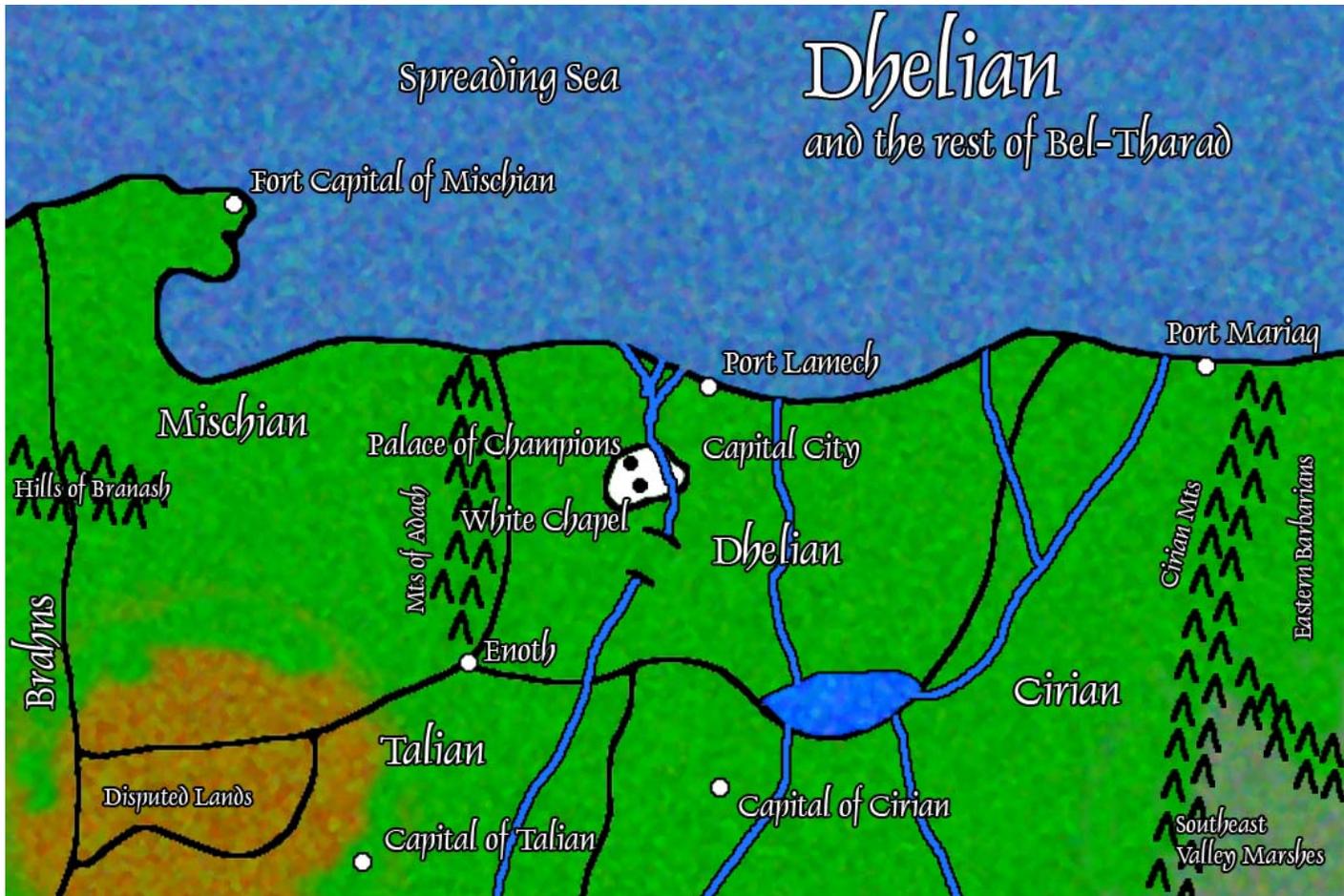


# Shalice and Morband

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# 1

There is a land very similar to the one in which we live. It is, however, unknown to most of us. The land, in their tongue, is known as Bel-Tharad, which means “The Differed Ones.” It is a vast land ruled by many warring kings, queens, princes, and lords. Our focus is upon one particular kingdom known as Dhelian, whose name has a meaning that has been lost in the ancient texts of the Tharadish poets.

Dhelian was a particularly long-lasting kingdom in Bel-Tharad in spite of the wars spread across the land. The cause for the wars was also lost in the texts of the poets long ago, but one nation that remained secure was Dhelian. Few kings or tyrants were foolish enough to wage war on Dhelian. Even the most barbaric of nations remained loyal to the tradition of Dhelianic peace. Dhelian was the northernmost kingdom of Bel-Tharad, bordered by the Spreading Sea to the north, Cirian to the east and south-east, Talian to the direct south, and Mischian to the West.

King Dhelius was known to his people as a kind and generous ruler, who gave up many of his own luxuries for the sake of his people. The normally critical Talic historians heralded his ability to peacefully generate friendships with surrounding kingdoms. He was born as Tetros Landhel, the younger brother of the Prince of Dorz, but after the unforeseen death of his father and elder brother in battle against the southern barbarians, he became King Dhelius CCCXLVI, later known as “Dhelius the Prudent” or “Dhelius the Wise.” There was some concern that a boy of only sixteen should become Dhelius, but it was not without precedent, and Tetros soon earned the titles later given to him.

Tetros’ eldest son was given the title of Prince of Dorz at birth when Tetros was forty-three years of age. This prince was born Paltrus Landhel, and at a young age earned the name “the Petty,” though this was known to few outside the Royalty. Paltrus was taught by many of the same instructors as Tetros was when he was a boy, as well as some new ones. Most of these instructors were also instructing at the Dhelian University, one of the finest institutions of learning in known Bel-Tharad.

This particular story begins with Paltrus, the day of his nineteenth birthday in the year 1397 A.U. It was custom for the Prince of Dorz to become Sel-Dhelius on this day. He would not be given the authority of Kingship as long as the First King was still alive and had access to the throne, but as the Second King, the Prince would use the power of the throne if the First King were not in power, and upon the First King’s demise or incapacitation, the Second King would become the new First King.

While Paltrus was in the purple dressing room, allowing the servants to dress him in the ceremonial armor, which he would wear to all Royal functions from this point onward, he reflected upon his future glory, and he shared these thoughts with the Arch-Knight.

“I suppose I should take a more active role in the Royalty than most Sel-Dhelius do. After all, there is a lot to do, and I do not want to leave all this work to my father. Do you think so, Polius?”

“That would not be unreasonable, my lord.”

“I do outrank you, do I not, Polius?”

“You do, my lord.”

“What work of my father’s do you think I should help with?”

“That would best be answered by the King, my lord.”

“I suppose I should take on part of his role as First Ambassador. We must create a Second Ambassador position. It is centuries overdue. We cannot allow him to be subjected to the grueling events that take place at every town. The parades held by peasants that take hours upon his arrival. All of that vulgar praise. He simply cannot constantly be required to handle grinning idiots day in and day out.”

Polius said nothing, knowing that he could neither agree nor disagree with the word of a person of such importance when he may or may not be right. Paltrus was finished dressing when he turned to Polius and began speaking again.

“You shall be my right-hand man, Sir Polius.”

“If the King consents, I will, my lord.”

Paltrus smirked, then stepped down from his stool. He walked towards the mirror to examine his ceremonial armor. He was glad with what he saw. The armor was of silver, to match the glorious gold of Dhelius’ jewels and garments. It was to be freshly polished for every occasion, and every time Paltrus was to leave the Capital City of Dhelian, among his servants would be one that knew only how to clean and polish armor, which he would do every night while the Sel-Dhelius slept.

The light brilliantly reflected the emblem of the Landhel Dynasty, two very noble-looking green dragons, one holding a sword and the other a blue shield, facing each other in peace atop a green hill. Paltrus’ ceremonial sword, which was worthless for combat, had carved into it aesthetic designs. In all of Bel-Tharad, there was not a sharper warrior.

Looking in the mirror, Paltrus became lost in thought when Polius said, “My lord, it is time.”

“Very well.”

Paltrus followed Polius out of the purple room and into the bright sun of the midday. The brightness of the sun lit up the city. The Capital City was created from gold and silver, even to the silver trees with green leaves that blazed in the sunlight. The roads were of gold lined with these silver trees, and the buildings were of silver, each of which could easily have fit several families to live comfortably. Each doorway was lined with precious stones of many colors. Each building was built with respect to the central palace and chapel, the center of the city.

This particular day, all of the peasants were gathered around the chapel, clearing only the road so that Paltrus may pass. There was no peasant that was not dressed cleanly and respectfully. The colors of their clothing were bright; their flowers spread pleasing, sweet fragrances, which they tossed in front of Paltrus as he walked by; and even their cheering harmonized with the voices of the blue, red, and green birds flying about Paltrus.

The golden path lay between two rows of silver trees, which were more than spaced enough for the peasants to come see their new Sel-Dhelius. As Paltrus stepped into the sun, mercifully honoring his people with his presence, he held up his left hand towards the people, and waved. He grinned as he saw the cheering people, altogether chanting, "Sel-Dhelius, our lord!"

Paltrus climbed atop a large white horse, which was dressed in many shades of purple and green. With Polius on his right, walking rather than riding, he slowly approached the White Chapel of Dhelianos, the "Immortal Emperor," from whom the name of the Kingdom and King were taken.

Like most everything in Dhelian, the Chapel is among the greatest in Bel-Tharad. It is tall enough that someone could only see the peak on an especially clear day. It is wide enough to have carriages made specifically to carry customers from one side to the other. It is long enough to span the length of some small cities. This enormous building serves a community within the Dhelian community, with plenty of room to spare. They live behind the Great Hall in which the rituals and services are performed. Most of these people are born, raised, and they will die as monks living in this building. There are many people, then, that never leave the chapel in their entire life. The only daylight that they ever know comes in through the beautiful stained glass windows, which are several dozen feet tall and of many colors.

In an attempt to appear pious, and to set a good example for those observing, Paltrus halted his horse and looked up at the Chapel. He beamed proudly as he looked upon the three immense doors that were the main entrance, the middle of which was slowly opening, waiting for him to pass. He looked above that to see the emblem of the Landhel family created in a round stained glass window, probably 40 feet tall. Above that, in a window that was rectangular but arching at the top, about 40 feet wide and 90 feet tall, was the image of Dhelianos, or at least what image the mortal eye can make of Dhelianos. He wears purple and green robes, and his face and hair shine of gold and silver. He has calm, blue eyes, and he holds out his arms, accepting all who come to him. He asks nothing of anybody, but loves all the way that they are.

When Paltrus was finished with his piety, he and Polius continued through the door ahead of them and into the White Chapel, from the golden street to the red carpet, with designs of branches and leaves sewn in green. Paltrus did not dismount, but continued into the White Chapel upon his horse, as was custom.

As beautiful as the stained glass windows are from the outside, they are overpowering in the inside, seeing the sunlight pass through them. As someone walks in, they can see the large windows on the side that cannot be seen from the outside of the front door. These windows, each about 40 feet tall and arched at the top, are of the many kings and saints of Dhelian that have served Dhelianos. They have reverent posture facing the front of the chapel, towards the great statue of the Immortal Emperor, holding out his arms, accepting the works and deeds of those great saints. This was not a bland gray statue, as one might find in the barbarian lands, but brightly colored, just as the window.

Behind the fortunate person that enters the chapel are those two windows that could be seen from the outside, only now they are lit up far more wondrously, as to make someone believe that they are images brought directly from Far Caelum. The roofs were so high up that no one would be able to see them if the room were not fantastically lit. As it were, one could gaze up at the ceiling and see the same intricate designs of leaves and branches found on the carpet below, though much larger as to be seen from the distant floor.

There were enough benches in that grand place to seat the dozens of thousands of people that would flock at the beginning of every week to worship Dhelianos, but still not enough to fit the hundreds more that would have to stand outside. Every person could hear clearly what was being said, due to the expertly designed acoustics of the room, though many worshippers could not clearly see what was happening from the distance. The room roared when the hymns to Dhelianos were sung, but through some mastery of architecture or magical arts were not painful even to the most sensitive ear.

The only things that could reach those high roofs were the wide and tall columns, which also displayed those elaborate patterns of leaves and branches. The floors were only carpeted in the aisles. The center aisle was the red carpet, and was twice as wide as the other aisles. All other aisles were carpeted in green, but also contained the same patterns as the center carpet. The rest of the floor was made of rock that was crafted, set, and polished so that no mortal could find where one rock ends and another begins. The walls, as well as the columns, were also made of these glass-like rocks.

Paltrus was not looking at any of these, however. As he rode forward, still with the peasants on both sides, he was looking straight ahead at the pulpit, where his father was standing in his golden garments, waiting to bestow upon him this honorable position in the kingdom. When he reached the end of the benches, he stopped his horse and dismounted, walking the rest of the way to his designated position. He knew the importance of the appearance of modesty in this ritual, and he kneeled and bowed his head as soon as he reached the king.

Dhelius looked only at his son rather than the peasants. This time that Paltrus spent kneeling was meant to be in prayer.

When Paltrus lifted his head, Dhelius began to speak. He had a deep voice, with a lilt that made many trust him immediately.

“What did you ask of Dhelianos, my son?”

“I asked for the Wisdom and Prudence of my predecessors.”

“And who are your predecessors?”

“You and the ancient kings who make wise decisions, my lord.”

“If you say that I am your predecessor, that means that you are to be king, does it not?”

“It does, my lord.”

“And why is it that you believe me to be wise, my son?”

“Because of the greatness of your kingdom and the love that the people have for you, my lord.”

“And you wish for this wisdom?”

“I do, my lord.”

“Was there anything else that was said in this prayer, my son?”

“Yes, my lord. I pledged my life to serve Dhelianos.”

“Then you have already shown that Dhelianos has given you the wisdom of which you have asked, and as a wise man you must be correct in saying that you are to be king.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“May it be. Rise, my Second, for that which has been known by Dhelianos for all time is now known to us. You are Sel-Dhelius, a member of the Royalty of Dhelian and Commander of the Dhelian forces.”

Paltrus stood and said, “I accept this honor, and my loyalty to the Kingdom is eternal.”

“Go now, and serve the Kingdom.”

Paltrus turned and left the chapel, knowing that on this day his new responsibilities would begin.

## 2

In the following day, Paltrus left the Fort of Dorz where he typically conducted his business and began walking through the White Chapel to the castle to meet with his father privately. He was no longer wearing the ceremonial silver armor, but instead a princely blouse, which was as white as any launderer could whiten and was stitched with the Landhel emblem, and brown trousers. After he passed through the sanctuary and into the back halls, he informed his father's servants that he was ready for their meeting. He then relished the sights of the saints painted on the walls. The humble and selfless acts of these saints and their devotion to Dhelianos inspired him to determination to one day be an image on those walls. The hallway in which he was present was fifty feet wide and arched up to a hundred feet, fantastically lit by the torches made by the arts of the Dhelian alchemists, who fashioned a chemical that would burn bright, long, clean, and consistent white light. This light was spread around the chamber by the polished shine of the gray and brown stones that made the floor and walls. There were no roofs in these hallways, as the gradual curl of the walls met at the top.

Paltrus was looking at the pictures of the legendary actions of these saints. If a king were to do something especially heroic, his action was immortalized in a painting on this wall, illustrating his sainthood. Though there were many Dhelian kings, only one-hundred and fifty were thus far immortalized in this way, and Tetros was one of only a dozen and a half that were immortalized during their own lifetime. Paltrus was determined to be sainted in his own lifetime as well. This hallway was of particular interest to him, as he wished to gather ideas on any methods that he may develop to achieve this dream.

The painting of his father was always of particular interest to Paltrus. He knew that if he were to be sainted, he may need to please many of the people who worked with and admired his father, therefore it reasonably followed that he might be more likely to impress them if he were to emulate his father. Paltrus, then, studied this particular painting often. It was brightly colored, taking place on a dirt road at midday, with fields on both sides of the road and the capital city of Dhelian in the distance, with the White Chapel particularly noticeable. A young maiden could be seen, fallen on the road, looking in amazement towards the then twenty-four year old King Dhelius, who was strangling an ogre with his bare hands. This ogre had just attacked the young maiden on the road. The extreme pain of the ogre that the painter illustrated brought out the strong sense of justice that Tetros Landhel had, and the conviction that this justice is right. All of the limbs of the ogre were broken, but Tetros' superior battle experience allowed for him to leave this fight without a scratch. His heroism, but more importantly his sense of justice in eliminating this feared ogre that sought to damage this poor maiden's sense of well-being, was what earned him this honor of sainthood.

Paltrus began to speak to himself out loud, saying, “It is this to which I must aspire. This justice. This unrelenting conviction. This is where I must be.”

A voice was heard behind him, saying “My lord.”

Paltrus turned to see the servant to whom he had spoken earlier. “Your lord is ready to see you.”

Knowing full well the path, Paltrus followed the lead of the servant, who took him through the White Chapel. Following the paths through the chapel would take them an hour and a half, which was spent mostly greeting the various residents there. They passed through the halls, which were essentially roads, even to the point of having horse-drawn carriages carrying passengers to various places. Many of these indoor roads were much larger than the Hall of Saints, sometimes seventy-five or a hundred feet across, and up to two hundred feet high. Most of these halls needed no pillars because of the arched walls, but some that did have pillars also had roofs and stained glass windows, similar to the ones in the Sanctuary. They passed through entire marketplaces, nearly as large as those outside the chapel, including buildings inside the very chapel building.

As they came out of the chapel and onto the outside road, they could see the Palace of Champions ahead, gray and tall, but not quite as tall as the Great Tower of the White Chapel. It did, however, have many more towers than the chapel, but only because the chapel was a long, continuous building rather than a complex. Nevertheless, this was a home fitting of an especially wealthy king.

Paltrus followed the servant over the bridge of the moat and into the courtyard of the castle. Upon entering, he was heralded by the sound of trumpets. He examined the yard to see the children of certain people within the Royalty playing many games with many toys. Membership within the Royalty of Dhelian was not limited to the Royal Family, but anyone working to govern the kingdom. These people were given the privilege of living in the Palace of Champions, the same complex in which the Royal Family lived, and there was ample room within the complex for them all.

