Bed,
Until the morning Sun touched her naked Face
And she awoke, and saw All,
And knew All saw her.
And she cried out:
"Mortal Man!"

Night fell fast upon the Land
As the Hag flew into the Banquet Hall
Casting blackest Darkness in her Wake
But all the Celebrants still could see
Her Anger
In her monstrous Face
And they shook with Fear.
The Hag had said the Kingdom was
To be divided among her Heirs.
But Aelfendor had been kept whole
While her Children divided,
Drawn and quartered.
Hrormir was mightily amused.
He swallowed his Laughter
In his Mead,
For none should laugh outright
At the Daedra Lord Nocturnal.
Without her gray Cowl of shadowed Night,
Her hideous Face forced the Moons
To hide themselves.
Hrormir the mighty did not quail.
"Wherest be thine Hood, shadowy hag?"
"Mortal Man hast taken it from me unaware.

When I awoke, my Face unmasked,
My Kingdom cast into the Light,
My Dark King Heirs in Pieces cast,
And here, my Champion smiles.
Yet in truth, thou kept thy Promise truly,
To never keep thy Promise true."

Hrormir
Son of Hrorgar
Bowed to the Hag, his Queen.
"And evermore,
'Til thou releaseth me, will I serve thee so."
"A clever Mind in a Champion
Is a much overvalued Trait."
The Hag released Hrormir's Soul
And he released her Hood.
And so in the Light of darkest Dark,
She left Aelfendor evermore.
And after drinking twelve Flagons of Mead,
And bedding four Wenches
Twice each,
Did Darfang return to Eversnow
With Hrormir
Son of Hrorgar.

The Song of Pelinal

Volume 1: On His Name

[Editor's Note: Volumes 1-6 are taken from the so-called Reman Manuscript located in the Imperial Library. It is a transcription of older fragments collected by an unknown scholar of the early Second Era. Beyond this, little is known of the original sources of these fragments, some of which appear to be from the same period (perhaps even from the same manuscript). But, as no scholarly consensus yet exists on dating these six fragments, no opinions will be offered here.]

That he took the name "Pelinal" was passing strange, no matter his later sobriquets, which were many. That was an Elvish name, and Pelinal was a scourge on that race, and not much given to irony. Pelinal was much too grim for that; even in youth he wore white hair, and trouble followed him. Perhaps his enemies named Pelinal of their own in their tongue, but that is doubtful, for it means "glorious knight", and he was neither to them. Certainly, many others added to that name during his days in Tamriel: he was Pelinal the Whitestrake because of his left hand, made of a killing light; he was Pelinal the Bloody, for he [drank] it in victory; he was Pelinal Insurgent, because he gave the crusades a face; he was Pelinal In Triumph, as the words eventually became synonymous, and men-at-arms gave thanks to the Eight when they saw his banner coming through war; he was Pelinal the Blamer, for he was quick to admonish those allies of his that favored tactics that ran counter to his, that is, sword-theory; and he was Pelinal the Third, though whether this was because some said he was a god guiser, who had incarnated twice before already, or that, simpler, he was the third vision given to Perrif, anon Alessia, in her prayers of liberation before he walked among the quarters of rebellion, is unknown.

Volume 2: On His Coming

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[And then] Perrif spoke to the Handmaiden again, eyes to the Heavens which had not known kindness since the beginning of elven rule, and she spoke as a mortal, whose kindle is beloved by the Gods for its strength-in-weakness, a humility that can burn with metaphor and yet break [easily and] always, always doomed to end in death (and this is why those who let their souls burn anyway are beloved of the Dragon and His Kin), and she said: "And this thing I have thought of, I have named it, and I call it freedom. Which I think is just another word for Shezarr Who Goes Missing... [You] made the first rain at his sundering [and that] is what I ask now for our alien masters... [that] we might sunder them fully and repay their cruelty [by] dispersing them to drown in the Topal. Morihaus, your son, mighty and snorting, gore-horned, winged, when next he flies down, let him bring us anger." ... [And then] Kyne granted Perrif another symbol, a diamond soaked red with the blood of elves, [whose] facets could [un-sector and form] into a man whose every angle could cut her jailers and a name: PELIN-EL [which is] "The Star-Made Knight" [and he] was arrayed in armor [from the future time]. And he walked into the jungles of Cyrod already killing, Morihaus stamping at his side froth-bloody and bellowing from excitement because the Pelinal was come... [and Pelinal] came to Perrif's camp of rebels holding a sword and mace, both encrusted with the smashed viscera of elven faces, feathers and magic beads, which were the markings of the Ayleidoon, stuck to the redness that hung from his

weapons, and he lifted them, saying: "These were their eastern chieftains, no longer full of their talking."

Volume 3: On His Enemy

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Pelinal Whitestrake was the enemy of all elfkind that lived in Cyrod in those days. Mainly, though, he took it upon himself to slay the sorcerer-kings of the Ayleids in pre-arranged open combats rather than at war; the fields of rebellion he left to the growing armies of the Paravania and his bull nephew. Pelinal called out Haromir of Copper and Tea into a duel at the Tor, and ate his neck-veins while screaming praise to Reman, a name that no one knew yet. Gordhaur the Shaper's head was smashed upon the goat-faced altar of Ninendava, and in his wisdom Pelinal said a small plague spell to keep that evil from reforming by welkynd-magic. Later that season, Pelinal slew Hadhuul on the granite steps of Ceya-Tar, the Fire King's spears knowing their first refute. For a time, no weapon of the Ayleids could pierce his armor, which Pelinal admitted was unlike any crafted by men, but would say no more even when pressed. When Huna, whom Pelinal raised from grain-slave to hoplite and loved well, took death from an arrowhead made from the beak of Celethelel the Singer, the Whitestrake went on his first Madness. He wrought destruction from Narlemae all the way to Celediil, and erased those lands from the maps of Elves and Men, and all things in them, and Perrif was forced to make sacrifice to the Gods to keep them from leaving the earth in their disgust. And then came the storming of White-Gold, where the Ayleids had made pact with the Aurorans of Meridia, and summoned them, and appointed the terrible and golden-hued "half-Elf" Umaril the Unfeathered as their champion... and, for the first time

since his coming, it was Pelinal who was called out to battle by another, for Umaril had the blood of the 'ada and would never know death.

Volume 4: On His Deeds

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Pelinal drove the sorcerer armies past the Niben, claiming all the eastern lands for the rebellion of the Paravania, and Kyne had to send her rain to wash the blood from the villages and forts that no longer flew Ayleid banners, for the armies of Men needed to make camps of them as they went forward. ...[and] he broke the doors open for the prisoners of the Vahtache with the Slave-Queen flying on Morihaus above them, and Men called her Al-Esh for the first time. He entered the Gate at ... to win back the hands of the Thousand-Strong of Sedor (a tribe now unknown but famous in those days), which the Ayleids had stolen in the night, two thousand hands that he brought back in a wagon made of demon-bone, whose wheels trailed the sound of women when ill at heart... [Text lost]... [And after] the first Pogrom, which consolidated the northern holdings for the men-of-'kreath, he stood with white hair gone brown with elfblood at the Bridge of Heldon, where Perrif's falconers had sent for the Nords, and they, looking at him, said that Shor had returned, but he spat at their feet for profaning that name. He led them anyway into the heart of the hinterland west, to drive the Ayleids inward, towards the Tower of White-Gold, a slow retreating circle that could not understand the power of Man's sudden liberty, and what fury-idea that brought. His mace crushed the Thundernachs that Umaril sent as harriers on the rebellion's long march back south and east, and carried Morihaus-Breath-of-Kyne to Zuathas the Clever-Cutting Man (a nede with a keptu name) for healing when the bull had fallen to a volley of bird beaks. And, of course, at the Council of Skiffs, where all of the Paravania's armies

and all of the Nords shook with fear at the storming of White-Gold, so much so that the Al-Esh herself counseled delay, Pelinal grew furious, and made names of Umaril, and made names of what cowards he thought he saw around him, and then made for the Tower by himself, for Pelinal often acted without thought.

Volume 5: On His Love of Morihaus

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It is a solid truth that Morihaus was the son of Kyne, but whether or not Pelinal was indeed the Shezarrine is best left unsaid (for once Plontinu, who favored the short sword, said it, and that night he was smothered by moths). It is famous, though, that the two talked of each other as family, with Morihaus as the lesser, and that Pelinal loved him and called him nephew, but these could be merely the fancies of immortals. Never did Pelinal counsel Morihaus in time of war, for the man-bull fought magnificently, and led men well, and never resorted to Madness, but the Whitestrake did warn against the growing love with Perrif. "We are ada, Mor, and change things through love. We must take care lest we beget more monsters on this earth. If you do not desist, she will take to you, and you will transform all Cyrod if you do this." And to this the bull became shy, for he was a bull, and he felt his form too ugly for the Parvania at all times, especially when she disrobed for him. He snorted, though, and shook his nose-hoop into the light of the Secunda moon and said, "She is like this shine on my nose-hoop here: an accident sometimes, but whenever I move my head at night, she is there. And so you know what you ask is impossible."

Volume 6: On His Madness

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And it is said that he emerged into the world like a Padomaic, that is, borne by Sithis and all the forces of change therein. Still others, like Fifd of New Teed, say that beneath the Pelinal's star-armor was a chest that gaped open to show no heart, only a red rage shaped diamond-fashion, singing like a mindless dragon, and that this was proof that he was a myth-echo, and that where he trod were shapes of the first urging. Pelinal cared for none of this and killed any who would speak god-logic, except for fair Perrif, who he said, "enacts, rather than talks, as language without exertion is dead witness." When those soldiers who heard him say this stared blankly, he laughed and swung his sword, running into the rain of Kyne to slaughter their Ayleid captives, screaming, "O Aka, for our shared madness I do this! I watch you watching me watching back! Umaril dares call us out, for that is how we made him!" [And it was during] these fits of anger and nonsense that Pelinal would fall into the Madness, where whole swaths of lands were devoured in divine rampage to become Void, and Alessia would have to pray to the Gods for their succor, and they would reach down as one mind and soothe the Whitestrake until he no longer had the will to kill the earth in whole. And Garid of the men-of-ge once saw such a Madness from afar and maneuvered, after it had abated, to drink together with Pelinal, and he asked what such an affliction felt like, to which Pelinal could only answer, "Like when the dream no longer needs its dreamer."

Volume 7: On His Battle with Umaril and His Dismemberment

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[And so after many battles with] Umaril's allies, where dead Aurorans lay like candlelight around the throne, the Pelinal became surrounded by the last Ayleid sorcerer-kings and their demons, each one heavy with varliance. The Whitestrake cracked the floor with his mace and they withdrew, and he said, "Bring me Umaril that called me out!" ... [And] while mighty in his aspect and wicked, deathless-golden Umaril favored ruin-from-afar over close combat and so he tarried in the shadows of the white tower before coming forth. More soldiers were sent against Pelinal to die, and yet they managed to pierce his armor with axes and arrows, for Umaril had wrought each one by long varliance, which he had been hoarding since his first issue [of challenge.]... [Presently] the half-Elf [showed himself] bathed in [Meridian light] ... and he listed his bloodline in the Ayleidoon and spoke of his father, a god of the [previous kalpa's] World-River and taking great delight in the heavy-breathing of Pelinal who had finally bled... [Text lost] ... [And] Umaril was laid low, the angel face of his helm dented into an ugliness which made Pelinal laugh, [and his] unfeathered wings broken off with sword strokes delivered while Pelinal stood [frothing]... above him insulting his ancestry and anyone else that took ship from Old Ehlnofey, [which] angered the other Elvish kings and drove them to a madness of their own... [and they] fell on him [speaking] to their weapons... cutting the Pelinal into eighths while he roared in confusion [which even] the Council of Skiffs [could hear]... [Text lost] ...ran when Mor shook the whole of the tower with mighty bashing from his horns [the next morning], and some were slain-in-overabundance in the Taking, and Men looked for more Ayleids to kill but Pelinal had left none save those kings and demons that

had already begun to flee... It was Morihaus who found the Whitestrake's head, which the kings had left to prove their deeds and they spoke and Pelinal said things of regrets... but the rebellion had turned anyway... [and more] words were said between these immortals that even the Paravant would not deign to hear.

Volume 8: On His Revelation at the Death of the Al-Esh

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And left you to gather sinew with my other half, who will bring light thereby to that mortal idea that brings [the Gods] great joy, that is, freedom, which even the Heavens do not truly know, [which is] why our Father, the... [Text lost]... in those first [days/spirits/swirls] before Convention... that which we echoed in our earthly madness. [Let us] now take you Up. We will [show] our true faces... [which eat] one another in amnesia each Age."

Song of the Askelde Men

(Nord/Traditonal)

Translation 3E213
Atheneum Monks at Old Anthel

Fifty Nights from home I last awoke
upon a sky-flung cliff in Hjaalmarch Hold

Though my flesh had died and gone to ground
My Vision went on, from body unbound

Winking there in the vale whence I came
This dead man's eyes saw pale flame

Where men the same who took life away
Sung high their battle-glory and praise

Wafting went I, a shade or a wight
Through stoic pines, pitched ink of night

Ere I came upon the pyre-burning throng
I heard carried on wind's wing their song

"Sing high and clear, bandsmen born of sky
Let Sovngarde hear and join our cry"

"These honored dead shed blood upon the fen
Ending Orc and Elf and traitor men."

"Your spirit went unto and filled their heart
You sped them to glory, Hail Spirit Wulfharth"

Then oil from urns fed greedy flames

burning what few my legion and I slayed

Wordlessy they chanted then until dawn
Every flake of ash gathered ere they marched on

Swept along unseen, so too went I
Meekly haunting these Children of the Sky

Tireless they went, over hearth and hill
Exhaustion seemed only to spur them still

Unflagging they went, a whorl of rage
Soon finding our camp, bloated with prey

My dead heart ached for I knew men within
Doomed, never knowing how close was their end

Again the Nord chests swelled up in refrain
I screamed unheard. I wept with horror plain

"Hear us, our ancestor, Ash King, Ysmir
Honor this warband as we to glory repair"

"Those dead to whom you spoke and heard
We bear them upon us, Your valor conferred"

And so it was, to the man each was smeared
With ash of a Brother's bone, blood and beard

These ashen brutes, the Askelde Men
Set to a gruesome task, each bowstring bent

I bellowed then, a cry of desperate rage
A futile howl among those men, an empty page

Yet one elder turned and unblinking, stared
into the vapor-soul of me, his nostrils flared

He bellowed ancient words, his beard aflame
And my vision fell away, Peace at last came

Songs Of Skyrim

Compiled by
Giraud Gemaine
Historian of the Bards College
Solitude

Ragnar the Red is a traditional song of Whiterun. Despite the grim final image the song is generally regarded as light and rollicking and a favorite in inns across Skyrim.

Ragnar The Red
There once was a hero named Ragnar the Red, who came riding to Whiterun from ole Rorikstead!
And the braggart did swagger and brandish his blade, as he told of bold battles and gold he had made!
But then he went quiet, did Ragnar the Red, when he met the shieldmaiden Matilda who said...
Oh, you talk and you lie and you drink all our mead! Now I think it's high time that you lie down and bleed!
And so then came the clashing and slashing of steel, as the brave lass Matilda charged in full of zeal!
And the braggart named Ragnar was boastful no mooooooree... when his ugly red head rolled around on the floor!

The Dragonborn Comes has been handed down from generation to generation of bards. The Dragonborn in Nord culture is the archetype of what a Nord should be. The song itself has been used to rally soldiers and to bring hope.

The Dragonborn Comes
Our hero, our hero, claims a warrior's heart.
I tell you, I tell you, the Dragonborn comes.
With a Voice wielding power of the ancient Nord art.
Believe, believe, the Dragonborn comes.
It's an end to the evil, of all Skyrim's foes.
Beware, beware, the Dragonborn comes.
For the darkness has passed, and the legend yet grows.
You'll know, You'll know the Dragonborn's come.

The Age of Oppression and The Age of Aggression are variants of one song. It isn't known which of the two was written first but the tune, with loyalty appropriate lyrics, is quite popular on both sides of the war.

The Age of Oppression
We drink to our youth, and to days come and gone. For the age of oppression is now nearly done.
We'll drive out the Empire from this land that we own. With our blood and our steel we will take back our home.
All hail to Ulfric! You are the High King! In your great honor we drink and we sing.
We're the children of Skyrim, and we fight all our lives. And when Sovngarde beckons, every one of us dies!
But this land is ours and we'll see it wiped clean. Of the scourge that has sullied our hopes and our dreams.

The Age of Aggression
We drink to our youth, to days come and gone. For the age of aggression is

just about done.
We'll drive out the Stormcloaks and restore what we own. With our blood and our steel we'll take back our home.
Down with Ulfric the killer of kings. On the day of your death we'll drink and we'll sing.
We're the children of Skyrim, and we fight all our lives. And when Sovngarde beckons, every one of us dies!
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The following is an ancient song we've only recently been able to translate. Without a tune or a sure pronunciation the song is lost to time. It's included here to show the deep history of song here in Skyrim.

The original version...

Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, naal ok zin los vahriin, wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal!
Ahrk fin norok paal graan fod nust hon zindro zaan, Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal!
Huzrah nu, kul do od, wah aan bok lingrah vod, Aahrk fin tey, boziik fun, do fin gein!
Wo lost fron wah ney dov, ahrk fin reyliik do jul, voth aan suleyk wah ronit faal krein!
Ahrk fin zul, rok drey kod, nau tol morokei frod, rul lot Taazokaan motaad voth kein!
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Nuz aan sul, fent alok, fod fin vul dovah nok, fen kos nahlot mahfaeraak ahrk ruz!
Paaz Keizaal fen kos stin nol bein Alduin jot, Dovahkiin kos fin saviik do muz!

And the translation...

Dragonborn, Dragonborn, by his honor is sworn, To keep evil forever at bay!
And the fiercest foes rout when they hear triumph's shout, Dragonborn, for your blessing we pray!
Hearken now, sons of snow, to an age, long ago, and the tale, boldly told, of the one!
Who was kin to both wyrm, and the races of man, with a power to rival the sun!
And the Voice, he did wield, on that glorious field, when great Tamriel shuddered with war!
Mighty Thu'um, like a blade, cut through enemies all, as the Dragonborn issued his roar!
And the Scrolls have foretold, of black wings in the cold, that when brothers wage war come unfurled!
Alduin, Bane of Kings, ancient shadow unbound, with a hunger to swallow the world!
But a day, shall arise, when the dark dragon's lies, will be silenced forever and then!
Fair Skyrim will be free from foul Alduin's maw, Dragonborn be the savior of men!

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Tale of the tongues is a newer song. One that has come in to favor since the Dragonborn put down Alduin. It actually describes the events of the first battle against the dragons.

Tale of the Tongues
Alduin's wings, they did darken the sky. His roar fury's fire, and his scales sharpened scythes.
Men ran and they cowered, and they fought and they died. They burned and they bled as they issued their cries.
We need saviors to free us from Alduin's rage. Heroes on the field of this new war to wage.
And if Alduin wins, man is gone from this world. Lost in the shadow of the black wings unfurled.
But then came the Tongues on that terrible day. Steadfast as winter, they entered the fray.
And all heard the music of Alduin's doom. The sweet song of Skyrim, sky-shattering Thu'um.
And so the Tongues freed us from Alduin's rage. Gave the gift of the Voice, ushered in a new Age.
If Alduin is eternal, then eternity's done. For his story is over and the dragons are... gone.

Songs of the Return

Volume 2: The First Tale of the Darumzu

Our great lord Ysgramor, the harbinger of us all, did then send forth his two beloved sons (with him the only other survivors of the brutalities of Saarthal) to seek out the bravest warriors of the land and mount the great return.

Yngol and Ylgar, they were called, and they were known among Atmora as fine warriors with bright eyes and dawning futures. Yngol, the elder, was the brave strategist, bringing his learnings to bear on the battlefield that his enemies would be defeated before they even know the battle had begun. Ylgar, the younger, was possessed of an unwavering spirit that drove his singular prowess to overwhelming feats in war. Together, the mind and the arm, they were capable of sowing a destruction most thorough and glorious to any foe who stood before them.

Before they parted ways to gather their crews, the two clasped arms and necks in the old fashion and laughed at the heavens for their stories to come.

Young Ylgar then took to the massive shipyards of Jylkurfyk at the southern point and commissioned two ships for himself and his brother. He would command the Darumzu, and his brother the Harakk, thus carrying the names of the two favored stars of their heavens. The shipmakers spirits had been suitably filled by Ysgramor's tales of the savage elves, and they set about to birth ships that befit their noble homeland.

Arrangements having been made, Ylgar set forth to the academies of honored soldiers, seeking out his most trusted friends and advisors to join him on the venture of the Return. By now the stories of the new land to the south were spreading before him, and the mere emergence of his presence was enough to cause the finest warriors to lay down their present undertakings and follow him.

So was he able to call to his side the great Shield-Sisters, Froa and Grosta (who thought and spoke as one), and they brought with them the wise war-teacher Adrimk, who first taught them to dance among the blades. She, in turn, mustered all the students at her command, whose names were not yet made, but some of whom would one day be known: Hermeskr (Who Threw His Shield), Urlach (Who Breathed Fire), Ramth the Greater, Merkyllian Ramth, and the Far-Sighted Uche, who would see the first of many dawns.

On the Day of Final Passage, when the many-oared fleet would last see the distant green summers of Atmora, the brothers were near in their father's wake as the freshly joined Five Hundred would eagerly press onwards towards Tamriel. Ylgar could see his well-minded brother smiling from afar across the waves, and they shouted war-cries to each other, longing for the soon-day when their assembled crews would draw the treacherous elf blood into the ground which they would now claim for their own rights.

But Kyne's ministrations are not to be taken lightly, and though her blessings gave wind to drive those brave sailors to their destiny, so too did her mighty tears fall, to drive them apart. When the Storm of Separation first arose, young Ylgar had no fear, for his crew was strong and able, and their ship drove true through the forest of swells as though pulled by the rope of fate.

When the skies cleared, and Ylgar glimpsed again, with new eyes, the land of his past and future home, he knew his brother's vessel was not within his horizon. The Darumzu, arriving late, drew forth onto the sands and Ylgar rushed to his father to seek word of his brother. The great Ysgramor, harbinger of us all, wept for his lost son, and sought comfort in the arms of his only remaining joy. The crew of the Harakk became the first deaths among the Five Hundred, and Ylgar so enraged with love for his brother that his crew would soon be counted as first among the many noble and honored names in the Companions.

Volume 7: The Tale of the Jorrvaskr

When at last the rightful claim of Saarthal had been retaken, driving the murderous elves back to their lofty cities, did great Ysgramor turn and let loose the fearsome war cry that echoed across all the oceans. The Five Hundred who yet stood joined in the ovation for the victory and the lament for their fallen peers. It was said to be heard on the distant and chilling green shores of Atmora, and the ancestors knew their time had come to cross the seas.

As the reverberations echoed out and drowned to silence, all looked to Ysgramor, who bore the blessed Wuuthrad, for his next commandment. With his lungs that bellowed forth the fury of humanity, he bade them to continue their march, that the devious Mer might know the terror they had brought on themselves with their trickery.

"Go forth," he roared. "Into the belly of this new land. Drive the wretched from their palaces of idleness. Oblige them to squalor and toil, that they would see their betrayals as the all-sin against our kind. Give no quarter. Show no kindness. For they would not give nor show you the same." (Our great forebear gave this order as he did not yet understand the prophecy of the Twin Snakes, that he would be fated to die before seeing the true destiny of his line.)

Hearing this, the Circle of Captains gathered each their crews unto themselves. From here, they decreed, we will go forth. Let each ship's band make its own way, seeking their fates to the open sun. A night spent in feasting, the Oath of the Companions was sworn anew, with each of the Five Hundred (so they still named their count, in honor of the shields that were broken at Saarthal) swearing to act as Shield-Brother and Shield-Sister to any of the Atmoran line were their fates to ever again entwine.

As the red hands of dawn stretched from the east, so broke the Five Hundred Companions of Ysgramor, setting about their journeys, sailing now across the land with waves of stone and crests of trees flowing under

their footed hulls.

The first to break from the grounded fleet was the crew of the Jorrvaskr, who had been formed of Ysgramor's closest friends. Their captain was known as Jeek of the River, so called by the Harbinger himself from their youths passed in glory. When assembling their glistening hull, he sought out the labors of Menro and Manwe, who now bore the native timbers across this new land of Tamriel. Among their fiercest were Tysnal (Who Was Twice-Named), and Terr, his twin and Shield-Brother whose girth was never spoken of to his face. There were others, too, in their band -- Meksim the Walker, Brunl (Who Fought with his Off-Hand), and Yust the Smiler. These and others were sworn to Jeek, and they pushed forth into the shadows where yet the sun had not reached.

Southwards they went, by beast and by foot. Elves they found, though none remain to tell what those battles entailed. The numbers of the Jorrvaskr never faltered, so shrewd were they in battle, with minds as sharp as their blades.

Once, as the sun beat from its high-home, Jonder the Tiny, the one who ran ahead, came over the hill to tell what was seen. Amidst a vast plain his eyes had met a monument of a bird, whose eyes and beak were opened in flame. When his brothers and sisters crested the hill, they too saw its glory, but they were afraid for no elven settlement could be seen to the horizon.

"But this is not seemly," said Kluwe, who went by Loate when hiding his face. "Is not this wide land fit for harvest? Why have not the elves, vile to their core, seen to exploit and tame it?" They asked of their elven captives (for they had many) what they found unfit about these plains. Yet even the captives who still bore their tongues could say nothing of the valley. They looked with fear at the winged colossus, and from their babblings did the warriors of the Jorrvaskr learn that it was older than even the elves themselves. Of those who wrought it solid from its mother-stone, nothing could be said, but it was known to drive a magic almost as old as Nirn itself, some remnant of the gods' efforts to render a paradise in Mundus before the shattering of Lorkhan.

This first of many, this crew of the Jorrvaskr, heathens and ancestors to us all, feared no stories or gods. Indeed, if there was something the elves feared, they would have it for their own. Thus began the labors, once more, of Menro and Manwe, whose eager hands again laid to the Atmoran wood which had born them all across the sea, and what was their ship became their shelter as this valley became their purview until the end of all their days.

Thus began the building of the Great City, circled by the running of the White River, as brought forth by these beloved of Ysgramor, yet but twenty-two of the glorious Five Hundred Companions.

Volume 19: The Second Tale of the Ylgermet

When that final battle at the barren pass was completed, and the melting snow carried elf-blood back to the sea, the crew of the Kaal Kaaz, the Sadon Reyth, and the most exalted crew of our lord's ship, the Ylgermet, at last parted ways, never to join shields again. They drew apart in that form which is not a loss, but a gain in knowing one's heart can be carried in the chests of others. So great was the love that those first of the Five Hundred had for each other, and most especially for the great Ysgramor, harbinger of us all.

They pressed eastwards, seeking the sea, when they came upon the barrow of Yngol, the mighty Ysgramor's son who had fallen to the whims of Kyne rather than the treachery of the elves. Our lord had not expected to lay eyes upon it again so soon, and his grief flowed anew at the sight of it, as a reopened wound will bleed as it did when first received.

His eyes turned to the south, where a river met the sea, and decreed that there would he and the crew of the Ylgermet create a great city, in monument to the glories of mankind, that from his palace he might always look upon the hill of his dear son's resting place, and feel that his line would know peace in this new home that was never known in Atmora.

The elven captives were set to work, bringing forth stone to build in their conqueror's fashion. As many elves died in the building of the city as had the crew of the Ylgermet slain while on way to its site, and Ysgramor drove the wretches ever more, to build higher, to lay a claim to the river so that none might pass into the interior of this land without first showing due respect to its rightful claimant.

Thus was the great bridge constructed, forever striding the river that no elf might sneak through to avenge his devious cousins. As the bridge was built long, so too was the palace built high, spires reaching the sky to show dominion even over the very winds that had brought forth such a grief.

In the deep hollows beneath the city, a great tomb was prepared for the day when lord Ysgramor, harbinger to us all, would be called home to glory in Sovngarde. But as we know, he chose instead to be buried on the shore, facing towards Atmora, that though his heart lived and died in this new land, it would forever yearn for the beauties of still-green Atmora, before the freezing took it.

Thus was founding of Windhelm, the city of Kings, though her history is long and her glories did not end with her founder.

Volume 24: The First Tale of the Krilot Lok

[When the time came for] breaking of camp, not all crews took southwards across the rolling lands. Some turned with quick eyes back to their ships, for their hearts were bounded to the waves as sure as they were bounded to each other [as allied Companions].

One such crew was that of the Krilot Lok, sinewy long folk from the [eastern] edge of Atmora. Their ruddy skin matched the dawn and it was often said that morning herself learned [her glorious colors from] the first faces to meet her at the break of day. The great Kyne lifted their souls and their winds, propelling them westwards with the new lands of Tamriel ever beckoning to the south.

In time, these perpetual wanderers came upon sights fearsome and terrible. Entire kingdoms of men beyond their recognition, skin charred like overcooked meat. Elves [even more devious than the northern betrayers] disgraced their horizons, until they learned the sheltered ways between. Great deserts the likes of which were never known in the homeland, peopled by beasts that spoke like men, with the [savagery?] of elves. Many a notable and well-sung Companion met his end at the spears of the legged snakes of the southern marsh.

Among the brave crew of the Krilot Lok were of Roeth and Breff the Elder, the great Shield-Brothers (who often swapped spears), and [their] war-wives, Britte and Greyf (the fair child), Shield-Sisters in their own right who could bring [the face of terror?] across the ice-chilled seas. Together these four stared into the abyss of trees that formed the foul-smelling homeland of the snake-men. And as they were blessed Atmorans who feared no shore of Tamriel, they ventured forth to seek out their glories in the most dangerous of these new lands.

Onward they flew, ravaging the swamplands, beating a trail between themselves and their ship such that they would never lose sight of the shore. In the far-off day when at last Roeth would fall, when Britte screamed her

famed war-cry so that all the marshes were emptied, this trail would fill once more with the treacherous snake men. So began the [burning?] march of these great captains of us all.

