



IMAR FELT HIS upper lip begin to pull back in a predatory smile as the last flakes of snow drifted lazily down. The clouds had been thinning over the last hour as he and his two men closed off the only escape route from the rocky vale which the *Kazenvek* had been slowly herded into by the other two groups of Barians. The sun would soon make an appearance and turn the world of dull ivory and gray into a brilliant prism of ice and dazzling white crystals.

He flashed the grin at Kailt even as he held up a leather-gloved hand to signal a halt. The other man cautiously slowed, lowering himself to an easy crouch, and exchanged a wry look with Vanik who returned it with half-lidded eyes that couldn't quite conceal his own excitement.

The three had grown up in Baria and they knew well how to move in the snow so that their weight was less than a whisper over the quiet northern drifts. It would never do to alert their prey to their presence until the trap was truly sprung. All three men moved with grace despite the naked blades they carried—Kailt and Vanik each with a bastard sword nearly four feet in length, while Imar rested his grandfather's two-handed sword across his left shoulder.

Soon, he mouthed, his breath misting the air, and the others noted his smile as it faded. “(We) make no [mistakes].” The two

words¹ were spoken so softly the others had to strain to hear, but they had been expecting them, after all. There may be pleasure in the hunt, and they may be young hunters, but they all knew it was no game.

The trio held their positions for a few moments, their eyes glancing over the snow-covered rocks around them and then down the wide mouth of the small vale to make certain there was no movement; then, at Imar's signal, they began to spread out slowly, cautiously giving each other the room needed to swing their large weapons and also to make certain none of their prey would escape the trap that had been set.

Now in position, each young man waited. They breathed deeply, slowly, trying to saturate their lungs for the fight that was only seconds away. Each could feel their adrenaline starting to rush in anticipation, their senses taking in the cold, clear air and the whisper of the light wind across the hills. Eyes narrowed, straining to see any movement that might reveal their enemies, ears sharpened to try and pick up any sound that might give them a moment's warning.

A sudden battle-cry came from the other side of the vale and the three young hunters saw the Chieftain of Drahl leading his two men in a charge toward what appeared to be another mound of snow. But as the Barians came on, the ice crystals exploded outward to reveal nearly seven feet and 350 pounds of solid, terrifying white-furred demon. Its sudden movement should have blinded the warriors with the unexpected burst of snow and jagged ice, but these three were not just veterans, they were the best the village of Drahl had to offer, and the ice demon—*Kazenvek* in the temple tongue—found its furious bellow met by the fierce cries of men who felt no fear for even this foe.

Imar's feral grin split his face to see his father lead the charge so

¹ See True Language in Glossary

boldly, and it took no small effort to hold position with Kailt and Vanik when he yearned to move in and take his part in the fight nearly a hundred yards away. Instead, he lowered his blade down to a guard position, holding the massive hilt tightly and prepared himself should this creature seek to flee or another of its kind appear. There would be no escape for the demons today—or any other day for that matter. Not so long as Baria stood to deny the creatures the heavily populated lands to the south.



The last of the Ten had just seated himself at the table when Imar stood, quieting the room instantly. “(The) [chieftain] will speak,” he said, bringing the focus of nine sets of eyes to his father. He nodded respectfully to Galt, then sat back down in his own sturdy chair, just as curious as the rest to discover what the chieftain had decided after the unexpected events of the hunt yesterday.

Galt rose from his seat before the heavy, worn table, round so that all would have a clear view of anyone who spoke. He was average height for a Barian—tall to the people of the south—with a short-cropped blond beard, long hair dyed the red and black of a chieftain, and cool gray eyes.

“(The) [time] /has come/ for [action],” he stated without preamble, speaking some of his words aloud while simultaneously gesturing the meaning of other words with his hands in what Barians called the True Language. “(The) [demons] /are coming/ [too fast] (and) in [numbers too great] for (it) to be [natural]. [Nothing like this] /has happened/ in [centuries]. (We) must know [why].”

There were a few nods around the table from the others, but none spoke, eager to learn of the plan that might put them back in control of a situation that had been getting steadily worse for the last two months. Light poured into the room through the heavy glass

windows, casting only a few shadows in the Meeting Hall. More often than not a fire would be dancing in the hearth, but in midsummer there were no snaps or hisses to steal the silence from the room.

Galt looked around the table once, his eyes looking more steel than gray. “(I) will go [north, past our patrols] with Imar. (We) will see with [our own eyes what] may be (the) [cause] of [our trials].”

There were noises of surprise around the table, one from Imar himself. *After what had just happened?*



Another mound of snow burst outward, the *Kazenvek* which had hidden itself within suddenly leaping forward from the north end of the vale, less than 20 yards from the first. Its roar of anger was met with the battle cries of the second group of three Barians, who had lain in wait to the northeast. Their goal had been to prevent the first demon from fleeing in that direction from Galt’s men, but they were more than eager to test their skills against this newcomer.

Imar saw Kailt and Vanik’s eyes light up eagerly at the fight that was to come, but his own brow had begun to furrow. In the past, *Kazenvek* rarely worked with one another—they barely tolerated each other’s presence without a fight for dominance. But as the second creature turned toward the new trio, the young Barian began scanning the area around him even closer. Could one of the snow-covered mounds here be hiding a *third* demon? Their numbers had been growing over the past two months, and although they certainly didn’t fight in tandem as the Barians did, they *did* seem more willing to ignore each other for their human enemies.

A *Kazenvek*’s hide was deceptive in many ways. Their long fur, which acted more like a boar’s bristles in toughness, covered them from head to toe, its composition designed to insulate and shed snow and ice in such a manner that bladed weapons also tended to

slide down or away from their target—making what would be a debilitating or even killing blow into just a glancing one. Spears would be more reliable if the monsters weren't so quick, despite their size. Thrown weapons were dodged or knocked to the side more often than not, and unless a spear thrust came at a distracted demon, the creature could slide to the side, grab the haft, and pull the human within reach of its long, deadly claws all too easily.

Kali led the second group of Barians into the fight, his single long braid like a viper behind him as he hurled a throwing axe at the new foe. The monster snarled as the head of the axe was batted aside, but not without taking a shallow bite out of the creature's forearm. The Barian to Kali's left lunged forward to the same side with his hunting spear, a deceptive blow designed to look sloppy, and the demon was happy to take the bait, grabbing at the spear with its uninjured clawed hand, while batting the spearpoint wide with the other arm.

Kali's second man leaped forward and swung wide with his broad sword toward the demon's grasping arm and wrist in a scythe-like motion, ensuring that if the blade were to be deflected it would still inflict a wound on the seven-foot monstrosity. Perhaps sensing what was to come, realizing that by avoiding the humans to either side it would leave itself vulnerable to the cold-eyed human in the center, the *Kazenvek* suddenly lunged backward, accepting a slashing wound from the broad sword.

But Kali was, for some reason Imar couldn't see from his viewpoint, not taking advantage of the opening that had been made for him. Instead, his deep blue eyes had suddenly turned toward the fight that the chieftain and his men were involved in a dozen yards away. Saying something to his own men, who quickly took a step forward to cover him, Kali thrust his longsword one-handed into the snow point-first, grasped his second throwing axe, turned to Galt, and hurled his weapon in a brutal two-handed motion.

At the last instant Imar saw what the sharp-eyed Barian had noted, and his breath caught in his throat as the axe flew end-over-end to bury itself in the shoulder of a *third* demon that had allowed the chieftain's fight to put the three humans out of position from where it had hidden itself less than ten feet from Galt's right-hand man.



"[This] /is/ [unwise]," Kali said from Galt's right side, drawing frowns from many of the Ten. Some nodded as Kali spoke, others kept more reserved expressions on their faces—watching Galt's reaction and measuring his responses.

"To send (the) [two most valued leaders] of Drahl into [such] (an) [unknown danger] /is/ (an) [unnecessary risk]," he continued. "Send [myself] and (the) [sub-chief] if (you) need [eyes] (you) can trust, but do not blind [our village] in (a) [gamble] to see [further]."

Kali's voice had always grated on Imar for some reason. There was nothing *wrong* with it that he could put a finger on, but it always felt as if the man was lecturing.

"(You) speak [quite eloquently], Son of Aik," Galt replied with the hint of a smile on his lips and tidiness to his hand motions that indicated amusement. Imar had had opportunity to see his father speak on equal footing with the Vansernic at one of *their* council meetings, so he knew that Galt would have no difficulties with the long-winded Second of Drahl. "But [there] /is/ [information that] must be /gleaned/ [which only] (I) will understand. And [only when] (I) see (it)."

"[Well] and [good, Chieftain]," Kali nodded respectfully. "Take [myself] or [another] of (the) [Ten] with (you) [then]. *Not* (the) [sub-chief]."

A few fists pounded gently on the dark table as other members of the Ten expressed their agreement with the Second's words.

"No, Kali. [Only] Imar can do [what] must be /done/ for [our people]."

Kali's face broke from its usual cool mask and his deep blue eyes flashed in irritation.

"Hear [my words, leaders] of Drahl," Galt said in heavy tones, his gestures deliberate and precise. "(You) [all] know (the) [truth] of [what] /has been happening/ [here]. [What] /happened/ [only yesterday]."



Even as Kali's axe spun past him, Galt was leaping backward while pivoting his body in a circle toward the demon that had lain in wait. The chieftain's black and red hair seemed to blur with the speed of his spin and his long sword came down in a vicious chop designed to line up with the counterspin Kali's axe hit had forced the monster into. Between the unexpectedly brutal impact from the thrown weapon and the sudden move Galt had made, the *Kazenvek* had no time to construct a defense and the Barian's sword cleaved straight through the creature's thick collar bone and into its broad chest.