Along the sides of the courtyard were many shops, inns, and servicemen, as the castle had its own marketplace as well. It was not as large as the chapel’s marketplace or the outer city’s, but still much larger and more successful than many of those in the surrounding kingdoms. As Paltrus watched this market, as he was always keen to do, he noticed a small group of darkly dressed men walking away from a particular icon shop and onto the road to the chapel. There were many dealings among the three marketplaces of the city, and these were monks specially ordained to be able to leave the chapel to keep the marketplaces connected and the economy stable.

The servant led Paltrus through the market and into the castle interior. Inside were private halls, meeting halls, festivity halls, dining halls, war halls, and any other hall one might possibly imagine for which a government might have use. There was even a hall dedicated to the meetings of the members of the Royal Committee of Hall Use, which decided what to do with the extra rooms within the Castle. Paltrus’ destination was a private hall in one of the towers, being the private rooms of the Bel-Dhelius.

“As you know, my lord, I am forbidden to enter the tower.”

“Yes, very well.”

The servant stood beside a great door leading into the tower of the Bel-Dhelius. Only the family of the Dhelius and his highest officers of the Royalty were allowed to enter the tower. These officers included the Arch-Knight and the Commander of the Constables. By ruling of the ancient laws, personal friends of the Dhelius were forbidden to enter the tower. Guards were posted on every entrance keeping any intruders out, but the guards themselves were forbidden unless called upon by the Dhelius’ officers. For this reason, these trusted officers also acted as the Dhelius’ personal guards when not acting in their regular position.

Paltrus entered the tower by a great room with the same polished floor and columns as the chapel, with a red carpet leading across the room to the staircase, which spiraled around the outermost part of the tower, connecting the rooms of the Dhelius family. The walls of stone in this great room were covered in needlework hangings made of silk, which depicted scenes of the mythology and history of Dhelian. There was furniture of solid wood and marble with vases and candlesticks of gold and silver. Very few people would see this furniture and these decorations, and many who did beheld them as the last sight of their lives.

The fourth-highest room of this tower was the Dhelius' private meeting hall, which was Paltrus' destination. In this room the highest business was conducted, but only with the Dhelius' family and his two highest officers. The third highest was the Dhelius' bedchamber. The second-highest was a room for the Dhelius to raise his children and the highest was a room for the Dhelius to conduct his private business. It contained many secret documents, many of which only the Dhelius would view, and only the Dhelius could enter the room. Even the Sel-Dhelius could not enter the room until he became the Bel-Dhelius. It was separated into two rooms. The first was a somewhat short antechamber, and was purposed only to lead into the second room. The doors to both of these rooms were locked, with locks that matched two different keys. This was to keep everyone but the Dhelius out of this room. Anybody who watched the Dhelius enter the room would only see him enter the antechamber before he closed the door. In this way, no person other than the Dhelius would see the inside of this room. The roof of this tower was flat and reserved for the king's stargazing.

Paltrus crossed the room to meet with Polius, who greeted him kindly and with reverence.

“My lord. Your lord is waiting for us.”

The two men climbed the stairs, admiring the wall hangings that were also present in the tower staircase. They circled the tower until they reached the fourth-highest room in the tower and both entered. They saw the Bel-Dhelius in his royal garments, sitting at the center table with Melbruss, the Commander of the Constables, in his light armor. The room was round and surrounded in bookcases full of texts regarding law, history, philosophy, theology, and books of hymns to Dhelianos. There was one break in the wall that allowed for a window that looked upon the staircase. This particular section of the staircase also had a window looking upon the Capital City, so that someone standing in the meeting hall would be able to see into the staircase and out the window and upon the city. The White Chapel could be seen from this window.

Polius and Paltrus approached the table and sat opposite of the Bel-Dhelius and Melbruss. Then the Dhelius raised his hands, looked up, and spoke.

“Praise Dhelianos for allowing us our paths, and honor Him by following them to their ends.”

He then lowered his hands and looked at Polius and Paltrus in front of him.

“Arch-Knight and my second, you are aware of the rumors growing in the city?”

Paltrus began to speak. “We know that Mischian and Talian are warring with one another again.”

“Do you know the cause?”

“The citizens know it concerns ownership of land,” said Polius. “A letter that I received from the Lord Mischius confirms it. This land is home to a particularly profitable mine according to the letters I've received.”

“May I see the letters sent to you by Mischius?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Polius removed from his satchel a document with a broken seal and handed it to the king.

Upon hearing this, Paltrus became angry, but said quietly to Polius, “Why has word of this not reached my ear?”

“I just received this letter moments ago,” Polius replied.

The king took the letter from Polius' hand and briefly looked over it before setting it on the table and speaking again.

“This is our present situation. Both Talius and Mischius ask for our support. We can give it to neither, but we must cause them to think that we are giving it to both without the other knowing it.”

“Talium also asks?” said Polius.

“Yes, he visited me personally. This land has long been disputed among these two countries, but nothing has been done about it because both have had more important matters to which to attend. This is new. That mine has never been profitable by means of gold or jewels. Talium claims that a local child has found Arrburdak buried beneath that mine.”

The three other men reeled, yet out of confusion rather than shock. Arrburdak was a city of ancient times said to be located in Cirian. The histories of Arrburdak were vague and contradictory, and most historians believed that they had thoroughly disproved its existence.

Paltrus spoke. “Why do they fight over this city? Surely there is very little value to a crumbling relic.”

“I do not know,” responded the king. “I do doubt they've found the city at all. It is leagues away from the location described in the legends. They have probably found a forgotten village. However, they both believe that there is some value in whatever they have found, and that may yet prove true, even if that value is not Arrburdak.”

The king turned towards Paltrus and said plainly to him, “I am hereby giving you a new title in addition to those that you already hold. Henceforth you will also hold the office of Second Ambassador.”

Paltrus had not yet discussed this idea with his father, but was pleased that the king also saw the need for such a position in the growing tensions among the nations.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Your first task in this role is to visit the area and learn more of the situation. Then you will determine what your immediate actions must be. After that, return here and I will consult you in your long-term policies in the matter. Remember that we do not want to lose the loyalty of either of them. Both have been allies of ours for some time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“You will also take Polius with you. Though this is likely to be a small matter, we still should be very careful, and for that I shall require the best efforts our kingdom can offer. Our skirmishes against the barbarians in the unknown lands to the south do not need your special attention, and this may still prove to be more problematic to the Tharadish balance than at first suspected, so do not worry that your time is wasted.”

Paltrus and Polius both responded in turn, “Yes, my lord.”

“I ask that you leave for that area immediately. Melbruss and I will discuss domestic matters for now.” Then the king turned to Paltrus specifically and said, “You and I will discuss your dealings with our own citizens upon your return.” He then turned to both of them again and said, “May Dhelianos guide your paths.”

Paltrus and Polius both responded in turn again, “Thank you, my lord.”

The two of them stood, bowed, and left the king to work with Melbruss. As they walked through the White Chapel's market on their way towards the Fort of Dorz to prepare for their journey, Paltrus asked Polius, “Did that letter reveal anything else about the situation?”

“No,” responded Polius, “however, my lord, I do seem to remember a passage concerning Arrburdak in my studies of mythology in my youth that may be relevant.”

“What did it say?”

“If I remember correctly, it said,

*In the lost city beneath Cirian lies a power within the reach of man.  
Of man are its origins and for man is its purpose.*

*Potential unknown and power unused,  
Infinite paths and unyielding will.”*

Paltrus thought over this briefly before saying, “Not very poetic, is it?”

“I don't know that it was meant to be, sir. But I wonder if it is true.”

“It may be. I also wonder if there is a connection between their paths and the Paths of Dhelianos.”

“What I studied said that there is none to be found, but many historians have wondered the same.”

Paltrus and Polius continued to the Fort of Dorz to prepare their units for the mission.

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Their troops were ready by the afternoon of that day. They waited patiently for Paltrus' command to depart, but he had not yet decided where to go. Polius approached him and asked, “My lord, do you know yet how you wish to proceed?”

Paltrus responded, “How do you think that we should?”

“I had thought that it might be best to first depart for Enoth. From there, you will depart to meet with Talius in his Capital City, and I will depart to meet with Mischius at a camp near the disputed lands. I thought it best that I meet with Mischius because his letter was sent to me and that you meet with Talius because he met with your father. That might make them feel more comfortable, as if we are taking personal interests in their affairs.”

“That does seem to be the best route.”

“We should also ask for secrecy. They must not allow other nations to know of our involvement, lest both discover that we are speaking with their enemy.”

“How shall we ask them to do this so as not to create suspicion?”

“We must convince them that we are asking this for their own benefit; that it would be best to surprise their enemies with our presence at a crucial moment. In that, we can stay behind in any battle that might erupt, telling them that it is not yet prudent for us to surprise the enemy.”

“This seems to be a good course of action. Let us follow it.”

Paltrus then mounted his horse and rode in front of his men to speak to them.

“We are going to leave from here shortly. We will head for Enoth and request lodging for the night, but we will not reach it until tomorrow evening. Tonight, however, we will camp in our tents, for we will be traveling cross-country, and there is neither road nor town where we shall be. From Enoth, twenty of you will come with me to the Talian Capital, and the other twenty will

follow Polius to a Mischian army camp near the disputed land. There you will receive further orders once we determine what shall be done. Now, let us ride.”

On that command, all men started forward in the direction of Enoth.

### 3

At sundown, Paltrus gave a signal to halt in a large field, where they planned to make camp and rest for the night. After Paltrus dismounted to make arrangements for the camp, he removed his armor, and the polish boy scampered to take it from him and tend to it. They brought with them green tents, food, fuel for a fire, and that which was necessary to tend the horses. They brought also golden trinkets and silken banners to adorn the Sel-Dhelius' pavilion for the night, and Paltrus ordered that everything be set up.

When the horses were tended to, the armor was freshly shined, and the evening meal had been served and eaten, Paltrus sat on a rock by the glow of one of the camp's fires. While riding, while setting up the camp, while eating, and now that he was resting, he had been thinking of Dhelian. He continued to think of the honor of his title, and what he must do if he is to acquire sainthood. The current mission seemed to him to be wasteful for this purpose, and Paltrus felt himself uneasy when thinking of other things that could be done. However, as he reflected upon the saints of the past and the heroic actions that earned them sainthood, he realized that most of those actions happened at unexpected times and in unlikely areas. This thought comforted him, but he also realized that he would need to likely be sent on many of these missions before any event of that sort were to happen. "For the moment," he thought to himself, "it would be best to be very aware of what's happening around me more than anything else. I must be on the lookout for anything that can be done."

After spending some time in thought, Paltrus looked up to see Polius in the glow of the fire sitting near him. He noticed that Polius was writing something on a small piece of paper, filling up the page and finding another piece in his satchel to write more. He already had several pages, and along with the pages was a small bunch of roots, apparently recently pulled.

"If you don't mind my asking," said Paltrus, "what are you writing, and why have you pulled those roots?"

Polius seemed startled, but quickly laughed before saying, "Oh, I am writing a letter to my wife to be sent with the messenger tomorrow. Our young son is ill, and I found this root that I believe might help. I am writing about what little I know of alchemy to try to help her. His illness is very mild, and most certainly of little concern, but I would still like to help, if I can."

"I never knew that you had a family, Polius."

Polius smiled and nodded.

After a pause, Paltrus spoke again. “Have you thought of sending your wife to an alchemist in the city? You might have better luck with the root, or he might even have other roots or plants that also may be helpful.”

Polius then looked up at Paltrus, but was still thinking of what he was writing rather than what Paltrus had just said.

“Not to try to undermine what you know of alchemy,” Paltrus said apologetically, “It merely occurred to me that you might have better luck with an artisan.”

Nervously, Polius laughed, knowing that he should not have made the Sel-Dhelius uncomfortable. “No, I take no offense, sir. I had actually already written that on the first page. I suppose my zeal to help my son overcame my senses. I now think that I should finish this soon.”

Paltrus smiled and turned away to allow Polius to continue his writing. He noticed that Polius wrote quite a few more pages before tying them together with the root and giving them to the messenger. Paltrus sat before the fire for some time still, contemplating what he might be able to do to help Polius.

Paltrus and Polius continued to speak to each other late into the night, and a great friendship and mutual trust formed between them very quickly.

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The next morning, Paltrus awoke at dawn to the sound of the messenger galloping past his tent, heading back to the Capital City to deliver the personal letters of the soldiers as well as a report that simply stated “All is well” to give to the Dhelius. Soon, Polius would come to wake Paltrus, but not before waking the other soldiers first. This was to ensure that Paltrus would not need to wait on the other soldiers before departing. Though Paltrus had been up late speaking with Polius the night before, he did not feel the need to wait until that moment to rise. He stood and exited his tent to see two soldiers readying a horse, and when they saw Paltrus they stood at attention.

“Sir! We apologize. We did not know you were already awake, and we will not be ready to go when you are.”

“That is not necessary, soldier. I awoke early, and I wish to walk around the camp before leaving.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was not long before everyone was ready to depart. Soon, the polish boy handed Paltrus’ armor to him, the tents were packed, and Paltrus mounted his horse. The entourage rode through the day until the noon meal, and during that meal Paltrus and Polius continued to discuss Polius’ family. They then mounted their horses again and continued towards Enoth, and spotted the Emerald Towers long before the time of their evening meal.

Enoth was a city that was on the land of all three nations, Dhelian, Mischian, and Talian, yet it was governed by none of these nations. It lay on the Plains of the Reparrie, but to the north of the city lay the Mountains of Adach. It had originally been founded by Talius, but in the ongoing struggle between Talian and Mischian, Talius lost the city to Mischius.

Yet Mischius had difficulty in maintaining control of the city because it was far from his Fort Capital. The city, then, grew of its own means, being an important trade city. There were still many ties to the Talian economy, and anyone traveling between Dhelian and Mischian would pass through the city to avoid the Mountains of Adach, through which was no remaining passage. As the city grew from the trade routes, it became popular among travelers as an end in itself, and many merchants would travel to Enoth for its own sake.

Upon seeing the growth of Enoth, Mischius desired the tribute that the city had not been paying. The regional governor of the city told the king that the difficult traveling conditions made the alms-giving impossible, but soon the issue erupted into a full battle in the year 1176 A.U. This battle upset the Dhelian king, who joined in the battle on the side of Enoth. Soon, the Dhelian king, the Mischian king, and the Enothian governor met in a treaty negotiation. The Dhelius told the Mischian king that he desired this war to end because it scared merchants away and upset the trade of Bel-Tharad. He then offered the Mountains of Adach to Mischius in return for Enoth's sovereignty, and Mischius accepted.

Since that time, Enoth has been a self-governing city-state and the Mountains of Adach have belonged to Mischian, though the more profitable mines on the eastern side of the mountains were still controlled by Dhelian.

As the entourage approached the city, the guards atop the emerald stone walls announced that a Dhelian visitor was approaching, and seemed to be from the Royalty. By the time they had reached the gate, it had already been opened, though opening the large doors was a slow and difficult task. Paltrus and his men entered the city, riding through the gray roads between the emerald buildings. Peasants quickly removed themselves from the road as they heard the beating of hooves on the stone, and Paltrus made his way to the largest tower in the center of the city.

The Dhelian men stopped before the gatekeeper of the tower, who was standing above them atop the gate.

“May I ask who approaches the tower of Enoth?” said the gatekeeper.

“You may, and I will tell you,” said Paltrus. “I am the Sel-Dhelius, with a simple request of the governor. I ask no more than lodging and simple food for my men and myself for the night. We have precious stones to give in return for his generosity, should he be willing to grant us this favor.”

“The favor shall be granted,” said an unseen voice, “but if the governor should accept a gift in return for this favor, then it would not be a favor at all.” The speaker, an aristocratic man who looked to be in the middle of his expected life, stepped out onto the gate. “That would rather be a business transaction, and the governor might instead prefer to give gifts to his friends that have already helped him so greatly in the past.”

“Good evening, governor!” said Paltrus. “How do things fare in these parts?”

“Very well, thank you, my lord! Thanks to the work of your father and your father’s fathers, our market has grown, our military surpasses the might of Cirian, and the two enemies, Mischian and Enoth, have become allies.”

“My heart is glad to hear this, governor!”

“Now, please enter, and we shall feast! Though not too heavily, as I am certain that you desire to be on your way by morning.”

“That is true, sir.”

The governor then turned to the gatekeeper and said, “Open the gate, please.” Upon hearing this, the gatekeeper yelled to the men behind him, and the gate slowly began to open.

Paltrus and his men entered the building and feasted, but Paltrus was hesitant to tell the governor his business in the area, as he believed the alliance between Enoth and Mischian might compromise their intent. By dawn, Paltrus and his men were ready to depart, and they separated into two units. Polius led one unit to the west, and Paltrus led the other to the south.

The ride to the Talic Capital lasted two days, but those days were cold for Paltrus, as he had no friends among the soldiers, who feared him. Silently he ate his meals and rested in the evening, and by the end of the second day from Enoth, he reached the Capital City of Talian.

The Talian Capital was built of the same emerald stone as Enoth and had similar design. Announced by the guards, Paltrus rode into the city and made his way to the center building to meet with Talius, who was waiting for him in the foyer.

“Greetings, Sel-Dhelius. It is a great honor to have such a worthy member of the Dhelian kingdom with us today.”

“It is an equal honor to be in this city today. Tell me, my friend, may we speak privately regarding important matters?”

“Yes, of course. I welcome your counsel.”

The two men dined separately from the soldiers to discuss their plans. They sat at a table in a well-lit room, whose floor was polished rock and walls were wood. Paltrus noticed that it did not seem to have been properly maintained in several years, as stains from food and drink had created occasional spots on the floor. There were bookcases on either side of them, and the table had books, papers, pen, and ink that Talius himself cleared away without calling to any servants. This was Talius' private office, where, on occasion, he would have his meals if he had little time to spare. Talius wasted no time in dealing the state affairs, and today was no exception. He did not wait to finish the meal before speaking.