Volume 56: The Final Tale of the Chrion

The Songs of the Return are eternal and numerous, for those first Five Hundred, those Companions of Ysgramor who cleared the way for mankind's rightful habitation, burned with a fire not seen since those days long passed. Each ship carried a crew that performed legendary feats that could feed the pride of any nation for a thousand years. And during this time of the broadening, scores of Companions wandered the land, bringing the light of the proper gods to the heathen land of elves and beasts.

They were but mortal, though, and in time, all would taste the glories of Sovngarde.

It was in one of the uncounted years after the retaking of Saarthal that the crew of the Chrion was declaring their fortunes in the eastern lands near the Red Mountain. They were encamped, surrounded by bodies of murderous elves who had attempted to make them believe they held peace in their hearts. The shrewd Rhorlak was the Chrion's captain, though, and would show no quarter to the liars of the southlands, as had been commanded by his lord Ysgramor, harbinger of us all.

It was in this state of carousing that they were approached by a young and breathless messenger of their sister crew from the Kaal Kaaz. The boy (Asgeir, as his name is now sung) had ran unimaginable distance at breakneck speed from the blood-stained fields of the Clouded Sun, to deliver the news to all who would hear. When he reached their camp, he bellowed a great sob before relieving his heart with the news that the mighty Ysgramor had breathed his last.

Asgeir continued his swift run, to inform the other crews as quickly as they could be found (for there were many now crawling the land, rendering our legacy from their deeds), and the camp of the Chrion descended into a mourning of the most forlorn sort. Among these fires sat the bravest men and fiercest women who have ever graced the dirt of this land, and they were brought low by such a notion. While we in the day-shine know only

Ysgramor's glory as it gleams through history, these Companions knew his might with their own eyes, and such a loss hangs so heavily on the heart that mere words cannot express the altering of their world.

For indeed the stories tell that Rhorlak, the most battle-hardened and unflinching of all captains, did collapse with grief, and never lifted again his mighty axe. And all around Tamriel, as the news spread as a dark cloud washes from horizon to horizon, did brilliant lights go out in silent honor of their fallen general and war-leader.

So ended the period of the Return, and the original glories of the Five Hundred Companions of Ysgramor, harbinger of us all.

Souls, Black and White

The nature of the soul is not knowable. Every wizard that has attempted it vanishes without a trace. What can be known is that souls are a source of mystic energy that can be harvested.

Every creature, living or dead, is powered by a soul. Without it, they are just lumps of flesh or piles of bones. This animating force can be contained within a soul gem, if the soul gem has the capacity. From the gem, the power can be used to power magical items.

Centuries of experimentation has demonstrated that there are black souls and white souls. Only the rare black soul gem can hold the soul of a higher creature, such as a man or an elf. While the souls of lesser creatures can be captured by gems of many colors, they are all categorized as white soul gems. Hence the division of souls into black and white.

White souls are far safer than black souls, although not as powerful. Beginning students of Mysticism should not dabble in black souls or black soul gems. Even if one were to ignore the guild strictures against the necromatic arts used to power black soul gems, it is dangerous to the caster to handle them for long. If the gem is not precisely the size of the encased soul, small bits of the caster's soul may leak into the gem when it is touched.

Sovngarde: A Reexamination

by Bereditte Jastal

Speculation regarding Sovngarde, the Nordic Hall of Valor

Death. It is something we all face. Or do we?

Just ask the nearest Nord what he thinks of the end of life, and you'll likely be treated to a horrific story of blood, bone and viscera, of courageous deeds and heartbreaking sorrow. Carnage notwithstanding, there may be even more to death than the average Nord warrior realizes. New evidence suggests a life beyond the battlefield, where a valiant Nord may live forever, downing mead and engaging in contests of strength and skill. But in order to fully understand the possibility of a Nord's eternal life after death, one must first reexamine the legends surrounding that most wondrous of warrior's retreats - Sovngarde.

According to the ancient writings and oral traditions of the Nords, going back as far as the Late Merethic Era, there exists a place so magnificent, so honored, that the entrance lies hidden from view. Sovngarde, it is called, built by the god Shor to honor those Nords who have proven their mettle in war. Within this "Hall of Valor" time as we know it has no meaning. The concepts of life and death are left on the doorstep, and those within exist in a sort of self-contained euphoria, free of pain, suffering and the worst malady a Nord could suffer - boredom.

But just how well hidden the entrance to Sovngarde is has been a matter of much scholarly debate, and there are those who believe Shor's great hall is just a myth, for there are no actual accounts from Nords who have experienced the wonders of Sovngarde then returned to tell the tale. Not that this has stopped anyone from looking. Some Nords spend a lifetime searching for the mysterious hidden entrance to Sovngarde. Most return home sad and broken, their hearts heavy with failure. They'll never know the pleasure of a mead flagon that never empties, or a wrestling tournament

without end.

What, some may ask, does the entrance to Sovngarde have to do with death? Everything, according to a series of ancient parchments recently discovered in the attic of a deceased Nord's home in Cyrodiil. What at first seemed to be a series of love letters was later found to be a correspondence between one Felga Four-Fingers, a medium of some note, and the ghost of a Nord warrior named Rolf the Large.

According to the parchments, Rolf had spent his entire life searching for the entrance to Sovngarde, without success. He was returning home to his village of Skyrim when he was waylaid by a band of giants. Rolf fought bravely, but was quickly killed, and the giants proceeded to play catch with his head. Amazingly, all of this was seen by Rolf in ghostly form as he drifted away from the scene, soaring upwards into the heavens, where he finally arrived... in the magnificent hall of Sovngarde!

Rolf could not believe his good fortune, and his foolishness for not having realized the truth so many years before. For death was the entrance to Sovngarde. So he was told by Shor himself, who greeted Rolf the Large as a brother, and personally handed him a leg of roast mutton and the hand of a comely wench. Sovngarde, Shor told him, can be entered by any Nord who dies valiantly in honorable combat.

It is time for Nords to learn the truth. Eternal life can be theirs, without the need to spend an entire mortal life in vain pursuit of something completely unattainable. In the end, all valiant Nords can enter Sovngarde. Dismemberment, decapitation or evisceration seems a small price to pay for the chance to spend an eternity in Shor's wondrous hall.

Spirit of Nirn

Lorkhan is the Spirit of Nirn, the god of all mortals. This does not mean all mortals necessarily like him or even know him. Most elves hate him, thinking creation as that act which sundered them from the spirit realm. Most Humans revere him, or aspects of him, as the herald of existence. The creation of the Mortal Plane, the Mundus, Nirn, is a source of mental anguish to all living things; all souls know deep down they came originally from somewhere else, and that Nirn is a cruel and crucial step to what comes next. What is this next? Some wish to return to the original state, the spirit realm, and that Lorkhan is the Demon that hinders their way; to them Nirn is a prison, an illusion to escape. Others think that Lorkhan created the world as the testing ground for transcendence; to them the spirit realm was already a prison, that true escape is now finally possible.

Spirit of the Daedra

HOW YOU SHOULD KNOW US

DEATH, DEFEAT, AND FEAR

We do not die. We do not fear death.

Destroy the Body, and the Animus is cast into The Darkness. But the Animus returns.

But we are not all brave.

We feel pain, and fear it. We feel shame, and fear it. We feel loss, and fear it. We hate the Darkness, and fear it.

The Scamps have small thoughts, and cannot fear greatly.

The Vermai have no thoughts, and cannot fear.

The Dremora have deep thoughts, and must master fear to overcome it.

THE CLAN BOND

We are not born; we have not fathers nor mothers, yet we have kin and clans.

The clan-form is strong. It shapes body and thought.

In the clan-form is strength and purpose.

THE OATH BOND

We serve by choice. We serve the strong, so that their strength might shield us.

Clans serve by long-practice, but practice may change.

Dremora have long served Dagon but not always so.

Practice is secure when oath-bonds are secure, and trust is shared.

When oath-bonds are weak, there is pain, and shame, and loss, and Darkness, and great fear.

HOW WE THINK ABOUT MAN

Perhaps you find Scamps comic, and Vermai brutish.

How then do you imagine we view you humans?

You are the Prey, and we are the Huntsmen.

The Scamps are the Hounds, and the Vermai the Beaters.

Your flesh is sweet, and the chase is diverting.

As you may sometimes praise the fox or hare, admiring its cunning and speed, and lamenting as the hounds tear its flesh, so do we sometimes admire our prey, and secretly applaud when it cheats our snares or eludes pursuit.

But, like all worldly things, you will in time wear, and be used up. You age, grow ugly, weak, and foolish. You are always lost, late or soon.

Sometimes the prey turns upon us and bites. It is a small thing. When wounded or weary, we fly away to restore. Sometimes a precious thing is lost, but that risk makes the chase all the sweeter.

MAN'S MYSTERY

Man is mortal, and doomed to death and failure and loss.

This lies beyond our comprehension - why do you not despair?

Surfeit of Thieves

by Aniis Noru

"This looks interesting," said Indyk, his eyes narrowing to observe the black caravan making its way to the spires of the secluded castle. A gaudy, alien coat of arms marked each carriage, the lacquer glistening in the light of the moons. "Who do you suppose they are?"

"They're obviously well-off," smiled his partner, Heriah. "Perhaps some new Imperial Cult dedicated to the acquisition of wealth?"

"Go into town and find out what you can about the castle," said Indyk. "I'll see if I can learn anything about who these strangers are. We meet on this hill tomorrow night."

Heriah had two great skills: picking locks and picking information. By dusk of the following day, she had returned to the hill. Indyk joined her an hour later.

"The place is called Ald Olyra," she explained. "It dates back to the second era when a collection of nobles built it to protect themselves during one of the epidemics. They didn't want any of the diseased masses to get into their midst and spread the plague, so they built up quite a sophisticated security system for the time. Of course, it's mostly fallen into ruin, but I have a good idea about what kind of locks and traps might still be operational. What did you find out?"

"I wasn't nearly so successful," frowned Indyk. "No one seemed to have any idea about the group, even that that there were here. I was about to give up, but at the charterhouse, I met a monk who said that his masters were a hermetic group called the Order of St. Eadnua. I talked to him for some time, this fellow name of Parathion, and it seems they're having some sort of ritual feast tonight."

"Are they wealthy?" asked Heriah impatiently.

"Embarrassingly so according to the fellow. But they're only at the castle for tonight."

"I have my picks on me," winked Heriah. "Opportunity has smiled on us."

She drew a diagram of the castle in the dirt: the main hall and kitchen were near the front gate, and the stables and secured armory were in the back. The thieves had a system that never failed. Heriah would find a way into the castle and collect as much loot as possible, while Indyk provided the distraction. He waited until his partner had scaled the wall before rapping on the gate. Perhaps this time he would be a bard, or a lost adventurer. The details were most fun to improvise.

Heriah heard Indyk talking to the woman who came to the gate, but she was too far away to hear the words exchanged. He was evidently successful: a moment later, she heard the door shut. The man had charm, she would give him that.

Only a few of the traps and locks to the armory had been set. Undoubtedly, many of the keys had been lost in time. Whatever servants had been in charge of securing the Order's treasures had brought a few new locks to affix. It took extra time to maneuver the intricate hasps and bolts of the new traps before proceeding to the old but still working systems, but Heriah found her heart beating with anticipation. Whatever lay beyond the door, she thought, must be of sufficient value to merit such protection.

When at last the door swung quietly open, the thief found her avaricious dreams paled to reality. A mountain of golden treasure, ancient relics glimmering with untapped magicka, weaponry of matchless quality, gemstones the size of her fist, row after row of strange potions, and stacks of valuable documents and scrolls. She was so enthralled by the sight, she did not hear the man behind her approach.

"You must be Lady Tressed," said the voice and she jumped.

It was a monk in a black, hooded robe, intricately woven with silver and gold threads. For a moment, she could not speak. This was the sort of encounter that Indyk loved, but she could think to do nothing but nod her head with what she hoped looked like certainty.

"I'm afraid I'm a little lost," she stammered.

"I can see that," the man laughed. "That's the armory. I'll show you the way to the dining hall. We were afraid you weren't going to arrive. The feast is nearly over."

Heriah followed the monk across the courtyard, to the double doors leading to the dining hall. A robe identical to the one he was wearing hung on a hook outside, and he handed it to her with a knowing smile. She slipped it on. She mimicked him as she lowered the hood over her head and entered the hall.

Torches illuminated the figures within around the large table. Each wore the uniform black robe that covered all features, and from the look of things, the feast was over. Empty plates, platters, and glasses filled every inch of the wood with only the faintest spots and dribbles of the food remaining. It was a breaking of a fast it seemed. For a moment, Heriah stopped to think about poor, lost Lady Tressed who had missed her opportunity for gluttony.

The only unusual item on the table was its centerpiece: a huge golden hourglass which was on its last minute's worth of sand.

Though each person looked alike, some were sleeping, some were chatting merrily to one another, and one was playing a lute. Indyk's lute, she noticed, and then noticed Indyk's ring on the man's finger. Heriah was suddenly grateful for the anonymity of the hood. Perhaps Indyk would not realize that it was she, and that she had blundered.

"Tressed," said the young man to the assembled, who turned as one to her and burst into applause.

The conscious members of the Order arose to kiss her hand, and introduce

themselves.

"Nirdla."

"Suelec."

"Kyler."

The names got stranger.

"Toniop."

"Htillyts."

"Noihtarap."

She could not help laughing: "I understand. It's all backwards. Your real names are Aldrin, Celeus, Relyk, Poinot, Styllith, Parathion."

"Of course," said the young man. "Won't you have a seat?"

"Sey," giggled Heriah, getting into the spirit of the masque and taking an empty chair. "I suppose that when the hourglass runs out, the backwards names go back to normal?"

"That's correct, Tressed," said the woman next to her. "It's just one of our Order's little amusements. This castle seemed like the appropriately ironic venue for our feast, devised as it was to shun the plague victims who were, in their way, a walking dead."

Heriah felt herself light-headed from the odor of the torches, and bumped into the sleeping man next to her. He fell face forward onto the table.

"Poor Esruoc Tsrif," said a neighboring man, helping to prop the body up. "He's given us so much."

Heriah stumbled to her feet and began walking uncertainly for the front

gate.

"Where are you going, Tressed?" asked one of the figures, his voice taking on an unpleasant mocking quality.

"My name isn't Tressed," she mumbled, gripping Indyk's arm. "I'm sorry, partner. We need to go."

The last crumb of sand fell in the hour glass as the man pulled back his hood. It was not Indyk. It was not even human, but a stretched grotesquerie of a man with hungry eyes and a wide mouth filled with tusk-like fangs.

Heriah fell back into the chair of the figure they called Esruoc Tsrif. His hood fell open, revealing the pallid, bloodless face of Indyk. As she began to scream, they fell on her.

In her last living moment, Heriah finally spelled "Tressed" backwards.

Surviving A Horker Attack

by Heidmir Starkad

On my travels through Skyrim I have run into many northern fisherman and hunters with intriguing tales of their encounters with horkers. The stories are varied, ranging from deadly attacks to a girl who claims she was saved from drowning.

I have taken it upon myself to compile some of these for those who journey along the frozen coast.

Our first tale is of a hunter named Gromm. He claims that one night while turning in after a long day of trapping, he saw a great shadow cast on the wall of his tent. Did he get the horker or did the horker get him?

Gromm was a great trapper working in the frozen tundra collecting fox pelts but as he was about to fall asleep one night, he heard some noises coming from outside of his tent.

His first instinct was to remain calm and see if the beast would pass, but after some threatening roars, Gromm slowly made for his axe. The creature detected his movement and began to thrash around using its great tusks to shred the hunter's tent and knocking the hunter off balance.

As he stumbled Gromm was able to use a frost spell scroll but the ice magic seemed to have diminished effect on the horker. That tidbit may be of use to someone out there.

After recovering from the stagger, Gromm was able to steady himself and with a few great cleaves killed the horker. Though his camp was in ruins, Gromm was lucky to walk away with only a slight goring to his left thigh.

Gromm's parting comment was that if you do encounter a horker, remain calm and remember that if you survive, the meat and tusks will fetch a nice bit of gold at market.

The Tale of Dro'Zira

Transcription and Commentary

by Sonia Vette

The following is a tale overheard, as told by a Khajiit father to his cub, while making camp with one of their caravans. I have attempted to transcribe it as he told it, for the Khajiit do not often speak of their history to outsiders. In truth I do not believe he would have spoken at all, but for the vast helping of Moonsugar he had consumed that night.

C ome and warm your fur by the fire, Ma'rashirr, and I will tell you of how our Dro'Zira came to be the greatest of all Kahjiit! *(ed: Dro'Zira I took in this case to be an honored ancestor)*

The ancient Khajiit heard the great roar of Alkosh the Great Cat King of Time *(ed: known as Akatosh in the empire, and Alduin in Skyrim)* and raced to his Voice. In three days' time they crossed the whole of Tamriel, resting not even for the moonsugar, for such was the speed of Khajiiti then.

They joined with the pride of Alkosh and were his strongest warriors. Lorkhaj, *(ed: Shor in the Nordic)* however, chose to give his roar to the Ra'Wulfharth to spite the Khajiiti warriors, for he was jealous of their devotion to Alkosh.

Seeing the ferocity of the Khajiiti warriors, Ra'Wulfharth could not bring himself to put them to death. Using the roar that Lorkhaj had given him, he spoke to Masser and Secunda, to move to their fullness in the sky. The Khajiiti warriors became Senche, but Lorkhaj stripped from them all reason.

When Ra'Wulfharth returned to sink his fangs into the Red Mountain, he called upon his people to aid him. Dro'Zira was the only among the "Rhojiit" who still remembered, and so was the only one who answered the

summons.

But these Nord bards are *(expletive removed)* and do not sing of how the great Ash King rode Dro'Zira up the Red Mountain itself to strike at the heart of the Dunmer. Never is it mentioned how Dro'Zira pounced atop Dumalacath, the Dwarf-Orc, when he had his blade to the throat of the Ash King so that he could not speak.

Nor do they sing of how Lorkhaj returned Dro'Zira from the lands of Sheggorath for his bravery and for saving the Ash King! So when you find a bard who speaks ill of the Khajiit, you be sure to leave him an iron claw in the back to remind him who saved Skyrim.

As for the rest of the "Rhojiit" They grew small and lost their cunning altogether, which is why you should not hesitate to strike them down when they approach the wagons. So it was told by my father, and so I tell it now to you.

Now, be a good cub and go fetch me some more moonsugar for these sweet cakes.

Much of the tale seemed to me, little more than a boast, but certain facts do seem to line up with what we believe is the truth behind the legends. It does raise questions as to why we do not know more about history of the Khajiit and what parts they have played that might not have been recorded by our written histories.

Ancient Tales of the Dwemer

Part I: The Ransom of Zarek

by Marobar Sul

Jalemmil stood in her garden and read the letter her servant had brought to her. The bouquet of joss roses in her hand fell to the ground. For a moment it was as if all birds had ceased to sing and a cloud had passed over the sky. Her carefully cultivated and structured haven seemed to flood over with darkness.

"We have thy son," it read. "We will be in touch with thee shortly with our ransom demands."

Zarek had never made it as far as Akgun after all. One of the brigands on the road, Orcs probably, or accursed Dunmer, must have seen his well-appointed carriage, and taken him hostage. Jalemmil clutched at a post for support, wondering if her boy had been hurt. He was but a student, not the sort to fight against well-armed men, but had they beaten him? It was more than a mother's heart could bear to imagine.

"Don't tell me they sent the ransom note so quickly," called a family voice, and a familiar face appeared through the hedge. It was Zarek. Jalemmil hurried to embrace her boy, tears running down her face.

"What happened?" she cried. "I thought thou had been kidnapped."

"I was," said Zarek. "Three huge soaring Nords attacked by carriage on the Frimvorn Pass. Brothers, as I learned, named Mathais, Ulin, and Koorg. Thou should have seen these men, mother. Each one of them would have had trouble fitting through the front door, I can tell thee."

"What happened?" Jalemmil repeated. "Were thou rescued?"

"I thought about waiting for that, but I knew they'd send off a ransom note

and I know how thou does worry. So I remembered what my mentor at Akgun always said about remaining calm, observing thy surroundings, and looking for thy opponent's weakness," Zarek grinned. "It took a while, though, because these fellows were truly monsters. And then, when I listened to them, bragging to one another, I realized that vanity was their weakness."

"What did thou do?"

"They had me chained at their camp in the woods not far from Cael, on a high knoll over-looking a wide river. I heard one of them, Koorg, telling the others that it would take the better part of an hour to swim across the river and back. They were nodding in agreement, when I spoke up.

"'I could swim that river and back in thirty minutes,' I said.

"'Impossible,' said Koorg. 'I can swim faster than a little whelp like thee.'

"So it was agreed that we would dive off the cliff, swim to the center island, and return. As we went to our respective rocks, Koorg took it upon himself to lecture me about all the fine points of swimming. The importance of synchronized movements of the arms and legs for maximum speed. How essential it was to breathe after only third or fourth stroke, not too often to slow thyself down, but not too often to lose one's air. I nodded and agreed to all his fine points. Then we dove off the cliffs. I made it to the island and back in a little over an hour, but Koorg never returned. He had dashed his brains at the rocks at the base of the cliff. I had noticed the telltale undulations of underwater rocks, and had taken the diving rock on the right."

"But thou returned?" asked Jalemmil, astounded. "Was that not then when thou escaped?"

"It was too risky to escape then," said Zarek. "They could have easily caught me again, and I wasn't keen to be blamed for Koorg's disappearance. I said I did not know what happened to him, and after some searching, they decided he had forgotten about the race and had swum ashore to hunt for

food. They could not see how I could have had anything to do with his disappearance, as fully visible as I was throughout my swim. The two brothers began making camp along the rocky cliff-edge, picking an ideal location so that I would not be able to escape.

"One of the brothers, Mathais, began commenting on the quality of the soil and the gradual incline of the rock that circled around the bay below. Ideal, he said, for a foot race. I expressed my ignorance of the sport, and he was keen to give me details of the proper technique for running a race. He made absurd faces, showing how one must breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth; how to bend one's knees to the proper angle on the rise; the importance of sure foot placement. Most important, he explained, was that the runner keep an aggressive but not too strenuous pace if one intends to win. It is fine to run in second place through the race, he said, provided one has the willpower and strength to pull out in the end.

"I was an enthusiastic student, and Mathais decided that we ought to run a quick race around the edge of the bay before night fell. Ulin told us to bring back some firewood when we came back. We began at once down the path, skirting the cliff below. I followed his advice about breath, gait, and foot placement, but I ran with all my power right from the start. Despite his much longer legs, I was a few paces ahead as we wound the first corner.

"With his eyes on my back, Mathais did not see the gape in the rock that I jumped over. He plummeted over the cliff before he had a chance to cry out. I spent a few minutes gathering some twigs before I returned to Ulin at camp."

"Now thou were just showing off," frowned Jalemmil. "Surely that would have been a good time to escape."

"Thou might think so," agreed Zarek. "But thou had to see the topography -- a few large trees, and then nothing but shrubs. Ulin would have noticed my absence and caught up with me in no time, and I would have had a hard time explaining Mathais's absence. However, the brief forage around the area allowed me to observe some of the trees close up, and I could formulate my final plan.

"When I got back to camp with a few twigs, I told Ulin that Mathais was slow coming along, dragging a large dead tree behind him. Ulin scoffed at his brother's strength, saying it would take him time to pull up a live tree by the roots and drop it on the bonfire. I expressed reasonable doubt.

"'I'll show thee,' he said, ripping up a ten foot tall specimen effortlessly.

"'But that's scarcely a sapling,' I objected. 'I thought thou could rip up a tree.' His eyes followed mine to a magnificent, heavy-looking one at the edge of the clearing. Ulin grabbed it and began to shake it with a tremendous force to loosen its roots from the dirt. With that, he loosened the hive from the uppermost branches, dropping it down onto his head.

"That was when I made my escape, mother," said Zarek, in conclusion, showing a little schoolboy pride. "While Mathais and Koorg were at the base of the cliff, and Ulin was flailing about, engulfed by a swarm."

Jalemmil embraced her son once again.

Publisher's Note
I was reluctant to publish the works of Marobar Sul, but when the University of Gwylim Press asked me to edit this edition, I decided to use this as an opportunity to set the record straight once and for all.

Scholars do not agree on the exact date of Marobar Sul's work, but it is generally agreed that they were written by the playwright "Gor Felim," famous for popular comedies and romances during the Interregnum between the fall of the First Cyrodilic Empire and the rise of Tiber Septim. The current theory holds that Felim heard a few genuine Dwemer tales and adapted them to the stage in order to make money, along with rewritten versions of many of his own plays.

Gor Felim created the persona of "Marobar Sul" who could translate the Dwemer language in order to add some sort of validity to the work and make it even more valuable to the gullible. Note that while "Marobar Sul" and his works became the subject of heated controversy, there are no

reliable records of anyone actually meeting "Marobar Sul," nor was there anyone of that name employed by the Mages Guild, the School of Julianos, or any other intellectual institution.

In any case, the Dwemer in most of the tales of "Marobar Sul" bear little resemblance to the fearsome, unfathomable race that frightened even the Dunmer, Nords, and Redguards into submission and built ruins that even now have yet to be understood.

Part II

by Marobar Sul

The hamlet village of Lorikh was a quiet, peaceful Dwemer community nestled in the monochrome grey and tan dunes and boulders of the Dejasyte. No vegetation of any kind grew in Lorikh, though there were blackened vestiges of long dead trees scattered throughout the town. Kamdida arriving by caravan looked at her new home with despair. She was used to the forestland of the north where her father's family had haled. Here there was no shade, little water, and a great open sky. It looked like a dead land.

Her mother's family took Kamdida and her younger brother Nevith in, and was very kind to the orphans, but she felt lonely in the alien village. It was not until she met an old Argonian woman who worked at the water factory that Kamdida found a friend. Her name was Sigerthe, and she said that her family had lived in Lorikh centuries before the Dwemer arrived, when it was a great and beauteous forest.

"Why did the trees die?" asked Kamdida.

"When there were Argonians only in this land, we never cut trees for we had no need for fuel or wooden structures such as you use. When the Dwemer came, we allowed them to use the plants as they needed them, provided they never touched the Hist, which are sacred to us and to the land. For many years, we lived peaceably. No one wanted for anything."

"What happened?"

"Some of your scientists discovered that distilling a certain tree sap, molding it and drying it, they could create a resilient kind of armor called resin," said Sigerthe. "Most of the trees that grew here had very thin ichor in their branches, but not the Hist. Many of them fairly glistened with sap, which made the Dwemer merchants greedy. They hired a woodsman named

Juhnin to start clearing the sacred arbors for profit."

The old Argonian woman looked to the dusty ground and sighed, "Of course, we Argonians cried out against it. It was our home, and the Hist, once gone, would never return. The merchants reconsidered, but Juhnin took it on his own to break our spirit. He proved one terrible, bloody day that his prodigious skill with the axe could be used against people as well as trees. Any Argonian who stood in his way was hewn asunder, children as well. The Dwemer people of Lorikh closed their doors and their ears to the cries of murder."

"Horrible," gasped Kamdida.

"It is difficult to explain," said Sigerthe. "But the deaths of our living ones was not nearly as horrible to us as the death of our trees. You must understand that to my people, the Hist are where we come from and where we are going. To destroy our bodies is nothing; to destroy our trees is to annihilate us utterly. When Juhnin then turned his axe on the Hist, he killed the land. The water disappeared, the animals died, and all the other life that the trees nourished crumbled and dried to dust."

"But you are still here?" asked Kamdida. "Why didn't you leave?"

"For us, we are trapped. I am one of the last of a dying people. Few of us are strong enough to live away from our ancestral groves, and sometimes, even now, there is a perfume in the air of Lorikh that gives us life. It will not be long until we are all gone."

Kamdida felt tears welling up in her eyes. "Then I will be alone in this horrible place with no trees and no friends."

'We Argonians have an expression," said Sigerthe with a sad smile, taking Kamdida's hand. "That the best soil for a seed is found in your heart."

Kamdida looked into the palm of her hand and saw that Sigerthe had given her a small black pellet. It was a seed. "It looks dead."

"It can only grow in one place in all Lorikh," said the old Argonian. "Outside an old cottage in the hills outside town. I cannot go there, for the owner would kill me on sight and like all my people, I am too frail to defend myself now. But you can go there and plant the seed."

"What will happen?" asked Kamdida. "Will the Hist return?"

"No. But some part of their power will."

That night, Kamdida stole from her house and into the hills. She knew the cottage Sigerthe had spoken of. Her aunt and uncle had told her never to go there. As she approached it, the door opened and an old but powerfully built man appeared, a mighty axe slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing here, child?" he demanded. "In the dark, I almost took you to be a lizard man."

"I've lost my way in the dark," she said quickly. "I'm trying to get back to my home in Lorikh."

"Be on your way then."

"Do you have a candle I might have?" she asked piteously. "I've been walking in circles and I'm afraid I'll only return back here without any light."

The old man grumbled and walked into his house. Quickly, Kamdida dug a hole in the dry dirt and buried the seed as deeply as she could. He returned with a lit candle.

"See to it you don't come back here," he growled. "Or I'll chop you in half."

He returned to his house and fire. The next morning when he awoke and opened the door, he found that his cottage was entirely sealed within an enormous tree. He picked up his axe and delivered blow and after blow to the wood, but he could never break through. He tried side chops, but the wood healed itself. He tried an upper chop followed by an under chop to

form a wedge, but the wood sealed.

Much time went by before someone discovered old Juhnin's emaciated body lying in front of his open door, still holding his blunted, broken axe. It was a mystery to all what he had been chopping with it, but the legend began circulating through Lorikh that Hist sap was found on the blade.

Shortly thereafter, small desert flowers began pushing through the dry dirt in the town. Trees and plants newly sown began to live tolerably well, if not luxuriantly. The Hist did not return, but Kamdida and the people of Lorikh noticed that at a certain time around twilight, long, wide shadows of great, bygone trees would fill the streets and hills.

