

THE BATTLE of



Scott E Rheuben

The Battle of Chi

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Big thanks to Mandy and Mum for all the help and support in getting this to some kind of 'quality' standard. Your assistance has been priceless.

We either see to believe

Or...

Believe – to see

Scott Rheuben

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From the creator of all Chi – thank you!

FOR MA

Adil (Sagittarius)



The Ranger Adil awoke, disconcerted. The screams rang in his ears, the lucid dream startling him, until he soon became aware of his surrounds. How long had it been now, almost thirty years since that fateful day? He had the same dream every night, of the time when his whole world had changed. The day his mother and father were murdered; the day he evaded the guards and barely escaped to the rocky slopes that bordered his hometown. He had been on his own since, after initially being helped by the Banali tribe and learning the art of survival through the most primitive ways. Adil stared into the remaining embers of his fire, while they glowed red. His dogs lay by his side, one alert and on watch while the other slept peacefully. A guileful fog concealed the open moors as he peered down from the ranges atop the cliff-face. This was one of his many resting places; not that he ever stayed in the one place too long. His other dog stirred, awaking sluggishly and stretching out. The larger dog tapped its paw impatiently then curled up to sleep. They had changed watch, but it mattered little as Adil was now wide awake. He surveyed the shadows for any sign of movement, while the mist passed leisurely revealing the slumbering moors below.

From a young age, of the time of the pink sun and the red stars, Adil had recognised that the world was going through a transition. The King's forces were

becoming almost invincible and he couldn't help but notice the dimness growing each day. He had wondered if all the children of his town had died on that haunting day that he had escaped, or if any that had been taken away had survived. It was not an uncommon event, the burning and ransacking of those towns that tried to live in sovereign order, outside of the King's tight rein. Particularly in the last few seasons, the King's forces, along with his ambition, had grown. More children were being captured and taken away under his command and the King hastily destroyed any rebellion, or town that tried to resist him. The King also had sentries posted that would ensure all law and order would be within the restrictions of the King's law. Only the outskirts held faint hopes, but even those people from the smaller villages knew that there was little that they could do. With severe droughts, they knew they would soon have to move to these larger towns just to survive. If there was a respectable season, like the last, it mattered little, as supply lines were cut and the people were simply starved into submission.

Adil suddenly saw a white rabbit running across the field below. He adjusted himself quickly, taking a second to aim and fire his crossbow. The arrow whistled through the air and in an instant, connected with its target. Even in full flight, the arrow pierced the rabbit directly through the heart. Adil's marksmanship had just as much to do with the quality of his bow as his exceptional eye sight. Very few materials could create a bow that would not be damaged by fire. Fashioned

from the ancient forges that had helped shape it and bring it to life. A special elvish twine also ran between both ends of the bow. This was twine that his father had given him, and that had long since become non-existent, since the time that the evil forces gained their power and had raped the land for anything of worth. Many flora and fauna had become extinct and resources plundered, since the last age. The ranger shook as a cold wind caught him by surprise. The hours had flirted by, as he suddenly became more aware of his surrounds. The sun would be up soon. It was time to get going.

While the morning set in and the mountains changed from blue to milky grey, the ranger moved aimlessly through the trees. The rabbit had done little to ease his hunger, but his dogs had satisfied bellies. He watched where the clouds cast long shadows across the rocky outcrops. Whilst he wandered through the shrubby undergrowth he soon became lost in his thoughts. After he had crossed a small stream, and climbed up the bank on the other side, Adil knew that he was surrounded. How stupid he had been not to notice them earlier; still, he could hear them long before they came into view. He slowed his pace and came to a stop in an open clearing within the forest. His dogs whimpered, also well aware of the smell of danger nearby. Finally the guards made their presence known, emerging through the thicket of trees and completely surrounding him. The ranger held the leads of his huskies in a way that urged them that he had this under control. They trusted him with their lives and sat

obediently, their eyes scanning each of the uniformed guards who were now standing in front of them.

“Hands up” the lead guard shouted boldly while he sat atop his horse and stared confidently into Adil’s eyes. Before the guard realised his mistake Adil smiled, raising his hands obediently and dropping his dogs’ leads.

The dogs reacted instantly, launching themselves at the unsuspecting guards that had emerged on the flank. The ranger moved just as quickly, reaching behind his back for his triple crossbow (that was always pre-loaded), bent down on one knee, with swift precision, aimed and fired. Seconds later five guards fell off their horses, dead; the lead guard among them. Adil’s dogs had taken care of one soldier each, while Adil had taken down the other three. The horses, recognising their chance at freedom, bolted away haphazardly through the trees. The remaining guard, stood stunned, half sliding out his sword, before sheathing it once again in frustration. They had all foolishly, underestimated this rogue hunter. The soldier felt his pride in tatters; his mouth remained open in astonishment, as he gawked at his attacker. The king would not be happy; he only prayed that he would be merciful to him. That’s if this man didn’t butcher him right now. He raised his hands as the ranger had already re-loaded another arrow and was watching him resolutely, with crossbow ready.

“Tell your king, to leave the people alone. They have done nothing wrong.”

The ranger then approached the guard's horse and led it around to face the way it had come. The guard thought about reaching for his dagger tucked away under his tunic, but this hunter had a position of power and was watching him like an eagle. Besides, the dogs also had their eyes fixated on him, watching his every move. There was no use resisting.

"He will never give in, or change his ways. Their destiny is in his hands" the guard replied, trying not to show fear in his voice, as he shook impulsively.

"Well, if that be the case, his destiny will be in mine."

With that the ranger reached out and slapped the rump of the horse. It jumped in response and set off at a torrid pace, up the slope, darting between the trees until it disappeared completely.

Shango (Cancer)



Shango was different from the others, he knew that. He had never seemed to fit in and was often ridiculed for his ghastly looks. He couldn't help it, having a nose like a giant eggplant and horns to match. He was skinny as a breadstick with a giant pork-like belly that looked more than a little out of place. It was like God had not known what to do with these remaining parts and just stuck them all together in an awkward rush. Still Shango had learnt to deal with the teasing long ago, and he resided in the treetops where no-one could easily bother him. He was thankful all the same, for just being alive, and his hind legs allowed him to drop from great heights unnoticed and jump a fair distance. He had also learnt a lesson, some time ago, of another amazing gift on what was the saddest night of his life.

It had been a boisterous night, not long after Shango had come of age. His parents were out with him and a travelling clan of goblins had raided their village just when the moon was at its peak. Shango shook impulsively with the memory, even though it was a warm night. While they had waited for their meals to come, his parents had cleared their throats and looked thoughtfully at Shango while they considered what to say.

"There is something we need to tell you" Shango's father had said finally.

“About yourself” Shango’s mother continued in a nervous whisper, while they both looked up at him uncomfortably, barely able to make eye contact (not that it was in their nature to do so).

There had been a long pregnant pause as if they neither of them knew how to continue. Shango remembered looking up at them blinking rapidly, eagerly waiting for them to continue. A wave of fear had enveloped him. What else was wrong with him, he had thought to himself.

The next moment was so random and instantaneous that Shango would never forget it for as long as he lived. There was a loud commotion outside, then someone screamed. In the next moment Shango watched horrified while his father was attacked and murdered, and his mother was dragged away screaming. He saw the village burning and bodies falling everywhere he looked, and.... so much blood. He could hear his mother calling out in anguish from somewhere outside, while he rushed out to save her. Shango then felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. He turned his head and looked deep into the evil eyes of one of the goblins. Its jaws were wide and dripping with his own blood! Its breath reeked of rotten flesh and old fish. Shango tried to run but was knocked over by another goblin who had tackled him to the ground, knocking over the table where he and his parents were about to have a meal. They had been saving their money all year for what had been referred to as a special occasion, and now.... now his father was dead and his mother had been dragged

away into the darkness. They were only here for the big occasion of telling him some vital news, and he felt that it was ...all his fault! But what were they about to tell him?

Shango felt both goblins roll off him as they tumbled and fell upon the table. He grabbed a nearby chair and swung it into one of them stunning them for a moment. It was in the next moment that he realised how strong his legs were as he kicked out and propelled the other goblin into the wall inside the inn, knocking it out instantly. Shango felt the adrenaline take over while he continued running in the direction that he had last heard his mother's cries. He ran out into the cold night and unexpectedly felt the most intense pain he had ever experienced. He looked down and saw a blade that had gone right through him. He looked across expecting to see a goblin, however all he saw was a dark hooded figure. Although Shango tried, he could not even see the attacker's eyes, just a faint glow beneath. Shango fell to the ground, snapping one of his horns on impact. He exhaled his last breath, while his life force left him.

It took Shango some time to realise what had happened. While the raiding party of goblins were disappearing towards the hills, Shango opened his eyes, unsure how he was still alive. He looked across and saw that there was another one of himself rising also. Now he thought that he must be dead and in some kind of shock! He kept watching, expecting his other self to do something but he just sat up and stared vacantly back at him. Occasionally his double would make another

movement, while it also looked around in bewilderment. The noise of the goblins had long gone as Shango rushed over to where his father had fallen. He felt for a pulse, but there was none forthcoming. His father was dead. He reached down, still in shock and picked up his dad's staff, which he had used for walking. It had intricate druid carvings, and he could still feel the warmth of his father's hand upon it. It was an item his dad had used to fight many battles long ago. Shango looked across at where he had last seen his other self, but it had strangely disappeared. He thought then that he must have simply imagined seeing himself, while he shook his head in confusion with all that had happened. He reached up and felt one of horns, which was aching horribly. The broken end was still lying outside, where he had fallen only minutes before. Shango still didn't know if he was alive or now in the afterlife. He grabbed some bread and took off running after the goblins. He knew that he must find his mother. She was all that he had left.

For months he tried to track and keep up with the goblins, but their trail turned cold, and now Shango was completely lost and on his own. His food had long since disappeared and he now spent his time looking for berries and other grass shrubs to eat. Shango was a vegetarian. All of his family had been; all of their half-breed kind for that matter. Shango heard a noise from behind the bushes and he turned and quite literally jumped in the air. This was no ordinary jump, he actually sprang as high as a nearby tree! While he was

in the air he looked at where the noise had come from and saw a hare dart off through the undergrowth. Upon returning to the ground, he tried again to spring into the air, but this time, it did not work nearly so well. It was almost a year before Shango was able to leap into the air again at such a height, but the next time he did, he learnt how to do this on impulse. Shango was grief-stricken after losing his parents and he did not know what to do, or where to go. They were all that he had. There was evidence enough of the goblins recent raiding party scattered across the town, which would not allow him to forget – even if that was even the faintest possibility. He left the remnants of their decrepit shack that they had lived in and soon began living in the trees on the edge of his home town. He wallowed in his sorrow and spent most of his days in a drunken stupor, falling out of the trees at least once a day. Shango awoke once again to another sunlit day, climbing down from the old tree he had dozed in, and strolling into town. He would begin the day where he spent most days, at the tavern, and see if he could work out what to do with his shattered and hopeless life.

The Tavern

Adil reached out and grabbed decisively at the reins of the only horse that returned to check on its fallen rider. Adil unclasped the binds of his dog's leashes and then mounted the steed. He decided that he would no longer keep them restrained. They were old enough to make their own decisions, which had always aligned with what he would expect of them anyway. He turned, hearing something lurking in the wild scrub and one of his dogs began growling in that direction. Adil turned and saw the predator's fluorescent eyes staring out at him. He gathered his crossbow quickly and fired, but the black flash reacted instantly and skilfully evaded each of the arrows. While it ran, Adil was barely able to identify it as a black panther before it bolted away skilfully through the trees. One of the dogs had taken off in pursuit, and only returned when Adil whistled for it to come back. It was very strange to see a panther round these parts. It was definitely not a good omen. It was time to go, Adil thought, before taking off in the other direction.

In the coming days Adil found another much smaller town. He rode in, dismounting from the horse and letting it stroll freely. He walked into the nearest tavern, his dogs following closely behind. He strode into the dingy tavern, the doors creaking loudly, like ancient floorboards facing winter. Adil looked around the smoke-filled room before walking to the bar and ordering a drink from the awaiting barman.

“No dogs allowed!” the man rumbled, looking disdainfully down at the dogs while he poured Adil a pint of the regular alcoholic drink that was the standard offering.

“You tell them that!” Adil replied casually, unconcerned by the barman’s tone.

Both dogs growled at the tubby man when he turned his attention back to them. The male dog glared threateningly, baring its teeth. The bar went silent as people watched in anticipation, waiting for something to happen. Confrontation was not common, in these parts, or anywhere for that matter. Most people chose to simply do as they were told, from those in a position of power. The barman huffed before turning to go down to the cellar while Adil casually grabbed his drink and made his way across the room. His dogs stopped for a moment as if considering their options, then promptly followed their master closely behind. Adil found a table in the far corner of the room and the dogs curled up at his feet. Those that had turned their attention to him soon fell back into their conversations and the strange man with the dogs became just another face in the crowd, which was much more agreeable to Adil. He took a few swills of the local beverage, before surveying the room more closely. When the barman returned he seemed not to have noticed that his last patrons had defied his orders before a new customer grabbed his attention.

Adil carefully observed each person in the room,

recognising no obvious trouble, before he relaxed and had another long swill of the local brew. It had been a long time between drinks. Before he had even finished half of his beer, two local thugs came in swaying and rudely made their way to the bar. They were already intoxicated swearing and spitting at the nearest patrons, while the barman cowered in fear. Though Adil couldn't distinguish them from any other louts, the locals recognised them immediately. It was Bob and Randy the town hooligans. Randy stood closer to seven foot than six, while Bob stood closer to five than four. Adil barely raised his eyes, keeping a close eye on them while he took another deep slug of his glass. He then secretly began loading his crossbow beneath the table, whistling softly to himself. The drunks continued stumbling about, abusing anyone who was trying to leave. Adil watched while the smaller one slapped a waitress on the arse and called her a slut. Adil then lifted his weapon above the table and calmly aimed from across the room. Without warning Adil fired three arrows, driving the two men backwards and pinning them to the wall with a thud. The arrows dug deep and the smaller man was stuck firmly while he wriggled to try and get free. After the initial shock, the bigger man pulled out the arrow that had torn through his tunic and snapped it in one hand. Adil was still whistling, busily making adjustments again with his crossbow, while the infuriated hulk started moving towards him. Adil raised the crossbow again, aimed and fired. This time, three arrows drove Randy backwards into the wall beside his friend. Two of them drove in either side of his

body and the other drove into his pants, just below his privates. While Randy struggled to get free, he soon realised he was stuck fast and the remaining crowd of patrons finally relaxed in a collective sigh and erupted into raucous laughter.

Adil finished his drink and went back up to the bar while the two men launched their slurred abuse at him. He ignored them while he came in closer to speak quietly to the barman again. The barman was so grateful that he said nothing more about his dogs still being inside. Adil asked news of the King's army, and the stodgy man told him all he knew, that the scouting parties were more numerous and more regular in their searches and that many children had been taken away from their parents. After hearing the question from the peculiar hunter, his mind ticked away with indecision. The barman finally decided that this man was most certainly not aligned in any way with the King. He leaned in closer, so that his patron could hear him above Bob and Randy's ongoing abuse. The barman cleared his throat and quietly told of how a few people from town were having underground meetings to form resistance parties. He went on, saying that they were sending messenger pigeons to neighbouring towns when the soldiers were coming, but hope was fading as they didn't know what they could really do to challenge the King. He was hoping that this rogue patron may be able to help. Perhaps he could be the town's saviour? Silence filled the room for a moment. As there was no response from his patron, the barman continued talking

about the last attack on the town which had been less than a week ago.

“What’s the damage?” Adil said casually, dropping some bread down from atop the bar for his dogs to eat.

“There were six dead, twenty injured and six houses burnt to the ground” the barman replied.

“No - for the drink” Adil replied nonchalantly.

The barman looked at him perplexedly, still in shock at what had just happened while the noise from the pinned thugs came back into boisterous reality. It suddenly dawned on him what the man was asking.

“Free sir... free. Come back anytime.”

Adil turned and approached the front door near where the ignorant thugs were still restrained. Their mocking threats simmered down when he stepped closer and stopped in front of them.

Adil looked closely at them, staring deep into both of their eyes. Randy, the bigger of the two was a coward at heart, but Adil could see they were both just town drunks, harmless in the scheme of things. Bob, well Bob just had a big mouth. Adil continued on out of the tavern towards his horse which stood patiently waiting where Adil had left him. His male dog however was not so forgiving. He stopped beside Randy and cocked his leg, relieving himself all over the man’s leg before following along behind. The crowd once again erupted

into raptures of laughter. Adil pulled the reins and set off, deciding that it would be a while before he would come back to this town, or any town for that matter. He knew that there would already be a bounty on his head from his last encounter with the King's guards. He didn't need to draw any more attention to himself. He needed to get back to nature, where he belonged.

Shango had been watching the strange man and his dogs from a far corner of the bar. Even though it was barely afternoon, he had had close to six pints by the time the whole scene had unfolded. Shango had watched on with amusement, and as he looked closely at the ranger, he was intrigued. He knew immediately that this was someone that he could learn a lot from. Shango thought about following the peculiar man, leaving home, for good, something that he would never have dreamed of, but what was home now, without his family? At that moment something seemed to go off inside his head; something he had never felt before. Though Shango briefly considered that it might be the fact that he was drunk, after only minutes of the ranger leaving, he got up and stumbled after him. Perhaps the ranger wouldn't mind some company. Besides, in his heart he knew there was nothing left for him, now that his parents were gone. Who knew if he would ever see his mother again? He rose, almost stumbling over the table before starting off towards the door.

"Where you off to ugly?" the barman heckled, laughing jovially, enjoying the morning's entertainment.

“You think he’ll let you tag along?” the barman jeered, laughing even louder.

Shango ignored the insults, while he focused on each drunken step. He could sense something unique about this man. He had a purpose that was contagious and worth following, even if his judgement was barely afloat with the alcohol that he had consumed. Shango resolutely decided that he would put his best foot forward and once again regain control of his destiny.

Wolfram (Scorpio)



The black mage, Wolfram, stood beside the King. He was part of the King's inner circle, and one of the few that was given rare insight into the King's plans. One of the guards stood before them shaking. He had returned from the outskirts of one of the villages with some sobering news indeed. He shivered as he told of how they had been attacked by the rogue hunter and how the other five guards had been killed. Wolfram watched closely while the young guard nervously finished reciting what had happened. The guard was breathing anxiously sweat beading on his brow, while he awaited the king's reply.

"What did this man look like?" the King asked, showing no signs of being unnerved, while he strolled definitively across the room.

The guard went on to tell the King of the rough looking man that had attacked them. After he had told the King everything that he knew, the King simply nodded and looked out the window at the gathering storm clouds, as if this was simply trivial news of no significance.

The King had not taken the news of the scouting party's defeat well. Wolfram recognised this instantly, when the King's eye twitched. It was only the slightest twitch but it was enough to be noticed by someone of his immediacy to the King. The soldier was still

trembling when the King asked all members of his inner circle (including Wolfram) to leave them be. The disconsolate figure heard the door swing noisily closed, upon the last of them leaving the room. He lifted his head and watched while the King's cheeks turned red in pure anger.

“Please my lord, I am sorry to bring such tidings, please spare me.”

The King suddenly transformed into a huge bull directly in front of the soldier. The soldier, who had been still until now, ran fearfully for the door, but the door was locked. In that moment the bull charged and within seconds the soldier slumped forward, his life force taken from him. The bull simply flung the soldier from the horns that he had just impaled his victim on and paced back across the room. The King was quick to anger and he was not renowned for being merciful, in these situations. The ranger that the soldier had spoken of, who had opposed his forces would pay dearly for his resistance. While the King morphed back into his human form, he called out to the guards patiently waiting outside. Within seconds they unlocked the door and rushed in, almost tripping over the fallen soldier as they dashed in.

“Clean this mess up would you” the King boomed, walking over the dead body, into the hallway and storming off down the corridor.

Wolfram grinned sheepishly from an adjoining

room. He always enjoyed hearing these men's final begs and screams. Wolfram could faintly hear the King asking for him from further down the corridor. When Wolfram made his way into the central meeting room the King looked across at him impatiently.

“Find this man and bring him to me. Alive or dead, it doesn't concern me.”

Wolfram nodded before making a hasty retreat. The King sighed heavily. He knew that Wolfram liked to work alone, but he would send a separate battalion along behind, just to make sure of things.

Wolfram moved like the wind as he raced out of the castle walls. His paws thundered across the earth, while his fur kept him warm against the cold southerly winds that were whipping in from the arctic. It was more than three nights on horseback to where the attack had supposedly taken place, but as a wolf, it would only take him two. Wolfram was renowned for his skills in the art of black magic. As the King's most highly regarded assassin, it was his ability to change forms, which allowed him to surround hapless victims and take care of whatever job was at hand. Few could match Wolfram in magic and he served his King for only as long as was convenient to his needs. Wolfram was much more ambitious than the King and his Kingdom, he wanted to rule other worlds, and knew that Gondorah was only a stepping stone to conquering future worlds. Wolfram knew that Chi was a concept the naïve King was barely aware of and that the other

worlds offered far more treasures than this simple world could. While he ran the lightning cracked around him, and the thunder threatened, concealed in a dark ominous cloud but rolling ever closer. In moments it would be raining heavily, which would cover his tracks. Not that Wolfram felt he needed his tracks covered. He was the hunter; never the hunted. A self-assured assassin and masterful black mage, and he felt that in this world, he was basically untouchable, even in regards to the King.

Wolfram eventually arrived at the location where the King's men had fallen. The stench was almost unbearable, even for him. He looked for tracks but after initially thinking that he had picked up a trail, it led to nothing. Wolfram asked some of the wood creatures but no-one seemed to have any information. After a long period of tracking, Wolfram was frustrated and turned back towards the castle. This Ranger had some talent at remaining inconspicuous. Just as Wolfram was about to leave he heard a sound coming his way. He watched the small battalion of King's men arriving on the scene. The King had not trusted him to take care of the ranger. Wolfram felt a sense of betrayal. Wolfram would take care of the King and his cronies, in due course, he thought to himself before turning indifferently back towards the castle.

Ballack

Meanwhile in the sleepy town of Sakeron there lived a mage of the pure, Ballack. As mayor of the town he had managed to maintain some balance and independence for Sakeron. Outlying towns that held this small sense of freedom did not sit well with the King and Ballack knew that it was only a matter of time before the King sent armed forces to conquer the town and bring it under the crown's dominant rule. Though Ballack practiced magic, his time was predominantly spent bringing law and order to the town and its townsfolk. Ballack had only ever fallen in love once and he had never been the same since. He shook with the memory, from so many moons ago. Her name was Selena and she was a beautiful woman from the elven folk, who lived in the nearby woodlands. Though it was forbidden, they had caught up secretly when her father fell asleep each night. His snoring would wake Selena and she would rush out to meet her beau. However, Selena's father was soon informed about these rendezvous. Selena had never seen her father so mad when he finally found out. He was red-faced and shaking in fury and he was so worked up Selena feared that he would cause himself a mischief. He took her aside one evening and abruptly ordered her to settle with one of her own, as was the Elvish custom. Selena could see her father would not make any compromises. His word was final!

One unforgettable night, while Ballack waited for

her in their usual meeting place, Selena never came. The next few nights, she still did not show. The next few sunrises for Ballack were a blur. He wandered around broken on the inside, speaking to the townsfolk, while his mind was elsewhere. He felt hollow – empty. Ballack’s eyes darted around, constantly searching, to see if Selena was hiding anywhere. Though she rarely appeared in town, it had been almost a quarter-moon since they had last caught up and Ballack was hopeful that she would make a rare appearance. Their last meeting had been the night of Summer Solstice. The next sunrise Ballack decided that he would go into the woods to search for her, though he feared that his search would be fruitless. He didn’t know where to look and had never felt comfortable in the woodlands. The daylight passed quickly and before too long, the last rays of sun filtered through the trees. Surprisingly the light caught upon something in a nearby tree. He went closer and found a small cloth from a dress; her dress. The scrawled message was undeniably from her, and while he read the words, his heart was broken forever:

“Though my heart is yours, we cannot be. Please do not follow, please forgive me.”

Selena had made her decision to stay in the woods, with her tribe, for good this time. Her mother was particularly overjoyed that she had obeyed her father and decided not to see the strange man anymore. She had known of Selena’s secret for a long time. Each night she had forlornly watched her only daughter rush off when the moon was at its peak. Selena cried what

seemed an endless flow of tears after making her decision, and though her mother comforted her, Selena knew that she would not get over this, well not for some time anyway. The man she loved with all her heart, she could not be with, and though her heart wanted her to resist and stay with Ballack, she had too much respect for the word of her father, and the word of their clan. After a few weeks though Selena knew something was wrong. She felt horrible and she was getting sick each morning. Soon the realisation dawned on her. She knew, even in the woods the King's guards did regular checks for any babies and children and when found, they would be taken away. Even worse, she knew her parents would cast her out for having a child with Ballack. The baby would be a half-caste and she would not be able to mate or live with another of their kind. She knew there was only one thing to do. She despondently packed her things and headed deep into the woodlands, away from her family, on her own. She knew that her parents would immediately draw the wrong conclusion that she had gone back to him, but so be it, this was the only option that she felt was available to her. She had no other choice. She had to protect their baby!

Selena managed well enough on her own, hunting and gathering enough food to survive. She felt exhausted on many days, and soon she simply lay down near a rocky brook. While days and nights came and went and the cold winds came biting in viciously, her belly continued to grow extraordinarily large and each

day she was in more pain, until one remarkable day, it happened. She felt her waters break. She tried to keep as quiet as she could until finally she felt it taking place; she was about to give birth! She pushed and pushed in complete exhaustion and was completely surprised when she saw two heads coming out – twins – what a blessing! However when she looked again she swiftly noticed how heavily she was bleeding. Selena pushed one final time, while her faint breath faded and her open eyes were left unseeing, just as two new beautiful children were born, crying and alone in the depths of the forest.

By pure coincidence, later that day, two soldiers were scouting nearby and were about to turn back to camp when one of them heard the noise. Was that a baby; out this far in the woods; surely not? They cautiously came in closer, weapons raised, expecting the new parents to fight for their newly-born child. When they stepped watchfully into the clearing, all they found was a dead mother and two babies crying their mournful cries. The men quickly wrapped the babies up in their coats, to take back to the King. This was not such an unusual occurrence as families tried to save their children by hiding out in the forests and anywhere away from civilisation. The King however knew this and he was unrelenting in his search to take all children so that he could confirm that none of them held the powers that would bring an end to his reign. The soldier, who had first heard the cries, was very pleased. It was satisfying to bring good news to the King, and

Twins, now that was quite a surprise! The King would certainly be glad to hear about this.

The Twins (Gemini)



The Twins had lived within the city walls all of their known lives. They were still only children, but the King himself was especially intrigued whenever he came across any sets of Twins. They stayed in a room within the castle, and he kept a close eye on them. After the first few years, they did not show any great powers, so the King's interest waned and they were soon sent to join the other children in the dormitories. On this particular day when the guards led them away to their quarters, outside the main tower, the guards stopped to chat to a pilgrim who worked at a market stall in the square. Twix (barely the eldest of the two) sensed an opportunity and grabbed his brother's hand, deciding that they would be safer on their own. They ducked and weaved through the alleyways, all the while getting further away from their captors. Though the guards tried to pursue them, they soon realised that they had no chance and gave up on the chase. They shrugged, deciding that it would make no difference if there were two less children in the dorms. Besides, the King had watched them up to this point, and it had been decided that neither of them were 'the one' that would end the King's reign.

It didn't take long for Twix and Leto to learn how to survive on the streets within the castle walls. They had each named the other, as was usual for all children, unless they named themselves. The twins were often

picked on, and they had been pelted with stones and often left bloodied and beaten, whenever another youth saw them. Even between the two of them, they could never stand up for themselves against even the smallest children they came across. This was largely due to both of them being born with such weakness in their bodies that it was an effort to even raise their arms in resistance. The only thing that they did have was each other, and an amazing ability to read minds. Twix the elder of the two was able to talk his way out of any situation, to the point where he was able to protect both of them from any social interaction. The twins spent most of their time hiding in barns with the horses and gathering whatever food scraps they could find. They often wondered who their parents were, but like all the other children, they knew they were orphans, and like all the others, they simply assumed that their parents were dead. There was no point in wasting too much time wondering if their parents were alive or if they might ever meet them. Maybe in another life Twix thought, while Leto nodded, reading his brother's thoughts, such was their connection.

It was during these early years that Twix's brother Leto almost died. His breathing was hoarse and he had an extreme fever and when Twix managed to find a healer in town, even they said that there was nothing that could be done. Twix left his brother when the moon struck full in the night sky and he set off into the country to find the forest clerics, who he was informed, were the only people that might be able to save his

brother. While he saddled and stole a horse (from the barn that they often slept beside), Twix realised this was the first time that he had left the city walls. He rushed off urgently along the road, guided by the radiant sky. He knew that even if he rode all night, he might not get there and back in time. His brother may not survive through to the next sunset!

One of the other children on the street had overheard the Twins talking a few days earlier about being able to read another's thoughts and he soon spread the word to his other friends. The story changed somewhat as rumours of a youth who had mind control powers soon spread around the kingdom. It wasn't long before word reached the King himself. The King heard the news that there was a child that had astonishing powers of mind control! This mind control was something so rare that the King sent off his guards to find this youth and bring him to the castle. The King thought of the potential that this child could provide if this power could be harnessed. Though it was not highly unusual, they found the boy actually living within the city walls themselves! A search party had circulated, however the youth was not hard to find with children leading the guards to the barn where Leto lay, struggling to breath and as pasty as a ghost. The guards looked at the dilapidated form crumpled in the corner, beside a bale of hay, lying in a pool of sweat. Surely this couldn't be anything more than a scrawny little kid.

"There's another one of those weirdo's" one of the kids alleged from behind the guard. The brash youth

was still hovering around like a bad smell, offering one of their own as a sacrifice to the armed men of the state. The guard smiled. Children were taught to be traitors if it was in the interests of the King.

“Find him and bring him to us!” another of the other guards shouted, not turning around.

“Do we get some kind of reward?” a sassy voice of a young girl enquired.

The men tried to ignore the youth that had spoken, while one of the guard’s threw a bread roll over his shoulder. The hovering youngsters reacted instantly, all scrambling to get a mere crumb of the food. Their withered eager limbs snatched at it while the bread fell apart willingly. In an instant all the pieces had been feverishly snatched and gobbled up. Meanwhile the guards moved in closer to the sick child. Leto couldn’t speak while his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell in and out of consciousness. Where was Twix, he thought to himself? Who were these blurry figures in front of him? He felt fear take a hold of him when he was grabbed by two of the guards and then fell back into the peaceful darkness once again.

The guards rushed him back to the King’s palace, and the King’s personal doctor was immediately called to help the child. When he was awake he was coughing up blood, and he had still not spoken since arriving earlier that morning. As the King himself looked over the sleeping child he had no recognition of the fact that

the child had been within his castle walls before. He did not remember the boy's face from a few short years ago.

Twix was unsure what to do. He had followed the advice he had been given and was where he thought he was meant to be, but there was no sign of the clerics. He called out to them, while the canopy of trees offered some protection from the brilliant sun. Still, it was muggy as hell, and he struggled to catch his breath. He had been riding all night and he realised that it must be getting on to mid-morning now. Twix was exhausted. He climbed off his horse and tied it to a nearby tree, before falling fatigued to the ground. After a few minutes he felt a little better, while he emptied the remainder of his water bottle into his eager mouth. He couldn't stay long, he had to find the clerics and get back to his brother, but where could they be? Suddenly Twix heard a peculiar noise not far away.

“POP..... REEEEEPP..... POP!”

All of a sudden he noticed the multitude of various coloured mushroom's that were changing shapes and turning themselves inside out in front of him. As they moved they produced one of the most extraordinary sounds that Twix had ever heard! When they turned in upon themselves, they would shrink dramatically in size and moments later pop themselves out, growing to the size of a giant bird. When this occurred little spores were released into the air. As well as these spores, miniature butterflies flew out of the giant mushrooms,

while they continued to pop incessantly. Twix gathered himself and rose to his feet when he saw a strange woman appear nearby, almost as if directly from the tree itself.

“Are you a cleric?”

“I am” she said gently. She then went on to tell him that his brother was now with the King, and that he would survive.

Twix felt some relief, but still felt disheartened that he had come all the way out here for nothing.

“So this trip was all in vain?”

“No, you must heed this warning. You cannot stay with the King; you must both get out of the castle walls before it’s too late.”

The old woman’s frazzled hair stuck out haphazardly like she had just been magnetised.

The Cleric looked deep into the young boy’s face to make sure he understood. Her eyes were milky and swirling; otherworldly, like nothing he had ever seen. He could see in her mind that she had his best intentions at heart, and that the King’s men had sadly taken her own child from her.

“So my brother... he’ll be fine?” Twix said blinking, as he refocused.

“Yes” she said warmly.

“Thanks” Twix replied jumping on his horse and readying himself to go.

“There are many things you need to learn. You must come back with your brother, as soon as you can” the Cleric advised, while Twix was turning away, eager to get going.

Twix barely heard the cleric’s final words while he tore off, back the way that he had come, hoping that the strange old lady was right.

Upon return Twix found out that Leto was indeed being looked after by the King. The Cleric had been right. Twix approached one of the guards and asked if he could see the King, but he was denied. Twix then focused on the man’s mind as he cycled through the man’s thoughts. Twix recited the man’s most pressing thoughts of catching up with his love affair that would be waiting for him after his shift. He pushed forward the idea of being led to the King and the King being so pleased that the guard would be let off early, so that he could be with her now. Twix then asked him again if he could see the King. This time, the guard willingly agreed to take him there and ushered him through the crowded square as a matter of urgency. Such was Twix’s ability that when they came to other guards within the castle, he was again able to persuade them to lead him through to the King’s personal chambers, something unheard of.

The King was startled at being interrupted, while standing and looking proudly at his reflection in one of his many mirrors. The guard that had led him in felt the fury of the King's glance, and immediately retreated out to the hallway. He shook his head ashamedly like he had been under a spell. What was he doing at the King's chambers? He knew there would be consequences for this, while he ran quickly down the steps back to his post. Twix remained standing there facing the King, feeling uneasy about what to do next. He looked around the King's chambers and was surprised to see innumerable mirrors of all shapes and sizes covering every wall in the room!

"What are you doing out of bed?" the King demanded abruptly, while he stared angrily at the child.

"Sorry your highness, it is not who you think...

.. my brother is under your care"

"Your brother..."

The King looked confused and then smiled when he noted the slight difference in the young boy. Twix wondered if the King had somehow recognised them from when they were babies. Twix somehow had a vague memory of his time under the King's watch.

"Yes, of course... I will take you to him"

Twix was led by the King himself through a range of dimly lit passageways and through to another chamber.

When Twix saw his brother, he noticed the change immediately. His brother had colour back in his face and he was not nearly as frail.

“So glad to see you brother” Leto exclaimed. Twix warmly embraced his brother, while the King smirked watching on, intrigued by the Twins. There was something familiar about these two. Perhaps they could both be of some use.

Over those next few years Twix and Leto became part of the King’s special counsel. After the inner circle met with the King, the King would then go back to Twix and/or Leto and ask them to advise on what each of the members were really thinking. While the King carried out their secret meetings, one (or both) of the Twins, would be observing from another room watching each of them intently and reading their deepest thoughts. It was in this way that the King learnt about Wolfram’s desire to be the leader. Still the King treated the Twins poorly on most occasions, giving them barely more food or comfort than what they had on the street. One sunrise Twix randomly remembered the words the Cleric had once told him, that they needed to leave the castle and the King before it was too late. Twix in particular, saw the dramatic change that was occurring in Leto. Leto had become selfish and cruel, playing evil tricks on the guards for his own amusement. Twix also felt himself fighting with his own demons, which seemed to grow from the shadows that enveloped the Kingdom. The Twins had been told by the King that he was their father, and although they both knew it not to

be true, Leto seemed to somehow choose to believe it. Twix knew that all children were taken from their parents, kept imprisoned for years and at best released into a world, dispirited and all alone. Twix watched as his relationship with his brother began to tear apart, while Leto became more and more corrupted by the King.

The biggest crack in the Twins' relationship occurred when Twix found the love of his life, Tara, a young maiden, who was a daughter of one of the guards. Twix would spend all day with her, wandering around the kingdom and somehow imagining a world here amongst the chaos, as long as he had Tara by his side. Tara loved him equally; he had a kind heart and was not like the other mindless and horrid men that filled the kingdom. Twix loved her with all his heart and he hoped that one day soon, she would be his wife. It wasn't long before Leto soon became jealous of his brother, and tried to pry them apart. He started by pretending to be Twix and trying to manipulate her so that she began to hate him. When Twix found out, he was furious, but after chastising Leto, Tara and Twix's relationship returned to normal again. After a few weeks, Leto tried again. This time he tried to seduce her through mind control, and by infiltrating her dreams. When Twix intercepted what his brother was doing he again confronted his brother about his behaviour and it stopped for some weeks.

It wasn't until late one night, when he caught the thought of his brother Leto whilst he was heading up to

speak to the King that Twix realised how evil his brother had become. Leto was going to betray him in the wickedest of ways. Leto was going to tell the King that his brother had plans to take over the kingdom, so that Twix would be exiled and so that he could have Tara all to himself. Twix sensed the urgency of what was about to happen and he knew that he had little time. He gathered some rations and ran out into the starlit night when he randomly caught another flash in his mind, of his brother, knocking at the King's door. Twix ran eagerly down into the courtyard. He jumped on one of the horses that had been tied up near the tavern and galloped out from the castle walls. It would not be long until a full scale search began!

Under Attack

After finding Selena's final goodbye note, Ballack had spent many an age wandering aimlessly through the forest. He always returned to town after a few sunrises (never venturing too far), but it wasn't long before he took off again, when he heard the rumours circulating of what had happened. Sakeron had no choice but to appoint a new mayor, but they all still considered Ballack the town's true leader, even the new mayor himself! One day, after Ballack had returned from an afternoon walk in the bitterly cold and misty hills, he found that the town was raucous and full of commotion. Crowds of people wandered aimlessly while their angry and fearful voices filled the courtyard. Word was spreading that the King's guards were coming, and to add to Ballack's heartbreak, he now feared that he could no longer protect his town; his home. He had been dreading that this day would come and now it was here, slapping him in the face, like winter's first assault. Ballack immediately set about preparing an extra watch on the watch tower, and with consent of the mayor, gave the townsfolk full access to the armoury. They would do their best, or die trying.