“I assume that your lord has told you why the current situation weighs heavily upon us. Am I correct?”

“He tells me that you believe that you have found Arrburdak.”

“That is true. It has been discovered in a mine in the disputed lands.”

“There is something that still confuses me, though. The legends of Arrburdak are contradictory, but all of them agree that the city is buried beneath Cirion. What causes you to believe that those legends are all wrong?”

“I do not doubt that Arrburdak is beneath Cirion. I am certain that it is. It is also beneath Talian, Mischian, and even Dhelian. Arrburdak is beneath us all. The legend you speak of only refers to Cirion because it stems from a personal letter of the founding Cirius, who did not care that Arrburdak was beneath other nations.”

Upon hearing this, Paltrus became more skeptical of Talius' claim.

“How can you know this?”

“Talian has long held secrets of Arrburdak that other nations do not. We have many documents that have survived some purging of knowledge.”

“You have kept this secret from Dhelian?”

“I do apologize, and I beg your forgiveness. It may please you to know, however, that I have only discovered these documents within the past ten years.”

Paltrus paused, but was far too interested in this story to chide the man.

“What purging is it that they were to have survived?”

“I do not know. Unfortunately, the records that we have do not tell us why there was a purging, but we are certain that these are real. They were found in our underground library, which has been kept secret, and only Talius has had knowledge of its very existence. I came across it one day some years ago, and I have no reason to doubt the authenticity. I've spent much of my time studying these parchments. That is how I know of the passage through the mine.”

“My father tells me a child found the passage.”

“By my urging. Children do not normally play at that mine. Their mothers do not allow it. The mine itself is dangerous and the possibility of children being slaughtered in combat is too great. When I learned of the mine's ancient connection to Arrburdak, I told a child to explore that area. An adult would raise too much suspicion; Mischian soldiers would suspect that a child is merely wandering.”

Any doubt of Talius' sanity had left Paltrus. This story seemed far too likely and to come from too respectable of a person to be wrong.

“I do regret sending the child,” continued Talius, “but he returned without a scratch, thank Dhelianos. Yet good did come out of it, for he confirmed the legend of Arrburdak. Now, my purpose has become urgent, as the power of Arrburdak may yet slip away from me. I was

always uncertain of what to do, as any activity in the disputed lands would draw attention, but now war seems not only likely but inevitable.”

“Could you use Mischius' ignorance of the mine to your advantage?”

“Unfortunately, Mischius is not ignorant of the mine. I was careful to tell the child not to enter the city, and I was certain that his parents would believe him to be telling the wild tales that children will tell, but I was not careful enough. His father, as chance would have it, was every bit as adventurous as he. I do not know if he believed his son's story, but he was foolhardy enough to enter the mine himself to see what was inside. Foolhardy as I was, by involving a stupid child in reconnaissance that should remain secret! Oh, how I regret such careless behavior. The father found and attempted to enter the city. He was not prepared for what he found, though, and he left before he could successfully enter the city. When he emerged from the mine, Mischian soldiers found him and captured him. He was but a mere farmer and was not willing to endure torture. He told the soldiers what he had seen, and they took him away to a Mischian prison. He may be dead by now, but I do not know. Shortly thereafter, some of my documents had disappeared from my study. A spy had infiltrated my court and stolen them. I know of the farmer and this spy because of a spy of my own. He retrieved the documents for me, but Mischius already knows what he needs to know.”

“Is the power unused of Arrburdak real?”

“Yes, it is quite real, and it is the reason that this battle is of the utmost importance. We cannot allow Mischius to gain control of the Flame of Man.”

“What is the 'Flame of Man'?”

“That is the power of Arrburdak that we must secure. It unleashes a power that exists within man. Man has accomplished much, but still has not reached his full potential. Through some art unknown to us, the smiths of Arrburdak created a pendent in the shape of a flame that unleashed the hidden power in its wearer. The wearer becomes physically unchallengeable, gains great knowledge, and is continually blessed by victory in battle.

“The Flame makes known that which is unknowable to the wearer, and even after it is made known it is still unknowable, even to the wearer. The wearer uses this unknowable knowledge to gain great power.”

“Why, then, did the city fall?”

“I do not know, though that is a question that I have had for some time, as well. As long as Mischius has knowledge of the Flame's existence, however, we cannot wait to discover the answer. We must strike now and secure the Flame!”

Paltrus now had no interest in anything other than the Flame of Man. He did not suspect that such an important mission would come about so quickly in his career. This was the story that was to canonize him as a saint. Like all such stories, it came in an unexpected time. It would constitute a heroic act, going into the heat of battle to keep lesser men from stealing a power which they could not control. Sainthood was now only a first step in his political power. With

the Flame, he could extend his power far beyond Dhelian, and possibly beyond the known Bel-Tharad. Only Dhelianos Himself would pose a challenge. Paltrus had no interest in helping Talius, but he knew that Talius would be instrumental in this deed.

“I quite agree, Talius. This must be done immediately. Tonight, indeed. Have a servant tell the soldiers, both yours and mine, not to gorge themselves tonight, as we will be preparing for battle immediately after. Tell them that the battle is tomorrow morning, so that any spies will not suspect it to be tonight. We will enter the field with every soldier thinking that we are merely preparing, but then we will give the order and attack the enemy's camp. Meanwhile, you, I, and a small number of my own soldiers will enter Arrburdak and secure the Flame while they are unable to reach us.”

Talium grinned and said, “I knew you would see how important this is, sir!” Then he stood and left the room in a hurry.

Paltrus stood, contemplating how Polius might respond to this surprise attack. Hopefully, he would fall back, guessing that there is something more important at stake than the allegiance of Mischius. It was possible that Mischius would see that the troops attacking them in the night were Dhelian, but hopefully the Flame would be in his hands before any counterattack could be made. Sending a messenger to warn Polius would require sending him first to Enoth, so that Mischius would not be suspicious at a Dhelian messenger coming from the direction of his enemy. It would be impossible to do this in the short amount of time that was available.

# 4

Before the break of morning, Paltrus was at the gate of Arrburdak with no distraction from enemy soldiers. Paltrus had received word that Polius and his men were not to be found anywhere near the enemy. He was pleased to hear this, but did not know to where or why they would have left. He gave little thought to this before continuing his journey.

The gate was easily opened. It was no larger than the gates at Enoth or the Talian Capital. There were designs and patterns carved into the gate that were every bit as eloquent as those carved into the columns of the White Chapel, with colorful branches and leaves of extinct flora that did not seem familiar to Paltrus. There were pictures of travelers being greeted by the inhabitants of the city. Paltrus felt more welcome passing through this ancient gate than he did passing through the gates of the Palace of Champions.

As the gate was opened, not one bit of dust fell from it, as if it had never fallen into disrepair or disuse. The mine could not possibly be kept clean, but the gate repelled anything that naturally disgusted those who passed through it. The open gate revealed a city equally pleasing to the eye. There were tall towers, spiraling towards the top of the cave, which seemed to be as distant as the sky itself. These towers were built of some smooth stone and supported by flying buttresses, as well as by each other. There were arched doors and windows with no glass, and through them anyone on the road could clearly see the insides of the towers. In the doors and lower windows one could see lounging furniture and lecture halls. Through the higher and much larger windows, one could see massive charts of constellations and complex stargazing equipment. The roads were polished and colored with pictures of great events in the life of the city. Yet in the midst of this colorful display, everything was touched by a green and blue light. The light did not seem to be very bright, but still revealed every detail of the intricate city much more clearly than the light of the sun would have done. Great distances could be seen as if close. It seemed that such a light could be seen by a blind man.

Paltrus and Talius led their men into the city, and could see no borders. The city itself spread as far as they could see in every direction excepting only the gate. It could easily be seen that this city was beneath all of Bel-Tharad. Talius looked ahead and saw a round tower that had four large windows on a single story that were higher than most of the other towers reached. Out of these four windows emanated the green and blue light that touched the entire city.

“There!” said Talius, “The Flame is in that tower. It is called the Tower of the World. We must scale that tower!”

“Then to that tower we will go,” Paltrus said. Then, turning to the soldiers, he said “Guard the entrance. I will go alone.”

“Alone?” Talius asked.

“Is there anything of danger in the tower according to the lore?”

“No, it should be quite safe, but--”

“Then the only danger is from the enemy behind us. You shall stay here and command the men while I retrieve the Flame.”

After a silent moment, Talius said, “Yes, my lord.”

Talium and the soldiers turned their attention away from the tower and towards the gate behind them, and Paltrus continued towards the tower. Looking up into the windows, Paltrus stared at the light coming out of them. The source was apparently not stationary, as the light seemed to slowly move. In some areas it was more blue, and in others more green, but always moving. As his horse continued towards the tower, Paltrus was in a trance, at times thinking he might have seen a corner of the Flame itself, and not just the light emanating from it. When he thought he saw it, his heart jumped, and he was overcome with ecstasy. Being in his trance, he hardly noticed that his horse had slowed to an easier pace, yet the seconds still passed as if hours.

Paltrus was roused from his trance, though slowly, by the sound of metal against metal and yells of pain behind him. Still slowly, he turned his horse towards the gate. There seemed twice as many soldiers as before, and they were fighting amongst themselves. One of the two apparent factions was far more successful, as the other was almost destroyed. Among the dead was Talium, but he was the only one there, living or dead, that was not wearing Dhelian armor.

While the fight continued, Paltrus heard hoofbeats from another direction, this time from between the Tower of the World and a neighboring tower. He turned and saw Polius upon his horse, in full armor, with desperation in his eye and a mace in his hand. He came at Paltrus, and before Paltrus could collect himself from his trance, he fell.

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Paltrus awoke from a dream. In this dream, a red fire was in his mouth, and Paltrus could not remove it. In pain, Paltrus tried to quench the fire with water, but streams would do nothing to it.

Paltrus did not wake from this dream onto a bed, but onto a cold stone floor. The stones were cracked and jagged. Dirt and pebbles found their way into his torn sackcloth clothing, pinching and cutting his skin. This pain, however, was overshadowed by the far greater stiff pain in the muscles of his back, which prevented him from sitting up with ease.

When he managed to sit up with much difficulty, he looked about him to find that he was in a room that was very dark, with only a small amount of light in his immediate area. There were no walls or ceiling to be seen because this dim light did not reach them, if they were even there.

Out of the darkness, Paltrus saw on his left a wolf approaching him. On his right, a panther approached him also. Both were showing their teeth, which were stained with blood. Before they reached Paltrus, he again fell into a dead sleep.

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“Well, we have a number represented as  $i$  such that  $i$  squared is negative one. Similarly, let’s assume, as nonsensical as it may be, that we may have a number, say  $b$ , such that  $b$  multiplied by zero is one.”

“But that seems to violate a basic rule of multiplication.”

“That is why I call it a ‘nonsense number.’ See what I mean?”

“Ah, yes, I follow.”

Paltrus woke to voices in unfamiliar accents, and opened his eyes to look at the ceiling above him. As his eyes cleared, he saw an unpolished yet smoothly laid out stone ceiling; similar to the floor he was lying on. The most peculiar thing, though, is that as he looked up towards that ceiling, directly above him, was a bed. It was simple and common, made and clean, but sitting upside down on the ceiling as a normal bed would on the floor, as if gravity pulled it up instead of down, and someone decided to put such a bed there in case such a person ever visited.

“And though it may be nonsensical, some interesting things may occur from such a number. If we were to divide the number five by zero, we could say that that is equal to five multiplied by  $b$ .”

“And six fifths multiplied by nine zeroths would be fifty four zeroths, or fifty four multiplied by  $b$ .”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Yet, all of these numbers would be essentially the same. And they would require us to ultimately redefine continuity.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Paltrus started to pull himself up to a sitting position. He saw that he was in a room that resembled a cave by its walls, but resembled a small stone house by its floor and ceiling. In front of him were two doors on either side of the room, and on the far side of those doors, against the cave wall, were two bookcases that contained several books, small sack bags, and apparatuses that were foreign to Paltrus. Between the bookcases, Paltrus saw a wolf and a panther sitting on

small round stools. The seats of the stools, however, were against the ground, and the wolf and panther were sitting on the legs of the stools, which Paltrus thought seemed to look quite uncomfortable.

The both of them were drinking from teacups that they held upside down. Holding their saucers in one hand, they tilted the cups towards their mouths just the same as most would do with a tea cup in the other hand, except that it was upside down.

There was a table between the two. This table, however, had its topside resting on the ground with its legs in the air, seeming to match the stools.

Paltrus' eye was caught by a bit of tea flying out from the wolf's cup, up towards the ceiling.

“Oh, bother!” said the wolf.

“We shall need to clean that before it stains the ceiling,” said the panther.

“Would you mind if I borrowed your stool?”

“Not at all.”

Paltrus watched as the panther stood on his hind legs and set his cup of tea precariously on one of the legs of the table that were up in the air. The panther then handed his stool to the wolf, who also set his cup of tea on another leg of the table. The wolf accepted the offer of the panther's stool and set it upon his own.

Climbing to the top of the stacked stools, the wolf could still not quite reach the ceiling. He then reached below the stool he was standing on and pulled up the stool on the ground, somehow managing to keep the stool on which he was standing from falling. There was now nothing between the stool on which he was standing and the ground. He then placed the stool that was previously on the ground on top of the other stool, and climbed on top of that.

He was now within an arm's reach of the ceiling, but again reached below and pulled the lower stool up on top of the higher stool, and climbed on top of that.

It was now clear to Paltrus why an arm's reach of the ceiling was not close enough to clean the spilt tea. The wolf, being, after all, a wolf, cleaned up the tea with his tongue. Then, in the same way as he climbed up through the air, climbed down by putting one stool beneath another until he had reached the floor.

Upon reaching the floor, the wolf looked towards Paltrus and excitedly said, “Oh, I'm glad you're awake! We're about done with our tea, but we'll direct you to the minister that brought you in just a tick.”

Trying to nod, Paltrus succeeded only in staring. Seeming not to notice, the panther said, “We'd offer you some tea, but you would probably not rather like it.”

The wolf then grinned, showing not the crimson-dripping, sharp teeth of a wolf, but the flat, brown-stained teeth of a man who drank a great deal of tea. The wolf and panther then quickly finished their tea, lifted up the table, set their cups underneath, and with a *smash* dropped the table on top of the cups.

“We can clean them later,” remarked the panther. Paltrus was disappointed in hearing this, as he was anxious to see the sink.

“Follow me, please,” said the wolf, grinning.

Paltrus stood and followed the wolf through the coarse wooden door on his right into a large, empty room with polished wooden floors, ceilings, and walls. The room was particularly bright, as a large window allowed bright sunlight into the room, hitting a large chandelier hanging from the ceiling and allowing light to dance on every surface in the room. This window was on the side of the room opposite of the door in which Paltrus entered the room. The wolf, though, turned to the left and headed towards one of two open doors. As the wolf approached the door to the right, Paltrus saw another wolf approaching him through the door to the left. No; this wolf was not a different wolf, but the same wolf. As the wolf leaned through the door on the right, Paltrus could see the wolf facing him through the left door.

“Could you follow me, Mr. Paltrus?”

“Ah, yes, my apologies,” said Paltrus.

The wolf chuckled and said, “No need to apologize, Mr. Paltrus. Many people become confused the first time they enter this room.”

Paltrus followed the wolf through the left door, and back into what appeared to be the same room through the right door. He then followed the wolf back through the door that he originally entered the room by, but now into a room that he had not yet seen.

The room was fairly bare by means of furniture, containing only two chairs on opposite sides of a very plain-looking wooden desk. This furniture, though, was right-side up, unlike the room in which Paltrus awoke. The walls and floor of the room were lavishly decorated not by means of paints, but by different colors in the building materials themselves. The colors were all dark colors, but created aesthetic patterns. The patterns these colors made were curving and pleasing to the eye, but Paltrus could not identify them with branches or leaves or anything else that he might have seen before. They did seem to have a form of some sort, rather than being aesthetic for its own sake, but it seemed to be an original form. There may have been such decorations on the ceiling, but it was so distant and the room was so dark that Paltrus could not see the ceiling. The dim blue light only allowed him to see what was directly in front of him.

Paltrus heard loud ticking, and could see that along the walls were a single row of clocks. None of the pendulums on the clocks were moving in spite of the loud ticking, and none of the clocks

seemed to agree on the time of day. Each clock was slightly different from the clock on its left and the clock on its right.

From the opposite end of the room, a door was opened and in came a fox in a particularly elegant court outfit.

“Ah! Mr. Paltrus! How are you this evening?”

“I, uh, I am very well this evening, I suppose.”

“Very good, very good. Have a seat and I’ll be with you in a moment. I’m sorry to keep you waiting, but we’ve been very busy lately with a lot of new people like yourself coming in.”

Paltrus sat and watched the fox remove his overcoat and place it on some unseen coat rack. The fox came and sat down at the side of the desk opposite Paltrus, but he was facing away from him.

“Mr. Paltrus,” said the fox. “Mr. Paltrus, could you turn around, please? I would like to speak with you, sir.”

Paltrus turned around to see a desk with the fox on the opposite side, this time facing towards him. He turned back again to see that there was no desk where he was facing before. Finally, he turned his chair back towards the fox, who was lighting a pipe. The fox’s match lit itself not by means of a torch, but by merely scratching the side of a small box, and its flame traveled along a path through the air into the fox’s pipe.

The fox puffed his pipe for a bit and pulled some papers on the desk towards him and began to write with a feather pen. On the desk, Paltrus now saw the source of light in the room. It was a candle on the desk, lit not by fire but by water. Paltrus reached out his hand and touched the water that danced like a flame. It was pleasantly cool to the touch.

“Oh! Mr. Paltrus!” said the fox.

Paltrus immediately pulled his hand away.

“It’s best if you don’t touch that, Mr. Paltrus. I know you cannot feel it, but it *is* painful.”

Paltrus responded by bringing his hand down to his lap.