Publisher's Note
"The Seed" is one of Marobar Sul's tales whose origins are well known. This tale originated from the Argonian slaves of southern Morrowind. "Marobar Sul" merely replaced the Dunmer with Dwemer and claimed he found it in a Dwemer ruin. Furthermore, he later claimed that the Argonian version of the tale was merely a retelling of his "original!"

Lorikh, while clearly not a Dwemer name, simply does not exist, and in fact "Lorikh" was a name commonly used, incorrectly, for Dunmer men in Gor Felim's plays. The Argonian versions of the story usually take place on Vvardenfell, usually in the Telvanni city of Sadrith Mora. Of course the so-called "scholars" of Temple Zero will probably claim this story has something to do with "Lorkhan" simply because the town starts with the letter L.

Part III: The Importance of Where

By Marobar Sul

The chieftain of Othrobar gathered his wise men together and said, "Every morning a tenfold of my flock are found butchered. What is the cause?"

Fangbith the Warleader said, "A Monster may be coming down from the Mountain and devouring your flock."

Ghorick the Healer said, "A strange new disease perhaps is to blame."

Beran the Priest said, "We must sacrifice to the Goddess for her to save us."

The wise men made sacrifices, and while they waited for their answers from the Goddess, Fangbith went to Mentor Joltereg and said, "You taught me well how to forge the cudgel of Zolia, and how to wield it in combat, but I must know now when it is wise to use my skill. Do I wait for the Goddess to reply, or the medicine to work, or do I hunt the Monster which I know is in the Mountain?"

"When is not important," said Joltereg. "Where is all that is important."

So Fangbith took his Zolic cudgel in hand and walked far through the dark forest until he came to the base of the Great Mountain. There he met two Monsters. One bloodied with the flesh of the chieftain of Othrobar's flock fought him while its mate fled. Fangbith remembered what his master had taught him, that "where" was all that was important.

He struck the Monster on each of its five vital points: head, groin, throat, back, and chest. Five blows to the five points and the Monster was slain. It was too heavy to carry with him, but still triumphant, Fangbith returned to Othrobar.

"I say I have slain the Monster that ate your flock," he cried.

"What proof have you that you have slain any Monster?" asked the chieftain.

"I say I have saved the flock with my medicine," said Ghorick the Healer.

"I say The Goddess has saved the flock by my sacrifices," said Beran the Priest.

Two mornings went by and the flocks were safe, but on the morning of the third day, another tenfold of the chieftain's flock was found butchered. Ghorick the Healer went to his study to find a new medicine. Beran the Priest prepared more sacrifices. Fangbith took his Zolic cudgel in hand, again, and walked far through the dark forest until he came to the base of the Great Mountain. There he met the other Monster, bloodied with the flesh of the chieftain of Othrobar's flock. They did battle, and again Fangbith remembered what his master had taught him, that "where" was all that was important.

He struck the Monster five times on the head and it fled. Chasing it along the mountain, he struck it five times in the groin and it fled. Running through the forest, Fangbith overtook the Monster and struck it five times in the throat and it fled. Entering into the fields of Othrobar, Fangbith overtook the Monster and struck it five times in the back and it fled. At the foot of the stronghold, the chieftain and his wise men emerged to the sound of the Monster wailing. There they beheld the Monster that had slain the chieftain's flock. Fangbith struck the Monster five times in the chest and it was slain.

A great feast was held in Fangbith's honor, and the flock of Othrobar was never again slain. Joltereg embraced his student and said, "You have at last learned the importance of where you strike your blows."

Publisher's Note
This tale is another, which has an obvious origin among the Ashlander

tribes of Vvardenfell and is one of their oldest tales. "Marobar Sul" merely changed the names of the character to sound more "Dwarven" and resold it as part of his collection. The Great Mountain in the tale is clearly "Red Mountain," despite its description of being forested. The Star-Fall and later eruptions destroyed the vegetation on Red Mountain, giving it the wasted appearance it has today.

This tale does have some scholarly interest, as it suggests a primitive Ashlander culture, but it talks of living in "strongholds" much like the ruined strongholds on Vvardenfell today. There are even references to a stronghold of "Othrobar" somewhere between Vvardenfell and Skyrim, but few strongholds outside of sparsely-settled Vvardenfell have survived to the present. Scholars do not agree on who built these strongholds or when, but I believe it is clear from this story and other evidence that the Ashlander tribes used these strongholds in the ancient past instead of making camps of wickwheat huts as they do today.

The play on words that forms the lesson of the fable -- that it is as important to know where the monster should be slain, at the stronghold, as it is to know where the monster must be struck on its body to be slain -- is typical of many Ashlander tales. Riddles, even ones as simple as this one, are loved by both the Ashlanders and the vanished Dwemer. Although the Dwemer are usually portrayed as presenting the riddles, rather than being the ones who solve it as in Ashlander tales.

Part V: The Song of the Alchemists

By Marobar Sul

When King Maraneon's alchemist had to leave his station
After a laboratory experiment that yielded detonation,
The word went out that the King did want
A new savant
To mix his potions and brews.
But he declared he would only choose
A fellow who knew the tricks and the tools.
The King refused to hire on more fools.

After much deliberation, discussions, and debates,
The King picked two well-learned candidates.
Ianthippus Minthurk and Umphatic Faer,
An ambitious pair,
Vied to prove which one was the best.
Said the King, "There will be a test."
They went to a large chamber with herbs, gems, tomes,
Pots, measuring cups, all under high crystalline domes.

"Make me a tonic that will make me invisible,"
Laughed the King in a tone some would call risible.
So Umphatic Faer and Ianthippus Minthurk
Began to work,
Mincing herbs, mashing metal, refining strange oils,
Cautiously setting their cauldrons to burbling boils,
Each on his own, sending mixing bowls mixing,
Sometimes peeking to see what the other was fixing.

After they had worked for nearly three-quarters an hour,
Both Ianthippus Minthurk and Umphatic Faer
Winked at the other, certain he won.
Said King Maraneon,

"Now you must taste the potions you've wrought,
Take a spoon and sample it right from your pot."
Minthurk vanished as his lips touched his brew,
But Faer tasted his and remained apparent in view.

"You think you mixed silver, blue diamonds, and yellow grass!"
The King laughed, "Look up, Faer, up to the ceiling glass.
The light falling makes the ingredients you choose
Quite different hues."
"What do you get," asked the floating voice, bold,
"Of a potion of red diamonds, blue grass, and gold?"
"By [Dwemer God]," said Faer, his face in a wince,
"I've made a potion to fortify my own intelligence."

Publisher's Note:

This poetry is so clearly in the style of Gor Felim that it really does not need any commentary. Note the simple rhyming scheme of AA/BB/CC, the sing-song but purposefully clumsy meter, and the recurring jokes at the obviously absurd names, Umphatic Faer and Ianthippus Minthurk. The final joke that the stupid alchemist invents a potion to make himself smarter by pure accident would have appealed to the anti-intellectualism of audiences in the Interregnum period, but would certainly be rejected by the Dwemer.

Note that even "Marobar Sul" refuses to name any Dwemer gods. The Dwemer religion, if it can even be called that, is one of the most complex and difficult puzzles of their culture.

Over the millennia, the song became a popular tavern song in High Rock before eventually disappearing from everything but scholarly books. Much like the Dwemer themselves.

Part VI: Chimarvamidium

By Marobar Sul

After many battles, it was clear who would win the War. The Chimer had great skills in magick and bladery, but against the armored battalions of the Dwemer, clad in the finest shielding wrought by Jnaggo, there was little hope of their ever winning. In the interests of keeping some measure of peace in the Land, Sthovin the Warlord agreed to a truce with Karenithil Barif the Beast. In exchange for the Disputed Lands, Sthovin gave Barif a mighty golem, which would protect the Chimer's territory from the excursions of the Northern Barbarians.

Barif was delighted with his gift and brought it back to his camp, where all his warriors gaped in awe at it. Sparkling gold in hue, it resembled a Dwemer cavalier with a proud aspect. To test its strength, they placed the golem in the center of an arena and flung magickal bolts of lightning at it. Its agility was such that few of the bolts struck it. It had the wherewithal to pivot on its hips to avoid the brunt of the attacks without losing its balance, feet firmly planted on the ground. A vault of fireballs followed, which the golem ably dodged, bending its knees and its legs to spin around the blasts. The few times it was struck, it made certain to be hit in the chest and waist, the strongest parts of its body.

The troops cheered at the sight of such an agile and powerful creation. With it leading the defense, the Barbarians of Skyrim would never again successfully raid their villages. They named it Chimarvamidium, the Hope of the Chimer.

Barif has the golem brought to his chambers with all his housethanes. There they tested Chimarvamidium further, its strength, its speed, its resiliency. They could find no flaw with its design.

"Imagine when the naked barbarians first meet this on one of their raids," laughed one of the housethanes.

"It is only unfortunate that it resembles a Dwemer instead of one of our own," mused Karenithil Barif. "It is revolting to think that they will have a greater respect for our other enemies than us."

"I think we should never accepted the peace terms that we did," said another, one of the most aggressive of the housethanes. "Is it too late to surprise the warlord Sthovin with an attack?"

"It is never too late to attack," said Barif. "But what of his great armored warriors?"

"I understand," said Barif's spymaster. "That his soldiers always wake at dawn. If we strike an hour before, we can catch them defenseless, before they've had a chance to bathe, let alone don their armor."

"If we capture their armorer Jnaggo, then we too would know the secrets of blacksmithery," said Barif. "Let it be done. We attack tomorrow, an hour before dawn."

So it was settled. The Chimer army marched at night, and swarmed into the Dwemer camp. They were relying on Chimarvamidium to lead the first wave, but it malfunctioned and began attacking the Chimer's own troops. Added to that, the Dwemer were fully armored, well-rested, and eager for battle. The surprise was turned, and most of the high-ranking Chimer, including Karenithil Barif the Beast, were captured.

Though they were too proud to ask, Sthovin explained to them that he had been warned of their attack by a Calling by one of his men.

"What man of yours is in our camp?" sneered Barif.

Chimarvamidium, standing erect by the side of the captured, removed its head. Within its metal body was Jnaggo, the armorer.

"A Dwemer child of eight can create a golem," he explained. "But only a truly great warrior and armorer can pretend to be one."

Publisher's Note:
This is one of the few tales in this collection, which can actually be traced to the Dwemer. The wording of the story is quite different from older versions in Aldmeris, but the essence is the same. "Chimarvamidium" may be the Dwemer "Nchmarthurnidamz." This word occurs several times in plans of Dwemer armor and Animunculi, but it's meaning is not known. It is almost certainly not "Hope of the Chimer," however.

The Dwemer were probably the first to use heavy armors. It is important to note how a man dressed in armor could fool many of the Chimer in this story. Also note how the Chimer warriors react. When this story was first told, armor that covered the whole body must have still been uncommon and new, whereas even then, Dwemer creations like golems and centurions were well known.

In a rare scholarly moment, Marobar Sul leaves a few pieces of the original story intact, such as parts of the original line in Aldmeris, "A Dwemer of eight can create a golem, but an eight of Dwemer can become one."

Another aspect of this legend that scholars like myself find interesting is the mention of "the Calling." In this legend and in others, there is a suggestion that the Dwemer race as a whole had some sort of silent and magickal communication. There are records of the Psijic Order which suggest they, too, share this secret. Whatever the case, there are no documented spells of "calling." The Cyrodiil historian Borgusilus Malier first proposed this as a solution to the disappearance of the Dwemer. He theorized that in 1E 668, the Dwemer enclaves were called together by one of their powerful philosopher-sorcerers ("Kagrnak" in some documents) to embark on a great journey, one of such sublime profundity that they abandoned all their cities and lands to join the quest to foreign climes as an entire culture.

Part IX: Azura and the Box

by Marobar Sul

Nchylbar had enjoyed an adventurous youth, but had grown to be a very wise, very old Dwemer who spent his life searching for the truth and dispelling superstitions. He invented much and created many theorems and logic structures that bore his name. But much of the world still puzzled him, and nothing was a greater enigma to him than the nature of the Aedra and Daedra. Over the course of his research, he came to the conclusion that many of the Gods were entirely fabricated by man and mer.

Nothing, however, was a greater question to Nchylbar than the limits of divine power. Were the Greater Beings the masters of the entire world, or did the humbler creatures have the strength to forge their own destinies? As Nchylbar found himself nearing the end of his life, he felt he must understand this last basic truth.

Among the sage's acquaintances was a holy Chimer priest named Athynic. When the priest was visiting Bthalag-Zturamz, Nchylbar told him what he intended to do to find the nature of divine power. Athynic was terrified and pleaded with his friend not to break this great mystery, but Nchylbar was resolute. Finally, the priest agreed to assist out of love for his friend, though he feared the results of this blasphemy.

Athynic summoned Azura. After the usual rituals by which the priest declared his faith in her powers and Azura agreed to do no harm to him, Nchylbar and a dozen of his students entered the summoning chamber, carrying with them a large box.

"As we see you in our land, Azura, you are the Goddess of the Dusk and Dawn and all the mysteries therein," said Nchylbar, trying to appear as kindly and obsequious as he could be. "It is said that your knowledge is absolute."

"So it is," smiled the Daedra.

"You would know, for example, what is in this wooden box," said Nchylbar.

Azura turned to Athynic, her brow furrowed. The priest was quick to explain, "Goddess, this Dwemer is a very wise and respected man. Believe me, please, the intention is not to mock your greatness, but to demonstrate it to this scientist and to the rest of his skeptical race. I have tried to explain your power to him, but his philosophy is such that he must see it demonstrated."

"If I am to demonstrate my might in a way to bring the Dwemer race to understanding, it might have been a more impressive feat you would have me do," growled Azura, and turned to look Nchylbar in the eyes. "There is a red-petalled flower in the box."

Nchylbar did not smile or frown. He simply opened the box and revealed to all that it was empty.

When the students turned to look to Azura, she was gone. Only Athynic had seen the Goddess's expression before she vanished, and he could not speak, he was trembling so. A curse had fallen, he knew that truly, but even crueler was the knowledge of divine power that had been demonstrated. Nchylbar also looked pale, uncertain on his feet, but his face shone with not fear, but bliss. The smile of a Dwemer finding evidence for a truth only suspected.

Two of his students supported him, and two more supported the priest as they left the chamber.

"I have studied very much over the years, performed countless experiments, taught myself a thousand languages, and yet the skill that has taught me the finally truth is the one that I learned when I was but a poor, young man, trying only to have enough gold to eat," whispered the sage.

As he was escorted up the stairs to his bed, a red flower petal fell from the sleeve of his voluminous robe. Nchylbar died that night, a portrait of peace that comes from contented knowledge.

Publisher's Note:

This is another tale whose origin is unmistakably Dwemer. Again, the words of some Aldmeris translations are quite different, but the essence of the story is the same. The Dunmer have a similar tale about Nchylbar, but in the Dunmer version, Azura recognizes the trick and refuses to answer the question. She slays the Dwemer present for their skepticism and curses the Dunmer for blasphemy.

In the Aldmeris versions, Azura is tricked not by an empty box, but by a box containing a sphere which somehow becomes a flat square. Of course the Aldmeris versions, being a few steps closer to the original Dwemer, are much more difficult to understand. Perhaps this "stage magic" explanation was added by Gor Felim because of Felim's own experience with such tricks in his plays when a mage was not available.

"Marobar Sul" left even the character of Nchylbar alone, and he represents many "Dwemer" virtues. His skepticism, while not nearly as absolute as in the Aldmeris version, is celebrated even though it brings a curse upon the Dwemer and the unnamed House of the poor priest.

Whatever the true nature of the Gods, and how right or wrong the Dwemer were about them, this tale might explain why the dwarves vanished from the face of Tamriel. Though Nchylbar and his kind may not have intended to mock the Aedra and Daedra, their skepticism certainly offended the Divine Orders.

Part X: The Dowry

by Marobar Sul

Ynaleigh was the wealthiest landowner in Gunal, and he had over the years saved a tremendous dowry for the man who would marry his daughter, Genefra. When she reached the age of consent, he locked the gold away for safe-keeping, and announced his intention to have her marry. She was a comely lass, a scholar, a great athlete, but dour and brooding in aspect. This personality defect did not bother her potential suitors any more than her positive traits impressed them. Every man knew the tremendous wealth that would be his as the husband of Genefra and son-in-law of Ynaleigh. That alone was enough for hundreds to come to Gunal to pay court.

"The man who will marry my daughter," said Ynaleigh to the assembled. "Must not be doing so purely out of avarice. He must demonstrate his own wealth to my satisfaction."

This simple pronouncement removed a vast majority of the suitors, who knew they could not impress the landowner with their meager fortunes. A few dozen did come forward within a few days, clad in fine killarc cloth of spun silver, accompanied by exotic servants, traveling in magnificent carriages. Of all who came who met with Ynaleigh's approval, none arrived in a more resplendent fashion that Welyn Naerillic. The young man, who no one had ever heard of, arrived in a shining ebon coach drawn by a team of dragons, his clothing of rarest manufacture, and accompanied by an army of the most fantastical servants any of Gunal had ever seen. Valets with eyes on all sides of their heads, maidservants that seemed cast in gemstones.

But such was not enough with Ynaleigh.

"The man who marries my daughter must prove himself a intelligent fellow, for I would not have an ignoramus as a son-in-law and business partner," he declared.

This eliminated a large part of the wealthy suitors, who, through their lives of luxury, had never needed to think very much if at all. Still some came forward over the next few days, demonstrating their wit and learning, quoting the great sages of the past and offering their philosophies of metaphysics and alchemy. Welyn Naerillic too came and asked Ynaleigh to dine at the villa he had rented outside of Gunal. There the landowner saw scores of scribes working on translations of Aldmeri tracts, and enjoyed the young man's somewhat irreverent but intriguing intelligence.

Nevertheless, though he was much impressed with Welyn Naerillic, Ynaleigh had another challenge.

"I love my daughter very much," said Ynaleigh. "And I hope that the man who marries her will make her happy as well. Should any of you make her smile, she and the great dowry are yours."

The suitors lined up for days, singing her songs, proclaiming their devotion, describing her beauty in the most poetic of terms. Genefra merely glared at all with hatred and melancholia. Ynaleigh who stood by her side began to despair at last. His daughter's suitors were failing to a man at this task. Finally Welyn Naerillic came to the chamber.

"I will make your daughter smile," he said. "I dare say, I'll make her laugh, but only after you've agreed to marry us. If she is not delighted within one hour of our engagement, the wedding can be called off."

Ynaleigh turned to his daughter. She was not smiling, but her eyes had sparked with some morbid curiosity in this young man. As no other suitor had even registered that for her, he agreed.

"The dowry is naturally not to be paid 'til after you've wed," said Ynaleigh. "Being engaged is not enough."

"Might I see the dowry still?" asked Welyn.

Knowing how fabled the treasure was and understanding that this would

likely be the closest the young man would come to possessing it, Ynaleigh agreed. He had grown quite found of Welyn. On his orders, Welyn, Ynaleigh, glum Genefra, and the castellan delved deep into the stronghold of Gunal. The first vault had to be opened by touching a series of runic symbols: should one of the marks be mispressed, a volley of poisoned arrows would have struck the thief. Ynaleigh was particularly proud of the next level of security -- a lock composed of blades with eighteen tumblers required three keys to be turned simultaneously to allow entry. The blades were designed to eviscerate any who merely picked one of the locks. Finally, they reached the storeroom.

It was entirely empty.

"By Lorkhan, we've been burgled!" cried Ynaleigh. "But how? Who could have done this?"

"A humble but, if I may say so, rather talented burglar," said Welyn. "A man who has loved your daughter from afar for many years, but did not possess the glamour or the learning to impress. That is, until the gold from her dowry afforded me the opportunity."

"You?" bellowed Ynaleigh, scarcely able to believe it. Then something even more unbelievable happened.

Genefra began to laugh. She had never even dreamed of meeting anyone like this thief. She threw herself into his arms before her father's outraged eyes. After a moment, Ynaleigh too began to laugh.

Genefra and Welyn were married in a month's time. Though he was in fact quite poor and had little scholarship, Ynaleigh was amazed how much his wealth increased with such a son-in-law and business partner. He only made certain never to ask from whence came the excess gold.

Publisher's Note:

The tale of a man trying to win the hand of a maiden whose father (usually a wealthy man or a king) tests each suitor is quite common. See, for

instance, the more recent "Four Suitors of Benitah" by Jole Yolivess. The behavior of the characters is quite out of character for the Dwemer. No one today knows their marriage customs, or even if they had marriage at all.

One rather odd theory of the Disappearance of the Dwarves came from this and a few other tales of "Marobar Sul." It was proposed that the Dwemer never, in fact, left. They did not depart Nirn, much less the continent of Tamriel, and they are still among us, disguised. These scholars use the story of "Azura and the Box" to suggest that the Dwemer feared Azura, a being they could neither understand nor control, and they adopted the dress and manner of Chimer and Altmer in order to hide from Azura's gaze.

The Talos Mistake

by Leonora Venatus
Imperial Liaison to the Aldmeri Dominion

As citizens of the Empire, all are of course familiar with the deeds of Emperor Tiber Septim. But it is the Emperor's ascent to godhood, as Talos, that is the subject of this work.

Until Tiber Septim's death, there had been but Eight Divines: Akatosh, Dibella, Arkay, Zenithar, Stendarr, Mara, Kynareth, and Julianos. These gods were, and are, worshipped throughout the Empire. And while some may have different names in the varying provinces (for example, Akatosh is known as "Auri-El" to the Aldmer; and Arkay is sometimes known as "Ar'Kay"), all are recognized and revered by all races and cultures of Tamriel.

But when Tiber Septim passed to Aetherius, there came to be a Ninth Divine - Talos, also called Ysmir, the "Dragon of the North." The man who was so loved in life became worshipped in death. Indeed, it can be argued that Talos, the Ninth Divine, became even more important than the Eight that had preceded him, at least to humans. For he was a god who was once just a man, and through great deeds actually managed to ascend to godhood. And if one human could achieve such a feat - couldn't it be done again? Couldn't all humans aspire to achieve divinity?

So we thought, we humans. And so we continued to worship Talos, and revere him as the ultimate hero-god. But that was then. This is now. And now, we know the truth:

We were wrong.

As citizens of the Empire, we all experienced the horrors of the Great War. And it was not until the signing of the White-Gold Concordat, the treaty between the Empire and the Aldmeri Dominion, that we once again knew

peace. One of the most important stipulations of that treaty, as every Imperial citizen is well aware, is that Talos can no longer be worshipped as a god. This edict shook the very foundations of the Empire. There were those who rebelled against the law. Indeed, some still do.

But the citizens of the Empire must know this: the Emperor did not agree to outlaw the worship of Talos because it was demanded by the Thalmor, the ruling body of the Aldmeri Dominion.

The Emperor agreed to the outlaw of the worship of Talos because it was the right thing to do.

Today, the Emperor, and indeed the Empire itself, recognizes that allowing the worship of Talos was a mistake. For by doing so, by allowing the worship of Talos as a Divine, the Empire actually did its people a great disservice: for this only succeeded in weakening the memory of the man Tiber Septim and his many extraordinary (though mortal) deeds; and pushing people away from the Eight Divines, the true gods, who do deserve our love and reverence.

And so, the Empire admits it was wrong. The Talos Mistake will not be repeated. May we find centuries of peace and prosperity with our new Thalmor friends, and continue to share a spirituality that binds together all the cultures and races of Tamriel.

There Be Dragons

by Torhal Bjorik

The last known sighting of a dragon in Tamriel was in the time of Tiber Septim. He made a pact with the few remaining dragons, swearing to protect them if they would serve him. Despite his promise, dragons were still hunted and slain. It's not clear if the last ones fled Tamriel or if they were exterminated.

There is no credible story of how dragons came to be. According to dremora that the College of Whispers have "questioned," they just were, and are. Eternal, immortal, unchanging, and unyielding. They are not born or hatched. They do not mate or breed. There are no known examples of dragon eggs or dragonlings. The Iliac Bay area has stories of such things, but so far all have proven false. The eggs turned out to be eggs of other reptiles. The small dragons were merely oversized lizards and no relation to true dragons.

Although they are not born, dragons can die. During the Dragon War of the Merethic Era, their numbers were decimated. The Akaviri invaders of the late First Era are said to have hunted and killed scores of them, before and after their defeat by Emperor Reman. Some sources say the Akaviri brought over dragon-killing spells. Others claim they built cunning traps. One tale even speaks of a rare poison.

It is well accepted that a dragon's most fearsome weapon is its fiery breath. Because they could fly overhead and rain down flaming death, archers and wizards were necessary when hunting them. It is less well known that some dragons could breathe a freezing spray of frost. The reports indicate that dragon might do one or the other, but not both.

Most people think of dragons as mere beasts. However, logically they must have had language in order for Tiber Septim to have negotiated with them. Indeed, the historical record is quite clear that dragons were highly

intelligent. They had their own language, but could also speak the languages of men and elves.

The records of Reman's hunts contain reports of dragons that breathe or spit fire. Recently some were unearthed that described dragons blowing freezing blasts of cold. The more fanciful tales have them summoning storms and even stopping time. These should be discounted as myths and faery tales. Even without this most fearsome weapon, their nearly impenetrable hide and granite-like teeth and claws made them terrifying opponents.

There is some confusion over when the last dragon was killed. It seems the last few vanished all at once. Some tales speak of a dragon king who devoured all of them rather than let mankind kill them. One of the more far-fetched stories has Tiber Septim absorbing their essences when he ascended to godhood. Although the exact cause is unknown, they are all gone. No dragon has been seen for centuries. There are a few known examples of dragon bones fused with the stone and rocks of cliffs and caves. Just enough proof to make the stories undeniable.

Thief of Virtue

Let me tell the tale of the Thief of Virtue. In the land of Hammerfell in the city of Sutch there lived a Baron who was quite wealthy. He was a noted collector of rare coins. The Baroness Veronique found the whole thing quite tedious. However, she did appreciate the lifestyle that the Baron's wealth provided.

Ravius Terinus was a noted thief. He claimed to be a master thief in the mythical guild of thieves. However, that was most likely just braggadocio. The only known Thieves Guild was wiped out over 450 years ago.

Ravius decided that the Baron should share his wealth. Specifically he should share it with Ravius. The wily thief crept into the Baron's castle one night intending to do just that.

The walls of the castle were noted for their height and unscalability. Ravius cleverly used an Arrow of Penetration to affix a rope to the top of the battlements. Once on the battlements, he had to evade the Baron's guards. By hiding in the shadows of the crenelations, he was able to work his way to the keep undetected.

Entering the keep was child's play for a thief of his caliber. However, a cunning lock with no less than 13 pins protected the private quarters of the Baron. Ravius broke only 9 lockpicks to open it. Using only a fork, a bit of string, and a wineskin, he disabled the seven traps guarding the Baron's coin collection. Truly Ravius was a master among thieves.

With the coins safely in his grasp, Ravius began his escape only to find the way blocked. The Baron had found the opened door and was raising the guard to scour the castle. Ravius fled deeper into the castle, one step ahead of the questing guards.

His only way out led through the boudoir of Baroness Veronique. He entered to find the lady preparing for bed. Now it should be said at this

point that Ravius was noted for his handsome looks, while the Baroness was noted for her plainness. Both of these facts were immediately recognized by each of the pair.

"Doest thou come to plunder my virtue?" asked the lady, all a tremble.

"Nay, fair lady," Ravius said, thinking quickly. "Plunder be a harsh term to ply upon such a delicate flower as your virtue."

"I see thou hast made off with mine husbands precious coins."
Ravius looked deeply into her eyes and saw the only path by which he would escape this night with his life. It would require a double sacrifice.

"Though these coins are of rarest value, I have now found a treasure that is beyond all value," Ravius said smoothly. "Tell me, oh beauteous one, why doest thy husband set seven deadly traps around these tawdry coins, but only a simple lock upon the door of his virtuous wife?"

"Ignace protects those things that are dearest to him," Veronique replied with ire.

"I would give all the gold in my possession to spend but a moment basking in your radiance."

With that Ravius set down the coins he had worked so hard to steal. The Baroness swooned into his arms. When the captain of the guard asked to search her quarters, she hid Ravius most skillfully. She turned over the coins, claiming the thief dropped them when he fled out the window.

With that sacrifice made, Ravius steeled himself for the second. He robbed the lady Veronique of her virtue that night. He robbed her of it several times, lasting well into the wee hours of the morning. Exhausted, yet sated, he stole away in the pre-dawn hours.

The Third Door

by Annanar Orme

I.
I sing of Ellabeth, the Queen of the Axe,
Who could fell a full elm with two hatchet hacks.
She could rip apart Valenwood just for her fun.
She studied under Alfhedil in Tel Aruhn.
He taught her the jabs, the strokes, and the stance
To make an ax-swing into an elegant dance.

He taught her the barbed axes of the Orcs bold,
The six-foot-long axes favored in Winterhold,
The hollow-bladed axes of the Elves of the West,
Which whistle when they swing through flesh.
With a single-headed axe, she could behead two men.
With a double-headed axe, she could fell more than ten.
Yet where she lives in legend has most to do
With the man who hacked her own heart in two.

II.
Nienolas Ulwarth the Mighty, who hailed from Blackrose,
The only man who could best Ellabeth with ax blows,
In a minute, she chopped fifty trees; he, fifty-three.
She felt at once that he was the only man for she.
When she professed her love, Nienolas just laughed.
He said he loved more his ax handle and shaft.
And if they weren't enough to slake all his desire
There was another woman named Lorinthyrae.
Fury gripped the Queen of the Axe, the maid Ellabeth,
And her thoughts turned to pondering musings of death.
Mephala and Sheogorath gave her a revengeful scheme

And for weeks, she worked on it in a state like a dream.
In the still of the night, she kidnapped her rival
And then told her choices between doom and survival.

III.
Lorinthyrae awoke in a house in the moors
In a room lightly furnished except for three doors.
Ellabeth explained that behind one of the doors the lass
Would find Ellabeth's and her love, the great Nienolas.
Behind the second lived a ravenous demon.
And behind the third, an exit to freedom.
She must choose a door, and to aid her decision
If she pondered too long, the axe'd make a division.
Lorinthyrae wept, and Ellabeth felt contrite,
And opened the door to her immediate right.
It led to the moors, and as she slipped through the gloom,
She advised Lorinthyrae to likewise abandon the room.
Lorinthyrae ignored her and did not feel her will bend.
Nienolas was largely behind the first door she opened.