The chieftain's feet came down in the snow which was suddenly reddened with the ice demon's blood. He stumbled for just a moment, then thrust a stabilizing leg up and out against the dying creature's hip so that he could both finish the cut and pull his weapon free from the huge body. Galt's two men side-stepped in the snow to cover their leader from their first target even as Kali stepped forward, pulling his own long sword out of the snow, and spinning it over his shoulder in a quick move to fling ice crystals into the face of the monster that he and *his* men fought.

Imar took a step forward, but tapped Vanik's shoulder once and made a circle with one finger held up, then gestured Kailt forward and to the left. The two Barians moved forward slightly, but now there was someone watching behind as well. *Kazenvek* could be ambush predators, but they didn't usually show this much patience when prey was in sight. Imar and his men would not be caught by surprise today, the young sub-chief determined.

The demon facing Galt's trio was covered in cuts, and its right knee looked to be crippled. The other monster, in better shape but clearly feeling pressed against Kali's trio, hissed out a scream of frustration and then—in a move that eerily mirrored Galt's earlier killing strike—leaped backward and twisted in mid air to face Imar and his men eighty yards away. The creature apparently liked facing the unknown trio better and sprinted forward in bounds that Kali and his men wouldn't be able to match.

Imar's eyes burned in anticipation. If the demon thought that *Kali* was dangerous, it was about to discover that—

Two mounds in the snow suddenly exploded into motion as if the other creature's hiss had been some sort of signal. Each of the nearly seven-foot monsters that had lain hidden were closer to Imar and his men than the other six Barians to the north. And all three of them lowered their heads and ate up the ground toward the waiting humans.



“And not [only yesterday],” Galt continued. “Just [four days ago] (I) /saw/ Tirsik /forced/ to kill (a) [demon] with [only] (a) [single] Barian able to get to (him) in [time] to help.”

Tirsik nodded grimly. No Barian who wished to survive fought a *Kazenvek* alone. It wasn't just their size and speed, but their disproportionately long arms. Their stamina. Their ability to survive

wounds that would slow or kill a human. Barians wielded long and two-handed swords for a reason—and no warrior of the north was without a spear or throwing axe to help soften the creatures up before being forced to close against them. The fact that Tirsik had survived with only a single slash to his forearm was a testament to his skill. Like Kailt was now, the warrior that Tirsik had fought alongside was still bedridden.

“[When our enemy] /started/ to move against (us) in [greater numbers] as (the) [spring] /began/, (we) /thought/ (it) [strange]. (An) [anomaly which] /would/ [shortly] right [itself]. But (the) [demons] keep /coming/. In [greater numbers].”

Galt looked around the table and saw the hard, uncompromising looks of the men before him. “(I) know (we) will not break. (It) /is/ [our duty] to protect (the) [southerners] from (the) [demons] and (we) have never /allowed/ [more than] (a) [handful] of [our enemies] to get through [our patrols] over (the) [last century].”

He paused a moment for emphasis. “But (we) have become [too defensive],” he continued, his hands moving as if in irritation. He saw the nods around the table as he expressed what they all had been feeling. “(We) /are/ (the) [hunters]. (We) do not allow (the) [ice demons] to shape [any battle] for (us).”



“Vanik, Kailt!” Imar shouted. “Axes ready!” His eyes narrowed as he carefully picked his target while giving Vanik a full second to spin back around, noting the two spears already flying through the air toward the injured creature running away from Kali’s group.

“Far demon,” he commanded. “Torso spread.” He balanced the great sword on his left shoulder again and pulled out his own axe. “*Throw!*”

Three axes spun through the cold air in a delicate but deadly

arc. The clouds were beginning to break, and sunlight caught the crystals of ice being thrown up in a small haze before each of the loping creatures as their long limbs came down and then burst back out of the snow. One of the spears from Kali's men sailed over the centermost monster as it came down from its leaping run, causing it to hesitate just a moment...and that's when the second spear finished its arc by burying itself in the creature's left side. The wound was deep enough for the spear to become a concern for the demon, but the distance it had traveled stopped it from coming out the front of the monster's abdomen.

Even as it roared in pain and frustration, the three spinning axes found their targets, Kailt's deflected by the demon's movement to bury itself in the huge creature's upper arm, but Vanik's throw ending its flight deep in the creature's right side while Imar's entered his enemy's sternum and cracked through it—ending the monster's cry of pain in a choking cough of blood. Despite the killing blows, it still managed two more large strides through the snow, its fur reddened, its eyes full of hate, before it pitched face-first and slid ten more feet.

The two nearer demons spared not even a glance for their fallen brethren, each seeking to kill or escape the trio of Barians before them. Again, Imar spared a moment to analyze his foes—they didn't seem interested in slowing, and there wouldn't be time to switch weapons again. He spared a half-second to wish he had his father's mount with him or that Kailt, Vanik, and himself had a long spear between the three of them to accept the costly charge that was coming, then made a cool decision based on what they *did* have.

“Right one be mine! Spread left (and) cut legs first. None get past (us)!”

Vanik took two quick steps left as Kailt crossed quickly behind Imar to get to their target even as the sub-chief strode boldly toward the charging demon that he had marked as his own. He couldn't

spare a glance at his two men, but he was aware of their moves just as he was of the other six Barians charging down the center of the vale, knowing they couldn't arrive in time to help, but unable to simply wait and watch.

Imar raised his head to meet the white eyes of the *Kazenvek*, an arrogant sneer on his young features as he lowered his sword point down and to the right, both hands holding tightly to the grip as he held it just to the side of his hip bone. The demons had always shown a mean cunning, but operated more on instinct than intelligence. And they could never hold themselves back from anything resembling a show of dominance from the humans. The warrior knew he was outmassed and that mass was multiplied by the speed of the enormous creature racing toward him, its breath steaming in the air as its thin lips parted in a snarl that revealed oversized canines and sharp, cutting teeth.

He had seen what those teeth could do to a man. He knew that its claws were quicker than he was and that its arms were longer than his, as well. But Imar was a Barian of the north, and he was armed with nearly six feet of deadly steel that he knew how to use. And the most lethal weapon at his disposal, his mind—filled with the training of generations of warriors who had fought the *Kazenvek* for centuries and knew all of their habits and movements—was sharper still.

The demon screamed its rage at the smaller creature before it and leaped at Imar, arms wide and claws leading like a thicket of sharpened death. The sub-chief threw himself into a roll even before the creature was fully in the air, lowering himself to one knee as he swung his massive blade in a murderous arc right to left above his head. The monster reached the apex of its leap just as the sword came across, and the steel tore through the creature's arms as if they were leaves on a tree.

The *Kazenvek's* scream became a howl of agony as it landed face-first in the snow, its lifeblood pumping out of the stumps of

its arms just as Imar finished his roll and rose smoothly to his feet. With grim determination, he turned and brought the blade down on the creature's back before it could do more than squirm in torturous pain. There was a sharp crack as the spine was severed, and then he turned back to see how his men had fared.

Kailt's left shoulder had been torn open, but the demon had paid a similar price it seemed, judging from the large gash on its side. Vanik had allowed Kailt's gambit to give him the angle he needed, and most of the monster's right leg had been shorn off. This didn't mean it was helpless, although a human would be all but dead from the wound, and Kailt was wisely keeping his distance from the hissing creature as he awaited Imar and the other six Barians to join him in a killing circle.

For the Barians of the north, who followed Tirnashc, God of Death, this wasn't a question of honor or personal glory. This was about survival and the extermination of their age-old enemies by any means necessary. A killing circle was a minimum of six warriors, but no Barian would be turned away to join in. The goal wasn't to torture the thing, but to end its existence without any of the men receiving a scratch from the deadly creatures.

Kailt would live—would even have use of both arms still, if Imar was any judge. But no more blood would be spilled on the part of his people. The killing circle would see to that, he knew. But he couldn't help but wonder how this had happened. Six or more Barians against one ice demon was what every man here knew to strive for. This madness of nine against *five* of the creatures? Imar shook his head in dismay. It couldn't continue.



“/Is/ [this then] (a) [war]?” Tirsik asked, his gestures broad to indicate speculation.

Kali immediately shook his blond head, his braided hair swinging slightly as he did. "(They) /are/ [still too disorganized]. (They) do not work or fight [together]. (They) remain [little smarter] than [animals]."

"/Could/ (they) be /migrating/ for [some reason]?" Imar wondered aloud with a questioning look toward his father.

"(I) have /looked/ into (the) [histories] at Karvh," Galt said, referencing the southernmost Barian village which housed the only library in all of the cold northern lands. "(The) [demons] have never /acted/ like [other animals]. (They) /formed/ no [herds] until [now], nor /did/ (they) seem to notice (the) [seasons]. (They) exist [only] to kill."

Galt tapped the table once with a calloused finger. "[This] /is/ [unprecedented]. And so (we) must learn [*why*] (the) [demons] /are moving/ [south]. /Migrating/ if [that] /is/ [what] /is happening/."

"(I) agree with (the) [chieftain]," Kali began, but with a note of stubbornness that Imar recognized all too well. "But (I) still say [that]--"

"[Enough], Kali!" Galt said firmly, his hand cutting abruptly through the air. "[There] /are/ [some things] (you) do not yet know. [When] (you) /are/ [chieftain], (you) may make [whatever decisions] (you) wish." He softened his voice, but his grey eyes remained firm. "[This decision] /is/ [mine] to make. (It) /is/ not [arbitrary]."

Kali nodded his ascent, though his brow remained furrowed.

"In [our absence], (you) will be [in charge] of Drahl's [patrols], Kali. (I) want (the) [scouts] /tripled/ and (I) want [their range] /doubled/. [When] (the) [demons] move [south] (they) must be /met/ with [organized force]."