“No doubt,” said the fox, “some things here seem odd to you. That is nothing to worry about. Because you have never been presented with things as they are, you cannot *see* things as they are even when they *are* presented to you. As you become more accustomed to seeing things as they are, things will seem to make some sense. However, it is impossible in this world of Extension to see things entirely as they are. Therefore as long as we are *here*, nothing will seem quite right. We have ourselves to blame for that.

“My name, as it may be, is Warren Herbert Why. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Asking questions will help ease the process as well as accelerate it. Please bear in mind, however, that *my* answers, while better than any that you will have already heard, are imperfect.”

Not knowing what else to ask, Paltrus simply pointed towards the wall and said, “What are these clocks?”

“These clocks are the most honest clocks in Extension. Each is as honest as any of the others. But they are still entirely inadequate, as you can see. They contradict each other; therefore no more than one of them can be right. As they are now, each is equally wrong. They are honest, however, in that together they present their best guesses, all of which are honestly wrong. And they know this. They shamefully present themselves, knowing full well that they are wrong and knowing full well that they are stupid. They may not be right, but they are vastly superior to the dishonest and arrogant clocks elsewhere in Extension.”

Paltrus seemed to notice that the ticking seemed to be much quieter than it previously was.

“How are they better?”

“They are better in that they admit this and do not claim their falsehoods to be true.”

“But they do not tell anyone what the time is.”

“I’m afraid I do not follow. What do you mean?”

Paltrus did not know how to respond, and now the ticking was much louder than it ever was.

“Ah!” said Mr. Why, “I know now what you intend to say. You mean they do not spread the lies about ‘Time,’ the falsehood told to us by our physical senses. ‘Time,’ I am afraid, is not quite what you think it to be. There is some truth in ‘Time,’ yes, but it is far more dynamic than it seems to be. I apologize for forgetting, but it has been quite some time since I’ve studied ‘Time’. But I am afraid that we’ve discussed ‘Time’ for so long that we are nearly out of it, especially since we have been short on it since the time we’ve entered the room.”

“How did I come to be here?”

“You did not come here at all; you were brought. Not by me, though I was among those who helped. You were brought by the One.”

“What is the One?”

“The One is our Lord. It is to Him that we owe our existence and any amount of goodness. Even those who love the Un more than they love Him would not exist without Him. It is quite incredible that He would humble Himself enough to help us. He is He That Is. He is the essence of existence itself and goodness itself. Therefore, we define everything that exists by its relation to Him.”

“How so?”

“If we say that something exists, we mean that there is a quality within it that originates from the One. Sometimes we specify what that quality is. If none of its qualities are from the One, then it does not exist. And in that case, it does not have any qualities at all, because all qualities that anything could possess are from Him.”

Confused, Paltrus asked, “What is the Un?”

“The Un is everything that is not of the One. Everything that is no thing. Nothing in the Un exists, but is nonexistence.”

“You seem to refer to it as if it exists.”

“Our pitiful language used in Extension requires it. But Un is nothingness. When we say something is of Un, we mean that something that should be there is not. Nothing can be entirely Un, because then it would no longer exist. Everything that is, is of One. Everything that is not, is of Un.”

“I’m still not sure I understand. How can something be Un, yet not exist? If it ‘is’ anything at all, then it must exist, or it could not be a member of anything, not even Un.”

“I’m afraid we have our meanings of words mixed up again. When I say something is ‘Un,’ I mean something in the same way that I say that water in a pond may be dirty. There is no part of the pond’s water that is not dirty, but it is not nothing but dirt, or else it would not be water at all. When something is Un, there is no part of it that is not infected by Un, but there is something in addition to the Un, or else it would not exist.”

“And by Un you mean that something is not there when it should be?”

“Yes.”

“And if something is entirely Un—”

“There is nothing that is entirely Un, because that thing would be no thing at all.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand.”

Paltrus thought for a few moments before he said, “Why did He bring me here?”

“I am afraid I do not know. There are some things we do not understand and some things we do not know. I neither understand nor know why you are there or why I am here. We don’t know why He chooses those whom He does, but we do know that there *is* a reason. We might be told at some point, but there are more pertinent issues at present. I do wish I could answer your question. I also wish I knew the answer.”

“If I don’t know the reason I am here, can I be told what happens now that I *am* here?”

“Oh, yes. You will meet the One. He will tell you that which you will wish to know, even if you do not understand it.”

Paltrus had never thought about meeting this mysterious madman called “the One,” but he knew it may answer many questions. Mr. Why continued.

“Like I said, I do not know *why* the One has called for you, but it must be important. He rarely asks us to venture so far into the Unknown Lands.”

“Why were you in the unknown lands?”

“That is where we found you.”

“I was in the unknown lands in the South?”

“You were in the Unknown Lands to the *North*.”

Paltrus then became confused. He never knew of any lands beyond the Spreading Sea.

“I've never heard of any northern unknown lands.”

“You've lived there all of your life.”

Paltrus' confusion was not alleviated, but the nearly-forgotten ticking of the clocks was now so loud that it was nearly paralyzing. Mr. Why began to speak, barely audible over the clocks.

“You believe that you are the prince of a land called Dhelian in a region called Bel-Tharad. We, however, have a different name for that region, that land, and your god. The region we call Barrisch-Nittook, the nation we call Morband, and what you call Dhelianos, we call Morbannius. Others call him Prometheus, and still others Beelzebub. You accepted his Un name as a title, Sel-Dhelius, which is derived from Dhelianos. My Lord was kind enough to bring you to the Southern Lands of Shallice.”

Paltrus could barely speak over the ticking of the clocks, but said, “You are the barbarians of the unknown lands. The unchartered lands whose people resist civilization despite the attempts of noble innovators who try to bring you happiness. I suppose you call our land unknown because you want to ignore something different from yourself.”

“Every citizen of Shallice was previously a citizen of Barrisch-Nittook,” said Mr. Why. “We don't ignore it, and we don't resist it because it's different from us. We resist it because we used to be a part of it before our eyes were opened. We do not care if something is different from *us*. We are not the standard. We only care if something is different from the One.”

After a brief pause, Mr. Why continued.

“We do not refer to Barrisch-Nittook as the Unknown Lands because we refuse to know anything about it. We refer to it as such because after trying very hard to know everything we can about it, we realize that there is very little to actually know. It is too full of Un.”

In much pain from the noise, Paltrus said, “I know those lands. I have spent my life seeing the majesty of the White Chapel and the Palace of Champions. I have seen that it is good. And I've seen the historical records, and why I shouldn't trust you. Your disgusting huts and self-destructive lifestyles.”

“You seem to rely on what you see quite a bit. But are we in a hut? Do I seem impoverished of my needs?”

Paltrus could not deny the intricacy of the room. The complexity of the designs on the walls alone surpassed that of anything he had known before.

“They cannot both be true. At least one of these two must be a lie.”

The ticking stopped. Paltrus looked up to see that the clocks no longer had hands to point to any of the numbers on their faces.

“The ticking stopped,” said Paltrus.

“It never started, actually,” said Mr. Why. Paltrus looked over at Mr. Why and noticed that he looked less like a fox and more like a human being, but still with fur and whiskers on his face. Paltrus felt a burning pain in his hand, and he saw that the candle was now lit by fire. “But it is good that you notice that.”

Mr. Why looked through his papers before saying, “We found you being attacked going into Arrburdak.”

In this confusion, Paltrus had forgotten about what happened in Arrburdak.

“What happened after I fell?”

“It is not what happened after *your* fall that is important, but the fall of almost fourteen hundred years ago. Your kingdom has not been without the Flame of Man. Its power has been in Morband since its inception long ago.

“You believed that the Flame makes known that which is unknowable. I tell you now that it does no such thing. It creates a falsehood. Something that is unknowable cannot be known. The Flame is not merely a paradox; it is a contradiction.

“The Flame has destroyed the nation of Dhelian, turning it into Morband. This did not occur as recently as Polius' capture of what he believed to be the Flame. Your King has known of the Flame for quite some time and used it to his advantage, as did his fathers. The reason you did not know of it until Talius told you is because only the King of Morband knows of its existence, aside from those of us in Shallice. He has not only knowledge of it, but possession of it. The Flame has created the entirety of the imbalance in Barrisch-Nittook, what your people would mistakenly call ‘peace’.”

Paltrus noticed that as Mr. Why spoke, he gradually became more human. He slowly lost the fur and the whiskers and became what appeared to be an ordinary man.

“The Flame is of Un,” continued Mr. Why. “It deceives its wearers and those who would gaze upon it. Only those with the protection of the One can resist its power since its first triumph. In truth it has only the power to destroy. First others, then itself once everything else is gone.”

“Will it succeed?” said Paltrus.

“Partly. For that matter, it has *already* partly succeeded. Even the Flame of Man itself is only the offspring of the Flame of Morbannius. The smiths of Arrburdak did not create the Flame as you have been told. Morbannius fashioned the Flame of Man using the Flame of Morbannius to give to your ancestor. This man was the founder of the nation of Morband, and the destroyer of Arrburdak. He was also the first to be reclaimed by the One after his misdeeds.”

Paltrus paused, considering the things that Mr. Why was telling him.

“What will the Flame do now that Polius has secured it?”

“What Polius discovered was not the Flame itself. It was merely an instrument of the Flame, known as a Pendant of Fire. His discovery will cause nothing that does not occur on a daily basis in Barrisch-Nittook, though possibly on a negligibly larger scale.”

“Is the Flame the reason I am here?”

“Very likely, but as I said, I am uncertain. However, the Flame is not the only enemy of the One. There is also Morbannius. The demon is controlling Barrisch-Nittook through the Flame of Man. And the Flame of Morbannius is controlling him.”

Paltrus had no more questions that he could fit with words. He stared at the desk in front of him, and saw a letter on the desk, signed as “W.H. Why.”

“Are you ready to meet the One?” said Mr. Why.

Paltrus looked back up at Mr. Why and said, “Yes.”

# 5

Mr. Why stood and directed Paltrus out through the door through which he had entered. Paltrus followed into the polished wooden room, which now contained only two doors on opposite walls, with the window on Paltrus' right as he walked through the room. Mr. Why directed him through this room and into the room in which Paltrus awoke.

By now, the furniture in the room seemed to be perfectly normal. The table and stools were standing on their legs, and the bed was on the floor rather than the ceiling. Even the two empty teacups were sitting on the table undamaged, and sitting on the stools were two men.

“Ah, I believe you have met Wolvus and Pantheus,” said Mr. Why.

“Oh, yes, we have met,” said one of the two men. He turned to Paltrus and grinned, showing brown-stained teeth and saying, “I don't think I ever did introduce myself, though. Please pardon my rudeness. I am Wolvus, and this is Pantheus,” he said, turning towards the other man.

“And what have the two of you been doing today?” said Mr. Why.

“We've been telling each other jokes, Mr. Why!” said Pantheus. “You might appreciate a divisibility joke that Wolvus told before.”

“Everyone knows that there is nothing I love more than a good divisibility joke, but let us save our vulgarities for a later time. At the moment, I am bringing Paltrus here to see the One in the Celestial City.”

“Oh, good!” said Wolvus. “The company of the One is always comforting in times like these. I will meet with you again later, Paltrus!”

“Very well,” said Mr. Why. “Let us continue, Paltrus.”

Paltrus followed Mr. Why through the door opposite the one in which they entered. The door led outdoors, but it was dark as midnight. Paltrus looked in the sky to see stars, but no constellations that he recognized. Mr. Why led Paltrus across a bridge over still water, and Paltrus could see a large crystal dome ahead. It seemed that not only were they approaching the dome, but the dome was approaching them, and soon the dome was enormous. Paltrus never understood exactly how it happened, but the dome seemed to cover them, and they were soon inside of it.

Looking up, Paltrus could see the stars above through the crystal, and could see many reflections of the stars through the crystal itself. Looking lower, Paltrus could see enormous circular crystal towers that were rounded at the top and connected by bridges every which way. These towers dwarfed the White Chapel and any tower that Paltrus had seen in Arrburdak. Stars could be seen through the crystal of the towers just as through the dome, as well as other white lights from an unknown source. The images of the stars stood still if Paltrus stood still, but as Paltrus moved, so did the reflections. The lights moved with Paltrus as well, but often in unpredictable patterns that differed from the stars.

The path on which they were walking was no longer a bridge, but a crystal street. On either side of the street was crystal shaped as grass. On the street could be seen a reflection of the stars above, and on the grass could be seen a distorted reflection of the stars, no less beautiful and in some manner far more beautiful to Paltrus.

The entire city was covered by statues of human beings, also crystal. There were crystal statues of people walking through the crystal streets, youths sitting underneath crystal trees, and children playing in the crystal grass. Paltrus also noticed a crowd of statues standing about one particular statue that seemed to be telling a story that fascinated the others.

Even inside these crystal people could be seen the stars, and the same white lights as in the towers. In spite of the darkness, these lights found everything in the city and made everything visible, though not always entirely clearly.

Mr. Why led Paltrus through the crystal city and into one of the crystal buildings. The two men scaled a stairway that circled the round tower, and in what appeared to be a short amount of time, they reached a door that was miles away from the ground on which they started. The door was of a very strong wood with a triangular symbol carved into it, and on each side of the triangle and in the center were symbols that looked like characters in a foreign alphabet. Mr. Why opened the door and entered the room.

Paltrus walked through the door into an enormous room, and the door behind him seemed to disappear. The room did not appear to be a room at all. The sky could now be seen nakedly, as it was before, with no dome, and the stars seemed to be closer to Paltrus, as if they were intent to watch something that was about to happen here in this place. The ground beneath him was no longer crystal, but seemed to be a looking-glass of sorts. It reflected the stars above just as the crystal did, but it rippled like water wherever he or Mr. Why stepped on it. This rippling glass ground stretched perfectly flat as far as Paltrus could see in any direction.

Paltrus looked at the reflection of the stars in the rippling glass beneath him, and in the glass the stars began to move. In the sky, the stars did not move, but soon a group of stars in front of him on the ground formed a three-sided figure. Soon the stars were concentrated enough to form what looked to be three solid lines instead of a collection of points.

In an instant, out of one of the points in which two of the lines met, a beam was shot away from the triangle, and towards a vertex of another triangle some ways distant. That triangle had shot a

beam to yet another triangle, which had already shot a beam towards the first triangle. The three beams had created a large triangle, with the three smaller triangles as the vertices.

Out of the center of this triangle, Paltrus saw that something began to rise up out of the glass. It was a door, and it was large enough to be a city gate. The glass flowed off of it like water as it rose, with sounds of small bells softly ringing in the wind. As the large door came up out of the water, a bright light coming through it blinded Paltrus, and he covered his eyes with his hand. As his eyes adjusted, Paltrus could see that through the door was another room just as the one he was in, but in daylight. Mr. Why had already begun to walk through the door while Paltrus was blinded. Paltrus ran through the door as quickly as he could, lest it should close and he lose this chance.

The sky was blue, streaked with white clouds moving through it as if they were running. Paltrus heard the loud sound of a whale, and he saw that there was indeed a whale in the sky, swimming through the air as if it were sea. It looked as though the whale was being rushed by the clouds or the clouds were running from the whale, but it was clear that the interaction between the whale and the clouds was the same as that of two young dogs playing. Paltrus saw other whales and other sea creatures swimming through the air. He saw giant squids and octopi, schools of fish of thousands of colors, and powerful turtles. And though he saw so many creatures in the air, the brightness of the blue sky and white clouds distracted him so that the creatures were barely noticeable.

Beneath him, Paltrus saw a floor that appeared as rippling water, yet solid enough to stand, just as the previous room. The floor still reflected the clouds and creatures of the sky, but Paltrus could still see birds flying through the water just as the sea creatures were swimming through the air. He looked, and he saw blue jays, robins, owls, eagles, and ravens. The water was very clear, but the sea had no visible floor.

Mr. Why was still walking ahead, and Paltrus ran to catch up with him. Mr. Why stopped and waited, and Paltrus did the same. In front of them, a descending stairway began to form out of the ground. The water fell into the form of the stairs, seeming to drain away from them while creating them, and the same sound of small bells that came from the door was emanating from the falling water stairs. Once the water flowed into the stairs, a door opened up at the end of those stairs and Mr. Why began to walk down the stairs and through the door.

Paltrus followed Mr. Why through the door, which led them to a golden bridge connecting the building they were in with another building.

Mr. Why turned on the golden bridge to the side and waited for Paltrus to follow. When Paltrus came to his side, he said, "Behold! I give you the Celestial City, the Capital of Shallice!"

Looking over the side of the bridge, Paltrus saw the crystal city, now with the sun in the sky, which made it alive to his eyes. The towers were formed from shimmering blue diamonds. These were not small jewel diamonds or even diamond bricks, but each tower was carved out of a single massive diamond. People could be seen everywhere in the city. There were people walking through the silver streets and along the golden bridges, there were youths sitting

underneath leafy green trees, and children playing in lush green grass. Paltrus could hear the sound of human voices softly singing songs in a language that he did not know, accompanied by stringed instruments. He heard laughter coming from below, and he saw a crowd of people gathered around a single man telling stories.

The wide silver street between two rows of towers became a stream part of the way through the city, and then became a blue and silver waterfall, before collecting into another stream, then back into a silver street. A child ran out from the grass and onto the silver street, and Paltrus saw him run up the waterfall, then turn around and jump off of it from a great height onto the silver street below. But the street splashed like silver water, and Paltrus saw light glistening from the silver water as it splashed. The child then rose up from the water and stood on the street, then ran to join his friends once again in the grass. Paltrus could see this clearly, in spite of the long distance between them.

As Paltrus watched this, a breeze brought a fragrance from the trees below. Paltrus took in the sweet smell, and closed his eyes. He then breathed in through his mouth to taste honey in the air. When he opened his eyes, he looked into the sky and saw the clouds swirling through it, this time playing amongst themselves without sea creatures.

He then looked again at the blue diamond towers. He could see luscious fruit plants hanging out of the windows. Rivers were flowing in and out of the towers, in some places on bridges, in others by waterfalls, and many of these streams emptied out of the towers as waterfalls to become streets below.