IV.
Ellabeth had lied; there was no demon of lore.
The top third of Nienolas was behind the third door.

Third Era: An Abbreviated Timeline, The Last Year of the First Era

by Jaspus Ignateous

It has been said that "citizens of the Empire who make the same mistakes as their forebears deserve to suffer the same fate." And while this may be true, it's hard to deny that the Empire's history is so long, and our forebears have made so many mistakes, it's sometimes hard to keep track.

This work is meant to serve as a concise compilation of the Empire's most recent events, in this, our current age - what we refer to as the Third Era. It is a period of time that has as yet comprised less than five hundred years. But it should at least serve as a starting point for those who wish to study our Empire's vast and varied history. And maybe, just maybe, prevent the repeat of a previous disaster.

It is also worth noting that when viewed in such a succinct structure, one truly gets a sense of just how often our great Empire has changed leadership. Indeed, it can be argued that much of the Empire's history in these past five centuries is the changing rule of that very Empire itself.

First Century

- 3E 0 - Beginning of Third Era, when all province in Tamriel are unified

- 3E 38 - Death of Emperor Tiber Septim, and crowning of Emperor Pelagius

- 3E 41 - Assassination of Emperor Pelagius, and crowning of Empress Kintyra

- 3E 48 - Death of Empress Kintyra , and crowning of Emperor Uriel I

- 3E 64 - Death of Emperor Uriel I, and crowning of Emperor Uriel II

- 3E 82 - Death of Emperor Uriel II, and crowning of Emperor Pelagius II

- 3E 99 - Death of Emperor Pelagius II Dies, and crowning of Emperor Antiochus

Second Century

- 3E 110 - War of the Isle

- 3E 111 - Knights of the Nine founded by Sir Amiel Lannus

- 3E 114 - Reported death of Empress Kintyra II

- 3E 119 - Birth of Pelagius III

- 3E 121 - Uriel III Proclaimed Emperor

- 3E 121 - War of the Red Diamond

- 3E 123, 23 Frostfall - Actual death of Empress Kintyra II, in captivity, in secret

- 3E 127 - Death of Emperor Uriel III, and crowing of Emperor Cephorus I

- 3E 137 - Death of Potema, the Queen of Solitude

- 3E 140 - Death of Emperor Cephorus I, and crowning of Emperor Magnus

- 3E 145 - Death of Emperor Magnus, and crowning of Emperor Pelagius III

- 3E 153 - Death of Emperor Pelagius III

- 3E 153 - Katariah takes throne from husband Pelagius, becoming Empress

Third Century

- 3E 200 - Death of Empress Katariah, and crowning of Emperor Cassynder

- 3E 202 - Death of Emperor Cassynder, and crowning of Emperor Uriel IV

- 3E 247 - Death of Emperor Uriel IV, and crowning of Emperor Cephorus II

- 3E 249 - Invasion of the Empire by the lich, Camoran Usurper

- 3E 253 - Camoran Usurper controls the Dwynnen Region with "Nightmare Host"

- 3E 267 - Defeat of Camoran Usurper Defeated

- 3E 268 - Crowing of Emperor Uriel V

- 3E 271-3E 284 - Various Conquests of Emperor Uriel Septim IV

- 3E 288 - Invasion of Akavir by the forces of Emperor Uriel Septim IV

- 3E 290 - Death of Emperor Uriel V, and crowning of Emperor Uriel VI

Fourth Century

- 3E 307 - Uriel VI gain full power as Emperor

- 3E 320 - Death of Uriel VI, and crowning of Empress Morihatha

- 3E 331 - Publication of the second edition of "A Pocket Guide to The Empire"

- 3E 339 - Assassination of Empress Morihatha, and crowning of Emperor Pelagius IV

- 3E 389 - Jagar Tharn betrays Emperor Uriel Septim VII

- 3E 396 - Regional Wars Throughout Tamriel

- 3E 396 - The Arnesian War

- 3E 399 - Defeat of Jagar Tharn

- 3E 399 - The founding of Orsinium

Fifth Century

- 3E 403 - Assassination of Lysandus, the King of Daggerfall

- 3E 414 - Vvardenfell Territory opened for settlement

- 3E 417 - The "Warp in the West" occurs

- 3E 421 - Greywyn founds the Crimson Scars.

- 3E 427 - Beginning of the Blight Curse in Vvardenfell, and arrival of the Nerevar

- 3E 427 - The Bloodmoon Prophecy comes to pass, on the isle of Solstheim

- 3E 432 - Publication of the third edition of "A Pocket Guide to The Empire"

- 3E 433 - Assassination of Emperor Uriel Septim VII

- 3E 433 - The "Oblivion Crisis"

- 3E 433 - The Knights of the Nine are reformed

Three Thieves

by Anonymous

"The problem with thieves today," said Lledos, "Is the lack of technique. I know there's no honor among thieves, and there never was, but there used to be some pride, some skill, some basic creativity. It really makes those of us with a sense of history despair."

Imalyn sneered, slamming down his flagon of greef violently on the rough-hewn table. "B'vek, what do you want us to say? You asks us 'What do you do when you see a guard?' and I says, 'Stab the fetcher in the back.' What d'you prefer? We challenge 'em to a game of chits?"

"So much ambition, so little education," said Lledos with a sigh. "My dear friends, we aren't mugging some Nord tourist fresh off the ferry. The Cobblers Guildhall may not sound intimidating but tonight, when the dues collection is housed there before being sent to the bank, the security's going to be tighter than a kwama's ass. You can't just stab at every back you encounter and expect to make it into the vaults."

"Why don't you explain specifically what you'd like us to do?" asked Galsiah calmly, trying to keep the tone of the group down. Most locals at the Plot and Plaster cornerclub in Tel Aruhn knew enough not to listen in, but she knew better than to take any chances.

"The common thief," said Lledos, pouring himself more greef, warming to

his subject. "Sticks his dagger in his opponent's back. This may slay the target, but more often gives him time to scream and drenches the attacker with blood. Not good. Now a good throat-slashing, properly executed, can both slay and silence a guard and leave the thief relatively bloodfree. And after all, after the robbery, we don't want people seeing a bunch of blood-soaked butchers running through the streets. Even in Tel Aruhn, that's likely to warrant suspicion."

"If you can catch your victim lying down asleep or resting, you are in an excellent position. You place one hand over the mouth with your thumb under the chin, then you use your other hand to slit the throat, and quickly turn the head to one side so the body bleeds out away from you. There is a risk here of becoming blood stained if you don't move the head quickly enough. If you're unsure, strangle the victim first to avoid the blood that tends to spurt out in three foot jets when someone is stabbed while alive."

"A very good friend of mine, a thief in Gnisis whose name I won't mention, swears by the strangle-and-slash technique. Simply put, you grab your victim's throat from behind and while throttling him, you batter his face against the opposite wall. When the victim is thus rendered unconscious, you slash his throat while still holding him from behind, and the risk of staining one's clothes with blood is practically nonexistant."

"The classic technique, which requires less grappling than my friend's variation, is to place one hand over the victim's mouth, and then saw through the throat in three or four stroke rather like playing a violin. It requires little effort, and while there's quite a bit of blood, it all jets forward away from you."

"There's no reason when one knows one is going to be slitting some throats not to take some precautions and bring some extra equipment. The best neck-hackers I know generally carry a bit of wadded cloth on the aft-side of their knives to keep blood from getting on their cuffs. It's impractical for this sort of assignment, but when you're only anticipating one or two victims, nothing beats throwing a sack over the targets head, drawing the string tight, and then supplying the killing blow or blows."

Imalyn laughed loudly, "Can I see a demonstration sometime?"

"Very soon," said Lledos. "If Galsiah has done her job."

Galsiah brought out the map of the guildhouse, freshly stolen, and they began to detail out the strategy.

The last several hours had been a whirlwind to all. In less than a day, the three had met, formulated a plan, bought or stolen the necessary ingredients, and were about to execute it. Not one of the three were sure whether confidence or stupidity were driving the other two, but the fates were aligned. The guildhouse was going to be robbed.

When the sun set, Lledos, Galsiah, and Imalyn approached the Cobblers Guildhouse on the east end of town. Galsiah used her cachous of stoneflower to mask their scent from the guard wolves as the three passed over the parapets. She also acted as lead scout, and Lledos was impressed. For someone of relative inexperience, she knew her way through shadows.

Lledos's expertise was demonstrated a dozen times, and the guards were of such a diverse variety, he was able to demonstrate all the means of silent assassination he had developed over the years.

Imalyn opened the vault in his unique and systematic method. As the tumblers fell beneath his fingers, he softly sang an old dirty tavern song about the Ninety-Nine Loves of Boethiah. He said it helped him focus and organize difficult combinations. Within seconds, the vault was open and the gold was in hand.

They left the guildhouse an hour after they entered. No alarm had been raised, the gold was gone, and corpses lay pooling blood on the stone floors within.

"Well done, my friends, well done. You learned well." Lledos said as he poured the gold pieces into the specially designed compartments in his tunic's sleeves, where they held fast with no jingling or unusual bulges. "We'll meet back at the Plot and Plaster tomorrow morning and split up the bounty."

The group parted ways. The only person who knew the most covert route through the city's sewer system, Lledos, slipped in through a duct and vanished below. Galsiah threw on her shawl, muddied her face to resemble an old f'lah fortune-teller, and headed north. Imalyn headed east into the park, trusting his unnatural senses to keep him away from the citywatch.

Now I teach them the greatest lesson of all, thought Lledos as he sloshed through the labyrinthine tunnels of sludge. His guar was waiting where he left it at the city gates, making a laconic lunch of the chokeweed shrub to which it had been leashed.

On the road to Vivec, he thought of Galsiah and Imalyn. Perhaps they had been caught and brought in for questioning already. It was a pity he couldn't see them undergoing interrogation. Who would break under pressure first? Imalyn was certainly the tougher of the two, but Galsiah doubtless had hidden reserves. It was merely intellectual curiousity: they thought his name was Lledos and he was meeting them at the Plot and Plaster. The authorities wouldn't therefore be looking for a Dunmer named Sathis celebrating his wealth miles and miles away in Vivec.

As he prodded his mount forward and the sun began rising, Sathis pictured Galsiah and Imalyn not undergoing interrogation, but sleeping the good deep sleep of the wicked, dreaming of how they would spend their share of the gold. Both would wake up early and rush to the Plot and Plaster. He could see them now, Imalyn laughing and carrying on, Galsiah hushing him to avoid bringing undue attention. They would take a couple flagons of greef, perhaps order a meal -- a big one -- and wait. Hours would pass, and so would their moods. The chain of reactions that every betrayed person exhibits: nervousness, doubt, bewilderment, anger.

The sun was fully risen when Sathis reached the stables of his house on the outskirts of Vivec. He reigned in his guar and filled its feed. The rest of the stalls were empty. It wouldn't be until that afternoon when his servants returned from the feast of St Rilms in Gnisis. They were good people, and he treated them well, but from past experience he knew that servants talked. If they began to connect his absences with thefts in other towns, it was only

a matter of time before they would go to the authorities or blackmail him. After all, they were human. It was best in the long run to give them a week off with pay whenever he was out of town on business.

He slipped the gold into the vault in his study, and went upstairs. The schedule had been tight, but Sathis had given himself a few hours to rest before his household returned. His own bed was wonderfully soft and warm compared to the dreadful mattress he had to use at the canton in Tel Aruhn.

Sathis woke up some time later from a nightmare. For a second after he opened his eyes, he thought he could still hear Imalyn's voice nearby, singing The Ninety-Nine Loves of Boethiah. He lay still in his bed, waiting, but there was no sound except the usual creaks and groans of his old house. Afternoon sunlight came through his bedroom window in ribbons, catching dust. He closed his eyes.

The song returned, and Sathis heard the vault door in his study swing open. The smell of stoneflower filled his nose and he opened his eyes. Only a little of the afternoon sunlight could pierce the inside of the burlap sack.

A strong, feminine hand clamped over the mouth and a thumb jabbed under his chin. Just as his throat opened and his head was shoved to the side, he heard Galsiah in her typical calm voice, "Thank you for the lesson, Sathis."

Timeline Series

Volume 1: Before the Ages of Man

By Aicantar of Shimerene

Before man came to rule Tamriel, and before the chronicles of the historians recorded the affairs of the rulers of Tamriel, the events of our world are known only through myths and legends, and through the divinely inspired teachings of the Nine Divines.

For convenience, historians divide the distant ages of prehistory into two broad periods of time -- the Dawn Era, and the Merethic Era.

* The Dawn Era *

The Dawn Era is that period before the beginning of mortal time, when the feats of the gods take place. The Dawn Era ends with the exodus of the gods and magic from the World at the founding of the Adamantine Tower.

The term 'Merethic' comes from the Nordic, literally, "Era of the Elves." The Merethic Era is the prehistoric time after the exodus of the gods and magic from the World at the founding of the Adamantine Tower and before the arrival of Ysgramor the Nord in Tamriel.

The following are the most notable events of the Dawn Era, presented roughly in sequence as it must be understaoo by creatures of time such as ourselves.

The Cosmos formed from the Aurbis [chaos, or totality] by Anu and Padomay. Akatosh (Auriel) formed and Time began. The Gods (et'Ada) formed. Lorkhan convinced -- or tricked -- the Gods into creating the mortal plane, Nirn. The mortal plane was at this point highly magical and dangerous. As the Gods walked, the physical make-up of the mortal plane

and even the timeless continuity of existence itself became unstable.

When Magic (Magnus), architect of the plans for the mortal world, decided to terminate the project, the Gods convened at the Adamantine Tower [Direnni Tower, the oldest known structure in Tamriel] and decided what to do. Most left when Magic did. Others sacrificed themselves into other forms so that they might Stay (the Ehlnofey). Lorkhan was condemned by the Gods to exile in the mortal realms, and his heart was torn out and cast from the Tower. Where it landed, a Volcano formed. With Magic (in the Mythic Sense) gone, the Cosmos stabilized. Elven history, finally linear, began (ME2500).

* The Merethic Era *

The Merethic Era was figured by early Nord scholars as a series of years numbered in reverse order backward from the their 'beginning of time' -- the founding of the Camoran Dynasty, recorded as Year Zero of the First Era. The prehistoric events of the Merethic Era are listed here with their traditional Nordic Merethic dates. The earliest Merethic date cited by King Harald's scholars was ME2500 -- the Nordic reckoning of the first year of time. As such, the Merethic Era extends from ME2500 in the distant past to ME1 -- the year before the founding of the Camoran Dysnasty and the establishment of the White Gold Tower as an indepenent city-state.

According to King Harald's bards, ME2500 was the date of construction of the Adamantine Tower on Balfiera Island in High Rock, the oldest known structure of Tamriel. (This corresponds roughly to the earliest historical dates given in various unpublished Elvish chronicles.)

During the early Merethic Era, the aboriginal beastpeoples of Tamriel -- the ancestors of the Khajiit, Argonian, Orcish, and other beastfolk -- lived in preliterate communities throughout Tamriel.

In the Middle Merethic Era, the Aldmeri (mortals of Elven origin) refugees left their doomed and now-lost continent of Aldmeris (also known as 'Old Ehlnofey') and settled in southwestern Tamriel. The first colonies were

distributed at wide intervals on islands along the entire coast of Tamriel. Later inland settlements were founded primarily in fertile lowlands in southwest and central Tamriel. Wherever the beastfolk encountered the Elves, the sophisticated, literate, technologically advanced Aldmeri cultures displaced the primitive beastfolk into the jungles, marshes, mountains, and wastelands. The Adamantine Tower was rediscovered and captured by the Direnni, a prominent and powerful Aldmeri clan. The Crystal Tower was built on Summerset Isle and, later, White Gold Tower in Cyrodiil.

During the Middle Merethic Era, Aldmeri explorers mapped the coasts of Vvardenfel, building the First Era High Elven wizard towers at Ald Redaynia, Bal Fell, Tel Aruhn, and Tel Mora in Morrowind. It was also during this period that Ayleid [Wild Elven] settlements flourished in the jungles surrounding White Gold Tower (present day Cyrodiil). Wild Elves, also known as the Heartland High Elves, preserved the Dawn Era magics and language of the Ehlnofey. Ostensibly a tribute-land to the High King of Alinor, the Heartland's long lines of communication from the Summerset Isles' sovereignty effectively isolated Cyrodill from the High Kings at Crystal Tower.

The Late Middle Merethic Era is the period of the High Velothi Culture. The Chimer, ancestors of the modern Dunmer, or Dark Elves, were dynamic, ambitious, long-lived Elven clans devoted to fundamentalist ancestor worship. The Chimer clans followed the Prophet Veloth out of the ancestral Elven homelands in the southwest to settle in the lands now known as Morrowind. Despising the secular culture and profane practices of the Dwemer, the Chimer also coveted the lands and resources of the Dwemer, and for centuries provoked them with minor raids and territorial disputes. The Dwemer (Dwarves), free-thinking, reclusive Elven clans devoted to the secrets of science, engineering, and alchemy, established underground cities and communities in the mountain range (later the Velothi Mountains) separating modern Skyrim and Morrowind.

The Late Merethic Era marks the precipitous decline of Velothi culture. Some Velothi settled in villages near declining and abandoned ancient Velothi towers. During this period, Velothi high culture disappeared on Vvardenfell Island. The earliest Dwemer Freehold colonies date from this

period. Degenerate Velothi devolved into tribal cultures which, in time, evolved into the modern Great Houses of Morrowind, or persisted as the barbarian Ashlander tribes. The only surviving traces of this tribal culture are scattered Velothi towers and Ashlander nomads on Vvardenfell Island. The original First Era High Elven wizard towers along the coasts of Tamriel were also abandoned about this time.

It was in the Late Merethic Era that the pre-literate humans, the so-called "Nedic Peoples", from the continent of Atmora (also 'Altmora' or 'the Elder Wood' in Aldmeris) migrated and settleed in northern Tamriel. The Nord culture hero Ysgramor, leader of a great colonizing fleet to Tamriel, is credited with developing a runic transcription of Nord speech based on Elvish principles, and so Ysgramor is considered the first human historian. Ysgramor's fleet landed at Hsaarik Head at the extreme northern tip of Skyrim's Broken Cape. The Nords built there the legendary city of Saarthal. The Elves drove the Men away during the Night of Tears, but Ysgramor soon returned with his Five Hundred Companions.

Also during the Late Merethic Era the legendary immortal hero, warrior, sorceror, and king variously known as Pelinal Whitestrake, Harrald Hairy Breeks, Ysmir, Hans the Fox, etc., wandered Tamriel, gathering armies, conquering lands, ruling, then abandoning his kingdoms to wander again.

A Tragedy In Black

A folk tale from the time of the Oblivion Crisis

The dremora looked on the young boy with disdain. He looked to be no more than seventeen or eighteen, on the cusp of manhood.

"You? You have summoned me?"

"Mother says I'm good with spells. Someday I'm gonna be a wizard. Maybe even archmage!"

"And what would your mother know of magic, boy?"

"She's a wizard! She's an enchanter at the Arcane University."

"Ah. Another dabbler in the mystic arts. I'm certain she is barely mediocre."

"You shut up! I read the scroll. I get to tell you what to do."

The dremora was silent. Compulsion bound his voice.

"I want to know how to make a magic dress. I need it for her birthday."

The dremora's answer was more silence.

"You have to tell me. It's in the rules."

Freed from the previous compulsion, the dremora answered, "First, you need a soul gem. I happen to have one, and would gladly give it you for so noble a cause."

"Really? Why do I need it."

With a hidden smile, the dremora handed over the dull black gem.

"It is not enough to cast a spell upon an inert object. Magic requires thought, intent, will and emotion. The soul powers the enchantment. The bigger the soul, the more powerful the enchantment."

"So how big is the one in this soul gem?"

"Oh, that one is empty. You'll have to fill it. But it can hold the largest of souls easily. Do you know how to do that?"

"No," the young man said sullenly.

"Let me show you. You cast a spell like this."

The tendrils of the soul trap spell spilled from his fingers and surrounded the boy. The young man's eyes went wide.

"I didn't feel anything," he complained.

"How about now?" the dremora asked, plunging his talons into the youth's rib cage. His heart beat only once before it was pulled from his chest.

Quickly the dremora snatched back the black soul gem, just as the youth died. His soul tried to flee, but was trapped by the spell and drawn into the gem. Only black soul gems can hold the souls of men and elves.

"Your mother obviously never told you never to accept a freely given gift from a summoned dremora," he said to the corpse. "You see, it breaks the

conjuration, freeing the summoned from the summoner. Now, let's go find your mother. After all, I have another black soul gem."

Treatise on Ayleidic Cities: Varsa Baalim and the Nefarivigum Test of Dagon

Chapter the Tenth

I will not be the first scholar to point to a combination of benign intent and arrogance on behalf of the Ayleids as the source of many ruinous affairs for the old heartland elves.

The Nefarivigum, a foul construct of Mehrunes Dagon, was erected to be ever watchful for the pilgrim who would approach it and best an unknown trial of worth. It is said that such a pilgrim would be rewarded with the blessing of Mehrunes Razor, a vicious blade through which Dagon himself can claim the very souls of those it strikes.

Benign intent compelled Ayleid folk to seek out the Nefarivigum. Arrogance let them believe themselves capable of disbarring any who would seek the Razor. So was built Varsa Baalim, a great, ringed, labyrinthine city, during the height of Ayleid rule.

Sure as death, pilgrims came to Varsa Baalim, and for years the Elves drove back many, until it came to pass that a vampire slipped into the city unnoticed. Merfolk were touched with the foul affliction, throwing the city into a gathering storm of madness and ruin, and soon it seemed none was left to prevent the Razor from being recovered.

Then, suddenly, Varsa Baalim was gone. Historic accounts dispute whether it happened through some final safety, a natural cataclysm, or by the touch of the Divines themselves. Whatever the cause, history agrees on the result: the mountains of the Eastern Niben swallowed Varsa Baalim, and the Nefarivigum with it, where has remained hidden since the early days of the First Era.

If the tale is true, then somewhere on the eastern fringes of the Niben Valley, where man's rule has scarcely reached through the years, the Nefarivigum still lies in wait, among a city of unliving abominations entombed within the cold bowels of the mountain.

Trials of St. Alessia

Akatosh made a covenant with Alessia in those days so long ago. He gathered the tangled skeins of Oblivion, and knit them fast with the bloody sinews of his Heart, and gave them to Alessia, saying, 'This shall be my token to you, that so long as your blood and oath hold true, yet so shall my blood and oath be true to you. This token shall be the Amulet of Kings, and the Covenant shall be made between us, for I am the King of Spirits, and you are the Queen of Mortals. As you shall stand witness for all Mortal Flesh, so shall I stand witness for all Immortal Spirits.'

And Akatosh drew from his breast a burning handful of his Heart's blood, and he gave it into Alessia's hand, saying, 'This shall also be a token to you of our joined blood and pledged faith. So long as you and your descendants shall wear the Amulet of Kings, then shall this dragonfire burn -- an eternal flame -- as a sign to all men and gods of our faithfulness. So long as the dragonfires shall burn, to you, and to all generations, I swear that my Heart's blood shall hold fast the Gates of Oblivion.

So long as the Blood of the Dragon runs strong in her rulers, the glory of the Empire shall extend in unbroken years. But should the dragonfires fail, and should no heir of our joined blood wear the Amulet of Kings, then shall the Empire descend into darkness, and the Demon Lords of Misrule shall govern the land.'

-- from the liturgy of the Re-Kindling of the Dragonfires

Troll Slaying

by Finn

Hello, fellow traveler, and welcome to this guide!

Within these pages, I will explain everything you need to know about fighting trolls, including how to negate their amazing healing powers and how best to take advantage of their natural love of cold. I'll even share with you my tried-and-true secret for killing trolls.

Intrigued? I hope so! Troll fat is a valuable commodity and there's fortune and glory to be made for the ambitious troll hunter.

Onward, then!

Chapter I: I Just Saw A Troll!

If you think you've seen a troll, remain calm and slowly back away. The wise hunter knows that preparation is the key to success, and you certainly don't want to hunt any trolls unprepared!

Ah, but is it really a troll that you've spotted?

The first step in your hunt is the proper identification of your quarry. Trolls are roughly man-shaped, with lengthy, muscular arms that end in claw-tipped fingers.
The creature's large mouth is filled with jagged teeth, all the better to crunch the bones of foolish hunters who didn't purchase my book.

Without a doubt, the troll's most distinctive and unusual feature is the third

eye nestled in the center of its forehead.

A troll's hide is covered in thick, shaggy fur. The coloration of this fur varies by region. Cave troll fur is brownish in color, while a frost or snow troll will have a white coat.

Chapter II: Stop Healing Yourself

So, you've properly identified a troll and now you're stalking the beast, ready to strike. You're in for a challenging battle, but a profitable one, assuming you survive.

The first thing you'll notice is that trolls are incredibly fast and strong for their size. A troll likes to pummel its prey into submission with powerful arm strikes and claw attacks. For this reason, I strongly recommend a shield.

If you're brave enough -- or foolish enough -- to fight a troll without using a shield, then you'd better be an expert at parrying with whatever weapon you've got.

Trolls also have the ability to rapidly heal from their wounds. As such, you do not want to get into a prolonged fight with one. Speed and aggression are the key to beating a troll, because there is no creature in Tamriel that can outlast one.

Of course, speed and aggression will only take you so far against an angry troll. This is where my secret weapon comes in.

Chapter III: Finn's Secret Weapon

Fire, my friend. Say the word and commit it to memory, for fire is the troll-hunter's ultimate weapon.

I can not overstate the importance of fire in battling a troll. Even trolls that don't dwell in cold climates are vulnerable to fire. If you're unable to use fire magic, carry a weapon enchanted with arcane flames.

Why is the troll vulnerable to fire? Rumor holds that the troll's regenerative abilities are less effective at healing burns. I don't really know the answer, but I can promise you this - fire works against trolls. This has been proven time and again.

Chapter IV: Trimming The Fat

The troll might be dead, but your job isn't finished just yet.

Let the flames die down and then examine the troll's corpse. If you're lucky, you'll find some fat deposits that will fetch a good price in an apothecary's shop. In fact, if you've got a knack for alchemy yourself, you can boil the fat down for use in all manner of potions and tonics.

If you can find it, be sure to check the troll's den as well. Perhaps you'll find the remains of some foolish adventurer who was too cheap-minded to purchase this book.

No doubt you can put his coin to wiser use.

Now you know everything that you need to make a living as a wealthy and reputable troll hunter. Go on, then! Get out there and find yourself some trolls!

The True Nature of Orcs

Orcs were born during the latter days of the Dawn Era. History has mislabeled them beastfolk, related to the goblin races, but the Orcs are actually the children of Trinimac, strongest of the Altmeri ancestor spirits. When Trinimac was eaten by the Daedroth Prince Boethiah, and transformed in that foul god's insides, the Orcs were transformed as well. The ancient name for the Orcs is 'Orsimer,' which means 'The Pariah Folk.' They now follow Malauch, the remains of Trinimac.

Who is Malauch?

He is more commonly know as the Daedroth Prince Malacath, 'whose sphere is the patronage of the spurned and ostracized, the sworn oath, and the bloody curse.' He is not technically a Daedra Lord, nor do the other Daedra recognize him as such, but this is fitting for his sphere. Of old he was Trinimac, the champion of the High Elven pantheon, in some places more popular than Auri-El, who protected them against enemies without and within. When Trinimac and his followers attempted to halt the Velothi dissident movement, Boethiah ate him. Trinimac's body and spirit were corrupted, and he emerged as Malacath. His followers were likewise changed for the worse. Despised by everyone, especially the inviolate Auri-El, they quickly fled to the northern wastes, near Saarthal. They fought Nords and Chimer for a place in the world, but did not get much. In Skyrim, Malacath is called Orkey, or Old Knocker, and his battles with Ysmir are legendary.

Twin Secrets

by Brarilu Theran

These secrets I lay down, knowing full well that none may ever take advantage of them. I am upon my death bed, and am loathe to see knowledge of any sort lost to the mists of time. Take these as the foolish reminiscences of an old man, or the insights of a master enchanter. I care not which.

It is well known that enchanting is limited where it once was not. The best enchanters of this age can imbue almost any spells into the metal and leather of armor and weapons. However, once enchanted, such an item will not enchant again. It is called the Law of Firsts. The first enchantment is the only one that takes.

In my life, I've traveled widely. I've seen Summerset Isle, communed with Psijiics, walked the shores of Akavir. I had hoped to see lost Atmora before I passed, that is not to be. I have even done the unthinkable. I have spoken to a dragon.

Dragons are said to be gone from the world. Yet I found one. Sheltered in the smoking ruins of Vvardenfell, I came upon it. My magic proved to be sufficient to defeat the beast. If that gives you cause to wonder, I will not deny that I was once a pyromancer of great skill.

Exhausted and near the end of my spells, I parlayed with the wyrm, offering

it life if it would share it's secrets. Haughty to the end, it agreed to one secret for one life. I asked for it's name, but it told me it would rather die than surrender that. Instead if offered me something else. And that it how I learned how to defy the Law of Firsts.

The law itself is inviolate. However, the skillful enchanter can weave two enchantments simultaneously into an item. For men and elves, the limit is two. The dragon said that men and elves have two arms, two legs, two eyes and two ears. I asked why that mattered, and the beast just laughed.

The enchanter must weave one enchantment with the left hand while weaving the other with the right. The eyes must focus on one and only one enchantment, while the ears only pay attention to the other. When I asked about my legs, the beast laughed again.

I spent two years mastering the technique. Just last month I made a sword with both fire and fear enchantments. Now I am too weak to make another. I go to my death victorious, for I have done what no other enchanter in modern times has done.

Uncommon Taste

By the Gourmet

Congratulations!

By opening this volume you have taken the first step on a truly epic journey, a voyage through the vast landscape of Breton food and its myriad joys and wonders. You will explore scents, flavors and textures so exquisite, they will seem impossible. But they are more than possible!