The Second nodded once more, this time with a fierce look in his eyes. Imar may not personally care for Kali, but the man was a Barian in every sense of the word. He would not fail his people.

"(We) will be [gone] no [more than five days]," Galt continued.

“If (we) find [what] /is causing/ [our enemies’ migration], (we) can prepare for [whatever] Tirnashc /wills/. But (He) /would/ not wish (us) to fight [blindly], without [knowledge].” His eyes swept the table, his gestures grand and his voice rising in volume. “(We) /are/ Barian. And (we) will survive!”

Ten fists thumped heartily onto the tabletop, and Galt nodded with approval. “(We) leave [tomorrow] at [first light].”



Imar stood in the early pre-dawn stillness, looking out over the village of his birth. It was a haphazard collection of sturdy houses made of wood or stone, blending the styles of the many peoples who traveled the roads north in the summer to Baria. Artisans and carpenters and stone masons from the Kingdoms of Auren who provided what they could in skill and labor so that every child born in Drahl and the other villages could focus on two things: fighting and survival. Not how to build or farm, not to learn the trades of artisan or herdsman. A Barian’s only occupations were warrior, tracker, or healer.

His ice-blue eyes were drawn to the stone wall that circled the village. A mere five feet high, but three feet thick, with iron spikes jutting outward, the wall wasn’t built to keep the *Kazenvek* out. In a land where the drifts in winter could reach as high as eight feet and sometimes more, only something built 20 feet tall might stop an ice demon’s leap from reaching the top, and structures that size were wholly impractical to keep safe in the ice and snow.

But every man, woman, and child in Drahl knew exactly where the wall was down to the exact inch. They learned its dimensions with their first tentative steps. They drilled as children to know where the stone and iron spikes lay even when buried beneath feet of snow. And as each young Barian honed their fighting skills, waiting

for the day they could join their first patrol, they did so within just a few strides of the barrier, so that they knew where it was in their bones...while their enemies would smash into it when the snow level was low but the wall was still all-but invisible, or step onto a buried spike when the drifts rose higher. No, it would never stop a concentrated charge, but the creatures knew nothing of tactics or how to fight as a warrior, trusting in the moves of the man to his left and his right as every Barian did.

His young features clouded, and Imar remembered what had happened two days ago. Those demons hadn't worked together, no, but they also hadn't gotten in each others' way, either. And that was something new. As his eyes traced the stone-and-iron wall which encircled the homes of his people, he wondered what would happen if their age-old enemy *did* begin to work together. If three of the monstrosities attacked the west wall, even as a pair here and there leaped over the wall to the east, to run rampant through the lanes between the homes of his friends and his family.

But even as this vision came unwilling to his mind, he found himself shaking his head in flat denial. Instead of the vicious creatures outflanking his people, he saw a block of five Barians holding their killing spears at the ready as those too young yet for patrols threw axes over the heads of their elders. He saw his men watching every foot of the wall and letting no stray demons sneak past the patrols. He saw himself and Kailt and even Kali mounted on their *psaeque* to take out any of their foes who thought they could come at Drahl from the south, and then nodded grimly.

As Galt had said at the meeting, the histories mentioned nothing of such organization in the last few centuries—and there was still nothing to indicate that would change—but every Barian who breathed was a tactician. And Imar knew in his heart that all of his people would prepare for the worst. So that they would survive. For no matter the odds, that's what it meant to be a Barian: to survive.

The door to his home opened, and he saw his father locked in a tight embrace with his mother for just a moment before he took her hand in his and kissed her palm. She brought the hand to her heart before closing the door without a word. Many goodbyes were like that in the north, especially in the village of Drahl where the ice demons roamed in the largest number; every farewell could be the last. Every glance, every touch, was that much sweeter.

“Do (I) get to find out [what] (we) /are doing/ yet?” Imar asked his father with a boyish grin showing through his sandy beard as he walked back toward the house.

Galt glanced up at his son. At twenty, Imar had finally stopped growing upward, but his shoulders and chest were *still* filling out. He stood a full head taller than his father and was already as wide. “(I) /did/ not tell (the) [Ten]” he said, with a tidy gesture, “and (I) shall not tell (you).”

The sub-chief raised his eyebrows, amusement and confusion warring on his face. “(I) /am/ to go in [blind]?” he asked.

“Before [sunset then],” Galt conceded with a little shake of his head. “(You) /are/ as [overly curious] as (you) /are/ [tall].”

“Blame Grandfather on [both counts],” Imar replied with another smile.

Galt grunted wryly and hoisted his pack to his shoulders. “Let (us) get Tila /outfitted/ and mount up. (We) have [miles] to cover before (you) get [your answers].”



Imar adjusted the gauze over his eyes with one hand while keeping the other on his father’s shoulder for balance. He wasn’t used to this much snow and sun in conjunction with one another. During most of the year when the snows covered Baria, Tirnashc, Father of All, rarely allowed the sun to shine in or around the seven villages where

His children dwelled, only permitting the lead-gray clouds to part at night so that the stars could shine down on the warriors of the north as they sought out their ancient enemy. But here, in the far north, almost a day's ride from Drahl, the summer sun glared off the snow that still clung stubbornly to parts of the cold tundra.

The wind blew hard as father and son gripped their knees to Tila's muscled flanks, and the mighty *pseque* leaped and ran across snow and rock in a pattern that only a Barian could ever grow accustomed to.

The sun was now beginning to sink into a bank of clouds that hovered a bit above the horizon, and Imar would soon be able to remove the protective cloth from his eyes. Since leaving this morning, father and son had made excellent time, stopping only briefly twice to eat. The remainder of the day had been spent on the back of their nearly tireless mount, Tila.

Psaeque were the only practical beasts of burden in the icy regions of Baria. Looking like a cross between a lynx and a snowshoe rabbit, they were easily the size of a horse and infinitely more practical across the snowy terrain. Each *pseque* lived upward of 120 years and remained loyal to a particular family for generations, although due to their smaller numbers they were borrowed by others to keep the patrols running constantly in search of any stray ice demons.

Tila had been Galt's father's, and someday she would belong to Imar, and their entire family was fond of the playful but very dangerous female. She would have made a real difference in the fight that had happened two days ago, but had been on loan to Indrik and his son as they took their turn patrolling the empty miles around Drahl.

Twilight was still an hour or two away, and Imar knew they would be stopping soon if for no other reason than to give Tila a chance to rest. It was probable that she could have continued far into the night even *with* two riders, but there was little wisdom in

pushing their mount to her limit when there was no need. Especially in light of where they were going.

The sub-chief squinted, his eyes trying to make out anything against the sun's brightness and its twin reflected in the snow ahead of them. They were climbing another rise, however, and everything was hidden beyond it save for the towering peaks of the Shirak mountain range, a few days' journey to the east.

Despite Galt's unwillingness to tell his son anything of their destination, Imar had been thinking through everything that had happened recently. No matter how he looked at the problem, he was still unsure if anything certain was actually known by anyone—even his own father. Scouts to the north had returned with no information or not returned at all, which was worrying in and of itself. But the two facts that *were* known were that the *Kazenvek* were beginning to come south almost as a species, and that such a large movement was not only unheard of, but was quite probably suicidal for the monsters. The creatures were not adverse to an occasional raid into the warmer lands to get a taste of their favorite game—the relatively unprepared peoples to the south and east—but the demons' preference was to live in the coldest climate they could find.

They would die if they had to live outside of Baria, Imar told himself, knowing even as he thought it that he was only hoping it was the truth. On the relatively few occasions that a *Kazenvek* had made it past the numerous patrols the Barians ran, the creatures had been killed almost within the day. They left a trail of blood and destruction that a tracker with the most feeble of skills could follow, and no ruler would spare any expense to have the demon destroyed as quickly as a unit of soldiers could be put together to do so. It was truly unknown if they *did* need the cold, but if the monsters *could* survive for long periods of time without the arctic wastes about them, then Drahl and the other six villages might be overwhelmed in a matter of weeks.

Once more, Imar made up his mind to ask his father rather pointedly about their mission when they made camp. His eyes again scanned the horizon cautiously. *Not much longer*, he thought as the sun began to approach the mountain's horizon to the west. In truth, he was in no particular hurry to either make camp or finish their scouting mission, however. Son and father had always been very close, but upon achieving the mark of sub-chief, First of the Ten and second only to his father, the two had seen much less of each other than either had wanted. And this had only worsened over the last two months as the demons had begun their movements. This little adventure made Imar long again for the days only a few years ago when he and Galt had gone hunting together; the rush of adrenaline upon sighting their prey, and the fierce pride of fighting at his father's side.

Many of the other father-and-son fighting teams had looked on enviously at the pair during the annual games six months ago when Imar had become First of the Ten, barely squeezing past Kali. Galt had worn a smile for days afterward, overwhelmed with joy at his son's accomplishments.

No, Imar reflected almost lazily, he was in no hurry for this to end, only curious as to what information his father was holding back.

A sudden cry of pain drifted over the rise and hit the sub-chief like a physical blow. Before the sound ended, his mind was clear. His legs clamped more securely about Tila, and he unsheathed his long sword, holding it tightly in his right hand, his left holding Galt's shoulder.

The Chieftain of Drahl had immediately pushed the *pseque* into a leaping sprint and unstrapped a spear from her broad side while simultaneously drawing his own sword from its sheath.

They reached the crest of the rise a few heartbeats later as Imar's mind reeled at the implications of that sound. It had been

undoubtedly human and caused by either a serious injury or stark terror. Either way, it meant ice demons. He and his father were a match for any two of the monsters, possibly as many as four when working in tandem, though in truth, they would be hard pressed. Factoring in Tila's help, should space permit, and perhaps as many as six of the monsters might be killed.