When the light of dusk withdrew and the darkness descended, the first of the soldiers rode in. They began mercilessly burning the thatched rooftops of homes and toppling anything or anyone that stood in their way. The people of Sakeron were not used to combat and Ballack recognised that he had to quickly take

command and somehow fight back. Still, he felt that with these odds, it was only a matter of time before they were overcome. He was a reasonable mage, practising his craft of magic since a young age, but his greatest gift was one that he had kept hidden from the whole town. It was the whip that he could produce from each of his wrists. He made one emerge as the nearest guard was bearing down upon him. He spun the whip above his head and threw it purposefully. The guard fell to the ground, knocking himself out on impact. Ballack heard the screams nearby as women were trampled and children too. Ballack heard a baby screaming and he impulsively ran into one of the nearest houses to locate exactly where the noise was coming from.

Ballack found a baby laying on a thatched weave of leaves and twigs, which was a customary baby's resting place in the village. There was no-one else around and Ballack had no idea whose child it was. He acted quickly, tying a makeshift baby harness across his torso and scooping the baby up and into place in one motion. He could hear more vivid screams and could smell that the town was now alight while smoke soon poured through the walls from an adjoining room. He turned impulsively and noticed that anyone who was still alive was running for the hills out behind the village. Ballack could see many guards now fortifying that possible escape route, so that no-one else could get through. He took a moment to think. What other way out was there? Think Ballack – THINK! He looked around the

room, and quickly saw that there was nowhere to hide. He saw the flicker of red while the flames ignited the thatched roof above. Ballack had to do something. He ran out with the baby, across the landing, and into another house that was already alight with flames. There he saw a guard with his back to him. Ballack raised his whip again. He flicked it skilfully so that it wrapped around the man's neck. The man was unable to let out a scream before being dragged to the ground. Ballack looked past the man, out into the marauding night's shadows, at the town, his town, which was burning down all around him. He ducked inside the nearest dwelling grabbing a mirror from the wall and running out into the descending night. While he ducked and weaved his way around the perimeter he witnessed a massacre of so many familiar faces. Some voices called to him silently or in a whimper, but as he ran, he felt helplessness gripping at his throat, trying to drag him down. He knew there was nothing that he could do for them now. Ballack set the mirror up against one of the remaining towers and ducked across the other side of the open yard behind some fallen food stalls. The baby started crying, and Ballack knew that he would maybe have only minutes before he was found. He needed a distraction – and fast!

Ballack concentrated fixedly on the mirror. Just when he was filled with despair and about to give up it finally happened. He watched as he conjured up an array of lights that sparkled playfully on its surface. In no time at all, the shafts of brilliant coloured light shot

out of the mirror, illuminating the sky. The guards nearest to him turned and charged off in that direction with their weapons raised. He had to go - now! Ballack ran through the main entrance not daring to turn around or see if he was being followed, while he sprinted for the nearest group of trees. He got there and kept running, and running – and running as the baby cried and cried and cried. Surely someone had heard the noise or seen him, he thought, climbing down the rocky outcrop and down the hillside, deeper and deeper into the wilderness. Although Ballack had lived in this town all his life, he didn't know what lay beyond the deep forest that he was now in. He had heard that the desert lay well beyond it, which was rumoured to be an eternal nothingness. Definitely not suitable for trying to help keep a baby alive, but Ballack had no other choice but to go on in that direction. Everything that he had loved and put his life into was now smouldering in ashes behind him. The smell burnt and charred his nostrils, as a memory of what would never be the same again.

Ballack continued on, deeper into the forest, unsure of where he was and soon losing all sense of the direction that he was headed in. Down turned into up and left into right, long ago, and any berries or food that he came across he would crush up and squeeze out for the child. Though this was not ideal, Ballack had no milk. Although Ballack was a fully grown man; he had never married and certainly never changed a baby. Not until now. What would Selena think, he found himself

wondering while he shivered in sadness? Ballack found a place to camp and relaxed somewhat, while he put the child safely down and gathered some dry pieces of kindling for a fire. Ballack had given his life to building Sakeron and providing order and freedom to its people, and now, now he had nothing. It had all happened so suddenly. Even with the warning, there was no chance of resisting the King's forces. In the end it had been complete annihilation. Ballack rested by his tepid fire, while he tried to ease his mind. His magic had some purpose, but Ballack knew that his inherited gift from his father, the whips, were his most helpful weapon for any impending threat. Ballack had heard of the ancient legends, and studied the ancient scriptures, knowing that the time of great tribulations written by the ancients was now upon them. The signs were all lining up. He could see it in the stars, on a clear night such as this. His father had also spoken of the faint whispers that mentioned a small speck of hope for the forces of good. There was danger in this knowledge and many lives had been lost speaking of such things and in most part, the services of evil had long hidden those secrets away. Ballack breathed heavily, his body was exhausted from God knows how many days of running. He felt his body sapped of all energy, while he sat down exhaustedly and took a moment to close his eyes. Just a small nap he thought to himself.

Suddenly he heard a noise, which jolted him awake. Something was coming closer. Ballack let the whip emerge while he moved closer to the sound.

Inopportunately, the baby made a noise that only babies can make, as it lay sleeping on a small mound of moss a few feet away. Hastily Ballack looked through the thicket of bushes and caught sight of a goblin that was now looking around anxious to find the source of where the strange noise had come from. Ballack lifted his arm simultaneously while the whip emerged and he flicked his arm purposefully at the goblin. The goblin had moved at the final moment so the blow had not caught it around the vocal chords as intended. It let out a horrific scream before it fell to the ground in pain. It held its shoulder and was still screaming when Ballack saw more goblins in the faint light, not too far off in the distance. They impulsively turned their heads and look directly at him through the trees. It was time to run... and fast!

Ballack turned and picked up the baby. He ran frantically while tree branches slapped him across the face, annoyed with being disturbed. Even in his haste, Ballack still nursed the baby carefully, making sure that it was protected. He needed to get the baby to safety. It was now fully awake and had begun crying again, which alerted the goblins to their exact whereabouts while they scampered along after him. Ballack could hear the sounds of at least four of them in pursuit. He knew it wouldn't be long until they were caught, especially since Ballack was now only running on adrenaline. His frail body struggled with each step, but each sinew and tendon ran with hope, so that he was still capable of running with some pace. He kept looking frantically for

something different, maybe a place to hide, but all he saw was more trees for as far as he could see. It was hopeless. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, the ground seemed to open up and a steady flowing stream was there beside him, leading off in another direction. Ballack stopped and stared. He was completely dumbfounded. Where had this come from, there was nothing and then this stream had appeared – out of nothing? Ballack tried to catch his breath while he quickly wondered what to do. He had got some distance ahead of the goblins, but he knew there was little time. He looked around and randomly saw an abandoned birds nest that might just hold a baby. The baby had stopped crying and was looking up into his eyes. He made a decision that was as heartbreaking as it was desperate. He was going to have to leave the baby and try to lead the goblins away. Besides he knew he could not fight them and protect the baby at the same time. He cried almost silently before putting the baby in the nest. He tested that it floated buoyantly before pushing it out into the middle of the water's flow. In no time the nest began heading downstream, to where Ballack could only pray was a safe place.

“Please mother, protect this child, and let it live a full and joyous life”.

Ballack heard the approaching goblins scampering ever closer, just out of sight. They would be upon him in no time. He looked back at the stream but with the flowing water, the baby was now almost out of sight. Please don't let them notice it! Ballack dashed off in

another direction, making as much noise as he could, leading the goblins his way, and praying that he could save the baby's life in the process.

Ballack heard them chasing him for at least the next hour. He hoped that they were all in pursuit and that none had seen or heard the baby. Eventually he was too exhausted to go on and he hid behind a tree and waited. Before he had completely caught his breath some of the goblins scampered past. Three, four, five, six and then another – my god! Goblins were renowned to be ruthless and Ballack knew that he stood next to no chance. They were also renowned to be stupid, but Ballack didn't know if that would save him. If only the Goblins kept going, he might survive. Just a few more paces and they would be gone. Suddenly one of them stopped and then they all stopped and began smelling the air. The closest one detected Ballack just before it was met with the whip's embrace. It fell to the ground as Ballack swung the whip in a high arc threateningly overhead, as it whirled above. Ballack produced the other whip from his other arm and swung it aggressively. The goblins seemed to hesitate for a moment, where had the smaller version that made that awful sound disappeared to? They looked at each other and then in unison, moved closer, circling Ballack with each step. A goblin pounced closer and was met with the right whip. It screamed in agony, while its flesh seemed to sizzle on impact. Hopefully they would retreat Ballack thought, but he knew that they wouldn't. He lashed out at another and another, left,

right, but then he felt one knock him off his feet from behind. The claws sunk in as another pounced on him and his last thought was a final prayer that the baby would live on.

Gyan (Aquarius)

The baby floated downstream, oblivious to the threat that was bearing down upon it. Birds chirped nearby while the afternoon sun caressed its face and the gentle water took it out of sight, just as the goblins hurried past. The baby continued floating downstream further and further away from the goblins, and Ballack, into the great unknown. After some time, the stream joined a much larger river and the current grew stronger and stronger. Large rocky outcrops littered the waterway while the nest managed to float freely, somehow able to find a path unrestricted of any obstacle. Eventually the nest came upon rapids and though it had started to come apart, the nest, and the baby it held, stayed afloat. The afternoon sun began to fade and dropped to the horizon, the water eventually slowing when it led the baby down another waterway and into a slow flowing creek. The nest eventually lodged into the swampy bank while the water petered out amongst the muddy islands.

The elder water nymphs were gathering together nearby (which they usually did at this time), to discuss the state of affairs and to argue about who was showing the effects of father time the quickest. They were all many hundreds of summers old, and the last of their kind. One of them, that was standing by the creek bed stuck out its long branch and bent one of its crooked fingers at the strange figure inside the nest

that had floated near the edge. The other five older ladies arched their crooked necks while they hunched forward to take a look.

“What is that Mildred?” one of them asked impatiently, trying to push forward curiously.

“I’m not sure” was the reply as her long extended hand brought the broken nest closer. Mildred gasped while she focused her eyes on the baby inside and almost fell over from the shock.

The elder water nymphs had never seen such a peculiar thing. They had only ever heard of humans, and here was one of them that had somehow come into their realm! When they all peered into the fading light and saw it with their own eyes they all gasped collectively. The wind took their whispers into a muffled conversation, while they all wondered what they should do with it. Although an unknown entity, there were rumours that humans had cut down the water nymphs and other family trees, in the past, though once again none of them had ever actually seen a human before. Not around these parts, and the water nymphs were renowned to not venture much, even these old ladies. If they stayed where they were it gave them more time to complain about the state of the world, even though none of them had ever really seen much of it. Still there were rumours enough, even around these parts. While they stood around debating what they should do, the baby started crying. They all raised their branches to their ears. What a horrible sound! Mildred however

soon stepped closer and decided to pick the baby up. She held it close to her trunk and she tried to calm it down, with the most soothing voice that she could muster, until it eventually stopped crying.

That was how it turned out that the water nymphs became the guardian of the human child. They named the child Gyan meaning enlightened one. Between the six old ladies they managed to work out how to care for the baby. These human babies were very different from their own children, who would remain dormant and unspeaking until they were well into their middle years. In contrast the human baby made a whole lot of strange noises and even though the water nymphs settled well away from the other swamp inhabitants, there were ears everywhere. When the baby could not be calmed, they rushed it to a quiet cave away from the prying ears of shadows and unwelcome listeners. Over those first few sunrises, Mildred in particular often worried about the child. What if it was in danger? The water nymphs were peaceful tree creatures. They stood no chance against anything that wanted to endanger or take the child. Whenever they heard other creatures nearby, they would talk loudly, summoning the wind and howling to each other to drown out the baby's noise. Still, Mildred feared (like all of them) that it was only a matter of time before it was noticed that a human child was out this far, near the stagnant tepid swamp.

Escape

Twix rode as fast as he could, but eventually he had to rest. Though the mare was fast, it was lazy and eventually refused to keep going. He stopped and made camp for the night near a stream while he watered the horse and found some berries that he and the horse could eat. Eventually he lay against a tree, looking into the growing darkness for any signs of danger. Twix awoke startled by the bright sunlight in his eyes. He had slept, and overslept at that! He saddled the horse and before he could even have time to relieve himself he heard a noise of a branch breaking nearby. He peered through the thicket of trees and saw a search party through the trees, coming towards him! He quickly jumped on the horse, turning it around while he waded across through the stream. Suddenly he heard a man yell out excitedly. He had been spotted! Twix tried to hurry the mare across what was a deeper waterway than he first thought. He heard a strange whizz as an arrow flew past his ear. After a perilously long time, the mare seemed to find its feet, reaching solid ground on the other side. It took off up the hill, while the other horses came through the clearing and entered the water on the other side, where he had been only moments earlier.

Twix was chased all that afternoon. At times the search party would bear down on him, but his mare found another gear and pinned its ears back, jumping over fallen logs and riding up and down boggy marshes

to escape capture. While the sunlight faded against the horizon Twix managed to get some distance away. He slowed to a canter while they rode with the wind at their back across the grassy outer plains, towards the mountain ranges. As night descended upon them, Twix was utterly spent, and so was the horse. They heard voices in the distance but Twix felt somewhat safe for now, and he rested and stretched his weary back. That night Twix fed what rations he had left to the horse, and also all of his remaining water. All that he had left was a bruised apple, and just when he had given it to his horse, he had a horrible thought. He was in such a state of delirium that he assumed the apple was actually some form of dried meat, and that he was turning his horse into a cannibal! What a strange thought to have, but he knew his mind was too tired to be thinking rationally any more. His vision was becoming blurry and he could hardly feel his legs. He must find water tomorrow, or he didn't know what they would do. He barely slept at all that night and when he did his thoughts were invaded by his capture and his brother mocking him while he lay with the love of his life. What a monster he had become, and even though he felt a deep anger for his brother, deep down he knew that the only way to take the anguish away was through forgiveness. No, how could he even consider forgiving Leto for what he had done. Twix shook his head trying to get back to sleep and wipe the images of his brother away, but before he knew it the sunlight of a new day peered out from above the hills and it was time to get going again.

Twix rode through woodlands all that morning, as far away from the distant noise of his pursuers as he could, until he could go on no more. He stopped, panting heavily and finally collapsed to the ground. Twix thought he heard the faint horns from the search party, but it seemed far away enough again for him to relax and rest for just a moment. Water he thought to himself, he and the horse needed water, but before he knew it, the horse seemed to shake its head impatiently glaring at him and whinnying before turning and galloping off, leaving him on his own. He was so tired, his mind began to wander. He imagined seeing a clear pool of water that he could drink plentifully from. For those quiet moments he didn't know if he was asleep or awake. While his mind wandered he was satisfied with simply falling asleep and not waking up. He had had enough; he just wanted it all to be over.

Daechir (Pisces)



“Seems like you’re a wanted young man” a voice said from out of the shadows.

Twix almost jumped before hastily rising to his feet and backing against a tree fearfully.

“Relax, I’m not going to hand you over to the King” the voice exclaimed calming his nerves, just a little.

The figure had emerged from behind a large boulder. He was wrapped in a dark robe and a hood covered its head. The man seemed to hover above the ground moving closer, while Twix backed away in distress. Who was this peculiar stranger?

“I’ve been through some hard times too you know” the man stated calmly.

“I’ve been wrongly done by many in the Kingdom. Mistreated and ignored for being.... different”

“I’m okay, I just need to find somewhere safe where, where even the shadows can’t find me” Twix replied glancing around anxiously, waiting for something else to surprise him.

“Do you have any water?” Twix added hopefully.

After relaxing for a moment Twix read the thoughts of the figure that stood in front of him. He had no ill

intent towards him, and he was simply a bizarre conjunction of sad and pitiful emotions.

“I know just the place; come with me. I have plenty of food and water” the dark elf motioned, leading the young man behind a hidden rock shelf and into his abode.

This was how Twix met Daechir, and Twix felt safe hiding there for some time while the approaching storm and search parties abated outside. Twix soon however realised why Daechir lived alone. He was somewhat of a sadist and blamed the world for all of his emotional turmoil. Daechir showed Twix some of his magic, including his ability to create a dense fog which deemed him somewhat invisible. Twix then had to endure Daechir endlessly repeating his story of how witches had given a concoction at a young age which resulted in him being suspended above the ground, unaffected by the full effects of gravity. Twix considered telling Daechir about his ability to read people’s minds, but when he went to speak, Daechir was too busy talking more about himself. It seemed Daechir hadn’t had company for quite some time. Twix felt that there was something else in Daechir’s character. He was a troubled soul, and Twix wasn’t sure if it would be safe to speak of such things. When Daechir did finally question him about why he was being hunted, Twix simply told him there were lies spread, to which Daechir rambled on with another one of his stories about how people had lied about him.

As time passed there were occasions where Daechir brooded constantly, his mood turning foul and peaking when he verbally abused Twix. Twix remained motionless, astonished by Daechir until Daechir broke down and began sobbing uncontrollably in front of him. After Twix had consoled him Daechir relaxed and settled down once again, almost forgetting his tears from a mere moment ago. Twix went to his sleeping quarters shaking his head. He knew that at some stage soon he would have to go his own way and leave Daechir behind. While Twix had appreciated Daechir taking him in, he felt that he must get on his way soon, before Daechir's emotional break-downs became any worse.

Moving On

When Shango had staggered out of the tavern there was no sign of the ranger. He jumped on a horse that he knew one of the thugs owned. Oh well, he wasn't planning on returning anytime soon he thought, galloping off out of town. He seemed to pull himself together after getting some distance away and he soon saw some fresh horse tracks over the next hill. Shango followed as quickly as he could, all the time wondering what he was going to say when he did catch up with the ranger. While he rode down another hill, and through a small stream he suddenly noticed that there were no tracks on the other side. This was unusual indeed, he thought, while his drunken mind spun with possibilities.

"Stop right there" a voice shouted from a nearby tree.

Shango stopped mid-stream. He could now see the other horse through the trees, just a little way upstream. The man's dogs emerged from the trees on the far side also, and when Shango looked up towards where the voice had come from, he could still not make out the figure.

"Why are you following me?" the ranger enquired from high in the pine tree, crossbow poised.

"I saw you in the tavern. I was impressed!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Adil asked

looking at the disfigured horned human below.

“I was wondering if I can come with you” Shango slurred his words roughly, while he tried to subdue his throbbing headache.

“To where?” Adil asked

“Wherever you’re going” Shango replied somewhat nervously.

“I don’t need another burden” Adil said climbing down stealthily from the tree and finally coming into Shango’s view.

“My parents they, they were killed by goblins... I have nothing back there for me” Shango muttered soberly. He felt stupid for coming and wished he was back at the pub, where he could swallow his remaining self-pride in another pint.

Adil looked closely at the young swaying man in front of him. Adil preferred to be on his own, but now felt a small sense of responsibility to look after the kid, rather than watch him go back and become a town drunk. What an odd looking character Adil thought to himself, staring at the huge belly, broken horn and big nosed chap in front of him, who was now looking miserably at the ground. Adil jumped on his horse and kicked his heels into its flank to get it going.

“Try to keep up” Adil said over his shoulder while his horse raced up the next bank into the trees and his

dogs tore off after him. Clouds of dust filled the sky, while a little grin appeared momentarily from the corner of his mouth. He took off in pursuit, not wanting to let the ranger down.

Kitsune (Libra)



Kitsune was busily making her way around the marketplace, evading eye contact and going about her business. It was hard for people not to look, especially men. Beautiful women seemed to be as rare as hen's teeth around here. So were handsome men; didn't she know that all too well! She often fantasised about finding her 'Mr Right'; whether it was in her fox or human form it did not matter. She had previously fallen in love only for her beloved to fall for another. She was only young at the time, barely a teenager, when she had met him and fallen head over heels. He was the man of her dreams. He seemed to show plenty of interest also, until a new girl came to town and he soon became smitten with her. Kitsune brooded and her jealousy overcame her one day. On this particular occasion, when her emotions reached a climax, she had her first shape-shifter experience, and turned into a beautiful fox. In her new form, Kitsune realised that she had the power to inflict this new girl with madness. However, the man Kitsune loved didn't lose interest and instead stayed loyally by her side. The memory pained Kitsune so greatly that she had left home and gone into the wilderness to lose her sorrow and try to move on. She knew however, deep down, that no matter how much she liked to say that she had gotten over it, her broken heart, would never fully heal.

Kitsune snapped back to reality while she continued

making her way through the marketplace glancing cheekily at a handsome man while she went into the nearest bar. It was barely eleven, but there would still be plenty of thirsty drunkards to swindle. She sat at an empty table and started shuffling the cards skilfully, awaiting her first victim. It wasn't long before a husky looking gentleman, engaged her and sat down opposite, confidently asking if she'd like a drink.

"No thanks" she replied batting her lashes.

"Would you like to play some cards?" she asked seductively flicking her hair.

He nodded almost immediately, hypnotised by her beauty. In no time she had him playing for money, and when he turned to engage the barman and order another drink, she rapidly removed more money from his money pouch that lay exposed on the table. When he turned back around, she suddenly snapped at him.

"Enough with you, you bastard" she shrieked viciously, gathering the cards and making her way to the front door. The man watched her go, perplexed, while he saw flames engulf the room. He ran screaming to the far door on the opposite side of the tavern, before the barman had even finished pouring the man's next pint. The barman looked up confused, as did the other patrons. Nothing had happened except the beautiful young lady had stormed out the front door, and the man that had sat with her had run out the back door screaming hysterically.

“Nutters” the barman said, while looking at the freshly poured beer, and after contemplating it for a moment, and not seeing anyone else in need of another drink, he took a handy swig of it himself.

Once Kitsune came outside into the sunlight she turned down a quiet alley and transformed herself into a young girl. She stuffed the wads of notes in her day dress. Now it was time to make some real money. She was barely noticed while she ducked in and out between the mass of people that had filled the marketplace. She subtly reached into bags and pouches, and stuffed expensive items into her own rucksack. Kitsune enjoyed days like this more than most. Market days always proved to be very rewarding. She smiled while grabbing another purse of coins and stuffing it into her bulging bag. Still as fun as this was, she knew that deep down her heart desired to find someone to share times with. She wanted to find her ‘Mr Right’ and settle down. Kitsune was a romantic at heart, and she yearned to be swept off her feet by someone who was worthy of her love. In some ways she realised that it was likely that she would have to meet another fox, as her many years in the woods, had made it harder for her to keep her human form for long periods. She knew though that this was becoming increasingly difficult with the way the King was building his kingdom, due to the forest being devastated more and more each day. Either way, she knew that she would have to make more of an effort because a good fox was hard to find, that was for sure!

The Mystic's Warning

When the daylight faded Adil and Shango made camp, to Shango's delight. He was exhausted, and thirsty! Adil wandered off, and within no time, came back with a couple of hare's which he put on the fire.

"That smells disgusting" Shango remarked, unimpressed with the stench of fresh meat.

"You don't eat meat?" Adil asked surprised by his young companion.

"Gross" Shango replied screwing up his face in a repulsed manner.

"Here... try some!" Adil said tearing off a cooked piece of flesh and holding it out in front of Shango.

Shango's belly grumbled hungrily. There were no edible plants within sight, and by now it was almost pitch black. His parents would be disgusted with Shango even contemplating such a thing, but they were no longer here, even though he felt like they were watching from the shadows. He missed them so much! Adil watched while Shango stared at the meat, and then Adil started to retract his arm and move the food away.

"A little bit can't hurt" Shango said innocuously reaching out and grabbing the morsel of food before it disappeared.

He was surprised by the taste, but he felt his

stomach satisfied almost immediately. While Adil grabbed the other hare, Shango eventually found himself grabbing the remaining one and gobbling it down even quicker than Adil, while Adil donated most of his hare to his dogs.

After days of riding Adil and Shango had come across the village of Pampaloni, one of the last remaining villages that still remained independent of the King. Shango had sobered up while travelling, though when they approached the village, he felt the awkwardness creep in. He was uncomfortable around people and wasn't used to keeping company. He had hardly spoken to the ranger, and barely made eye contact, and even in those briefest of moments, never for too long. Within the walls, many townsfolk practiced the true magic, and healers learnt their craft with open hearts and open minds. Adil walked by, somewhat intrigued by their powers, though somewhat fearful at the same time. As a child he was taken in by the Banali tribe, who had many clerics within their ranks. They would often use magic to work with nature ensuring that they were never noticed by the unlearned eye. The sunlight beamed down torturously while Adil told his dogs to wait with Shango and then told Shango not to move, before ducking under one of the tents, intrigued by the mages and their wares. He was suddenly grabbed on his arm by a hand as cold as ice. He turned suddenly to see an old woman staring intently at him. Upon staring at Adil she spoke with absolute resolution. With her steely eyes and raspy

voice she informed him that the end was coming, and that he had no time to waste.

“Please sit down. You must” she continued resolutely.

“I must go. I have somewhere to be” Adil responded, feeling uncomfortable.

“You have nowhere to be, but where you are.”

The lady looked deeply in his eyes, until Adil felt that he couldn’t move even if he wanted to.

“Your life is in danger grave, for only a child, us all can save.”

Adil looked at her confusedly, unsure of what she was getting at. He knew not of any children and didn’t feel like wasting any more time in discussion with this strange old woman. Her eyes were beaming the brightest blue, while her white hair fell severely across her face. Her face was withered and lines were etched like deep trenches, each with a story to justify its place on her leathery skin.

Suddenly her face changed colour while she struggled for breath. She was gasping when Adil caught her moments before she fell to the ground.

“The child...” and just as suddenly she died in his arms. Adil looked around completely shaken by what had just happened. No-one outside had noticed what

had transpired as the tent canopy shaded them from view, they simply continued going about their business, ignoring the shadows and secrets within the stall.

Adil put the psychic down on the ground and looked out to where he had left Shango. He was not there! He looked around again and finally saw him over at a nearby stall. Adil's dogs had followed but they continued looking back uncertainly to where their master had left them. Adil quickly made his way back amongst the growing crowd of people and over towards Shango. He felt uneasy by what the mystic had said, while he carefully watched some of the King's guard's walking across the far side of the marketplace. What were they doing here? Adil knew that they had to get out of there – and quickly! He wondered, what had the mystic meant about a child? Surely he wasn't talking about his companion; he seemed too old to be classified as a child, although Adil couldn't be completely sure? He didn't know much about children. Adil tried to motion to Shango who was now some distance away, over at another stall, looking at trinkets. Maybe Adil would be better off leaving him; maybe he would find his way here, in another town? No; Adil had said that he could come with him, well not in so many words, but he would keep his promise. One of the guards turned in Adil's direction while Adil spun around and ducked back under one of the tents. He kept himself low, easing himself along beneath one of the tables, in the direction of Shango. Unfortunately Shango wasn't exactly the most inconspicuous travelling

companion, with his funny horns, nose and big belly, although Adil realised that he couldn't help how he looked. Still, maybe if he stopped drinking so much; he might lose some weight. Adil tried gesturing to Shango, finally catching his attention and nodding briskly that it was time to go. The guards had turned away again while Shango had finally got close enough for Adil to whack him on the head and hurry him along.

"I told you to stay put!" Adil said, annoyed with having to put up with his disobedient young companion.

They rushed to the other side of the courtyard, while the dogs followed compliantly, not far behind.

They were moving quickly across the marketplace when Adil made eye contact with a young girl. She looked at him strangely, almost blushing while she tried to avoid eye contact. He wondered if this was how things were going to be from now on, scrutinising every child for some kind of sign. The girl seemed uneasy as she took off out of sight, barely managing to lug the huge rucksack behind her. Adil wondered if he should go over and try to speak to her, but she had moved swiftly, like only a child can, and was soon gone from view. There was something odd about her, Adil realised, but he swiftly shook aside the thought. He had enough to worry about just getting out of town without catching the guard's undivided attention.

Kitsune had glanced at the outlandish man and his

grotesque companion. He had looked curiously at her, so she had ducked and weaved more quickly through the crowd, avoiding further scrutiny. She passed a dog, who growled deeply at her while she stepped back in terror. Kitsune drew in a sharp breath while it strode past. Oh how she hated dogs. They scared her like nothing else could. It looked back at her and barked, while the oblivious owner pulled at the lead, for it to follow. Kitsune immediately focused on the dog's owner. This will teach you for having a dog. Instantaneously the owner began sobbing loudly, so loudly that people turned to look. Kitsune had just planted the image of that man's mother dying brutally while she lay sleeping. It was a little harsh but Kitsune had never been one for her sensitivity. Kitsune soon felt exhausted, particularly the energy it took to keep her form when a dog was around. She ran hastily out of the front gates as fast as she could go.

"Excuse me" a high-pitched voice said from behind her.

She turned, angrily at being spoken to.

"I think you dropped this"

A young woman had run after her and held out a gold necklace that must have fallen from her bag.

"I'm sure you'd be devastated, if you lost something as beautiful as this."

The woman seemed to be staring at her bulging bag curiously. Kitsune snatched the necklace from her, and stormed away, while the woman simply gaped in amazement. Kitsune never knew how to react to kindness. Did these people not know that self-interest was all they should worry about? When she made her way out of the town and out of sight from a human and a half-breed that were deep in discussion, she relaxed. Kitsune stopped and looked around and after realising that she had not been followed, she ducked behind a grove of bushes. Kitsune emerged a few seconds later, in her true form, as a bright red fox. She licked at the stubs where her previous nine tails were, now only two remained. It was time for her to get home. She had matters to attend to. She made sure no-one was following before she rushed off West towards her home in the outer desert country.

The Water Nymphs

The leader of the swamp ravens heard it first, the peculiar sound, of, of, of... No it couldn't be, not out here in the swamps. There was no human colony within days of here. But there it was again, muffled now, but definitely the unmistakeable sound of – a human child! The ravens gathered together and then spread out to find the source of the sound. This wouldn't take long as there were not many creatures that lived in the swamp. The gators and serpents were resting in the late afternoon and the hawks and buffalo were seemingly unconcerned by the sound, or had not heard, but the head raven always had an open ear out for anything out of the ordinary and was utterly determined to locate the source. He circled lower and as he drew in closer to the quarters of the water nymphs, he noticed them acting somewhat unusually. He landed resolutely in the middle of the elders of the swamp, while they reluctantly parted for him.

“How is you lovely ladies this gorge-us aftanoon?” the raven pried.

“What do you want Delano?” Mildred asked shortly, fearing Delano may notice the small bundle that was hidden in the cave behind them. She had just hidden it away just in time when she saw him approaching.

“I think I must be getting old, like you old lasses, as I been hearing things?”

"You been having those bad dreams again have you?" one of the water nymphs chided, and they all laughed, though somewhat nervously.

"No, I ain't..... I been hearing some human baby noises I has"

"What in the world are you on about Delano" another water nymph asked hesitantly, trying to keep her composure.

He was peering at each of them accusingly, passing a guilty judgement on the lot of them.

"Youse do know what the King would fink if a human baby was being 'arboured all the way out here don't youse. He'd be mighty interested in finding out this sorta news."

"I can imagine he would be. Of course if we ever see anything like this human babbee, or whatever you call it, we will be sure to let you know" Mildred said in reply, somehow managing to keep her nerves at bay.

She could feel a cold sweat creeping down her spine.

They all watched while Delano cast his eyes over them once again and finally seemed satisfied enough to take off. Just when they thought they had survived a close call, at that exact moment the baby cried once again. Delano turned in mid-air and looked straight down at where the sound had come from, in behind the

water nymphs. He tried to dive down to grab the baby up but the old dastardly water nymphs moved over and shielded it, while they frantically waived their branches in the air, keeping him at bay.

“The King will hear of this. You will pay for your deceit!” Delano yelled before taking off fervently towards the castle.

Mildred

When Delano left, the water nymphs immediately began to panic. They would need to take this baby away quickly, but where? Most of them had never left the swamp. Why had they lied to Delano? Why hadn't they given him the child? Mildred quickly decided that they would be less noticeable if she took the baby away on her own. The others seemed to agree, a little too quickly for her liking. Without further ado, she picked up the baby and started running, to where, she was not yet sure, but the adrenalin certainly got her on her way. After she had travelled some distance through the marshy swamp and into the higher country, she could hear the rumours spreading through the forest while more trees turned to watch her trudging past. She was struggling to move quickly, as she was of an age fifty times some of these young elks, but she dared not stop for a longer period of time than she had to. While she continued on, she wondered where she should be heading. She had no idea why they had lied to Delano. Surely they knew that they could not keep the human child safe; but Mildred was old enough to remember the ancient legend. It had been written, a long time ago, that a human child would return all things back to equilibrium. For all she knew, this could be that prophesised child. Mildred also knew that the dark powers had long since hidden this information and only a handful of those who dreamed of a better world, were left to tell the tale. The only other creature old enough and caring enough that Mildred could think of going to

for help was Karcha. Karcha was an old rock creature from the times before men. Mildred was young in comparison even though she was nearing five hundred years old. Karcha was fully aware of the ancient scriptures. For all Mildred knew, she may have even helped write them! Mildred only hoped that she was still alive. She had only met her once, back when her own parents lived as their neighbours. In that moment, she made her decision. She would continue north, to her old country, to either find Karcha or be killed for keeping the flame of hope alight.

The baby cried loudly and often but there was little Mildred could do about it. She found as much water as she could and also crushed fruits and nuts into a liquefied concoction while the child drank greedily, which seemed to calm it down somewhat. The woods were alive with whisperings of this foreign tree and its unique companion. Word spread like a fire raging up the hillside, surpassing them while they were watched from above, in the most part disapprovingly. Many of the animals flew and crept close, watching from higher ground to ensure that they got a good peek at this strange sighting. One of the water nymph elders carrying a human baby, this was something different indeed, even with the changing wind in the air. The rabbits hopped curiously closer, always excited by any new gossip. Still Mildred carried on, as fast as she could. She preferred to move during the night though with each step she wilted as she was so craving water, and the baby, well Mildred was sure the baby must have

been thirsty. While she stopped on the higher slopes she heard the birds and animals talking mischievously nearby. She looked up at the bright moon and prayed that she made it to Karcha with the baby still alive. She wondered how long a baby could survive without some form of water, or sustenance. The baby, which up until that point had been sleeping for hours, awoke suddenly and started crying. Mildred wailed also. She was at her wits end. Why had she not given the child up? Who was she to try and save it, for a breath of hope that had been written back in the ages? Who could know if this was even the one, the supposed saviour, it was simply the first human child that she had ever seen. She was going on a whim, something her late mother had told her never to do, but deep down she sensed that she was doing the right thing. Still Mildred realised that this was definitely very un-nymph-like behaviour.

Suddenly Mildred heard a noise that was so familiar it startled her. When she raised her head she saw the flowing water only a few paces in front of her. She wiped at her tired eyes as if to clear them. This was impossible; it had not been there moments before. Mildred looked closer thinking that her eyes were playing tricks on her. The water was white; pure white. She moved closer and reached down with her spare hand and took a sip. It had a strange taste, something she had never tasted before, but it tasted good. She then dipped her long sinewy fingers into the white substance and held it close to the baby. Its mouth surrounded her finger and it suckled away greedily.

Mildred continued with each of her fingers for the child, feeding it for what felt like hours, while she also fervently drank as much as she could. This discovery had been a miracle. The angels from the middle sky seemed to want to keep this child alive. For a moment the flame of hope burned a little brighter.

Wolfram's Rage

Delano had flown day and night to get to the castle. He would pass on these tidings to his lord Wolfram, who held close counsel with the King. Wolfram looked after his kind very well and Delano would be rewarded by such an intriguing piece of information. It was dawn when he approached the castle. He flew towards the quarters of Wolfram and crowed three times, as was the custom, and then landed on a nearby tower. Delano breathed heavily upon landing on the parapet. He had been flying at a frantic pace to get here. A guard saw him land and nodded in acknowledgement, recognising that it was one of Wolfram's ravens. Delano ignored the simple human. He did not waste time on such trivial things as greetings or formalities with humans. After a few moments Delano heard the gate open and immediately slam shut while Wolfram emerged, looking tired and bleary-eyed. Wolfram was still upset by his failed capture of the ranger. The King had not been pleased when Wolfram had returned with nothing. Though he cared little for the King, Wolfram's pride had taken a blow. He hated failing. Still, Wolfram now hoped that his most trusted pawn might have some news of the ranger.

"What news Delano?" Wolfram requested gruffly.

Delano caught his breath then recited the news about the noise back at the swamps, and how he had seen and heard a human baby who was being looked after by the water nymphs. While Delano spoke

Wolfram's eyes opened wide and when he finished, the response was swift.

"Take me to them!"

Wolfram was stunned by the welcome news. This was a greater piece of information than one resistant woodsman. This was possibly the news that he had hoped for all of his life. If this was perhaps 'the child', then this was the opportunity to seize the Chi of this planet and move into the echelons of worlds beyond this one.

"Can I at least get some rest, I been flying for two long days" Delano asked, anticipating the response but nevertheless hopeful.

"Now!" Wolfram rumbled as if not hearing him, while he morphed into a huge raven and started off in the direction of the swamplands.

Delano sighed and took off, careful not to disappoint his leader.

The other water nymphs had been very fearful since Mildred had left with the child. There would be dire consequences for her and for them as well. Occasionally some of the other ravens of the swamp would fly above and mock the nymphs saying that they would suffer for what they had done. There was nothing that they could do now, but wait. The clouds gathered in the distance and soon a great storm dropped hail and lightning,

lighting up the evening sky. They all clung together and wallowed endlessly, their long sinewy arms soaking up the rain while it fell ceaselessly. However the rain did little to ease their minds, and the vicious hail cut into them, as their bark was battered by its ferocity. After what seemed like an eternity the rain suddenly stopped, and the sun came out to warm them. The swamp rats scampered past their feet, and for once they ceased their worry and managed to relax. There was even some laughter as they joked amongst themselves about how clucky Mildred was. Suddenly something dark passed across the sky, blocking out the sun. They all looked up and realised what was coming towards them. It was Delano and another raven, though this one was much, much larger and they could see the raging fury in its eyes while it honed in towards them.

Wolfram's keen eyes saw the wandering water nymphs at the edge of the swamp. He would not be merciful for them harbouring a human child. He had heard of the myths of the ancients and knew the risks if this was THE CHILD and if it was not found and taken care of immediately. Wolfram dived in amongst them, changing shape upon landing and they all stepped back fearfully. He landed on one knee whilst a dark robe enclosed around him. He rose to his feet, standing at almost seven foot tall and although he was still shorter than the nymphs, they cowered in his presence. What was standing in front of them was pure evil, there was no doubt about it and they all stood shaking, afraid of what was to come. Delano landed with a thud near

Wolfram, wheezing exhaustedly.

“Where is the child!” Wolfram boomed angrily.

“What...” one of the water nymphs started, but there was no point trying to lie now.

“We don’t know” she continued truthfully, hoping that this would be a reasonable answer.

Wolfram reacted suddenly, unleashing a sword and swinging it through the nymph that had spoken, before it fell to the ground in two. It looked stunned while it stared at its lower trunk, turning lifeless and grey, before its eyes closed for the final time.