Indeed, by following the carefully selected recipes presented in this cookbook, you will prepare extraordinary dishes with such ordinary ease, those around you will suspect sorcery. But the only magic is that which exists in your own heart, the passion you possess for creating delicious, amazing food that can be prepared easily, and enjoyed endlessly.

Start here, and some day, you too can be a Gourmet!

Sunlight Souffle'

Ingredients

- 2 1/2 Ounces Cow's Cheese
- 1 Ounce Butter
- 1 Ounce Flour
- 9 Ounces Milk
- A Dash of Salt
- A Dash of Pepper
- A Cupful of Ground Nutmeg

Recipe

- Stoke the flames of your oven, and achieve a moderate heat.

- Grate the cheese into thin shavings by running a finely honed elven dagger over the block.

- Separate the egg whites from the yolks, and beat the whites vigorously until they thicken.

- Begin preparation of the signature Sunshine Sauce - melt the butter, and add in the flour while stirring continuously until well blended. Move the mixture to a smaller flame and begin gently stirring in the milk. It is crucial that you do not stop stirring! Continue to do so for ten minutes, until the mixture thickens. Then, and only then, will the Sunshine Sauce be considered ready.

- Add the salt, pepper and nutmeg, and remove from the flame.

- Add in the grated cheese, and then the egg yolks. Stir well until fully blended. Then, gently add in the egg whites with a spoon made of carved hickory wood.

- Gently pour the mix into four stonework souffle' dishes, filling each nearly (but not quite!) to the top.

- Put the dishes in your moderately hot oven and shut that door! Keep sealed for 25 minutes, or your scrumptious suns will rise, only to fall down flat into the oven's abyss.

- Remove after 25 minutes, and serve immediately.

Behold, the brilliance of the sun, and the exquisite flavor of the Sunshine Souffle'!

Potage le Magnifique

Ingredients

- 4 Cups Chicken Broth
- 4 Cups Beef Broth
- 2 1/2 Ounces Butter
- 1 Wooden Flagon of Flour
- 1 Cup Diced Carrots
- 1/2 Cup Diced Onions

Recipe

- Stoke the flames of your open-pit fire, and achieve a low heat.

- Combine all ingredients into a large soup pot.

- Stir vigorously!

- Once hot, pour into earthen soup bowls immediately!

Behold, the Gourmet's signature dish - the Potage le Magnifique!

But wait. I know what you're wondering. "That's it? Is that all there is to it? What's the secret of the Gourmet?"

Do you really expect me to give away the secret to my most popular dish? Well guess what? I will! For that secret, my friends, is YOU! That's right, the Potage le Magnifique is delicious, and extraordinary. Using just the simple ingredients listed, you will create a potage that is both hearty and delicious. But in order to make the Potage le Magnifique truly magnificent, it takes the imagination of a truly inspired chef. Do you have that gift?

I have served bowls of the Potage le Magnifique that have caused grown men to weep with with joy. Can you guess what I added? Can you create... magic?

Varieties Of Daedra

by Aranea Drethan
Healer and Dissident Priest

There is little chance of our ever understanding the various orders of Daedra and their relationships to the Daedra Lords and their dominions. Of the varieties of Daedra that appear in our world, and the varieties of their relationships to their fellows and their Daedra patrons, there is no end. In one place and time they are seen to be this, and in another place and time they are seen to be the opposite, and in another place and time they are seen to be both this and that, in completely contradictory terms.

What Daedra serves this Prince? What Daedra gives orders, and what Daedra serves, and in what hierarchy, and under what circumstances? What Daedra exist in fellowship with one another, and what Daedra have eternal enmity to one another, and what Daedra are solitary, or social, and by turns solitary or social? There are no limits to the varieties of behaviors that may be observed, and in one place they may be this, and in another place they may that, and all rules describing them are always found to be contradictory and in exception to others.

Further, from whom may we seek answers to our questions about these orders? From mortals, who know little but what they may observe of another world? From the gods, who speak in riddles, of enigmas wrapped in mysteries, and who keep things from us, the better to preserve their dominion over us? From the Daedra themselves, who are never the models of straightforwardness or truthtelling, but rather are famous for misstatements and obfuscations?

And even were the Daedra to speak the truth, how can we know if they know themselves, or that there is any truth about them that is to be known, or are all arrangements among the Daedra protean and ever subject to change?

In short, what is to be known is little, and and what is to be trusted is nothing.

These things being said, I shall venture to relate what I have observed and heard of the relationships of the servants of Lord Dagon in my brief service to the Telvanni Wizard Divayth Fyr, when I sought him out and offered to bring peace to the victims of corprus in his sanitarium, once the Prophecies of the Incarnate had been fulfilled, and Dagoth Ur had been destroyed, and the Blight had been banished from the island of Vvardenfell forever.

Divayth Fyr told me that he, by choice, trafficked only with two Daedra Powers -- Mehrunes Dagon and Azura.

Azura, he said, knew and understood all things, and declined to speak of these things, or only spoke in riddles.

Mehrunes Dagon, on the other hand, out of pride, fixity of purpose, and a predictable lack of subtlety in thought, knew nothing and understood nothing, and was inclined to speak freely and without falsehood.

Divayth Fyr said that Dagon's chief servants, the Dremora, were like him in pride, fixed purpose, and lack of subtlety, with the addition of the peculiar traits of honor and loyalty, both within their class and within their relationship to Lord Dagon.

And Divayth Fyr said that the Dremora were ordered into clans and castes, and these clans and castes were well-defined. Individual Dremora might rise or fall in ranks, or move back and forth among clans, but only when regulated by complex oaths, and only at the will and pleasure of their Lord Dagon.

The Dremora refer to themselves as 'The Kyn' ('the People'), contrasting themselves to other Daedra, whom they consider unthinking animals. The term 'kynaz' refers to a member of the Dremora race ('he of the Kyn').

The least of kyn castes are the Churls, the undistinguished rabble of the lowest rank of Dremora. Churls are obsequeous to superiors but ferociously

cruel to humans and other Daedra.

Next in rank are the Caitiffs, creatures of uncalculating zeal, energy without discrimination. Caitiffs are used as irregulars in the faction wars of the Daedra, as berserkers and shock troops, undisciplined and unreliable, but eager and willing.

The highest of the regular rank-and file of Dremora troops are the Kynvals, warrior-knights who have distinguished themselves in battle, and shown the deliberate steadiness of potential war leaders.

Above the rank and file warriors of the Churl, Caitiff, and Kynval castes are the officer castes.

A Kynreeve is a clan sheriff or clan officer. Kynreeves are typically associated either with a clan fighting unit or an administrative office in the order of battle.

The Kynmarcher is the lord and high officer of a Daedric citadel, outpost, or gate. A Kymarcher's command is usually associated both with a unit and with a 'fief' -- a location or territory for which he is responsible.

Above the Kymarcher is the Markynaz, or 'grand duke'. A Markynaz is a lord of lords, and member of the Markyn, Mehrunes Dagon's Council of Lords.

The highest rank of Dremora is the Valkynaz, or 'prince'. This warrior duke is a member of the Valkyn, Mehrunes Dagon's personal guard. The Valkynaz are rarely encountered on Tamriel; normally they remain by Mehrunes Dagon's side, or serve as commanders of operations of particular importance or interest to Dagon.

Of the varieties of other Daedra I encountered while I served in Divayth Fyr's Corprusarium -- Ogrims and Golden Saints, Daedroths and Winged Twilights, Scamps and Clannfear -- there is much that might be said, but little that is helpful or reliable.

I did note, however, that when Divayth Fyr sought a Daedra of a character like unto the Dremora, but of greater power, and greater inclination for independence and initiative, or solely as a master, he summoned Xivilai, who are like the Dremora in personality and temperment, except that they hate subordination, and are liable to disloyalty and betrayal when they feel they have not been treated with the proper deference and respect.

The feral, beastlike Daedra like the Clannfear and the Daedroth appear in the service of many different Daedric Powers, and may represent common creatures existing like wild animals in the wildernesses of Oblivion. Other savage, semi-intelligent creatures like Scamps and Spider Daedra may also be found in the realms of various Daedra Lords.

The case of the Elemental Atronachs, on the other hand, is less certain. Flame and Frost Atronachs, for example, appear to be highly intelligent, but not all varieties of Elemental Atronachs seem to be social or to have the power of speech. Divayth Fyr preferred not to summon or deal with these creatures, had little experience with them, and showed no inclination to speculate upon their nature, so I learned little about them during my time at Tel Fyr.

Vernaccus and Bourlor

by Tavi Dromio

Hallgerd walked into the King's Ham that Loredas evening, his face clouded with sadness. While he ordered a mug of greef, his mates Garaz and Xiomara joined him with moderately sincere concern.

"What's wrong with you, Hallgerd?" asked Xiomara. "You're later than usual, and there's a certain air of tragedy you've dragged in with you. Have you lost money, or a nearest and dearest?"

"I haven't lost any money," Hallgerd grimaced. "But I've just received word from my nephew than my cousin Allioch has died. Perfectly natural, he says, just old age. Allioch was ten years younger than me."

"Aw, that's terrible. But it goes to show that it's important to savor all of life's possibilities, 'cause you never know when your time is coming," said Garaz, who had been sitting at the same stool at the smoky cornerclub for the last several hours. He was not one cursed with self-awareness.

"Life's short all right," agreed Xiomara. "But if you'll pardon a sentimental thought, few of us are aware of the influence we'll have after our deaths. Perhaps there's comfort there. For example, have I told you the story about Vernaccus and Bourlor?"

"I don't believe so," said Hallgerd.

Vernaccus was a daedra (said Xiomara, throwing a few dribbles on flin on the hearth to cast the proper mood), and though our tale took place many, many years ago, it would be fair to say that Vernaccus still is one. For what after all is time to the immortal daedra?

"Actually," Garaz interrupted. "I understand that the notion of immortality--
"

"I am trying to offer our friend an inspirational tale in his hour of need," Xiomara growled. "I don't have all bloody night to tell it, if you don't mind."

You wouldn't have heard of Vernaccus (said Xiomara, abandoning the theme of immortality for the time being) for even at the height of his power and fame, he was considered feeble by the admittedly high standards of the day. Of course, this lack of respect infuriated him, and his reaction was typical of lesser daedra. He went on a murderous rampage.

Soon word spread through all the villages in the Colovian West of the unholy terror. Whole families had been butchered, castles destroyed, orchards and fields torched and cursed so nothing would ever grow there again.

To make things even worse for the villagers, Vernaccus began getting visitations from an old rival of his from Oblivion. She was a daedra seducer named Horavatha, and she delighted in taunting him to see how angry she could make him become.

"You've flooded a village and that's supposed to be impressive?" she would sneer.

"Try collapsing a continent, and maybe you'll get a little attention."

Vernaccus could become pretty angry. He didn't come very close to collapsing the continent of Tamriel, but it wasn't for lack of trying.

A hero was needed to face the mad daedra, and fortunately, one was available.
His name was Bourlor, and it was said that he had been blessed by the goddess Kynareth. That was the only explanation for his inhuman accuracy with his bow and arrow, for he never missed a target. As a child he had driven his marksmanship tutors wild with frustration. They would tell him how to plant his feet, how to nock a bolt, the proper grip for the cord, the best method of release. He ignored all the rules, and somehow, every time,

the arrow would catch a breath of wind and sail directly to his target. It did not matter if the quarry was moving or still, at very close range or miles away. Whatever he wanted to strike with his arrow would be struck.
Bourlor answered the call when one of the village mayors begged him for help. Unfortunately, he was not as great a horseman as he was an archer. As he rode through the forest toward the mayor's town, a place called Evensacon, Vernaccus was already murdering everyone there. Horavatha watched, and stifled back a yawn.

"Murdering a small town mayor isn't going to put you in famous company, you know. What you need is a great champion to defeat. Someone like Ysgramor or Pelinal Whitestrake or--" she stared at the figure emerging from the forest. "That fellow!"

"Who's he?" growled Vernaccus between bites of the mayor's quivering body.

"The greatest archer in Tamriel. He's never missed."

Bourlor had his bow strung and was pointing it at the daedra. For a moment, Vernaccus felt like laughing -- the fellow was not even aiming straight -- but he had a well-honed sense of self-preservation. There was something about the man's look of confidence that convinced the daedra that Horavatha wasn't lying. As the bolt left the bow, Vernaccus vanished in a sheet of flame.

The arrow impaled a tree. Bourlor stood and stared. He had missed a target.
In Oblivion, Vernaccus raged. Fleeing before a mortal man like that -- not even the basest scamp would have been so craven. He had exposed himself for the weak, cowardly creature he was. As he considered what steps to take to salvage the situation, he found himself face-to-knee with the most fearsome of the Daedra Princes, Molag Bal.

"I never thought anything much of you, Vernaccus," the giant boomed. "But you have more than proven your worth. You have shown the creatures of Mundus that the daedra are more powerful than the blessings of the Gods."

The other denizens of Oblivion quickly agreed (as they always did) with the view of Molag Bal. The daedra are, after all, always very sensitive about their various defeats at the hands of mortal champions. Vernaccus was proclaimed The Elusive Beast, The Unpursuable One, He Who Cannot Be Touched, The Bane of Kynareth. Shrines devoted to him began to be built in remote corners of Morrowind and Skyrim.
Bourlor meanwhile, now found flawed, was never again called to rescue a village. He was so heartbroken over his failure to strike his target that he became a hermit, and never restrung his bow again. Some months later, he died, unmourned and unremembered.

"Is this really the tale you thought would cheer me?" asked Hallgerd incredulously.
"I've heard the King of Worms told more inspirational stories."

"Wait," smiled Xiomara. "I'm not finished yet."

For a year's time, Vernaccus was content to watch his legend grow and his fledging worship spread from his home in Oblivion. He was, in addition to being cowardly and inclined toward murderous rages, also a very lazy creature. His worshippers told tales of their Master avoiding the bolts of a thousand archers, of moving through oceans without getting wet, and other feats of avoidance that he would rather not have to demonstrate in person. The real story of his ignominious retreat from Bourlor was thankfully forgotten.

The bad news, when it came, was delivered to him with some relish by Horavatha. He had delighted in her jealousy at his growing reputation, so it was with a cruel smile she told him, "Your shrines are being assaulted."

"Who dares?" he roared.

"Everyone who passes them in the wilderness feels the need to throw a stone," Horavatha purred. "You can hardly blame them. After all, they represent He Who Cannot Be Touched. How could anyone be expected to resist such a target?"
Vernaccus peered through the veil into the world of Mundus and saw that it

was true. One of his shrines in Colovian West country was surrounded by a large platoon of mercenary soldiers, who delighted in pelting it with rocks. His worshippers huddled inside, praying for a miracle.

In an instant, he appeared before the mercenaries and his rage was terrifying to behold. They fled into the woods before he even had a chance to murder one of them. His worshippers threw open the wooden door to the shrine and dropped to their knees in joy and fear. His anger melted. Then a stone struck him.
Then another. He turned to face his assailants, but the air was suddenly filled with rocks.

Vernaccus could not see them, but he heard mercenaries in the woods laugh, "It's not even trying to move out of the way!"

"It's impossible not to hit him!" guffawed another.

With a roar of humiliation, the daedra bounded into the shrine, chased by the onslaught. One of the stones knocked the door closed behind him, striking him in the back. His face broke, anger and embarrassment disappearing, replaced by pain. He turned, shaking, to his worshippers who huddled in the shadows of the shrine, their faith shattered.

"Where did you get the wood to build this shrine?" Vernaccus groaned.

"Mostly from a copse of trees near the village of Evensacon," his high-priest shrugged.

Vernaccus nodded. He dropped forward, revealing the deep wound in his back. A rusted arrowhead buried in a whorl in the wood of the door had jolted loose in the assault and impaled him. The daedra vanished in a whirlwind of dust.

The shrines were abandoned shortly thereafter, though Vernaccus did have a brief resurgence as the Patron Spirit of Limitations and Impotence before fading from memory altogether. The legend of Bourlor himself never became very well known either, but there are still some who tell the tale,

like myself. And we have the advantage of knowing what the Great Archer himself didn't know on his deathbed -- his final arrow found its target after all.

Wabbajack

Little boys shouldn't summon up the forces of eternal darkness unless they have an adult supervising, I know, I know. But on that sunny night on the 5th of First Seed, I didn't want an adult. I wanted Hermaeus Mora, the daedra of knowledge, learning, gums, and varnishes. You see, I was told by a beautiful, large breasted man who lived under the library in my home town that the 5th of First Seed was Hermaeus Mora's night. And if I wanted the Oghma Infinium, the book of knowledge, I had to summon him. When you're the new king of Solitude, every bit of knowledge helps.

Normally, you need a witches coven, or a mages guild, or at least matching pillow case and sheets to invoke a prince of Oblivion. The Man Under the Library showed me how to do it myself. He told me to wait until the storm was at its height before shaving the cat. I've forgotten the rest of the ceremony. It doesn't matter.

Someone appeared who I thought was Hermaeus Mora. The only thing that made me somewhat suspicious was Hermaeus Mora, from what I read, was a big blobby multi-eyed clawed monstrosity, and this guy looked like a waistcoated banker. Also, he kept calling himself Sheogorath, not Hermaeus Mora. Still, I was so happy to have successfully summoned Hermaeus Mora, these inconsistencies did not bother me. He had me do some things that didn't make any sense to me (beyond the mortal scope, breadth, and ken, I suppose), and then his servant happily gave me something he called the Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack.

Wabbajack.

Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack.

Maybe the Wabbajack is the Book of Knowledge. Maybe I'm smarter because I know cats can be bats can be rats can be hats can be gnats can be thats can be thises. And that doors can be boars can be snores can be floors can be roars can be spores can be yours can be mine. I must be smart, for

the interconnective system is very clear to me. Then why, or wherefore do people keep calling me mad?

Wabbajack. Wabbajack. Wabbajack.

Walking the World

Volume XI: Solitude

by Spatior Munius

Welcome, friend. In our latest volume, we cover Solitude. Spatior could not be more pleased to be at the very seat of Imperial power in Skyrim. In the course of our tour, you'll see that Solitude's riches extend from her people to the history and architecture that make up the city itself.

As ever, we begin our journey outside the city walls, this time at the bottom of the hill that ascends all the way to Solitude's massive gates.

Solitude's Surroundings

Before scaling the hill to the city, you should be sure to take in the sights. Wander the track that leads down to the docks, and you can stop to enjoy one of the best views of the Great Arch.

Originally serving as both a landmark and windbreak for Solitude's port, the easily-defended Great Arch also provided an ideal building site for the ancient Nords.

The city gradually grew to extend across the entire length of the arch. This growth culminated in the building of the Blue Palace, home of the High Kings and Queens of Skyrim. We will visit the palace later.

The Gates of Solitude

Entrance to Solitude is guarded by two gates and three towers. The first of these towers, situated at the crossroads, is Sky Tower. It's mostly a lookout, although in times of war, barricades are erected across the nearby road to act as a first line of defense.

The second tower and first, smaller gate are collectively known as the Squall Gate. Here, attacking armies meet their first real resistance. Last and

certainly most impressive is the Storm Gate.

While Castle Dour, found just within the city's main gate, has always been a massive walled structure, Solitude's outer walls and gates were not added until shortly after the coronation of High King Erling.

Looking up and to the left of the main gate, you can see a small hint of Erling's preference for a more rounded style of architecture that we will see later in the Castle Dour extension, as well as the interior arch and the windmill.

Now we pass through the gates and enter the main shopping district of Solitude.

The Well District

Stepping inside Solitude's gates, you get your first view of the city itself. Rising tall and proud before you, banners waving from its crown, is the Emperor's Tower. Home to the Kings of Haafingar before the consolidation of Skyrim and the creation of the Blue Palace, the Emperor's Tower is now used exclusively as guest quarters for Emperors who come to visit the city.

To your left and right are Solitude's inn and shops. Here can be found some of the finest imported goods in Skyrim. After all, Solitude is a wealthy city with ready access to the major shipping lanes of Tamriel.

Continuing ahead, you'll come to the ramp that takes you up to Castle Dour. From here, you can truly feel the weight of this stone bastion's looming presence. The left-most tower, topped by the pointed roof of Erling's extension, was once the castle barracks and jail. Today, the tower is the center of military power here in Solitude.

Looking right past the looming Emperor's tower, you can glimpse Solitude's natural bridge arcing gracefully over to the windmill. Built during High King Erling's day, the bridge was said to be used used to discretely allow Captain Jytte, the famous privateer, to enter Castle Dour. Some historians claim that she and the High King were simply attempting to keep their

business dealings quiet. Others believe the Jytte and Erling were involved on a more personal level.

At the end of the bridge is the windmill. The tower and the windmill serve as one of Solitude's most recognizable man-made landmarks. The Windmill's power was once used to open the gates to what is now the East Empire Company Warehouse, but today that task falls to the strong backs of the dock workers.

In the shadow of the windmill you'll find the outdoor market and the well. Here, you can buy a number of local delicacies including the famous spiced wine made exclusively in Solitude.

From here we'll travel up the ramp and into Castle Dour Courtyard.

Castle Dour

As you enter the courtyard of Castle Dour, you are confronted with the banner of Solitude hanging over the door to what is now Castle Dour proper.

At the far end of the courtyard stands the impressive Temple of the Divines. The founders of Solitude were deeply devout and Solitude is the only place in Skyrim where all of the divines are worshiped in a single temple. All three of the buildings here are well worth taking a look inside, but only the Temple and Castle Dour's military wing are open.

If you do venture inside the temple, take special note of the alcoves at the front. You can see the empty alcove that once held the shrine of Talos before Talos worship was outlawed.

From the courtyard, travel out the exit between Castle Dour and the Temple and you'll get your first sight of the Blue Palace. Along the way, be sure to stop outside the Bards College, a large building on your left marked by the Flame of Callisos burning beside the steps.

Named for a famous bard, it is said that as long as the flame burns, the

college will stand.

The Bards College

Looking up from the Bards College steps, you can see that the college stands taller than the Blue Palace itself. The bards who train here can be heard throughout Skyrim, singing songs that capture the history of the ages. If you get a chance you should be sure to catch the Burning of King Olaf, an ancient festival where "King Olaf" is burned in effigy.

Continue up the road from the college and you'll reach the courtyard of the Blue Palace, our final destination.

The Blue Palace

The Blue Palace is home to the Jarls of Solitude, who for centuries have also served as the High Kings and High Queens of Skyrim. The northeast wing, on your left as you enter, holds the living quarters of the Jarl and her court on the top level and various servants below.

The southwest wing, known as the Pelagius Wing, has fallen into a state of disrepair. Named for the famous High King, Pelagius the Mad, the wing is rumored to be haunted by the king's ghost. The wing has been locked and left alone since shortly after Pelagius's death.

You should be sure to venture inside the Blue Palace. The grand atrium and court chambers are a sight not to be missed.

Other Points of Interest

Spatior has shown you Solitude in all its grandeur, but there are a few places more to see. The walls of the city are easily accessible and well worth climbing for the remarkable view. The Solitude Docks are also worth a visit, as they are the largest in Skyrim.

That's all for Walking the World Volume XI. Spatior does not know his next

destination yet, but you can be sure that where he does go he will leave you a record of the best things to see.

Spatior Munius, World Traveler

War of the First Council

by Agrippa Fundilius

This account by the Imperial scholar Agrippa Fundilius is based on various Imperial and Dunmer sources, and written for Western readers.

The War of the First Council was a First Age religious conflict between the secular Dunmer Houses Dwemer and Dagoth and the orthodox Dunmer Houses Indoril, Redoran, Dres, Hlaalu, and Telvanni. The First Council was the first pan-Dunmer governing body, which collapsed over disputes about sorceries and enchantments practiced by the Dwemer and declared profane by the other Houses.

The Secular Houses, less numerous, but politically and magically more advanced, and aided by Nord and Orc clans drawn by promise of land and booty, initially campaigned with great success in the north of Morrowind, and occupied much of the land now comprising Redoran, Vvardenfell, and Telvanni District. The Orthodox Houses, widely dispersed and poorly organized, suffered defeat after defeat until Nerevar was made general of all House troops and levies.

Nerevar secured the aid of nomad barbarian tribesmen, and contrived to force a major battle at the Secular stronghold of Red Mountain on Vvardenfell. The Secular forces were outmaneuvered and defeated with the help of Ashlander scouts, and the survivors forced to take refuge in the Dwemer stronghold at Red Mountain.

After a brief siege, treason permitted Nerevar and his troops to enter the stronghold, where the Secular leaders were slain, and Nerevar mortally wounded. General slaughter followed, and Houses Dwemer and Dagoth were exterminated. Nerevar died shortly thereafter of his wounds.

Three of Nerevar's associates among the Orthodox Houses, Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil, succeeded to control of the re-created First

Council, re-named the Grand Council of Morrowind, and went on to be come the god-kings and immortal rulers of Morrowind known as the Tribunal, or Almsivi.

The Warrior's Charge

An old poem of the Redguards

The star sung far-flung tales
Wreathed in the silver of Yokuda fair,
Of a Warrior who, arrayed in hue sails
His charges through the serpent's snare

And the Lord of runes, so bored so soon,
Leaves the ship for an evening's dare,
Perchance to wake, the coiled snake,
To take its shirt of scales to wear

And the Lady East, who e'ery beast,
Asleep or a'prowl can rouse a scare,
Screams as her eye, alight in the sky
A worm no goodly sight can bear

And the mailed Steed, ajoins the deed
Not to be undone from his worthy share,
Rides the night, towards scale bright,
Leaving the seasoned Warrior's care

Then the serpent rose, and made stead to close,
The targets lay plain and there,
But the Warrior's blade the Snake unmade,
And the charges wander no more, they swear

Watcher of Stones

by Gelyph Sig

Thane of Bjorin

Long have I waited at the Guardians. I must know: are the stories true? Surely you've heard them. Tales of the stones granting powers to Heroes of old, those special few being able to choose any stone to rewrite his fate. Of course you've heard them, that's why you touch the stones as you pass by. You've heard they bring luck, or a sign from the gods. But you think little of the action. It has no true meaning for you. I see it in your eyes as you pass. You do not believe. But I have always believed. Always felt that I was one of the few whose fate was not sealed at birth by the stars overhead. One of the few who could use these stones, draw on the power of the gods to change my life, change my future. I have always felt it.

I have done much in my years. Fought battles, defended villages, quested and adventured throughout Skyrim. I have bested the Companions of Whiterun in combat, and performed deeds worthy of everlasting praise in song from the Bards College. No task was too small or great if it could bring me honor, glory, proof that I was worthy of the stones' power.
And yet, nothing.

I have found many of these accursed stones in my travels, and none have responded to my touch. With each new feat I would return to the Guardians, wondering if the gods finally deemed me worthy. But now those days are gone. I am an old man, with no fight left in me. And so here I sit, watching the faces of those who pass by on their daily errands, their mundane travels from one city or town to another. Most of you do not even give the stones a passing glance. You have never heard their call, you will never feel drawn to them. Some days, I envy you that.

Long will I wait at the Guardians, for I must know. Are the stories true?

The Waters of Oblivion

A hundred and twenty numbered ages in the void that fated folk had grown deep-schooled in evil. Then the Bright Gods resolved to punish those faithless spirits, and shatter the unruly caitiffs, those huge, unholy scathers, loathsome to the Light. They repented exceedingly that they had gazed upon Oblivion, and seen there the first of dark kin, and welcomed them as brothers and sisters.

The Principalities of Victory beheld how great was the wickedness of the wayward spirits, and saw that they were bold in sin and full of wiles. They resolved then to chasten the tribes of daedra, and smite darkkind with hammer and hand.

But ever shall Darkness contest the Light, and great were the Powers that breathed the void and laid waste upon one another, and no oath might bind them, so deep were they in envy and perfidy. For once the portals are opened, who shall shut them upon the rising tide?

The Wild Elves

by Kier-jo Chorvak

In the wilds of most every province of Tamriel, descended philosophically if not directly from the original inhabitants of the land, are the Ayleids, commonly called the Wild Elves. While three races of Elven stock -- the Altmer (or High Elves), the Bosmer (or Wood Elves), and the Dunmer (or Dark Elves) -- have assimilated well into the new cultures of Tamriel, the Ayleids and their brethren have remained aloof toward our civilization, preferring to practice the old ways far from the eyes of the world.

The Wild Elves speak a variation of Old Cyrodilic, opting to shun Tamrielic and separating themselves from the mainstream of Tamriel even further than the least urbanized of their Elven cousins. In temperament they are dark-spirited and taciturn -- though this is from the point of view of outsiders (or "Pellani" in their tongue), and doubtless they act differently within their own tribes.

Indeed, one of the finest sages of the University of Gwilym was a civilized Ayleid Elf, Tjurhane Fyrre (1E2790-2E227), whose published work on Wild Elves suggests a lively, vibrant culture. Fyrre is one of the very few Ayleids to speak freely on his people and religion, and he himself said "the nature of the Ayleid tribes is multihued, their personalities often wildly different from their neighbor[ing] tribes" (Fyrre, T., Nature of Ayleidic Poesy, p. 8, University of Gwilym Press, 2E12).

Like any alien culture, Wild Elves are often feared by the simple people of Tamriel. The Ayleids continue to be one of the greatest enigmas of the continent of Tamriel. They seldom appear in the pages of written history in any role, and then only as a strange sight a chronicler stumbles upon before they vanish into the wood. When probable fiction is filtered from common legend, we are left with almost nothing. The mysterious ways of the Ayleids have remained shrouded since before the First Era, and may well remain so for thousands of years to come.

The Windhelm Letters

The following transcribed letters were recovered from a strongbox found after a fire consumed a house in Solitude in the early part of the 3rd Era. Nobody by the addressed name lived at the home, and it is unknown how long the family had owned the strongbox. The letters are believed to have been written during the reign of Jarl Elgryr the Unminded, who ruled Windhelm in the Second Era and about whom few other records are extant.

My dearest Thessalonius,

I hope this letter reaches you, and finds you well. It is getting more difficult to find paper within the city, but I still save the scraps sent by the city's tax agents. I hope you don't mind a household reckoning on the reverse of this.