He could see people walking past windows in the towers, and he could see large theaters inside of the towers through enormous windows, and inside some of these theaters he could see the choirs that were singing the beautiful music in the city. These choirs were not all in the same theater and never were any harpists found among the choirs, but somehow their otherworldly music was in perfect harmony.

Most of these towers seemed to have some sort of architecture that baffled Paltrus. Windows were enormous, and indeed some levels had only columns instead of walls, but nevertheless, these towers seemed to be obviously vastly stronger than anything in Bel-Tharad, even to the most unmindful observer. Paltrus also saw gymnasiums, classrooms, kitchens, dining halls, and lounging rooms through the windows. Among these towers were the golden bridges, so that anyone could easily move from one tower to any other tower in the city.

To his left, Paltrus saw that the city gathered around a large cliff, and there was a great stairway carved into this cliff that reached the top. Around this cliff at its base as well as upon its top were gardens with many different kinds of fruits for anyone to take as he pleases. There were many kinds of animals in the garden that were friendly to anybody entering. Paltrus watched as an infant fed an apple to a lion several times its size while the infant's mother was petting the lion.

“We will be going to the top of the cliff,” said Mr. Why. “That is where the One resides.”

Mr. Why led Paltrus across bridges and through towers, and in every tower they crossed through, Paltrus saw many people that were richly dressed and friendly, both to him and to each other. He passed through many of the same kinds of rooms that he saw through the windows in other towers. Inside of these towers, he saw many large windows, some covered in stained glass and some with nothing between the indoors and the elements outside. The rooms with glassless windows were not furnished to endure outdoor weather, but they were entirely undamaged by possible storms.

The rooms through which Paltrus walked were thickly carpeted, and the walls were adorned with decorative papers and cloths. Paltrus saw many colors, and at times unusual combinations of blue, gold, green, red, silver, and white. The patterns of the colors were at times merely aesthetic, and at other times became pictures of what appeared to be historic moments of Shallice. The pictures and the aesthetic designs flowed into one another so that Paltrus could not tell where the pictures stopped, and at times the walls, floors, arched ceilings, and hanging cloths seemed to be one enormous picture that he could not see all at once.

As he crossed a golden bridge, Paltrus noticed that nowhere in the city could there be found any shadows. The towers did not cast shadows upon the grass, and neither were the youths sitting beneath the trees covered by shade. A person walking on the street cast no shadow on either side of himself. Yet there was no need for shade, as the perfect white light in the city allowed clear sight yet did not invade one's eyes unwelcomed. Anybody could plainly see miles away, but could close his eyes and sleep at any moment he wished.

Every time Paltrus crossed a golden bridge, he was most struck by the sweet fragrance coming from below. There were times that he was certain he could actually see the smell, as it was so potent. When he breathed, he was filled with a desire to collapse and merely breathe for as long as he possibly could. This kept such a hold over him that he could barely keep up with Mr. Why or notice the shadowless city.

After following Mr. Why through rooms and over bridges, Paltrus noticed that they were atop the cliff in the higher garden. He looked down to the lower garden to see the same child as before, though now riding on the lion's back. He continued to follow Mr. Why through the higher garden. There were no towers on the top of the cliff, but several smaller buildings surrounding the garden with only a single story. They walked through the grass in the garden, among trees and bushes that grew many different types of fruits, oftentimes more than one type on a single tree or bush. Mr. Why led Paltrus to one of the smaller buildings, which had the same diamond walls as the towers, but were not circular as the towers were. Instead, these buildings were built like homes of relatively wealthy commoners.

They entered the building through a door that resembled a garden gate more than it did a door. It was metal and curved with floral designs, and anybody could see between the bars through the door. Mr. Why opened the gate and entered the building. The floor in this building was red carpet. The blue walls did not meet in an arch and there was no ceiling to join them. Instead, Paltrus looked up to see the clouds from between the walls.

Every door in the building that Paltrus came across was just as the front door; a gate that seemed to belong in a garden. Whenever Paltrus crossed such a door, he could see through the bars into whatever room it led into, and met a friendly smile of anyone in that room. Some of these people were sitting in lounging furniture, some were studying at desks, and some were standing and enjoying each others' company.

Paltrus followed Mr. Why through these blue hallways to find a man sitting at a brown desk.

"Hello, Lyceus, how are you today?" said Mr. Why.

"I am doing quite well on this glorious day," said Lyceus.

"We are here to see the One. May we proceed?"

"Of course. He will always accept any who will come, as you know."

"Splendid!" said Mr. Why, and opened another gate-door.

Mr. Why started to walk through the door and across a stone path, and Paltrus followed. He soon found himself on an earthen path in a forest. Unlike the city, the forest had shadows, but these were shadows that gave great beauty to whatever they were cast upon. Paltrus saw shadows from the trees cast upon Mr. Why as he moved through the forest, and at once saw a great physical strength that he did not notice before. Paltrus stopped following Mr. Why for a moment because he was taken by the beauty of the trees. The trees were as still as a painting, but grew into such a complex pattern that they almost seemed to be moving.

The forest was not silent. Paltrus could hear the singing of birds, but could also hear a single flute playing a lighthearted song in a minor key. The music was trying to communicate something to its audience. It was as if this music was somehow a language that Paltrus did not realize he knew until someone began to speak it to him. Soon, other flutes began to join, and created a harmony and a counter-melody. The song that was originally a monologue became a discussion among diverse strangers quickly becoming close friends. Harmonies were showing admiration for the story being told by the melody. Counter-melodies were telling the same story from a different perspective but with the same ending in order to enrich the story. Then, more friends joined the conversation as the strings of lyres were plucked in agreement with the flutes, filling in small parts of the story that the flutes left out.

Paltrus looked ahead and did not see Mr. Why anywhere, but did not feel as though he had lost his way. There was a single path that curved through the forest but had no forks. When he remembered where he was after listening to the music, he continued through the forest. Time slowed, and as the beautiful music continued, Paltrus found that the tempo of the music, though not rushed, was faster than the speed of time. As he walked forward on the path, he was able to look closer at the shadows cast by the motionless trees and the trees and the path upon which the shadows were cast. After several turns, he found that he was close behind Mr. Why again, and they were exiting the forest.

Paltrus again started to follow Mr. Why, now towards an enormous building that appeared to be built of wood and stone. Ancient as it appeared, it was in no more danger of decay than the diamond towers. The path leading up to the door of the building was smooth stone with green grass on either side, and Paltrus studied the rounded pillars and ornate corners and windows of the building as he walked across this path.

The heavy doors opened before the two, and they entered into a foyer. The greatness of the design of this building was every bit as glorious as the diamond city. This place was built deliberately, and by a great architect, unlike the city which seemed to simply spring forth naturally. The walls and ceiling were of polished wood and marble. The ground was also of marble, but covered by elaborately designed rugs in the center of every room. The furnishings were not unlike what Paltrus remembered of the Fort of Dorz, with red cushioned chairs and couches surrounding polished wooden tables. There were marble pillars holding vases in corners and greenery lining the ceilings. There were no fireplaces, which led Paltrus to wonder if the weather ever changed in Shallice. There were clear glass windows, open, and allowing the breeze to dance with the curtains on either side. There were rare cases for the walls to be given an opportunity for paintings, as most walls either contained a glass door leading into another room or a window leading to the outside, but on these rare occasions such a painting would depict a beautiful landscape or an image of the city.

Mr. Why did not enter these rooms, but walked straight through the foyer to the only door that was not already opened. Mr. Why himself opened the door, but stepped aside to allow Paltrus to enter the room.

This room was a library. It was very wide, and so long and tall that Paltrus could see neither the far wall nor the ceiling above. There was no wall that was not covered by shelves. Even directly above the door in which Paltrus entered was a bookshelf. There were spiral staircases and many levels with railings so that any part of any shelf could be reached. Many people were walking through this library, on the ground, up and down the stairs, and across the tiers. There were, however, no books. Paltrus looked throughout the room and saw that all of the shelves were completely bare, save for two books on the lowest shelf in the corner of the room. These books, Paltrus saw, were titled *Before* and *During*.

“There is much wisdom to be found in this room,” said Mr. Why from behind Paltrus, “but we cannot always see it.”

“In just these two books?” said Paltrus.

“These shelves are filled with books. We unfortunately cannot see all of them because of our self-inflicted blindness. We are shown wisdom and we are given perfect light that casts no shadow, yet even then we still do not always allow ourselves to see wisdom as it is. I may see more or fewer books than you do; it is difficult to be certain of such a thing. We may only see different books. While we are in Extension we will never see all of the books. There are some who never see even one of the books; even when dead men rise to show them.”

Mr. Why looked past Paltrus and smiled. Paltrus turned to see a hoary man walking towards them.

“This,” said Mr. Why, “is the One. No amount of reverence that you can show Him is ever too much, but He accepts all that you desire to give.”

Paltrus was unsure of what to do, but remembered how he showed respect to his father. He did not know how appropriate that reverence would be here. He slowly and awkwardly kneeled and bowed his head.

“Rise, my son,” said the One. Paltrus noticed in his Voice what seemed to be the sound of streams of water.

“I have many things to show you, few of which you will understand right now.” The Voice of the One was deep, slow, and clear.

Paltrus was no longer in the library, but did not wonder how he came to be where he was. It was a room that looked to be a study. The scholar who owned this study, however, seemed to need no books. Instead, he only wrote, using no resources aside from himself, for he knew perfectly well what was to be in the books he was writing. As such, the study was adorned with paintings where most studies would have books.

In front of Paltrus were an uncountably infinite amount of spheres, and inside of these spheres Paltrus could see still images of the universe. As large as the universe was, Paltrus was able to see in these spheres the minutest details of the lives of human beings, while seeing the awesome glory of stars many times the size of his own sun on the other side of the universe, frozen in time. Every sphere was different, though the difference among some was difficult to see.

“These,” said the One, “are the infinitesimal moments. At any instant, you are in an infinitesimal moment. At any instant distinct from that instant, you are in a different infinitesimal moment. You perceive time in this way, as infinitesimal moments converging at infinity. This means that in any length of time, you travel through an infinite number of moments.”

“Does one infinitesimal moment cause the next?” asked Paltrus.

“No,” said the One, smiling. “You do not travel through infinitesimal moments in such a way, though your imperfect nature leads you to believe so. You see things in the past causing the future to be what it is and nothing more. In reality, time is an equation, and the existence of what happens at an infinitesimal moment is determined by the equation as a whole.”

The spheres in front of Paltrus quickly rearranged themselves, and Paltrus witnessed, as best he could, an infinite amount of moments become what he soon realized was a timeline. This timeline was arranged now not by images that could be seen by the eye, but by numbers that extended up as high as Paltrus could see.

“When you escape from the world of time and see the temporal realm from the outside, you will see that time itself is a balance. If the past were to change, the future would change, certainly, as you can see naturally for yourself. What you do not see, however, is that if the future were to change, the past would change as well. We change the entire equation. The further away from the Origin we are, the larger the differences become from one equation to the next. A single infinitesimal moment not only affects its future, but its past as well.”

The One then reached out his hand and changed a single number in the timeline, and as He pressed His finger against the timeline, Paltrus could see ripples spreading into the rest of the timeline. Along with the ripple came a change in the numbers whenever it crossed them. These ripples, though, did not weaken the further away it went from the gentle press of the One, but instead grew. Paltrus could see miles away from him that the ripple had become a torrent, and this torrent was spreading into the past as well as the future.

“The equation always balances itself,” said the One.

The One then began to rearrange some of the elements in the timeline. An unfamiliar name written “Plato” He moved from 450 B.C. to 1500 A.D., and the equation swirled with names rearranging themselves. Paltrus could not see the thousands of changes happening at once, but he did see the names “Euclid,” “Pythagoras,” “Archimedes,” and “Thales” move from their position before the Origin to reside near Plato, and the names “Newton” and “Gauss” moving from 1600 and 1700 A.D. to reside near 500 B.C. The name “Euler” moved from 1700 A.D. to 1200 B.C., and the name “Fibonacci” moved from 1200 A.D. to 2100 A.D.

“This balance exists because of the Origin. Without the Origin, time would come into chaos and destroy itself. That is why I placed the Origin into the equation. Time needed salvation, and only I, as the Origin, had the capability of creating order.”

“Why was the equation in chaos?” said Paltrus.

“I allowed another to change something in time. Before then, time needed no balance. It was perfect. But I did not stop another from changing something in time, causing chaos. He removed and destroyed one of the infinitesimal moments. He used your ancestor and his sons to do this, and that is why you are here. You are here to be forgiven for the sins of your fathers.”

The One turned away from the timeline and faced Paltrus, and He warmly said, “Just as the smallest weight contributes to the balance of a scale, so, too, does the smallest person contribute to the balance of time. His existence is necessary. You, however, have more to contribute to the balance, though not in the manner in which you previously thought. Aside from your own forgiveness, you are also here to bring others like yourself to me, so that they too may be forgiven. That will be your contribution to balance.”

“That is what Mr. Why does, is it not?”

“Yes, it is. He was once like you. In fact, in your homeland, he was your uncle before your father murdered him to gain the throne.”

Then the One turned back to the timeline and said, “This is not your world, as you have noticed. It is similar, but other changes must be made before it would resemble your world.”

“He is my uncle?” said Paltrus.

Turning back to Paltrus, the One said, “He *was* your uncle, but there is no reason why that should carry any weight with you. It carries none with him. He did not tell you because it did not occur to him that you might think it to be important. It is the furthest thing from his mind. It does not seem to you to be so now, but your relation to him in that world is entirely unimportant. He cares for you now in a very different and much more powerful way. He is your brother.”

# 6

Paltrus now found himself on barren, hard earth, with dead grass in some places and in others trees covered in filth. To his right was the One, and in front of him was Mr. Why.

“There is more for you to see,” said the One. “Mr. Why will show this to you.”

“You will not come?” asked Paltrus.

“Yes, I will. You may make your bed in the Unknown Lands, and I will be there.”

The One then became invisible to Paltrus, but Mr. Why said, “You may not always see Him, but now that you know Him, He is there. For the moment, I will be speaking on His behalf. I am imperfect in this, but He will reveal any mistakes that I may make at some point.”

Mr. Why then moved so that Paltrus could see what was in front of him. The barren earth came to a black shore, meeting an ocean that was perfectly calm, without the tiniest ripple from this shore to the horizon. It was red and brown, and in it were floating blackened trees and bloated dead bodies of humans and animals. The humans were wearing clothes that, although were mostly destroyed by now, looked to originally be the clothing of nobility, and the animals included both those that were used as beasts of burden and those used as pets. There was some filth covering these bodies that Paltrus could not identify. Even these floating objects were entirely motionless, revolting to passing scavenger birds that dare not approach them.

At some point in the past, an enormous tree had grown out of the ocean. It was now long dead, and blackened in parts like the trees floating in the ocean, but still standing. Indeed, it seemed to be quite sturdy, save for some branches that had broken off to become what Paltrus first thought to be the floating trees in the ocean.

The tree was hollowed out, but not by whatever malevolent will brought death to this land. Instead, this tree seemed to be carved methodically, or possibly *grown* methodically, into a tower approximately the size of the White Chapel. There were great windows carved into the tree, and balconies built off of some of these great windows large enough to host dinner parties or moonlit balls. Paltrus could see what was once a great society through these windows. Now this society was reduced to broken furniture, torn needlework, stained rugs, broken glass, and an occasional corpse on the ground. A complete civilization could live in this tower with room for expansion when the tree was alive, but now this world seemed almost frozen in time and death.

One of the branches had grown from the tree to the shore. It was carved into a passageway, and it became a long and winding bridge leading from the shore to a great gate leading into the tree-city. Like many of the things Paltrus could see on the balconies, this gate was destroyed. It did not seem to be destroyed by invaders, though. The gate had not fallen *into* the city, but *out of* it.

“This may not be easy for you to see,” said Mr. Why, “but you must see it. You will see things that are even more torturous than this before the end, but this is nevertheless very important for you to see.”

Paltrus followed Mr. Why into the tree-city, through the winding bridge and the gate. Beyond the gate, the ground was covered in dead leaves, dirt, and some kind of sticky moisture, and Paltrus was ankle-deep in them. Paltrus passed through a dark tunnel in this muck before coming into the center of the tree-city. Nowhere in the tower was there any built architecture. Instead, every bridge, every walkway, every arch, every door, everything was carved out of this tree. The central hall was circular, with a platform along the perimeter for walking, but there was a hole in the middle of the room, and Paltrus could see that there were several hundred stories above him and several dozen beneath him, with platforms just as the one on which he was standing. Curved paths were carved out of the tree leading from one level to the next over the chasm, so that any level could be reached by scaling these paths. On some levels there were also curving paths merely leading from one side of the hall to the other, so that someone could cross the chasm by this bridge rather than circling the hall.

Doors, oftentimes broken, oftentimes missing, and in rare occasions seemingly functional, were in the sides of the circular hall. There were signs above some of these that told that they were stores or meeting halls, but the writing on the signs had worn out long ago. Around some of the other doors appeared to be decorations as if they were the front door of somebody’s home.

High above, Paltrus could see the gray and cloudless sky above. Far below, Paltrus could see red and brown water from the ocean collected at the bottom of the chasm, filled with dead leaves and dirt. Paltrus could also see dead leaves slowly falling below him towards the ground beneath, disturbed by the footsteps of the two intruders that just entered.

Paltrus looked closely at the wall to find that at one time, there were elegant patterns carved into it that have faded.

“Come,” said Mr. Why, “There is another part of the city for you to see.”

Paltrus followed Mr. Why up through the winding paths, and every step they took disturbed the dead leaves, which fell to the pit at the bottom to create the only movement that the city had seen in ages. Upon reaching the highest level, Paltrus saw a closed door that was entirely unlike the others in the tree. This one was built of stone.

“This door,” said Mr. Why, “is the first and possibly the most horrible thing built by the hands of man after they touched the Flame. The tree was once alive, but the stones were always cold and dead.”

“We are to enter?”