“We will continue this till I get some acceptable answers” the black mage continued.

There was a silence, long and drawn while the remaining nymphs considered what to say. They were all shaking more now, and their knees could be heard rattling like un-fleshed bones.

Wolfram reacted swiftly again, swinging his blade at the nearest nymph and it yelped in pain, before falling dead to the ground.

“Really, all we know is that one of our friends took the child in that direction a few sunrises ago! Please don’t hurt us anymore!” another one of them said through sobs and anguish.

There were only three of them left now. If Mildred had died, they were the last three of their kind.

“You know the crime of harbouring children is life in jail.” Wolfram said suddenly relaxing a little and changing into his other form, a large grey wolf, while he circled around them.

“...but the jails are getting overcrowded so I think I’ll spare you that worry” Wolfram continued, circling playfully, while his eyes stared at each of them resolutely.

“Where did the child come from?” Wolfram snapped suddenly, facing one of the last three nymphs.

“We, we don’t know” was the despondent reply, to which Wolfram attacked viciously knocking the tree down to its knees and mauling it till its breath stopped.

“Please we don’t know really.. that is the truth” one of the last two nymphs cried out, not knowing how to stop this madness.

Wolfram turned sharply to face her.

“I believed her, I was just not happy with the answer” Wolfram snapped angrily, but then once again he suddenly relaxed and smiled at the last two remaining nymphs. Delano had been smiling widely with each of Wolfram’s torturous blows. It was the first time that he had seen his master shape-shift into his wolf form.

“You’ll have wished you had turned the child over to Delano from the moment you saw it!” Wolfram remarked bitterly. He jumped towards one of the nymphs and his jaw tore off one of their arms in one snap, but before Wolfram even landed he had changed back into a raven flying off above the tree line, spitting out the branch as he went.

The nymph that had just lost her arm cried out mournfully, but breathed a sigh of relief at no further attack. The other nymph came closer to comfort her, weeping as she approached. They had almost lost their entire race in one encounter. Delano, who had been catching his breath, simply smiled evilly and then took off following Wolfram in search of the child. Fortunately they had been spared, though for how long they did not know?

“Run Mildred, they’re coming!” the nymph who had just lost her arm, said under her breath, hoping the wind would somehow carry her words and warn her friend of the impending danger, that was now ruthlessly in pursuit.

Karcha

Mildred and the baby had rested well after their refreshment of the white water. On the new dawn the sky was orange and full of life while they ventured towards the caves in the hope of finding Karcha. The sun beamed down heavily while they lumbered on. Mildred's roots were aching and splitting with all the walking, and she felt as old as she had ever felt. The baby cried and cried and cried and there was nothing Mildred could do but keep going. They passed through the high country, watching while creatures scuttled out of sight, the faint whispers about them barely heard. Mildred did her best to try not to listen and she trudged on with purpose in each step. When the light was passing beneath the uneven horizon, they finally came upon a huge cave entrance. This was the sort of place Karcha would reside. Mildred only hoped that she would be found within. Either way, this was the place that they would stop for the night.

When they entered the darkness, the baby was making its baby noises while they stepped further and further into the shadows. It took a while for Mildred's eyes to adjust to the dark. She wasn't used to moving in the dark, but suddenly she caught sight of movement. There it was again, over against the far wall. Silence filled the cavern and then again the noise was heard, though this time directly behind them! Mildred turned nervously to try and see who it was. Suddenly a snake's head reared up close to them, its tongue flicking in and

out. Even in the darkness, she could now see that it had a striking gold streak down its back with red flecks, scattered across it.

“What have we here, some visitorssssss? We don’t often get visitorsss” the snake hissed, rearing up closer to Mildred and dangerously close to the baby.

Mildred drew back horrified, while she tried to get as far away from the serpent as possible. She didn’t like the reference to ‘we’. She knew that she had no way of protecting the baby and she was now cut off from running back out of the cave. All she could think to do was scream, and so she screamed as loud as a water nymph elder can scream, while the noise boomed and echoed off the walls, and then, then there was just silence. The serpent moved closer and Mildred could also see another serpent with a bluish hue coming up behind the first.

“No-one can hear you in here, don’t worry we’ll try to be as hosssspitable as possssssssible” the other snake hissed, and they both sneered playfully. They moved closer until the gold streaked snake started wrapping itself around Mildred’s leg. It took all of Mildred’s resolve not to faint, as it slithered higher and higher, coiling up to her waist.

Unexpectedly a rumble came from the distance, softly at first, but as it came closer and closer the noise became deafening. Soon the rocks in the side of the cave began to shake and seemed to transform as if they

were being pushed aside. From out of complete darkness another large boulder appeared to fill the void. The snakes seemed stunned while they looked strangely at the wall, uncertain of what had just happened. The serpents were curious and the gold tinged snake withdrew its embrace and joined the other as they slithered away from Mildred to investigate further. Although she knew she should have bolted for the cave opening, Mildred was frozen in fear and simply couldn't move. Instead she just hugged the baby closer and closed her eyes in fear. The serpents slid closer to the far wall. Suddenly a giant eye opened in the rock and two huge hands reached out and grabbed a hold of the snakes, crushing them in an instant. It distorted its shape and stepped forth from the rock itself, and raised itself, standing almost as high as the rock ceiling above. It sighed deeply while its giant eye peered down at Mildred and the baby shaking in fear, in front of her.

"Is that you Mildred?" the rock creature asked after a few seconds, its voice reverberating off the walls and throughout the cave.

Mildred was still stunned until she finally opened her eyes again and recognised the familiar figure; the person that she had been longing to find.

"Karcha, we are so glad to have found you, and just in the nick of time" Mildred replied, a wave of relief sweeping over her.

Mildred then went on swiftly explaining to Karcha

what had happened since discovering the child. Though Karcha was listening she couldn't help but stand and gape at the human baby in front of her.

"So this could be the one that has been spoken about since the real dawn of time?" Karcha asked, not looking at Mildred but her three huge green agate eyes stared fixedly in amazement at the child.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Better - I'm sure..." Mildred spluttered, exhausted by her last few days of exertion.

"What do you think?" Mildred enquired at length, while she watched Karcha, fascinated by her reaction.

"Who can tell in regards to such things" Karcha said squatting down next to Mildred.

Some clattering noises and mutterings from a foreign tongue could be heard faintly, further down towards the entrance to the cave that they were in.

"Come, it's not safe here. Follow me, I will take you to my place" Karcha stated and with that she changed into a large round boulder. She rolled back through the hole in the rock wall that she had created and out of sight, into the eternal darkness.

Mildred followed as quickly as she could, keeping a firm grip on the child while she tried to keep up. The noises and mutterings grew louder in the shadows but Mildred tried to focus solely on where she was going.

She didn't know how long she could go on. She was completely and utterly exhausted. She just wanted to feel safe, for at least a moment. After moving as fast as Mildred felt safe to, without cracking her trunk further and dropping the baby, they finally emerged from under the ground. The cold night air smacked into her violently, almost knocking her off her feet. The stars were beaming brightly, almost flashing in time with each step. A meteor shower clashed in the night sky above, causing a brilliant eruption of light, which was soon swallowed by darkness once again. Mildred could no longer hear any voices in pursuit, and managed to exhale a sigh of relief. Karcha had changed shape again uncurling from the boulder. She was now running, the earth shaking with each step. They ran towards what looked like a small hill and just when Mildred thought that Karcha was going to turn again into a ball and plough through it, the green mossy covering drew back and a cave entrance was revealed. Mildred was now not far behind and when they entered the cave the living moss again covered the entrance, so that they remained hidden.

"I haven't moved like that in years. Takes me back to my old dancing days" Karcha pronounced when Mildred eventually caught up to her within the enclosed room.

"Welcome to my humble abode" Karcha continued, while Mildred struggled to catch her breath. Karcha could see how exhausted she was from her journey from the swamp. Karcha was actually amazed a water

nymph could travel so far.

Mildred held the baby in one hand and leaned against the wall, while she looked up intriguingly at Karcha's home. What started with a small entrance-way opened up into a huge cavern within, and a fireplace at the far wall cast a welcome light around the room. When Mildred looked more closely at her surrounds, she noticed the unusual dried fruits and various hanging ornaments on each wall. There were earthen pots and ornaments along some rock shelves on the far wall, but otherwise it was quite bland. Not how Mildred would decorate her home.

"Thank you Karcha, you ah, saved our lives back there" Mildred said sincerely, turning and looking into her old friend's eyes.

"It has been too long Mildred, I remember you from back in the days of the ancients. Your mother came along to many of our gatherings. She was a good friend.

"I remember" Mildred said, smiling happily. Those days were long gone now; when the evil forces were only small and insignificant in number, and of little concern to the flow of life. Mildred had been a mere child when her mother had gone to those meetings. Mildred missed her mother, but it had been many hundreds of winters since she was last alive. Still the memory caught her unawares, shaking her while she let the thought of her parents drift across her mind, like a boat sailing across a placid sea.

The baby which had been crying softly since they had started running now broke out in wailing cries.

“Can I hold the baby, it has been many a year since I have seen a human baby?”

“You have seen one before?” Mildred asked surprised.

“Why of course. I have seen many things” Karcha replied smiling.

Mildred passed the baby over to Karcha who held it lovingly. It ceased crying immediately. Mildred envied the response instantly.

“You have done a great deed Mildred protecting this human child...

..You do know that you are now in danger potential of the grave variety though?”

“Yes” Mildred replied exhausted.

“My sincerest apologies Mildred; you must be starving. Please help yourself to some food. I was just baking a cake when I heard your faint call of anguish.”

“It’s not...”

“It’s a rock cake, please just take it out of the firebox there and help yourself” Karcha interrupted her, confirming her assumption, as if already knowing what

the question was going to be.

Though this sounded like the most unappealing food possible Mildred decided that she would give it a go. After cutting a small slice, she was surprised at how soft and fresh it was and she quickly finished it and almost without even realising it, had already cut herself another, much larger slice.

“So what should we do next Karcha?” Mildred asked, while they both looked kind-heartedly at the child.

“We will have to see the hand that fate deals I’m afraid” Karcha replied, though Mildred knew that this response just meant that Karcha was still trying to work out what to do.

Mildred noticed that Karcha had been feeding the baby juice from one of her local plants. Karcha knew (from an ancient recipe), that this juice was very similar to the ‘milk’ liquid which human babies drank. Mildred looked closely at the white fluid. It looked just like the white lake that had miraculously appeared a few days before. After a short time Mildred fell asleep, overcome with tiredness. Mildred had been sleeping against the wall for a few hours, no doubt exhausted from her journey, when Karcha heard a foreign noise in the distance. The strange noise was still some way off, but coming closer every second.

“Mildred, it is time for us to go!” Karcha said swiftly

sensing the danger outside.

“What, where, who.. me? Baby, where?”

“I’ve decided what needs to be done.”

They ran out the back of the cave and into another passageway. Mildred was soon falling behind, her weariness returning instantly after such a short rest. Mildred couldn’t help but notice that the walls were lit up, illuminating their way. Mildred took a closer look at the walls abruptly realising that they were covered in thousands and thousands of glow worms!

“What, where are we going?” Mildred yelled ahead to Karcha while she continued running.

“We will pass the child on safely to the human’s relatives”

“Relatives, do you have human friends?”

“No, but I do have a monkey friend” Karcha said turning while she ran, so that Mildred could hear her.

“Monkey?” Mildred replied confusedly, but she ran on determinedly, hoping that Karcha had not become so old that she was turning senile.

Confrontation

Delano was barely able to keep up with Wolfram, while they continued on. Wolfram rarely needed any guidance, due to him being such a good tracker, but whenever he was unsure, either an animal or one of the spindly pines pointed in the direction that the water nymph and baby had gone. They flew on, Wolfram changing into human form when they entered the cave. Wolfram clapped his hands together and immediately a flame burned between his hands as Delano looked on in awe. His leader continued to amaze him. It wasn't long before they saw the carnage that had unfolded. The two serpents were dead, well one was pulverised while the other convulsed intermittently. It was alive but inaudible and therefore of no use. They looked like they had been squashed by something, it was definitely a crush wound, however Wolfram was unsure of exactly what could have caused it. The water nymph had obviously had help from somebody. A small twig from the water nymph lay on the rock floor, which Wolfram picked up and sniffed at. The nymph and child couldn't be more than a few hours ahead of them! Wolfram was about to turn to leave the cave the way they had come, but he couldn't help but notice, even with his dimly lit flame, the variation of dark in the far wall. Upon closer inspection he found the gaping hole that Karcha had created.

"Come" was all Wolfram said. The flame disappeared while he morphed into a wolf and raced off

through the newly found space.

Delano did his best to keep up but the gap was increasing at each pace. There was no way he could keep up with a wolf, even without his last few days of activity. He could barely see the grey streak ahead of him and eventually he lost sight of Wolfram altogether. Suddenly Delano emerged from the dark enclosed tunnel and into the brisk night air. He looked around him unable to see where Wolfram was, so he flew higher into the sky to get a better look. He could see, some distance ahead, the faint speck of Wolfram circling around a small mossy hill. Delano eventually approached and landed noisily, beside his master.

“QUIET!” Wolfram hissed, giving Delano a furious glance, at his nonchalance.

Wolfram seemed to be focused on the hill, sniffing the air strangely and staring fixedly at the thick covering of incandescent moss.

Delano thought that his master had lost his mind, when he unsheathed his blade and swung it at the mossy hill itself. The moss reacted almost instantaneously moving out of the way before the blade tore through it, and Delano’s mouth fell open when it revealed a huge cave opening.

“This way!” Wolfram said, moving forward and plunging into yet more darkness. Delano breathed a long sigh then followed Wolfram into the dark cave.

Surprise

Mildred followed Karcha, going through passageways and up and down tunnels till they emerged once again into the cold night air. The clouds sporadically covered the moon, which made the light minimal, while she struggled to look ahead. They were in completely different surroundings with dense rainforest seeming to hug them tightly. There were trees on all sides and Karcha seemed to somehow glide between them even with her incredible size. While Mildred tried to keep up, Karcha ran ahead, still holding the baby while she urged Mildred to hurry along. Mildred knew there was no use complaining and besides Karcha was much older than her, but still the distance between them grew. Finally Karcha slowed and began calling out into the silent forest.

“Cheeko! Cheeko where are you?”

When Mildred finally caught up and bent over to regain her breath, she looked around in the subdued light, trying to look for something out of the ordinary between the condensed trees. It wasn't long before they heard activity, some distance behind them. They both looked at each other, recognising that they were being hunted and knowing that the impending danger was not far away.

“Cheeko, quickly this is no time for your games!” Karcha called out once again, but once again – there was no response.

Mildred continued staring up the slope where the noise had come from until finally her eyes caught a grey mass far up on the hillside but running with distinct purpose. Running towards them! Mildred turned back to where Karcha was but she had disappeared. Where had she gone? Mildred stood no chance on her own! She quickly realised that Karcha had the baby. Had Karcha left her to be sacrificed and taken off with the baby on her own? Surely she wouldn't do such a thing, would she? If this was the chosen one, perhaps she might. Mildred legs were knocking together in fear, while she wondered if this was going to be the end. She turned back towards the hillside but she could no longer see anything. Their pursuer had reached the dense part of the rainforest where the ground evened out, now Mildred could only hear the panting noise growing louder and louder while whatever it was came closer and closer.

Wolfram could smell them while he ran through the coppice of rainforest. They couldn't be more than one hundred paces ahead and he was ready to attack. He had decided that dead or alive, he was going to bring the baby back to the King, or better yet, become the rightful ruler of this Kingdom and beyond. Suddenly, from the corner of his eyes Wolfram caught sight of a huge pillar of stone while it swung dangerously towards him. At the last second, Wolfram just managed to evade the full impact, which would have been his end. He was however knocked severely to his right, as he felt his legs go out from under him and he collapsed with

the force of the blow.

When Cheeko had still not appeared, Karcha had run around the side of the nearest trees, trying to formulate a plan. She was annoyed and disappointed that he had not come. Where was he? She had also witnessed the wolf coming down the range and was quickly making her way back towards it. She was trying to find a suitable spot to blindside it, before it reached Mildred. Karcha knew the water nymphs were renowned peace dwellers, and would never raise their hand in attack, even if it was to defend their own lives. Karcha had put the baby down on a soft shrub of flowers and continued on until she found a huge fig tree that offered good sight up the hill and was on the path that was most likely to be used by their assailant. For an instant Karcha thought that she had chosen the wrong vantage point although it wasn't long until she heard the wolf surging down towards them. Luckily she had reacted just in time. She stepped forth and swung her huge arm and though the wolf had turned at the last moment, she had hit it with enough force to knock it out cold. On impact it had turned into human form and flew through the air, crashing into a tree. A changeling; wow; she had not seen one of them for some time! The King had definitely sent one of his best after the child. Karcha moved over to the injured figure. He was still breathing, but Karcha had no intention of hurting him anymore. At least he wouldn't be getting up for a while. Karcha slowly made her way back in the direction of the baby. She had not heard Delano fly

down through the canopy nearby. She had not seen him creep around beside her, inching closer. All the while Delano had been focusing on the rock creature, trying to locate a possible weak spot. It seemed almost entirely covered in rocks of varying shapes and sizes. He focused on the smaller rocks that joined his upper and lower leg, deciding that this would be as good a possibility as any. Delano drew on all his remaining strength while he flew purposefully towards his target, hoping that he was right. He would do this to avenge the death of his fallen master.

The Hunt

It wasn't until the raven had flown past her with a small rock in its beak from her lower leg did Karcha realise what had happened. She suddenly felt the sharp pain and groaned in anguish. She faltered for a moment before sinking to the ground. Almost immediately she saw the raven approach once again, this time its claws raised, aiming for her throat. She was able to roll out of the way just in time, while the bird narrowly missed her. Although Karcha was in pain, she felt a rising anger, as she watched it circling in once again. When it came closer she swung out with her tremendous arm and her giant fist collected one of the bird's wings. Delano felt the excruciating pain, while he tried to move his crippled wing. Karcha heard the shrieking bird staggering about on the ground, directly in front of her. Upon raising herself to her knees, Karcha threw one of her fists firmly into the earth. The ground split on impact causing a great chasm to break open and spread beneath the raven. A surprised look crossed Delano's face as he again tried to flap his wing. Delano was only able to use one wing, while he tried to take flight, but to no avail. The earth disappeared beneath him before he toppled into the gaping chasm, screaming, as he fell into the earth itself.

Mildred had heard the turmoil not far back down the hill and although her legs told her to run away, she ventured back towards the noise. She pushed through the shrubs seeing Karcha bent down on one knee, a

pained expression spread across her face. Mildred saw that there were a number of rocks that had tumbled from her leg while Karcha struggled to get to her feet. What had happened? Mildred ran up to her and helped her, but she simply turned and said that she was fine. Mildred tore off some of her younger branches and tied them around the gaping hole, but still small rocks continued to fall out from the wound.

“What happened Karcha?”

Karcha wheezed with a deep pain, but did not reply. Finally she responded.

I think it might have taken one of the key stones” Karcha said looking down anxiously.

“Who?” Mildred asked.

“Never mind” Karcha said while she simply waived Mildred away impatiently, grimacing with the pain.

“Got to make sure the baby is okay” she added before limping off through the trees.

Mildred had almost forgotten – the baby. It’s what had gotten them into this awful mess in the first place. She followed Karcha (who could barely walk by this stage) and she was astonished at what she saw. Even Karcha was astounded by what they were confronted with. The baby had been raised up by flowers that were glowing with different colours of light. The flowers themselves seemed to be gently cradling the baby and

they radiated warmth so that even Karcha and Mildred could feel it.

Mildred seemed stunned for a moment while Karcha finally reached out for the child.

“Be careful” Mildred said cautiously from behind her.

“Look after the darling” came the voices from the flowers themselves, before they gently passed the child over to Karcha.

“Of course” Karcha replied, taking the baby gently before stepping back.

“C’mon we have to hurry, he won’t sleep forever”

“Who won’t?” Mildred replied, but Karcha was already hobbling away.

Wolfram awoke with a monster headache, with the sun beaming viciously down on him. He could feel the pain tear through him, when he tried move. He realised that his shoulder was dislocated and that he might have broken a rib. His leg was also at an unusual angle.

“CRACK” the sound echoed through the deciduous trees while he forced his leg back into place. It was soon followed by his shoulder.

“Pop!”

Anger overpowered the pain. Someone would pay for this!

Even with his regenerative powers it would take some time to heal, time that he didn't have. He shook his head trying to remove the daze and remember what had happened. How long had he been unconscious? He looked down at the trees ahead and noticed signs of another confrontation not far down the way. He saw the unusual stones and then noticed the huge crack in the earth. Maybe Delano had offered some resistance Wolfram thought, seeing a trail of more pebbles and larger stones leading away through the trees. He smiled to himself. The hunt was still on.

Cheeko

Wolfram spread his huge wings and flew up into the air, flapping awkwardly with one arm, but still, it was quicker this way. It wasn't long before he caught sight of his targets through the trees. The water nymph was running somewhat wearily, lagging behind. More importantly, a rock monster that was with them, was limping in severe pain, but holding the baby closely. So that explained the crushed serpents and his huge headache, he had been hit by that monstrosity! Well revenge would be particularly satisfying. Wolfram dived down, not far behind them, turned into a wolf and immediately began the chase. He could see the tree elder only a short distance away and had caught up to her in no time. Wolfram jumped through the air and pounced on the back of the tree nymph; teeth and claws digging in at the same time, while her thick flesh gave way beneath.

Mildred didn't know what had hit her as she fell to the ground. An immense pain flowed through her body while she felt her life vanish in one almighty crack. On hearing the commotion behind her, Karcha turned and stared into the merciless eyes of the wolf. It slowly moved off Mildred and Karcha watched while it turned into a human form, a black robe covering all of its features.

"I've got something special for you!" Wolfram spoke lavishly while he drew forth a rod, held it to his mouth and blew into it.

Karcha felt a few metallic blades bounce off her rock chest, but then felt the pain stab into her as one went between the crevices into her unseen flesh beneath. She had held the baby high, which had luckily not been hit, while she reached in and pulled out the blade. It was a fish-like creature that had a razor sharp nose. Karcha gasped with the pain, throwing the tiny creature to the ground. She wondered how she was going to stop this changeling. She must protect the baby somehow. The canopy of trees above her made it very hot and humid and the rocks from her lower leg continued to crumble and fall away. It was then that Karcha felt hopelessness take over. She felt completely helpless for the first time in her life. The next razor fish would be the end of her. Randomly, out of the corner of her eye she saw something flying through the air towards her. She turned sharply and recognised what it was. It was Cheeko, her monkey friend. He swung through the air on a vine and plucked the baby from her moments before Karcha was hit by another barrage of razor fish, which would have surely killed the child.

“Cheeko” Karcha managed to say smiling as she keeled forward to the earth for the final time.

Although Cheeko felt the intense pain of just seeing his old friend die, he had only just managed to save this baby’s life and he knew that the time for tears was not now. Although his heart was being squeezed in agony, Cheeko somehow managed to grab another vine and swing from tree to tree while the black mage stared evilly in his direction. Wolfram was irate about this

monkey's interference. Dead or alive, he no longer cared; he knew that either way, the child's body would give him unimaginable power. Wolfram conjured up fire, between his hands and sent spheres of flame into the trees. The monkey continued jumping away, from tree to tree, barely evading the burning fireballs. Trees smouldered all around him while Cheeko tried desperately to escape. He almost dropped the baby when it started crying, he was so startled by the sound. Still, he held on and swung through the trees until he was a safe distance away. He put the baby down, wedged tightly between two branches, and made his way back towards the dark mage, carefully so as to remain hidden. Who did he think he was? He wouldn't mess with Cheeko, that easily. While Cheeko circled back around, he collected vines on his way. He would give this wolf a treat, he thought to himself.

Wolfram could barely see through the smoke and knew that he may have lost the child. He was trying to peer through the smoke while changing back into a wolf. In frustration he began running from smouldering tree to smouldering tree and onwards towards more rainforest. He was confused, as their smell was still here. In that instant he had no doubt that they were still here somewhere, now Wolfram just had to sniff them out.

The crazy wolf had been running around in circles for the last few minutes but had now stopped and was trying to catch their scent. Now was Cheeko's chance. He threw bind after sticky bind of the vine, at the wolf

while it uncurled and recoiled around the furious animal. The vines wrapped the wolf in a sticky vine encasing, almost mummifying him within seconds. If only the creature was mummified, Cheeko thought. Although it fought aggressively to free itself, the wolf remained tightly constrained. Only after he was sure that it would not break free, did Cheeko bound off, back towards the baby. When he reached it Cheeko scooped it up from the forked branch, swinging between the trees to safety, while he left the smouldering trees behind.

Cheeko was stunned by what had just taken place. Only a short time ago he had heard a noise and come closer, as curious as ever, to find his good friend, Karcha mortally wounded and holding a human baby! Cheeko had barely gotten to his friend in time to impulsively grab the baby that Karcha held so lovingly in her arms. A human baby; what was Karcha doing with a human baby in the first place? Cheeko contemplated this as he swung from tree to tree and gliding through the air, one hand firmly around the child. He did not know what that creature was back there, but it had pure evil written all over it. He continued swiftly leaping between the trees, quietly confident of escaping, as Cheeko was no ordinary monkey. Cheeko had two legs, (like all monkeys) but he had three arms! There were many advantages to this, including being able to hold the baby on his back while he swung through the trees. Cheeko also literally had an eye in the back of his head, so he always knew what was happening behind him.

Cheeko had sensed a change in the air and that was why he had left his usual retreat to have a snoop around. He was a loner now, ever since he had been sent out of the clan since his last episode of stealing. It wasn't his fault that he had a gift, and besides, the tiresome ways of the clan were not evolutionary. He was different from the others and many of them liked to pick on him and throw fruit at him whenever he came close. Cheeko was only trying to entertain some of the younger ones by doing his juggling act, when one of the mothers that he had borrowed the fruit from, had screamed thief to 'the family' and one of the senior brothers had chased him out. That was almost half a moon ago now, but it was not the first time that Cheeko had been expelled.

While Cheeko paused to catch his breath, he realised that he was many ranges from where he had left the wolf. He was safe now he thought, while he brought the baby around in front of him to have a closer look. His eyes widened with amazement. He had never seen a human before, let alone a baby, and was surprised at the lack of fur on its body. It looked up into his eyes and Cheeko couldn't help but smile. He wondered what food or drink it required, and it quickly dawned on him that he had no idea at all. He realised in that moment, that there was only one thing that he could do. He would have to take it to 'the family'.

Debilla (Virgo)



Cheeko had not seen the great mother of the clan for some time now. He had been told by many of the brothers that he was not to climb within ten trees from her tree house unless he wanted to become eternally breathless. Cheeko knew that the great mother would know what to do with the child, though he certainly didn't trust the brothers to look out for its best interests. All Cheeko knew was that if Karcha was trying to save it, the baby was worth saving. While Cheeko made his way through the trees he came upon a clearing and he continued on loping through the long grass towards the next canopy which was the home of the monkey tribe. He knew that there would be watchers on guard in case of trouble, and he didn't want to alert them to his (or the baby's presence). The baby let out a slight cry and Cheeko dived into the long grass, hoping that they had not been heard. They were probably too far away for anyone to have noticed but he knew that it was going to be hard to get the baby to the great mother without being detected. As quiet again filled the air, Cheeko listened intently – nothing.

"Shut up would you!" Cheeko said angrily at the baby, but it just gurgled and smiled at him. Cheeko couldn't help himself, smiling back. This baby's good mood was contagious.

Cheeko gathered himself and ran to the far edge of trees and then swung around the other perimeter.

While he swung towards one of the trees he realised that he was being watched.

“Cheeko what are you doing here?” a familiar voice asked from a nearby tree.

Cheeko looked across to see Debilla, an annoying girl from one of his previous classes, blinking in the afternoon sun.

“Shh, pretend you didn’t see me!” Cheeko uttered, trying to hide the baby from the view. Debilla was watching intently now, eyes widening when she saw the strange parcel on Cheeko’s back.

Suddenly Cheeko felt a rope net surround him while he lost his grip on the tree. He quickly put the baby on his belly and tried to brace himself for contact with the ground.

“Thud!”

He felt the wind go out of him, as he landed harshly on the ground. Luckily he was only a short distance up the tree when he had fallen. He looked worriedly at the baby but realised gladly that it was unscathed. It did however begin crying and screaming so loudly that the nearby wrens flew hurriedly away. Surely Cheeko’s cover was blown now.

“What you got there Cheeko?”

Cheeko looked up into the taunting eyes of one of

the older brothers, Ricko.

“I’ll take that if you don’t mind” Ricko pronounced while reaching inside the net and taking a hold of the baby.

Cheeko fought with all his might while he tried to stand up and hold onto the baby, but three of Ricko’s friends were with him. They held Cheeko down forcefully so that Ricko was easily able to lift the baby out.

“human baby stealing, that is low even for you isn’t it Cheeko?” Ricko sneered, laughing while he began walking away with his new toy.

“Will you take it to great mother?” Cheeko asked desperately.

“No I think I might keep it for a sacrificeor use it like a coconut or something” Ricko said laughing while he tried to keep the baby quiet (without any success), and then ran away swiftly through the trees.

The other three associates remained standing over Cheeko refusing to let him go, even with Debilla’s urging. One of them started slapping Cheeko while the rope netting restricted his ability to defend himself. Suddenly Debilla did something unexpected, jumping behind and bopping one of the taunting monkeys with a rock, knocking him out cold. The two others looked up and in that moment Cheeko got an arm free and he hit

out with all his might, knocking the one that had been slapping him clean on the chin before he also fell to the ground. The other monkey had pushed Debilla aside and was raising his arm to hit her. Cheeko quickly got free of the net and he threw his tail around the monkey and drew him close towards him. Cheeko then lashed out with all three arms hitting him angrily with each blow, annoyed at losing the child, especially to Ricko. He was also venting from seeing his old friend die, all for what could be now nothing. Cheeko was crying now, letting his emotions flow, until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s enough Cheeko” Debilla whispered calmly.

Cheeko let the monkey go and he fell beaten and bloodied but still alive. Debilla looked at Cheeko, a strange look passing over her face.

“What have you brought into our clan? You have cursed us all” she shouted angrily, before turning and rushing back to her home.

Daechir and Twix

Wolfram was burning with rage, but with his shoulder and ribs aching, he struggled to change his form after being so tightly bound. It was almost a full day before the wet sap had dried and he was able to struggle free of the bind. He had not eaten for days and he knew that the monkey was well and truly gone. This was bad tidings indeed. The legend was possibly coming to fruition! Though this might not be the baby that was prophesised about, there was every chance that it could be. The King would want it found at all costs. All babies and children were taken to the King and kept under close inspection to ensure that it was not the 'new hope'. The signs were definitely lining up, the stars confirmed it. Wolfram sighed deeply. It was time to report back to the King about this baby, but Wolfram would return and next time he would make sure he came back with the child.

Wolfram eventually made his way back and reported to the King. He then took a few nights to recover from his injuries. The King was infuriated that he had not succeeded in capturing this child, but no more than Wolfram himself; he was fuming about what had happened and his most recent failure. The King was definitely concerned by the news though. This could be the child that could ruin the Kingdom; his Kingdom! Wolfram brooded in his quarters after being dismissed by the King. Wolfram assumed Delano had been killed in his confrontation with the rock monster, since he had

not returned. If he was alive he would be annoying Wolfram now for some kind of reward for the initial news of the child. The Kingdom became an even darker gloomy place, while the storm clouds gathered above, and the days had little or no light. It was a place where rainbows feared to tread, as the darkness of the empire spread itself further and further across the planet. The lightning raged for nights and nights, while dark emotions brooded, ready to be unleashed.

After three nights had passed, Wolfram had recovered enough to continue his search for the baby. He was unable to fly and his leg had not fully healed, so he took a horse and bolted in the direction that he had last seen the child. On his travels he heard the constant whispers of a baby, and the rumour of a new uprising in hope. Wolfram defied any creature within his sight and warned them not to speak of such things at the cost of their lives. The rumours of the baby only seemed to magnify his failure to catch it. While he went he was spurred on by hearing new tidings that the monkey clan still had the child and he took the horse to the brink of collapse each day. There was also word that the King had now put out a reward for the child. Damn! Wolfram thought to himself. Now he would have competition in his search for the baby. At least he had a head start. Tomorrow he would ride till the horse could gallop no more, then abandon it, and change into a wolf, and he would arrive when the moon was at its peak. His leg had recovered well enough. There would be no stopping him this time!

Cheeko leapt through the canopy of trees, looking below for Ricko. He managed to evade being seen while he ducked around the corner and peered in at Ricko's dwelling. As expected, Ricko had not brought the child back here. That would have been too obvious. If the baby got raucous it would surely have been heard. Cheeko kept going down towards the sandy plains, knowing Ricko often ventured down that way. When the trees dwindled in number Cheeko began running along what was becoming softer and softer ground. Although it was a sunny day Cheeko was surprised to see a dense fog nearby which he first mistook as smoke. He ran through it, not seeing anything for a few moments, before continuing on, feeling his way through the strange fog and out into the clear space ahead. Over the next dune, Cheeko could see the vague outline of Ricko, heading for a rocky outcrop on the other side of the sandy plains. Cheeko trudged his way awkwardly through what was now sand. It squeaked noisily while he tried to move faster through the uncooperative sand. He must save the child.

Daechir the dark Elf had travelled with Twix, zigzagging around search parties, but the search for Twix had long died down. There was talk that 'the gifted child' may have been born and all focus had shifted to finding the child, (or so the rumours were that Daechir had overheard). He had left Twix behind on this day while he lay sleeping comfortably on the soft furs that Daechir had provided. He was a quiet lad Daechir thought, but still it was good to have some company.

He left before sunrise to search for some ingredients for a new spell that he was trying to master. After a few hours of wandering, and not finding any of the herbs that he was looking for, he almost jumped when he heard a sound close by. He watched the monkey coming from a short distance away and immediately camouflaged himself within his dense fog. Daechir watched while the large monkey ran down the hill and past him carrying..... no it couldn't be – A HUMAN CHILD! Was this the child that the King was supposedly after? The monkey barely even noticed the fog nearby while it ran on down the slope. Daechir hovered above the sand in his meditative position. Daechir never had his feet on the ground anymore, not since he drank that strange concoction the witches had given him in exchange for the Elvish ring. He reluctantly gave up his family's ring for the broth of 'levitation on will'. He was Elvish by blood, but his family had been outcast from the Elves before he was even born. Besides, it was just a stupid ring anyway and he'd always dreamed of having the power to levitate. When he woke up the next day he tried to get out of bed and his feet stopped a foot above the ground. Even though it was meant to be able to be summoned, the levitation broth had given him permanent levitation! At first he was furious with the witches and though he had tried to find them, he had had no success, largely due to his inability to at first move any real distance. It had taken some time to learn to move somewhat normally again because the actions of hovering and gliding took some time to get used to. Once he had mastered these skills he stood proudly,

and was no longer angry with the witches. He shook himself back to reality while he observed the monkey running up the next sandy slope. Daechir watched the monkey bounding away while the child cried distraughtly. He wondered whether this sort of information would appease the King. Daechir had been exiled for years and wondered if this news might get him back into all spheres of the Kingdom. Is that even what you want, he asked himself, and replied calmly that he wasn't sure.

Suddenly he heard another noise. Another monkey had emerged from over the crest, running directly towards him! For a startled moment Daechir thought that he had been seen, but then he remembered his camouflage and immediately jumped (contradicting the laws of gravity), towards a rocky ledge nearby. The monkey ran beneath him struggling through the fog and out the other side in pursuit of the other monkey. No this was something that the King would definitely want to know about, he smirked to himself. He watched while the second monkey gave chase and once they were both some distance away, Daechir immediately set off as fast as he could go towards the Kingdom.

A couple of days earlier, Daechir had passed on the news to Twix of this new search for a baby and it was received with welcome relief that he was no longer the focus of attention. Twix was having trouble sleeping and early one morning he read the active mind of Daechir, who was going out for spell ingredients. Twix pretended to be asleep and then followed Daechir, who was in

search of some rare herbs. Twix soon caught up to Daechir, though he was careful to remain out of sight. He observed from a different vantage point while the strange morning unfolded. From some distance away, he saw the monkey run past with a baby and then another monkey follow some moments later. Was this the child that was supposedly going to overthrow the darkness he wondered? A moment later Twix watched Daechir head off quickly in another direction. He read Daechir's thoughts while he hurriedly raced away. He was going to tell the King and take the reward for the child. Twix always felt there was something deceitful about Daechir. He wondered why Daechir had spared him, was it just because he felt like some company, or was it because the reward was far greater for the child? All Twix knew was that Daechir was a strange character and now was the time to part ways with him. Although he knew he was putting himself in danger, Twix decided then and there that he would try and help this baby. Besides, what else was he going to do, run and hide like a coward the rest of his life?

Casero

Adil awoke Shango just before midnight, while the clouds descended across the full moon. The wind whipped in from the West. The seasons were changing. Adil had been having pleasant dreams for the last few weeks and the vivid nightmares of his parents were less frequent. It had been almost a week since the last one.

“Time to go” he whispered while his dogs stretched unenthusiastically behind him.

“Time to what.. it’s the middle of the ...” Shango replied wearily, trying to roll over and go back to sleep.

One of Adil’s dog’s stepped forward, and was drooling over Shango’s head. Its breath was horrible.

“Okay, okay I’m up” Shango grumbled.

They could both hear the howls of hungry wolves off in the distance, while they made their way purposefully across the flooded plains. Adil was careful in his movements, ensuring that he moved as stealthily as possible, however he knew that his efforts were futile. It was hopeless now that Shango was with him. Shango had no consideration in regards to covering his tracks, while he dragged himself along carelessly. Adil realised that he didn’t have the time to cover both of their tracks which he usually would. Adil sensed that they needed to get moving. Something was pushing him forward, almost directing him through the dark and

all-consuming night.