Windhelm remains as cold as ever, but nothing compared to the heart of her king. Smoke and revelry rise from the palace daily, while we have little wood or coal to keep the chill off. I fear for the little ones, but they're so brave, having never known any other kind of life. We all speak of you daily, and hope that we may come to see you soon.

Yours,
Reylia

Dear Thessalonius,

Your last message arrived safely, but the promised gold mentioned within did not. When I mentioned this to the courier, she shrugged and turned to the door with no other word. While hearing from you brings joy to us all, I would caution you to not trust that particular woman again.

The minds of the city grow numb with cold and silence. We starve, and the unminded one makes no appearance, no speech, nothing to succor his

people. His wizard has been seen walking the streets of the city at odd hours, visiting homes. I saw him paint some horrid symbol on one door -- it dripped like blood before vanishing like sand in the wind. The next dawn, nobody who lived there still drew breath. I am a friend to one of the scullery maids who was sent to clean out the house. She described the most horrible things to me and the children, but I will spare you the details.

The worst of it is, that was a house that supported the king. If that's what happens to his friends, what will be the fate of the rest of us?

But don't let this shift your mind from its important tasks. We all know you work to free us, and pray for your success and swift return.

Love,
Reylia

This next letter was scribbled onto a piece of cloth with what appears to be charcoal.

Thess.,

I hope you didn't actually ... [illegible] ... efforts are important, but our sufferings must remain ... [illegible] ... retaliation can be swift and terrible. If you no longer care for me, at least think of your ... [illegible] .... Love always, R

Dear Thessalonius,

Weeks go by and we have no word from Solitude. I tell the children that you're simply very busy, but it's getting harder to make excuses for you. If you can no longer send money (and I understand, smuggling anything of value into the city has become a fool's errand), at least send word that you still live and work for the freedom of Windhelm.

As regards your issue that I mentioned previously, worry not. With food

shortages being what they are, I have removed it from my concerns.

Always yours,
Reylia

My dearest Thessalonius,

It was good to hear from you at last. Please forgive the rantings of a starving mind. We have at last depleted the basement stores of food, even with the strictest rationing. I see the little ones' faces growing thin and my heart weeps for them. They are, in some ways, brave. I think they're looking after me moreso than I them.

Please come home. I strongly desire to look upon your face.

-- R

Papa,

Ma said to write you, so we love and miss you. Ma is tired a lot, but has lots of visitors, so we are being good and helpping.

Love,
Stessl and Shapl

Thessalonius,

I don't have much time. The city has finally broken. The gates of the palace will not keep us out. The storming begins soon. I have gathered those who still have a spirit to live, and we are taking our own fortunes to hand. I hope to see you on the other side of this. Pray for us as we once prayed for you.

Your Reylia

The Wispmother: Two Theories

by Mathias Etienne

Among the folk tales from the northern reaches of Skyrim, few subjects are as popular as the Wispmother: ghostly women who lure unsuspecting travelers to their doom, steal children, and takes vengeance on those who wronged them in life.

Similar tales exist throughout Tamriel: The Melusanae of Stros Mkai, who lure ships to wreck on jagged shoals, then consume the souls of those aboard. The serpentine Chalass of Black Marsh. The Amronal of Valenwood.

But unlike these mythic creatures, most scholars concede that Wispmothers actually exist. Though rare, credible reports of their sightings are simply too frequent to be ignored. Herein, a synopsis of what can be gleaned from provincial legends, and the dominant theories on what they may actually be.

Wispmothers

Most tales agree on only a few basic facts about Wispmothers. They are always female. They take the form of human (some say Elven) spirits, wreathed in mist and decaying rags. They have an affinity for frost magic, rarely appearing in more temperate climes.

But beyond that, the tales differ wildly. Some say they are ghosts, waiting to be laid to rest. Others, that they are all that remains of the Snow Elves who once ruled Skyrim. Some say they are native to Hjaalmarch (or the north more generally), but other tales mention them in forgotten places, on mountaintops as far away as the Jeralls.

Most reputable scholars dismiss these stories, preferring instead to focus on the few documented sightings from recent years. From these, two dominant theories have emerged:

Based on his extensive research into necromancy and Cyrodiil's Ayleid culture, Master Sadren Sarethi posits that Wispmothers are a necrologic state, a type of lich-dom developed by a now-forgotten First Era culture. Under his theory, these are no mere ghosts - they are a cult of powerful sorceresses who achieved eternal life through undeath.

Alternately, Lydette Viliane of the Synod contends that Wispmothers are not undead at all, but rather elemental manifestations arising out of Nirn itself. By noting several similarities to Spriggans and Ice Wraiths, she contends that the Wispmothers are essentially elemental personifications of snow or mist, innately wielding the power of their element, instead of manipulating it through conventional sorcery.

Wisps

In most accounts, the victim is initially drawn to the Wispmother by glowing, ghostly lights. Although initially passive, these creatures later attack in tandem with her, distracting the victim and draining their energy.

Popular legend holds that these are the spirits of the Wispmother's previous victims. These spirits strengthen her, so anyone hoping to destroy her must first release the souls of those she has killed.

To scholars, this description immediately recalls the Will-o-the-Wisp, a rare and dangerous swamp denizen of southern Tamriel. Oddly, Cyrodillic legends invariably refer to Wisps as lone predators, while these appear to exist in some sort of symbiotic relationship with others of their kind.

Viliane argues that these Wisps are a sub-species of true Wisps, scavengers that lure prey to the Wispmother and share in the psychoetherial energy released by her kills. As co-dependent scavengers, they most likely lack the formidable defenses of their predatory cousins, rendering them far more vulnerable.

Alternately, Sarethi posits that these "Wisps" are merely emanations or conjurations of the Wispmother, and not free-living creatures. This is

supported by one incident in which an adventurer reportedly killed a Wispmother directly, only to observe the remaining Wisps immediately perish as well, though the source is considered highly unreliable.

In summary, scholarly opinion about Wispmothers and Wisps is sharply divided, and is likely to remain so for some time. But all sources agree on one crucial point: these are highly dangerous foes, and should be avoided at all costs.

Withershins

By Yaqut Tawashi

"All right," said Kazagha. "Why don't you want to talk?"

Zaki put down his mug of mead and just stared at his wife for a few seconds. Finally, grudgingly: "Because everything I have a conversation, darling, it flows in alphabetical order. Just like I told you. I think the only way to stop it is not to talk at all."

"Couldn't you just be imagining this?" said Kazagha patiently. "It wouldn't be the first time you had an insane paranoid delusion. Remember when you thought the royal battlemage of Black Marsh was hiding behind every tree with lewd intent, intent on making you -- a middle-aged, fat, balding tailor -- into his personal sex slave? You don't need to be ashamed, but it's Sheogorath's way to make us all a little crazy sometimes. If you go to the healer--"

"Damn it, Kazagha!" snarled Zaki and stomped out, slamming the door behind him. He nearly collided with Siyasat, his neighbor.

"Excuse me," she said to Zaki's back. He clamped his hands over his ears as he stormed down the street, turning the corner to his tailor shop. His first customer was waiting out front, smiling widely. Zaki tried to keep his temper under control and took out his keys, returning the customer's smile.

"Fine day," said the young man.

"Gods!" hollered Zaki, sending the young man flying with a well-placed punch, and dashing away.

As much as he hated to admit that Kazagha was right, it was evidently time, once again, for one of the healer's herbal cocktails. Tarsu's temple to health, mental and physical, was several streets north, an impressive obelisk.

Halqa, the chief herbalist, met him before he came in the hall.

"How are you today, Sa'Zaki Saf?"

"I need to make an appointment with Tarsu," said Zaki in his calmest voice.

"Just one moment, let me see how his schedule looks." Halqa said, looking over a scroll. "Is this an emergency?"

"Kind of," said Zaki, and slapped his head. Why couldn't he say yes, or absolutely, or sure?

"Let's see," said Halqa, frowning. "The best I can do is next Middas. Would that work for you?"

"Middas!" cried Zaki. "I'll be a complete psychotic by Middas. Isn't there anything earlier?"

He knew what the answer would be before she said it. There was no alternative. In a way, he had forced the response. If only he had kept the conversation going until "Y."

"No," said Halqa. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to make the appointment--?"

Zaki walked away, gritting his teeth. He wandered the streets, his head down to avoid all conversations, until he looked up and discovered that he had walked all the way to the wharf. A sweet breeze was blowing along the water and he took several deep breaths until he felt almost normal. When his temper cooled, he could think again. What if this alphabetical conversation wasn't a delusion at all? What if what he felt wasn't paranoia, but acute awareness? He knew it was the classic dilemma: am I crazy or is there really something weird going on?

Across the road was a shop called ParaDocks, featuring a display of herbs, crystals, and vapors trapped in orbs . The sign in the window read "Mystical Consultation sunrise to noon." It was worth a shot, though Zaki was dubious. The only people who generally came down the wharf for healing

were stupid adventurers who didn't know any better.

Incense burned in copious billows of pink and gold, obscuring and then revealing the clutter within. Jijjic death masks glowered down from the walls, smoking censors hung by chains from the ceiling, and the floor was a maze of bookshelves. At a wellworn table in the back a small man wearing a headress was tabulating a young lady's purchases.

"Okay," said the man. "Your total comes to fifty-seven gold pieces. I threw in the restorative scale conditioner for free. Just remember, the candle should be lit only after you invoke Goroflox The Unholy, and mandrake root does best in partial shade."

The customer gave a quick, shy smile to Zaki and left the store.

"Please help me," said Zaki. "Every conversation I hear or get involved in seems to be arranged alphabetically. I don't know if I'm going insane or if there are some kind of bizarre forces at work. To be honest with you, I'm normally a skeptic when it comes to your type of business, but I'm at the end of my rope. Can you do anything to make this madness end?"

"Quite a common problem, actually," said the man, patting Zaki on the arm. "When you get to the end of the alphabet, do conversations then go to reverse alphabetical order or start at the beginning of the alphabet?"

"Reverse alphabetical order," said Zaki, and then corrected himself. "Damn it! I mean, it starts from the beginning, all over again. I'm in agony. Can you call on the spirits and tell me, am I insane?"

"Sauriki," said the man with a reassuring smile. "I don't have to. You're quite sane."

"Thank you," said Zaki, frowning. "By the way, my name's Zaki, not Sauriki."

"Unusually close, eh?" said the man, patting Zaki on the back. "My name's Octoplasm. Follow me, please. I think I have just what you need."

Octoplasm lead Zaki down the narrow corridor behind the desk. The two men pushed past dusty cabinets filled with strange creatures in liquids, past heaps of neolithic stones, past stack after stack of moldering leather-bound books, into the dank heart of the store. There he picked up a small, squat cylindrical drum and a book, and handed them to Zaki.

"'Vampirism, Daedric Possession, and Withershin Therapy,'" said Zaki, squinting his eyes to read the book in the gloom. "What in Oblivion does this have to do with me? I'm not a vampire, look at this tan. And what's Withershin Therapy, and how much will it cost me?"

"Withershins, from the Old Cyrodilic withersynes, which means backwards," said Octoplasm in a serious tone. "It's the art of reversing the direction of things in order to gain access to the spirit world, and break curses, cure vampirism, and trigger all manners of apotropaic healing. You know the story about the guy who was told that slaughterfish live in hot water, so he said, 'Well, let's boil them in cold water'?"

"Xenophus," said Zaki instinctively, his brother having taken a rather esoteric upper level course in Cyrodilic philosophy as an elective in at the Imperial College thirty-one years before, and immediately wishing he hadn't. "And what do you do with the cylindrical thingy?"

Octoplasm lit a candle and held the object over it so Zaki could see more clearly. All along the cylinder were narrow slits and when Zaki peered within them, he saw a succession of old black and white drawings of a naked man leaping over boxes, one frame after the next.

"You spin it like so," said Octoplasm, slowly whirling the device clockwise so the man within leapt over the boxes over and over again. "It's called a zoetrope. Pretty neat, eh? Now, you take it and start spinning it counterclockwise, and while you're doing it, read this incantation I've marked in the book."

Zaki took the zoetrope and began spinning it counterclockwise over the candle, so the little naked man within seemed to bound backwards over the

boxes. It took a little coordination and concentration to keep whirling at a steady pace, but gradually the man's awkward and jerky backjumps became more and more fluid until Zaki could no longer see the individual frames flipping. It looked just like a little humanoid hamster on an endless reverse treadmill. While he continued to spin the zoetrope with one hand, Zaki took the book in the other and read the underlined passage.

"Zoetrope counter-spin, counter-spin, counter-spin / Pull my life from the rut that it's in / I invoke the Goddesses Boethiah, Kynareth, and Drisis / To invert my potentially metaphysical crisis / My old life may have been rather pointless and plain / But I dislike the prospect of going insane / Make the pattern reverse by this withershin / Zoetrope, counter-spin, counter-spin, counter-spin."

As he chanted the spell, Zaki noticed that the little naked man in the zoetrope began to look more like himself. The moustache vanished, and the hairline receded. The man's waistline expanded, and the buttocks sagged to the shape and texture of half-inflated balloons. Scales approximating his own Argonian pattern appeared. The man began to trip as he bounded backwards over the boxes, taking bigger breaths and sweating. By the time Zaki reached the end of the incantation, his twin was clutching his chest and tumbling end-over-end over the boxes in a free-fall.

Octoplasm took the zoetrope and the book from Zaki's hands. Nothing seemed to have changed. No thunder had rumbled. No winged serpents had sprung out of Zaki's head. No fiery explosions. But Zaki felt that something was different. Good different. Normal.

At the counter, when Zaki pulled out his sachel of gold pieces, Octoplasm merely shook his head: "Are treatment radical such of effects term long the what sure be can't we, naturally. Charge no."

Feeling the first real relief he had felt in days, Zaki walked backwards out of the shop and down the road to his shop.

The Wolf Queen

Book One

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of the first century third era sage Montocai:

3E 63:
In the autumntide of the year, Prince Pelagius, son of Prince Uriel, who is son of the Empress Kintyra, who is niece of the great Emperor Tiber Septim, came to the High Rock city-state of Camlorn to pay court to the daughter of King Vulstaed. Her name was Quintilla, the most beauteous princess in Tamriel, skilled at all the maidenly skills and an accomplished sorceress.

Eleven years a widower with a young son named Antiochus, Pelagius arrived at court to find that the city-state was being terrorized by a great demon werewolf. Instead of wooing, Pelagius and Quintilla together went out to save the kingdom. With his sword and her sorcery, the beast was slain and by the powers of mysticism, Quintilla chained the beast's soul to a gem. Pelagius had the gem made into a ring and married her.

But it was said that the soul of the wolf stayed with the couple until the birth of their first child.

3E 80
"The ambassador from Solitude has arrived, your majesty," whispered the steward Balvus.

"Right in the middle of dinner?" muttered the Emperor weakly. "Tell him to wait."

"No, father, it's important that you see him," said Pelagius, rising. "You can't make him wait and then give him bad news. It's undiplomatic."

"Don't go then, you're much better at diplomacy than I am. We should have all the family here," Emperor Uriel II added, suddenly aware how few people were present at his dinner table. "Where's your mother?"

"Sleeping with the archpriest of Kynareth," Pelagius would have said, but he was, as his father said, diplomatic. Instead he said, "At prayer."

"And your brother and sister?"

"Amiel is in Firsthold, meeting with the Archmagister of the Mages Guild. And Galana, though we won't be telling this to the ambassador, of course, is preparing for her wedding to the Duke of Narsis. Since the ambassador expects her to be marrying his patron the King of Solitude instead, we'll tell him that she's at the spa, having a cluster of pestilent boils removed. Tell him that, and he won't press too hard for the marriage, politically expedient though it may be," Pelagius smiled. "You know how queasy Nords are about warty women."

"But dash it, I feel like I should have some family around, so I don't look like some old fool despised by his nearest and dearest," growled the Emperor, correctly suspecting this to be the case. "What about your wife? Where's she and the grandchildren?"

"Quintilla's in the nursery with Cephorus and Magnus. Antiochus is probably whoring around the City. I don't know where Potema is, probably at her studies. I thought you didn't like children around."

"I do during meetings with ambassadors in damp staterooms," sighed the Emperor. "They lend an air of, I don't know, innocence and civility. Ah, show the blasted ambassador in," he said to Balvus.

Potema was bored. It was the rainy season in the Imperial Province, wintertide, and the streets and the gardens of the City were all flooded. She could not remember a time when it was not raining. Had it been only days, or had it been weeks or months since the sun shone? There was no judging of time any more in the constant flickering torch-light of the palace, and as Potema walked through marble and stone hallways, listening to the pelting

of the rain, she could think nothing but that she was bored.

Asthephe, her tutor, would be looking for her now. Ordinarily, she did not mind studying. Rote memorization came easily to her. She quizzed herself as she walked down through the empty ballroom. When did Orsinium fall? 1E 980. Who wrote Tamrilean Tractates? Khosey. When was Tiber Septim born? 2E 288. Who is the current King of Daggerfall? Mortyn, son of Gothlyr. Who is the current Silvenar? Varbarenth, son of Varbaril. Who is the Warlord of Lilmoth? Trick question: it's a lady, Ioa.

What will I get if I'm a good girl, and don't get into any trouble, and my tutor says I'm an excellent student? Mother and father will renege on their promise to buy me a daedric katana of my own, saying they never remembered that promise, and it's far too expensive and dangerous for a girl my age.

There were voices coming from the Emperor's stateroom. Her father, her grandfather, and a man with a strange accent, a Nord. Potema moved a stone she had loosened behind a tapestry and listened in.

"Let us be frank, your imperial majesty," came the Nord's voice. "My sire, the King of Solitude, doesn't care if Princess Galana looked like an orc. He wants an alliance with the Imperial family, and you agreed to give him Galana or give back the millions of gold he gave to you to quell the Khajiiti rebellion in Torval. This was the agreement you swore to honor."

"I remember no such agreement," came her father's voice, "Can you, my liege?"

There was a mumbling noise that Potema took to be her grandfather, the ancient Emperor.

"Perhaps we should take a walk to the Hall of Records, my mind may be going," the Nord's voice sounded sarcastic. "I distinctly remember your seal being placed on the agreement before it was locked away. Of course, I may verily be mistaken."

"We will send a page to the Hall to get the document you refer to," replied her father's voice, with the cruel, soothing quality he used whenever he was about to break a promise. Potema knew it well. She replaced the loose stone and hurried out of the ballroom. She knew well how slowly the pages walked, used to running errands for a doddering emperor. She could make it to the Hall of Records in no time at all.

The massive ebony door was locked, of course, but she knew what to do. A year ago, she caught her mother's Bosmer maid pilfering some jewelry, and in exchange for her silence, forced the young woman to teach her how to pick locks. Potema pulled two pins off her red diamond broach and slid the first into the first lock, holding her hand steady, and memorizing the pattern of tumblers and grooves within the mechanism.

Each lock had a geography of its own.

The lock to the kitchen larder: six free tumblers, a frozen seventh, and a counter bolt. She had broken into that just for fun, but if she had been a poisoner, the whole Imperial household would be dead by now, she thought, smiling.

The lock to her brother Antiochus' secret stash of Khajiiti pornography: just two free tumblers and a pathetic poisoned quill trap easily dismantled with pressure on the counterweight. That had been a profitable score. It was strange that Antiochus, who seemed to have no shame, proved so easy to blackmail. She was, after all, only twelve, and the differences between the perversions of the cat people and the perversions of the Cyrodiils seemed pretty academic. Still, Antiochus had to give her the diamond broach, which she treasured.

She had never been caught. Not when she broke into the archmage's study and stole his oldest spellbook. Not when she broke into the guest room of the King of Gilane, and stole his crown the morning before Magnus's official Welcoming ceremony. It had become too easy to torment her family with these little crimes. But here was a document the Emperor wanted, for a very important meeting. She would get it first.

But this, this was the hardest lock she ever opened. Over and over, she massaged the tumblers, gently pushing aside the forked clamp that snatched at her pins, drumming the counterweights. It nearly took her a half a minute to break through the door to the Hall of Records, where the Elder Scrolls were housed.

The documents were well organized by year, province, and kingdom, and it took Potema only a short while to find the Promise of Marriage between Uriel Septim II, by the Grace of the Gods, Emperor of the Holy Cyrodiilic Empire of Tamriel and his daughter the Princess Galana, and His Majesty King Mantiarco of Solitude. She grabbed her prize and was out of the Hall with the door well-locked before the page was even in sight.

Back in the ball room, she loosened the stone and listened eagerly to the conversation within. For a few minutes, the three men, the Nord, the Emperor, and her father just spoke of the weather and some boring diplomatic details. Then there was the sound of footsteps and a young voice, the page.

"Your Imperial Majesty, I have searched the Hall of Records and cannot find the document you asked for."

"There, you see," came Potema's father's voice. "I told you it didn't exist."

"But I saw it!" The Nord's voice was furious. "I was there when my liege and the emperor signed it! I was there!"

"I hope you aren't doubting the word of my father, the sovereign Emperor of all Tamriel, not when there's now proof that you must have been ... mistaken," Pelagius's voice was low, dangerous.

"Of course not," said the Nord, conceding quickly. "But what will I tell my king? He is to have no connection with the Imperial family, and no gold returned to him, as the agreement -- as he and I believed the agreement to be?"

"We don't want any bad feelings between the kingdom of Solitude and us,"

came the Emperor's voice, rather feeble, but clear enough. "What if we offered King Mantiarco our granddaughter instead?"

Potema felt the chill of the room descend on her.

"The Princess Potema? Is she not too young?" asked the Nord.

"She is thirteen years old," said her father. "That's old enough to wed."

"She would an ideal mate for your king," said the Emperor. "She is, admittedly, from what I see of her, very shy and innocent, but I'm certain she would quickly grasp the ways of court -- she is, after all, a Septim. I think she would be an excellent Queen of Solitude. Not too exciting, but noble."

"The granddaughter of the Emperor is not as close as his daughter," said the Nord, rather miserably. "But I don't see how we can refuse the offer. I will send word to my king."

"You have our leave," said the Emperor, and Potema heard the sound of the Nord leaving the stateroom.

Tears streamed down Potema's eyes. She knew who the King of Solitude was from her studies. Mantiarco. Sixty-two years old, and quite fat. And she knew how far Solitude was, and how cold, in the northernmost clime. Her father and grandfather were abandoning her to the barbaric Nords. The voices in the room continued talking.

"Well-acted, my boy. Now, make sure you burn that document," said her father.

"My Prince?" asked the page's querulous voice.

"The agreement between the Emperor and the King of Solitude, you fool. We don't want its existence known."

"My Prince, I told the truth. I couldn't find the document in the Hall of

Records. It seems to be missing."

"By Lorkhan!" roared her father. "Why is everything in this palace always misplaced? Go back to the Hall and keep searching until you find it!"

Potema looked at the document. Millions of gold pieces promised to the kingdom of Solitude in the event of Princess Galana not marrying the king. She could bring it into her father, and perhaps as a reward he would not marry her to Mantiarco. Or perhaps not. She could blackmail her father and the Emperor with it, and make a tidy sum of money. Or she could produce it when she became Queen of Solitude to fill her coffers, and buy anything she wanted. More than a daedric katana, that was for certain.

So many possibilities, Potema thought. And she found herself not bored anymore.

Book Two

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of the first century third era sage Montocai:

3E 82:
A year after the wedding of his 14-year-old granddaughter the Princess Potema to King Mantiarco of the Nordic kingdom of Solitude, the Emperor Uriel Septim II passed on. His son Pelagius Septim II was made emperor, and he faced a greatly depleted treasury, thanks to his father's poor management.

As the new Queen of Solitude, Potema faced opposition from the old Nordic houses, who viewed her as an outsider. Mantiarco had been widowed, and his former queen was loved. She had left him a son, Prince Bathorgh, who was two years older than his stepmother, and loved her not. But the king loved his queen, and suffered with her through miscarriage after miscarriage, until her 29th year, when she bore him a son.

3E 97:
"You must do something to help the pain!" Potema cried, baring her teeth. The healer Kelmeth immediately thought of a she-wolf in labor, but he put the image from his mind. Her enemies called her the Wolf Queen for certes, but not because of any physical resemblance.

"Your Majesty, there is no injury for me to heal. The pain you feel is natural and helpful for the birth," he was going to add more words of consolation, but he had to break off to duck the mirror she flung at him.

"I'm not a pignosed peasant girl!" She snarled, "I am the Queen of Solitude, daughter of the Emperor! Summon the daedra! I'll trade the soul of every last subject of mine for a little comfort!"

"My Lady," said the healer nervously, drawing the curtains and blotting out

the cold morning sun. "It is not wise to make such offers even in jest. The eyes of Oblivion are forever watching for just such a rash interjection."

"What would you know of Oblivion, healer?" she growled, but her voice was calmer, quieter. The pain had relaxed. "Would you fetch me that mirror I hurled at you?"

"Are you going to throw it again, your Majesty?" said the healer with a taut smile, obeying her.

"Very likely," she said, looking at her reflection. "And next time I won't miss. But I do look a fright. Is Lord Vhokken still waiting for me in the hall?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Well, tell him I just need to fix my hair and I'll be with him. And leave us. I'll howl for you when the pain returns."

"Yes, your Majesty."

A few minutes later, Lord Vhokken was shown into the chamber. He was an enormous bald man whose friends and enemies called Mount Vhokken, and when he spoke it was with the low grumble of thunder. The Queen was one of the very few people Vhokken knew who was not the least bit intimidated by him, and he offered her a smile.

"My queen, how are you feeling?" he asked.

"Damned. But you're looking like Springtide has come to Mount Vhokken. I take it from your merry disposition that you've been made warchief."

"Only temporarily, while your husband the King investigates whether there is evidence behind the rumors of treason on the part of my predecessor Lord Thone."

"If you've planted it as I've instructed, he'll find it," Potema smiled,

propping herself up in the bed. "Tell me, is Prince Bathorgh still in the city?"

"What a question, your highness," laughed the mountain. "It's the Tournament of Stamina today, you know the prince would never miss that. The fellow invents new strategies of self-defense every year to show off during the games. Don't you recall last year, where he entered the ring unarmored and after twenty minutes of fending off six bladesmen, left the games without a scratch? He dedicated that bout to his late mother, Queen Amodetha."

"Yes, I recall."

"He's no friend to me or you, your highness, but you must give the man his due respect. He moves like lightning. You wouldn't think it of him, but he always seems to use his awkwardness to his advantage, to throw his opponents off. Some say he learned the style from the orcs to the south. They say he learned from them how to anticipate a foe's attack by some sort of supernatural power."

"There's nothing supernatural about it," said the Queen, quietly. "He gets it from his father."

"Mantiarco never moved like that," Vhokken chuckled.

"I never said he did," said Potema. Her eyes closed and her teeth gritted together. "The pain's returning. You must fetch the healer, but first, I must ask you one other thing -- has the new summer palace construction begun?"

"I think so, your Highness."

"Do not think!" she cried, gripping the sheets, biting her lips so a stream of blood dripped down her chin. "Do! Make certain that the construction begins at once, today! Your future, my future, and the future of this child depend on it! Go!"

Four hours later, King Mantiarco entered the room to see his son. His queen

smiled weakly as he gave her a kiss on the forehead. When she handed him the child, a tear ran down his face. Another one quickly followed, and then another.

"My Lord," she said fondly. "I know you're sentimental, but really!"

"It's not only the child, though he is beautiful, with all the fair features of his mother," Mantiarco turned to his wife, sadly, his aged features twisted in agony. "My dear wife, there is trouble at the palace. In truth, this birth is the only thing that keeps this day from being the darkest in my reign."

"What is it? Something at the tournament?" Potema pulled herself up in bed. "Something with Bathorgh?"

"No, it's isn't the tournament, but it does relate to Bathorgh. I shouldn't worry you at a time like this. You need your rest."

"My husband, tell me!"

"I wanted to surprise you with a gift after the birth of our child, so I had the old summer palace completely renovated. It's a beautiful place, or at least it was. I thought you might like it. Truth to tell, it was Lord Vhokken idea. It used to be Amodetha's favorite place." Bitterness crept into the king's voice. "Now I've learned why."

"What have you learned?" asked Potema quietly.

"Amodetha deceived me there, with my trusted warchief, Lord Thone. There were letters between them, the most perverse things you've ever read. And that's not the worst of it."

"No?"

"The dates on the letters correspond with the time of Bathorgh's birth. The boy I raised and loved as a son," Mantiarco's voice choked up with emotion. "He was Thone's child, not mine."

"My darling," said Potema, almost feeling sorry for the old man. She wrapped her arms around his neck, as he heaved his sobs down on her and their child.

"Henceforth," he said quietly. "Bathorgh is no longer my heir. He will be banished from the kingdom. This child you have borne me today will grow to rule Solitude."

"And perhaps more," said Potema. "He is the Emperor's grandson as well."

"We will name him Mantiarco the Second."

"My darling, I would love that," said Potema, kissing the king's tear-streaked face. "But may I suggest Uriel, after my grandfather the Emperor, who brought us together in marriage?"

King Mantiarco smiled at his wife and nodded his head. There was a knock at the door.

"My liege," said Mount Vhokken. "His highness Prince Bathorgh has finished the tournament and awaits you to present his award. He has successfully withstood attacks by nine archers and the giant scorpion we brought in from Hammerfell. The crowd is roaring his name. They are calling him The Man Who Cannot Be Hit."

"I will see him," said King Mantiarco sadly, and left the chamber.

"Oh he can be hit, all right," said Potema wearily. "But it does take some doing."

Book Three

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of the first century third era sage Montocai:

3E 98
The Emperor Pelagius Septim II died a few weeks before the end of the year, on the 15th of Evening Star during the festival of North Wind's Prayer, which was considered a bad omen for the Empire. He had ruled over a difficult seventeen years. In order to fill the bankrupt treasury, Pelagius had dismissed the Elder Council, forcing them to buy back their positions. Several good but poor councilors had been lost. Many say the Emperor had died as a result of being poisoned by a vengeful former Council member.