“Yes. But we must be careful. We can observe and learn, but we must do nothing else for the moment.”

Mr. Why took hold of the door’s handle and pulled, and he opened the door with great difficulty. A cold air and rancid smell rushed to meet Paltrus, and he believed that he heard the voices of dying men faintly in the distance. What was beyond the door could not be seen because there was no light in the opposite room.

“This will be quite difficult, and possibly very painful, but you will survive,” said Mr. Why.

Upon saying that, Mr. Why entered the door and dropped, knowing that there was a hole in the ground. Paltrus walked toward the hole and looked down, seeing nothing.

“Shall I drop now?” he yelled.

Nothing could be heard except the dying voices in the distance. Paltrus knew that there was nowhere else to go, and he dropped. The distance was very long, and Paltrus felt that when, or if, he reached the bottom, he would certainly be killed. A ledge caught his foot and he lost his balance, spinning out of control towards the bottom until he landed on his arm and yelled in pain.

“You will be fine in a minute,” said Mr. Why.

“*I think it’s broken,*” said Paltrus, still in pain.

“I can’t see you well enough to know what you’re talking about, but it probably is. We just fell more than the height of the tree. Can you stand?”

“We should be dead if we fell such a distance.”

“Oh, no, this place has less power over us than that now. Are you still in pain?”

“Yes, but it is lessening.”

“Very well. Can you stand?”

Paltrus found that he could stand and the pain in his arm was nearly gone. The place he was in was mostly dark, but he could see a faint light off in the distance, and from that light he could see that he was in a stone hallway, and the light was coming through the door at the end from inside of a room.

“Good,” said Mr. Why. “Follow me. This next room is our first destination.”

Paltrus saw the silhouette of Mr. Why going towards the door, and he followed. He came into a stone throne room, which, like everything else in this place, was dead. There were torches on the walls giving some inconsistent light, but no windows anywhere for the light of the sun to enter the room. There were two rows of round columns, one on each side of the path from the door through which they entered to the throne. The masonry of the columns, floors, and ceilings was poor and very unstable. There was no royal carpet leading from the main entrance to the large stone throne, and on the throne was a mangled corpse, holding his hands as if grasping something that was not there.

Throughout the room, chains of varying length were suspended from the ceiling. Some of the chains ended high up in the room and some extended to touch the floor. There was no pattern in the places that they were set or their lengths. At the end of the chains were attached objects of many different sorts, including eating utensils, hammers, dead animals, furniture, jewels, and many other seemingly arbitrary objects.

“What are these things?” Paltrus asked.

“The people of this city believed it would make them happy.”

“Why?”

“They did not have a reason. They had something that they *thought* was a reason, but I have forgotten what it was. It was by no means, however, the height of their stupidity.”

As they continued down the room, Paltrus looked at the wall upon the left and noticed a shadow next to the shadow of a column. It was an image of a powerful man with a large scimitar, hiding and waiting to attack. Paltrus could not see the man and assumed that he was behind the column, patiently waiting for them to pass so that he may catch them at unawares. Paltrus was alarmed, as they were unarmed, and he stopped Mr. Why and pointed towards the shadow.

“What can we do?” he said in a whisper. “We cannot jump up to get away, but we cannot defend ourselves.”

“We could jump if we wanted,” said Mr. Why, making no effort to quiet his voice. “We could defend ourselves if we wanted. But do not fear the shadows. They can do nothing to us. There is nothing there.”

“Then why is there a shadow if there is nothing to cast it?”

“These torches are mostly the result of the labor of men. Those men believed that they did it *entirely* on their own, but they were wrong. Through much sweat and blood they were able to cast a small amount of light, but what little light there was told both truths and untruths. In some cases they can help us, but many times they do not. The shadows are often lies. Do not let them fool you.”

Mr. Why turned to Paltrus and said, “There is an old proverb, Paltrus. ‘A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.’ What do you think of it?”

“I would say that that is quite true. A wise man often perceives things differently.”

“What about this one? ‘Think in the morning. Act in the noon. Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night’.”

“That seems to be good advice. One should do things at their appointed time.”

“What about this one. ‘Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without improvement are the roads of Genius’.”

Paltrus was surprised at this particular proverb, as it was quite different from the others.

“I suppose there may be some truth to that, but it seems as though it would soon lead to chaos with no room for genius at all.”

“There is one more that I would like to share with you. ‘A dead body revenges not injuries’.”

Paltrus felt shame upon hearing this proverb, because he realized that it is a belief that he may have held before, though he may not have admitted so at the time.

“Do you know that those proverbs all came from the same place? And they entered this world through this very room. The lies from this room are not always lies. That is what allows them to exist, and that is what is most dangerous about them. Until you are able to discover what is and what is not, you should probably not look at the shadows in this room at all.”

“You can see that there is no man there? Even though we cannot see behind the column?”

“Yes, very clearly.”

Paltrus followed Mr. Why towards the throne, and as they passed the column, Paltrus saw that there was nothing behind it but the shadow itself. The shadow world showed Paltrus that the man jumped from behind the column and killed them both. There was, however, no man and no attack, and he and Mr. Why were both very much alive.

As the two continued towards the throne, Paltrus remembered Mr. Why’s advice and turned away from the wall. They approached the dead king, and Mr. Why turned around to face the room.

“Do you recognize this place, Paltrus?”

Paltrus turned and looked and saw nothing that was familiar, yet he knew what city this was. “This is Arrburdak,” he said.

“That is right,” Mr. Why said. “The first time you entered the city, with Talius, you only saw New Arrburdak. This time we entered through Old Arrburdak. When the Flame of Man was introduced, Old Arrburdak was quickly destroyed and New Arrburdak was created.

“This is the Tower of the World, which you were trying to enter when you were attacked. In fact, this is the room that you were trying to find. This king was holding the Pendant of Fire that Polius now holds and believes to be the Flame of Man. At this moment, he is carrying that Pendant to the Dhelius, with the false news that you were betrayed by Talius.”

“But there should be windows in these walls. The light from this room should be emanating throughout the city.”

“If you could see out of this room, you would see that the city is not at all as it appeared to be. There is no light there, but you believed that there was.”

The two were now back in the library, and the One was standing beside Mr. Why.

“I not only took you out of Morband so that you may be brought to Shallice,” said the One. “I also brought you here so that others may be brought to Shallice.”

Paltrus noticed that there were tears in the eyes of the One.

“There are many that will never be brought to Shallice. And there are some that *you* must defeat. These are men that are trying to prevent the chosen to be taken from their clutches. They will not succeed, for the chosen are always brought to Shallice. Sometimes they themselves are chosen.

“In this task, you will be my instrument. You must show the people of Morband the truth by revealing the Dhelius’ true intentions, first to himself, and then to the people. But first you must return to the cave.”

Though he did not fully understand why, Paltrus felt a great deal of loyalty to the One, as well as great admiration towards his power. He knew that he must do whatever the One asked of him, though he had much difficulty with the idea of moving against his homeland.

Paltrus bowed, knowing that he could do nothing else. “I will do as you say, my Lord.”

“You will not be alone, nor will you be leading your party. You will be very important very soon, but for now, you will be at Mr. Why’s side.”

“I understand,” said Paltrus.

“Come with me,” said Mr. Why.

# 7

Paltrus followed Mr. Why once more, out the front door of the great house and into the forest. He heard no music this time, for he was deep in thought. He had just given his loyalty to the One, the leader of those against whom his forefathers had fought and thought of as simpletons who craved power through evil conquest. Many times in his life, he had sworn an oath to give his loyalty to Dhelianos. Now Paltrus began to feel ill in the pit of his stomach, knowing that today he had become an oathbreaker many times over.

“You were an oathbreaker before that,” said Mr. Why. He had turned around and stopped in the forest. Paltrus did not remember vocalizing his concerns. He looked up at Mr. Why and saw the shade once again emphasizing a great strength. “I am not hearing your thoughts,” continued Mr. Why, “but I saw your emotions in your face, and I remember the guilt that I felt upon that realization. I felt shame in learning that my values had been wrong, but I have already sworn oaths, and I am scum for going back on my word, even if my oaths were misguided. ‘Should I not continue to follow Dhelianos so that I do not break my word?’ I thought to myself. Even the One would believe in keeping honor.

“But I learned something else. By taking those oaths to Dhelianos, I was breaking another oath. My oath to the One predates my oaths to Dhelianos. It even predates my entrance into the temporal realm. It was wrong to enter into those oaths to Dhelianos. Yes, I am an oathbreaker. I have taken opposing oaths. There is nothing I can do to regain my honor. But there is something that the One can do to restore my honor to me, and he has broken my oath to Morbannius for me, and done the work that I cannot do. Now I hold my first oath: My oath to the One.”

“Many of the things that I now know to be true,” said Paltrus, “would frighten and worry those whom I love at home. We considered such things to be not only nonsense but *obvious* nonsense. We thought of it to be cultish stupidity. We thought of people who began to believe such things to be ill. We thought of them as sheep, too stupid and gullible to have any real wisdom or even basic understanding, who allowed themselves to be led around thoughtlessly to no end.”

“Many people who have been shown what you have just seen continue to believe such things about us. In fact, they often believe it more strongly after being shown this, and look at us with even more incredulity than before. And this is far from the first time that I’ve heard Northerners try to associate us with the religion of the Eastern Barbarians. Rest assured, we are not cultish, as you can now plainly see.

“As for the sheep accusation,” concluded Mr. Why, “We are very thankful to have a Good Shepherd. But do not think that that means we do not study His every move.”

Paltrus and Mr. Why now continued down the forest path, now side-by-side instead of Paltrus behind. They exited the forest and reentered the one-story, ceilingless, gated building by which they first entered the forest.

As they walked down one of the hallways, Paltrus looked into the rooms they passed by between the bars of the gates, and in one room he saw a woman so beautiful that he stopped moving, and Mr. Why stopped with him. The woman was standing in front of a bookcase and writing in an open book in her hands. She turned and smiled at Paltrus, then looked back at her book and continued writing.

“Who is that?” said Paltrus.

“There are some that call her Venus,” said Mr. Why. “But those who call her that misunderstand a great deal about her. We call her Listhunia. She is one of the Firstborn who did not betray the One, whereas Morbannius is one of the Firstborn who did betray Him. She governs love and beauty, and she oversees that love which is reserved for a man and his wife.”

“What book is that in which she is writing?”

“Someone’s diary.”

Paltrus looked for a little while longer before saying, “May we stop and speak to her? I have many questions she may be able to answer.”

“I am sorry, but we cannot.”

Paltrus was surprised to hear this, and he turned to Mr. Why, not having to even ask him the question before he said, “Our work is to be done alone, save for the One and each other. In some ways we are more fortunate in that. In other ways we are less fortunate.”

Paltrus looked back at Listhunia. She had put the diary in which she was writing into the bookcase and was searching for another book that she could not seem to find. Finally, she turned back around and looked at Paltrus, and he could see tears on her face.

“Like us, it sometimes pains her to do what she knows is right. But she will do it. That is why we have not heard her voice.”

Paltrus continued to look into the room. Listhunia wiped her tears and took another book from the bookcase. She opened the book, took her pen, and began to write.

“Is it wrong of me to look into this room?”

“No, not at all. It would be wrong for you to enter, and I know that you will not do it.”

“No, I will not. I would be frightened to do anything against her conscience.”

“You might be surprised at how many have no such fear.”

Paltrus began to move away, and Mr. Why with him.

“There is more for you to learn, and more for you to see,” said Mr. Why. He then led Paltrus through a gate and into a room. He sat on one side of a large wooden desk and motioned for Paltrus to sit on the other.

“Listhunia also works with another, Tyerias, to oversee the love between parents and their children,” said Mr. Why. “They work very well together, because the love that two parents have for their children is a natural extension of the love that they have for each other.

“There are many like her that oversee various realms of the created world. Moscannis, who is sometimes mistakenly called Jupiter, oversees the physical parts of the created world. The One Himself set forth the rules to govern the physical world, and Moscannis’ most wise decision was to make those rules into laws which do not change anywhere in Extension or Time.”

“The One has so much power. It seems that He could do all of that Himself with no effort at all. He would probably have more success, as well.”

“That is true. In fact, the word ‘effort’ itself takes on a very different and much more meaningful definition when applied to the One.”

“Then why does He give such important duties to lesser deities?”

Mr. Why paused for a moment and pondered the question.

“There are many things about your question that are not quite right. It is to be expected that you err, but that fact does not nullify the error.

“At any rate, these are not deities. They are Overseers. They were created long before we were and have a great deal more power than we do, but nevertheless they are *created* beings, just as we are. Secondly, it is not quite right to say that they are lesser beings. Nor would it be right to say that they are greater beings or equal beings. The very idea of ‘value’ does not apply to them. When applied to living beings, such descriptions are only fitting in describing the unclaimed fallen. Even then only the One has the knowledge to say who is greater and who is lesser, but the greatest among them is still lacking that which is necessary.”

“What is necessary?”

“For them? Redemption. And only the One can give it to them, for they have not the power to redeem themselves. For the Overseers who never turned away, that which is necessary is that

which is a very part of their being: The One. ‘Redemption,’ for the claimed fallen among us, the Secondborn, concludes with the restoration of that part of our being.

“Now, the heart of your question was not invalid. You can now see that it would have been correctly stated as ‘Why does the One delegate important duties to Overseers if He can do it Himself with no effort at all?’ The answer is that He does so for the same reason He calls us to be with Him. He does not require our presence, but He *desires* our presence and wants to become a part of each of us by creating a relationship with us and by enriching that relationship with interaction. We cannot even begin to know how many creatures, maybe in other worlds even, that he creates with this in mind, but I would imagine that He never stops creating new creatures with this in mind, nor does He stop enriching the relationships of many of those He has already created.”

Paltrus was beginning to see that this conversation was beginning to be quite different from the previous ones. “I have not heard you speak of desire before now in such a way,” he said.

“I suppose not, but it is still something that I would naturally speak of. Desire, as well as the rest of the realm of emotion, is a part of both temporal and eternal reality. To look at the whole of Existence, even to look at it emotionlessly, which is often beneficial, is to include the presence and the causes and the effects of emotion. A truly reasonable person must recognize emotion in some sense or another, even if reason lacks passion while observing it.”

Mr. Why then continued his description.

“The Overseers are much the same as we are. He has created them, and given them these duties to enrich His relationship with them. It is very similar to the way in which a parent may assign chores to a child. The parent does not do it because he does not wish to do the chores himself. In fact, oftentimes the parent sacrifices a great deal by having the child do these chores, because the child cannot do them adequately. The parent assigns these chores knowing full well that he himself will likely need to repair the damage done by the child. The parent assigns the chores because he wants the child to grow, and he wants the relationship between the two of them to grow.”

“But I suppose that the Overseers do not have any failings in their tasks?” said Paltrus. “Then the One does not need to correct any of their mistakes? I don’t suppose He would assign such an important task to an Overseer should He know they would fail.”

Visibly surprised, Mr. Why said, “That is a very large leap. Of course they made mistakes. Their mistakes were of an extraordinarily different nature and impact than the mistakes of a Secondborn child, but they were still mistakes. Their mistakes differed from ours in that they never originated from the *naïveté* of a child, but always the *rebellion* of a child, whereas ours originate from both. The One told you of the one whom was assigned to govern temporality, did He not?”

Paltrus thought of this a moment, and he remembered the timeline. Mr. Why continued.

“He was given a responsibility that had dominion over most of the other realms that govern the Secondborn: the physical, the emotional, and a great deal of others. Only the realms of the logical were outside of its dominion, because they were realms that the One governed directly, and still does to this day. When the temporal realm was in harmony, it was ruled by an Overseer named Itera. The same people that use the names Venus and Jupiter called him Chronus, but in their lack of understanding did not realize that he was the same as he whom they called Prometheus. Itera turned from the One and His purposes and destroyed a small part of temporality before the One prevented him from laying waste to it all. The effects were devastating to the realms within its dominion, and some of the Overseers embraced the destruction rather than resisting. Many realms were completely destroyed, and those of us who were Secondborn, who depended upon those realms, lost many things that were precious to us. These are things that we cannot even begin to imagine now, as a man blind from birth cannot begin to imagine sight. Indeed, the number of physical senses possessed by the Secondborn was reduced to five basic senses and a small number of minor senses. Other realms, such as the temporal realm itself, were damaged but not destroyed. The Overseers that remained loyal to the One now spent their time trying to maintain their realms amidst the chaos.

“Itera then ceased to be whom he had been, and became Morbannius, whom your people call Dhelianos and often revere for his supposed wisdom. Morbannius and those who embraced his destructive ideals were stripped of their Overseer status, and they were cast away.”

“What became of them after that?”

“They became mostly nothing. That was the beginning of Un. The remaining Overseers now maintain what they can in their realms, awaiting their restoration.”

Paltrus thought of this, then asked, “Itera ruled the temporal realm, but it seems that his actions must have been performed in the passage of time, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s very perceptive of you. But it would be more correct to say ‘*a* passage of time,’ not ‘*the* passage of time.’ The Firstborn dwell within a temporal realm themselves; otherwise the rebellion would not have been possible, as you said. But it is a radically different sort of temporality than that which we experience here in Extension. Their temporality is based upon different and fewer principles and is independent of space.”

“Does that have anything to do with why you have said nothing of the ‘claimed fallen’ of the Firstborn?” said Paltrus.

“Yes,” said Mr. Why. “And I am quite impressed that you see that so quickly.”

Mr. Why stood from his chair. “Now,” he said, “it is time to return to the cave to release the other prisoners.”

“Arrburdak?” said Paltrus.

“Yes, as well as the other parts of the Unknown Lands. Follow me.”

Mr. Why began to leave the room by turning a corner opposite of the door by which they had entered. Paltrus followed around the corner and through an open gate leading outdoors. There, he saw a military's horse stable, where many knights adorned in armor were tending to their horses as if they were preparing to depart. Among these knights, Paltrus noticed Wolvus and Pantheus.