The tortoise Casero, sat immobile and watched while the human figures moved closer to her. There was no doubt with his movements that the first man was well accomplished in the ways of the land. He moved with skill and precision through the night. Casero almost laughed when she saw the second figure trudging along. He was the complete opposite and he was certainly not doing them any favours in regards to being noticed or being followed. Soon they were close, very close, as the Ranger stopped right beside Casero and smelt the air. Casero held her breath (even though her head was under the water) hoping that she would not get detected. Fortunately the man continued on and had not discovered her even though Casero was literally only one step away! She easily camouflaged herself as one of the large rocks that the humans were stepping across while making their way to the other side of the creek bed. It was quite unsurprising; she had never been found when she didn't want to be, but she still always worried that it was only a matter of time. The second man stepped on her back, and caught her by surprise. What a fatty, she thought to herself. Casero considered swimming out from under him, and watching him fall but thought better of it. She had done this on many occasions, and particularly enjoyed doing it to the bigheaded humans. She watched closely while the fat clumsy man was making his way up the boggy marshland and when he slipped in his haste, she almost laughed out loud. She liked to laugh at others

misfortune. Casero was a giant tortoise with a brown shell and faded yellow markings. She had four stubby legs, next to no neck, a flat head and two poor excuses for eyes that blinked indifferently in the failing light of the moon. She had no time for humans, even though time was one thing she had a lot of. Humans were always so busy eagerly running around trying to save something or do something. Casero often grumbled about the darkness out there, beyond her homeland, or what was left of it, but she had barely ever left the marshy riverbanks and the glen that ran across her marshy homeland. She often pondered about the state of the world especially when she noticed the change. The sky was turning more noticeably red and the water was getting warmer. She knew that her time would soon be coming to an end, perhaps even accelerated before her time was due. Tortoises just knew these sort of things.

It wasn't until daybreak, a few days after the two men had passed that Casero looked into the still waters and had an epiphany. The water turned into a mirror in which Casero could see a range of possible futures and none of them held anything but death. Casero shook with fear, tears rolling down her cheeks and falling haphazardly into the still water. She glanced away and it wasn't until she looked again did she see a happy ending. That huntsman who had recently passed, he held that possibility. Something told Casero that he was vitally important for the future to go on. It was time for Casero to start to make a difference, before it was too

late. Casero stretched out her stumpy legs and with strong resolve decided that she would follow the ways of the water, (knowing the humans always needed water) and if it was fated, their paths would cross again. None of her kind would ever have fathomed entertaining the idea, but Casero felt it from somewhere inside (and the increase in water temperature) that something big was going to happen, and she may as well be a part of it.

Cashing in

When he wanted to, Daechir could move swiftly, especially if the wind was moving in the right direction. Fortunately on this afternoon the wind was very eager as he let himself be taken by the breeze in the direction of the Kingdom. He was not expecting much of a welcoming committee and he wondered how he was going to get the chance to speak to the King. To disguise himself Daechir meditated and conjured up his safety blanket of fog once again, so that he would not be seen on his travels. After a few hours he arrived within the inner mountain range of the King's castle. Upon his approach he could see the customary guards posted at the entrance. Unfortunately they knew him by sight, and it would cause too much suspicion if a thick fog simply glided through the entrance. Daechir's reputation preceded him and he had been exiled many winter's ago, from being anywhere within the inner kingdom. He did however have information. How could he get in the King's ear, without a battering from those useless thugs the King called guards? As Daechir approached the far edge of the city walls he allowed the fog to clear and rested down by the lake, to consider what his best option to get inside would be. He wondered if perhaps he could climb the outer walls when all of a sudden he heard an all too familiar voice nearby.

"What a fortuitous surprise seeing you my old pal."

You owe me a small fortune!" the confident voice

persisted while a fox appeared from behind a willow tree.

It was Kitsune an old acquaintance from days when Daechir used to gamble and mix with all types of squalor and hustlers. He had not seen her for years, and he was trying to remember how he had swindled her in the past.

“Hello old friend” Daechir said as kindly as he could, but he was nevertheless startled by Kitsune being here. A thin layer of sweat formed on his brow even though it was a cool day.

“You know there’s a bounty on your head Daechir” Kitsune pronounced, staring closely at him.

“Is there, I wasn’t aware.”

“Seems you ripped off more important people than just little old me” Kitsune stated nonchalantly, while she manicured her perfect claws.

“We can leave that all in the past anyway” Kitsune continued, smiling while speaking in a remarkably soothing tone.

There was a long silence before Daechir seemed to relax a little. Kitsune was nothing for Daechir to worry about, was she?

“Here catch!” Kitsune said throwing an apple, and when Daechir reached for it, it turned into a serpent.

Daechir threw it aside horrified and when he looked again at where Kitsune was, she was no longer there.

“Nighty night” Daechir heard from behind him while Kitsune put a smelly rag near his face and Daechir saw his reality fade to black.

Kitsune turned into an elderly man while she dragged the elf up towards the city gates. The old man was hunched and barely able to move the Elf, while the guards came closer.

“Can you help an old lad take this traitor to the King” Kitsune croaked to which the guards immediately took a hold of the Elf and called over some other guards to help. While they dragged Daechir’s body up the parapet to the King, Kitsune followed behind, grinning audaciously. It had been a nice surprise to see the dark elf hovering around the city walls. What was he doing there, Kitsune wondered? She didn’t however waste too much time thinking about it. She would be appreciative of the king’s reward and be quickly on her way back to her treasure trove in the outer plains. Daechir had been a terrible gambler in the past, and the King had many friends who had been robbed blind by the introverted Elf. This reward should more than cover any lost wagers from the past.

The King was his usual unhappy self, but did brighten up somewhat when he recognised Daechir. He would take out his brooding emotions on this old deceiving scum Daechir. Maybe he would hang his head

on the castle walls as a warning to anyone who betrayed his loyal forces, or stood in any form of opposition.

“You have done well Kitsune” The King boomed before going over to one of his tables and retrieving a small pouch of gold coins. He threw it towards Kitsune who caught it and nodded appreciatively. Kitsune then made her way out, knowing that the King did not like to keep company any longer than was required.

The King (Taurus)



When Daechir awoke he was tied up in a dark prison cell, with only a pale light, barely distinguishable, from above. Water was dripping softly on his bald head and he had a throbbing headache. He tried to yell out, but realised that his mouth was stuffed with something wretched and foul. It suddenly dawned on him that he must be inside the castle walls. He then remembered what had happened. That dastardly fox, she would pay for this! He turned his head (as much as he could) upon hearing a key turn in the cell door. After the rusty door swung noisily open, he was surprised to see the King himself facing him, smiling.

“Daechir, what a pleasant surprise.”

The King’s tone was calm, which only made Daechir more anxious.

“I do believe you owe some of my institutions and compatriots quite some money.” The long drawl of the King exuded poise while he looked at the startled figure before him.

The King removed the foul linen material from Daechir’s mouth and stared deeply into his very soul. Being this close to the King was terrifying and Daechir wanted to run away and hide, but he suddenly remembered what he had seen and why he had actually sought to see the King in the first place. He also

remembered the chap Twix that he had taken in, hadn't the King been looking for him? He could tell the King everything, but then again he might keep that up his sleeve, just in case it was needed.

"I, I have information for you my lord."

The King waited patiently for him to continue. In the meantime he also pulled out a ball and chain that up until then, he had kept hidden behind his back.

"Of course you do Daechir; of course you do "the King whispered quietly.

"I would expect a good story to help save your hide."

Daechir hesitated, nervously trying to decide how to begin.

"This had better be good!" The King continued before he started to swing the chain, loosening up his shoulders for some torturous blows.

Further news of the Child

Daechir spoke as quickly as he could, but couldn't stop himself from the occasional stutter. The King listened intently, astounded that his deceitful prisoner actually had some news of importance. It supported the update about the child that Wolfram had provided some days earlier. The King swung the ball and chain to within inches of Daechir before he suddenly stopped, withdrew the weapon and smiled.

“You are lucky. That news has just saved your life.”

The King grinned while he considered all that he had just been told. Daechir relaxed a little himself. Finally the King cleared his throat and spoke again.

“Let me paint a picture for you” the King stalled purposefully, stroking his beard.

“The next time I see you, you had better have that baby with you or else. Or else - I will not be so generous” and with that the King revealed a dagger with his other hand and cut the ties that held Daechir. He was free! He waited until some moments after the King left the room and (when he felt it was safe) levitated out the open door to his freedom. On his way out he carefully stole a robe and helmet from one of the rooms, so that he avoided notice from the ignorant guards. If recognised they would probably beat him up and throw him in a cell. After taking some time to compose himself, he made his way carefully across the

main square. Once he had passed the outside walls, he levitated across to the thicket of bushes and collapsed in tears while he recovered from his most recent emotional ordeal. He was surprised that he hadn't blabbed everything to the King, including the news of Twix. Still this was probably because he deeply resented the King, but he felt that Twix now owed him for sparing him, and Daechir would expect some gratitude at the very least, when he returned to his companion.

When Daechir returned to the cave, he couldn't find Twix anywhere. Over the next few days Twix still hadn't returned. He felt angry and disappointed. Another person had left him, on his own; and especially after everything that he had done for him! He was a friend no more Daechir decided, clenching his fists and taking off in the direction that he had last seen the baby. Daechir had been roaming the plain-lands for some days, trying to find any sign of the child. It was on one of these frustrating days of finding nothing that he had had another emotional breakdown. After his encounter with the King and the departure of his friend, he wanted more than anything to find this child and prove that he was just as capable, and worthy, as anyone. He needed to try at least, if not simply just to calm his corrugated and sporadic thoughts. After almost giving up, he looked down at the ground and noticed a monkey's footprint, barely there, on the edge of the woodlands. He remembered the monkey that was holding the child. Could this footprint be from a monkey in the same monkey clan? Daechir continued with renewed vigour, a

rejuvenated hope spurring him on. This could be monumental. He felt that if he could get the child he would prove himself, even if it was just to prove it to himself.

Mother

Cheeko approached the hidden rock ledge that Ricko's footprints led towards. He had stopped to catch his breath and wondered what he was going to do when he eventually came face to face with him. Ricko was a giant of a monkey, and would easily destroy Cheeko in a physical contest. No, he would need to outsmart him somehow, he needed to be rational not emotional, if he was to get the baby back. He ventured through the narrow pass, while it opened invitingly and he had to rub his eyes in amazement. Cheeko was astounded to see a secret valley and a pink lake lying placidly in the middle of it. Flowers bloomed everywhere and little wrens flew about chattering to themselves. Other flying creatures swarmed around the lake and Cheeko even thought that he saw a fish flying amongst the dragonflies. Cheeko could see why Ricko had kept this place a secret, it was stunningly serene. Suddenly Cheeko looked across the other side of the river and saw the baby on the far side of the lake. Where was Ricko, he wondered? He looked around carefully – there was still no sign of him. Cheeko contemplated it for a moment longer and then thought it best to get the baby and get out of there as quickly as possible. He rushed through the reeds and shrubs pushing his way closer to the baby. Out of nowhere he heard a noise and moved slightly out of the way when a glancing blow caught him across the head. Still it was enough to knock him to the ground. He looked up into the eyes of Ricko, who was now atop him and had him pinned firmly to

the ground.

“I’m afraid Cheeko that I can’t have you snooping around anymore.”

“You do realise that no-one can know about this place, and especially no-one can know about this baby of yours” the evil raspy voice of Ricko continued.

Ricko seemed to be wondering what to do next while he manoeuvred his body weight. It mattered little though because Cheeko could not move at all. He had blood running down the side of his head where Ricko had connected with a solid blow. Finally an evil grin crossed Ricko’s face while he again raised his club, the weapon that he had knocked Cheeko down with.

“Stop there Ricko” a booming voice yelled from behind them.

Ricko turned to see two of his sisters and another brother all with arrows poised ready to shoot. Ricko hastily looked across the lake to where the baby was and saw that the nosey Debilla was over there and about to pick up the child.

Ricko promptly considered his options.

“Lisa, Haley, I was just stopping this outcast from hurting the baby” Ricko pleaded trying to convince his sisters that Cheeko was the one that had done the wrongdoing.

The sisters looked at each other for a moment, contemplating their brother's words.

"Brother, tie him up" one of the sisters said to the brother nearest to them. Ricko reacted swiftly, diving and rolling through the reeds while arrows skimmed through the air above his head. He managed to get down to the water, but rather than head across towards the child, Ricko decided to swim in the other direction, further away from the arrows of his siblings. Escaping the fury of mother was the most important thing for now. He dived and kicked under the water, making it to the far bank and then running off into the undergrowth. The search party did not pursue. They ensured that Debilla was protected while she returned with the child and then they all stared oddly at the child. None of them had seen a human baby before.

"Are you okay?" Haley asked Cheeko, while he dusted himself off and rose to his feet. After tearing off some of his garment Cheeko tied it to his head and nodded that he was fine.

"We'd better hurry back to show Mother" Lisa remarked, turning her horse back towards home. Cheeko impatiently jumped on Debilla's steed and took off without her. The ungrateful little shit she thought. Without her telling the others, he would probably be dead by now. The other sister offered Debilla a ride on the back of her steed while they all tore off back to camp. Ricko disdainfully observed the departing monkeys from the thick reeds, on the furthest bank of

the lake. What was so darn special about this human baby?

It was well and truly dark by the time they arrived back at camp. Mother was stunned when they raced in and presented the baby to her. It had been crying the whole way back and it wasn't until Mother picked it up, did it stop. She called for milk and a huge husk of fresh milk was given to her, which she then poured slowly for the baby. It drank greedily, while all the monkeys stared gobsmacked by the sight of it. Cheeko stood just outside Mother's hut while the sisters and Debilla explained what had happened. Cheeko realised how lucky he was that Debilla had gone for help, otherwise he and the baby may not be alive now. Still he didn't show any gratitude towards her.

"So Cheeko tell us how did you come by this child?" Mother asked looking up and directly at him, her piercing eyes demanding answers.

Cheeko then told Mother and the rest of them, everything that had happened. Mother's eyebrows rose when he mentioned Karcha. They had both been members of the high council long ago, and Mother was always surprised that Karcha had taken a shining to the young and cheeky Cheeko.

"They will be coming for the baby" Mother finally whispered solemnly, knowing full well that it would mean battle for her tribe. She cleared her throat before continuing.

“I will hold counsel early next morning. In the meantime everyone get some sleep, there are busy times ahead.”

While the others left her, she sighed deeply and drank her, now cold tea. She knew there would be many casualties and that they stood no chance without some assistance from their allies. Hopefully old alliances would remain true, to the promises made by their ancestors.

Call for Resistance

Adil heard noises up ahead. He signalled for Shango to wait where he was, while he dismounted his horse and went ahead with his dogs in tow. Shango happily obliged, slumping down in exhaustion and wondering how far it was to the next town and more importantly, the next pub. A multitude of animal noises filled the air while Adil crept forward between the bushy shrubs. He and his dogs crawled forward, over the dewy grass, to watch what was unfolding down below. A number of monkeys were talking to a tribe of dwarves and there was hushed whisperings while they all looked about alertly, hoping not to be heard. Adil crept even closer, so that he could hear more clearly, while he told his dogs to stay behind. He looked down from his high vantage point and fortunately the wind was carrying their hushed voices to his ears. Luckily Adil had learnt many languages in his travels and though Dwarvish was relatively easy to understand, he had not heard the monkey language since he was a child.

“So, are you telling us, that you have the child?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to get across to you”, one of the monkeys replied impatiently.

“Can you help us protect it?” the monkey continued.

“Where is it?” one of the grey bearded dwarves asked curiously.

“Back at our colony; please ...we cannot protect it alone”

“No!” the greyest of the grey beards responded bluntly.

“We don’t deal in such trivial pursuits. Besides we have our own agenda to ensure our survival” one of the Dwarves continued.

“But surely you’ve heard” one of the monkeys enquired, looking around before it spoke even more softly.

“Surely you’ve heard - the legends about a human child. That can save us all.”

“Enough with this babble; we have our own interests to protect, and they are not human interests!”

The dwarves turned their backs to the monkeys and made their back to their caves, while the sisters shook their heads in disappointment. Mother had emphasised how important it was for the dwarves to join them in protecting the child. Adil could see that they looked defeated already, for whatever was to come. Adil decided that he would track the monkeys back to their camp. A human child, how would they have come by a human child? The King had taken all children from camps and kept them in the Kingdom under constant watch for any sign of special abilities, or so the rumours suggested. To Adil’s knowledge, there was no town

within five days ride of here. It would seem that this child was indeed a long way from home. Perhaps he might be able to help. Adil made his way back to his dogs and then back to where Shango was resting. He told Shango of the news of what he had heard and that they were going to help protect the baby.

“Why do we want to do something like that?” Shango asked frustrated and exhausted with their constant movement.

“C’mon you might learn something” Adil said while he mounted the horse. He and his dogs left the campsite resolutely and started tracking the monkeys back to their home. Shango remained seated, stubbornly refusing to follow Adil on this mindless task. Soon he could barely hear Adil’s horse’s distant canter. Silence filled the air, while Shango felt the discomfort of being alone again. All of a sudden he heard a bird shriek nearby and almost jumped out of his skin. He abruptly realised that he was safer with the ranger than on his own, especially out in the wild unknown. He reluctantly gathered himself and tore off through the trees after Adil. Maybe the monkey’s had some kind of alcoholic beverage that would stop these shakes that he was having?

Adil and his dogs were joined eventually by a gasping Shango. They went on purposefully through the biting cold night until they heard a commotion ahead. They soon heard cries for help. Adil then increased their pace, while pained cries filled the night. The monkeys

were already under attack.

Monkey Massacre

Wolfram had ridden the horse to breaking point. He left it panting and on its knees while he morphed into a wolf and rushed on. When he came upon the thick row of trees, he knew that he was close to the monkey colony; he could smell their stench. He would not be fooled this time while he looked ahead and noticed the traps that had been set in front of him. Wolfram threw rocks into the snares and watched the nets go up with nothing in them. He could see the archers from the trees before they saw him, as he changed into a raven. He tested out his wings, which seemed fine, while he rose higher into the sky. He then began circling above before diving down to attack them before they could even get a shot off. He heard the raised alarm when he landed on the rope bridge an instant before changing back into a wolf. He steadied himself then he began tearing through their defences. More monkeys rushed forward, raising their weapons in defiance, not that the direction of their assailant had been confirmed yet. Wolfram was too quick for them, while one by one they were tossed from the trees or simply ripped apart. After a few minutes of decimating their forces, Wolfram realised that it would only be a short time before he would have the child. He could see the main hut, not far away now. From another adjoining walkway between the trees Wolfram noticed an unusual fog begin to set in. He looked at it peculiarly, while he threw another monkey from the tree bridge, and then refocused on cutting a swathe through the monkeys who stood

defiant in opposition. All of a sudden a monkey swung in from behind Wolfram, knocking him off his feet.

“Leave us alone, we will give you what you came for!” Ricko screamed looking down at the beast sprawled out on the rope-bridge.

Ricko was roughly the same size (well physically much stronger), but he could sense its power, such immense power, beneath those searing red eyes that glared back at him.

He saw the figure smile briefly and then change into a raven, before he lost sight of it in the darkness. Ricko looked around sharply, wildly swinging his club, readying himself for combat. Suddenly it tore in from behind him, its talons sinking into his shoulder while it lifted him from the rope bridge and threw him over the edge in what would be a deathly descent.

Daechir had created his usual fog and was casting spells at any monkey that came nearby. This led to them losing their balance and toppling over the edge. He was making progress while he continued gradually forward. He was planning on grabbing the child and escaping back to the King. The King had offered a huge reward for this child’s capture and this was his big chance to prove himself. On the other hand maybe he would keep the baby for himself and raise it as his own. Then he would have company all the time!

Twix had followed the monkeys back to their village

in the treetops, still unsure of how he was going to be able to help the child. He watched from a distance, and he could sense the growing panic while he read the minds of the monkeys. For many of them they felt that the child was a burden, and they knew it threatened their very existence. Some fled for cover, unconvinced that their leader had made the right decision to fight for the child. Twix looked up at the night sky, seeing the stars of Gemini beaming brightly down at him. He waited for a sign, to know what to do. Suddenly fighting broke out in the monkey village above. The monkeys were under attack! Twix rushed forward to help, not knowing what he was going to do, but wanting to try and protect the child that he had seen earlier, when suddenly his legs went out from under him. Twix hit the ground and felt a hand cover his mouth, while he looked up into the eyes of one of the monkeys.

“Shh” the voice said, observing him closely to make sure that he wasn’t a threat.

Debilla looked down at the strange looking young man. He would have been a lamb to the slaughter just running in like that. What was he doing here anyway? Was he the father of the baby, no surely he was too young, but she had no idea about these funny humans; maybe they had no self-control?

Adil was getting closer when he saw monkeys falling off their bamboo bridges and walkways in the sky. He saw a fog covering the eastern side of the village and moving closer towards what seemed like the centre

of the colony. The wolf was working from another angle and the monkeys seemed to be losing this battle very quickly. It was a massacre! Adil knew there was little time. He jumped off his horse and onto a nearby tree climbing up it as fast as he could go. He heard the anxious wailing of monkeys while they reluctantly tried to form a perimeter around the main house. Shango was not far behind, but Adil yelled down at him to wait there, with his dogs. The fog was getting closer and the wolf was barely being slowed down by the monkeys that dared to stand in its way. Adil realised the urgency as he swiftly decided what to do. There was no way these monkeys were going to move, not even for him. He ducked under one of the bridges and while upside-down pulled his way along until he was beneath the main house. Adil swiftly pulled out a blade and hacked his way through the floor above him, and with one movement, agilely pulled himself inside the room.

A candle illuminated the shadows as Adil came face to face with an old female monkey. Her face was withdrawn and deep rings set in beneath her eyes. Veins protruded from her skinny arms and legs, where the hair had fallen out. It held the baby tightly in one hand and held a sharp thin blade in its other, to protect the baby.

“Please let me help you. Let me take the baby” Adil said mildly, but the female monkey seemed unperturbed, while she continued holding the baby. She seemed in shock with what was happening, unknowing how to protect her village, and the child. Suddenly her

eyes refocused and she seemed to snap back into reality. They could both hear the renewed conflict with the wolf fighting her family just outside the door! She looked at the human figure standing in front of her and hastily pushed the baby into his hands.

“May the light bless you... both of you!”

With that Adil took the baby from Mother and quickly climbed down through the opening in the floor and jumped across to a nearby tree. It was hard to hold on with Adil now only having one arm to grab onto the tree, while he made his way cautiously down. Somehow he managed get down to where his horse, Shango and his dogs were waiting, and they sprinted off through the trees as fast as they could travel.

Wolfram was now surrounded by fog while he tore through the monkeys. Some of these last opponents provided more opposition, as they at least knew how to fight, but they were still no match for Wolfram, who had changed back to human form, to take care of the final few. Wolfram peered through the fog and thought he could make out another figure there. It was not just an ordinary fog after all. Someone was using it as a camouflage to try and beat him to the baby! He held up his metallic instrument to his mouth and blew into it. Wolfram heard the resulting scream when one of his tiny blade-fish creatures found its target.

Daechir had seen the wolf turn into a human and soon saw it turn and look directly at him. He tried his

vertigo spell on it which didn't seem to have much of an effect and then watched as it put an instrument to its mouth. Daechir decided to move quickly towards the large tree-house, to get to the child but suddenly felt a sharp pain sink into his arm. The pain was unbearable while he stumbled and then lost his balance, toppling over the edge.

Wolfram smiled while he looked around, surveying the scene triumphantly. The fog had cleared and all of his opponents had been defeated. There was no-one stopping him now except what was inside that house. He conjured up a small ball of fire and set the thatched roof alight. It burned quickly while he stood ready for whoever was left remaining to emerge and give up the baby, or burn together with it. The roof continued to burn while Wolfram stood back and waited. Surely no-one could stay in there much longer. Maybe the baby was in there on its own? It was no good to him dead, he abruptly realised. Suddenly a panicked half-alight female monkey burst through the door, surging forward through the thick smoke. She was wielding a sharp blade and slashing crazily at the air and whatever else she could come into contact with. The house literally disintegrated behind her while she stood there madly still swinging her singed limbs. Surely she wouldn't have left the baby inside? Was there somewhere else they would have hidden it?

“Where is the baby!” Wolfram boomed angrily at the old monkey.

She suddenly looked up manically at Wolfram and responding by charging at him with her blade.

“YOU ANIMAL!” she screeched, but Wolfram was far too quick for it. He ducked aside and brought out his sword that he had hidden under his cloak. He swung it accurately, but rather gently, giving the monkey a harsh blow to her upper back, intentionally not doing too much damage. She sunk to her knees dropping her weapon, while blood seeped from the open wound. Her family, her whole tribe had been wiped out.

“Did you not hear my question? I will not be as polite the second time” Wolfram gloated.

“You’re too late” Mother said somewhat satisfyingly.

“...the baby is safe.”

Wolfram lurched in anger at the monkey, knowing that he was not going to get any more of out of the one known fondly as Mother. He raised his sword once again and quickly ended the monkey’s life. While the tree house blazed and fell apart, Wolfram was incensed. He was about to turn and leave the smouldering tree-top village when he randomly looked at the tree beneath the burnt remains of the house and noticed the strange fabric that had caught on one of the branches. Someone had got in from underneath! His arrogance had slowed him down and he had let the baby escape his grasp again. They could not be far

ahead he thought, and it was then that he noticed the hoofmarks below. He quickly turned into a raven and followed keenly on their trail. He was so furious; he could barely contain his anger, flying off frantically in desperate pursuit of the child.

Cheeko's Last Gift

Daechir had seen the ranger drop down onto his horse with the baby. Although he himself had fallen, he had not hit the ground. He had stopped once again a foot above the ground, like he always did. Daechir pulled out the intruding sharp item that had embedded in his shoulder. It was alive! He threw the small razor fish into the bushes and held a hand over the wound to try and stop the bleeding. He tried to move across to the horse, but his shoulder ached with the pain, and when he did move one of the ranger's dogs turned and snarled in his direction. The disfigured young man who was waiting with the dogs was whirling around a staff and also watching Daechir closely. They couldn't have been more than thirty paces away! If only he could get up Daechir thought to himself, but he couldn't lift himself. After what seemed like only moments, they were gone, galloping away at full speed into the far recesses of the night. Daechir's plan to bring the baby back to the Kingdom had failed. He was distraught as he sat there anxiously and was soon surprised to see a monkey climb down to where the group had just been and then swing away between the trees in pursuit.

Wolfram flew through the canopy of trees at a frenetic pace. He soon saw a monkey ahead of him swinging through the trees, also following the baby's trail. No, it couldn't be. Wolfram looked again; it appeared to be the same monkey that had tied him up previously! Revenge would be sweet with this one.

Cheeko was swinging quickly between trees. He had stayed away from the conflict and was about to climb down and grab the baby from Mother when he noticed what the strange human was doing. He watched from above while the man came through the floor of Mother's hut and climbed out with the baby and was quickly on his way. Cheeko knew there was little else that he could do, but follow. He felt cowardly for not standing in battle with his fellow monkeys but he sensed he had more urgent matters in helping save this human child. He owed it to Karcha. Besides they had kicked him out, why should he care? Still, Cheeko wiped a tear away when he looked back and saw mother's hut burning, before he quickly turned and took off after the baby. They were always just out of sight over that next hour, but still Cheeko could follow them easily enough. The rain began falling which made things somewhat slower in terms of getting a grip on the vines and Cheeko knew that once they were out of the forest he would be a lot slower running and tumbling along. Cheeko soon noticed with his third eye that a giant raven was also following, not far behind him. It weaved in and out through the trees, trying to be inconspicuous. Cheeko knew that he was going to have to turn and at least cause some kind of distraction, and he had just the plan.

While he swung, Cheeko grabbed nuts from the nearby trees. Soon the raven came within range; it was time to act. He turned swiftly pelting it with the range of nuts and seed pods that he had collected. Wolfram

was surprised when he felt the barrage of nuts crash into him, causing blood to gush from his face. He changed direction sharply to avoid the full impact of projectiles that were still being hurled in his direction. Cheeko turned again, but lost sight of the raven, while he swung to a far branch. Maybe he had done enough to stop its pursuit. He spun around again and just caught sight of it. It was above him now but flew back down threateningly. Cheeko just managed to evade its talons, but it knocked him from his vine and down to the ground below. He fell into some reeds while the rain continued hurtling down. Before he could get up he felt a presence near his left leg, and then it was on him. The raven had turned into a wolf and had jumped onto his chest, its jaws drooling with saliva while it spoke in a vicious tone.

“This is the last time that you will interfere, monkey!”

Just before it was about to bite into his neck Cheeko reached down his lower thigh and grabbed his special bag of powder. It was all that he had. He instantly threw open the bag in the wolf’s face just seconds before the creature bit down on him and ended his life.

Wolfram gasped with the powder that had filled his face and blinded him, an instant before he had killed the monkey. He was blinded and he coughed viciously as he bent over and huddled in pain while he turned back into a human figure. It had filled his lungs and he

found it hard to breath. His eyes could only see bright flashes while he tried to regain his vision. His nose was also burnt from the powder; so that his strong sense of smell was rendered useless for the time being. He was furious and coughed angrily before he soon managed to catch his breath. But still Wolfram could not see where he was going and he could only sit and hope that his vision would return soon. His pursuit of the baby had once again been hindered by the monkey. Wolfram felt his pride hurt by yet another failed attempt. He stumbled his way into some bushes, trying to continue the chase, but it just made him more infuriated. Wolfram summoned up the scorpions that in no time at all, swarmed out from the undergrowth and helped to assist him back to a clearing.

“Go, find the child, and bring it back to me!” Wolfram ordered, while he found a rock to lean against his eyes still searing with the pain. The scorpions marched off through the trees, an army of them in pursuit of the human baby.

Debilla knew there was little she could do for her clan. The wolf creature had wiped out most of them and she had seen monkeys falling from the sky when they had stepped within that strange fog. She watched the dreadful scenes unfold from below and knew there was little she could do but hide. After some initial resistance from her captive, he too soon just hid and watched on, horrified. She watched while another human and his ugly companion took off on horseback with the child and then she saw Cheeko following after them. Before

she could think about moving, she caught sight of the wolf creature, which turned into a giant raven and headed off in pursuit of Cheeko and the others. She thought about staying to check if any of her clan had survived but she knew that she had to follow immediately. Besides, Cheeko might be the last monkey left of her tribe!

“Try and keep up” Debilla said to the young man, who was just as shocked as she was, and who had until that point, not moved, even a step. She took off running and then swinging between branches, while she followed the trail of the raven, Cheeko and the other humans.

Debilla was a great tracker and after chasing for the better half of a day, they came to a clearing and saw a terrible sight. Cheeko’s body was lying, bloodied and face down, and it looked as if he wasn’t breathing. She ran to him and put her hands on his chest, trying to conjure up her healing powers within. There was no way to bring him back; he was gone. They could hear a creature in the woods, not far away, who was swearing and obviously in some kind of discomfort. Strangely Debilla also saw a scorpion scampering away through the trees, in that direction. After they both waited in the long silence, Debilla finally raised herself from her position beside Cheeko.

“Let’s keep going” Debilla said, while tears ran down her face. It was finally sinking in what had happened. Her family had been wiped out in a complete massacre;

even Cheeko. Now all she had was to try and find out what was so damn important about this baby.

“What is so special about this child?” Debilla voiced her thoughts to her companion, through tears of incomprehension.

“I have no idea” Twix replied puffing with exhaustion. He had been finding it hard to keep up with the monkey, even though it was a female. When Debilla started off again, Twix reached down and removed the sword from the body of the dead monkey. He would need to arm himself for whatever conflict lay ahead. He wiped the blade clean on the grass, and tried to keep up, as best he could.

Farran (Aries)



Daechir was seething while he was left in silence and finally managed to levitate away from what was left of the smouldering ashes of the monkey village. He recovered in another forest nearby, where he had taken some time to find suitable ointments and herbs to heal his damaged shoulder. He ducked down when he unexpectedly saw a Rabeer appear in the clearing nearby. Rabeers were rare around these parts. Actually they were rare anywhere on the planet. Some had rumoured that they were even extinct. They were a rabbit and a deer crossed; however that happened, Daechir didn't want to think too much about it. He watched it for some time until it randomly closed its eyes and fell asleep. It slept peacefully but after a while, Daechir heard it begin to mumble in its sleep, talking of the battle of this generation, which was coming soon. Daechir had briefly forgotten about the child and he soon felt that this creature could be a threat to his comfortable place in the Kingdom. What did this Rabeer know?

For the next few weeks Daechir tracked it across the land, making sure that he stayed out of sight. On one occasion Daechir felt he had been noticed but he camouflaged himself in the fog and moved further away, but the Rabeer seemed nonplussed and went casually back to looking for food. It did however seem to be in quite a rush, since Daechir had first seen the

animal, a few days earlier. Each day while he followed the Rabeer, Daechir grew more resentful towards it. One evening he overheard the creature mutter something about a child. Was it the same child that he had seen earlier at the monkey village? Could it be the same one that he had been so close to catching, but had been caught off guard by the other assailant Wolfram? Perhaps this Rabeer knew where the child was; perhaps it could be useful? When the time came he would kill it, Daechir thought when he awoke that next morning, but only after he had found out all that it knew. It had rained during the night and a light mist engulfed the valley. He wandered over to where he had watched the Rabeer settle the previous evening but was shocked to see that it was not there. It had done something unusual and taken off during the night! Daechir looked, in a frenzied search, for tracks but the rain during the night had washed the ground clean. He felt deep within that he must find the Rabeer and kill it, for a reason unknown to him, but there it was, that feeling of hatred, like the Rabeer had caused his anguish, like an enemy from his past, that was like a splinter digging beneath his skin. It must be eradicated, so that it could irritate him no longer.

Ravamorel

Ravamorel made her move, sharply and almost stealthily, well as stealthily as a slightly overweight dwarf can. She had dropped her mallet and instead dropped down upon the ogre and twisted its neck to a peculiar angle before it fell to the ground, dead. She picked up her mallet which had made a piercing sound, only detectable by the ear of a dwarf. There was danger at hand and she had better get on her way before she was caught. The ogre hordes were vicious around these parts, especially now that they had come out of their hibernation. It wasn't needed for the mallet's sound to indicate their presence; Ravamorel could smell them well enough. However they could smell her also, she had to remind herself.

The ogres were filthy giants, standing like towers against the evening moonlight. Their huge muscles bulged when they moved and their slimy bodies were scantily clad with random patches of hair, while saliva drooled from their haggard jaw. Ravamorel unexpectedly almost tumbled over on the uneven ground, cursing loudly in her frustration. She had just kicked her broken boots on the bare turf. Why had her husband Boris not resealed them like he said he would? He was so lazy, and was guzzling too much guacko juice these days, so that he could barely see his own toes, even if he wanted to. C'mon focus, she said to herself while she grabbed the mallet and jumped behind a boulder, just before another ogre appeared. It looked

across the clearing to where its friend lay dead. It roared horribly while it peered around, trying to find out the location of who had done this. The noise was deafening. Ravamorel emerged from behind the boulder and swung hard at the ground directly in line with the filthy creature. The ground shook violently while the ogre lost his balance and tumbled to the ground, wiping out two small trees when it fell. Ravamorel quickly made the most of her advantage, by scampering over and finishing the ogre off with her giant mallet before it was able to rise again.

Ravamorel knew it was time to get moving. There would be others. There always were. She rushed off back through the cave towards her home. She would have to get past the late-risers, ogres that were still to make their way out of the caves, but this was her best chance. She knew Boris wouldn't send out a search party; he probably hadn't noticed that anything was out of the ordinary. Not after how she had stormed off on him the night before. It had become a regular thing, she often preferred to be alone and would spend days apart from the clan, dreaming of a different world, one that offered peace and freedom, not this eternal fight with the underworld. The dwarves were renowned for only caring about themselves, though Ravamorel had bigger dreams than that. She took off back towards the caves and then maybe she would drop back in to see the clan – maybe.

After Ravamorel had navigated her way through the caves, she was confronted with the back of another

ogre who was standing looking out of the cave; its silhouette blocking the vacant night sky beyond. The filthy ogre was the only thing standing between her and freedom. She bounded up the walls of the surrounding rocks and leapt off, swinging her mallet at the back of its head. The ogre consequently collapsed almost instantaneously upon impact. She ran out of the caves and down to the valley below, the full moon lighting her passage across the rough terrain. Eventually she stopped and relaxed. She would be safe for now. She looked in her bag, but there were no food supplies. Boris must have taken her food and left her the wrong satchel! The greedy old sod couldn't be trusted with anything. All that it contained was a flagon of water. She pulled out the cork and drank heartily, swallowing the liquid before realising what she was drinking. It was some of Boris's funny juice! Before she had time to spit it out, she had swallowed more than half a bottle!

Adil couldn't stop the baby crying, but the noise seemed to click the horse into another gear while it galloped emphatically through the scrub, jumping over fallen trees as it made its way through the night. It galloped till dusk and the dark grey sky made it hard to tell that it was even day-time. Shango and the dogs followed behind as best they could, always staying just within sight of Adil. It rained in boatloads and they were soon trudging through water up and down hills and on their way to an area that Adil knew little about. There were on the edge of the distant slopes, where it was rumoured that no human had really ventured. Finally

the baby stopped crying and at the same moment, the rain also ceased. Adil decided it was time for rest. They had been riding for a few solid days now. His dogs were exhausted in trying to keep up with the steed and so was Shango who was only now wearily coming into camp, his horse and he both gasping for breath. As Shango slumped to the ground, he dropped his staff which jolted against a rock and activated a blade at one end. No-one was more surprised than Shango who smiled, and began playing with the staff, for a moment forgetting his fatigue. They all needed a good rest after such a hurried escape. It was only now that Adil looked more closely at the baby that he had rescued. It had dark wisps of hair and deep-set almost purple eyes. From first glance Adil couldn't tell if it was male or female, but he assumed that was normal with babies. Still, there was something about this baby that seemed different however Adil had no idea what it was.

They had made camp, near a trickling stream, the flowing water seeming to calm their fatigue. After they had just managed to relax they heard a strange noise from behind some nearby bushes. Adil put the baby down warily, grabbing his crossbow and aiming it, while his two dogs moved closer to the rustling sound. Suddenly, before his dogs sprang to attack, a figure emerged from the bushes stumbling forward, seemingly drunk, while it fell flat on its face, directly in front of them. Adil looked closely at it. It was unquestionably a dwarf and it looked and smelt like it had not cleaned itself for weeks.

“Who are you?” Adil asked, while his dogs tilted their heads to the side, curiously looking at this strange creature.

The dwarf looked up. She was seeing two figures and at least four dogs, and she decided not to try and fight, hoping that it was someone that was not posing a threat. By god, she had been fighting for such a long time now, and had only drunk the odd concoction the day before. It was all Boris’s fault anyway, the lazy bastard. She had not seen her clan for a full moon now, not since the last Goblin horde had come through.

“Ravaaaaaamorelllll your at service” she said shaking her head and smiling drunkenly, before passing out again in a drunken stupor, directly in the middle of them.

The baby giggled at the sight of the Dwarf and Adil simply sighed and shook his head. He didn’t need someone else to slow him down, especially someone like this; it would just be plain dangerous as if it wasn’t dangerous enough already. He looked across at Shango who was simply smiling amusedly at their most recent acquaintance.

Ravamorel felt the ice cold water wake her up instantly and she looked around in alarm. A man and his dogs, as well as an odd looking man, with an empty pail, all stared at her with an unimpressed look. How had she gotten there, and who were these people she wondered? Ravamorel blinked while she shook herself

and looked more closely at them, and she saw a baby in the human's arms.