His children came to attend his funeral and the coronation of the next Emperor. His youngest son Prince Magnus, 19 years of age, arrived from Almalexia, where he had been a councilor to the royal court. 21-year-old Prince Cephorus arrived from Gilane with his Redguard bride, Queen Bianki. Prince Antiochus at 43 years of age, the eldest child and heir presumptive, had been with his father in the Imperial City. The last to appear was his only daughter, Potema, the so-called Wolf Queen of Solitude. Thirty years old and radiantly beautiful, she arrived with a magnificent entourage, accompanied by her husband, the elderly King Mantiarco and her year-old son, Uriel.

All expected Antiochus to assume the throne of the Empire, but no one knew what to expect from the Wolf Queen.

3E 99
"Lord Vhokken has been bringing several men to your sister's chambers late at night every night this week," offered the Spymaster. "Perhaps if her husband were made aware --"

"My sister is a devotee of the conqueror gods Reman and Talos, not the love goddess Dibella. She is plotting with those men, not having orgies with them. I'd wager I've slept with more men than she has," laughed Antiochus, and then grew serious. "She's behind the delay of the council offering me the crown, I know it. Six weeks now. They say they need to update records and prepare for the coronation. I'm the Emperor! Crown me, and to Oblivion with the formalities!"

"Your sister is surely no friend of yours, your majesty, but there are other factors at play. Do not forget how your father treated the Council. It is they who need following, and if need be, strong convincing," The Spymaster added, with a suggestive stab of his dagger.

"Do so, but keep your eye on the damnable Wolf Queen as well. You know where to find me."

"At which brothel, your highness?" inquired the Spymaster.

"Today being Fredas, I'll be at the Cat and Goblin."

The Spymaster noted in his report that night that Queen Potema had no visitors, for she was dining across the Imperial Garden at the Blue Palace with her mother, the Dowager Empress Quintilla. It was a warm night for wintertide and surprisingly cloudless though the day had been stormy. The saturated ground could not take any more, so the formal, structured gardens looked as if they had been glazed with water. The two women took their wine to the wide balcony to look over the grounds.

"I believe you are trying to sabotage your half-brother's coronation," said Quintilla, not looking at her daughter. Potema saw how the years had not so much wrinkled her mother as faded her, like the sun on a stone.

"It's not true," said Potema. "But would it bother you very much if it were true?"

"Antiochus is not my son. He was eleven years old when I married your father, and we've never been close. I think that being heir presumptive has

stunted his growth. He is old enough to have a family with grown children, and yet he spends all his time at debauchery and fornication. He will not make a very good Emperor," Quintilla sighed and then turned to Potema. "But it is bad for the family for seeds of discontent to be sown. It is easy to divide up into factions, but very difficult to unite again. I fear for the future of the Empire."

"Those sound like the words -- are you, by any chance, dying, mother?"

"I've read the omens," said Quintilla with a faint, ironic smile. "Don't forget -- I was a renowned sorceress in Camlorn. I will dead in a few months time, and then, not a year later, your husband will die. I only regret that I will not live to see your child Uriel assume the throne of Solitude."

"Have you seen whether --" Potema stopped, not wanting to reveal too many of her plans, even to a dying woman.

"Whether he will be Emperor? Aye, I know the answer to that too, daughter. Don't fear: you'll live to see the answer, one way or the other. I have a gift for him when he is of age," The Dowager Empress removed a necklace with a single great yellow gem from around her neck. "It's a soul gem, infused with the spirit of a great werewolf your father and I defeated in battle thirty-six years ago. I've enchanted it with spells from the School of Illusion so its wearer may charm whoever he choses. An important skill for a king."

"And an emperor," said Potema, taking the necklace. "Thank you, mother."

An hour later, passing the black branches of the sculpted douad shrubs, Potema noticed a dark figure, which vanished into the shadows under the eaves at her approach. She had noticed people following her before: it was one of the hazards of life in the Imperial court. But this man was too close to her chambers. She slipped the necklace around her neck.

"Come out where I can see you," she commanded.

The man emerged from the shadows. A dark little fellow of middle-age dressed in black-dyed goatskin. His eyes were fixed, frozen, under her spell.

"Who do you work for?"

"Prince Antiochus is my master," he said in a dead voice. "I am his spy."

A plan formed. "Is the Prince in his study?"

"No, milady."

"And you have access?"

"Yes, milady."

Potema smiled widely. She had him. "Lead the way."

The next morning, the storm reappeared in all its fury. The pelting on the walls and ceiling was agony to Antiochus, who was discovering that he no longer had his youthful immunity to a late night of hard drinking. He shoved hard against the Argonian wench sharing his bed.

"Make yourself useful and close the window," he moaned.

No sooner had the window been bolted then there was a knock at the door. It was the Spymaster. He smiled at the Prince and handed him a sheet of paper.

"What is this?" said Antiochus, squinting his eyes. "I must still be drunk. It looks like orcish."

"I think you will find it useful, your majesty. Your sister is here to see you."

Antiochus considered getting dressed or sending his bedmate out, but thought better of it. "Show her in. Let her be scandalized."

If Potema was scandalized, she did not show it. Swathed in orange and silver silk, she entered the room with a triumphant smile, followed by the man-mountain Lord Vhokken.

"Dear brother, I spoke to my mother last night, and she advised me very wisely. She said I should not battle with you in public, for the good of our family and the Empire. Therefore," she said, producing from the folds of her robe a piece of paper. "I am offering you a choice."

"A choice?" said Antiochus, returning her smile. "That does sound friendly."

"Abdicate your rights to the Imperial throne voluntarily, and there is no need for me to show the Council this," Potema said, handing her brother the letter. "It is a letter with your seal on it, saying that you knew that your father was not Pelagius Septim II, but the royal steward Fondoukth. Now, before you deny writing the letter, you cannot deny the rumors, nor that the Imperial Council will believe that your father, the old fool, was quite capable of being cuckolded. Whether it's true or not, or whether the letter is a forgery or not, the scandal of it would ruin your chances of being the Emperor."

Antiochus's face had gone white with fury.

"Don't fear, brother," said Potema, taking back the letter from his shaking hands. "I will see to it that you have a very comfortable life, and all the whores your heart, or any other organ, desires."

Suddenly Antiochus laughed. He looked over at his Spymaster and winked. "I remember when you broke into my stash of Khajiiti erotica and blackmailed me. That was close to twenty years ago. We've got better locks now, you must have noticed. It must have killed you that you couldn't use your own skills to get what you wanted."

Potema merely smiled. It didn't matter. She had him.

"You must have charmed my servant here into getting you into my study to use my seal," Antiochus smirked. "A spell, perhaps, from your mother, the witch?"

Potema continued to smile. Her brother was cleverer than she thought.

"Did you know that Charm spells, even powerful ones, only last so long? Of course, you didn't. You never were one for magic. Let me tell you, a generous salary is a stronger motivation for keeping a servant in the long run, sister," Antiochus took out his own sheet of paper. "Now I have a choice for you."

"What is that?" said Potema, her smile faltering.

"It looks like nonsense, but if you know what you're looking for, it's very clear. It's a practice sheet -- your handwriting attempting to look like my handwriting. It's a good gift you have. I wonder if you haven't done this before, imitating another person's handwriting. I understand a letter was found from your husband's dead wife saying that his first son was a bastard. I wonder if you wrote that letter. I wonder if I showed this evidence of your gift to your husband whether he would believe you wrote that letter. In the future, dear Wolf Queen, don't lay the same trap twice."

Potema shook her head, furious, unable to speak.

"Give me your forgery and go take a walk in the rain. And then, later today, unhatch whatever other plots you have to keep me from the throne." Antiochus fixed his eyes on Potema's. "I will be Emperor, Wolf Queen. Now go."

Potema handed her brother the letter and left the room. For a few moments, out in the hallway, she said nothing. She merely glared at the slivers of rainwater dripping down the marble wall from a tiny, unseen crack.

"Yes, you will, brother," she said. "But not for very long."

Book Four

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of the first century third era sage Montocai:
3E 109:
Ten years after being crowned Emperor of Tamriel, Antiochus Septim had impressed his subjects with little but the enormity of his lust for carnal pleasures. By his second wife, Gysilla, he had a daughter in the year 104, who he named Kintyra, after his great-great-great grandaunt, the Empress. Enormously fat and marked by every venereal disease known to the Healers, Antiochus spent little time on politics. His siblings, by marked contrast, excelled in this field. Magnus had married Hellena, the Cyrodiil Queen of Lilmoth -- the Argonian priest-king having been executed -- and was representing the Imperial interests in Black Marsh admirably. Cephorus and his wife Bianki were ruling the Hammerfell kingdom of Gilane with a healthy brood of children. But no one was more politically active than Potema, the Wolf-Queen of the Skyrim kingdom of Solitude.

Nine years after the death of her husband, King Mantiarco, Potema still ruled as regent for her young son, Uriel. Their court had become very fashionable, particularly for rulers who had a grudge to bear against the Emperor. All the kings of Skyrim visited Castle Solitude regularly, and over the years, emissaries from the lands of Morrowind and High Rock did as well. Some guests came from even farther away.

3E 110:
Potema stood at the harbor and watched the boat from Pyandonea arrive. Against the gray, breaking waves where she had seen so many vessels of Tamrielic manufacture, it looked less than exotic. Insectoid, certainly, with its membranous sails and rugged chitin hull, but she had seen similar if not identical seacraft in Morrowind. No, if not for the flag which was markedly alien, she would not have picked out the ship from others in the harbor. As the salty mist ballooned around her, she held out her hand in welcome to the

visitors from another island empire.

The men aboard were not merely pale, they were entirely colorless, as if their flesh were made of some white limpid jelly, but she had been forewarned. At the arrival of the King and his translator, she looked directly into their blank eyes and offered her hand. The King made noises.

"His Great Majesty, King Orgnum," said the translator, haltingly. "Expresses his delight at your beauty. He thanks you for giving him refuge from these dangerous seas."

"You speak Cyrodilic very well," said Potema.

"I am fluent in the languages of four continents," said the translator. "I can speak to the denizens of my own country Pyandonea, as well as those of Atmora, Akavir, and here, in Tamriel. Yours is the easiest, actually. I was looking forward to this voyage."

"Please tell his highness that he is welcome here, and that I am entirely at his disposal," said Potema, smiling. Then she added, "You understand the context? That I am just being polite?"

"Of course," said the translator, and then made several noises at the King, which the King reacted to with a smile. While they conversed, Potema looked up the dock and saw the now familiar gray cloaks watching her while they spoke with Levlet, Antiochus's man. The Psijic Order from the Summerset Isle. Very bothersome.

"My diplomatic emissary Lord Vhokken will show you to your rooms," said Potema. "Unfortunately, I have some other guests as well who require my attention. I hope your great majesty understands."

His Great Majesty King Orgnum did understand, and Potema made arrangements to dine with the Pyandoneans that evening. Meeting with the Psijic Order required all of her concentration. She dressed in her simplest black and gold robe and went to her stateroom to prepare. Her son, Uriel, was on the throne, playing with his pet joughat.

"Good morning, mom."

"Good morning, darling," said Potema, lifting her son in the air with feigned stain. "Talos, but you're heavy. I don't think I've ever carried such a heavy ten-year-old."

"That's probably because I'm eleven," said Uriel, perfectly aware of his mother's tricks. "And you're going to say that as an eleven-year-old, I should probably be with my tutor."

"I was fanatical about studying at your age," said Potema.

"I am king," said Uriel petulantly.

"But don't be satisfied with that," said Potema. "By all rights, you should be emperor already, you understand that, don't you?"

Uriel nodded his head. Potema took a moment to marvel at his likeness to the portraits of Tiber Septim. The same ruthless brow and powerful chin. When he was older and lost his baby fat, he'd be a splitting image of his great great great great great granduncle. Behind her, she heard the door opening and an usher bringing in several gray cloaks. She stiffened slightly, and Uriel, on cue, jumped down from the throne and left the stateroom, pausing to greet the most important of the Psijics.

"Good Morning, Master Iachesis," he said, enunciating each syllable with a regal accent that made Potema's heart soar. "I hope your accommodations at Castle Solitude meet with your approval."

"They do, King Uriel, thank you," said Iachesis, delighted and charmed.

Iachesis and his Psijics entered the chamber and the door was shut behind them. Potema sat only for a moment on the throne before stepping off the dais and greeting her guests.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," said Potema. "To think that you

sailed all the way from the Summerset Isles and I should keep you waiting any longer. You must forgive me."

"It's not all that long a voyage," said one of the gray cloaks, angrily. "It isn't as if we sailed all the way from Pyandonea."

"Ah. You've seen my most recent guests, King Orgnum and his retinue," said Potema breezily. "I suppose you think it unusual, me entertaining them, as we all know the Pyandoneans mean to invade Tamriel. You are, I take it, as neutral in this as you are in all political matters?"

"Of course," said Iachesis proudly. "We have nothing to gain or lose by the invasion. The Psijic Order preceded the organization of Tamriel under the Septim Dynasty and we shall survive under any political regime."

"Rather like a flea on whatever mongrel happens along, are you?" said Potema, narrowing her eyes. "Don't overestimate your importance, Iachesis. Your order's child, the Mages Guild, has twice the power you have, and they are entirely on my side. We are in the process of making an agreement with King Orgnum. When the Pyandoneans take over and I am in my proper place as Empress of this continent, then you shall know your proper place in the order of things."

With a majestic stride, Potema left the stateroom, leaving the grey cloaks to look from one to the other.

"We must speak to Lord Levlet," said one of the grey cloaks.

"Yes," said Iachesis. "Perhaps we should."

Levlet was quickly found at his usual place at the Moon and Nausea tavern. As the three grey cloaks entered, led by Iachesis, the smoke and the noise seemed to die in their path. Even the smell of tobacco and flin dissipated in their wake. He rose and then escorted them to a small room upstairs.

"You've reconsidered," said Levlet with a broad smile.

"Your Emperor," said Iachesis, and then corrected himself, "Our Emperor originally asked for our support in defending the west coast of Tamriel from the Pyandonean fleet in return for twelve million gold pieces. We offered our services at fifty. Upon reflection on the dangers that a Pyandonean invasion would have, we accept his earlier offer."

"The Mages Guild has generously -- "

"Perhaps for as low ten million gold pieces," said Iachesis quickly.

Over the course of dinner, Potema promised King Orgnum through the interpreter, to lead an insurrection against her brother. She was delighted to discover that her capacity for lying worked in many different cultures. Potema shared her bed that night with King Orgnum, as it seemed the polite and diplomatic thing to do. As it turned out, he was one of the better lovers she had ever had. He gave her some herbs before beginning that made her feel as if she was floating on the surface of time, conscious only of the gestures of love after she had found herself making them. She felt herself like the cooling mist, quenching the fire of his lust over and over and over again. In the morning, when he kissed her on the cheek, and said with his bald white eyes that he was leaving her, she felt a stab of regret.

The ship left harbor that morning, en route to the Summerset Isles and the imminent invasions. She waved them off to sea as she footsteps behind her. It was Levlet.

"They will do it for eight million, your highness" he said.

"Thank Mara," said Potema. "I need more time for an insurrection. Pay them from my treasury, and then go to the Imperial City and get the twelve million from Antiochus. We should make a good profit from this game, and you, of course, will have your share."

Three months later, Potema heard that the fleet of the Pyandoneans had been utterly destroyed by a storm that had appeared suddenly off the Isle of Artaeum. The home port of the Psijic Order. King Orgnum and all of his ships had been utterly annihilated.

"Sometimes making people hate you," she said, holding her son Uriel close, "Is how you make a profit ."

Book Five

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of Inzolicus, Second Century Sage and Student of Montocai:

3E 119:
For twenty-one years, The Emperor Antiochus Septim ruled Tamriel, and proved an able leader despite his moral laxity. His greatest victory was in the War of the Isle in the year 110, when the Imperial fleet and the royal navies of Summerset Isle, together with the magical powers of the Psijic Order, succeeded in destroying the Pyandonean invading armada. His siblings, King Magnus of Lilmoth, King Cephorus of Gilane, and Potema, the Wolf Queen of Solitude, ruled well and relations between the Empire and the kingdoms of Tamriel were much improved. Still, centuries of neglect had not repaired all the scars that existed between the Empire and the kings of High Rock and Skyrim.

During a rare visitation from his sister and nephew Uriel, Antiochus, who had suffered from several illnesses over his reign, lapsed into a coma. For months, he lingered in between life and death while the Elder Council prepared for the ascension of his fifteen-year-old daughter Kintyra to the throne.

3E 120:
"Mother, I can't marry Kintyra," said Uriel, more amused by the suggestion than offended. "She's my first cousin. And besides, I believe she's engaged to one of the lords of council, Modellus."

"You're so squeamish. There's a time and a place for propriety," said Potema. "But you're correct at any rate about Modellus, and we shouldn't offend the Elder Council at this critical juncture. How do you feel about Princess Rakma? You spent a good deal of time in her company in Farrun."

"She's all right," said Uriel. "Don't tell me you want to hear all the dirty details."

"Please spare me your study of her anatomy," Potema grimaced. "But would you marry her?"

"I suppose so."

"Very good. I'll make the arrangements then," Potema made a note for herself before continuing. "King Lleromo has been a difficult ally to keep, and a political marriage should keep Farrun on our side. Should we need them. When is the funeral?"

"What funeral?" asked Uriel. "You mean for Uncle Antiochus?"

"Of course," sighed Potema. "Anyone else of note die recently?"

"There were a bunch of little Redguard children running through the halls, so I guess Cephorus has arrived. Magnus arrived at court yesterday, so it ought to be any day now."

"It's time to address the Council then," said Potema, smiling.

She dressed in black, not her usual colorful ensembles. It was important to look the part of the grieving sister. Regarding herself in the mirror, she felt that she looked all of her fifty-three years. A shock of silver wound its way through her auburn hair. The long, cold, dry winters in northern Skyrim had created a map of wrinkles, thin as a spiderweb, all across her face. Still, she knew that when she smiled, she could win hearts, and when she frowned, she could inspire fear. It was enough for her purposes.

Potema's speech to the Elder Council is perhaps helpful to students of public speaking.

She began with flattery and self-abasement: "My most august and wise friends, members of the Elder Council, I am but a provincial queen, and I can only assume to bring to issue what you yourselves must have already

pondered."

She continued on to praise the late Emperor, who had been a popular ruler, despite his flaws: "He was a true Septim and a great warrior, destroying -- with your counsel -- the near invincible armada of Pyandonea."

But little time was wasted, before she came to her point: "The Empress Gysilla unfortunately did nothing to temper my brother's lustful spirits. In point of fact, no whore in the slums of the city spread out on more beds than she. Had she attended to her duties in the Imperial bedchamber more faithfully, we would have a true heir to the Empire, not the halfwit, milksop bastards who call themselves the Emperor's children. The girl called Kintyra is popularly believed to be the daughter of Gysilla and the Captain of the Guard. It may be that she is the daughter of Gysilla and the boy who cleans the cistern. We can never know for certain. Not as certainly as we can know the lineage of my son, Uriel. The eldest true son of the Septim Dynasty. My lords, the princes of the Empire will not stand for a bastard on the throne, that I can assure you."

She ended mildly, but with a call to action: "Posterity will judge you. You know what must be done."

That evening, Potema entertained her brothers and their wives in the Map Room, her favorite of the Imperial dining chambers. The walls were splashed with bright, if fading representations of the Empire and all the known lands beyond, Atmora, Yokunda, Akavir, Pyandonea, Thras. Overhead the great glass domed ceiling, wet with rain, displayed distorted images of the stars overhead. Lightning flashed every other minute, casting strange phantom shadows on the walls.

"When will you speak to the Council?" asked Potema as dinner was served.

"I don't know if I will," said Magnus. "I don't believe I have anything to say."

"I'll speak to them when they announce the coronation of Kintyra," said Cephorus. "Merely as a formality to show my support and the support of

Hammerfell."

"You can speak for all of Hammerfell?" asked Potema, with a teasing smile. "The Redguards must love you very much."

"We have a unique relationship with the Empire in Hammerfell," said Cephorus's wife, Bianki. "Since the treaty of Stros M'kai, it's been understood that we are part of the Empire, but not a subject."

"I understand you've already spoken to the Council," said Magnus's wife, Hellena, pointedly. She was a diplomat by nature, but as the Cyrodilic ruler of an Argonian kingdom, she knew how to recognize and confront adversity.

"Yes, I have," said Potema, pausing to savor a slice of braised jalfbird. "I gave them a short speech about the coronation this afternoon."

"Our sister is an excellent public speaker," said Cephorus.

"You're too kind," said Potema, laughing. "I do many things better than speaking."

"Such as?" asked Bianki, smiling.

"Might I ask what you said in your speech?" asked Magnus, suspiciously.

There was a knock on the chamber door. The head steward whispered something to Potema, who smiled in response and rose from the table.

"I told the Council that I would give my full support to the coronation, provided they proceed with wisdom. What could be sinister about that?" Potema said, and took her glass of wine with her to the door. "If you'll pardon me, my niece Kintyra wishes to have a word with me."

Kintyra stood in the hall with the Imperial Guard. She was but a child, but on reflection, Potema realized that at her age, she was already married two years to Mantiarco. There was a similarity, to be certain. Potema could see

Kintyra as the young queen, with dark eyes and pallid skin smooth and resolute like marble. Anger flashed momentarily in Kintyra's eyes on seeing her aunt, but emotion left her, replaced with calm Imperial presence.

"Queen Potema," she said serenely. "I have been informed that my coronation will take place in two days time. Your presence at the ceremony will not be welcome. I have already given orders to your servants to have your belongings packed, and an escort will be accompanying you back to your kingdom tonight. That is all. Goodbye, aunt."

Potema began to reply, but Kintyra and her guard turned and moved back down the corridor to the stateroom. The Wolf Queen watched them go, and then reentered the Map Room.

"Sister-in-Law," said Potema, addressing Bianki with deep malevolence. "You asked what I do better than speaking? The answer is: war."

Book Six

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of Inzolicus, Second Century Sage:

3E 120:
The fifteen-year-old Empress Kintyra Septim II, daughter of Antiochus, was coroneted on the 3rd day of First Seed. Her uncles Magnus, King of Lilmoth, and Cephorus, King of Gilane, were in attendance, but her aunt, Potema, the Wolf Queen of Solitude, had been banished from the court. Once back in her kingdom, Queen Potema began assembling the rebellion, which was to be known as the War of the Red Diamond. All the allies she had made over the years of disgruntled kings and nobles joined forces with her against the new Empress.

The first early strikes against the Empire were entirely successful. Throughout Skyrim and northern High Rock, the Imperial army found themselves under attack. Potema and her forces washed over Tamriel like a plague, inciting riots and insurrections everywhere they touched. In the autumn of the year, the loyal Duke of Glenpoint on the coast of High Rock sent an urgent request for reinforcements from the Imperial Army, and Kintyra, to inspire the resistance to the Wolf Queen, led the army herself.

3E 121:
"We don't know where they are," said the Duke, deeply embarrassed. "I've sent scouts out all over the countryside. I can only assume that they've retreated up north upon hearing of your army's arrival."

"I hate to say it, but I was hoping for a battle," said Kintyra. "I'd like to put my aunt's head on a spike and parade it around the Empire. Her son Uriel and his army are right on the border to the Imperial Province, mocking me. How are they able to be so successful? Are they just that good in battle or do my subjects truly hate me?"

She was tired after many months of struggling through the mud of autumn and winter. Crossing the Dragontail Mountains, her army nearly marched into an ambush. A blizzard snap in the normally temperate Barony of Dwynnen was so unexpected and severe that it must certainly have been cast by one of Potema's wizard allies. Everywhere she turned, she felt her aunt's touch. And now, her chance of facing the Wolf Queen at last had been thwarted. It was almost too much to bear.

"It is fear, pure and simple," said the Duke. "That is her greatest weapon."

"I need to ask," said Kintyra, hoping that by sheer will she could keep her voice from revealing any of the fear the Duke spoke of. "You've seen the army. Is it true that she has summoned a force of undead warriors to do her bidding?"

"No, as a matter of fact, it's not true, but she certainly fosters that rumor. Her army attacks at night, partly for strategic reasons, and partly to advance fears like that. She has, so far as I know, no supernatural aid other than the standard battlemages and nightblades of any modern army."

"Always at night," said Kintyra thoughtfully. "I suppose that's to disguise their numbers."

"And to move her troops into position before we're aware of them" added the Duke. "She's the master of the sneak attack. When you hear a march to the east, you can be certain she's already on top of you from the south. But listen, we'll discuss this all tomorrow morning. I've prepared the castle's best rooms for you and your men."

Kintyra sat in her tower suite and by the light of the moon and a single tallow candle, she penned a letter to her husband-to-be, Lord Modellus, back in the Imperial City. She hoped to be married to him in the summer at the Blue Palace her grandmother Quintilla had loved so much, but the war may not permit it. As she wrote, she gazed out the window at the courtyard below and the haunted, leafless trees of winter. Two of her guards stood on the battlements, several feet away from one another. Just like Modellus and

Kintyra, she thought, and proceeded to expound on the metaphor in her letter.

A knock on the door interrupted her poetry.

"A letter, your majesty, from Lord Modellus," said the young courier, handing the note to her.

It was short, and she read it quickly before the courier had a chance to retire. "I'm confused by something. When did he write this?"

"One week ago," said the courier. "He said it was urgent that I make it here as quickly as possible while he mobilized the army. I imagine they've left the City already."

Kintyra dismissed the courier. Modellus said that he had received a letter from her, urgently calling for reinforcements to the battle at Glenpoint. But there was no battle at Glenpoint, and she had only just arrived today. Then who wrote the letter in her handwriting, and why would they want Modellus to bring a second army out of the Imperial City into High Rock?

Feeling a chill from the night air at the window, Kintyra went to shut the latch. The two guards on the battlements were gone. She leaned over at the sound of a muffled struggle behind one of the barren trees, and did not hear the door open.

When she turned, she saw Queen Potema and Mentin, Duke of Glenpoint, in the room with a host of guards.

"You move quietly, aunt," she said after a moment's pause. She turned to the Duke. "What turned you against your loyalty to the Empire? Fear?"

"And gold," said the Duke simply.

"What happened to my army?" asked Kintyra, trying to look Potema steadily in the face. "Is the battle over so soon?"

"All your men are dead," smiled Potema. "But there was no battle here. Merely quiet and efficient assassination. There will be battles ahead, against Modellus in the Dragontail Mountains and against the remnants of the Imperial Army in the City. I'll send you regular updates on the progress of the war."

"So I am to be kept here as your hostage?" asked Kintyra, flatly, suddenly aware of the solidity of the stones and the great height of her tower room. "Damn you, look at me! I am your Empress!"

"Think of it this way, I'm taking you from being a fifth rate ruler to a first rate martyr," said Potema with a wink. "But I understand if you don't want to thank me for that."

Book Seven

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of Inzolicus, Second Century Sage:

3E 125:
The exact date of the Empress Kintyra Septim II's execution in the tower at Glenpoint Castle is open to some speculation. Some believe she was slain shortly after her imprisonment in the 121st year, while others maintain that she was likely kept alive as a hostage until shortly before her uncle Cephorus, King of Gilane, reconquered western High Rock in the summer of the 125th year. The certainty of Kintyra's demise rallied many against the Wolf Queen Potema and her son, who had been crowned Emperor Uriel Septim III four years previously when he invaded the under-guarded Imperial City.

Cephorus concentrated his army on the war in High Rock, while his brother Magnus, King of Lilmoth, brought his Argonian troops through loyal Morrowind and into Skyrim to fight in Potema's home province. The reptilian troops fought well in the summer months, but during the winter, they retired south to regroup and attack again when the weather was warm. At this stalemate, the War lasted out two more years.

Also, in the 125th year, Magnus's wife Hellena gave birth to their first child, a boy who they named Pelagius, after the Emperor who fathered Magnus, Cephorus, the late Emperor Antiochus, and the dread Wolf Queen of Solitude.

3E 127:
Potema sat on soft silk cushions in the warm grass in front of her tent and watched the sun rise over the dark woods on the other side of the meadow. It was a peculiarly vibrant morning, typical of Skyrim summertide. The

high chirrup of insects buzzed all around her and the sky surged with thousands of fallowing birds, rolling over one another and forming a multitude of patterns. Nature was unaware of the war coming to Falconstar, she surmised.

"Your highness, a message from the army in Hammerfell," said one of her maids, bringing in a courier. He was breathing hard, stained with sweat and mud. Evidence of a long, fast ride over many, many miles.

"My queen," said the courier, looking to the ground. "I bring grave news of your son, the Emperor. He met your brother King Cephorus's army in Hammerfell in the countryside of Ichidag and there did battle. You would be proud, for he fought well, but in the end, the Imperial army was defeated and your son, our Emperor, was captured. King Cephorus is bringing him to Gilane."

Potema listened to the news, scowling. "That clumsy fool," she said at last.

Potema stood up and strolled into camp, where the men were arming themselves, preparing for battle. Long ago, the soldiers understood that their lady did not stand on ceremony, and she would prefer that they work rather than salute her. Lord Vhokken was ahead of her, already meeting with the commander of the battlemages, discussing last minute strategy.

"My queen," said the courier, who had been following her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to win this battle with Magnus, despite his superior position holding the ruins of Kogmenthist Castle," said Potema. "And then when I know what Cephorus means to do with the Emperor, I'll respond accordingly. If there's a ransom to be paid, I'll pay it; if there's a prison exchange needed, so be it. Now, please, bath yourself and rest, and try not to get in the way of the war."

"It's not an ideal scenario," said Lord Vhokken when Potema had entered the commander's tent. "If we attack the castle from the west, we'll be running directly into the fire from their mages and archers. If we come from

the east, we'll be going through swamps, and the Argonians do better in that type of environment than we do. A lot better."

"What about the north and south? Just hills, correct?"

"Very steep hills, your highness," said the commander. "We should post bowmen there, but we'll be too vulnerable putting out the majority of our force."

"So it's the swamp," said Potema, and added, pragmatically. "Unless we withdraw and wait for them to come out before fighting."

"If we wait, Cephorus will have his army here from High Rock, and we'll be trapped between the two of them," said Lord Vhokken. "Not a preferable situation."

"I'll talk to the troops," said the commander. "Try to prepare them for the swamp attack."