Normally, any more than two of the monsters tolerating each other was unheard of, but the events of two days ago still sat uncomfortably on Imar's mind. The creatures had been sighted moving in even larger groups, anywhere between six and a dozen—a terrifying number to face even for Barians. Some scouts had reported that less than two days' journey to the north there were even more of them.

The scouts.

"Father?" Imar nearly had to shout to be heard over the rushing wind as Tila bounded over the hilltop and down into a small valley.

"There should not be any scouts this far north," Galt said over his shoulder, answering his son's unspoken question.

"Vansernic?"

Galt shook his head. "Too far north from their mountains."

Tila's direction changed slightly as Galt steered her toward a darker shadow a few rods distant. It looked to be a cave of some sort, its opening perhaps three feet from the ground. With no sight of movement anywhere and no other place of concealment to speak of, it was their logical destination.

When the pair were within spear-throwing range, Galt slowed Tila to a stop, and father and son dismounted with the ease of years spent riding. Imar moved in front at a cautious trot while Galt moved his arm back with the spear in preparation for a throw to cover his son's position should anything appear at the cave's mouth. Tila was left to fend for herself, both Barians knowing the *pseque* wouldn't stray far and could easily handle one or even two demons on her own.

In truth, Imar would have felt better with his grandfather's two-handed sword—still strapped to Tila's side—in his hands, but as soon as he saw the opening to the cave, he knew he'd have to stay with the longsword; a weapon that might still be too big depending on the cavern's dimensions. The greatsword would have been impractical at best and a serious hindrance at worst.

The opening was bigger than Imar had at first thought due to his original angle of approach. Certainly large enough for a *Kazenvek* to get inside. The real question was how far back it went...and how many of the monsters might be waiting inside. *Wouldn't they just attack each other in such close quarters?* he wondered.

Without warning, a bellow of pain and anger sounded and an ice demon shot out of the cave mouth with preternatural speed, clutching its arm as if wounded. Galt released his spear while trying to compensate for the creature's swiftness and direction—he had clearly expected anything coming out of the cave to be rushing *toward* them rather than away. As a result, the broad head of this weapon was almost a foot off target, merely grazing the demon's side and causing its retreat speed to increase even more swiftly.

Some sort of warning went off in the back of Imar's mind. He looked around for something to substantiate it, but nothing appeared, and he shrugged it off for now. Whoever had made the cry that had brought them here was most likely inside, and judging by the demon's retreat, still fighting. He would surely enjoy some reinforcements.

Eying the distance up to the cave's mouth, the young man took two running steps and leaped into the opening, silently thanking Tirnashc for the lack of snow inside the cave. He slid to a quick stop, managing to retain his balance while keeping his guard up.

Galt followed a moment later, electing to pull himself up to the waist-high opening more cautiously, undoubtedly due to his smaller build and desire to *not* push his son further into the cave until they

were both ready. Once up, he pulled a throwing axe from his belt and tapped his son on the shoulder twice. *Forward.*

Imar nodded, lowering the strip of gauze from over his eyes as he did so, then pulled a throwing axe of his own from his belt before taking a few slow steps forward. The interior of the cave stretched before him at least forty yards before being lost in the shadows. It smelled of earth and ice, long abandoned by anything living. Even as he began to cautiously move forward, his breath steaming in the air before him, that warning feeling in the back of his mind began to grow. If there had been a battle, where were the bodies? Why couldn't he hear anything other than his own quiet tread and the sound of his heart beating rapidly in his chest?

The haft of his father's axe touched Imar's shoulder lightly, and he came to a halt. Galt obviously felt that something wasn't right as well.

Imar's skin began to tingle, and he wet his lips. The cave was as quiet as a gentle snowfall at midnight. So why had they seen the *Kazenvek* running from here if there was no one alive to make a sound?

Galt tapped his son's lower back once, and Imar nodded. It was time to back out of here and rethink this.

He took one careful step back, and two ice demons rose like ghosts from the rocks that they had been hiding behind less than thirty yards away from where Imar stood. There had been no warning. No sound.

At almost the same time, he heard Galt take one step and release his throwing axe with a short hiss of air.

Behind them.

Imar turned just in time to see his father's axe sink into the chest of one of the *two* ice demons that had been coming up from their rear. It gave a frothy choke of hatred even as it fell back and then down to the ground outside the cave.

Father and son charged the remaining *Kazenvek* as Imar hurled his own axe over his father's shoulder, mindful of the two monsters behind him. There wasn't enough of a ceiling to put much arc into his throw, nor was it the most carefully aimed shot of his life, but the sub-chief was very good, and at the moment, very desperate.

The ice demon turned with that impossible swiftness while raising an arm to ward off the blow. The axe clipped the monster's forearm near the elbow, leaving a tearing gash, but the weapon didn't stay in.

The distraction did allow Galt to lower his broad shoulder into the demon's ribs, however, while simultaneously hacking off the monster's other arm with a powerful slash from his sword. The creature stumbled back with a blood-curdling howl of pain and frustration, its back smashing into the cavern's side, and Imar's quick thrust up through its abdomen and into its lungs ended the cries in a burble of escaping air and blood. There was now a clear run to the cave's mouth, and the two humans had just enough time to get out of the carefully laid trap that had somehow been prepared for them.

Galt leaped to the ground next to the ice demon that lay on the red-stained snow and rocks with six inches of steel from the chieftain's axe buried in its chest and glanced back to make sure that Imar still followed.

A glance that would cost him his life.

Even as Imar ran past the one-armed creature sliding to the cavern floor, he saw, like a nightmare image, the ice demon next to his father raise an arm and hamstring Galt's legs despite the weapon sticking grotesquely from its chest.

Imar's eyes went wide in shock, and a blaze of hatred swept through him. He suddenly pivoted his body around in response to a change in the noise to his left and swung his longsword back in a spin. The monster he would have sworn had taken a mortal wound had just begun to stand despite the blood mixed with air from

its lungs, which bubbled out of its chest wound. The sub-chief's sword—backed by his anger and the momentum from his pivot—sliced through the creature's remaining arm and far into its rib cage.

Its gurgling howl reverberated off the cavern walls even while clutching the weapon embedded in its side with the crook of what remained of its arm, as if to deny its own death. Imar didn't have time to shake it loose. He leaped to the ground and took two quick steps, glancing at the demon that lay in the snow beside him.

Despite his hideous wounds, Galt had killed the *Kazenvek* they had both thought already dead. The chieftain's sword was stuck through the monster's neck, and strangely enough, it, too, clutched the steel that had killed it, effectively preventing Imar from utilizing the weapon he so desperately needed against the pair of unhurt demons that would be emerging from the cave mouth any second. There just wasn't time to wrestle the weapon free *and* get his father to safety.

The Chieftain of Drahl was crawling forward through the crimson snow, his calves a steaming, bloody mess of severed muscles.

There was no time to plan, only to move. Imar took two quick steps to his father's side and then lifted him up and over his own broad shoulders. A gasp of pain escaped Galt's lips, and the younger man found himself hoping that his father would pass out. The wounds were not only messy-looking, but there appeared to be a black stain around the edges of the cuts. If Imar didn't know better, he would think it was venom of some sort.

"Tila!" he shouted, even as he awkwardly began running across the snow. The *pseque* was not where the pair had left her, but there was little chance she would have been killed and no chance at all that she would have returned to the village, no matter the danger. With Galt over his shoulders, Imar couldn't look back to see how close the two uninjured ice demons were undoubtedly getting. They were certainly better suited for running through the layer of snow, so

this was a race the young warrior knew he couldn't win despite the adrenaline pounding through his blood. But if he could get to Tila...

He hadn't gone more than twenty yards and was preparing to shout again, when the *pseque* came bounding into view, blood streaking her front paws in mute testament to the fate of the first beast that had bolted from the cave which had baited the trap for the two humans. There was a growl of frustration from one of the demons who had just emerged into the light as it realized that an avenue of escape had perhaps just opened up for the two humans.

But Imar had no intention of retreating. Galt would never be able to ride unaided if he was unconscious, and it would take too much time to bind his wounds to prevent him from bleeding to death as it was. There really weren't very many options left to the young Barian except to stand his ground, and he was honest enough with himself to know that his emotions were too interested in vengeance at this point to feel any sorrow that retreat and survival weren't viable at the moment.

As Tila rushed up to them, growling low in her throat, Imar dropped his father none-too-gently onto the snow at the *pseque's* feet, hoping that the pain would wake the injured man.

"Father," he called, even as he unstrapped his great two-handed sword from Tila's side and glanced at the approaching demons.

"That...was unkind," Galt said through teeth clenched in pain.

"Sorry," Imar replied, pulling some strips of cloth from their saddlebags. "Need (you) awake. Think (you)...sleep." He couldn't remember how to say "unconscious" in the common tongue.

"Imar," Galt warned, his eyes glassy with pain, nevertheless watching the two ice demons as they raced closer.

"Can (you) bind hurts?" Imar asked, raising the great sword to prepare for a charge.

"I'll...have to," his father growled through what must have been agony.

The sub-chief grimaced at what he heard in Galt's voice. The injuries were bad, but a gnawing suspicion was beginning to grow in the young warrior's mind. "Good," was all he said as he watched the approaching monsters slow down to a more cautious advance. It was obvious they had no desire to face a prepared Barian with a two-handed sword who was backed by a still-growling *pseque*.

He shifted his grip on the hilt, the point held high. The *Kazenvek* kept just out of reach of the blade and managed to keep the human between them and Tila while regarding Imar's blade with a canny respect and more than a glimmer of intelligence.

That's what Imar didn't like, he finally decided. Not only did these demons seem a head taller than any of their brethren, and move quicker than any he had ever seen, but they moved with purpose, rather than just animal hunger.