"Wow" a human baby, Ravamorel exclaimed, wide-eyed with amazement.

"Your kind weren't so interested in looking after a baby?" Adil said, suddenly defensive and angry towards the Dwarf.

"What do you mean my kind?" Ravamorel said awkwardly, grabbing at her throbbing head.

Adil then told her of what he had heard when the monkeys had spoken to the Dwarves.

"I don't think they would exactly classify me, as one of THEIR KIND anyway" Ravamorel sighed, her eyes staring earnestly at the baby. She couldn't seem to look away, drawn to her like a moth to the flame.

"Anyway, we've got to go, all the best with your hangover" Adil continued while he climbed aloft his horse and they began plodding away, with Shango and his dogs in tow.

"Wait! Can I come with you, I can be of service"

"No, three's a crowd!" Shango exclaimed from behind Adil.

"Whoa, who are you ugly man?" Ravamorel replied upset by the rejection.

“We don’t need anyone slowing us down” Adil added, not bothering to turn around.

Suddenly Ravamorel noticed the high-pitched sound aggravating her headache, and at the same time she noticed a small movement off in the bushes not far from the ranger’s horse. Ravamorel ran and jumped and when Adil turned at the noise beside him, he could see a goblin flying out of the nearby vegetation. Before he could even move, Adil saw a hammer flying through the air and hitting the goblin mid-air just before it was about to jump on his back. Adil looked down beside him and saw the dead goblin, while the dwarf simply tottered up and picked up her hammer. They both looked around to make sure there was nothing else nearby of imminent danger. The only movement was that of the swirling wind.

“Perhaps you could be of some use” Adil said finally, smiling. He nodded at the Dwarf and they all continued on their way, while Shango secretly fumed with disappointment.

His mood soon settled down when an appealing thought crossed his mind. Perhaps this dwarf might have some alcohol remaining, though the idea was now less appealing than a few sunrises ago. Still, the thought put him at ease, as he fell into another weary slumber.

The Scorpions

Twix and Debilla were making good time while they ran through the trees, past the caves, and through the marshy scrubland. Debilla could tell that they were not far behind now, but they needed to rest soon. Suddenly from over a nearby hill they heard the scampering of hundreds of tiny feet. Scorpions! Twix held up the sword, ready to fight. Unfortunately Debilla only had her sharp manicured nails to fight with. They came in close while Twix swung furiously, slaying many of them while others simply surged in from behind to take their place. Debilla waited patiently until she was confronted by one that had crept in behind her. They were having a stand-off while she watched the tail carefully. Now! She dived in nails out, slicing the head off her opponent, while the tail swung down narrowly missing her. Twix was doing well, he had wiped out more than twenty, but still they came over the hill. How many more were there? He continued fighting, running on adrenalin, while Debilla tried her best, behind him. Suddenly one of them caught him unawares; its stinger diving out and thrusting into his chest. Twix swung his blade decisively and pieces of it flew apart and crashed into the nearest incoming scorpion. He could feel his energy sapping, realising that he could no longer even hold his sword up, and then he fell exhaustedly to the ground. Only a few scorpions were remaining while the last of them scampered closer. Debilla looked at Twix and knew she had to do something. She attacked the first one that approached the helpless Twix. It retreated momentarily

and then moved forward again while she wondered how long they would be able to resist. Suddenly she heard a noise from above. Two eagles were circling above before they unexpectedly flew down and attacked the relentless scorpions. Each eagle swooped down and picked up a scorpion biting it in two, before they circled again, ready to continue their attack. The remaining scorpions looked up and then scurried away for their lives. Debilla looked skyward while the birds seemingly nodded in silence and then flew off into the blushing sunset.

Debilla knew she had to act quickly. She put her hands on Twix who was turning white and whose breathing had lessened considerably. He had gone unconscious. Her hands seemed to illuminate before she placed them on his chest and closed her eyes. She felt the heat surge in her hands which she held firmly on the wound before reciting a healing prayer. Debilla repeated this for some time until her energy waned. As the daylight came and went slowly his pulse increased, even though he remained unconscious. Twix woke the next sunrise, exhausted and starving. He sat up suddenly and looked into the eyes of a female monkey. What had happened, where was he? That's right; he had followed her in pursuit of the child. He had been poisoned by the scorpion. How had he survived?

"Did you save me?" Twix asked, his breathing was still slow, but he had recovered considerably.

"Maybe. What's your name anyway?" Debilla

enquired, trying to hide her relief.

“Twix” he said, breathing deeply, glad to be alive.

“Mine’s Debilla, but you can call me Deb”

“C’mon we’ve lost a lot of time!” she continued, before throwing him some berries and a coconut of water that she had found nearby.

They hurried on and occasionally made small talk but Debilla soon realised that she did not particularly like the company of the strange human. On some occasions while she ran, she wondered whether it would have been better if she had not saved him, but she knew that she would never have considered that option. Twix could read her thoughts and didn’t think much of his companion in return. Slowly the sequence of recent events returned to him in more detail. If she had not got involved back at the monkey village he would have likely joined the ranger, his strange looking companion and the child. Instead she had stepped in and chosen the safe option for both of them. Her mind and thoughts were bare; she had a simplistic view of the world that Twix did not understand. Where was her thirst for new knowledge and variety? Her optimism was naïve he concluded. He would have to find his own way eventually, when her tracking skills were not proving so useful. Tomorrow, Twix decided, he would find his own way to those they were following. He just couldn’t stand the lack of intellectual conversation from the female monkey. She was so one-dimensional he

thought to himself while he continued struggling to keep up with her.

New Company

Twix started to notice his surroundings while the shadows lengthened and the afternoon sunlight withdrew behind the distant mountains. He realised that there were fewer trees and now it was back to thick scrubby landscape again and the desperate biting wind. He was getting frustrated at the constant pace, and couldn't relate to the unwavering optimism of his companion. He had however finally overtaken Debilla and decided that he would find a suitable place to camp and then tell her that from tomorrow he was going to find his own way. He pushed aside some more spiky bushes and was suddenly grabbed by an unseen hand and a blade was put firmly to his neck. He dropped his own sword in fright.

"Be very quiet son, or you'll only have a handful of breaths left" a croaky voice said from the growing darkness.

Debilla was now a fair way back and had not noticed (or cared) that he had disappeared from sight.

"Name your business here, what say you?" the voice asked.

"We.. I .. I am following the ranger and child, keen to help..."

"You said we, who's we?"

“Ah, this ah.. monkey has been tagging along”

“monkey?”

Suddenly Debilla walked into a clearing nearby. She was in clear view of them, but was facing another direction.

“Hold it right there” the voice shouted, putting the blade more firmly against Twix’s neck.

Twix looked down at his sword on the ground and considered reaching out for it.

Debilla jumped at the voice, while she turned and looked somewhat concernedly at Twix’s predicament.

Twix turned his head slightly and he was surprised that he couldn’t see his assailant. He detected movement and glanced down, noticing that the figure was a Dwarf! Twix decided to reach for his sword, but he was too late. In the blink of an eye the Dwarf had retracted its blade, grabbed both of Twix’s hands and tied them together. Twix was frustrated with himself for acting so slowly.

“Drop your weapons” the Dwarf demanded turning back to Debilla, while she held her hands up in reply, confirming that she had none. Now that Twix’s hands were tied the Dwarf went over and tied Debilla’s hands together and then tied twine joining them both.

“We’ll just go and ask the boss if he wants any

more tag-alongs” the dwarf said calmly and a little more jovially than before.

“We don’t need her to come; she’ll only slow us down” Twix replied abruptly, pointing at Debilla.

“Hey, don’t be so rude, it is you men, who would get nowhere without a woman around” said the Dwarf as it unexpectedly kicked Twix in the shins.

Twix winced with the pain, astonished by the Dwarf’s reaction. The cold winds had set in and he couldn’t remember the last time he had been kicked in the shins; it was not a nice feeling.

Only when Twix had a closer look did he now notice the female features of the Dwarf. He had never seen a dwarf before, let alone a female one. He had heard that they often preferred to stay in their caves cooking and cleaning, but really what did he know anyway. He had barely been out of the city walls up until recent times.

“I found us some dinner” the Dwarf said cheekily, pushing aside some a nearby thicket of scrub and Twix and Debilla finally got a good look at the ranger and child. They also looked across at the ugly human with a broken horn and grotesque face. Twix quickly turned away in disgust.

“What do you want?” Adil asked tiredly, speaking to Twix before looking more carefully at both of them.

“I have followed the child from the monkey village.

A previous acquaintance deceived the child by informing the King of its whereabouts. I want to help protect the child. I, I am here to be of service” While he spoke, Twix looked at Adil with compassion and used his keen mental ability to influence the ranger. Twix focused intently within Adil’s mind, while the ranger started contemplating the idea that this newcomer might offer at least as much help as his other unwanted guests. Still, he was only a child, not even Shango’s age.

Adil looked long and hard at Twix, particularly looking into his eyes to see if his soul bore any harm towards the child. He could see nothing of the kind, unless he was hiding something. Otherwise he seemed to be an honest and wholesome youth.

“And you?” he enquired nonchalantly, turning his attention towards the female monkey.

“We followed after my home was destroyed. I’ve lost everything, so I’m here also to help protect the child from whatever comes”

“Okay fine I don’t need a sob story” Adil retorted, for some reason getting instantly frustrated with the monkey.

“Ravamorel cut them loose” Adil continued, before turning back to the untended fire.

Adil felt sorry that he had snapped at the monkey, but he was overtired and frustrated by his growing

company. How was it that he was the custodian for this child; he had never asked for this responsibility? But deep down he knew that this was just how it was, and there was nothing he could do, but see what happened. So now he had the weird-looking kid Shango (who he felt sorry for), the timid, even younger adolescent, the drunkard dwarf Ravamorel and a female monkey to look after. Could things get any worse? Suddenly the baby started crying. Maybe one of the others could change the baby he thought, but when he turned Ravamorel was already holding the baby lovingly. Unexpectedly a cold breeze blew in, while Adil tucked in beside the fire to get warm and his dogs curled up peacefully at his feet. Maybe he should start delegating them some other duties he thought as he drifted off into a restless sleep.

Darpana (Leo)



Darpana awoke noisily, stretching in the morning sun and drinking in the view. He looked out over the open plains below and off into the distance where the castle lay, like a speck on the horizon. He could sense the imbalance in the world and that the time for standing idly by was done. He knew from somewhere deep inside that there would soon be a battle to decide the future of this planet and give any hope for future generations. It was what he had always dreamed and he felt that it was coming closer, like storm clouds rolling in gradually from the horizon. He roared confidently, clearing his throat and scaring the lights out of a field mouse that was scampering across the grass and had simply fallen over in fear. Darpana rose and shook his mane, while the birds flew gracefully above. There were few things that Darpana feared, but dark magic was one thing that troubled him, and he knew it was coming closer and gaining in power. It was one thing that he had not worked out how to defeat – but he would find a way, he would make sure of that. There were rumours spreading through the forest amongst the noisy wrens and mischievous snakes that the King was planning on taking over the entire world. There was evidence enough, with his kingdom spreading, but now the whole planet had been put on notice. Lines were being drawn in the sand, and though any resistance was thwarted quickly, Darpana knew that when the time came, he would happily give his life to fight for his

freedom and the freedom of others. He knew many creatures in his jungle could be counted on to stand firm, but there were also many such as the serpent and scorpion that could never be trusted. While he plodded along contentedly he smelt the air with interest. A strange odour hung on the breeze. He could sense trouble at hand so he stopped and hid himself in some nearby undergrowth. It was a peculiar smell, one that he had not smelt before. Not ogre, nor goblin, something else. How appropriate that it was time for breakfast!

The Rabeer had been running for more than the last two sunrises, leaving at midnight, after realising he was being watched by something. He finally slowed to a stand-still when he noticed the wide open plain of beautiful coloured flowers. He wandered dreamily through them, inhaling their scent and grabbing lustfully at those within arm's reach. When he had reached the far tree-line he stopped and stood motionless, ears pricked, sensing that once again, something was watching his every move. He tried to decide which direction to run, but knew he was too late. Whatever he did now, he would be caught. Once again old Farran had been too preoccupied collecting the pretty edible flowers to notice imminent danger. How stupid he was, but even now while he looked at them in his hands, he realised that he could never resist their sweet fragrance. His legs began twitching with fear, while he tried to remain calm. He glanced about anxiously, trying to see where his predator was hiding.

Suddenly the undergrowth erupted and a huge lion jumped out from its hiding place, pinning Farran to the ground, and knocking the wind clean out of him. Farran almost died from the initial shock and then while he lay trapped, he tried to plead with the creature. Regrettably he had lost his voice so he was thankful for each inaudible squeak, as every second that he remained alive was unexpected.

“So what are you meant to be anyway?” The lion snapped looking down through his ferocious jaws.

“Me, Sir, uh, I’m a Rabeer. What else would I be? Finally his voice had sound again.

Haven’t you ever seen a Ra-rabeer before?” Farran continued, bravely.

“Actually no, I haven’t. I’ve never heard of your type.”

“I am the last of my type. The final one, so please don’t eat me!” Farran was desperate now, begging between sobs.

“What are you doing here?” Darpana asked coolly.

Only those that lived here knew that Darpana was a vegetarian, and this creature didn’t look like good eating anyway.

“I heard there was a great warrior that lived around these parts; someone who would challenge the King.”

“Sssh” Darpana said looking around to see if any deceitful serpents were listening. He knew that they were basically ears for the King.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, but come with me” Darpana replied before getting off the Rabeer and walking back towards his cave on the edge of the forest.

Farran breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was exhausted from his travels yet overwhelmed and full of adrenaline now that he had not been eaten by this huge lion. But who was to say the lion was not going to eat him back at his cave? Still he didn’t have any other option. As Farran gathered himself, he thought he heard a noise; the same noise that had previously trailed him for some time. There was evil at hand he was sure of it, but he could not see anything, so he turned and chased after the lion towards the cave. Once inside Farran was surprised at how spacious the cave was.

“Are you sure you haven’t been followed?” Darpana asked looking over the shoulder of the Rabeer but not seeing anything unusual.

“No, well, uh, I don’t know, I... “

“Who told you of this warrior round these parts?”

“I don’t know. I heard it. In a dream”

Darpana’s nose was twitching again. There was

something out there, which had a different smell, not this faun, or whatever it was. He looked over its shoulder again and this time he saw a dagger hurtling towards the rabeer's back! He tackled the Rabeer to the ground while the blade whistled overhead and hit the rock wall behind them, falling safely to the ground. Darpana could not see who had thrown the knife and he swiftly considered rushing out of the cave in the direction that it had come from. He continued looking out towards the trees but there was nothing that could be seen, just a faint fog and the branches waving in the wind outside. It was too risky to blindly give chase and besides, this Rabeer must know something important. He had to protect it. Darpana looked down at the creature and noticed that it had passed out from the shock. He must stay here and make sure that it was safe, and then, then someone would pay for this hostility; especially within his own home.

Daechir's Demons

The Dark Elf, Daechir, was furious that he had not killed the Rabeer. He took off after seeing the lion knock it to safety. Still it didn't matter, what he had heard from the mystics and what had been confirmed by the Rabeer along the way, seemed to be true. This was the beginning of an uprising and this lion had something to do with it, he was sure of it! Daechir could be offered a handy reward for passing this information on to the King. Was the lion, the leader? Daechir realised that he should have been more patient to find out more information, but patience was not his strong point. Besides, he hadn't fancied getting too close and being eaten by a lion! While he made his way back through the swampy marshes, he summoned a passing crow, which came to him eagerly enough. After making sure no-one else was listening, Daechir then passed on the news to be given to the King. It was not that Daechir, thought highly of the King, but Daechir felt that he himself deserved more in this lifetime, and he knew that the King rewarded good information handsomely. He only hoped it would meet the King's expectations. He remembered the last visit he had with the King and knew the next time he saw him that he'd better have the child. Still, he was sure the King would be appreciative of such tidings. This was Daechir's time to rise from the depths, he was sure of it!

A wave of unease had blanketed Daechir, while the dark clouds swept across the crescent moon. He only

hoped that the Rabeer had not heard what was said in rock valley. Surely it could not have heard anything? Daechir had watched and waited until it had galloped across the cliff face before summoning the mystics. Surely it was too great a distance for the Rabeer to actually distinguish any of the words; wasn't it? The mystics had confirmed the King's pursuit of this child who would supposedly tip the balance in favour of the light, and put the dark shadows back into submission. Daechir had been told by the mystics that the child had descended from a long line of holy kings and that it was crucial for victory in the upcoming war. This child had supposedly been hidden away by many breeds to ensure its safety, and would one day rise when all hope seemed lost; which may well be now. Still, while Daechir pondered the possibility, he realised that he should have made sure that he killed the Rabeer when he had the chance. The dark powers were closing in on the location of the child and Daechir knew that any rebellions would only prolong the search. In that moment Daechir thought back to his family, the memory was always jarring, and left him in tears. He remembered their charred images after they were burnt for practising magic in the unpractised way. Though the previous King proclaimed it an accident, there was no doubt in Daechir's mind who was at fault. It had made revenge palpable when he later sent a fireball through the previous king's bedroom in the dead of night, leaving only ashes and bones and burnt flesh. This was when the dark powers took control of Daechir and he had decided to follow in the footsteps that his parents

had only just begun to travel down. The ensuing and current King, though powerful, had seemed to accept and embrace all forms of dark magic as long as it supported his reign and didn't inhibit his progress. In this regard Daechir accepted the King and his sovereignty. Daechir was not ambitious enough to want more power; he just wanted to simply be allowed to do whatever he desired to do. Still, if the opportunity to gain more power presented itself – well he might have to re-consider his options.

When Wolfram returned with the disappointing news, the King was furious. He could barely contain himself while he felt himself raging away inside. The King was turning, he could feel it. He quickly ushered away all members of his counsel, while he shut the door to his inner quarters. He was now alone –and mightily angry. His muscles bulged while his body transformed from human form into a giant bull. Though his inner circle knew that he had this transformation, he preferred for them not to witness it. He was starting to lose complete control and he didn't want the counsel to see the extent of his wrath. He had a lot of self-pride, something that had helped him become the powerful ruler that he was today. The table crashed over, along with the goblet of liqueur that smashed to the floor. This ranger would be found and treated mercilessly for his treason, he reassured himself. Perhaps they would bring his head back to put atop the castle walls, or even better, the rogue would be brought back alive so he could suffer with the King's fanciful tortures. The

thought calmed him while he changed shape and colour and returned to his human form. No-one had withstood the King's army and once he had the child, well, it was only a matter of time before his kingdom encompassed all the outer regions and outlying villages as well. All that would be left after that would be the wild forests and desert plains. They would be easily conquered, for the animals would provide even less resistance than man. Many creatures had already turned their allegiance to the King, proving to be worthy informants. Yes, the King knew it was only a matter of time before he would expand his empire and conquer the world.

Upon transformation to human form, the King had relaxed somewhat before glancing at his map and trying to determine the approximate location of the baby. When Leto joined him for dinner that evening the King grew more irritated. Leto once again could not stop with his rambling. His incessant pestering chatter was like a hungry mosquito on a still night. Why was he always talking? The King suddenly became aware that Leto was talking about the useless Wolfram who had failed him once again. The King had had enough. He did not want to hear Leto's useless opinion.

"SILENCE!" he boomed while Leto looked up fearfully, a mouthful of food falling back onto his plate.

"GET OUT, I don't want to hear any more of that babble!" The king persisted before throwing his plate of food which smashed emphatically against the far wall.

Leto quickly left the table and took off out of the room, fearing any further reprimand from his father. While the King filled his glass, his mood simmered. Finally some silence. Unexpectedly a crow flew to the King's window. This had better be good, the King thought before rising and going over to where the bird had landed. The crow eagerly passed on news from that ineffectual Daechir. So the resistance parties were rising. He slammed his fist down on a nearby serving table, emphatically smashing it in two and then set about preparing an army. The war was about to begin!

The Lava Giant

Adil and his party travelled quickly, venturing on sun-up and sun-down, and over open plains and up and down mountains. No-one questioned where Adil was taking them, which was fortunate because Adil himself had no idea. Finally they stopped while they stood at the base of a huge mountain, wondering what to do. The summit seemed lost in the clouds above, which had spread casually across the sky. The earth felt strangely warm beneath the ground. They all looked in unison while the clouds cleared and the top of the mountain became visible. The earth rumbled and the mountain-top appeared to open in front of their eyes. Suddenly in its place a huge transparent giant rose from where the top of the mountain had been only moments before. Red lava started flowing over the edge of the mountain, but fortunately not in their direction - not yet. The giant seemed furious with them being there. He looked down and roared out an incomprehensible bellow that Adil knew was not a welcome. Suddenly a huge wave of lava flowed over the edge, rushing down towards them! Adil looked around for a way to escape the oncoming flow of burning liquid. There was no way for them to get across to safety. The rock ledges in front of them required some navigation and care in crossing and the way back was already flowing red. The lava raced down the mountain, bearing down upon them. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a lake of water surrounded them. The giant looked down irate while his lava simply fizzled and solidified on impact with the water. Steam rose

steadily around them, while Adil remained motionless, astonished with what had just happened. The giant roared again and then reached down with his massive hands to squeeze the life out of them. Adil gathered himself and quickly fired his crossbow at the giant. They all watched while the arrows simply went through the space where his arms should have been and disintegrated into the lava below. The giant swiped down again but the steam was getting in its eyes which, fortunately for Shango, made it narrowly miss wiping him out.

The tortoise, Casero who had been watching from nearby couldn't believe her luck. She rubbed her eyes and looked again – it was definitely the same human! She had been swimming since that time that she had decided to follow the human, and now some moons later she had found him! Casero swam across a nearby inlet and through to the newly formed lake surrounding the island of rock that they were stuck on.

“Here I'll take you to safety!” a croaky voice said from water's edge. Adil and the others looked around startled, to try and locate where the voice had come from. Through the steam, they could just make out the big beady eyes of a huge tortoise that was peering up at them.

“Hurry we don't have much time” it said, while Adil and the baby, one of the dogs (who couldn't swim) and Shango climbed aboard. Adil's other dog jumped in the water and paddled its way across following closely

behind. Twix, Debilla and Ravamorel waited as they could not all fit on Casero's back. Twix was not the best swimmer, while Debilla thought it best to stay with the others and wait for the tortoise to return. Ravamorel, like nearly all dwarves, did not have a clue how to swim. So they crouched low and readied themselves for the giant's next attack, while the steam sizzled loudly around them. Casero swam as fast as she could and dropped the ranger, his dog, the fat man and the child safely on the mainland, away from danger and then swam hurriedly back for the others. The fat man certainly was as heavy as she thought he would be! When Casero was almost back she watched horrified while the one they called Ravamorel was plucked up between two fingers and tossed into the lava screaming. Twix was shattered at seeing Ravamorel dropped to her death especially because Ravamorel had just jumped in front of him and saved him.

"QUICKLY" Casero said upon approach of the water's edge. Twix couldn't move he was so traumatized. "C'mon" Debilla said helping Twix onto the tortoise's back.

Twix stared back at where Ravamorel had just been, while the giant tortoise carried them across to where the others were waiting.

Shango was almost shaking when the Lava Giant roared in fury, while lava spewed forth bubbling and cascading down all sides of the mountain. Twix and Debilla soon joined the others on the other side and

together they ran through the trees away from danger. The giant cleared his eyes and after seeing that they had made it across to safe ground, began hurling balls of lava in their direction. Adil looked back over his shoulder towards where the tortoise had dropped them and saw it nod before diving back into the water just before a fireball landed where it had been an instant earlier. Adil turned and ran forth with the others. He could feel the heat while trees caught alight in an inferno behind them. Still they ran with all their might, their legs aching with pain, before they soon found themselves out of range from the lava giant. They stopped for a moment and turned, witnessing the chaos behind them. Twix was crying inconsolably for Ravamorel's death and Adil, bowed his head in silence. Another ally had lost their life to save this baby. How were they surrounded by water just before the lava engulfed them, Adil wondered, and where had that giant tortoise come from? Adil looked to the sky and saw the giant plumes of smoke, realising that any advantage they had in regards to remaining hidden were gone. It could surely be seen for some distance, in all directions. No matter how much they might want to stop and grieve, they all realised, they must move quickly.

The Forest of Shadows

Darpana had heard the commotion from some distance. He saw the smoke rising in the sky not two mountains away. He had been wondering what to do with the Rabeer, who had been sleeping almost since it had arrived. Darpana flicked his mane and wandered out into the afternoon sunshine, while the Rabeer snored loudly behind him. The sky was green today and clouds were building in the West. He sensed that someone was in danger, while he opened his huge jaws and roared, so that even the passing birds faked their death in fear. He heard the Rabeer jump awake disconcertedly from behind him in the cave.

“Time to go!” Darpana yawned before prowling out through the trees towards the smoke.

Farran awoke and glanced around nervously. He hadn’t slept for days and had no idea how long he had been out for. After hearing the lion’s roar he was now wide awake, while he looked blearily around the cave. His stomach rumbled hungrily, while he wondered what he was going to eat. Suddenly he remembered following the lion back to this cave and passing out after staring at a blade embedded in the rock wall. Someone had tried to kill him! Farran jumped up and chased after the lion trying to catch up while it disappeared through the rugged landscape ahead.

After Farran had come alongside Darpana, the lion increased its pace. Farran complained and requested

that the lion slow down, especially since they had just passed a whole bed of gorgeous edible flowers!

“So do you have a name?” Darpana asked while he plodded along casually, with Farran lurching hungrily not far behind.

“My name dear sir is Farran” the Rabeer replied enthusiastically rushing up alongside the lion.

“Mine is Darpana” the Lion replied indifferently.

“I am forever in your gratitude sir, for saving my life” Farran responded, bowing to the lion.

“Don’t worry about it” The lion exclaimed while he continued through the tree-topped slopes, his nose twitching as he continued on.

“Can I just get some flowers to.. “

“No!”

They passed on through another valley and up the next ridge while they looked down to the open plains below. They could see a travelling party of humans, some strange looking creature, two dogs and... and... Darpana cleared his eyes to get a better look while he squinted through the afternoon sunlight.. it was – A HUMAN BABY! Darpana watched horrified while they headed directly towards the forest of shadows. He must stop them! Darpana rushed down the hill while Farran followed, regretfully passing another colourful array of

blossoms.

Adil and his unique clan were still in mourning with the loss of Ravamorel. It had been slow going while they trudged wearily over bare ranges and the sky was a bleak orange. Adil still remained, watchful for any danger and the baby was getting used to being held by him while it gargled and moaned. Before too long Adil noticed that the trees grew thicker again, and they were entering a forest. After barely a hundred metres into the woods, the sun was blanketed and it was dark; eerily dark. They continued moving and Adil looked around to see shadows somehow forming between the trees, even though there was no light behind them. He reached for a small blade that he kept by his side and kept one hand on it, at the ready. Adil's dogs whimpered with each step, while they ventured further and further into the forest. Shango seemed keenly alert while he fidgeted nearby, and the baby as if sensing danger, began to cry. Twix had so many voices in his head that he couldn't distinguish what they were saying, or where they were coming from, yet he was able to control them and ease them into the background - for the moment. The shadows grew until they could make out ten, no twenty shadows of various sizes and shapes, a whole army of creatures! Their shadows were moving closer but there was no sign of the actual creatures themselves. Panic crept across Adil's brow. This was an enchanted forest, and it was hard to fight creatures you couldn't actually see. He felt his mind being absorbed by thoughts of anger and pain

while he tried to shake it off. He could see Shango and Debilla holding their heads while the madness began to overcome them also, before Adil suddenly buckled to his knees. All he could do was hold the baby close while shutting his eyes seemed the only way to ease the manic voices in his head.

Finally Farran had caught up and come within earshot of Darpana, as they approached the edge of the forest. Farran was just about to charge off naively past the lion, until Darpana stopped him. Darpana tore off a giant leaf from a nearby tree, quickly ripping off a hair from his mane and covering Farran's eyes.

"What are you doing?" Farran asked the lion curiously.

"You cannot open your eyes when you enter this forest; simply follow my sounds until we come out the other side okay?"

Farran barely had time to respond while he heard Darpana moving on quickly ahead. He listened closely and then began to follow as diligently as he could. Darpana had simply wrapped his mane over his eyes, while he ran ahead, his keen hearing leading him towards the others.

Adil heard the animal running in their direction. He barely opened his eyes before making out a lion running directly towards them! The ground around him seemed alive with shadows and fierce jaws that were driving

him insane, still he couldn't look away. He took a hold of the blade and held it out threateningly towards the lion, but when he blinked again he noticed it had pulled up just short of them, and suddenly spoke.

"You need to cover yours and the baby's eyes immediately" the voice boomed urgently.

"You too!" he said moving his head in the direction of the others who were rolling on the ground writhing in pain, barely able to distinguish his words.

Adil immediately tore off a strip of his cloak and tied it around the eyes of the baby. Adil managed to cover his dogs' eyes and did the same for himself, which seemed to keep the shadows at bay temporarily. Shango couldn't seem to move and Darpana quickly sniffed out some nearby palm leaves, tore one off and followed his way over to where he lay curled on the ground. Darpana was surprisingly agile for a huge lion and even without his sight, succeeded in placing the palm leave over the figure's face and somehow lifting Shango onto his back. He almost wished he hadn't, the agitated figure sure was heavy! Debilla and Twix seemed able to comply, nodding and then covering their eyes and trying their best to get over to the lion.

"Okay follow my noise, I will lead us out of here" Darpana said to Adil and Farran, moving forward as quickly as he dared, so that the others could keep up.

They made their way slowly through the trees for

what felt like hours. They wandered through thick spider webs that covered them in sticky fibres until they felt that they would be unable to move any further, but still they managed to somehow make their way through. Darpana continued to make noises and they all managed to continue through the gnarly trees and sticky webs without getting caught up. While they lumbered on, they noticed that they were walking through what seemed like piles of leaves. At times they were sinking up to their knees! Sharp stinging pains tore through their lower limbs but still they managed to keep going. Eventually, after Shango had seemingly recovered a little from the madness, Darpana could no longer continue carrying his hefty burden. He crouched down while Shango dismounted and again began walking on his own. They struggled on battling their stinging legs and their chaotic minds while Darpana urged them on from somewhere ahead. Adil and his dogs were used to using their other senses but Shango in particular tended to fall behind often, due to the voices leading him astray. In contrast Twix's mind was like a steel trap, and he fell behind, not from the madness of the voices, but in having to forego sight. Farran and Debilla on the other hand, managed to keep up well enough with the lion; they were so used to relying on all of their senses in the wild. Although the shadows were still lurking, they seemed to stand back at the edges rather than how they had seemingly come through them previously, and it was like they were wild animals scared of fire now that they all wore their blindfolds.

It seemed like days before Adil walked into something huge and furry.

“We have made it out” Darpana remarked comfortably, while he looked closely at the strange man and his company.

Adil took off his blindfold and then the baby’s (who had fallen asleep). The blinding light of daylight surprised him while he squinted in the brilliant light. Farran and Debilla were not far behind, followed by Adil’s dogs and then Twix not far behind them. Twix with his exceptional mind seemed to cope with the ordeal better than any of them. Where was Shango? After they all called out for some time finally the figure of Shango emerged from the trees. Adil stopped Shango just before he was about to collide with him, so preoccupied were his steps. Adil reached out and took off Shango’s blindfold and they could all see his blood red eyes and dark rings circling below. Fortunately though the madness was receding and after a few minutes in the sunshine Shango was feeling slightly better. Farran also struggled for some minutes as if his mind had been corrupted permanently. After some time he too came back to normal, after the shadows in his head finally withdrew and faded into the background.

An Arbitrary Union

When they had all seemingly recovered, Darpana introduced Farran and himself to the ranger and his strange companions. Adil looked closely at the Lion and the Rabeer. He had not seen a Rabeer for some time, but used to have one as a friend, back when he was a young boy. Adil introduced himself, his two dogs, Shango, Twix and Debilla and finally after they had all had exchanged pleasantries, all eyes turned to the child.

“and this is... well this is a baby” Adil said, not really knowing how to explain how he had come by it.

The baby opened its eyes, sensing everyone watching it, and it giggled pleasantly. This was what had united them, the protection of this one small child.

While they ventured on together, Darpana took the lead, knowing the surrounds much better than the others. Although they only had minor cuts and abrasions from their time in the forest, when they rested Debilla, spent time tending to their wounds. They were all surprised one evening when Farran was mumbling in his sleep, something about finding the place where the crabs reside, and finding ‘the one that shines brightest’ . When he awoke some time later, Darpana questioned him about the crabs.

“What crabs, has someone got crabs?” Rabeer asked innocuously, to which they all chuckled and they continued on their way.

When the day turned purple and the night began to take form, they came to the edge of a barren plain. Shango and Adil volunteered to go hunting for food. There was not much about but a few lean field mice and some giant lizards. Even in the twilight Adil still managed to hit the five mice that were a good fifty paces away. Shango, eager to prove himself, used his staff to take down two giant lizards that had put up a bit more of a fight. When they returned, Twix had already lit a fire and they eagerly cooked up their meal. Darpana turned his head, preferring to chew on some shrubby grass.

“Just try it” Farran said waving a piece of the cooked meat in front of the Lion’s nose.

Darpana was ravenous, and decided that he could not resist trying the meat. Surely once would be okay. He chewed hesitantly and then swallowed the tasty morsel, while he immediately felt strength return to his tired body.

“So, what do you think?” Farran asked eagerly.

“It’s okay” Darpana replied eventually.

Shango looked across knowingly. He knew that like him, Darpana would no longer remain a vegetarian.

Adil shared the last of his water with the baby and then his dogs, and the rest of the party also finished their supply. The trees had long disappeared and when

they looked further ahead they abruptly realised that they were on the edge of a desert. While the stars shone brightly and they rested, Darpana sniffed at the air trying to take stock of where they were. It seemed they were at the edge of the sands of time, an ancient place which was once a meeting place of the old sages. His father had once talked of it, and he had heard of its serenity and also of its wickedness, both in equal measures.

The panther waited until nightfall, so that her camouflage was complete while she circled around the camp. She was biding her time to steal the baby. It should be hers, she had always wanted a baby of her own and now, this was her chance. When she got closer the lion sniffed and growled in her direction, and although it lay down again beside the fire to sleep, it never closed its eyes. The panther decided that she could wait; she knew there would be plenty of opportunities that would arise. Yes, she would wait for the most ideal time to strike. She had heard the rumours of the bounty on this group (especially for the child) and the panther had seen some of the assailants first hand, whilst making her way across the land. The ranger in particular had travelled some distance from where she had first laid eyes on him, a long time ago now. No, she would take the baby and keep it for herself, besides what did they know about caring for a baby?

The Sands of Whispers

They awoke and started off again well before dawn. Adil had woken initially, startled and alert. He had had another one of those dreams about his parents. They had rested too long and Adil and Darpana both realised that it was time to get going. To where, they were not sure, but they knew they were safer on the move. It was beautiful as they made their way through the warm night, under a canopy of brilliant yellow stars. While they walked Darpana soon felt they were being watched. Adil too was on guard and alert, his dogs also keenly looking at the fleeting shadows while wild mice scurried across the sands. They soon began to hear whispers and mutterings, though when they turned, they saw nothing but desolate and irregular banks of sand. When dawn awoke they began to see further into the darkness but they could still see nothing in regards to where the strange noises were coming from. The noises grew and soon became denser, like an endless flow of voices speaking in foreign tongues. There was wickedness and evil and pure hate muttered by voices that could not be seen, everywhere that they turned – and it was getting louder and louder! Shango was starting to look rattled again, fearing another episode of insanity. Darpana realised that there was only one way to stop the noise. He covered his ears and then made the others cover theirs, before he began to pick up the pace. It didn't stop the noise completely, but at least turned it into background noise. The sun began to rise more quickly while they felt the surging heat of the day

and sweat began dripping from their brows. There was no shade as far as they could see and while they ran Darpana soon began to worry. He knew that they could not rest out here. If they didn't find some shelter soon they would perish in this heat. The others were tiring, while the sand got thicker and harder to trudge through. Darpana prayed that he was leading them the right way as the sand fell away with each new step. With each movement he could feel the sand giving way, making progress excruciatingly slow.

When they reached another crest, Darpana looked out hopefully, but once again he only saw miles and miles of sand stretching to the horizon. Farran had somehow remained cheerfully optimistic, but eventually even he grew miserable. Adil could see before he got there, by the disheartened look on the Lion's face that it was more of the same; more of this endless nothingness. They all caught up and one by one fell to the sand exhausted and disheartened after looking out over the next dune. It was hopeless; Darpana could not push them on any further. Besides who could say they were even heading the right way, or if there was a right way? They all knew that they had come too far and there was nowhere for them to go, in any direction. Adil continued to cover the baby with his tunic, but sweat was forming even on its bare head. The heat was becoming overbearing, and they all felt they were going to burn to death soon. When the sun reached its full height they all struggled even to find breath. Without warning a sand storm swept across the

dunes, bringing some relief to the relentless heat, but also bringing a blanket of sand into their faces. Adil shielded the baby but took the brunt of the sand as it barraged against him. The others covered their face as much as they could; feeling defeated and deflated.

The sand storm passed, just as quickly as it had arrived but still they didn't feel like rising from the sand. None of them could take anymore. Debilla was sobbing uncontrollably and Shango had a twitch confirming that the whispers of madness had re-emerged. They had all given up. Darpana was the first to open his eyes and rise. He looked out again over the plain below and abruptly gasped in awe. He was dumbfounded by what his eyes were witnessing! This was surely a mirage, but then he soon heard Shango yelp excitedly also. There just below them was a small waterfall leading down to a beautiful river that extended out towards, what they could now see on the edge of the horizon. Was it really? It looked to be ... the OCEAN! With their last ounces of strength they gathered themselves for the climb down the side of the sand dune. One of Adil's dogs could barely move. It was his female dog. He looked at her as she turned towards him, knowing that it was too far for her to climb down the side of the sand dune to reach the bottom. She walked forward and stood despondently at the edge of the waterfall. It was far too high for anything to survive a drop from that height. She looked at the other dog and then had a long last glance at her master, knowing that it might be the last time that she saw him, and

then she jumped over the edge.