“Therefore,” Wolvus began to say, continuing the conversation he was having with Pantheus before Paltrus entered the stable, “if we define division of any number  $a$  by  $x$  as the multiplication of that number,  $a$ , by the multiplicative inverse of  $x$ —”

“Which we already do for any meaningful definition of division,” said Pantheus

“Correct, we do—Then we have that zero multiplied by  $b$  will result in one.”

“But, we have already demonstrated that any number multiplied by the additive identity zero will result in zero in any ring.”

“Correct.”

“But, then,  $b$  cannot be a member of a ring.”

“Yes, correct.”

“Then nonsense numbers do not make a ring, and most *certainly* do *not* make a field.”

“Yes!”

“Then there is very little, if any, meaningful algebra in these nonsense numbers!”

“That is why they are called nonsense numbers!”

The two men roared with laughter and Paltrus continued to follow Mr. Why into the stable.

## 8

By the next day, Paltrus was riding North, to Barisch-Nitook. He had camped the night before with these men whom he had only met the day before.

The events of the previous day were continually in his thoughts. He was still not without doubts that the One is merely an illusionist, and he was merely a pawn in a plan of the southern barbarians to invade Bel-Tharad.

These doubts were always swept away by the words of Mr. Why, "You seem to rely on what you see quite a bit." Paltrus knew this was true, and he knew that he could no longer rely on what his senses could tell him. Everything that he knew to be true a week ago had now collapsed before his eyes.

As Paltrus rode further northward with his party, he could see that the day was becoming darker earlier than he expected. The sky was becoming a dark crimson. The ground was dry and cracked and had little growing out of it.

In the distance, Paltrus could see the Mountains of Adach, and knew that he was on the Plains of the Reparrie. Yet at the base of the mountains there was no city. The city of Enoth was missing.

Paltrus rode with his party towards where the city should have been. In its place was an enormous hole in the ground. Nothing was spared by whatever had destroyed the city. In the hole was only darkness, and what little light was left in the day could not penetrate this darkness. It rightfully should have been noon.

The weakening light revealed only the first two or three yards of the sides. The hole was apparently much deeper than this, because there was a cold wind being forced into it, as if there were very little air inside. Paltrus could hear the wind rushing against the rocks from deep within. The wind was not very loud, indeed the scuffling of the horses was louder, but nothing else could be heard coming out of the hole.

"What happened to the city?" said Paltrus to Mr. Why.

"We called this city 'Zsarletch'," said Mr. Why. "It was destroyed quite some time ago."

"But I was here merely days ago," said Paltrus.

Paltrus looked down into the hole again, and he saw something out of the darkness slowly and painfully climb the wall. It was human, though not easily recognizable as such. It was naked, seemingly, though covered in so much filth that Paltrus could not even see if it was a man or a woman. Its entire body was covered in severe burns. It had a great deal of difficulty in the climb. Some of its muscles in its arms and legs were partly ripped from its bones and hanging by its tendons. The remaining muscles were extremely weak. Paltrus was amazed, seeing that that such a thing must not be able to even stand, much less climb. The creature nearly slipped and fell back into the hole several times, but finally reached the edge and climbed out. There, it awkwardly began to rise to his feet, and, with much difficulty, began to walk irregularly towards the South. It was obviously disoriented and blind. Paltrus could hear the creature groaning and creaking. It looked as though it had been without water for many days, and was probably delirious.

“When the One calls someone, he will come, no matter where he may be when he is called,” said Mr. Why.

“Shall we help him?”

“Yes, we shall.”

Wolvus dismounted and brought to the creature his drinking pouch. He stood in front of the creature, but it did not seem to notice that there was something in its path. Wolvus put his hand on the creature’s shoulder and stabilized it. The creature apparently could not see Wolvus and appeared to be confused, but made no fight. Wolvus put his drinking pouch on the lips of the creature and tilted it so that water flowed into its mouth. The creature drank the water ecstatically, and Paltrus could hear that the creature’s vocal creaks had started to become excited.

Wolvus then stopped pouring the water into the creature’s mouth and held the pouch over its head. Then he began to pour the water onto the creature, and steam began to rise from the creature’s skin as though it were a fire being put out. The creature began to scream a gargling scream, loud and high-pitched. It waved its arms maniacally without reaching for anything in particular. It did not have enough control over its legs to run away. The cool water was agonizing, but the creature could only comprehend the pain itself. It could not comprehend how to stop the pain, and it could not comprehend that the pain was the healing of its burns.

It fell to the ground and began to cry in gargles and creaks. Wolvus looked at his hand and saw that it was burned where he touched the creature on the shoulder. He took what little was left in the pouch and poured it onto his hand. He made great efforts to suppress a scream.

Wolvus walked over to his horse and mounted it once again. Paltrus then watched the creature begin its southward journey once again, on his hands and knees, even more awkwardly than when it was walking, crying along the way.

“Another unit will soon gather him and help him further,” said Mr. Why. “We have done all that we can for the moment. The One always does far more work than we do.”

The party then continued towards the North, but Paltrus looked behind to see that the creature had clumsily begun to stand again.

As Paltrus came closer to the Capital City of Morband, he saw that the very light around him was changing to a red color, and the clouds in the sky were black and perfectly still. The land was broken as if quakes had been continually ripping it apart over a period of many years, and the party often needed to alter course to go around the aberrations in the terrain. The black clouds soon covered the entire sky, and no sunlight penetrated them. The red light remained and seemed to be coming from underneath the ground. It was accompanied by what Paltrus recognized as the smell of rotting meat that could not be escaped. The very taste of rotting meat was in the air when Paltrus tried to breathe through his mouth.

The party hurried to the Capital City. As they climbed a steep hill, they came to the top and saw the Capital City in the distance for the first time. Very little of the city could actually be seen from this distance through the dark and deceitful light, but there was still some evil that could be seen, or somehow detected, even from this hill.

Paltrus saw that the black clouds were coming out of something within the city to spread throughout the skies of Morband. Light was brought into the city to be trapped and corrupted. Or, possibly, light was destroyed utterly when brought too close to it.

They continued to navigate the terrain until they came to the gates of the city, which had fallen outward. As Paltrus passed them, he saw the body of a filthy and diseased peasant, and it had been pinned to the inside of the gate with a large spear. The roads were not maintained, and were often unrecognizable. Stones in the roads were overturned, and the dirt next to the roads was typically an easier path than the intended paths themselves. Decrepit buildings were in the city, many of which had already collapsed and killed those who lived inside of them. Paltrus looked to his right, and he saw houses built unnaturally and unnecessarily close together. These buildings were built of wood and bones, but the materials did not meet to close, so that the elements could have been kept out. Paltrus could see between the logs and bones to see corpses inside of the buildings. Some of these corpses had evidently built themselves into a trap by not building a door into their house. Paltrus surmised that they stayed trapped in their houses until they had died of thirst. There were a few that were still living within these houses, and they looked to be starving to death. To his left, Paltrus saw large empty spaces, where houses could have easily been placed to prevent the crowded conditions.

Within these empty lots, many half-starved peasants were using stones to dig holes with little success. Paltrus could hear them desperately saying "I must find the sun" repeatedly. Others, who were wearing what Paltrus vaguely recognized to be official law-enforcement garb, were trying to whip the peasants to force them to dig faster. They themselves were also half-starved and could not concentrate enough strength to successfully whip any of the peasants, who did not notice the officers around them.

Paltrus slowly surveyed the city with his party. He could recognize the city, but painfully and mournfully. Some of the buildings that he remembered were in the correct places, but always

deformed and decrepit. Paltrus felt most disturbed at the one thing that was inescapably similar to his memory: All of the buildings, even the buildings that seemed to be built by blind peasants, were built with respect to the central palace and chapel, the center of the city.

The roads were littered with corpses of both humans and animals, and Paltrus wondered why they did not flee the city long before they met their deaths. Paltrus looked and beheld the structure that he once knew to be the Fort of Dorz. Now he saw that the architecture was mostly what he remembered, but the ceiling had caved in and the walls were crumbling. The building was not even placed on its foundation correctly. Two guards were at their posts at the main entrance to the small fort, but one was dead. The other was angrily fighting off a slow-moving skeleton attempting to gain entrance to the building. Paltrus looked closer and saw that the skeleton was not actually a skeleton, but a human, starved to the point to where he was little more than a skeleton. He was trying desperately to gain entrance to this building, though Paltrus did not know why, unless what he remembered as the kitchen was intact.

Paltrus saw the main avenue of the city, which he had traveled down merely days ago while the peasants chanted “Sel-Dhelius, our lord!” This road now appeared as mere dirt, dry and cracked land, and no human had any interest in gathering there.

The party rode their horses onto the main avenue and slowly continued on the path to the chapel. On either side of the road were rows of dead trees, and on these trees grew black leaves in the shapes of fingers. These fingers were dripping some liquid of the same color. The leaves grew before Paltrus’ very eyes, and slowly began to reach out for him, stretching further than human fingers could.

The party continued down the road while the black fingers reached towards them, but Paltrus saw that none of his companions acted as though they were afraid. Nevertheless, all of the fingers on all of the trees continued to reach out for them.

Paltrus looked up to see what he remembered to be the White Chapel, which was as black as sackcloth made of hair. The top of the tower had broken off and fallen onto the street in front of the chapel, and out of the opening came the black smoke that formed the clouds above them.

A round window had an illustration of two dragons on a mound of bodies of soldiers. One was black and the other was red. The black dragon thrust his sword into the heart of the red dragon, and the red dragon clamped his teeth onto the neck of the black dragon. There was a shield that was broken in two lying on the mound next to them. This was the emblem of the Landhel family.

Above that window was another window, though it may be more appropriately thought of as an anti-window. It was rectangular at the bottom but arching at the top, about 40 feet wide and 90 feet tall. Light did not pass through this window. Instead, the window sucked up whatever light ventured near it and only released darkness. If the window had any image at all, it could not be seen through the darkness.

The party rode their horses around the wreckage in front of the chapel before Mr. Why signaled a halt.

“We must dismount here,” he said. “The horses will be safe here, but they will not be safe inside. We will also be at a disadvantage on an easily frightened animal once inside.”

The knights dismounted and continued into the Black Chapel. Mr. Why took point and opened the large wooden door. After hearing the door creaking and partly break off of its hinges, Paltrus felt a cold air bring the strong stench of rotting meat that he had been smelling in Barisch-Nittook. Mr. Why entered the chapel, and Paltrus saw him enveloped by the darkness as he entered.

He then heard Mr. Why light one of his self-lighting matches and saw him apply the match to a torch. The torch caught the fire and Mr. Why held the torch in the air, revealing the room just well enough to move through it, though not comfortably. Paltrus then entered the room behind Mr. Why, and saw people that were in the room running away from the light of the torch, usually on all fours. Paltrus saw that the columns were frighteningly unstable, especially for a room of this size, and apparently neglected. The rows of pews had mostly been broken and in some places splintered.

The room was perfectly silent. Paltrus could not even hear his own movement or breathing. He did hear, though, as if from a great distance, though it could not have been far, one of the knights say, “I have a horrendous feeling. I do not know what it is. It is not fear. It is not sadness. It is not anger. But it is powerful, and I fear that it will overtake me before the end.”

“Do not pray while we are in here,” Paltrus heard another knight say, directly in his ear.

“Why?”

“We do not want them to know our prayers.”

The party continued down the chapel aisle, and Paltrus could still not even hear his own footsteps. He looked at the sides of the chapel, and there he saw the stain-glass images of kings and saints, facing the front of the chapel. They were difficult to see, because the light from the torch barely reached them, but there was a bit of a red glow from the light coming up from the ground outside. The windows were broken where the eyes of the subjects should have been, and their mouths were open as if they were screaming. Though Paltrus could hear nothing in the room, the mere sight of the silent screams of the icons brought pain to Paltrus’ ears, as if he could hear the hysterical screaming coming from the windows. The kings and saints were terrified by whatever it was that they saw at the front of the chapel.

Paltrus turned and looked to the front of the chapel. Where he once believed to be a statue of Dhelianos was a pillar of black smoke that stayed in place, never expanding or rising, and as dark as a moonless night. Mr. Why continued to walk towards the front of the chapel when the pillar of darkness began to collapse onto the floor and spread to cover the ground of the entire room.

Mr. Why halted, then drew his sword with his free hand and yelled, "Brace yourselves!" Paltrus could still only hear Mr. Why as if from a distance, but followed orders and drew his sword. The other knights did likewise.

The darkness gathered around their feet, but Paltrus did not know what to do. He knew that the One must know of their plight, and he began to pray that He would help them. Paltrus saw that the darkness was no longer a distant threat, and now no longer a mere threat at all. It was not something that was yet to come and it was not a memory of something that was past. It was immediate, and it was real. He was immersed in the very essence of evil itself. His mind raced through a thousand thoughts in moments, almost all nonsensical, some that were not even relevant to the darkness before him. When fear had brought him to the end of his mind, only his prayer emerged to drive away the lunacy.

He then heard a crash of metal against metal and looked to his right. A knight had tried to strike Paltrus with his sword, but Wolvus had moved his shield between them to protect him. Paltrus moved out of the way while Wolvus continued to fight the knight. The fight ended when Pantheus came behind the enemy and drove his sword between the enemy's helmet and armor.

The knight collapsed and Pantheus pulled off his helmet, but the knight could not be seen underneath the darkness on the floor.

"You villains!" said the knight in his dying breath. "Why do you betray the One? He will punish you for your crimes! You will never again see the Crystal City!"

The knight then wheezed for a brief period before his breathing ceased.

Paltrus recognized the voice. It was the knight who had advised him not to pray while in the Black Chapel. He looked in the direction of the voice, and he knew that he had failed to do as the knight had said. "My strength of mind has failed me," he said to himself. "He should not have died. I cannot undo what I have just done."

"Do not fear his words," said Pantheus. "He does not serve the One."

Paltrus continued looking in the black smoke where he assumed that the knight's body was lying. The party began to move again and Pantheus continued standing by Paltrus.

"I'm afraid we need to keep moving," said Pantheus.

The light from the torch was getting further away from them and the area in which they were standing was getting darker. Paltrus looked up at Pantheus, and the two men ran through the darkness to catch up with their party.

They passed through the sanctuary and into the back halls of the chapel. The room into which they had entered looked as though it had already begun to collapse, but stubbornly refused to fall, still allowing humans and beasts to pass through. It was a tall room and the two walls met in an arch to form the ceiling. Mr. Why continued to hold up his torch, but there were weak red

torches lining the sides of the room that allowed Paltrus to see that the walls had been painted. This was the hallway in which great acts of the saints were illustrated to be examples of honor for anyone who may see them.

Mr. Why's torch cast shadows on these walls when a knight passed in front of it, but in the shadows of Mr. Why's torch, the walls, as well as the paintings on them, could be seen by the light of the weak red torches. At one point, Paltrus looked and beheld the painting of his father in one of these shadows. It was as he had always remembered it. His father was defending a maiden who was mercilessly attacked by an ogre.

The knight then moved away from that section of the wall and the light from Mr. Why's torch illuminated the painting, showing Paltrus what he had never seen. He recognized his father in the painting, but he was not on a road. He was in a small room of a very old building that looked as though it should be condemned. Out of the open door of the room, Paltrus could see a hallway with lines of doors. Inside of the room was a mostly nude woman sitting on a blood and sweat stained bed with a blank expression on her face, as though she was only vaguely aware of where she was. Paltrus could not help but assume that she was likely under the influence of opium.

What little attention the woman could seemingly give was given to the Dhelius' activity, not as though it were an event to concern her, but as though it were merely in her line of sight. She was looking indifferently as the king strangled an infant that was trying to cry.

Underneath the foreground of the painting was a message messily written in lead, "THE WHORE'S BASTARD SON WILL NOT SPOIL THE AMBITION OF THE KING!"

Paltrus looked at the image of his father, and he saw anger and desperation in his face. He felt disgusted by the actions of his father, but also pity. This was an act to exercise some sort of control, but demonstrated how little control the repulsive man actually had. Paltrus could not help but wonder how and when his father lost control.

Paltrus noticed that as he continued to stare at the painting, the king began to look less menacing and the child more threatening.

"Do not lose perspective," said Wolvus' voice behind him. "It is easy to forget what the images really are when illuminated by these lights."

Paltrus then saw that the main party had continued on, and the light from Mr. Why's torch was growing fainter. He was now seeing these images by the light of the red torches. He looked again, but this time more carefully. This time, even by the light of the red torches, nothing in the image seemed to fit with its surroundings. It seemed as though it were segments of different images plastered together to make a false image. The image had then become chaotic and nonsensical. Objects began to move until the infant was gone. It was not replaced by an ogre, but by a second image of the king.

"Come," said Wolvus, "Keep looking at the light of the torch and follow until we catch up."

The light was so far away that Paltrus could not see his immediate surroundings, but he felt a hand take hold of his arm and begin to pull him quickly towards the party. The hand was pulling him faster than he could run and held his arm with a strength that was painful. Paltrus was surprised at the strength of Wolvus' hand, which seemed to be far beyond that of any man that he had encountered before. As they came closer to the light of the torch, Paltrus saw that Wolvus' hand was not holding his arm, but that both men were being pulled by an unseen force towards the light.

The two men were brought up to the rest of the party, and they soon exited the passageway to enter one of the many chapel marketplaces. Paltrus looked, and he saw that there were many pillars lining the length of the room holding the large building in place, but just as in the sanctuary, he had little confidence that they would stand long.

Paltrus looked now to the walls, and there, the red glow partly illuminated many large stain-glass windows. The first window on his left depicted a community fair. Children were running and playing and vendors were selling novelties. In the center of the fair was the main attraction, a man tied to a stake in the midst of burning fuel. The next window depicted a team of physicians hard at work examining the human anatomy, cutting out organs from their living test subjects to perform various alchemical tests on them. In a cage next to the operating table, a future subject watched in tears while awaiting her time.

Paltrus saw these windows, and he could not turn away. He could not move. He looked again at yet more windows on the wall, and they all depicted many scenes of lynching, dismembering, stabbing, and other deaths. In each of these pictures, the victims were crying for mercy and the murderers seemed to demonstrate either mirth and merriment or concentration as if finishing an important task. Paltrus knew that to the right of the path was another row of such images, but he now realized that the images he had already seen would haunt him for many years, and he could not bear to see more.