The creatures closed slowly upon the young Barian, eyes wary, teeth exposed in silent snarls.

"Father," Imar said softly. "Hurts. (They) be bound?"

"Yes," Galt said after a moment. To the sub-chief's surprise, it came from behind and *above*.

"(You) on Tila?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Imar," Galt answered with a hint of amusement showing even through his obvious pain.

"Good," Imar said. He glared warningly at one of the demons as it moved to outflank him. Tila's warning growl deepened, and the monster's eyes seemed to flicker toward the *pseque* in...was that irritation? "If (I) die, (you) go."

"There will be...no need...for (me) to go anywhere...my son." He was gasping for air, though the wounds were not the reason Imar was suddenly sure.

"Huh," the sub-chief grunted, thrusting experimentally at the closer ice demon. It batted at the weapon and gave ground, but not much. "See your legs. Sickness." He couldn't remember the word

for “venom” either, wondering, as his mind seemed to suddenly be splitting in twelve different directions, if he ever had.

“Possibly poisoned,” Galt conceded.

“Go. Warn others.”

“Warn others,” one of the *Kazenvek* said in a mocking tone.

Imar nearly dropped his guard in astonishment. Despite himself, the point of his sword lowered an inch, and the creature who hadn’t spoken lunged toward him, long arms extended. The demon attacked too high, however, allowing the young human to spin in a sidestep while squatting down. As he came around, he brought his blade downward in a savage stroke that lopped off both of the monster’s arms at the elbows. He ended the familiar move by spinning a second time and slamming the hilt of his sword into the small of the maimed creature’s back while keeping the point of the blade aimed directly at the heart of the one who had spoken and looked as if it was about to make a similar attack.

The force of the greatsword’s hilt to the back caused the first monster to stumble forward even as it shrieked its pain over the loss of its arms. Imar heard Tila step back in the loose snow, then there was a rushing whip-crack as her paw slashed forward with enough power to snap the demon’s neck. A scant second later, he heard the meaty *thunk* of a spear slamming into flesh—Galt was apparently not taking a *Kazenvek*’s death as a given any more.

The sound of the spear striking home told the young Barian two things: First, that his father was still aware enough to act, but second, that the venom, for there was no doubt in Imar’s mind that it was—impossible as that seemed—had affected Galt enough to make him too unsure of his throw to attack the remaining demon. Otherwise, it, too, would be dead. His father was conscious, but not in any condition to back his son up.

“Go!” he shouted, and was gratified to hear a protesting growl

from Tila, followed by the great beast leaping away in her league-eating run. Imar knew she wouldn't let Galt fall.

The Barian took three quick steps away from the downed ice demon to be safe—not trusting what he thought he knew about the creatures' mortality any more than his father did—while keeping a sharp eye on the last monster's claws and vowing to himself to *not* let them anywhere near his flesh. He was now alone and couldn't afford any mistakes. In truth, though, this suited the young Barian just fine. Despite his sure-footed moves, he was still in a state of shock over the creature's ability to speak, and there were some questions he wanted to ask.

He aimed his sword at the creature's face, allowing his surprise to finally show. "Talk?"

"Yes, I can speak," it sneered in a voice like a man who'd been swallowing broken glass. The *Kazenvek* sounded as if its vocal cords had just received a nasty cut, and it was drowning in its own blood. An unnerving sound, but Imar wasn't going to be distracted by it. "And much better than you, you grunting idiot!"

"Huh." He had heard insults before and wasn't too impressed. He jerked his head in Galt's direction while keeping eye contact with the demon. "Poison?"

The monster's face split in a hideous grin. "Possibly poisoned," it said in exactly the same tone that Galt had used earlier. It lowered its head and turned it slightly to the side, eyes narrowed. "You're certainly not used to speaking, are you? You sound like a child." Its tongue licked its upper lip. "We like children."

Imar scrunched his face up as if in anger, glanced left, and then made a deliberately crude swing to the right. If it spoke, did that mean it could be tricked? The demon took the bait and stepped closer, suddenly swinging swiftly and low, but the warrior had expected the counterattack and nicked the monster's wrist as he leaped nimbly back.

“Not child.”

The *Kazenvek* hissed, but Imar thought it was more in irritation than pain. “Just an imbecile, then?”

The sub-chief began circling the creature to keep it engaged, but also to make sure there weren’t any more of the monsters creeping up from behind. He used his peripheral vision, thankful that the sun had started to set to keep the glare down, but kept his eyes locked on the ice demon, trying to see if these new versions liked dominance displays any more than their lesser brethren.

He shrugged once. “Demon never talk before,” he said as if this change weren’t anything new, but inwardly he was amazed at the *Kazenvek’s* mastery of the language and apparent intelligence. How could something so monstrous have such a grasp on human speech? They’d never shown a *glimmer* of true intelligence before.

The demon smiled again without seeming to even breathe. It stood a little over seven feet and had to weigh at least 400 pounds. Pure, white fur covered every inch of its hide, and even the irises of its eyes were devoid of color, but it was the claws that commanded Imar’s true attention. Where every *Kazenvek* he had ever fought had long talons that were either white or pale gray, those on this particular monster were so black that they seemed to pulse with darkness. The source, the Barian suddenly realized, of the venom in his father’s body. He noted them carefully, ready to dodge in a heartbeat were they to strike.

“How (you) able to talk?” he asked.

“All *Kazenvek* can speak your crude language,” it finally said after a moment of its own silent scrutiny, “primitive as it is.” Its voice was low and coarse, some of the words slurring into the others, and Imar realized its mouth wasn’t made to speak the common tongue of man.

“(You) lie,” he said bluntly. “No demon talk.”

“Obviously, I do.” Then it raised its head slightly to look down at the smaller human. “Or did you mean ‘demon no talk?’ As in,

‘be silent’? It’s hard to speak with inferior species, and you truly are barbaric.”

Imar’s eyes went flat. He had let all of the insults go until the end. “Barian” was a complex word in the temple tongue. It translated poorly to mean “survivor”, but that captured none of the important nuances to the word. A Barian survived through intelligence, cunning, and skill, not brute strength, utilizing the mind as the most powerful weapon of all. “Barbarian” corrupted the word, reducing it to the level of an enraged wild boar—a creature that survived through sheer animal ferocity. Any true Barian found the latter word to be an unpardonable insult.

“Not barbaric,” he breathed. The sun was just a glimmer on the horizon now, and there was no wind, allowing words to carry very well.

The *Kazenvek*’s eyes narrowed. “Well, something’s set you off. I’m sure you’re just dying to leap at my throat and avenge your sire.” The creature flexed those black claws. “Aren’t you?”

“No.” Imar’s sword hadn’t wavered an inch.

“What?” the monster spat out in surprise. “You’ve killed the others, why not me?”

“You be talking.”

“How good of you to notice,” it said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Much.”

The demon seemed to relax slightly, straightening even further. Its arms remained wide, however, and it continued to glance at the greatsword still aimed at its mouth. “So because I speak so well, you think I’m more dangerous and powerful than my fellow *Kazenvek*.”

“Huh,” Imar snorted.

“Contempt?” The creature seemed genuinely perplexed. “Then why—?”

The sub-chief brought his sword down in a rapid arc while

calmly stepping forward. The move was so unexpectedly casual, and the Barian's eyes were so completely emotionless, that the creature's leap backward was a hair too late. The steel edge bit into the demon's skin from head to groin, leaving a long, angry red mark that quickly began to well up and bleed. It was not a death wound, but the demon's life would be endangered from loss of blood in the very near future. Or every other one which Imar had ever fought before would have been. Now he was unsure.

The *Kazenvek* crouched once more, letting out a horrific scream of rage and pain from its split lips. It held its ground for less than a heartbeat with its claws flexing, a red glint in its eyes as the blood stained and matted its fur. Then it became the very thing it had accused its attacker of being: a raging creature of anger. The demon had learned from the attacks of its brethren and now kept its swings low and quick, striking rapidly with either arm. Imar danced away from the black claws, nicking the monster's extremities almost at will with his greatsword—each hit inflicting more pain and eliciting more savagery from the creature.

After a few minutes of this, Imar backed off, noting the monster's blind attacks as the blood from the sword's first strike gathered in wet clumps of hair too thick to simply shake off. The demon stopped swinging and remained crouched as if to spring, its wide nostrils flaring with the effort to both scent its prey and draw air into its lungs. The monster knew it couldn't afford to paw the blood out of its eyes; its arms must remain out and on guard against the attack that could come from anywhere.

Imar stepped back again, allowing his boots to make a slight crunching sound in the battle-trampled snow, causing the *Kazenvek* to peer in his general direction. With an irritated growl, the creature shook its head rapidly, sending blood flying, then squinted its eyes open to glare at its enemy.

Instead of remaining in a ready position, the young warrior

straightened slightly, noting with grim satisfaction the swelling and bleeding from nearly a dozen wounds on the monster's once-white hide. The exertion of battle had caused them to bleed even more, but *Kazenvek* had supernatural stamina, and those he and Galt had fought today obviously had even more. This one was not that far gone, but it was certainly no longer a threat to a true Barian.

Imar now stood at his full height, blue eyes glinting brightly, his dark hair plastered to his head with sweat. He had fought well this day and remained untouched. Galt would be proud. But first, there was the business at hand.

The Barian grinned in anticipation, allowing contempt to once more color his voice as he articulated the words. "You imbecile," he spat.

The demon launched itself toward the human in unthinking fury as Imar turned on his heel to the right, crouched, and then severed the creature's hands from its arms, echoing the move he had made moments ago with this one's counterpart. It landed face-first with another howl of pain in the bloody slush that the once-pristine snow had become.