Taken by the Flow

Adil could not believe she had jumped. He ran to the edge and looked below but from this height he couldn't see if she had come up from the water far below. He was crestfallen. They managed to climb halfway down the sand dune before finding a decent spot for some of them to jump into the water below. Shango volunteered to go first, jumping headfirst into the water. For a few moments they feared that he had cracked his head on rocks somewhere beneath the surface. Stupid Shango, why would he jump head first, Adil thought! He had previously forgotten just how young Shango and Twix really were. After a few moments Shango's rough horns appeared while he leapt up out of the water, drinking and smiling and waving for them to dive in. Adil knew it was too dangerous with the baby, even holding it above his head. Instead he leaned out from the side of the waterfall to drink some water and then filled his flask, giving as much to the baby as it could drink, before continuing on down the side of the sand dune. The ground fell away dramatically after a little way, but Adil ensured that he kept his footing, and carefully made his way towards the bottom. Farran didn't need any further encouragement leaping out into the water and landing right near Shango. Debilla was not far behind, and then Twix, though scared of jumping from even this height, closed his eyes and also followed, diving legs first, towards the water below. Darpana looked down uncertainly. He had a fear of water, and after stretching

out as far as he could while still being at a safe distance, he took a drink and then turned and followed Adil down the side of the sand dune towards where the others were waiting below.

They spent some time at the bottom of the waterfall, catching their breath and even finding some trees to rest in the shade. Adil stepped into the water, holding the child just above the surface while he felt the coolness take over his body. He felt the wave of relief when Shango offered to hold the child and he dived below the cool surface. After feeling exhausted and barely able to stand, he now felt alive again!

“Any sign of her?” Adil asked Shango after seeing no footprints or marks on the bank where his dog may have left the water.

Shango looked disheartened and confirmed that there was nothing. Adil knew that she was not a swimmer and had likely perished from the height of the jump. She had been a good dog. His other dog let out a whimper and a howl from the bank before he jumped into the water behind Adil and paddled easily across. How ironic it was that he was the one that was a good swimmer.

The water itself was buoyant and they floated comfortably on its surface. No matter how much they coaxed him, Darpana did not venture in, though he did drink more than Adil thought capable for any creature. When the day lost some of its heat and fell to the

horizon, they all felt rejuvenated and Darpana started off. They all prepared to follow, without question and while the current was going downstream, Adil suggested they stay in the water, and let the current take them. Darpana simply huffed and continued on plodding along the loose sandy ground on the bank. Darpana soon found that he had to run purposefully, so that he did not fall behind. Oh how he wished that he could join them in the water, as it would take effort to keep up with them, especially in this dastardly sand. He did manage to somehow keep up though. While he looked across at the others he felt re-energised when he saw Adil holding the baby lovingly while it slept in his arms.

The stars twinkled constantly in the darkness while meteorite showers filled the sky and when they collided with each other, they would light up the sky in brilliant explosions of colour. The milky moon sent Shango on a tangent, sometimes sulking, and at other times cheerful. There were testing times when he and Farran had to be pulled apart and they began bickering constantly. Adil was ever alert; especially because it was a time the rest of them were all relaxing and letting their guard down. He looked across at the shoreline where he could see the silhouette of Darpana. He had saved them from the forest of shadows, and guided them this far though Adil felt he still knew nothing about the lion. He wasn't used to company, but being this baby's guardian, he would take whatever help that he could get. It was amazing how far that he had come,

from being a loner to trusting in these unique strangers. He still felt like he was in dream. Had he passed out from fatigue and was simply dreaming all of this? Still, for some reason he didn't appreciate the monkey Debilla tagging along. Adil looked down, they were now travelling at some pace with the waters flow, and he could hear Darpana panting nearby, trying to keep up. They continued on through the next day like this, and though sometimes Darpana stopped on the shore to drink, it wouldn't be long until they saw him ambling up beside them once again.

The next sunrise welcomed them with Winter Solstice. The air was noticeably still and the temperature dropped to almost below bearable. When the night again engulfed them, Adil began to seriously worry about the child. Apart from some water, it had not had a decent serve of milk, for he did not remember how long. It would have been back around the time he had met the dwarf Ravamorel. He smiled at her memory; she had been a good friend for the short time that he had known her, well as much as a cranky opinionated female dwarf can be. When the full moon peaked in the sky they heard a noise ahead of them. It was a crashing sound, rising and falling, of which Adil had never heard before. The baby awoke from another sleep and now began to cry another monologue of cries and whimpers once again. Adil looked across and could no longer see the outline of the lion. When he looked ahead he saw the water begin to open out and only a thin sliver of sand between them and - and what must

bethe ocean itself!

The one that shines the brightest

Adil, like the others, had never seen the ocean before. He watched while the water petered out onto white sand. Each of the group was spread out on the beach when Darpana eventually came up from out of the nearby undergrowth, puffing exhaustedly. They took a moment while Darpana got his breath back and they all wondered which direction to go next? The moon shone brightly while they looked more closely at their surrounds. The clear turquoise water was a more beautiful sight than they had ever seen. The moon passed behind some clouds while only a thin shard of light pierced through. Suddenly Adil saw movement, not thirty paces away from them! Something small was moving about scurrying across the top of the sand. Soon the clouds cleared and the moon lit up the night sky and he saw thousands and thousands of them, something he had never seen before. This was his first sighting of solider crabs. They all reached for their weapons, Adil lifted his crossbow quickly and aimed, but quickly realised that it was pointless. There were too many of them! He looked at Darpana who simply shook his head assuredly and smiled. The multitude of crabs continued running indiscriminately across the sand, their claws snapping open and closed while they were busily scurrying into holes and back out others, busy doing who knew what.

Suddenly there was a strange noise and the crabs all seemed to stand to attention, and then as orderly as

you would like, began marching directly towards them! The baby had settled down and they all watched mystified while the crabs marched closer. They could hear a clicking sound as they moved in formation and then all of a sudden they parted. From behind them a huge blue crab came majestically, almost effortlessly, through the middle of them, carrying an iridescent blue glowing gem. The group could tell immediately that it was the Queen crab; her presence demanded attention and even Darpana bowed his head somewhat. It came forward and stood in front of Adil. He watched while she put the gem aloft on her back and then she reached her thin arms forward to hold the child. Adil sensed a feeling of trust while he unconsciously found himself handing the baby to the Queen crab. Twix who stood just behind Adil tried to read the Queen's mind. He was surprised when she responded through ESP, with a message confirming that she meant only peace and love for the child. A long thin tube-like nozzle came from the Queen's underbelly and it began feeding the child who drank eagerly and impatiently.

"Rest dear child, drink and replenish" the Queen crab did not speak to the child but communicated once again via ESP. Twix heard the conversation loud and clear, amazed by this correspondence.

"Not all of them will make it you know" the Queen continued, communicating with the child, while Twix blushed at overhearing what was being said.

Twix didn't hear a reply from the child, and wasn't

sure if the Queen heard anything either, but maybe the baby could reply at another level, that Twix was not privy to.

“Gyan... she is so beautiful” the Queen crab finally spoke aloud while she looked down at the child.

“Who?” Shango asked curiously mystified that the crab was able to speak.

“As the water nymphs named her; this is Gyan which means enlightened one”

“The who ... nymphs?” Shango enquired again, but he felt himself getting more and more confused, so he simply shrugged and decided not to ask any more questions.

“Your life is in danger grave, for only a child, us all can save” The Queen said boldly.

Adil almost shuddered with the echoed words, the same words the mystic said to him in town before she died. He had forgotten until now, and their relevance was unmistakeable.

“Gyan is the water bearer, the child that can bring peace back to our planet. Keep him safe.”

“Didn’t you call Gyan a she?” Adil asked curiously.

“Gyan is of both sexes and of no sex; they simply are... and are not, at the same time”

“Here take this” the Queen said, tying the gem into Darpana’s mane.

“When the time comes, it will protect you. All of you.”

“We must go, and you must be on your way, there is little time. Follow the brightest star until it disappears, from there ... it is up to you” and with that the Queen handed the full and happy baby back to Adil and hurried scurrying back through the middle of the crabs. They in turn followed her back to their homes, until moments later; there was no sign of life at all, only a naked and deserted beach.

Let the stars guide

They all stood in astonishment for minutes, so amazed by what had just happened. The only sound was the faint crashing of waves on the gentle shore. Adil would have thought he was dreaming up all of this if he didn't see the flashing blue gem that was now swaying in Darpana's mane. They soon got themselves going when Shango located the brightest star and started bounding off up the beach. It wasn't long before they heard a noise in the darkness up ahead. Shango retreated somewhat, while Adil reached for his dagger and peered cautiously into the darkness. It was getting closer. Suddenly his dog ran ahead and barked loudly. Adil squinted to try and see further, and then all of a sudden he saw his dog return – followed by his other dog, Tiger! She had a black burn mark on her and she had injured herself in the fall from the top of the waterfall, but she was well and truly alive. She licked at his leg and sidled up to him, while wagging her tail excitedly. Adil was ecstatic that she was alive and back with them and he felt a welcome wave of relief wash over him. On her birth, Tiger had been the runt of the litter, but although she was the brashest of her ten siblings, she had also proven to be the bravest, and her presence improved the mood for everyone.

The next day, while they trudged along the beach, the heat became a lot more bearable due to the fresh sea breeze that whipped along the shoreline. The sky was yellow (well more mustard), and they were able to

survive on small fish that came close to shore. The tide receded and when the water withdrew, the sand grew more prominent. The ocean was alive with activity and the reflection on the water, looked like the stars dancing in the sunshine. Twix walked in silent contemplation. He considered the thoughts of the Queen crab and wondered who else would lose their life for this child. They had already lost Ravamorel, but how many others had died before her? In that instant the vague and unfamiliar figures appeared in his mind. He saw Ballack, Mildred, Karcha and Cheeko and their prior struggles in a flash, and then the vision was gone. Twix was gobsmacked. While he lumbered on behind the others, tears welled in his barren eyes. They weren't the first to take a chance on this baby and no-one could say if any of them would survive to ensure its protection. Twix started having serious doubts about this quest. He could make a new life for himself out here. Maybe he could even live with the crabs?

Gyan seemed to recognise when they were thirsty as small inlets of fresh water came into sight whenever they were parched. Adil had no doubt now that Gyan helped save them from the lava giant and had created the river that led to the sea, and definitely the stream of milk after Adil had first saved her. He wondered if he should refer to Gyan as a he or a she. Adil was just as confused as Shango with the Queen crab's explanation. There was no way to identify, even when changing her cloth coverings; there was just nothing there! While he looked at each member of the group, Adil was assured

that they all had the same clear purpose. They were all here to do whatever it took to protect Gyan – whatever it took!

After another sunrise and sunset of travelling in the same direction and then another, they were starting to get frustrated with the endless beach. Twix was the first to notice, upon nightfall, that the star that they had followed each night had disappeared completely. Now they had to find themselves a new direction. Darpana immediately started sniffing at the air, trying to find something of significance. They stood there for some time in the same spot, looking for a sign. They considered going on up the beach, in the same direction, although they could just make out the rocky cliffs blocking them not far up ahead. From out of nowhere the bright moon shone down upon a fleeting creature rolling across the sand. When they looked more closely they noticed that it was some deburpers that had rolled in close to the group. They were small scaly creatures who made a burping sound as they rolled across the sand. No sooner had the clan of deburpers circled around them they had disappeared bouncing off into the undergrowth. The group were surprised by their guests, and Shango immediately set off after them. The others shrugged and followed Shango. They ventured inland and after no time realised they were in a jungle. Though they had caught up to Shango, there was no sign of the deburpers and the moon had passed behind some heavy shrouding cloud. They ventured on uncertainly, unsure of whether they

were going the right way. How long would they continue on like this?

Adil was noticing the baby getting heavier and heavier each day, while it began growing dramatically. They continued on, noticing that the ground became swampy and the humidity exhausted them more and more. They clambered through the wild terrain and spent many hours removing leeches that were unrelenting in the infinite treacherous jungle. The air seemed to lack oxygen, though they had not travelled upwards for any significant period of time. While they caught their breath, Adil's arms were beginning to tire. Gyan was growing at a phenomenal speed. It must have had some sort of inhuman growth spurt because it was now already almost too heavy to carry. Soon they reached some higher ground and had a brief but welcome rest. When Adil put the baby down he was stunned to see that it began to crawl. All of them gasped seemingly collectively. None of them had ever seen anything grow at such a rapid pace.

In the late afternoon they stopped for the night. Farran sat subdued and tired as he looked around for wild flowers. Sadly he had not seen any for quite some time. Darpana plonked himself down noisily beside Farran, before clearing his throat and speaking.

“So, have you had any more premonitions lately?”

“Huh?”

""Crabs, the one who shines brightest" Darpana said motioning towards the blue gem that swung back and forth in his mane.

Farran seemed to be looking past Darpana, in a jaded trance-like daydream. Just as Darpana was about to repeat his question, Farran replied.

"Beware – the Bull!"

"What do you mean?" Darpana asked carefully.

"About what?" Farran enquired staring vacantly at the lion, while he blinked attentively.

"The Bull?"

"What Bull?" Farran replied curiously.

"Never mind" Darpana said sighing before trudging off to get some rest for the night. Farran was an odd character that was for sure.

The days soon wore on and the jungle fruit diminished further, they quickly became frustrated with each other and miserable with being lost. While Debilla watched the others start getting short with each other she realised that a sign would come soon enough. She felt that only when they were completely lost, would they find the way. Randomly a shower of rain began and it doused the growing anger and resentment that Shango was having with Farran. He was only one rash comment away from him knocking some sense into

him, Shango thought to himself. He would have to wait until that dastardly lion, Darpana, stopped checking up on them. At least the shakes from his alcohol withdrawals had stopped. They started off again eventually stepping out of the incessant rain into - sunshine. When they looked back, they noticed that the clouds and falling rain was going off in another direction. Adil looked at the child who was turning back intently and pulling at his tunic.

“I guess we are going that way!” Adil said sighing deeply as he readjusted the baby in his arms. It wouldn’t be long before he could no longer carry the child at all. They all wanted to stay in the sunshine, out of the relentless rain, but they all turned begrudgingly. Whether they agreed or not, it had been decided that Gyan, was somehow going to lead them. How ridiculous Shango thought, but said nothing. Collectively they sighed and stepped back into the irritating downpour that they hoped, would somehow lead them through this never-ending jungle.

The Snow of Eternity

They followed the path for some days, occasionally walking uphill, but mainly downhill, while the rain fell incessantly. It irritated Shango along with the constant whining of Farran, until he could take it no more. He jumped onto Farran's back and they rolled over the ground, Farran fighting back as he kicked wildly at the big nose of Shango.

"Stop it, we don't need this" Debilla said jumping between them, and hissing angrily.

"If you keep up that behaviour you can leave now" Adil added, while looking sternly at the young man. Adil had learnt to appreciate Shango's company, but he would not stand for this childish behaviour. While Farran could be quite irritating, they had to keep themselves united and watch each other's back, not fight amongst themselves.

They were all exasperated, cold and soaked through while Adil wished that Gyan could direct them in another way, rather than follow this constant rain. The group was totally on edge, they needed to find their way soon, before the rifts grew too wide, Twix realised. He himself was only one comment away from saying goodbye to the lot of them. Soon the trees soon became sparse and the rain began to ease. They looked through the haze ahead and were confronted with, no it couldn't be.....snow! When they each carefully set foot onto it they each expected to feel the cold take over

their bodies. Shango in particular, with his big feet, had been barefoot for a while now. His feet coverings had disintegrated back when they had encountered the lava giant. But each of them was astounded when they found out that it was no colder than the earth they had been walking on. They ventured on comfortably, before settling together under the gathering stars. Although they all looked for some food, it was only Debilla who came back with anything. They looked at her holding a handful of mushroom and roots and Adil sniggered under his breath, but within half an hour she had cooked up a mouth-watering meal that sufficed all of their appetites. They also had ample water since the fire that Debilla had started had caused the ice began to melt away and they filled their flasks and drank what they could. While they huddled in close to get warm, the darkness enveloped them and all was silent, until they all fell into a deep slumber. Suddenly they all woke with a start. It was Farran yelling.

“Don’t look into her eyes!” he shouted while he sat bolt upright, staring into the darkness.

Impulsively they all looked across at Debilla strangely, then realised it was just another of Farran’s dreams. When Farran eventually lay back down and started snoring they all re-settled. It was only Darpana who remained alertly awake. He knew that this was another premonition. Suddenly he remembered the gem. He looked down protectively at it, while it swung back and forward in his heavily tasselled mane. Hopefully the Queen was right, for whatever obstacles

they were yet to face.

Gyan went from crawling to walking, and when they found some more edible berries, Gyan even tried chewing at some real (non-puree) food, even though their teeth had not yet formed. What, surely it could not have been more than three full moons since Adil had looked after the baby. Definitely it was less than six, he was certain of that! Not that he knew much about babies, but he knew that it was not humanly possible to turn from baby into child in that short space of time. They set off the next morning (they assumed it was morning but there was no change in dark and light out here) and it wasn't long before a blizzard set in. As they went deeper and deeper into the snow, they were surprised to see that it was becoming icier while they climbed higher and finally the snow stopped falling. They all turned and looked around to find some shelter. Adil's dogs were the most proactive, venturing forward to do a better search of the area.

Daechir could just make them out through the snow, not far ahead of him. He had managed to track them from the jungle. He had been looking for the child for some time now since he had last seen it with the monkey. He had stumbled upon the tracks of the Rabeer in the outer jungle and had followed them to the Snow of Eternity. He was ecstatic to find the lion and Rabeer with the others – and with the actual baby as well, now that was extremely fortunate! He had frustratingly travelled around in circles before fortuitously seeing the Rabeer's hoof-print in the mud

of the jungle and now, now he was now just within sight of the group. One of them looked strangely familiar but, from this distance he couldn't be sure. He crawled closer from his vantage point while the sleet and snow whipped in awkwardly. This time he was ready to take the child to the King and exchange it for land and a wife. He trusted that he could negotiate such a deal, with the King, for the current reward was much more significant than what he was asking for. It had become clearer to him each lonely day that if he gained prestige and companionship, he would find happiness. He imagined fancifully that with this new life he would be able to leave behind this emotional turmoil that he was going through. Yes, he would be celebrated for his accomplishments and he would have someone who loved him for who he was. He couldn't wait!

Daechir cast the fog around him, like a blanket, while he managed to creep up within ten paces of the child. The lion turned towards him, seemingly looking into his eyes but Daechir knew that with his fog, he was invisible from more than five paces. The ranger turned towards him also and the baby seemed to look directly at him. It was just the sight of the strange fog that would have startled them, he had to remind himself. He knew that he must still act quickly though, but before he could move he felt the ice cracking beneath his feet. His fear changed to relief when rather than falling he hovered there above the freezing water. He then tried to move away but soon felt the water rise from beneath him and begin to re-freeze. He couldn't move. His body

was becoming frozen! He saw the baby looking directly at him, and before he could even scream out, he became just a solid pillar of ice.

The others looked curiously at the peculiar fog before it dispersed and they were shocked to see revealed an extraordinary pillar of ice, that they swore had not been there before. Twix in particular looked closely at it. It looked almost like it had previously been a human figure, and it looked familiar. The others had lost interest and had walked some distance away before Twix finally turned away from the strange form and took off after them.

Shango's Secret

The snow started once again, coming down in a vicious snow storm, while they trudged on wearily. It would be dark again in a few hours, so they would need to start looking for another place to camp for the night. They were all ravenous and even Debilla was unable to find any roots or wild mushrooms around here, in this bare landscape. Suddenly from the cliffs above four Eliops clambered down from the rise above, catching them off guard. These were enormous creatures that were half- Elephant, half-Cyclops! They were covered in white fur and their one huge blood-shot eye stared down at the group hatefully. Huge tusks protruded alongside their colossal trunk and they had three enormous legs that somehow managed to balance their gigantic frame. The party retreated instinctively, apart from Farran and Shango. Shango jumped on ahead as he leapt between the legs of the closest Eliop. He bounded into the air to reach the Eliop and activated the blade on his staff while jamming it as hard as he could into one of its nearest legs. It squealed in pain and swung its trunk before Shango could move out of the way. The blow knocked him some distance until he connected sickeningly with a large boulder jutting out of the snow. Shango felt his pulse stop, while the others watched on breathlessly. Adil in particular felt his heart sink. Farran took some more paces forward confidently then stopped in fear, retreating slightly. The Eliops trumpeted loudly, some of them rising up on two legs, and then making a noise like they were chuckling

amongst themselves while they peered down at the tiny figures below them. Moments later the group were even more shocked when Shango rose again – two of him! His double rose from the ground grabbing its staff. It jumped beneath the Eliop and bounded even higher activating the blade edge while he swung and sliced open the belly of the Eliop, which had barely felt its last blow. The Eliop looked down stunned by what had just happened and it crumpled forward gracelessly into the snow. While it lay bleeding and defeated, the other Shango moved forward and finished it off mercifully.

Another of the Eliops moved threateningly towards Adil and the baby, while they all hastily prepared themselves for combat. They were still stunned by what they had just witnessed, almost frozen in their movements while Shango had fought, died and came back to life in front of them. They impulsively stepped back while Adil put down the child and reached for his crossbow, readying himself to fire. The baby simply stared at the Eliop that was almost upon them and then looked at its giant feet. Suddenly the ice cracked and broke apart and the Eliop tumbled into the freezing waters. It struggled in vain to get itself out, but as it tried it simply cracked more of the ice around it, and then –then the struggling stopped. The other two Eliops turned and retreated after witnessing their two companions fall. After the group had confirmed that the Eliops were not about to return and that the danger had dissipated, they all turned and looked back at Shango. The whole party were collectively speechless by

what they had just witnessed. They had seen him struck a mortal blow, but he had risen again – as two Shango's!

“Must be my lucky day” Shango remarked, while they all continued to stare. Minutes later his other self just faded and disappeared, and he smiled at them as if nothing remarkable had just happened.

“C'mon nothing more to see here” Shango said, leading them on over the next ridge of snow, grinning as he went.

The Panther

While a blizzard engulfed the party the panther found their tracks and followed them towards the outer plains. When the Eliops attacked the previous day, she had watched on eagerly, but fretted for the young child. She was close to running down to defend the child, but she was glad to see how it all unfolded. There was certainly more to them than met the eye; especially that grotesque one who had somehow risen from the dead, as two people. Still, she knew they must be getting tired now, and the time to act was soon. The panther had changed colours from the darkest night to pure white. Only her eyes remained a vivid green, but otherwise she could barely be noticed. She had followed them from the forest of shadows, but she had lost the group back in the desert, when she had kept a fair distance away so that she was not sighted. Since then she had turned back and circled around the desert, losing the scent and any hope of catching them, until the previous sunrise. She had caught their trail on the edge of the 'Snow of Eternity'. The snow continued to fall heavily and the wind swept it in horizontally, so that the panther could barely be seen within three paces. Now was her chance to steal the child. It had grown considerably since she had last sighted it. She would name it Eliza, she thought to herself. She watched while the two dogs continued on ahead of the others. She moved in even closer. Only the white of her fur protected her from being seen. She watched and waited until the ranger put the child down. Now was the time

to act! She sprung forward and grabbed the child, turning on her heels and running for her life. She sped off through the thick snow with the heavy child hanging in her mouth, like a cub.

Adil had barely had time to realise what had happened. The snow was falling heavily making it hard to see ahead. He had put Gyan down for a moment to check if his dogs had found a place to shelter and then... he had heard a noise, and turned to see a creature taking off through the snow - with Gyan! Adil reacted immediately reaching for his crossbow, He aimed quickly and fired at the creature's white legs, but it zigzagged away and his arrows fired into the snow. He gave chase as fast as he could go in pursuit of the creature. Though he could follow the footprints they soon disappeared with the heavy snow covering any possible way of tracking it. Darpana had chased too, after seeing Adil go, and was soon at his side. While he sniffed the air ahead he realised that he could also offer little guidance. The snow was falling too heavily for them to know exactly which direction it had gone. Debilla was just returning to Shango and the others after tracking and killing two wild snow foul. She was delighted with her efforts and was glad to be able to, once again, provide for the group. Surely they would be impressed, even Adil had to be impressed. Only when she sauntered back to where they had been, did she find out the news.

“Have you ever eaten snow foul, it's a delicacy!”

“Where have you been, Gyan has been stolen. We’ve got to catch up to Adil” Shango shouted hastily in reply before taking off in the direction Adil and the lion had gone.

Adil was crestfallen when he reunited the others. Even the snow foul, that Debilla had found and cooked that evening didn’t improve his sober mood. They all knew that they must get Gyan back, before this creature caused it any harm, or before the King got his evil hands on the child!

“Thanks Debilla that was delicious” Shango muttered, but no-one else spoke a word.

Only one of the dogs returned from looking for a place to shelter, which seemed unusual to Adil. He hoped the creature had not killed her, as it was his injured girl, Tiger who once again had disappeared. She was getting lame from her injuries back at the waterfall. She would stand no chance against something of that size. The other dog was still sniffing around trying to find somewhere to rest, and to appease his master, who was now completely demoralized. They gathered their things and headed on in the direction that the white creature had initially gone. Unfortunately they each knew that if the creature was smart, it would change directions many times so as not to be found. Debilla began crying; for the child, or for her lost clan, none of them knew, but they each shared her sadness. Darpana led them the next daybreak and the next. Although Adil could track better than any of them, the

lion's sense of smell was their best chance of finding Gyan. Soon they were out of the snow and back into rocky slopes. While the sun began to set, the mood was sullen and bitterly miserable. While the dull sky cast a drab light in the pale afternoon, and the wind chilled their very bones, none of them spoke a word.

The King's Army

After another restless sleep, Adil and the others lumbered on. They were surprised when the daylight disappeared and night, all of a sudden, took over. They thought the sun had simply gone behind the clouds, but the darkness consumed the light and they struggled to clearly see the way ahead. They had never seen an eclipse before, Darpana, although the eldest of them, had only ever heard his father speak of it when he was a child. Soon Adil's remaining dog's ears pricked up and he began barking loudly with meaning. Adil reacted immediately, climbing up the nearest tree and looking in the direction that his dog was so excited about. The full eclipse slowly retreated and light returned to the day. Adil saw Tiger far in the distance, through the sparse canopy of trees. Tiger was circling around a clearing and seemingly leaving her odour on nearby bushes before taking off in another direction. Had she tracked the baby's scent; or was it something else? Adil knew that they had to follow, and quickly! Before he climbed down he looked out to the East and saw a cloud of dust coming over the hills. That was certainly some search party! Adil knew immediately that it was the entire King's army that was coming towards them, and that they were no more than two morns ride away! Adil scampered down the tree, and saw that the others were stretching out and resting. Adil looked down at his dog who was circling impatiently, and then they both took off through the trees, while the others saw them disappear and hurriedly gathered themselves to follow.

Kitsune had been meditating, perched up on a high mountain, when she noticed movement some distance away. She saw the party, like ants below, moving purposefully through the trees. She had been trying to find them for some time now, as were the whole of the King's army, but the outer reaches were a wild and unknown place. She smiled at finding them again... and luckily before all the others. She looked closer and was shocked that –THE CHILD WAS NO LONGER WITH THEM! Where had it gone? Had the King already found it? No, surely not, she had seen their forces long back over many ranges. She kept her eyes closely poised on the dog running beside the huntsman. Kitsune was afraid of dogs and she shuddered at its sight. Hadn't this man had two dogs previously? All the better Kitsune thought, one dog was more than enough. She would continue to follow them from a distance. She had to find out where the child had gone!

The King had been deeply irate for many a night after Wolfram returned and informed him that the child was still alive, and that he had failed to capture it again. The King had forbidden Wolfram to leave until he decided what to do. When the crow had also confirmed the sighting, he had prepared an army and led them and Wolfram out to hunt down the child. He knew that he had to be there to make sure the job was done correctly. They had ridden out of the castle more than a full moon ago and were being told by the woods and plains creatures, rumours of where the baby's approximate whereabouts might be. The King's army

grew while they ventured on, as did Wolfram's frustration. He was annoyed that he had not succeeded previously, and he hated having to wait for the King's army in this expedition. They were just slowing him down. The King had Leto riding beside him, who was rumoured to be a genius, but Wolfram simply saw him as a liability. The young man stupidly believed that the King was his father, how ridiculous! He was just a peasant boy, like all the others, orphaned as per the King's orders. Wolfram couldn't imagine the King ever being romantically involved with anyone. The frail boy Leto had no skills with a sword, and Wolfram could sense he had no magic energy which he could evoke. He had no idea what the King saw in him. Wolfram envied the bounty hunter Kitsune, who was able to come and go, at will, not restricted by the King. There were detriments to being part of the King's Counsel. Soon, he thought to himself; soon he would take what was rightfully his and be ruler of not only this planet, but all other habitable planets in the galaxy. This was something this small-minded King simply could not fathom. All Wolfram needed was the child!

Kinji (Capricorn)



Adil shadowed his dog while they ran through the trees following Tiger's scent. Eventually they slowed and stopped near a mossy outcrop of rock at the edge of a clearing. Adil looked ahead and saw a rocky slope barely twenty paces away. Up until then they had been able to follow the tracks of Tiger, but when they stopped they realised the scent and paw prints had disappeared. Where had she gone? Adil realised the trail that they had been following had turned cold and he watched while his dog circled the area, trying to pick up her scent. The others caught up, struggling for breath, while Adil stood scratching his head and contemplating which way to go.

"Halt there, all of you!" A masked man appeared almost from the rock face itself, such was his camouflage. He looked at them strangely. What a weird mishmash this group was, especially to be venturing around these parts. He stood tall, while he cleared his throat.

"You cannot go forth without correctly answering my simple little question" the masked man said brazenly.

"We will go this way, if we want to" Darpana replied in frustration at being told what to do, while he stepped forth defiantly.

“No you won’t” the man replied hastily. While he spoke a huge dragon sauntered around the edge of the outcrop. It stretched out its wings, its wingspan spreading at least the length of ten humans on each side. The strange gangly masked man then nodded his head and a huge blast of fire roared from the dragon’s mouth.

Darpana felt the pain sear through his feet, while he hurriedly stepped back, almost falling over. He had stupidly allowed his pride to get in the way once again. None of them had seen a dragon before. It was rumoured that they were extinct, but here was one in front of them, well and truly alive. Adil’s dog growled, baring its teeth, but Adil put his arm down to settle it, knowing that it would do no good.

“You’ll play by the rules” the man exclaimed smiling assuredly.

“I don’t like rules. Whose rules?” Darpana replied, more softly this time. He was wincing from the pain while eyeing the masked man with anger in his eyes.

“My rules!”

“Not the King’s?” The Ranger asked.

“Why would I care about the King, he cannot harm me” the man responded to the ranger brashly.

“What if I get the question correct, will you grant me one request?” Adil enquired, changing the topic.

“What request?”

“To help us find the child”

“What child?”

“The child, who will help bring the light back to this planet!” Darpana said heatedly, still reeling while he licked at his singed black paws.

“Why would I care about doing that?” the masked man said rudely.

“The child is the only one who can defeat the King. Do you want the King to become even more powerful?” Adil explained patiently. He wondered if this conversation was going anywhere.

“I have no care either way. There is no gain in me waging war against the King. It is in his interests to say and do terrible things, but it is not in mine to challenge him. I don’t want his kingdom.”

“Are you scared?” Darpana asked, breathing more awkwardly now; the pain in his paws was excruciating.

“Me....scared; why would I be scared? I am a descendant of a long line of dragon-lords, proven warriors in combat who have defeated legions of armies in their time.”

“So you’re not like them, you’re scared” Darpana replied, before Adil could stop him.

Adil feared that this masked man would run out of patience and give the signal to turn them all to charcoal.

“I fear no one!” the man rebuked while contemplating what he had just heard. The dragon shuffled forward staring fixedly at them, just waiting for another gesture from its master. Finally the awkward silence was broken when the masked man continued.

“Alright, here are my terms. I will give you two questions. One I will ask you now. If you get it correct I will help you find this child. Then I will ask you another question tomorrow, which if you get correct, I will help you fight against the King.”

He cleared his throat before continuing once again.

“However, if you get either question wrong, I not only leave, but my dragon turns you to ash, how does that sound? “

Adil had been looking for another way around this so-called dragon-lord, not interested in these terms, but Darpana replied on behalf of all of them, letting his ego get the better of him again.

“Let’s play” Darpana said showing confidence, but internally not feeling very confident at all. The masked man smiled in response, clearing his throat once again and at length spoke.

What we see

What we breath

Another term for energy?

Darpana had no idea what the answer was. He wasn't so good with words. Darpana looked first at Twix, he was the intellectual of them all, but he had no idea. He then looked at Adil, and then Shango, but they all had the same blank expression. Debilla simply looked at them vacantly. They were all stunned when Farran cleared his throat.

"That would be Chi" Farran shouted confidently.

Kinji was disappointed and surprised that any of these ignoramuses' would know of such a thing.

"Correct" he said finally, his head slumping forward in displeasure. Eventually he raised his eyes and introduced himself.

"My name is Kinji, Dragon-lord of the outer plains."

Adil introduced himself and the rest of the party.

"What's your dragon's name?" Darpana enquired while they stood for a moment in another awkward silence.

"Name, he doesn't have a name, he is just a dragon" Kinji said almost laughing at such a strange question.

“What would you ask of me till the next day falls” Kinji finally demanded, forgetting the terms that he had agreed to.

“We are looking for the baby. The child” Adil corrected himself, as it was a baby no more.

“Well what are we waiting for?” Kinji said jumping on top of the dragon, which had been resting patiently. It was still staring angrily at the party, before Kinji and the dragon soared into the air. They circled a few times so that Adil and the others could keep up and then led them in the direction they had previously been travelling. Adil and the others ran on and soon Adil could see his dog, Tiger just ahead of him. It had been waiting for them. When Adil came closer, Tiger nuzzled up to him and whimpered turning its head sharply in one direction and started heading off that way. The others followed, while the dragon cast a shadow from above, as he passed in front of the sun.

The panther turned and looked skyward. It saw the dragon bearing down upon her although it was still some distance away. She hid behind a tree. The child was struggling and while she cradled it between her large front legs, she tried to think of where they would be safe.

“Eliza darling stop crying I will take care of you. You are my beautiful girl aren’t you?” The child continued crying even after she fed it some sweet leaves, to which it chewed on happily for a few minutes, before spitting

out. The dragon seemed to pass overhead and continue on, which helped the panther relax for a moment. Maybe it had not seen her, maybe it was looking for something else. Suddenly through the trees, she saw two dogs bolt towards her. They would be upon her in no time! She put Eliza down gently and then showed her fangs ready to attack as soon as they got closer. Just a few more paces now and she would lunge at the first one. Suddenly three arrows flew through the trees and at the last second she jumped sideways avoiding two of them, but the third went through her chest. She wheezed at the impact, and was soon whining, like only an injured cat can. Her pursuers emerged from the trees, and though the human went past her to her child, the lion came up and spoke to her firmly.

“Where is the King?”

“I do not know of what you speak.”

Twix stared down at the panther reading its final thoughts.

I am only a wishful mother cast aside and on my own.

The panther struggled for breath, as the arrow had pierced her lung. Finally she managed to continue.

“Please look after my child” it continued, which puzzled Darpana.

Darpana turned away confusedly. He felt the pain

surging through his blistered paws. While he stood over the panther he watched the blood pouring from her wound. It would not be long before she would die. Twix stood beside Darpana. He could see by looking into the panther's thoughts that her words were true; she had acted alone.

She tried to speak again, but only a grating noise came out. She tried again, though this time the words came out only in a whisper.

“Forgive me.”

Leto's Discovery

While Leto rode alongside the King, he couldn't help but notice that his wrists were becoming uncomfortably itchy. He scratched them, but it did little to help. After they had ridden all that day and late into the night they stopped on the edge of the forest. They could surely not have been more than a day's ride from the baby now and the army was completely exhausted with the pace that they had been keeping. When Leto finally sat on his own, settling in for the night, he felt a burst of pure hatred towards Wolfram. At that exact same time he felt an excruciating pain in his wrist again. He looked down shocked while he saw a long fibrous rope-like substance coming out from his wrist. He looked around suddenly self-conscious with this strange phenomenon, but the soldiers were snoring or talking amongst themselves, completely ignoring him. The King, most importantly, was nowhere to be seen. Leto watched while the substance uncurled like a rope and instinctively he moved it back and forth, still shocked at what was coming out of him. It took some time to control it completely, and while he began to calm down with its presence, it soon retreated back into his arm. Leto sat staring at his arm, waiting for the rope-like weapon to return, but it, along with the itch, had disappeared. He considered telling the King what had happened, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself. He had felt outcast his whole life. Father could be cruel sometimes, and he didn't know how he would take the news. Besides, he could not yet summon it at

will, but when he could he would bring that arrogant Wolfram down and prove his loyalty to his father, the King.

The morning came to light, casting an eerie red light all around the army while the King could just make out the dragon in the distance. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of men and creatures that had joined in the King's march. It seemed like every living creature knew the magnitude of the moment. Wolfram offered to go ahead with a scouting party but the King hushed him and pressed on, leading the army, who were exhausted by the relentless pace that the King was expecting. Still, they all knew better than to stop now. They had all heard of the cold-bloodedness of the King. Wolfram was furious, squeezing his hand into a fist while he fell in line and marched on amongst them. Meanwhile Leto had edged up beside the King, quietly whispering in his ear that he would need to take care of Wolfram sooner rather than later.

"You let me worry about that" the King scolded him abruptly.

Now was definitely not a good time to let him know of his recent self-discovery.

The King signalled to the vultures to fly ahead and find out what was happening. He was impatient with having no news for the last few days. He wondered where Kitsune was. No doubt she was up ahead somewhere, and hopefully she would not let him down

in retrieving the child, like Wolfram had. Hopefully, in contrast, she was making some progress. While Leto rode along hastily, trying to keep up with his father, he suddenly got an image of his brother Twix. He was up ahead and was a part of the group that had the child. He then thought back to how he had betrayed his brother to the King. The feeling made him somewhat uneasy, but he managed to push that feeling down, squashing down any feeling of regret. He had lived with Tara for some time after Twix had escaped, but the thrill of the chase had disappeared, and deep down, he knew that she always loved his brother more than she loved him. In response to these feelings that he read in her mind, he had beaten her. She denied his claims and he had eventually thrown her out on the street, and had not seen her again. What a liar she was! Leto had been so bitter that he also told the King that Tara's father, (one of the guards) had slandered the King, and he was executed that very evening. He felt no remorse for what he had done to her (or her father), but his own brother? No surely it wasn't remorse. Could it be pity? The next time he saw his brother, he decided that it would be for the last time. How dare he deny that the King was their father? He was a liar and Leto resented him with all of his being, almost as much as he resented Wolfram.

First Word

The following day, when the last sunlight was starting to descend behind a distant mountain Adil and the others began looking for a place to camp. Darpana looked down at his paws that were healing nicely. Debilla had done a good job. All of a sudden Kinji turned towards them resolutely; the stern look was settled back upon his face while he spoke.

“Time’s up ladies and gents; okay this is your final question. If you get this right, I will join you on your quest. If you get it wrong...” suddenly, on cue, the dragon raised its head and a fireball surged through the air, lighting up the treetops behind them.