He turned his head down to the ground, and attempted to clear his mind of the images by focusing on what he saw. On the ground he saw very old rocks that were made black by fire, and he saw the dancing light of Mr. Why's torch. He then looked up at his party, and he saw that the other knights were also stunned by these images.

"Look upon these only if your stomach can tolerate it," said Mr. Why, who was looking at the ground. "Sometimes we must know of these things, because we are here to prevent these atrocities from happening again. Now, let us continue to move forward."

Mr. Why then began to move forward into the marketplace, and the knights forced themselves to look away from the windows and follow. Very few buildings remained standing. The further they moved into the room, the more powerful the stench of death became, and Paltrus had difficulty resisting illness in his stomach. At the fringes of Mr. Why's torchlight, human-like creatures ran behind rubble to hide, just as in the sanctuary, and the glow of their eyes could be seen, as if they were the eyes of dogs. Paltrus thought he could see them more clearly in small glimpses, and he believed that he saw blood dripping from their mouths as they would abandon

the corpses that they were devouring in the street. The knights had to pass over several corpses, but some, even some that had been partially devoured, were not yet corpses. When the living saw the knights coming, they would open their mouths to scream, because they did not have enough uneaten muscles left to run. No sound would come from their mouths. The party then continued to walk past them.

Paltrus soon exited the chapel and came onto the outside road. While they were in the Chapel, a thunderstorm had started, but the force that muted sound prevented Paltrus from hearing the thunder. From where he was, he could see the Palace of Champions from the light of the lightning. It was as dilapidated as the Black Chapel, with many collapsed towers and crumbling walls. The drawbridge had been destroyed and had fallen into the moat, and was replaced by an unsteady bridge that seemed to be scavenged from the hull of some wrecked ship.

The party crossed the bridge one at a time to avoid putting too much weight onto it, and they entered the courtyard. There were many people here that were afraid of them, too, but the walls of the courtyard prevented them from running. Paltrus saw them try to climb the walls with no success, and the party continued on into the palace.

“This is the Palace of the Conquered,” said Mr. Why while he illuminated the chamber. “Our destination is in the highest tower.”

Paltrus followed the party to the base of the tower of the Bel-Dhelius, but as they came closer to the door of that tower, there were fewer and fewer creatures running from their light. It seemed to Paltrus that they were afraid to approach the door.

They reached the door, and Paltrus saw that it was closed and barely still on its hinges. From the other side of the door came the sound of a gluttonous voice, groaning while eating. Mr. Why pushed open the door and held up his torch. There was a hideous man-beast. Its skin was thin and gray, if it was there at all. In many places it seemed to be falling off of what few muscles it had, eaten away by a plague. Its entire body seemed to be partly decomposed as if dead for some time, yet it remained animated against the will of nature. On its hairless head was nailed a black metal crown, wildly twisted, with no consistent or sane design from whatever metal-worker had created it.

The creature did not seem to notice the light, and indeed, Paltrus noticed that it did not have eyes. In place of eyes, the creature had dark holes. The creature had unhinged its jaw, and its mouth grew large like that of a serpent as he devoured a corpse in military uniform with his inhumanly sharp teeth. Its hands looked vaguely human, but had large, powerful claws which it used to rip open the body of the officer. The corpse’s head and left arm had already been eaten, as well as a portion of its torso.

Mr. Why took a step forward. The monster heard the footfall and faced the party, then unhinged his jaw and screamed a long, high-pitched, deafening scream that terrified Paltrus. The monster had the voices of many screaming animals inside of him. It then turned, held out its arms that were like the wings of a bat, and flew to the back of the room and up the spiral tower staircase, out of their sight. It did not flap its wings as a bat does, but was propelled into the air by some

force that was unseen save for a black liquid that was left in its trail. The very liquid itself seemed to be alive, but painfully dying.

“Come, we must pursue!” said Mr. Why. Paltrus had little time to survey the room, but he did see that there were many other corpses that had been partly eaten, apparently by this creature. He quickly looked at the corpse that the creature did not finish eating, and he saw that its remaining hand was grasping a small chain meant for a pendant, but whatever pendant was previously on it had been ripped from it. He also recognized the uniform, but it was not until he had already begun running up the spiral stairs that he realized it was the uniform of the Arch-Knight, Polius.

The party followed the suffering black trail up to the king’s private study. With one hand, Mr. Why pulled the door to the antechamber off of its hinges and threw it out the window behind him into the thunderstorm. He then kicked in the door to the main chamber, and Paltrus saw the creature inside. It had been writing in a book, but once it heard the door being broken down, it again turned to them, unhinged his jaw, and screamed a high-pitched scream. Paltrus turned white and started walking backwards, and Pantheus stabilized him so that he would not fall out of the window behind him.

The monster then dropped the book and flew out the back of the room, demolishing a solid wall, and flew up above to where they could not see, again without so much as flapping its wings.

Mr. Why slowly and calmly went into the room and Paltrus followed while the rest of the party waited outside of the room.

“I have never seen this room before,” said Mr. Why.

“Neither have I,” said Paltrus.

Aside from the wall that had been destroyed, the walls were covered in bookshelves that were messily filled with books, and there were books stacked as high as the ceiling all over the room. Many papers were flying into the thunderstorm through the new hole in the wall.

Mr. Why picked up an arbitrary book off of the ground and opened it.

“This is dated 1178 A.U.,” he said. “It looks as though it is a journal. I believe it is written in blood.

*“The pain does not go away. I continue to thirst for blood and hunger for human meat. Animals and vegetables no longer satisfy me. I cannot control my desires, but I do not attempt to do so. I write this in my own blood. It is more freely available to me than is ink because I cannot stop my bleeding.*

*“I take the peasants for myself when I can. The whores are the easiest to obtain, but the least satisfying. Nothing yet has fully satisfied me, but instead everything only adds illness to my desire. Yet I continue to seek satisfaction, no matter how it escapes me.*

*“A recent dispute between a nation and a city allowed me to take a large number of captives while they believed they were fighting each other. The captives are now in the prisons below me, and I am eager to taste them. Foreign delicacies will be a new experience for me.”*

Mr. Why closed and dropped the book. He examined the room in disbelief, with tears in his eyes. “I once greatly desired to see this room,” he said. His voice began to break as he continued. “Even after I came to Shallice, it was difficult to suppress my great desire to see this room and what wisdom it may hold.”

Paltrus shared Mr. Why’s disbelief and shock at what he was seeing, yet his shock was too great to weep. He walked over to the leftmost bookcase and picked up a book on the top shelf. He picked it up and began to read to himself.

*Day fifty-four of Spring in the year twenty-seven of the city.*

*Only the Flame can ease my suffering, but it is the Flame that creates the pain. I cannot keep the Flame entirely to myself, but I can control what the others believe about it, and that is what I must do. Nobody must know what this is. I will kill all who tell of it and keep everyone out of the Great City.*

*Day thirty-two of Winter in the year twenty-nine of the city.*

*The one who claims himself to be King of the Demons to the south of my kingdom has hidden away some knowledge of the city. All of the rulers of all of the nations now call themselves “King of the Demons,” but I must prove to them that I have become the Great Demon himself. I have waged war against this king’s nation and burned his libraries. I fed him alive to his starving subjects, whom I later impaled on posts and displayed throughout their capital city. Yet I fear that he may have hidden something away that eluded me. He or his descendants may be the end of my line. To prevent this, I boiled his children, despite the protests of their mother. I do not understand the reason for her concern, but it causes me to fear that she may have hidden some of her children away from me. I regret giving her to my dogs, because I now realize that she may have one day told me of any missing children should I have made her my mistress.*

Paltrus dropped the book and fell to his hands and knees. He vomited on the book stack that was on the ground in front of him and began to cry. Mr. Why walked over to him and handed him a clean cloth to wipe his mouth.

“That one that you just read was probably written by the first Dhelian,” Mr. Why said, his voice still weak. “He is now in Shallice, but is still having a great deal of difficulty living with his past. He often needs to be reminded of the nature of redemption.”

“How can such a villain have any kind of redemption?”

“You must pray that he can. He may have more evil in his life than you do, but your hope and his hope are the same.”

Mr. Why then paused before saying, “After reflecting upon his life and his evil deeds, he said that he was able to see something that he could not see before. ‘The truth is unpleasant for us, and we are unpleasant for the truth,’ he said.”

Mr. Why handed Paltrus a small pouch of water. “Rinse the vile taste from your mouth.”

Paltrus sat up and took the pouch. He rinsed and spit the remaining vomit onto the ground. Mr. Why then handed him another pouch. Paltrus took the pouch and drank some of its contents. It was wine. It slowly began to settle his stomach and bring his strength back to him. Paltrus closed his eyes and thought of Shallice. He heard Mr. Why walk across the room. He opened his eyes and turned to Mr. Why and saw that he picked up the book in which the monster had been writing.

*“The descendent of the King of the Demons to the South has discovered information about the Great City as my ancestor warned may happen. His prediction may yet prove true, and my line may soon end. I have sent my Arch-Knight and my son in hopes that their own greed will cause them to kill all who know of it, and I will kill any who know of it upon their return.”*

Mr. Why then turned a page and began reading again.

*“Something terrible and unexpected happened. I was relieved to kill the Arch-Knight, the only surviving person to know of Arrburdak, when my son, whom I believed to be dead, entered the tower with a group of ruffians. I am hiding now, but I know that they are here to kill me. Damn the Demon King. I never expected him to cause my son to raise an army against me. I had never thought that Mordred may one day suffer the same fate as Arthur. I hear them pounding on my door. I know they want the Flame, but I will not—*

“The writing trails off,” said Mr. Why. He then closed the book and dropped it before walking towards Paltrus to address him.

“Come. Grendel is trapped and can no longer run from us, but we gain nothing from tarrying.”

# 9

Paltrus handed the wine pouch back to Mr. Why and stood, feeling his strength growing with every movement. The two men returned to the party, and together they walked up the spiral staircase until they came to the hatch leading to the roof. Mr. Why motioned for Paltrus to first enter the hatch. The men moved aside to allow Paltrus through.

As Paltrus opened the hatch, he was struck by a familiar fragrance. It was the fragrance of the summer air in Dhelian. So high up in this tower, the fragrances of bakeries and blossoming plants were absent, and Paltrus could detect only the air itself. It was, he believed, the smell of purity. Memories of Dhelian and the Dhelius came into his mind, and with them the sympathies he learned for most of his life. He remembered seeing his father working diligently with his stargazing equipment. He remembered how much his astrological work benefited the entire kingdom, and how he was always extraordinarily adept and precise in predicting the flow of seasons and the rise and fall of kingdoms.

Paltrus climbed through the open hatch and saw, as he expected, a calm summer night. As he looked across the roof, he saw the backside of his father, sitting in a chair and adjusting a spherical astrolabe. His concentration was divided between the astrolabe and the sky, which was brilliantly filled with stars. The king was carefully charting the movement of the planets and drawing complex diagrams with a compass and straightedge. The glow of the moon was bright enough to make everything visible. Paltrus felt as though even the quiet was visible, or at the very least visibly demanded by the moonlight. He dare not disrespect the demand.

He came up behind his father, not intending to disturb his work. He looked at the many diagrams of constellations which were far beyond his own capabilities. Beside the diagrams were pages of notes regarding future weather conditions and political troubles and even resolutions to those troubles. Paltrus' admiration for his father's work was renewed.

After Paltrus watched for a few minutes, the king noticed his presence. He turned towards Paltrus with a confused expression.

“Your face is familiar.”

“I am your son, Paltrus.”

“Oh yes. What are those filthy rags that you are wearing? I did not recognize you in them.”

Paltrus looked down at his clothes and saw that his armor was now dirty sackcloth, and he was ashamed for his father to see this.

“Why are you with those people there?” the king said. He looked towards the hatch and Paltrus turned to see his party, also in sackcloth clothing. Paltrus turned back to face the king, who looked at him with fatherly concern. “Do you not know that they are from the unknown lands to the south?”

“They tell me that *these* are the unknown lands,” said Paltrus.

The king laughed a kindhearted laugh and said, “Oh, now, that’s something I’ve not heard before.” He then stood, smiled at Paltrus, and said, “Come, we will kill a fatted calf to celebrate your safe return. I will have someone dispose of the barbarians.”

Paltrus was now comforted that his world was now to return to what he had known. His relief was reflected by the release of tension in his muscles, and the beginnings of a smile.

“Do not be deceived, sir!” said Wolvus. Paltrus turned to look at Wolvus and saw that the party was now again in their armor. He turned back to the king, who was still smiling, happy to see his son.

The king then unhinged his jaw and opened his mouth wide. The high-pitched, deafening scream paralyzed Paltrus from fear. As Paltrus watched the king scream, he saw that his teeth grew to be inhumanly sharp, his beard and most of his hair dissolved, his crown became black, his skin became a sickening color, and his eyes retreated into his head, leaving only dark sockets. A blast of lightning revealed the pouring rain, and the stars disappeared.

The monster raised his left arm and some weapon materialized in his hand. The weapon itself could not be seen because it was surrounded by a black smoke. The weapon quickly moved to land on Paltrus, who raised his shield at the last moment. The force of the weapon was powerful and knocked Paltrus to the ground. Another scream was followed by a second blow, which Paltrus dodged by rolling out of its path. The weapon crashed into the water collecting on the ground, and in his panic, Paltrus nearly drowned in the water as it rushed towards him.

Paltrus stood and faced the monster in terror, who turned to him and again screamed maniacally. Paltrus struggled to remain conscious.

Then he heard a familiar voice, that of the One, say “Do not be afraid. You are in a Mighty Fortress.” Without understanding the reason, Paltrus became calm as he watched the monster raise up his arm and swing his Un weapon at him. Paltrus did not raise his shield or sword against the monster, and the weapon landed on his arm. He did not feel any pain, and he was entirely unharmed. Though the monster was still screaming, it brought no pain to Paltrus’ ears.

The creature summoned a great deal of strength to force a particularly powerful blow directly on the top of Paltrus’ head. Like all of the other blows, it did not harm Paltrus in the least, and this

time the feedback from the blow knocked the creature down onto the ground. Paltrus looked, and he saw that the eyes of the creature, the eyes of his father, came back into their sockets.

“You would defy your own father? You would deny your own family and rebel against your nation?” said the king.

Paltrus thought again of the many oaths he had taken to protect his nation and his king. The nation was to be put before his own life. His king was to be obeyed, and his father respected. Those oaths were now shattered. “You were an oathbreaker before that,” he remembered Mr. Why telling him.

Paltrus refocused his attention on the king and said, “I have no interest in your arbitrary notions of honor.”

The monster’s eyes then fell out of its sockets and onto the ground. It then stood and desperately continued to scream and strike Paltrus, who merely watched and pitied the creature. Eventually, the creature released one more desperate scream and then enveloped itself in its own mouth. There was now nothing remaining; the creature had gone out of existence.

Paltrus looked at the table where he once saw an astrolabe and astrological diagrams. He now saw a mutilated body and papers that had been destroyed by the rain. The rain and lightning then stopped and Paltrus turned to his party.

“Is our task complete?” Paltrus said.

“No, there is much more to do,” said Mr. Why.

Mr. Why and the rest of the party then began to climb down the hatch and Paltrus followed. They descended the staircase and came to the room in which the body of Polius lay half-eaten. Hanging on the walls of the room were corpses of people that had been strung up and left to die some time ago. Also in the room were many cruel devices of torture in place of furniture. The party merely walked through the room and into the passageway.

They then walked through a door and onto a terrace, where they looked down from the hill to the city below. The clouds had cleared and the smoke coming from the chapel had lessened. The sun was rising and Paltrus could see the ruins of the entire city.

“Why did our own knight turn against us?” Paltrus said.

“He was deceived,” said Mr. Why. “It is a devastating reality at times. There are some that always see the Crystal City, and never the Celestial City.”

“I think he really believed that he saw and understood the One.”

“Most do.”

“How do I know that I am not as he was? How do I know that I see things as they are?”

“Never trust your own judgment, but never question the judgment of the One.”

“How will I know that I correctly understand the judgment of the One?”

“You can never be certain of this. But follow what He says and understand His Words as best as your abilities will allow. Your abilities will be highly limited while in the world of Extension, but He will strengthen you.”

Paltrus contemplated this, then said, “Before he turned against us, he told me not to pray while in the Black Chapel. He said that we do not want the enemies to hear our prayers.”

Mr. Why shook his head emphatically. “*No*. There is no time that does not specifically call for prayer. Every moment is bettered with that aid, and it is never unsafe. Never cease to pray.”

“Would the Ministers of Un have heard the prayers while we were in the Black Chapel?”

“That is very likely, though I do not know for certain.”

“If they could possibly have heard them, would it not have been safer to stop prayer at that moment?”

“We have no need to keep them from knowing what we know. We do not need to deceive them. We do not need to be cunning as they are; we only need to be truthful.”

Paltrus continued to look at the city below. He saw that most of the people were hiding from the sunrise behind whatever remaining walls were standing, while some were peeking around those walls to see the sun.

“What do we do now that the Dhelius is destroyed?”

“We will tend to the people,” said Mr. Why. “We will show them what their king really was. Some will come with us to Shallice. Others will refuse to believe us, and I am not exactly certain of what they will do. I expect, though, that they will fragment themselves into different sects and rebuild the Dhelian Empire, though not quickly. I think it will happen very similarly to the building of the first Dhelian. Patriotism will be destroyed and reborn under a different flag with a different identity many times over. Unquestioned heroes will become unquestioned villains, and unquestioned villains will become unquestioned heroes. It will have a different flag, a different name, different rulers, different ideas, and different superficial goals. Eventually, they will use the guise of peace to rebuild the Dhelian tyranny as it was yesterday. Even before they come to that, it will still be Morband. It was Morband since the Flame first came to Arrburdak, and it will not cease to be Morband until the last days.”