Though effective, his move was by no means an original one. Whenever *Kazenvek* were enraged or hungry enough, they inevitably leaped or attacked their opponent too high. Far in the past, Barians had tried to figure out why the monsters always fell back on the predictable move, but when it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming, the men of the north had finally decided to train specifically for the attack, and generations of Barians had maimed tens of thousands of the creatures over the centuries before killing their ancient foes.

As Imar would do...but not yet. He turned swiftly to face the downed creature, noting with satisfaction and hope Tila's tracks heading south toward the village. Perhaps Jaki would be able to leech the venom from his father before it killed him. Then he shook his

head and deliberately erased such thoughts from his mind. He had a duty to see through as Sub-Chief of Drahl.

The young Barian slowly approached the ice demon. It remained face down, the heat from its blood melting the snow around it into a steaming red pool, but Imar could detect its ragged breathing.

“Roll,” he commanded, prodding the creature’s ribs with the tip of his sword forcefully enough to open another wound.

There was a low growl for a response, but the huge body slowly moved until its face could be seen. Despite himself, the sub-chief smiled; the bristle-like hair on its body was stained and knotted with blood, both arm stubs were jammed tightly into the creature’s armpits to slow the blood flow, and there was a look of bitter hatred in its eyes.

“What are you smirking at? I thought you killed my kind all the time.”

“Not you,” Imar replied with a shake of his head. “You talk.” It was difficult to remember his vocabulary, but at least his attention was no longer split between that and battle.

“So I talk.”

“Me have questions.”

“Does you?” it mocked.

Imar opened another cut across the demon’s face, and only the creature’s reflexes kept it from losing an eye. “*I* have questions, then.”

“You want me to answer your questions?” the creature spat up some frothy blood. “Come to Khadûl!”

Imar’s eyes narrowed. “‘Come’. Mean go?”

There was a slight pause. “Yes.” It smiled knowingly at Imar. “‘Go to Khadûl’ is what I meant.”

“Huh. Doubt that.”

“Why should you care what I meant? Aren’t you going to try and finish me?”

Again, the sub-chief found himself wondering at the demon’s

speech. Sometimes intelligent, at other times almost petulant. He lowered the point of his blade to its neck. “*Try* and finish?”

“I can’t be killed, human. No tr—” Its head shifted to the left. “No talking *Kazenvek* can.”

“Talking,” Imar shook his head with his eyebrows raised slightly at the creature’s feeble attempts at misdirection.

“Are you capable of *any* independent thought, or do you just repeat everything you hear?” it snarled in exasperation.

“You think I be stupid because I talk bad.” He shrugged. “This be not my language.”

“What do you mean? All humans speak this tongue.”

Its breathing had already recovered, and Imar found himself taking a half step back. Did their bite contain poison, too?

“Barians speak true language of Tirnashc. Like common language, but fast.”

The *Kazenvek* smirked through its split lips. “Perhaps you can teach me. To make our conversation easier.”

Imar was wary about the way that the demon’s mannerisms didn’t reflect its wounds. Speech should be extremely difficult—as should thinking—with such grave injuries. It would surely die of blood loss within the hour if left alone, yet the monster remained quite lucid.

“Never teach you our language, demon, and,” Imar finally shrugged half-apologetically, “common language not easy. Questions now. One: you say ‘talking demon’. Mean to say different. Two: Say you not be kill. Three: Say ‘come to Khadûl’. Want answers.”

The *Kazenvek’s* mouth opened, and the stump of a bloody, once-long tongue snaked out to caress a broken fang. No doubt the result of its fall. “You’re more intelligent than you act, aren’t you?”

“No,” the sub-chief said pointedly, “more intelligent than I talk. Now answers.”

“You’re direct, too.”

The Barian swiftly stepped up and made a long cut down the demon's chest from collarbone to sternum, deliberately slicing to the bone as he did it, then leaped back. Blood welled up anew, and the monster shrieked its pain.

"Now answers," the Sub-Chief of Drahl repeated emotionlessly.

"One," it grated through clenched fangs, making it even harder to understand. "So what? Two, I *can't* be killed. Three, what's the difference?"

Imar sorted the answers out in his head for a moment, noting that some of the demon's other wounds had slowed their bleeding to a trickle. "If I chop off head," he said carefully, "you talk still?"

"No!" the *Kazenvek* exploded. "Could you?"

"I not say 'can't be killed.'" He allowed his features to become overtly curious. "What happen if (I) chop off head now?" He raised his greatsword and positioned himself as if to do just that.

"I would suffer in agony for eternity." The demon grimaced. "Which would not displease you, I'm sure."

Imar pointedly looked at the other creature a few yards away. Its head was twisted at an unnatural angle, and Galt's spear still stood high, embedded in the monster's back.

"That one suffer?"

"For eternity," the demon agreed with an unreadable expression on its face.

"Sound bad."

"It *is* bad, fool! Why do you think I stopped attacking you?"

"(I) win fight," he returned easily.

"Besides that," the *Kazenvek* snapped.

"Besides that?" the warrior echoed. "What else be there? We fight. You lose. You die."

The creature's earlier cuts were now beginning to clot. Perhaps it wasn't lying about its supposed immortality. But Imar wanted

more information. “Maybe,” he said slowly, “I chop off head. Take to village. See ‘suffer for eternity’. Show to others.”

“No!” The demon seemed genuinely distressed.

“Will not let you die without answers,” Imar said firmly. Then, strangely compelled to be honest, “Maybe not even then.”

The creature narrowed its eyes once more, as if thinking. “If I answer your questions, will you kill me...permanently?”

“You say you can’t be killed,” Imar shook his head with a frown. “Now you can die ‘permanently’? Why will I trust your answers?”

The demon held the human’s eyes steadily, and its gurgling, slurred voice became softer, almost hesitant. “You know who I serve, do you not?”

The sub-chief nodded slowly. Was that *fear* in its voice?

“What if I were to swear to answer your questions truthfully? By Him?”

Imar stared at the monster as if contemplating its words, but truthfully, he was desperately missing his father. What did a 20-year-old warrior know of the theology of a banished God of Evil? *Could* demons swear to their god and risk their soul as a human would? Did *Kazenvek* have souls to endanger, or was this why they were damned? The Chieftain of Drahl might know this, but he was leagues away and possibly dying.

He looked up at the purple and red sky where the sun’s last rays had vanished, knowing that darkness was about to fall. The temperature would drop, and Imar was poorly prepared to survive another of these monstrosities without an axe or a spear. Two would surely slay him if just a touch of their claws meant his death.

And yet he needed answers. *This* was why his father and he had come north, after all. To leave with no real knowledge but even more questions seemed a betrayal to the chieftain’s sacrifice. And, ultimately, it was his duty as the Sub-Chief of Drahl to *get* those answers.

“Your wretched god will hold you to your swear,” Imar spoke in firm tones as if he knew exactly what he spoke of.

“Yes,” it said grudgingly. “Nor does He forgive failures. You will kill me as I say? I...don’t want to face Him like this.”

Something in the demon’s words didn’t sit right with Imar, but he was running out of time, and there were other considerations. He had no provisions other than the clothes he wore and the small emergency stores on his belt. He also had to face the very real possibility that his father wouldn’t make it back to Drahl alive. Which meant not only would he become chieftain, but he would be the sole man in all of Baria who knew of the threat to come.

And we thought the migration of the demons was our real problem, he thought bleakly.

“Do we have a deal?” the creature growled tightly, misunderstanding Imar’s silence. “I will answer your three questions—”

“Seven questions,” Imar interrupted.

“I will answer four questions to the best of my knowledge, I swear this by—”

The sub-chief quick-stepped forward and held his sword once more above the creature’s neck. “Five questions,” he growled menacingly. “Not make trade with demons.”

“Of course,” it spat back at him. “You wouldn’t want to sully your precious honor.”

Imar held his sword steady. “Not care about honor,” he said with a negligent shake of his head. “Five or suffer for eternity, demon.”

“I swear by Kazultuzak to answer your five questions, Imar of Baria.” Upon saying the Dark God’s name, the *Kazenvek’s* eyes turned grey, and by the end of its sentence, they were darkest black.

It took all of the young man’s strength to not cut the monster’s head off then and there. *How could it possibly know my name? Did Father say it?* He couldn’t remember. *And what just happened to its eyes!*

He took a deep breath, his teeth clenching, and noted almost with detachment the minute trembling of the sword from how tightly he now grasped the hilt. “How (you) die?” he practically snarled, forgetting to articulate in his disgust.

“You must cut out my heart and only then remove my head from my body.” The demon’s head turned toward the Barian, and Imar could swear it was now blind. The pitch-black eyes seemed almost like holes in its bloodied face. “Will you do this, human?”

“I will, demon.”

“Ask.”

“One, poison my father. How?”

“All *Kazenvek* possess venom if they are chosen by Him.”

Imar had no doubt who “Him” referred to, but it made no sense. *Ka’zak has no power here*, he thought, not daring to name the Dark One even in the silence of his own mind.

“Can...make good?” He couldn’t think of the word for “cure”.

“If you mean, is there an antidote, I have never seen one.”

Imar was surprised at the demon’s neutral tone, expecting the creature to gloat. Indeed, since naming the Dark One, the monster was almost solemn. Part of him noted this even while he felt his own heart twist sharply in grief. There was no cure; his father would probably die. The young man shook his head and buried such thoughts deep down. There would be time enough for grief later.

“Two—”

“Three!” the *Kazenvek* interrupted with a strange authority.

“Three,” Imar conceded, shaking his head again, this time at the sense of unreality of what was happening. “Do you attack my father deliberate?”

It shook its head. “If you mean did we attack him specifically, knowing who he was, then no.” So. Father and son had just been in the wrong place, and now Galt would die because of it.

The demon paused for just a moment. “Who was he?”