"No," said Potema. "I'll speak to them."

In full battlegear, the soldiers gathered in the center of camp. They were a motley collection of men and women, Cyrodiils, Nords, Bretons, and Dunmer, youngbloods and old veterans, the sons and daughters of nobles, shopkeepers, serfs, priests, prostitutes, farmers, academics, adventurers. All of them under the banner of the Red Diamond, the symbol of the Imperial Family of Tamriel.

"My children," Potema said, her voice ringing out, hanging in the still morning mist. "We have fought in many battles together, over mountaintops and beach heads, through forests and deserts. I have seen great acts of valor from each one of you, which does my heart proud. I have also seen dirty fighting, backstabbing, cruel and wanton feats of savagery, which pleases me equally well. For you are all warriors."

Warming to her theme, Potema walked the line from soldier to soldier, looking each one in the eye: "War is in your blood, in your brain, in your

muscles, in everything you think and everything you do. When this war is over, when the forces are vanquished that seek to deny the throne to the true emperor, Uriel Septim III, you may cease to be warriors. You may choose to return to your lives before the war, to your farms and your cities, and show off your scars and tell tales of the deeds you did this day to your wondering neighbors. But on this day, make no mistake, you are warriors. You are war."

She could see her words were working. All around her, bloodshot eyes were focusing on the slaughter to come, arms tensing around weapons. She continued in her loudest cry, "And you will move through the swamplands, like an unstoppable power from the blackest part of Oblivion, and you will rip the scales from the reptilian things in Kogmenthist Castle. You are warriors, and you need not only fight, you must win. You must win!"

The soldiers roared in response, shocking the birds from the trees all around the camp.

From a vantage point on the hills to the south, Potema and Lord Vhokken had excellent views of the battle as it raged. It looked like two swarms of two colors of insect moving back and forth over a clump of dirt which was the castle ruins. Occasionally, a burst of flame or a cloud of acid from one of the mages would flicker over the battle arresting their attention, but hour after hour, the fighting seemed like nothing but chaos.

"A rider approaches," said Lord Vhokken, breaking the silence.

The young Redguard woman was wearing the crest of Gilane, but carried a white flag. Potema allowed her to approach. Like the courier from the morning, the rider was well travel-worn.

"Your Highness," she said, out of breath. "I have been sent from your brother, my lord King Cephorus, to bring you dire news. Your son Uriel was captured in Ichidag on the field in battle and from there transported to Gilane."

"I know all this," said Potema scornfully. "I have couriers of my own. You

can tell your master that after I've won this battle, I'll pay whatever ransom or exchange --"

"Your Highness, an angry crowd met the caravan your son was in before it made it to Gilane," the rider said quickly, "Your son is dead. He had been burned to death within his carriage. He is dead."

Potema turned from the young woman and looked down at the battle. Her soldiers were going to win. Magnus's army was in retreat.

"One other item of news, your highness," said the rider. "King Cephorus is being proclaimed Emperor."

Potema did not look at the woman. Her army was celebrating their victory.

Book Eight

by Waughin Jarth

From the pen of Inzolicus, Second Century Sage:

3E 127:
Following the Battle of Ichidag, the Emperor Uriel Septim III was captured and, before he was able to be brought to his uncle's castle in the Hammerfell kingdom of Gilane, he met his death at the hands of an angry mob. This uncle, Cephorus, was thereafter proclaimed emperor and rode to the Imperial City. The troops formerly loyal to Emperor Uriel and his mother, the Wolf Queen Potema, pledged themselves to the new Emperor. In return for their support, the nobility of Skyrim, High Rock, Hammerfell, the Summerset Isle, Valenwood, Black Marsh, and Morrowind demanded and received a new level of autonomy and independence from the Empire. The War of the Red Diamond was at an end.

Potema continued to fight a losing battle, her area of influence dwindling and dwindling until only her kingdom of Solitude remained in her power. She summoned daedra to fight for her, had her necromancers resurrect her fallen enemies as undead warriors, and mounted attack after attack on the forces of her brothers, the Emperor Cephorus Septim I and King Magnus of Lilmoth. Her allies began leaving her as her madness grew, and her only companions were the zombies and skeletons she had amassed over the years. The kingdom of Solitude became a land of death. Stories of the ancient Wolf Queen being waited on by rotting skeletal chambermaids and holding war plans with vampiric generals terrified her subjects.

3E 137:
Magnus opened up the small window in his room. For the first time in weeks, he heard the sounds of a city: carts squeaking, horses clopping over the cobblestones, and somewhere a child laughing. He smiled as he returned to his bedside to wash his face and finish dressing. There was a distinctive

knock on the door.

"Come in, Pel," he said.

Pelagius bounded into the room. It was obvious that he had been up for hours. Magnus marveled at his energy, and wondered how much longer battles would last if they were run by twelve-year-old boys.

"Did you see outside yet?" Pelagius asked. "All the townspeople have come back! There are shops, and a Mages Guild, and down by the harbor, I saw a hundred shops come in from all over the place!"

"They don't have to be afraid anymore. We've taken care of all the zombies and ghosts that used to be their neighbors, and they know it's safe to come back."

"Is Uncle Cephorus going to turn into a zombie when he dies?" asked Pelagius.

"I wouldn't put that past him," laughed Magnus. "Why do you ask?"

"I heard some people saying that he was old and sick," said Pelagius.

"He's not that old," said Magnus. "He's sixty years old. That's just two years older than I."

"And how old is Aunt Potema?" asked Pelagius.

"Seventy," said Magnus. "And yes, that is old. Any more questions will have to wait. I have to go meet with the commander now, but we can talk at supper. You can make yourself busy, and not get into any trouble?"

"Yes, sir," said Pelagius. He understood that his father had to continue to hold siege on aunt Potema's castle. After they took it over and locked her up, they would move out of the inn and into the castle. Pelagius was not looking forward to that. The whole town had a funny, sweet, dead smell, but he could not get even as close as the castle moat without gagging from the

stench. They could dump a million flowers on the place and it wouldn't make any difference at all.

He walked through the city for hours, buying some food and then some ribbons for his sister and mother back in Lilmoth. He thought about who else he needed to buy gifts for and was stumped. All his cousins, the children of Uncle Cephorus, Uncle Antiochus, and Aunt Potema, had died during the war, some of them in battle and some of them during the famines because so many crops had been burned. Aunt Bianki had died last year. There was only he, his mother, his sister, his father, and his uncle the Emperor left. And Aunt Potema. But she didn't really count.

When he came upon the Mages Guild earlier that morning, he had decided not to go in. Those places always spooked him with their strange smoke and crystals and old books. This time, it occurred to Pelagius that he might buy a gift for Uncle Cephorus. A souvenir of Solitude's Mages Guild.

An old woman was having trouble with the front door, so Pelagius opened it for her.

"Thank you," she said.

She was easily the oldest thing he had ever seen. Her face looked like an old rotted apple framed with a wild whirl of bright white hair. He instinctively moved away from her gnarled talon when she started to pat him on the head. But there was a gem around her neck that immediately fascinated him. It was a single bright yellow jewel, but it almost looked there was something trapped within. When the light hit it from the candles, it brought out the form of a four-legged beast, pacing.

"It's a soul gem," she said. "Infused with the spirit of a great demon werewolf. It was enchanted long, long ago with the power to charm people, but I've been thinking about giving it another spell. Perhaps something from the School of Alteration like Lock or Shield." She paused and looked at the boy carefully with yellowed, rheumy eyes. "You look familiar to me, boy. What's your name?"

"Pelagius," he said. He normally would have said "Prince Pelagius," but he was told not to draw attention to himself while in town.

"I used to know someone named Pelagius," the old woman said, and slowly smiled. "Are you here alone, Pelagius?"

"My father is... with the army, storming the castle. But he'll be back when the walls have been breached."

"Which I dare say won't take too much longer," sighed the old woman. "Nothing, no matter how well built, tends to last. Are you buying something in the Mages Guild?"

"I wanted to buy a gift for my uncle," said Pelagius. "But I don't know if I have enough gold."

The old woman left the boy to look over the wares while she went to the Guild enchanter. He was a young Nord, ambitious, and new to the kingdom of Solitude. It took little persuasion and a lot of gold to convince him to remove the charm spell from the soul gem and imbue it with a powerful curse, a slow poison that would drain wisdom from its wearer year by year until he or she lost all reason. She also purchased a cheap ring of fire resistance.

"For your kindness to an old woman, I've bought you these," she said, giving the boy the necklace and the ring. "You can give the ring to your uncle, and tell him it has been enchanted with a levitation spell, so if ever he needs to leap from high places, it will protect him. The soulgem is for you."

"Thank you," said the boy. "But this is too kind of you."

"Kindness has nothing to do with it," she answered, quite honestly. "You see, I was in the Hall of Records at the Imperial Palace once or twice, and I read about you in the foretellings of the Elder Scrolls. You will be Emperor one day, my boy, the Emperor Pelagius Septim III, and with this soul gem to guide you, posterity will always remember you and your deeds."

With those words, the old woman disappeared down an alley behind the Mages Guild. Pelagius looked after her, but he did not think to search behind a heap of stones. If he had, he would have found a tunnel under the city into the very heart of Castle Solitude. And if he had found his way there, he would have found, past the shambling undead and the moldering remains of a once grand palace, the bedroom of the queen.

In that bedroom, he would find the Wolf Queen of Solitude in repose, listening to the sounds of her castle collapsing. And he would see a toothless grin growing on her face as she breathed her last.

From the pen of Inzolicus, Second Century Sage:

3E 137:
Potema Septim died after a month long siege on her castle. While she lived, she had been the Wolf Queen of Solitude, Daughter of the Emperor Pelagius II, Wife of King Mantiarco, Aunt of the Empress Kintyra II, Mother of Emperor Uriel III, and Sister of the Emperors Antiochus and Cephorus. At her death, Magnus appointed his son, Pelagius, as the titular head of Solitude, under guidance from the royal council.

3E 140:
The Emperor Cephorus Septim died after falling from his horse. His brother was proclaimed the Emperor Magnus Septim.

3E 141:
Pelagius, King of Solitude, is recorded as "occasionally eccentric" in the Imperial Annals. He marries Katarish, Duchess of Vvardenfell.

3E 145:
The Emperor Magnus Septim dies. His son, who will be known as Pelagius the Mad, is coronated.

The Woodcutter's Wife

Volume 1

As Told By
Mogen Son of Molag

Legend tells of a woodcutter who built a shack deep within the pine forest. There, he hoped to live in peace with his family.

The woodcutter's family lived well for a time, but without warning, the weather turned bitterly cold and spoiled the harvest. Before long, with their meager supply of food all but gone, the family was starving.

Late one snowy night, a traveler knocked on the cabin door seeking shelter from the biting cold. Always generous of heart, the woodcutter welcomed the stranger into his home, apologizing that he had no food to offer.

With a smile, the traveler cast off his cloak to reveal the garments of a mage. As the woodcutter and his family looked on, the mysterious visitor reached into his satchel and withdrew a scroll tied with a silver ribbon. No sooner had the wizard unfurled the scroll and read the words aloud, when a great feast appeared from out of thin air. That night, nobody in the woodcutter's cabin went hungry.

Day by day, the snow piled up. Every night, the mage produced another scroll from his bag and read the words, each time summoning a new feast. On the fifth night, the woodcutter's wife awoke her husband to confess her mistrust of their magical guest. Surely, she argued, there was some price to pay for the magical feasts that everyone enjoyed night after night.

The woodcutter would have none of it. After nearly dying from the lack of food, his family was eating well. The divines had sent them a gift, he explained, and it was foolish to question their wisdom.

But the woodcutter's wife would not be persuaded. Every night, she grew more fearful and more desperate. She was certain that the family had

entered into a devil's bargain, and the time would soon come when the mage would ask for something unspeakable in return for his gifts.

While everyone in the cabin slept, the woodcutter's wife snuck out of bed and took her husband's axe in hand. She crept into the traveler's room and with one swing, lopped off his head.

Suddenly, the wizard's disembodied head awoke. His eyes opened wide and when he beheld his maimed body, he let forth a terrible cry.

Awakened by the horrified scream, the woodcutter and his children rushed into the room and gasped at the terrible sight of the decapitated mage.

With his last gasp of breath, the traveler laid a fearful curse on the woodcutter's wife. After her mortal death, she was damned to rise once again and walk the woods alone only to burn at the rising of the sun.

To this day, those who walk the pine forest late at night tell tales of a weeping woman glimpsed between the trees. She carries a bloody axe, the stories say, and is terrifying to behold.

Words of Clan Mother Ahnissi to her Favored Daughter

Ahnissi tells you. You are no longer a mewing kitten and you have learned to keep secrets from Ahnissi, and so Ahnissi tells you.

In the beginning there were two littermates, Ahnurr and Fadomai. After many phases, Fadomai said to Ahnurr, "Let us wed and make children to share our happiness."

And they gave birth to Alkosh, the First Cat. And Ahnurr said, "Alkosh, we give you Time, for what is as fast or as slow as a cat?"

And they gave birth to Khenarthi, the Winds. "Khenarthi, to you we give the sky, for what can fly higher than the wind?"

And they gave birth to Magrus, the Cat's Eye. "Magrus, to you we give the sun, for what is brighter than the eye of a cat?"

And they gave birth to Mara, the Mother Cat. "Mara, you are love, for what is more loving than a mother?"

And they gave birth to S'rendarr, the Runt. "S'rendarr, we give you mercy, for how does a runt survive, except by mercy?"

And many phases passed and Ahnurr and Fadomai were happy.

And Ahnurr said, "We should have more children to share our happiness." And Fadomai agreed. And she gave birth to Hermorah. And she gave birth to Hircine. And she gave birth to Merrunz and Mafala and Sangiin and Sheggorath and many others.

And Fadomai said:

"Hermorah, you are the Tides, for who can say whether the moons predict the tides or the tides predict the moons?"

"Hircine, you are the Hungry Cat, for what hunts better than a cat with an empty belly?"

"Merrunz, you are the Ja'Khajiit, for what is more destructive than an kitten?"

"Mafala, you are the Clan Mother, for what is more secretive than the ways of the Clan Mothers?"

"Sangiin, you are the Blood Cat, for who can control the urges of blood?"

"Sheggorath, you are the Skooma Cat, for what is crazier than a cat on skooma?"

And Ahnurr said, "Two litters is enough, for too many children will steal our happiness."

But Khenarthi went to Fadomai and said, "Fadomai-mother, Khenarthi grows lonely so high above the world where not even my brother Alkosh can fly." Fadomai took pity on her and tricked Ahnurr to make her pregnant again.

And Fadomai gave birth to the Moons and their Motions. And she gave birth to Nirni, the majestic sands and lush forests. And she gave birth to Azurah, the dusk and the dawn.

And from the beginning, Nirni and Azurah fought for their mother's favor.

Ahnurr caught Fadomai while she was still birthing, and he was angry. Ahnurr struck Fadomai and she fled to birth the last of her litter far away in the Great Darkness. Fadomai's children heard what had happened, and they all came to be with her and protect her from Ahnurr's anger.

And Fadomai gave birth to Lorkhaj, the last of her litter, in the Great

Darkness. And the Heart of Lorkhaj was filled with the Great Darkness. And when he was born, the Great Darkness knew its name and it was Namiira.

And Fadomai knew her time was near. Fadomai said:

"Ja-Kha'jay, to you Fadomai gives the Lattice, for what is steadier than the phases of the moons? Your eternal motions will protect us from Ahnurr's anger." And the moons left to take their place in the heavens. And Ahnurr growled and shook the Great Darkness, but he could not cross the Lattice.

And Fadomai said:

"Nirni, to you Fadomai leaves her greatest gift. You will give birth to many people as Fadomai gave birth today." When Nirni saw that Azurah had nothing, Nirni left smiling.

And all Fadomai's children left except Azurah. And Fadomai said, "To you, my favored daughter, Fadomai leaves her greatest gift. To you Fadomai leaves her secrets." And Fadomai told her favored daughter three things.

And Fadomai said, "When Nirni is filled with her children, take one of them and change them. Make the fastest, cleverest, most beautiful people, and call them Khajiit."

And Fadomai said, "The Khajiit must be the best climbers, for if Masser and Secunda fail, they must climb Khenarthi's breath to set the moons back in their courses."

And Fadomai said, "The Khajiit must be the best deceivers, for they must always hide their nature from the children of Ahnurr."

And Fadomai said, "The Khajiit must be the best survivors, for Nirni will be jealous, and she will make the sands harsh and the forests unforgiving, and the Khajiit will always be hungry and at war with Nirni."

And with these words, Fadomai died.

After many phases, Nirni came to Lorkhaj and said, "Lorkhaj, Fadomai told me to give birth to many children, but there is no place for them."

And Lorkhaj said, "Lorkhaj makes a place for children and Lorkhaj puts you there so you can give birth." But the Heart of Lorkhaj was filled with the Great Darkness, and Lorkhaj tricked his siblings so that they were forced into this new place with Nirni. And many of Fadomai's children escaped and became the stars. And many of Fadomai's children died to make Nirni's path stable. And the survivors stayed and punished Lorkhaj.

The children of Fadomai tore out the Heart of Lorkhaj and hid it deep within Nirni. And they said, "We curse you, noisy Lorkhaj, to walk Nirni for many phases."

But Nirni soon forgave Lorkhaj for Nirni could make children. And she filled herself with children, but cried because her favorite children, the forest people, did not know their shape.

And Azurah came to her and said, "Poor Nirni, stop your tears. Azurah makes for you a gift of a new people." Nirni stopped weeping, and Azurah spoke the First Secret to the Moons and they parted and let Azurah pass. And Azurah took some forest people who were torn between man and beast, and she placed them in the best deserts and forests on Nirni. And Azurah in her wisdom made them of many shapes, one for every purpose. And Azurah named them Khajiit and told them her Second Secret and taught them the value of secrets. And Azurah bound the new Khajiit to the Lunar Lattice, as is proper for Nirni's secret defenders. Then Azurah spoke the Third Secret, and the Moons shone down on the marshes and their light became sugar.

But Y'ffer heard the First Secret and snuck in behind Azurah. And Y'ffer could not appreciate secrets, and he told Nirni of Azurah's trick. So Nirni made the deserts hot and the sands biting. And Nirni made the forests wet and filled with poisons. And Nirni thanked Y'ffer and let him change the forest people also. And Y'ffer did not have Azurah's subtle wisdom, so Y'ffer made the forest people Elves always and never beasts. And Y'ffer named them Bosmer. And from that moment they were no longer in the

same litter as the Khajiit.

And because Y'ffer had no appreciation for secrets, he shouted the First Secret across all the heavens with his last breath so that all of Fadomai's children could cross the Lattice. But Azurah, in her wisdom, closed the ears of angry Ahnurr and noisy Lorkhaj so they alone did not hear the word.

The Wraith's Wedding Dowry

by Voltha gra-Yamwort
(translated by Apthorne)

"The poets are right. There is something life-changing about being in love," said Kepkajna gra-Minfang, sometimes called the Wraith. "I haven't wanted to rob anyone or anything in weeks. Why, the other day, I saw the door wide open at a wealthy merchant's house, but my mind was fully occupied with what I should wear on my wedding day."

"You have been out of the right society for very long now," frowned her friend Khargol approvingly. "You never told me what happened to your first husband, you know, the one the shaman gave you?"

"Torn apart by ash ghouls," smiled Kepkajna dreamily. "It was rather saddish. But I know nothing like that would happen to Wodworg. No life of adventure for him. He's practically an Imperial. In fact, he is one. Did I tell you how we met?"

"Hundreds of times," grumbled Khargol, reaching for his flagon. "He was your jailer, and he refused you food until you promised to marry him."

"Have you ever heard of anything so madly romantic in all your life?" sighed Kepkajna, and then grew serious. "I was going to say that I hope my old friends will wish me well, but as Old Bosriel used to say, there's no point in hoping for what cannot be. We'll leave with the Imperial Knights for Balmora immediately after the wedding, but as long as we're in Dagon Fel, the gang will find some way of disrupting my love life and bring me back to the light. I know it."

As the days approached towards the Wraith's wedding day, there was certainly something sinister in the air that Kepkajna could smell when she was not transported by heady bliss. Dark figures seemed to shift in the shadows and disappear when approached. She recognized the clothing of

some beggars near Wodworg's cottage as costumes, but the mendicants hurried away before she could recognize which of her old gang was stalking her.

But these moments of apprehension were few. Kepkajna was truly happy, making arrangements for the ceremony to be performed at the very dungeon where Wodworg had imprisoned her. Her father was long since dead -- another victim of the ash ghouls -- but her fiance's commander volunteered to act in his behalf. Of course, Kepkajna had to supply her own dowry. She spent every last mark of her savings of ill-gotten gain to buy her beloved a truly wonderful present.

The wedding was set for the stroke of midnight, as is Orc tradition. The handmaidens, wives of Imperial officers, were busily sewing her into her gown of red velvet and fine gold filigree in the mid-morning. Dolcetta, one of the handmaidens, remarked that she had heard that Kepkajna had bought Wodworg a truly beautiful gift for her dowry.

"Let me show it to you," Kepkajna giggled, dashing from the room half-dressed to her hidden alcove. The present had been stolen.

The women were horrified, but the Wraith found herself merely irritated, not surprised. This was truly the old gang's style. They knew that a wedding ceremony without a dowry was marked as unlucky. She asked her handmaidens to finish dressing her quickly while she pondered what the burglars would have done with her treasure.

The whole region was honeycombed with secret lairs and abandoned sites thieves used to store their loot. There were obvious places, of course, but after much reflection, she thought of where she would have put it under similar circumstances. Once the handmaids had finished, Kepkajna bade them to make certain that the ceremony went on as scheduled, and not to fret as she might be a little late. She wrapped herself in a shawl to protect her gown from dungeon dust and set off for the Shrine of Malacath.

The Wraith had never before attempted to rob her own friends, and though she was peeved at them for trying to ruin her happiness, she had no interest

in hurting them physically. Her style was to avoid conflict, though she knew it would be inevitable. The lessons her mentor Khargol had given her had helped her avoid the lances and blades of guards and Imperial Knights over the years: now she would see if they would allow her to survive a den of thieves and the unknown dangers of the Shrine. Without, most importantly, ruining her dress.

The desolate place was so empty as she delved into it that she feared she might have made a miscalculation. It was not until she found the small room hidden down a long corridor that she knew she was at the right place, and that it was well suited for an ambush. She grabbed the chest with her treasure within, and turned to face the assault.

Two of her old gang, Yorum and Yohr-i the Redguard twin brother and sister, were outside the door as she came from the room. They knew the Wraith better than to taunt her and immediately attacked. Yorum struck out with a left thrust of his blade while Yohr-i sought to rush her. The Wraith neatly sidestepped Yohr-i, while dropping her weight to her rear left leg, shifting her right shoulder to the left to slip past Yorum's strike. The twins crashed into one another and Kepkajna passed swiftly on.

Almost immediately, she was set on by the Argonian Binyaar, his mace whistling through the air at her head. They had never much liked one another. The Wraith snapped into a duck, so the mace whacked with a tremendous clamor against the stone wall. Binyaar was thrown off balance, giving her a few seconds lead hurrying up the passage. Ahead she could smell the fresh night air.

The last of her dowry's defenders was Sorogth, an Orc with whom she had shared a brief romance. It was he who Kepkajna knew had masterminded the theft. In a way and in context, she thought, his devotion to her misery was rather sweet. At the moment, though, she was most concerned with avoiding his barbed ax that seemed ideal for breaking her dress's fine stitchwork and the flesh beneath.

Bending her knees slightly, bobbing to avoid strikes to the head, weaving her head to confuse Sorogth of her next move, shuffling her feet

arrhythmically, the Wraith made an impossible target. She ducked inside his thrusts, sidestepped his swings, and then sidestepped his thrusts, and ducked his swings. As erratic as she tried to make her defensive moves, Sorogth still kept pace with her, refusing to budge from his position at the dungeon outlet.

Midnight was coming, and the Wraith finally decided that she must end the confrontation. When Sorogth swung out next, she sidestepped to her left, swayed down, and ducked her head, so the ax whistled over her right shoulder. In that instant, his right side was exposed, and she reluctantly smashed the chest hard into his torso. There was not enough time for Kepkajna to see if she had killed him or merely knocked him unconscious. In truth, she thought of nothing else but rushing to her wedding ceremony.

At precisely midnight, Wodworg and Kepkajna were united together. He was delighted with her dowry gift, a fine suit of armor that would make him the envy of other Imperial jailers. Even more, he was enchanted by his wife's tale of retrieving it from the Shrine of Malacath.

"Did it occur to you to put on the armor when you knew that it was an ambush?" he asked.

"I didn't want to dent your present," she replied, between kisses. "And I certainly didn't want to wrinkle my gown."

Wulfmare's Guide to Better Thieving

by Wulfmare Shadow-Cloak

So, you want to make it as a cutpurse. You want to live the life of a criminal, always one step ahead of everyone and pockets brimming with septims. Maybe it appeals to you to try and earn a living by robbing some wealthy merchants or extorting your local shopkeepers? Let me give you a bit of advise - don't bother. For every skilled thief I've met in my day, I've seen a twenty who thought that they had what it took but ended up rotting in jail.

But if you're anything like me, you don't listen to advice. You do whatever you want and never let anyone else tell you otherwise. To Oblivion with the risks - all that matters is the coin. Sound familiar? If it does, then this book might just teach you the difference between acting like a petty thief and a master criminal.

I know what you're thinking. Who's this Wulfmare? Who does he think he is telling me how to be a better thief? What makes him an expert? Simple. Maybe you heard about that heist in Mournhold, when Queen Barenziah's coronation crown went missing? Or perhaps the tale of an Elder Scroll gone missing from the White-Gold Tower reached your ears. That's right... it was yours truly. I've done just about every kind of job you can imagine and I've got the septims put away to prove it. How else could an ex-thief find the resources to publish his own book?

Now that I have your attention, let's start with two of the most fundamental skills you'll need to sharpen if you want to make it as a cutpurse - picking locks and picking pockets. And before you roll your eyes and throw this book aside in disgust, I can promise you that the easiest way you're going to get caught is by ignoring the basics - but if you can master these activities you'll find yourself swimming in coin.

Picking pockets is one of the easiest skills to learn, but you'd be surprised

how often I've seen novice thieves muck it up. The lesson here is two-fold. First, know your surroundings and second, know your approach. Where and when you decide to go fishing is just as important as who you chose as your mark. Follow them a while, there's never a need to rush. Wait until they're somewhere isolated and out of earshot of any guards - but most importantly always know when to let the mark go. Getting pinched simply isn't worth the risk. There'll always be plenty of other marks who'll come along with their pockets full. As far as the approach goes, don't drop into your crouch until you are completely out of the mark's view - directly behind and preferably close to them. Don't spend too long deciding what you'll lift either. A good thief should be able to hit a mark and make off with something valuable in less than five seconds. Last of all, plying this trade at night will greatly reduce your chances of getting caught. If you have no other choice and you have to do it in the daylight, just make sure you aren't out in the open.

Lockpicking is an art form that takes years to master. The important thing to remember is that no two are alike, each one behaving completely differently. As long as you keep your wits about you, and your patience, you'll find them easier to defeat than you'd initially expect. Good picks are always essential. Make sure you have plenty of them tucked away in your pockets. Always take your time and keep a light touch on the picks. When the tumblers begin to fall into place, you should feel the pick tremble ever-so-slightly - this means you're near the sweet spot. Slow down at that point and only move the picks with the finest touch. If you blindly poke at the lock like an old man, all you're going to end up with is a bunch of broken picks and equally broken pride. As a last resort, if the lock is completely confounding you, there's always the option of smashing it. Just keep in mind that this is rarely successful and could potentially make a great deal of noise.

By using my techniques, I'm not merely suggesting you'll be a successful thief, I'm giving you a solid guarantee. All it takes is a little bit of patience and a great deal of practice then maybe, just maybe, you'll become as successful as Wulfmare.

In my next volume, we'll move onto another important tool in your arsenal -

sneaking. I'll prove to you that the shadows can be just as potent of a weapon as your blade if you know how to bend it to your will.

The Yellow Book of Riddles

For earnest pleasure, and the strengthening of the mind, the author here collects all that he has learned of the art of riddling, by dint of diligent study, and through years of discourse with others of similar inclination.

The posing and puzzling of riddles is a convention of polite aristocratic Western society. Nobles and social aspirants collect books of riddles and study them, hoping thereby to increase the chances of their appearing sly and witty in conversation.

A metal neither black nor red
As heavy as man's golden greed
What you do to stay ahead
With friend or arrow or steed

daeL :rewsnA ehT

A man says, "If you lie to me I will slay you with my sword. If you tell me the truth, I will slay you with a spell." What must you say to stay alive?

.drows a htiw em yals lliw uoY :rewsnA ehT

A Bosmer, was slain. The Altmer claims the Dunmer is guilty. The Dunmer says the Khajiit did it. The Orc swears he didn't kill the Bosmer. The Khajiit says the Dunmer is lying. If only one of these speaks the truth, who killed the Bosmer?

crO ehT :rewsnA ehT

Yngol and the Sea-Ghosts

Masser and Secunda passed over Ysgramor's people as their fellowship landed in long-boats upon the rocky shores of Hsaarik Head on their journey from Atmora to Mereth. Boats littered the coast, but Ysgramor did not count his kin, Yngol's among them.

Ysgramor commanded the sea-ghosts to surrender his kin, and a great gale darkened the sky. The seas thrashed and churned, and a wrathful storm appeared. Ysgramor took up the oars and rowed into the storm alone.

Upon the Sea, Ysgramor wrestled the sea-ghosts, and the storm carried him along the jagged coast. Two fortnights passed without relief, until finally the storm broke. Come the next dawn, Yngol's long-boat was found in the icy surf, but the vengeful sea-ghosts had already taken Yngol and his clansmen.

In his terrible grief, Ysgramor slew a dozen dozen beasts and burned them in honor of his fallen kinsman. A barrow-hill was dug in the Atmoran tradition, and Yngol was laid to rest with rites and honors among his clansmen far below the rocky face of Hsaarik Head, the first Children of the Sky to perish in Tamriel.