Wow he didn’t do things in halves did he, Adil contemplated silently to himself. Darpana let out a growl from deep within. Not another one of these stupid riddles.

“What finds a way, no matter how steep?

Goes around, or wears through

Wakes you when you sleep;

Is in me, is in you? ”

They all looked at each other; hoping one of them had the answer. Twix even tried to read Kinji’s mind, but it was not working. They looked hopefully at Farran, but he just shook his head. Hey, he had contributed last

time; surely someone else might know this one! The silence was overwhelming, while Adil almost flinched, wondering if he could somehow get some shots off before the dragon opened its mouth.

“Time’s up” Kinji said decisively, ready to give his dragon the signal to turn them into ash.

“War - ta” a voice came from the child, while they all looked shocked by where it had come from.

Adil almost dropped the baby, when it spoke. It was the baby’s first word! They all stood speechless, not even contemplating the words that had been uttered. Kinji was as surprised as any of them, as he sighed reluctantly.

“Correct” Kinji’s mood was brooding and despondent once again. How could they have got these riddles right, especially this silly looking Rabeer and a baby, the two least likely? Abruptly his mood seemed to change while he sighed and realised that he must stick to his promise. Besides, he was a man of his word, and his word was final!

“Well done my dear child, well done” Kinji confirmed before rubbing the baby affectionately on the head.

“Okay, we will join you in challenging the King.” Kinji continued, shaking hands with Adil while his dragon, seemed to relax and smile at the nervous party,

who weren't about to start trusting it too quickly. Darpana eyed it angrily, but he knew that it was just doing his master's bidding.

The vultures approached them while the shadows began to lengthen. Kinji turned his dragon around and it let off a stream of fire resulting in many of them falling from the sky, blacker than they had been a moment ago. There were more than twenty birds and smaller hawks which also came down from above, diving down in an aggressive formation. Adil reached for his crossbow and fired into the sky, bringing down sometimes two and three at a time. The dragon breathed its fire and torched the others but one escaped flying back the way it had come. It would inform the King of their exact location and that the child was there with them. Adil knew that there would be no surprises when the King finally caught up to them.

The Power of the Fox

Darpana could smell the presence of something lurking in the shadows. It was not pleasant, not pleasant at all. Soon his turn on watch finished and Shango grumbled his way over to keep guard. Although cautious of the strange scent, Darpana soon managed to fall into an uncomfortable slumber. Everything was hazy while he was caught in a dream that was so vivid and life-like, that Darpana himself was not so sure that it wasn't real. He looked up and seemed to be surrounded by fire and opposite him, on the other side of camp; he could just make out a young girl. Darpana looked around not sure if he was awake or asleep but he could barely stand up. He soon felt an overcoming feeling of nausea and woke up vomiting, while he continued to see everything constantly moving. The girl however was gone. Shango looked across worriedly while he himself was noticing that the mountains seemed to be moving and he was feeling jaded and confused. He felt the same as he did back in the forest of shadows. No, not the same – worse! The madness was lurking at the back of his mind, prying at the door, trying to get in.

Kitsune smiled down from her vantage point. She was casting a spell over them, altering time and space, so that they became disoriented. Interrupting their dreams and playing with their reality, so that they were disoriented and helpless. Then she would simply sneak in and take the child, it would be that easy. While

Kitsune looked on, she saw the clan waking and rolling around almost in a drunken state, while others slept erratically, lost in fitful and fanciful dreams. Kitsune created fire around the party, and when she saw that none of them reacted, she knew it was time to move.

Kitsune came down from the hill where she had been watching them. Even the dragon lay sleeping, shrieking fearfully, while it shook in a dream state. Kitsune morphed into a young girl upon coming within the group. It seemed appropriate to take on the figure of a human child. Kitsune looked around for the only thing that she feared. She saw one of the dogs lying asleep while the flames inched closer. She breathed a sigh of relief, but while she looked around she felt nervous. She could not see the other dog that had re-joined them. She decided to move in quickly, closer to the child while it slept innocently. She put her hands around it and left the ring of fire that was getting dangerously close to each of them. She'd done it – she had the child! She turned and started to move away from the camp. She was so excited and focused on her escape path, that she had forgotten about anything else. Suddenly from out of the bushes the other dog sprang towards her. While still holding the baby she covered her face, but rather than take its final leap, the dog unexpectedly remained low to the ground and sank its teeth into her leg. Kitsune yelped in pain, and changed back into a fox. She had dropped the child and fled before the beast attacked her again. While she ran the fire went out simultaneously and the spell was

broken. Tiger stood over the child, waiting for any other potential threats while the party, still dazed and confused, struggled to rise to their feet. By the time they had gathered themselves and looked around Kitsune was gone and all that was left was charred earth and a missing baby.

Adil awoke and looked at the burnt ground that was around them. He suddenly noticed that the child was not there beside him. He could hear it not far away, as he rushed over to Tiger who was growling nearby and standing protectively over the child. The child lay at its feet, crying, while a big black bruise was blossoming on its forehead. Adil was horrified. What had happened? Kinji looked around strangely at his entourage, ready to take off, until he remembered who they were. The dragon too was rattled. Adil's other dog sidled up to him. It had been burnt badly by the flames. Adil immediately wrapped his dog's wounds where the fur had been burnt away and the pungent smell of burnt fur and flesh filled his nostrils.

When dawn sprung upon them they heard the horns signalling that the King's army was not far away. Not far away at all! Adil fed Gyan the last of the rations of food that they had collected. Gyan was now well and truly able to walk on his own, and Adil was glad that he preferred now to walk instead of being carried. They looked around them uncertain of what would be the best way to go. It was Darpana who decided and after sniffing the air, he started off in a different direction.

“What can you smell?” Adil asked, but Darpana was already too far ahead for him to hear.

The King saw Kitsune hobbling out into the clearing while they rode closer to the fox. When she was within earshot, she immediately told the King what had happened. She went into detail about who the party now contained and the ravenous wild dog that had attacked her.

“I was so close” Kitsune said, to which Wolfram sniggered nearby.

“Fall in line” The King boomed angrily, while they marched on. He was infuriated that Kitsune had failed him, but realised that if he wanted the job to be done properly, that it would be up to him. Besides, he would then have the honour of killing the child!

Darpana led them through a ravine where the rocks cradled their way while they ran on between the steep rock walls. While they ran they noticed that the walls were so steep that they blocked out the sun. They could hear the King’s army, further behind them. Surely they were no more than eight long furlongs away by the sounds of it.

“Quickly, I have a plan” Darpana urged them on while they made it through the rocky passage. When they reached the end, he led them up the nearest rocky slope.

Darpana took them up the side of the mountain and eventually came to a stop, while the dragon circled above.

“Stay here and be ready for anything” Darpana stated before taking off hurriedly back down the slope.

Adil knew immediately what he was planning, while they watched him reach the ground below and continue racing back the way that they had come.

Surprise

The day had become unbearably hot, the trees around the army seeming to almost wilt away under the immense heat. The King was surprised to see the Lion when it appeared in full view and then after coming into sight, took off again towards the mountains. The King bolted off in pursuit, almost salivating with the prospect of the imminent battle. They were so close now! Wolfram was also not far behind. He was eager to prove his wares and to take a hold of the child once and for all, while the army followed their King's lead. Twix saw in his mind, the King chasing Darpana, and then warned the others.

“Get ready. They’re coming!”

The King and his army surged through the narrow mountain pass barely making out the lion running ahead of them. It wasn't until they had nearly reached the end did they realise their mistake. The King suddenly looked up instinctively just managing to steer his horse aside and evade a massive boulder that thudded into the earth beside him. The soldier nearest him was not so lucky. They had been led into a trap! The King galloped on while his men took position and began trying to fire volleys of arrows at the party above. Adil had taken up a good position and had brought down soldiers three at a time; while Kinji and his dragon flew down menacingly and burned a swathe through the army before circling back once again.

“Quick there are more rocks over here!” Debilla yelled to Farran and Shango while she continued hurtling them down at the army below.

Still the King’s forces kept coming and they all saw the incoming winged serpents, gargoyles and baby dragons coming closer. The small dragons shrieked wildly as fire filled the air. They fiercely battled in mid-air with Kenji and his dragon, swarming in all around them. Bats and flying spiders also filled the air while Adil tried to take cover and protect Gyan from their flying predators. The flying spiders had four wings and they ducked and weaved aggressively through the air. Shango leapt into the air and managed to bring down a number of the winged beasts but the multitudes kept coming. Although there were also birds that flew in to support Kinji and the others, they were greatly outnumbered. Adil knew they couldn’t stay here any longer; they had to retreat to a safer location. They took off back down the slope knowing that this was where the real battle would begin. They had to find somewhere that was more advantageous than where they currently stood. Although they had utilised their element of surprise, it was now time to get off this mountain and let intuition guide them to somewhere where they stood some kind of chance against these odds.

Daechir felt so cold, while the ice and snow fell away around him. The sun was bright and though his lower half was still frozen, he was alive and he was furious! He managed to crack the ice with many heavy

blows from his free arms, while he shivered involuntarily. He looked around where the previous snow slopes had melted away and he was out in the middle of what would soon become a wide expanse of water for almost as far as he could see. When he had kicked off the remaining ice from his legs he realised that he was no longer gravitating, but his feet were back on the ground. He had lost his ability to levitate! He tried to walk but it had been so long since he had had to. The ice was melting quickly and he heard the cracking of the ice beneath him, while he stumbled his way to try and find some sort of higher ground. Daechir struggled for a long time dragging himself along, and continually hearing the ice cracking around him, thinking that at any minute he would plunge into its icy embrace, which would surely be impossible to escape from. He stopped briefly, struggling to catch his breath and almost gasping in shock while he looked out towards the horizon. He watched the sky and ground become filled with creatures from all over the kingdom, all seemingly headed in one direction. This was going to be the battle of this, and maybe all, generations. This was his big chance to make a new life for himself. The ice cracked loudly while Daechir saw the icy surface begin to come apart. He had to do something right away. It was now or never!

Brotherly Love

Adil's troop made their way quickly down the slope and they promptly noticed that the plain was full of animals. They were all battling for their lives, each using their skills and abilities to try to beat their opponents. Some of them were hybrid creatures which Adil had never seen before. Darpana roared and charged into a group of soldiers bowling them over fiercely and making sure that they didn't get up. Shango bounded down, jumping on a Goblin's back and extending his blade into its flesh until it fell to the ground. He used his feet to spring through the air, swinging his staff and connecting with the soldiers in front of him who had raced through the gap. Adil crept down slowly, holding the child under one arm, while Gyan kicked about, averse to being carried. Adil knew that it would be near impossible to use his crossbow and protect Gyan at the same time. He ducked under a soldier's attack, putting Gyan down briefly and swinging his arm behind him, which connected with the back of the man's head. While the guard dropped to the ground, Adil quickly reached out and took the soldier's sword. This would be much more useful.

Twix had raced down from the rocky pass into some vacant space on the open plain below and looked around at the fighting that was befalling. He then suddenly realised that he was standing on his own. He looked around wondering how he could be most helpful, his sword raised eagerly.

“Good to see you brother” a familiar voice exclaimed unexpectedly from behind him.

Twix looked around to see his brother smiling at him evilly. What looked like a whip was in his hand – and actually; no it couldn’t be..... it was actually coming out of his wrist!

“What the..”

Suddenly Leto had thrown his arm and the whip wrapped around his leg, taking him to the ground, as Twix tumbled forward, dropping his weapon. Twix looked up at his brother, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh you like my little weapon do you; maybe you two should get more acquainted.”

Leto whipped Twix while he laid there helpless. As soon as the whip made contact, a huge welt of blood appeared across his ribs and he yelped with the pain.

“You know Tara loved me more than you don’t you” Leto proclaimed mockingly.

He didn’t just go there, did he, Twix thought? Twix concentrated on trying to feel only affection for his brother. He tried to concentrate his thoughts on feeling a deep expression of love, and suddenly felt something begin to happen within him. Unexpectedly from his wrists there emerged a similar type of rope-like whip, the same as his brother’s.

Leto stood shocked for a moment watching, but then raised his arm to deliver another blow.

Twix acted instinctively, swinging his arm sharply. Somehow the whip reacted concisely as it flung towards his brother and it wrapped around Leto's arm. Twix then actually managed to use his brother as leverage and pull himself up. While they stood facing each other, other Orcs and grotesque creatures rushed towards Twix, circling in behind him. He spun around and threw his arm towards the Orcs and two of them fell holding their chests, while they looked down at the huge slash wound that was not there a moment ago. Twix swung back around, narrowly avoiding his brother's whip that cracked near his left leg. Another whip emerged from Twix's other hand and he threw his arm towards Leto making contact just before Leto could swing again. Twix's whip took Leto off his feet and he fell to the ground – hard.

“See you later brother” Twix shouted, turning and forgetting about his blade. He raced off just as more Orcs were making their way through the pass and closing in fast.

The World in Conflict

The sky was a complete contrast as the dark clouds loomed ominously and the lightning crashed, while the sunlight fought bravely to hold position. Twix created confusion in the minds of those who opposed him and he was making steady progress across the battle field. In most cases his would be attackers dropped their weapons and looked at him with compassion while he altered their thoughts. As Twix ran he looked up and saw Kinji knocked from his dragon and the masses of savage gargoyles began swarming in around the riderless dragon. Kinji dropped from the air like a brick, and Twix could barely watch. Fortunately Gyan had also seen him fall and created a loch that he fell into like a pin drop, moments before impact. Twix ran towards the water and dragged Kinji out. Kinji stared up at Twix, shaken and winded, but still alert and ready for action. He nodded and drew a short blade that he seemed to flick open. The blade unexpectedly doubled in size and instantly came alight with flames. He moved with surprising speed while he ducked to the side and swung at a deer that was just about to inflict a mortal blow to Twix.

It was hard to know where to turn. The plain was engulfed in battles and duels and the sky was filled with mid-air battles as flying creatures battled for supremacy. Kinji turned his head and watched while his dragon was overpowered by the gargoyles and the baby dragons. Kinji could tell it was badly injured when he

witnessed it being taken viciously to the ground. It had landed awkwardly, however it still sent out bursts of fire in all directions as it spun its head anxiously, fighting to the death. Kinji ran emotion-charged towards his dragon and saw a giant raven land near its head. Kinji watched the raven rapidly change into a human and ruthlessly murder his dragon with its long sword. Filled with fury, Kinji sprinted towards the human, but was obstructed by some wild cats. One of them lashed out at him, its claws grazing the side of his head while he rolled along the ground with the beast atop him. Twix was not far behind and he swung his whip catching the cat square on its back. It fell off Kinji in pain and Kinji swung his blade into another cat which screeched in pain with the blow. He turned back to the one Twix had struck and swung again in a wild rage. It would not attack him again. He turned back to where the figure was that killed his dragon, but he was gone and all that that remained was his lifeless friend.

Suddenly random patches of the open plain turned to water. Some of these were small ponds while others were giant lakes of unknown depths. Twix looked across to the far edge where he could just make out Adil and Gyan. Kinji had once again fallen into a pool that had all of a sudden appeared under his feet, so random were the pockets of water that had appeared. Creatures that could not swim fell in, unable to make it to the edge, while other creatures soon appeared from below the water diving above the surface to be involved, or more commonly, having their own epic battles below. Schools

of fish and sea creatures swarmed together, divided between good and evil and having their own battles of survival. Twix tried to make his way across to Adil and the child, while he and Kinji ducked and weaved their way across, following each island of land and fighting their way to the other side. Twix could tell that Adil had spotted them when arrows flew consistently through the air, taking out opponents around them. They battled on, through the swathe of the King's army and creatures that wanted to see the darkness reign forever.

Meanwhile, Darpana was fighting for his life and also trying to protect the Rabeer. Farran was running forward and snapping at the heels of various foes without fear or self-preservation, forcing Darpana to step forward and deal with any dangerous retaliation. Though Farran was not a fighter, Darpana admired his courage, even if he was being stupidly naïve.

"Get on my back" Darpana bellowed while Farran continued jumping around. Finally Farran sighed before reluctantly climbing onto the Lion.

Darpana surged forward hurling himself towards the soldiers, bowling them over and scattering the troops around him. He ran, knowing that he needed to get out of the middle of the battleground, or else they would be easily surrounded. He looked around intuitively smelling the air. Adil had taken the child to the far edge of the plain. He would try to get to them, or die trying. The dwarves and elves were here fighting alongside him, as were many creatures of the forest.

Unfortunately many of them were unaccustomed to such conflict, though they fought with all the conviction that they had. Some began opening their plumes of feathers to dazzle the attackers, while monkeys or bears pelted nuts, rocks (or whatever they could get their hands on), at their foes. Other small birds worked together and mimicked other animals so creatures would turn around thinking they were under attack and then they were surprised when the attack came from a different direction. The snakes and scorpions however slithered dangerously, between the ranks, getting in behind many of the animals and inflicting their poisonous venom. Some of the tree snakes and pythons however stepped up against them, the pythons wrapping themselves around the other snakes and squeezing them tightly until they fell asleep. The planet almost vibrated with the energy that was in such dynamic conflict. The world was on a knife-edge. Something was going to give, sooner rather than later.

The sky was soon almost in semi-darkness, such was the sheer volume of flying creatures that were blocking the sun. Darpana felt arrows cast glancing blows into his back leg, but still he ran on. He hoped Farran had not been hit. Suddenly the earth dropped from below him, and he had plummeted into water! He had never felt such fear in his life; he feared water more than anything! He struggled to try and paddle with his legs but with Farran's weight, he couldn't help himself from sinking while his head dropped below the water. He looked across to the nearest land and realised that

he was in an enormous loch of great depth. Fear immediately took a hold of Darpana, realising that he would not be able to make it across to the water's edge. Although it helped when Farran jumped off and swam towards the water's edge, Darpana was gripped with terror. He tried desperately to keep his head above the water, but to no avail. After swallowing more water and realising that it was hopeless, panic set in. Randomly Darpana felt something below his feet, something slippery, but firm. He felt the ground move along below the surface while he hastily tried to get traction. Finally his paws gripped and he was able to stride a few paces to reach the solid ground nearby. He looked down barely seeing a whale before it plunged down deep below the water. It had saved him from drowning by coming near the surface so that he could move along its back. Darpana looked around at the scene of chaos that had unfolded, while Farran was lashing out at a rebellious deurburper. He watched the Eliops battling the buffalo nearby, as one of them fell unceremoniously into a wide expanse of water that had opened beneath it. While Darpana caught his breath, the deurburper had retreated and Farran, without hesitation, again jumped onto his back and surprisingly hugged him. Many of the enemy had fallen into these random pools and were clamouring to try and get to the edge. Their heavy armour however was making them sink like a stone, and many screams of anguish were heard as they sank below the depths to their death.

Wolfram had emerged from the mountain pass

while the conflict broke out around him. He summoned the scorpions patiently while they swarmed in around him. He simply pointed and in response they marched on and aggressively raised their tail and attacked the animals that stood in defiance. He smiled watching while the giant dragon careered into the ground, not far away. He changed into a raven and flew over to it, cautiously avoiding its fireballs, while it swung its head viciously. Wolfram then morphed back into human form, while he stood behind it and raised his sword, dealing a swift blow to finish the dragon off. He then saw, not far away, a pack of Dwarves. They would be Wolfram's next victims – and then not far past them he could see the ugly one that had been with the child. He would be dealt with shortly after that!

The King had taken a moment while his army flooded through the mountain pass and had started taking supremacy over the animals. His forces vastly outnumbered the paltry opposition. This would all be over before nightfall the King thought, smiling to himself. He heard the storm clouds and thunder in the distance. It seemed Mother Nature wanted to be involved, or at least witness the massacre. He looked around while the clashes unfolded but he could not see where the child was. Surely it couldn't be far away. He watched as the dragon was overwhelmed by the gargoyles and watched on amused while the flying spiders flew in aggressively, biting at the huge body of the beast. These spiders he was especially proud of. He had been a close friend of their creator. Suddenly from

out of nowhere, vast pools of water of varying sizes appeared all across the plain. Within moments people and animals were calling out in distress while they were claimed by the water. Where had this come from? Surely it would take some great magic to create such an event? Even Kitsune was not spared as the King saw her fall into a pond nearby. The King looked down at the sodden fox while it scrambled to the water's edge. Many of his army however were not as fortunate, crying out while they sank to their death. The King was furious at what had happened while the rage continued building until he felt himself morphing into a bull once again.

“What do we do now?” one of his guards questioned from beside him. The man's voice was shaking he was so astonished at witnessing the King's transformation.

The King turned hurtled towards him, knocking him out cold while he took off zigzagging across the plain. He was running head down bowling over some wild horses and furiously knocking down whatever else stood in his way in his frenetic rush across the plain.

Kitsune shook herself off and watched the bull tear off across the plain. Never had she seen the full extent of the King's fury and though she had heard the rumours, never had she seen the King's transformation. Kitsune did not enjoy such open-hand combat preferring the intricate side of deception and victory. She had little concern for this warfare. She shook

herself dry while she tried to survey the plain for the one thing that was of greatest concern, the child. She must find the child before even the King himself!

Shango was surrounded by soldiers, and he was in an unfortunate position in relation to the King's archers. While the arrows flew above him some of the soldiers crouched and held up their shields, while others were struck by the flying arrows that did not discriminate. Shango tried to bound away but he was utterly defenceless when two arrows pierced through his chest. As he fell, the infantry moved away, but moments later he rose again; both of him! He battled with extra vigour working in tandem while both he and his double, swung in unison. Soldiers dropped around him, and gargoyles that swooped in to attack were soon felled in one blow. Still, they kept coming. There were too many of them! Suddenly a flying blade struck him in the back, and another blow dropped his double. It was all over. All his efforts had failed! Even though it had happened before Shango was still surprised when it happened again! Just when they had all moved on to find the next opponent, he rose, but this time there were four Shangos'! He started to wonder if perhaps he was immortal. He had died once, and then twice (well three times if you thought about it) and here he was – another four of him standing again. After the soldiers had heard a noise they turned back around, but this time their faces were filled with terror. They tried to run, some tripping over while they backed away. Meanwhile Shango made his way slowly forward,

bringing down each new opponent while moving ever closer towards Adil and the others. He must help protect the child, he did not know what it was that kept his resolve so purposeful but he swung and defended with true grit. Ogres and Eliops also confronted him and four Shangos' worked together, leaping about, to cut the swathe down until all those that had opposed him had fallen. Suddenly the other three Shangos' disappeared and he was alone again. Obviously the gift didn't last forever; just like the last occasion. It was time to keep going he thought while bouncing across the battlefield towards where he could just make out his companions.

Close Encounters

Wolfram saw the grotesque human running across the plain, while he flew above. The man was jumping about with his staff and succeeding in taking out a number of the wild creatures, as none of them could reach him with his spritely leaps and bounds. Wolfram dove in lower towards his target and changed into a wolf upon impact. He knocked the ugly figure to the ground and in an instant delivered a killer blow with a bite to his neck. That was one less opponent for Wolfram to worry about, he thought sneering while climbing from the lifeless figure of Shango.

Shango had not realised what had happened. He was jumping and swinging his staff creatively, making contact with many creatures and keeping them at bay. Then, all of a sudden, he was knocked to the ground, as the air from his lungs escaped him. Shango immediately felt a sharp pain followed by wetness on his neck. He turned to see the jaws of a wolf while it jumped off him in celebration and continued on towards his companions. Where had it come from, he wondered, while he felt his life force leaving him? Part of him then rose and seemed to hover like a cloud above the battle ground, just as it had previously. More guards surged on past him, barely glancing at his fallen body while they went off to find another battle. He looked across to the far side of the plain and could only just make out Adil and the child before his spirit descended back to his lifeless body on the ground. He soon blinked his

eyes and rose, looking across at his double beside him. He must make it over to the others.

When they had risen, the two Shangos fought like men possessed. Both he and his double cut a swathe threw the creatures that opposed him and he again started making headway towards the far side of the plain. Two wild boars ran down and stood opposing them, blocking the way that Shango was running. Both Shangos then bounded forth and swung their staves viciously, while the boars tried to evade the blows, their teeth gnashing viciously. It wasn't long before both Shangos landed solid blows on the side of the wild boars heads, knocking them out cold. Suddenly his feet went out from under him, and he realised that the ground had given way to water. When he emerged again above the surface and paddled to the water's edge, he realised that his double was gone. He bounded on purposefully, hoping that he would get to the child before that wolf did. He couldn't wait to face that wolf again after that surprise attack; and wouldn't it be surprised to see him again! What they doesn't know can only help Shango, he thought to himself while he jumped decisively towards the far side of the plain. He jumped clean over one of the pools of water as he saw more creatures come pouring into the plain, seemingly from almost every conceivable angle. It seemed like everything on the planet was fighting for its life.

Twix and Kinji had joined Adil, while they fought to protect the child from the growing swell of dark forces. Debilla appeared from out of nowhere beside them and

began hurtling large rocks at any creature that came too close. It wasn't long before Darpana and Farran also arrived. Darpana had a deep wound on his lower leg, which Adil only noticed when Farran had hopped off his back and he caught the great Lion's brief wince. Debilla had noticed too, coming closer and conjuring up her healing powers while placing her hands on Darpana's leg. Darpana continued fighting, lashing out at any assailant that got too close, but he nodded to Debilla in appreciation when the pain slowly began to subside. Adil let sail with more arrows and three more combatants fell from their horses. He then noticed that he only had a few more arrows left. From the corner of his eye he caught sight of Shango bounding towards them. They were going to have to retreat soon. The enemy was coming in from all sides, and they were barely hanging on. While the clan was all together again, injured as they were, Adil remembered the jewel the Queen crab had given them. Gyan had ripped it out from Darpana's mane some days ago, after being attracted to the bright colour of the stone. There were no other options. Adil now took it off Gyan, who shaped to cry just when Adil held it aloft.

"Help... please" Adil muttered, looking to the sky and hoping the Queen crab was right about this gem. If it was going to keep them safe, there was no better time than now!

Adil could see the bull racing towards them from one side and the wolf hurtling towards them from the other. They would be upon them in no time! Suddenly

a brilliant flash of light came from the jewel and turned the darkening day to brilliant light. When they looked around they realised that the incoming wave of foes were blinded for the moment, causing them to halt their attack. Their assailants were desperately covering their eyes, rolling on the ground and trying to regain their sight. Adil's group turned and ran as fast as they could, through the scrubby land, trying to get to the nearby thicket of trees, while the King's forces could not see them. With his giant bounds, Shango had easily caught up to them and they had approached the safety of the trees relatively unscathed. While they ran for their lives they heard the anger and confusion behind them. They had almost smelt the wolf when it dived forward towards them. It was so close, narrowly missing Farran by the merest of margins, before it cried out in frustration with the blinding light. The bull also, snorted and shouted out in fury at losing them. Darpana led them away from the chaos, running through the grove of trees and climbing over the next rocky pass to whatever awaited them beyond.

Daechir had to improvise, while he struggled to use his legs. The ice was cracking more regularly beneath him; he must be quick. He tried to remember the transportation spell, which he had never been able to perfect. Well this would be his last chance he thought, while the cracking grew louder. Daechir closed his eyes and meditated, uttering the ancient words and exhausting all of his energy. When he re-opened his eyes, he realised that he had succeeded. He had arrived

in a wide plain, where it seemed everyone else was too! There was activity all around him, he could hear it, but strangely he could not see a thing. He wondered if something had gone wrong with the spell but while he listened, he heard the distressed voices of other humans and creatures. No-one could see!

Lady Medusa

Lady Medusa had watched proceedings in her rivulet of transparency, up in the confines of her mountain cave. While the water bubbled and hissed, she could see in its reflection, the group not far away and coming in her direction after their narrow escape. She began cackling heartily to herself, while the party ventured ever closer. She saw the child and the gem radiating within the child's firm hold. Wow this was her lucky day. The ancient mystics had talked of such a day. If she could kill the child and raise the gem she would have powers beyond this world and all would bow to her will! She shuffled towards the entrance and flew down into the caves far below, where she would await them, hidden in the darkness.

The group was thrilled by their narrow escape. Only Twix seemed to in a sullen mood while they moved along the mountain pass.

""I'll never find love again" Twix said reminiscing quietly to Farran who was strolling along nearby.

Farran turned and looked directly into his eyes before speaking resolutely.

"You'll find your love again!"

Twix stared at the Rabeer. His voice had changed, seemingly coming from someone else.

“Thank you” Twix replied warmly, appreciating the Rabeer’s kind words.

“What did I just say?” Farran asked obliviously, blinking while he looked at Twix.

“You said I’d find my love again”

A cold wind crept through the valley and though Twix shuddered, Farran felt warmth from within. Farran had just had that same surge of energy that he had felt when Darpana had asked him about his premonition.

“Well I’ve been right before” the Rabeer stated smiling. It was only now that he recognised that he had a gift. Finally he felt that he had something to contribute to the group and that he was here for a reason.

When they approached the cave, the dogs sniffed at the air, smelling danger ahead, but there was no other way for them to go. Farran surprised them by walking confidently on ahead. It had been barely one new dawn since they had escaped from the battle on the great plain. Gyan fell in behind them now holding the gem once again while it radiated light and illuminated the way ahead. Spiders were crawling across the walls, ready to spread the rumours, which would soon expose their location to the King. They looked ahead to where the cave branched off in two directions.

“We need to split up” Darpana exclaimed while Adil

nodded in agreement.

“Gyan, Shango and Twix will come with me” Adil confirmed while his voice echoed off the cave walls.

“I will take Farran, Kinji and Debilla then” Darpana stated, wishing that he was not being separated from the child.

“Good luck my friend. We’ll see you somewhere on the other side” Adil continued, not knowing when or if they would see each other again. They stopped for a moment in an awkward silence, each appreciative of their time together. Even Shango and Farran seemed sad to be separating – just a little sad.

Kinji then drew his sword which roared alight with flames and he walked ahead of Darpana lighting the way ahead, while Farran ran eagerly along beside him.

Lady Medusa had not had company around these parts for many a year. She had seen in her rivulet that this moment would come. That she would see the child first hand. A glowing flame emerged from the tunnel as footsteps approached. When the figures stepped into the cavernous room she was surprised to see that the child was not with them. The party had split up! She looked through the darkness at the lion, the rabeer, the monkey and the strange little man holding his flaming sword. She would put them out of their misery quickly. Her snakes flicked their tongues in anticipation while she brushed them back over her shoulder, and quietly

whispered for them to be patient. “Not yet my dears - not yet!”

While the masked man waved the flaming sword around to illuminate the shadows, she stepped forward into his view. Her snakes reared decisively, all eyes connecting with his. On instinct Kinji surged forward courageously about to swing his sword at the hellish female figure that he saw, but before he could, he turned to stone. The blade alight with flames remained, held by a hand now encased in solid rock. Darpana looked ahead at the stone statue that was once Kinji. He then glanced at the ground, seeing the feet of the Medusa nearby. He closed his eyes and leapt towards her, his claws drawn and ready. Lady Medusa saw the lion and quickly hobbled aside, almost tripping over on her long dark dress. The light flickered around the room while she moved around to face the Rabeer.

“Don’t look at her!” Darpana screamed after failing to connect with her and landing heavily against the far wall.

It was too late! Farran’s mind did not catch the words while he looked through the flickering light and his eyes fixed upon the snakes and Lady Medusa herself. Farran turned to stone within seconds and now Darpana only had Debilla left with him. He looked across at the ground, trying to locate where the Medusa was without looking up.

“Debilla are you okay?” Darpana asked worriedly.

“Can I open my eyes now?’ came the reply.

Darpana saw the hairy feet of the monkey nearby and moved over closer to it. He looked up (just slightly) scanning the cavern for signs of the Medusa, but there was nothing there. She had disappeared.

“It’s okay; you can open your eyes now!” Darpana said sighing heavily.

Darpana looked despondently at his friends Farran and Kinji who were now frozen in stone. He had let them down; he had failed to protect them. This was not good, what kind of a leader would let this happen so easily. He realised forlornly that one of Farran’s premonitions had just unfolded.

“It’s not your fault!” Debilla remarked sensing his disappointment and putting an arm around him to comfort him. Still, no matter what she said, Darpana felt responsible.

Darpana looked up, finally taking in their surrounds in more detail. There were a number of other caves leading from this room, but he knew there was only one way to go now, back through the tunnel they had come from.

“Come, we’ve got to keep the others from the same fate” Darpana stated resolutely, before taking off back the way they had come. Debilla went over to Kinji and eventually managed to pry the sword from his solid

grasp then hurriedly chased after the lion, trying not to fall too far behind.

Lady Medusa had rushed down one of the corridors. The lion had been getting a little too close for comfort and besides; she needed to find the others. While she weaved her way through the narrow passages, she let herself relax. She knew these tunnels like the back of her wrinkly translucent hand. Eventually she could hear voices in another cave up ahead. She made her way to an adjoining room and soon saw the blue glowing light coming closer towards her from down the end of a long passageway. She could see, even from this distance away that the ranger, though rugged, was quite a handsome fellow. Perhaps she would keep him alive, she thought to herself. Maybe he could be a fun play-toy. She moved around the cave, waiting for them patiently. She smiled wickedly, weaving around in the shadows upon them entering the room. She was now almost within reach of the child and that magnificent gem.

Darpana rushed back through the darkness, realising that he was leaving Debilla some distance behind. The child was the most important thing, he justified to himself while he continued galloping back the way they had previously come. He had committed the way to memory but while he turned into the new passageway where they had originally left the others, he was going on his sense of smell alone. He rushed into the thick darkness, hoping he didn't run full pelt into a wall. His leg was still aching where he had been

injured during the battle, but all of that had gone with the appearance of the Medusa. His nose was twitching while he slowed and turned corners, and then continued on increasing his pace, through the complete and endless blackness. His mind was riddled with grief. Although Kinji was simply a companion the Rabeer had become a close friend. He had failed Farran.

Darpana soon saw the blue light of the gem ahead where the narrow passageway opened up into another much larger room. His eyes had well and truly adjusted to the gloom. While he surveyed beyond the group, he could just make out the figure moving perilously close to the child. Darpana then felt a new surge of energy while he dashed into the room keeping his eyes to the ground and focusing on that distinct stench of the Medusa to guide him. He leapt into the air instinctively, hoping this time he wouldn't miss.

Lady Medusa had been so mystified by the sight of the child and the gem up close that she hadn't noticed the creature that had surged into the room and was now hurtling towards her like a cannon-ball. At the last moment she noticed the incoming blur, but she was too late! She looked up decisively at the lion trying to catch his eyes, but they were closed. In an instant he was upon her and she felt the full impact of his outstretched claws tearing into her. She screamed a piercing scream, but when she hit the ground, no more noise was heard.

Adil turned with Gyan while they illuminated the dark space where the noise had come from. The attack

had come from right beside them! Even his dogs had not noticed! They each looked down and took in the sight of a snake headed woman who had mortal wounds to her head and neck.

“Don’t look at her!” Darpana bellowed, his voice echoing off the walls, but fortunately her powers had been lost, while she struggled for breath.

“The end is coming” she managed to say grinning ridiculously at Adil before she breathed her last breath.

“What the; what happened, where are the others?” Adil enquired, still in shock. He had so many questions for Darpana.

“I’ll tell you later, the others... There’s only Debilla left, we must go back and find her.”

“Do we really need to, we really should keep going” Twix said shakily, not happy about turning back, especially after seeing the dangerous snake-woman that the lion had just slain. None of the others had even detected the dangerous Medusa lurking in the shadows.

They soon saw light coming from the passageway behind them as Debilla emerged with Kinji’s sword raised. She panted for breath and then nodded at Darpana when she looked across and noticed the dead body of the Medusa. Before Adil or the others could ask any more questions they heard noises coming from back towards the main entrance. It was distinctly the

sound of a bull and it didn't sound happy.

“Quick let's go!” Adil pronounced decisively. He was still traumatized like the others, that Farran and Kinji were no longer with them, but there was nothing more they could do, but go on.

Overcoming Fears

Darpana grabbed the gem, putting it in his mane before stepping forward to lead them once again. He led them through the next tunnel and the next, using his nose for guidance. He ducked and weaved through each passageway, taking only an instant to decide when each path presented itself, before venturing on, through one of the many options that confronted him. They all fell in behind, obediently following the lion once again. Gyan was complaining (in gibberish), that he wanted his gem back while being annoyed with having to keep up with the feverish pace of the lion.

As she ran, Debilla had felt Kinji's sword change in her hand. It had got lighter and had shrunk somewhat, the grip seemingly moulding perfectly to her hand. They could hear their pursuers back in the room of the Medusa, deciding which tunnel to take. Darpana hoped that he was not leading the group to a dead end and that those following them would choose a different passage in their chase. Darpana stopped and listened to the strangely familiar sound up ahead. What exactly was it? He soon recognised the sound of running water and then saw water begin trickling down into the passage ahead of them. Darpana thought about turning around for a moment, especially when he saw more water up ahead. Darpana's legs began to shake. He was frozen in panic.

"Come on, what are you waiting for?" Shango said bounding on ahead.

Darpana looked down at the flowing water beneath his feet. Ever since he was a lion cub he was afraid of water. He managed to get his legs moving, stumbling along before he was soon almost waist deep in water. The clan were now all wading through the tunnel while Darpana struggled to keep his head above the water. He was soon having anxiety attacks yet the others hadn't noticed. Darpana felt rattled while he felt something tugging at his hand. It was the child! It had furtively grabbed the gem and continued on moving through the water fearlessly. They could hear noises behind them, somewhat muffled but still far too close for their liking, especially as they had lost their ability to run and were going a lot slower than they had hoped.

When they reached the end of the tunnel they saw it open out into another vast room and on the other side of the cavern there was a wide opening leading outside. Although it was night, they could see the stars glowing brightly in the vacant space on the other side. The water was illuminated green while glow worms lined the walls below the water's surface. Strange fish could be seen swimming nonchalantly, casually going about their business in seemingly drunken lines.

"We've just got to swim across and we're out" Adil shouted excitedly grabbing a hold of Gyan who was struggling to try and paddle on their own. He also grabbed the gem off Gyan, not wanting Gyan to drop it while struggling within Adil's grasp.

They all started off, in some form of swimming.

Although Shango wasn't a swimmer, his strong legs propelled him rather well through the water and Debilla seemed to learn easily enough.

Darpana looked across to the other side. It was only fifty paces, a few long strides on a full gallop, but to swim, that was something else entirely.

"C'mon Lion" Adil remarked while looking back and seeing that Darpana had not moved from the relative safety of the passage, where the water was not so deep.