“Fff!” Imar dismissed his enemy’s question with a half wave of the greatsword. Why the creature was trying to find out information when it was about to die made no sense, but he would still give it nothing.

“Four,” he finally continued. “Why so many demons now? Not stay north?”

An evil smile creased the creature’s broken teeth and bloodied lips. “A warming trend has developed.”

Imar frowned down at the *Kazenvek*. “You. Where do you come from?”

“Khadûl’s back door, barbarian,” it said, breaking out in hideous laughter, “Khadûl’s back door!”

The sub-chief glared at the creature for a moment, then plunged his sword hard through the monster’s abdomen—effectively pinning it to the ground. The laughter still bubbled forth—maniacally now—and flecks of blood spewed out of its mouth as it roared at its own private joke.

With a grunt of disgust, the young human unsheathed a long hunting knife from his side and thrust it underneath the demon’s rib cage. Then, with a look of acute distaste, he pushed his gloved hand deep into its chest cavity.

The creature’s innards were hot, not just warm, and despite the protective leather of the glove, it became quickly uncomfortable. After a few moments of poking around—the demon’s laughter rising to an hysterically insane level, its arms flailing about wildly enough that Imar had to put his knee down on the creature’s left shoulder to finish—Imar’s fist finally clutched its grisly prize, and he hauled the large black heart out.

The monster let forth a long moan of agony. “Cut off my head! Cut it, cut it, cut it!”

Imar had encountered resiliency of a supernatural degree before when fighting the *Kazenvek*, but found himself appalled at the

tenacity of this beast. He was holding the demon's *heart* in his hand and it still *lived!*

"My head," the creature almost whispered as its strength finally, *finally* began to fail. What was left of its arms flopped down at its sides, and its head rolled back. "He'll eat my soul..."

After a moment of careful thought, the warrior rose, dropping the heart to the red slush at his feet. He pulled his greatsword from the monster's body with a grunt as the demon lay in the blood and ice, its black eyes unblinking. After another moment, Imar nodded and then swung his sword around and down to decapitate it.

The demon's body immediately began to smoke, causing Imar to curse and take three quick steps back. The corpse, heart, and head turned gradually to black and then, in a matter of seconds, melted into a hot, tarry ash that caused a mist to rise as it melted the snow further around it. Within a few more seconds, there was just a dark smear and an evil stench of decay lingering in the air.

Imar glanced once more at the other bodies, but a howling cry from the north reminded him of how alone he was. The wind would begin soon, and the cold would be merciless, he knew. It would be best to be back at the village as soon as possible and see how his father fared.

He moved to his left and swung his sword, decapitating the second *Kazenvek*, Galt's spear still in its back, then looked toward the cave. *Best to be safe*. He jogged back to the cavern's entrance and retrieved his and his father's abandoned swords after cutting off both of those demons' heads. Finally, he took one last look at the remnants of the creature that had claimed to come from Khadûl itself.

The sub-chief took a deep breath, then turned south and began the long journey home.



Dawn was perhaps an hour away when Vanic brought Imar to the healer's house on his borrowed *pseque*, Venya. The Barian looked as exhausted as Imar himself, and his eyes were hooded with worry over the chieftain. The son had had hours of walking to think about what it might mean to him if his father didn't survive, and from the look of the man who had found him—one of four mounted men searching for the sub-chief—he wasn't alone in his concerns. It was clear from the way Vanic looked at the doors to the house that he wanted to follow Imar in, but he also wanted to give the chieftain's son the time he needed with his father if the worst came to pass.

Wordlessly, he gripped Imar's shoulder once, then led Venya toward the stables, leaving the young man standing in the middle of the hard-packed earthen street trying to find his mental and physical balance. He'd been awake since before yesterday's dawn, and his eyes felt like someone had rubbed gravel into them. His shoulders ached from both the fight and the burden of carrying three swords over the leagues as quickly and safely as he could, all too aware that he also carried knowledge that his people would need to survive in the coming days.

He watched Vanic's silhouette leading the larger shadow of the *pseque* until the two blended into the darkened buildings of Drahl and then turned resolutely back to the doors of the healer's house. He knew that he was delaying the inevitable, but every moment that he stood here was another moment where he could cling to the hope that his father still lived. That he was still only the Sub-Chief of Drahl. That the burden that had been placed upon him could be passed to someone with more years, more wisdom, than someone who had seen only twenty summers.

He sighed once, then straightened his back and walked with a resolute stride to see his father. The doors to the healer's house were cunningly made with a pedal at the base that would open the doors inward without effort if someone came bearing a stretcher or

a wounded man on his shoulders. Surely, he thought, it had been handy when they brought in the chieftain, for there was no way that Galt had walked in on his own power.

Just as the doors opened to Imar's gentle push, a young woman whose hand had clearly been about to open the doors from the inside took a step back. Her face was so pale and her eyes so haunted, Imar almost didn't recognize his own sister. With a low, wounded sound, Alina hurled herself into his chest and buried her face there, her shoulders shuddering, although whether it was in relief that her brother had survived or sorrow that their father hadn't wasn't clear.

Perhaps both, he thought, putting his arms protectively about her. Only two years separated them, and Imar had always been closer to her than his older sister, who had married and left the family house when Alina and he were ten and twelve.

Her hands clenched at the furs on his back with the strength that came from her years of practicing with weapons side-by-side with her brother, and he rested his lightly bearded face against the top of her head for just a moment before taking a deep breath. "Father?" he asked.

He heard her swallow and then clear her throat before loosening her grip on him. "(He).../rests/," she said softly, then stepped back to look up at him and free her hands. "(He) /said/ (you) /would/ come. [Tonight]." Her gestures were choppy than usual. From the bruises under her eyes, she clearly hadn't slept any more than Imar had, and though there were no tears, he could tell she had been crying at one point.

"Mother?"

Her face looked suddenly stricken. "(They) /said/ [their good-byes] and...and [then] (he) /sent/ (her) [away]. Before Jaki /began/ to amputate. (He) /said/ (he) /wanted/ (her) to remember (him) as (a) [whole man]. (The) [man] (she) /fell/ [in love] with."

"But (he) let (you) stay?" Imar asked with some surprise.

Alina flushed just slightly but kept her head high. “(He) /does/ not know (I) /waited/ for (you).”

He nodded, and the hint of a smile touched his eyes. Alina would always do whatever she wanted to do and then ask for forgiveness...on the rare occasions that she was caught.

“Imar, (I) think (he) /is/ [delirious]. [Some] of (the) [things] (he) /said were/...” She shook her head.

“[Impossible]?” he gestured broadly to indicate a question.

“Yes!” she returned with a frown.

Imar looked at his sister for a moment and went over everything that had happened from the past two months leading up to last night’s fight and the revelation of the real danger his people faced. He felt his shoulders bow even more under the perceived weight he now knew they would soon be carrying. “Go [home],” he said not ungently. “Sleep if (you) can, but rest. (You) and (the) *Caltiashe* will be /needed/ in (the) [days] to come.”

She cocked her head to one side. “[What] /do/ (you) know?”

He sighed once, looking down the hallway behind her to where their father waited. “Not [enough].”



Jaki met the sub-chief at the entryway of the infirmary as if the healer knew the young man was coming. Without preamble, Imar spoke. “[How] /does/ [my father] fare?”

Jaki’s face fell. He was in his late forties with graying hair and a limp that came from having an iron leg. It was no coincidence that only the lame and women became healers in Barian society. Every able-bodied man was needed to patrol the snowy regions and destroy the *Kazenvek* that abounded. Male children longed for the day that they could take up the battle against their traditional enemies, but if they should ever be hurt beyond the ability to do battle, it was

considered a high honor to become a healer, and thereby give life back to the society that had given the warrior life.

Jaki had been the only survivor in an avalanche that had crippled him when he was 22 years old. Exposed to the elements and vulnerable to the wandering ice demons, he had dragged himself to a sheer rock face and held off one of the tenacious monsters through the night with a crushed leg and only a spear for a weapon. When a search party found him in the morning, he had been brought back to Drahll and healed, but he would never be able to walk the snow again with his own two legs. He was hailed as a true Barian by his community, not only for his survival skills on that one fateful night, but because he had also accepted his injury with dignity and thrown himself into his new career as a healer, becoming one of the most renowned in the profession throughout the north.

Imar had known him since childhood and was able to read his moods quite well. Jaki seemed aggravated now, and the young man thought he knew why.

“(The) [chieftain] /does/ [well],” the healer finally replied, “for [someone who] /is dying/.”

The words made Imar think back to what the *Kazenvek* had said about the venom. No cure. He had had almost eight hours to prepare himself for the reality of the situation, but nevertheless felt a sharp stab of pain in his stomach at Jaki’s pronouncement.

“[How long],” Imar’s hands faltered, and he gritted his teeth for a moment. “[How long] /does/ (he) have?”

Jaki shook his head—and Imar was certain now of the other man’s anger—before replying. “(He) /has been poisoned/, but (it) /is/ like [nothing] (I) have ever /seen/.”

“In [what way]?” he asked, already feeling as if he half-knew the answer.

“[His body] /resists/ [all our] /attempts/ to stop (the) [decay]. And (the) [Chief] /said/ that (he) /was poisoned/ by (an) [ice demon].

Although (he) /has been fading/ in and out of [consciousness], (he) /keeps repeating/ [this].” He glanced at Imar with a frown. “(You and (I both) know [that] /is/ [impossible], but—”

“(It) /is/ [true],” the younger man interrupted, his gestures swift. “[Another one] /spoke/ to [me].”

“(It) /*spoke*/?” Jaki exclaimed in open astonishment. But then his brow furrowed and he shook his head slowly. “And yet...”

“[What]?” Imar prompted.