Darpana could hear the King coming closer and he knew there was no other way. He leapt forward, crashing into the water while he tried to paddle his legs like the others. Why were humans such good swimmers? He felt his head going below the surface and soon swallowed a mouthful of water. He felt his lungs get heavy while trying to kick harder, but when he looked around he was still only out half-way; right in the middle of the cave. The others were calling for him to hurry from the far side, knowing helplessly that there was nothing that they could do. There was no way any of them were strong enough to try and help drag him across. Relax, Darpana thought, while he tried desperately to calm his breathing. He started kicking again, but this time in more purposeful strokes, until he started to get somewhere. The noise behind him was growing louder. The King would not be far from the edge of the passage and at this rate, would catch him before he reached the other side. Darpana turned his head and saw a figure emerge from the passage, and

then he heard an arrow whistle through the air while the figure behind him toppled over into the water. The fish seemed to swarm towards the man and the water started changing colour behind the Lion. Darpana could hear the King exhaling angrily retreating out of sight, behind the fallen soldier, while Darpana kept on paddling as best he could. Just when Darpana thought he'd never make it, his feet finally touched on something. He was back on solid ground. He had made it to the other side! The others helped him get across the slippery rocks before they all raced out into the bitterly cold night. They ran down the hill away from the cave while water trickled along beside them. They heard the King and others splashing into the pool of water behind them and swimming furiously across in a frantic pursuit.

While Darpana ran down the hillside he felt an unexpected pain from within. Something was happening. Suddenly as he ran down the slope he felt himself changing. Wings emerged from behind his broad shoulders while his mane changed into hair and his broad snout became a human face. A feminine face! As she leapt she unfurled her wings and glided. The others almost fell over in amazement when they saw him change. Darpana was now a female Sphinx, the transformation was now complete after his heroism and courage back in the caves. As she flew she heard a whoosh from arrows that were fired from above. She looked back and could see that the King and his men were standing on the top of the hill, some firing and the

rest in mad pursuit. She could see the bull tearing down the hill after them, and the wolf not far behind. She knew that they could not run forever. They must face the King and fight for the child and their own lives.

“Quick we need to find a place that suits us for battle” Darpana shouted, reaching the flat ground and surging on to ensure that they kept up their steady pace.

Adil simply looked across at Darpana still completely gobsmacked. He was still holding Gyan, but was absolutely astounded by the transformation in the lion. It was a human’s head that was speaking to them and the bold and beautiful features of a woman.

“Over there” Darpana said pointing towards nearby woodland. The trees were densely clumped together but in random places, quite sparse. It would have to do they decided. At least it would provide some sort of vantage point for the ensuing conflict, which would decide everything.

Tara

Debilla was sure glad to see trees again. She grabbed hold of some vines and swung through the air, while she tied the sword to her side, which fortunately had compacted down to the size of a dagger. Adil took position further back. He had found a suitable tree that was hidden in a far corner of the forest. He put Gyan in one of the forked branches and began to collect whatever he could quickly turn into arrows. Shango helped while he jumped about below, collecting suitable pieces and jumping up to hand them to Adil. Adil sharpened them quickly, and stuck arrow heads on to the ends, of which he still had a bagful. Suddenly Adil looked down and took some real notice of his surrounds. There were hundreds of bright pink mushrooms covering the forest floor that he had somehow missed seeing before.

“Shango can you pass me a dozen or so of those mushrooms”

Shango grabbed two handfuls and bounced up to give them to him. Adil coated the arrowheads with the poisonous substance within the mushroom. This would make things a lot easier, but he knew that the flimsy arrows still needed to break the skin for the poison to take effect.

Twix was exhausted but had been wandering around managing to get his whips to emerge. He was still amazed by their appearance. He practised flicking

his arm, and accurately snapped branches that he had been aiming for. He could see his brother in his mind's eye, running down the hill, and then he saw something which caught him completely off guard and rattled him. He gasped aloud, stunned. It was Tara, she was communicating with him! How could this be? She had been following the King's army to try and find Twix. He then had flashbacks of his brother's time with her and how he had beaten her and thrown things at her. She had eventually escaped his brother's clutches and spent a great deal of time searching for him, but now, why was she coming NOW! Twix tried to warn her to stay away, but still she kept coming.

The morning seemed to go by quickly, and then when the afternoon set in, time began to drag on through the last weary hours of sunlight. The King and the remainder of his army waited patiently just in front of the forest while they caught their breath. Wolfram was on one side of the King, and Kitsune the other. Their eyesight had recovered well, after the first few hours of blindness. When their vision had improved enough for them to give chase, they did so with as much exuberance as they could muster. Wolfram was now frantically eager to attack, but the King held up his hand, signalling him to wait. The King would make sure of things this time. The child must not survive! Suddenly they heard a commotion behind them and when they turned they saw clouds of dust. Someone was coming! It was Leto, holding what the King recognised as Leto's previous lover, while he raced

towards them. They all couldn't help but notice the whip coiled around the maiden, who struggled to break free of his clutches.

"There's no time for this Leto, what are you thinking?" The King boomed angrily.

"Believe me your highness, my brother will do anything to save his beloved" Leto responded, grinning wildly.

Twix dropped to the forest floor in dismay. His mind's eye had just seen Tara ambushed by Leto and being held captive not more than eight hundred paces through the forest! It took all of his resolve not to run out there and offer himself sacrifice if only they would let her go, but he knew that would do no good. That was what his brother wanted him to do.

"Brother where art thou?" he heard his brother calling faintly, while the voice moved closer.

Twix could hear Tara's muffled cry for help also, as they moved deeper into the forest. Twix knew there was little time. He needed to think of something, and quickly.

Twix & Leto

That night, which happened to be the start of the Equinox, the King waited until the darkness had descended before deciding that it was time to go into the forest. He wasn't going to wait until Leto had drawn his twin brother out. It had already taken too long. Lightning and thunder raged overhead, while the King peered furiously into the line of trees that stood in front of him. There was no way to circle around it, so he simply split their forces into three separate battalions. These included Wolfram and his minions, Kitsune and the wild cats and the King himself who was shadowed by his highest legion of the King's guard. The King morphed into a Bull and charged into the forest while his men tried the best they could, to keep up. The King charged through the forest ducking around trees and trampling his way through. After some time, the King was surprised and almost bowled over by a giant golden Sphinx that had swooped down and knocked him into a tree, which snapped under his weight. The King was rattled somewhat while he saw it fly in lower tumbling the men behind him. Some of his archers had stopped and fired, but the arrows simply glanced off nearby branches while it weaved through the treetops. The King shook his head and got to his feet, chasing after the Sphinx at a frenetic pace.

"Brother I brought you a surprise!" Leto shouted, letting go of Tara and allowing her to run ahead. While she ran, he flicked his arm and his whip tripped her up

on the mossy rocks. She fell heavily, and Twix could see that with the fall, she was bleeding from a gash to her head. Worst of all, she had not got up. It took of all his efforts not to run out to her. His brother was only twenty paces away now. Twix could tell he was trying to get in his head, trying to see through his eyes, and work out exactly where he was. Twix knew in a few more brief moments he would lose his element of surprise, while he hid behind the tree waiting. Now his brother was only ten paces away. He threw a rock as a distraction and it bounced off a tree. Leto turned in that direction immediately running forward, his whip poised. Now was Twix's chance. He uncurled his own whip, stepped forward and threw his arm forward hoping that he was close enough.

The whip wrapped around Leto's leg cutting into his ankle while taking him to the ground. Leto was completely caught off guard, surprised by where the attack had come from. His brother had tricked him. While Leto was on the ground, Twix rushed back over to where Tara was, and checked her for signs of life. All of a sudden her eyes opened.

"Twix is that you? ...I, I'm... I'm, sorry" her gentle voice was faint but she was fine.

"Look at this slut, would you. Do you want to put her out of her misery or shall I?" Leto chortled mockingly while he lifted himself from the ground and started coming back towards them.

“Leave her alone!” Twix cried looking up and moving in front of her protectively.

“Come, join us brother. You can thrive with us. We will bring the dark ages to power” Leto declared.

“You’ve gone mad brother; you need to see the light”

“You need to feel the pain” Leto replied heatedly while he flicked his arm.

The whip slashed across Twix’s chest and he felt it cutting into him. He winced in agony and a short gasp of breath exuded from him. While it unwound, Twix raised his arm and swung, but Leto had also simultaneously released his other whip. The whips curled around each other in between them and wrapped tightly. As they both pulled, the whips knotted tighter. Leto pulled heavily on his whip and Twix fell forward unable to maintain his footing on the slippery rocks beneath his feet.

“Haha brother, I was always stronger than you, did you not know this?

“Father always told me you were weak.” Leto continued.

He then began dragging his brother towards him, while Twix slid across the mossy grass, leaving a trail of blood.

“The King is not our father!” Twix replied, unbelieving that his brother could be so naïve.

“He’s not yours; he has long ago disowned YOU!” Leto replied scornfully. His brother was heavy, but he had pulled him up almost to his very feet. Leto was like a man possessed, lashing out and kicking Twix savagely. Twix’s head fell to the ground hard. He was unconscious.

During this time Leto had not noticed that Tara had gone. She had snuck around behind him and found a sharp stick on the ground.

“Take this you animal!” Tara screamed while impulsively jumping on his back and plunging it in between his shoulder blades, as far as it would go. It snapped when it went in up to her hand, and he screamed out with the pain. Suddenly Leto’s whip retracted into his wrist and so did Twix’s who was barely breathing at the foot of his brother. Leto stumbled away from his brother, turning and looking in the direction where the sharp pain had been inflicted. With fury in his eyes he saw the girl, who was crouched down, the butt of a stick left in her hand, the rest she had plunged into his back.

“You will pay for that!” Leto cried out.

Tara ran like her life depended on it. She knew that he would kill her for sure; he had almost killed her in the past for simply arguing with him. If only she had

gone a bit lower she thought, knowing that she had missed his heart. Although he was wounded, Leto could still move as quickly as her, and he had his whips. He raised his hand while the whip re-emerged and he swung his arm towards her. She had just changed angles, and his whip narrowly missed tripping her up. He started off after her. Twix meanwhile had regained consciousness. His clouded mind tried to refocus on where he was. Slowly he was able to get to his feet. He heard the whip crack of his brother, while he turned, suddenly aware of what had happened. Fortunately Leto's whip had not found its target. Who was he attacking? His mind was still foggy but suddenly Twix remembered Tara. He must protect her! He could now see his brother at the far tree-line. He could just make out the stick coming out of his brother's back, and the blood-soaked tunic that he was wearing. Twix stumbled forward watching while his brother chased Tara with renewed vigour, and he could see that he was getting ready to strike again. Twix was still too far away when he saw his brother run up to the next row of trees and then throw his arm forward again. He heard Tara's yelp when the whip connected, and through the trees he could just see that the whip was wrapped around her neck. He was suffocating her!

Twix knew that there was some distance to reach his brother. He would not be able to make it in time! He impulsively looked down and all of a sudden, had another idea. Twix saw a rock on the ground not far away. He swung his whip and was just able to reach it.

Quickly in that motion, he swung his arm back and threw his arm forward with all his might. The rock surged out from the whip and rocketed towards his brother. Leto fell forward with the blow. He was knocked out cold. The whip uncurled from around Tara's neck while she fell to the ground, gasping to try and get air back into her lungs. Twix ran forward even more fervently when he saw the deep red mark around her neck. He crouched down to her, hugging her tightly. After some panicked minutes, her breath came back to her. She was alive!

Winner Takes All

In anticipation, Wolfram's canines were dripping with saliva, and when the King gave the word, he was off. His wolf pack followed along with the other ravens. Though he was moving quickly Wolfram was still cautious. He didn't want to be surprised again. He was sick of being made to look the fool; this would be his last chance to prove himself. Wolfram slowed down and began to move more carefully, his eyes darting around, ready for anything. He stopped and signalled for the ravens to go ahead and find out the exact location of the child. Eventually he also sent some of his wolves forward, just for good measure. The lightning flashed around him, lighting the night up like day in brilliant flashes. Wolfram waited more patiently than usual. There would be no mistakes this time.

Adil saw the ravens coming from some distance. He aimed his crossbow, putting his special poison-tipped arrows aside for later. He fired, taking the ravens down before they had even seen him. They dropped, three at a time, while the remaining ravens tried to change direction and steer clear. When they broke formation, Adil squinted in the darkness and fired each arrow separately taking down 1,2,3....4. The fifth raven had turned more sharply and headed back the way it had come. Time to move, Adil thought grabbing Gyan, while he jumped down from the lower branch and ran.

The wolves were heard before they were seen, and Shango hid behind a tree in anticipation. He was ready

to attack and would cover Adil while he made his way up another tree. As they came closer, Shango could feel the sweat on his forehead. His good horn felt numb from the cold night. They were almost upon him. Now! He moved out from the tree and swung his staff low and hard. It collected several wolves' legs and he heard the snap and the yelps while they tumbled into the undergrowth. Those remaining slowed down in time and snarled furiously, ready to tear the ugly man apart. Where was some back-up, Shango thought? Suddenly a barrage of rocks was hurled at the beasts from above. Debilla, the female monkey had good aim landing a couple of glancing blows on the head of the nearest wolves which drew blood. She then jumped from tree to tree, trying to distract the beasts while they tried to work out which target they should focus their attention on first. The wolves soon became more infuriated and some turned realising that they would be more useful if they came back with their master. Shango reacted instinctively jumping forth and surprising them with his leaps, while he surged through the air and swung, knocking down more of the savage beasts. One of the wolves had come from the shadows, to his side and was almost upon him when an arrow whizzed through the air and the wolf fell on top of Shango. It took the wind clean out of him while he felt the full weight of the beast holding him down. It stunk of rank meat, but Shango was still grateful to be alive. The remaining wolves moved closer while Shango tried to get out from under the creature, but they soon turned and retreated after another few arrows whistled through the air and

found their mark.

Only one of the ravens returned to Wolfram, though that was all he needed. He looked into its eyes and saw the child and the ranger's exact location. Wolfram ran quickly through the forest and after some distance he could soon see the jewel glistening in a tree up ahead. It shone like a beacon, catching his eye while he moved closer, but the gem was still some distance away. He peered around eagerly but there were no signs of the child. Where had they gone? It wasn't long before five of the wolves returned. Two of them were nursing injuries, but it did not concern Wolfram. His wolves were starving and ravenous, but Wolfram did not share his final food rations with them. The hungrier they were the more desperate they would be to get their next meal, when the time came. He then stared into one of the wolves' eyes and saw what had transpired. Was there another ugly man, who had joined them, Wolfram wondered. He remembered how he had taken care of him on the plains, not more than a few days ago. Surely there was not another one so ugly in any of the far realms? He shook his head, not giving it another thought. It didn't matter, he now knew exactly who he was up against and he would take care of them all!

Outfoxed

Kitsune was casual in her approach, checking her nails while the others tore off into the forest around her. She headed into the trees on the far edge of the woods. The wild cats followed, prowling along behind, warily stalking their way between the trees. Kitsune had noticed that time had again sped up through the hours of the evening as the new morning clouded in grey. The sun seemed restricted and unable to shine, like it was caught in a web behind the clouds. She noticed the monkeys swinging between the trees and she cast a spell to make them fall drunkenly from their perches in the trees, before they could cause too much mischief. The cats moved forward and helped themselves. She would feed her brethren, she thought to herself. The wild cats were different from other cats. They each had a thin row of sharp razor-sharp bristles that ran the length of their spine. Kitsune's eyes glowed while she looked deep into the canopy of trees ahead. She had amazing vision and could see what most others could not. There was one monkey some distance ahead that she had seen before. It was the monkey that had been with the main party. She went ahead striding more resolutely now. The child would be hers soon enough. After Kitsune had run ahead, the wild cats soon noticed that she was gone, and they quickly stopped their gouging and rushed off to follow her. Soon the panthers, jaguars and cougars caught up and moved ahead of Kitsune, inspired with now seeing their live target in a tree up ahead. All these cat breeds were

capable of climbing trees and they all wanted to prove themselves to Kitsune. Perhaps if one of the males proved themselves, she would consider taking him as a partner, Kitsune thought, smiling to herself.

Debilla had smelt the wild cats while they tracked closer. Although Adil and Shango were close, she realised that she had to lead the creatures away, so she bounded through the trees in the opposite direction. She swung through the trees collecting whatever ammunition that she could find on her way. After she had circled some distance from the others she stopped in one of the trees, pretending she hadn't noticed her pursuers. After a few moments the tree that she was in, shook. One of the cats had leapt onto the trunk below her and was climbing ever closer. Debilla turned and dealt a barrage of nuts at it. They pounded into the snout of the beast. The startled cougar fell awkwardly onto another waiting cougar below and they began to fight viciously amongst themselves. While she swung to another tree she hurtled more nuts at the other cats, and then when she was finally clear of them she dropped down to the forest floor. She unsheathed Kinji's sword while she hid behind a large tree, and it extended and quickly started glowing fire. Debilla's eyes glanced across catching sight of the sharp bristles of one of the jaguars while it stalked past. The creature looked up abruptly, but too late. Debilla swung the fire sword and slayed the wild beast. The other wild cats that had been prowling behind suddenly turned towards her and sprang forward with their claws out

and jaws wide. She swung the blade continuously slashing at the beasts while they flung themselves towards her. Another jaguar pounced out of the undergrowth, aiming for the jugular, but she swung the blade, just in time. There was blood - lots of blood, but soon all of them had been slain, while she remained, almost breathless with exhaustion. Though she had been wounded by some of their claws, she was well and truly alive. Wow, who'd have thought she would be such a heroine. If only her monkey clan could see her now she thought, but the memory of their loss quickly saddened her.

Suddenly Debilla felt dizzy. The trees seemed to sway for no apparent reason. The darkness suddenly came alight in a whirling rainbow and she saw something move nearby. What was that? A ferret? Another wild cat? When it came up closer to her she realised it was a red fox. She tried to swing the blade again, but she was so dizzy and weak that she could barely keep herself from falling over, let alone swing a sword. It was the same feeling that she had had once previously.

"Sorry dear" Kitsune whispered, before she used the blade Debilla was holding, to inflict a final blow.

Kitsune had known what the monkey had been doing, swinging from tree to tree. It was a smart move to lead the cats away from the child, but while Kitsune sat and observed proceedings, she had noticed the monkey's brief glance back to where the others were.

This was going to be too easy.

Kitsune moved back towards where the child and the others were and changed into a young girl. She ran into the clearing where she knew the ranger was, while she pretended to be running away from something.

“Stop there” a voice said from the tree which Kitsune assumed was where the ranger would be.

“Please, help me, they’re coming!”

Adil climbed down, to take a closer look at the girl. What was she doing out here? Adil tentatively nodded to someone behind another tree, realising that there was no other option but to look after her. The disfigured man emerged from inside one of the trees, offering his hand to Kitsune. She looked past him and spotted the child, who was in one of the lower branches nearby. It would be as simple as snatching it now, but getting away would be more difficult. Besides, what was the rush; she had their confidence? She could simply wait with them till they slept and slip off with the child. One of her spells would keep them in a nice long slumber. Yes, she could be patient; this was all going perfectly to plan. Suddenly she smelt something nearby. She had once again forgotten about the dogs! When she was just about to reach out to take the man’s hand, she stopped and retreated slightly. The man simply took her actions as fear from what had been chasing her.

“It’s okay we won’t hurt you” Shango stated moving towards the young girl, while she retreated.

The dog was pacing forward, growling as it moved out in front of Shango. It bared its teeth threateningly.

“Tiger, at ease” the ranger shouted down to his dog, surprised by its strange behaviour.

It continued growling, but lowered its front lip; still staring intently at the young girl. The young girl was almost quivering in fear, while she continued stepping backwards.

“What’s wrong Tiger?”

Suddenly Tiger glanced up at its master, regret in its eye for its impending disobedience, and then it sprang forward. It attacked the girl who fell backwards and Shango raised his staff to kill the ranger’s dog.

“Wait” Adil shouted, simultaneously reaching down and grabbing the staff in mid-air while they both watched on.

To their utter surprise, the girl suddenly morphed into a fox. It fearfully tried to escape, but the dog attacked again, biting into its neck and the fox subsequently fell to the ground, bleeding severely. Adil jumped down and ran over to the fox while his blood-soaked dog took a step backwards.

“Well played” Kitsune managed to whisper before

her eyes glazed over.

The Battle of Chi

Darpana had enjoyed using her new wings, while she flew down and wiped out swathes of the King's elite forces. When she swung low, she felt an arrow pierce through her right wing. She had been hit, and consequently she fell lower and crashed into a small battalion of soldiers, skittling them like disorientated ants. She was dazed as she saw two bulls charging from some distance. She shook her head, until she saw just one. The King was upon her in no time and Darpana just managed to evade being impaled by his horns. He had slowed after missing her and circled back around. Darpana rose to her feet, changing back to a lion before she charged towards him. The King had just managed to turn when she had leapt onto his back, and they both tumbled to the earth. Darpana's claws swung close to the bull but it used its strength to throw her off into a tree, which cracked upon impact. Darpana was shaken up. Even as a lion, she was no match for the bull's strength; he was too strong. She suddenly remembered what Farran had prophesised. He had been right about not looking into her eyes, even though he had looked at the Medusa, and his other prophecy was now coming to the fore. Beware the bull.

The King charged again relentlessly, missing with its horns but its huge torso whacked into Darpana's lower leg. She felt bones shattering with the impact. This was it Darpana thought, while the King circled back around and stamped his foot, ready to charge yet again. As the

bull charged, Darpana made a silent prayer for the gods to protect the child, while she closed her eyes and waited. When the thunderous steps were almost upon her, she anticipated the contact and stretched out her claws as far as they would go. The blow grazed either side of the King's head narrowly avoiding his eyes while his horns pierced through the heart of the lion and through to the trunk behind. When the King pulled his head back, he noticed the deep gauges across his head and the blood that was flowing down his neck, some of which was his own. He changed back into human form, exhausted, as he fell. The remaining soldiers had watched the epic battle unfold and one just managed to catch the King before he fell to the ground.

When Leto awoke his brother was standing over him. His hands were tied behind his back, and he felt a pain in his back.

"Twix is that you? What happened?"

Twix looked angrily over at his brother. He was wondering what he was going to do with him.

"You don't remember?" Twix enquired incredulously.

"Were we in some kind of trouble?" Leto replied a blank look on his face.

"Hi Tara, how are you?" Leto enquired but she was still trembling in fear behind Twix.

She turned away completely shell-shocked by Leto's words.

"What's wrong? What did I do?" Leto asked looking at both of them in bewilderment.

When Twix stared into his eyes, he realised. His brother's mind had been corrupted by the King. He had been put under a powerful spell that had turned Leto against his brother. The King had stronger powers than Twix had realised.

"Who is your father?" Twix asked.

"We don't know Twix; do we?"

"What happened to my head?" Leto continued. He was puzzled by the way his brother was looking at him, while he felt the giant lump on his skull.

Twix remained staring at his brother until he felt sure that Leto did not seriously remember anything that had happened. Finally he relaxed a little, releasing Leto from his binds, but still keeping a watchful eye on him.

The King had recovered somewhat when he opened his eyes and saw his men staring down at him worriedly.

He was in pain and his ears were ringing like a bell. He looked around suddenly and remembered where he was.

“C’mon what are we waiting for; **FIND THE CHILD!**”

The King was too tired to change into a bull, so he grabbed one of the guard’s horses and rode forward through the trees, feeling fatigued and light-headed.

Adil saw the King’s men coming through the trees while he loaded his poison-tipped arrows. He fired two at a time, as they dropped off their horses and caused chaos behind them while their horses turned in all directions. Those that missed the first rounds of firing were cunning though. They split up to surround the remaining group. Adil had been looking around, scanning eagerly, but he could not see the King. He turned his head again, where had Gyan gone? In recent times Gyan never stopped mumbling incomprehensible babble, especially now that they were walking, but now Adil only heard silence. He called out, but soon he saw more guards so he kept firing to keep them at bay. After he connected with a few more shots, he reached in his quiver and pulled out what was now his final arrow! He looked around again to locate Gyan and saw the child climbing up another tree, not too far away. Another guard emerged behind Shango and Adil turned and fired, taking him down. He had no more arrows!

The King had circled around to the other side of the clearing, after observing where the arrows were roughly being fired from. While he moved he felt the strength slowly returning to him. The blood from both sides of his head, had congealed and the dizziness had eased somewhat. He peered through the undergrowth and

saw the ranger with his back to him firing into the shadows to his right. He could not see the child. No matter, he thought; he would take care of this pesky ranger first. The King had only enough energy and anger to partly change form. He was now half-man, half-bull. From his torso upwards he was bull, however his lower half remained human. This frustrated the King further, as he could not get the same momentum, but still he stamped his foot and ran straight towards the tree which held his target.

Adil heard a noise behind him and looked down just as a half-bull creature was about to collide with the tree beneath him. He had no time to think while it connected solidly and an almighty crack filled the air. The tree strained for an instant then began to fall, Adil along with it. It collapsed with a thud and moments later, Adil was struggling for breath. The wind had been knocked clean out of him. One of the larger branches had him pinned down and he struggled frantically to get free. Adil looked up and the half-bull was no longer there. In its place stood the King himself, who was now standing over him!

“Where is the child?” The King bellowed angrily.

Adil could not respond even if he wanted to, and the King quickly put his sword into the branch that was holding him down and through it, to his leg beneath. Adil felt the immense agony when the blade went through his leg, but he could not even let out a scream.

“You cannot win!” Adil finally managed to gasp out at length.

“I already have!” The King replied, knowing he was wasting his time with his victim, while he removed his sword and struck a significant blow through Adil’s chest.

The King knew it was now only a matter of time before he found the child. The ranger was really the last major obstacle and it had been easy in the end.

Suddenly the King noticed a fog setting in around him. Where had that come from?

Daechir moved quickly, seeing the King for the first time since the castle. It had been one of those days. He was in a foul mood; a complete emotional wreck.

“You’ll never threaten me again” Daechir cried, his voice shaking as he came up beside the King.

“Daechir is that you, what are you doing here you vile rodent.”

Suddenly the King felt a sharp pain through his chest. He looked down to see that Daechir had put a spear through his chest. The King fell forward to the ground, for the last time.

Daechir finds his peace

Daechir felt some pity for the King, but he was angry; very angry. Still, he couldn't believe he had just killed the King. He realised that he would now definitely get a reputation for this sort of thing. He caught sight of Twix in the distance between the trees, while he moved towards him, still fuming. He still felt betrayed by his old companion. Today was another of those hate-fuelled days where he was feeling like an impassioned wrecking ball that would not stop until the switch flicked off!

Leto walked through the trees. He needed some time on his own for a moment. His brother had looked at him strangely, almost like he was an enemy. What had happened? He had no recollection, apart from when he and his brother were back at the castle. Though when he thought about it, they must be older than he realised, because his brother now looked old and worn like a comfortable boot. It almost looked as though years had passed since Leto's last memory of his brother. Twix's hair was all frizzled and wavy and deep lines of anxiety were etched on his face. Leto continued walking further through the trees, trying to piece together his memories and barely noticing the deep fog that had enveloped him.

"Hello friend" a voice came from within the fog.

Leto could not see the face and certainly had no familiarity with the voice.

“Who is that, do I know you?”

Daechir was furious. He had saved Twix from the King and had fed and watered him in his abode and this was the gratitude shown! He moved in closer to Twix, looking at his face and the face that looked back at him, showed nothing. After all he'd done for him; how could he be so emotionless! Daechir felt the fury rise again while he lifted his sword and struck a blow to the side of the young man. Leto screamed in agony before falling to the ground.

“And that's the thanks I get...” Daechir cried, while the young man lay crumpled in front of him.

Twix heard the cry, while he and Tara were walking together through the woods. The noise was close. He had been reconnecting with her after such a long time apart, and Twix now realised how much he had missed her. As Twix turned he saw a fog, and he could barely see through the dense cloud, further down the gully. That was the same way that his brother had been walking! He rushed down there anxiously, with Tara not far behind.

While Twix ran he was soon engulfed by the thick fog. He soon saw his brother on the ground, a deep wound in his side. Twix looked up and saw Daechir standing there, sword in hand, his eyes wild and lost.

“Daechir what have you done?”

“Twix, is that you? I, I didn’t know you had a...”

Twix was by his brother’s side, holding a hand to stop the blood flow. Leto was still alive but was bleeding pretty badly. His could feel his brother’s pulse, but it was weak.

Daechir was beside himself with grief. What had he done? His emotions toiled relentlessly, as he saw the situation that had unfolded in front of him. His actions had now suddenly dawned on him. There were no excuses. It was all HIS fault!

“I’m sorry” Daechir whimpered, while Twix heard him sobbing in misery.

Suddenly Twix heard a sharp cry from Daechir and when he raised his eyes, he saw that Daechir had impaled himself on his sword.

Within Grasp

Wolfram had watched closely when the young girl came into the clearing. Who was she and what was she doing here? There was something familiar about her though. He continued to observe her as she moved closer to the ranger and another figure that could not clearly be seen from Wolfram's vantage point. He was as astonished as any of them when he saw her reaction to the dog. Why was she so afraid of a mere dog? His eyes widened even more when it attacked her and she turned into... into that conniving fox, Kitsune. How close she had come! Wolfram glanced around but could no longer see where the child had disappeared to. It couldn't be far away though. He was almost ready to sneak in and attack when the King himself emerged from behind the group. Not long after Kitsune had fallen, the King and his men had approached. The King had charged in and knocked the ranger from the tree and dealt swiftly with him. Now this was becoming all too easy! He worried that the King would kill the child though. It was no good to Wolfram dead! Wolfram shifted to move and he was once again surprised when he observed a strange fog setting in. Wolfram suddenly remembered the monkey village and the dark elf. While he peered through the clearing fog, he then saw the King himself lying dead! The arrogant fool had seemingly been killed by the elf and then had strangely disappeared. He would be after the child for himself. What a strange sequence of events! Wolfram realised that he must get to the child first, so that he could

control this world and the worlds beyond. He quickly set off to find the child but he had naively forgotten about the ugly man they called Shango.

“Going somewhere?” a voice questioned from beside him.

Wolfram just managed to duck in time before the staff collected the side of his head. It was only a glancing blow, but he fell off balance into a shrub. While he was falling he alertly changed into the wolf. Was this the same man that he had killed before? Surely it couldn't be, but then again the similarities were uncanny!

Shango watched the figure stumble after he only just made contact. While it fell, it turned into a wolf and in an instant, hurled itself back at him, catching him unprepared. It ripped into him relentlessly, until his pulse stopped. Wolfram looked down at the ugly human incredulously. How had it survived the fight on the plains? After a brief moment, Wolfram turned and started off in the direction that he had seen the fallen ranger. The child could not be too far away from there. He heard a noise behind him and when he turned he saw; no it couldn't be! There were two identical figures of which he had just defeated, standing there!

“It takes two to Shango!” Shango stated, grinning at the wolf.

Wolfram dived at one of them, as both opponents

swung simultaneously. One had toppled over as the other managed to connect with Wolfram's back. Wolfram turned and leapt upon the one that had lost its balance, quickly killing him. He rushed towards the remaining figure that once again connected with a solid blow. When he leapt forward again, Wolfram changed into a raven, avoiding the next aggressive swing. He flew above and behind the human and then he changed into a wolf catching him from behind. Wolfram again killed the remaining figure, while both versions now lay dead upon the earth. He was sore from the blows that the man had landed, as he lurched off once again to find the child. Wolfram coughed up some blood, before staggering off. After a few more minutes, he heard something a little way behind him. Surely it couldn't be!

"Remember me" a voice shouted from behind him and he turned around disbelievingly.

There in front of him were four Shangos! Wolfram could not trust his own eyes! He felt a drop of perspiration fall from his brow. This was going to be difficult. Wolfram ducked and weaved snapping with his teeth and trying to bite at the human's legs, while running forward. In contrast Shango bounced around, swinging his staff and laughing, easily avoiding the wolf's teeth. Perhaps he might be invincible, he thought, pondering the possibility happily to himself.

Although Shango had done this previously, it still astounded him when he came alive again. When he jumped and spun around, the wolf was leaping

backwards to avoid being hit. Shango himself knew there was limited time of having this advantage, before he became one again. Would he be himself again, he wondered, he had never been four before? The Wolf kept retreating unsure what to do, changing into a raven and then back to a wolf while the staves were spinning relentlessly. Wolfram turned into his human form after jumping back and then put something to his lips. Suddenly something struck Shango and he fell forward. A sharp animal was stuck in his chest, as one of him fell forward poisoned. Another second later, another Shango fell. There was just two of him left now, while he jumped nervously, barely avoiding the tiny sharp animals that were being shot out like darts. Shango retaliated by bounding forward and swinging his staff, connecting some solid blows while the man changed back into a wolf. How much longer was he going to have his other self with him? Together they were connecting with some solid blows and eventually the wolf limped into an empty tree trunk. The Shangos had him cornered; now it was time to finish this wolf-changeling off! Shango paused, considering his next step. After quick deliberation they both sauntered forward, staves raised and ready for anything. Unfortunately they hadn't seen the raven emerge from the top of the hollowed out tree and fly behind them while they approached. Suddenly Shango turned upon hearing his other self, fall, a blade pierced through his chest. The human figure of Wolfram up close was more imposing than any that Shango had seen. In fear, he suddenly realised that he had underestimated his

opponent for the briefest of moments, yet a moment too long. While Shango tried desperately to jump away the figure's blade was drawn back and hurled through the air, just when Shango hoped he may have bounded far enough away.

Wolfram looked down at the lifeless bodies. He checked them all for a pulse. They were all gone. He waited again, after retrieving his sword, but there was no more rising from the grave. He had beaten the ugly man eight times in total now; seven times in the most recent conflict alone! Wolfram felt his head. He felt like his skull had been cracked, he had at least three broken ribs, a broken arm and something was not right in his leg, but still he was alive, and victory was now only a short distance away. He dragged himself back to the tree where he had last seen the fallen ranger and the murdered King. He could still not see the child, but he could hear it sobbing, not far away. When he moved closer he eventually saw the child through the trees and the solitary limping mutt protecting it. The baby had grown significantly now and looked like a young boy. Wolfram saw, some distance away, Leto and what appeared to be his twin brother, as well as the young maiden, who were making their way towards the child. Why hadn't the dark elf found the child and why hadn't Leto taken care of his brother? Wolfram had known all along that Leto was useless. He turned quickly, recognising that now was his best chance. He realised that all he had to do was get the child and take them to the altar of the mystics for the world to be his. Wolfram

raised his weapon to his lips and aimed at the dog. It turned on instinct, suddenly recognising the danger, but too late! It was caught by surprise. The dog moaned then keeled over convulsing before it finally stopped moving altogether. Wolfram then pushed through the undergrowth and grabbed the child.

“Now all the worlds are mine!” Wolfram exclaimed feeling a new surge of adrenalin rush through him.

Suddenly Wolfram was surprised by the earth giving way beneath him. The forest floor had turned to water and he plunged into the freezing cold depths.

The Rightful King

Twix and Tara had been carrying Leto towards the child, while Leto was going in and out of consciousness. Suddenly Twix saw a dark robed human emerge up ahead and grab Gyan. He felt a surge from his wrist while he let his brother slump gently forward to the ground. He then swiftly threw his arm forward, hoping that he was not too late.

The whip from his wrist curled around the child, while Wolfram struggled to try and stay above water. It was hard with his injuries, and the freezing cold water. Suddenly the child had been pried from his grasp as the whip curled safely around Gyan and he was being carried away to safety. In frustration, Wolfram made a last ditch effort to grab for the child. He dived out and grabbed a hold of its leg so that the child was now being pulled from both sides. Suddenly the child looked down into his eyes. There was power there, so much power. Unexpectedly Wolfram could feel the water turning to ice. The child was freezing him.

“NNNNOOOooooooo” Wolfram yelled, but in moments he was frozen solid.

Twix was pulling hard to try and bring the child to safety and was almost losing grip, when the man’s arm froze solid. Twix then pulled once more, falling backwards when the man’s frozen arm snapped and the child was released from its deathly grip, as it sailed through the air.

After Twix had fallen he looked up anxiously, but was relieved to see Gyan had landed safely in a nearby shrub. Twix looked around him and there was now just pure white. He looked up and above them there was a kaleidoscope of colours. Rainbows coloured the whole sky while wrens and sparrows flew joyously overhead. Twix went over to Leto, who was fortunately still breathing. His arm hung by his side, almost useless after Daechir's savage blow. The bandage that he had tied across his brother's shoulder earlier was covered in blood, but it had seemed to have stemmed the flow. Still, Twix wasn't sure if his brother was going to make it. Tara ran up to check on the child, but Gyan seemed more than fine. There was a wisdom swirling within its eyes while it stared at Leto. In barely minutes Leto regathered consciousness, and colour seemed to return to his face. From some distance away, through the trees, they heard a muffled wheeze. Twix jumped up and ran over cautiously, hoping that one of their foes had not survived. When he made his way to where the noise had come from, he saw movement. It was Adil's female dog, Tiger. It was loyally sitting beside where he had fallen. It been whining and waiting beside its master, not losing hope.

"Can you help me outta here!" a barely audible voice suddenly wheezed.

It was Adil. He was still alive!

Adil was struggling to lift the branch on his own. With Twix's help they were able to remove the heavy

limb from Adil before he stood up awkwardly and dusted himself off. All that remained of his wounds were scars, and when Adil limped over to Gyan, Gyan simply smiled warmly. Adil hastily checked on his other dog and Twix went to check on Shango, but his male dog and Shango had passed on. They feared the worst for Darpana and Debilla as well. Neither had returned. After some time, Adil and Twix realised that they would not be coming back. Twix then tried introducing Tara and Leto to Adil but he was in mourning for his lost friends and barely heard him. Adil eventually raised his head and was surprised when he saw another Twix standing beside them! Twix again introduced Tara and his brother, Leto, who looked worse than Adil imagined he himself looked. Twix had never mentioned that he had a twin! They soon noticed that the child had wandered off through the trees and they wondered if they were meant to follow. Both Twix and Adil stood in silence, aggrieved with the death of their friends, while Tara and Leto were simply dumbfounded by all that had happened. Gyan returned to them some moments later, the gem flashing a bright blue light as the child held it aloft and walked up to Adil.

“You are the rightful King. Protect this land as you will” Gyan proclaimed, giving the gem to Adil.

In response, Adil held out his hands and received the gem. He looked deep into the bright blue jewel, which was now glowing and saw a bold new era of colour and life. When he looked more closely he could see a future realm and an older version of himself

leading others into a new world. It was a future that he was helping to create. When he looked up Gyan had disappeared and only his dog Tiger, Twix, Leto, and Tara remained.

“What... where did Gyan go?” Twix asked looking around confusedly.

Gyan had disappeared and Twix, Leto and Tara anxiously searched for any sign of the child.

“He will always be with us” Adil replied at length in an ethereal whisper.

“C’mon it’s time to get started” Adil continued, walking ahead, while they finally ventured out of the forest, into the sunshine and into a whole new world.