“[There] have /been/ [stories] in (the) [past],” the healer said cautiously, “about [ice demons that] speak. [Demons whose touch] /is/ [death]...” Once more, he trailed off and seemed lost in thought.

“Honored Healer,” Imar said, suddenly. “(I) wish to see (him).”

Jaki looked back at his sub-chief, and he nodded slowly. “(He) /said/ (he) /would/ not die [before] /seeing/ (you), but...(the) [Chief] /is/ [weak].

Imar nodded back, his blue eyes full of grief, but strength as well. Jaki placed a hand on the shoulder of the man he knew would soon be leading the people of Drahl, then turned and led him to a healing stall at the back of the infirmary. The largest building in any Barian village was devoted to healing. Although not as skilled as Tarzha’s Disciples in the southern lands, the healers in Barian society were by no means backward. Utilizing some of the best combinations of herb-lore, curative alchemy, and—although not generally admitted to—magic, healers were able to care for the many injuries sustained in the ceaseless struggle against the *Kazenvek*.

Walking down the wide aisle between beds, Imar noted that nearly half of them were filled now. It had been generations since Drahl had seen so many injured, and the young warrior was grimly certain that soon there wouldn’t be enough beds at all. His tactical mind was already considering which supply house could become a backup infirmary when Jaki stopped in front of one of three

curtained doorways at the end of the aisle that led to larger rooms for those in need of more care.

“(I) /should/ warn (you),” the healer said gravely, “(he) may not be able to speak. Or to see (you).”

The sub-chief nodded curtly, not trusting his voice at all, and gestured a single word. “[Blind]?”

“Yes.” He took in Imar’s look and then stepped back. “(I) will be [close] if (you) need (me).”

Again, Imar nodded wordlessly. Jaki gestured for the younger man to have strength, then walked back down the wide aisles, nodding to the two other healers as he passed them. Imar couldn’t remember even *seeing* the pair of women as he had been led in.

For just a moment, the young man stood facing the muted gray curtain with apprehension. He had always looked up to his father, and in this, he wasn’t alone. All the members of the village treated Galt with the deepest respect, and with most people, the Chief remained a figure of power and knowledge. His reflexes seemed sharper at thirty-seven than they ever had, and although not possessing the stamina that he once had at twenty, he made up for it in cunning and skill.

Throughout his life, Imar’s father had been a source of strength, and the prospect of seeing him now, weak and dying, pained him. Would his father be unable to speak as Jaki had warned? And if he could, would it just be the ravings of a fever-dream? In his young life, Imar had seen what serious injuries, or even exposure to the elements, could do to a man. Every Barian had. Now he found himself almost balking at the notion of seeing his own father this way. He wanted his last memories of Galt to be as the man had been all his life: strong and sure.

As I must be now, he told himself. Straightening his shoulders, he consciously eased the tension from his features. He would face his father as if visiting a great warrior, not a dying man.

Pushing aside the curtain, he ducked under the entryway and into the small room. A low fire was banked inside the hearth against the back wall, and a kettle of warm water hung over it. Dim starlight filtered into the room from the small window to the left, revealing his father's figure lying on a raised cot. The strips of hair dyed a black and red color, signifying his rank as chieftain, were plastered to his head with sweat. There was no blanket over him, and although clothed only in a brief loincloth, his body glistened with a sheen of perspiration.

Imar's eyes were transfixed, however, by the bandaged stumps of flesh that had once been Galt's legs. They had been completely amputated, but not before the venom had done its work. The chieftain's skin was a sickly, pallid color, and his fingernails were totally black. Despite a lingering scent of incense that had been sprinkled into the fire, the cloying smell of death permeated the room, and Imar found himself blinking back the hot sting of tears in his eyes.

"Imar."

Galt's ragged breathing hadn't changed, nor had his eyes opened, but he apparently knew well the presence of his son.

"Father?" His voice was hardly a whisper.

"The true language has been denied me. I am blind." He took a deeper breath. "We must talk while I still have time."

"You...can not move?" Imar asked haltingly.

There was a short pause before Galt answered. "No. The demon's venom has paralyzed me."

"Will die?"

"Very soon, my son."

Imar stood stock still as the tears rolled down his face, momentarily collecting in his short beard. "(We) need (you)," he murmured, then took a deep breath and exhaled. "Will care for our family. Our village. Watch (them)."

"Thank you, my son. They will all need to be strong in the

coming days. But they have always *been* strong.” His words seemed less ragged, and the weakened tenor the chieftain had begun with was beginning to fill again with an echo of what it had once been.

“You...talk well,” Imar said with a spark of hope in his voice.

“Make no mistake,” Galt returned, sensing his son’s thoughts, “I will be dead before the sun rises. Tirnashc is with me. He has told me of this day and now gives me strength to tell you what you must know.”

“(He) /said/ (you) will die?”

“No. He spoke to me long ago when you were but a child. I was to prepare for the day that the true *Kazenvek* would return. I would know them by their speech and their touch—which would be death.”

Imar’s breath caught in his mouth as he remembered the demon’s words. “True *Kazenvek*,” he finally said, “from Khadûl?”

“Yes. They will come from the ‘back door’ of Khadûl.”

“Blade!” Imar cursed. “One say this to (me).” And then something clicked in the back of his mind. “Tirnashc’s vision,” he said hesitantly. “Is why (we) go north? Not scouts?”

Galt’s lips seemed to turn up slightly, though Imar couldn’t be sure in the light from the stars and the fire’s embers. “Yes. I had to know if the moment had come. And I couldn’t tell anyone of my vision until I was sure it was coming to pass. I meant for you to know before—to prepare you. But now...”

Imar was sure of Galt’s smile, weak as it was. How much strength would Tirnashc give to his father before he died?

“Now I’m sorry I won’t live to see the glory as you lead our people, *all* of Baria, to victory.”

“I?” Imar asked in confusion. “I not All-Chief?”

“You are a great warrior, my son. In time, you will be the greatest our people have ever seen.”

“Tirnashc say this?”

“I need no god to tell me that. A father knows. You, Imar, will

become chieftain after me. You have fought the true *Kazenvek*, talked to one; you will be their bane and carry our war banner to Khadûl itself!”

“Huh,” Imar grunted, a sad smile touching his face. His hands moved unconsciously as he slipped back into the true language. “(I) think (you) /are/ [biased].”

“Imar, do not tease your father so. You know I can no longer see.”

“Think you...” he shook his head. “Not know word. Mean too close to (me).”

“Biased.”

“Yes.”

Galt laughed weakly. “I shall miss you, Imar. You’ve kept a level head despite all of your father’s attempts to fill you with pride.”

“Learn from best,” he said simply.

“Then listen to me now,” Galt returned, his voice gaining even more strength even as Imar thought he could see his father’s body begin to fail, the pale skin seeming to take on a gray hue. “Our people face their darkest time. It will become much, much worse before it gets better. *If* it gets better. Tirnashc has foreseen the end of our world within your generation’s lifetime unless a miracle comes.”

The chieftain wet his lips and swallowed raggedly, though the timbre in his voice resonated with a new vigor. “I have left lists for you at our home with a series of locations written down. Inventories for caches of weapons and supplies that have been waiting for this moment. Even information about the Accords with the outsiders. You must prepare our people to live up to our name.” He paused, allowing Imar to absorb the words even as he tried to catch his own too-shallow breath.

“And then, my son, you will leave.”

“Leave Drahl?”

“Not just our village. You must leave our lands altogether for

reasons that He has not shown me. But you will have someone to help you and watch your back. And that person must be The Beast's child, Kitoor."

Imar's brow furrowed for a moment. He had last seen Kitoor almost two years ago when the enigmatic Child of The Beast had stayed in their village for some months. The Barian found the man to be a deep well of knowledge with a youthful demeanor despite his years. Over the time spent together, Imar had begun to look upon the outsider as an actual friend. He had a mischievous streak that appealed greatly to the son of the chieftain. Others would no doubt be against a southerner joining a Barian on a Quest—for surely that would be the only reason Imar would leave his people. Even Galt would normally be against such a pairing.

"Tirnashc say must be Kitoor?"

"He's a good man, Imar, even for an outsider. Tirnashc could not have chosen a better companion for you."

Imar was baffled. Galt traditionally held little more than contempt for those who were not Barian. Obviously, something had happened to change his mind about Kitoor, however, and Imar just wished he knew what it was.

"Kitoor good," he agreed. "Surprise (you) think so, too."

"Hm. Ask him about how we met sometime," Galt returned softly. The man swallowed again, jaws suddenly clenching, and even in the dimness, Imar could see the sweat running down his father's face, could actually *feel* the chieftain's pain.

He opened his mouth, but found he had nothing to say. He felt as if he were in a dream. His father dying, yet speaking in a sturdy voice; visions from Tirnashc Himself predicted years ago now coming true; all this on top of a heated battle and a long, cold journey home. Imar needed rest, he knew, yet didn't wish to leave Galt, aware that it would be the last time he would ever see the man who was not just his father, but his best friend.

“I know,” Galt said, understanding Imar’s silence. His voice remained strong, but his entire body was clenching in agony. “I shall be watching you from His halls, my son. Do not forget that.”

“Yes,” Imar said, catching whispers of his father’s pain and tasting the bitterness in his own mouth.

“You have brought me more joy than a dozen sons could.” His eyes opened, but they were filmed over. “Come beside me.”

Imar walked hesitantly to the cot and lowered himself to one knee. “(I) am here,” he said in a low voice.

A brief light showed in Galt’s eyes, and Imar knew that his father’s sight had returned for a moment. “I thank you, Tirnashc,” he sighed, and closed his eyes again. “The love of a father,” he said gently.

“(The) love of (a) son,” Imar returned in a thick voice.

No more words were spoken as the fire slowly died and its amber light faded to a dull glow, and then to darkness.